

**EAST AFRICANA COLLECTION**

**GENDER PERSPECTIVES IN THE CREATIVE WORKS OF MARJORIE OLUDHE  
MACGOYE**

By  
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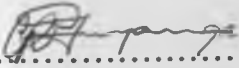
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## DECLARATION

This dissertation is my original work, and to the best of my knowledge, has not been presented for an award in any other university.

  
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This dissertation has been submitted for examination with our approval as the University of Nairobi supervisors.

  
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## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to my wife Dolphine Achieng. Her encouragement, care and inspiration have made my academic life one endless and exciting voyage.

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## **Abstract**

This study undertakes to establish the artistic contribution of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye in terms of authorial ideology and artistic vision. The study is guided by the following questions: What do we know about Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's life and creative works? Is Macgoye's ideology consistent with her artistic vision? Is Macgoye's vision relevant to the African society she writes about? What contribution does the author make to the emancipation of women?

Our research is based on the hypotheses that Macgoye's writing is influenced by cultural hybridity, and that as a woman writer in a society largely patriarchal, she strives to liberate women through her works. In the exploration of Macgoye's social vision, as it relates to the gender perspectives in her works, we scrutinize the completeness and authenticity of her artistic vision, the uniformity with which it is imparted, and the stylistic devices used to accomplish the task. To achieve the above objectives, we employ gender criticism as a literary theory and method of analysis. It is a modified version of feminist literary criticism, which takes into account the peculiar circumstances within an African setting. It harmonises antagonistic sexual standpoints to bring women and men into dialogue.

We note that, though English by birth, Macgoye has adopted Kenya as her home and proceeded to reflect indigenous experiences in the background of her European world-view. We term the phenomenon of double heritage in Macgoye's works, 'bi-continental posture'. Her European background and East African experiences make her perception eclectic. As a cultural boarder-operator she criss-crosses from European to the African cultural backgrounds and vice-versa in search of the most effective ways of expressing her artistic vision. This is what Valeri Kibera calls an "inclusive Vision" in reference to Macgoye's. This inclusivity is sexual, cultural, religious and racial. The author envisions a society in which the historically feminine values of love, compassion and sharing are treasured just as much as the historically masculine values of control, structure, possessiveness and status.

Our analysis reveals that Macgoye, in her oeuvre creates room for a female subject position. With little or no support from their male spouses, the women protagonists emerge from the shadows of male domination and struggle until they 'come to birth' as important members of the society. These women characters grow psychologically, economically and politically until they 'come to birth.'

By addressing the themes of colonialism, history, women's empowerment in the post-independence Kenya, Macgoye has proved that with commitment, Europeans in postcolonial Africa can correct the negative impression created by white colonial writers and rewrite themselves meaningfully in Africa's postcolonial literary history. This is why we contend that Macgoye's artistic excellence does not only culminate in the liberation of her women protagonists but also the rebirth of the author as an African writer conversant with the transformation taking place in Kenya - her adopted motherland.

**Peter Wasamba**

**June 2002**

## CHAPTER ONE

### MARJORIE OLUDHE MACGOYE: LIFE, WORKS AND CRITICISM

This chapter lays the foundation for a comprehensive study of the creative works of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye. We begin by introducing Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye: her life history and creative works. This is followed by a discussion of the research problem, objectives, hypotheses and justification for the study. The study then proceeds to conduct a critical assessment of literature relevant to Macgoye's works before closing with a presentation of a theoretical framework to guide the study.

#### **Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye**

Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye is a unique writer in Kenya. This is because the author defies easy categorization as a writer in Kenya and as an individual. British by birth but Kenyan by choice, Macgoye arrived in Nairobi in 1954 at the height of the struggle for independence at the age of twenty-six. She came as a bookseller for the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the mission arm of the Anglican Church. Gradually she immersed herself into the life of Nairobi and became part of it. Six years later, she married Daniel Oludhe Macgoye, a Luo medical officer. When Kenya received its independence from Britain in 1963, Macgoye, along with nine million others, became a citizen of the new Republic of Kenya. Since that time, the author has lived and worked in Kenya, except for a four-year stint in Tanzania.

Right from the early days of her marriage, Macgoye started struggling for recognition as 'an African woman'. She tried to understand the life of the people she had become part of to know how far she was going to adapt to their customs. It is this quest to understand the new society she belongs to and the desire to be understood by her hosts that dominates her writing.

Because of this background, Macgoye is a peculiar, perhaps even a remarkable, figure in the literature of Kenya and of Africa. She certainly does not fit in any of the typical categories of African writers. She is naturalized rather than native-born. This implies that while she is undoubtedly Kenyan, and while her marriage into a Luo family gives her special insight into that community's experience and sensibility, Macgoye clearly occupies a position very



from that of indigenous native writers in Kenya. At the same time, while there is a large community of white Kenyans, many of them former settlers or their descendants, Macgoye has stayed aloof by consistently rejecting the privileges that go along with being white in a former colony of her native country. Compared to her predecessors such as Elspeth Huxley and Karen Blixen, Macgoye writes from a fundamentally different point of view and with radically different ends in mind. Elspeth Huxley and Karen Blixen write from an outsider's point of view with outsiders' concerns in mind. This kind of writing displays a consciousness of being part of a European colonial Diaspora.

Macgoye's unique position as a British-born Kenyan writer is best understood in the light of four influences: the emancipating role of education in her life, her working-class background, her devotion to a socially active Christian faith and her commitment to Kenya as her adopted motherland.

The author was born Marjorie Phyllis King in Southampton, England, on October 21, 1928, the only child of working-class parents. Her father, Richard Thomas King, was a clerk in shipyard. As the oldest boy in his family, Thomas had been forced to leave school and go to work at age twelve, and therefore missed the more satisfying and lucrative artisan training that his younger brother enjoyed. Macgoye's mother, Phyllis, did complete school and was a teacher before she was married. This is a job she did not enjoy.

Macgoye's maternal grandparents lived with the family during her early years until their deaths in the mid-1930s. Her paternal grandparents also lived nearby. The author's childhood was affected by the Great Depression and by the world wars: World War I was a recent memory that had left its mark, and World War II overshadowed her teenage years. The wars affected the whole of British society, but as an important passenger and cargo port city, Southampton, Macgoye's hometown, was a prime military target. In her memoirs, Macgoye recalls two severe attacks, along with constant disturbances in Southampton.

As a young girl growing up in society that valued masculinity, Macgoye thought that higher education was beyond her reach. The only person that she knew who had been to university was a doctor in the neighborhood. Nevertheless, she made it to secondary school on a scholarship, graduating in 1945 when World War II was in its final stages. In 1947, at the age of nineteen, Marjorie got her university degree. She was awarded a scholarship to a women's college in Surrey: the Royal Holloway College of the University of London. The college experience opened a new world to Macgoye, bringing her into contact with the scholarly debates of the day, as well as the day's international political and social issues. It was here, also, that Macgoye sensed a call to missionary work. After working for sometime in a bookshop, she did her Masters, in literature specializing in 19th Century Literary Criticism.

In her literary career, the author has experimented with various genres of literature such as poetry, fiction and the literary essay. Macgoye's first poem was published in the *London Daily Mirror* when she was only seven years old. Since then, Macgoye's poems have been published in *Summer Fires*, *Boundless Voices*, *East African Poetry*, *Zuka*, *Dhana*, *Illuminations* and local Newspapers. Some of the major texts she has published are: *Victoria and Murder in Majengo* (1971), *Growing up at Lina School* (1971), *Song of Nyarloka and Other Poems* (1977), *Coming to Birth* (1986) and *The Present Moment* (1987). Others are *Street Life* (1987), *Homing In* (1994), *Moral Issues in Kenya: A Personal View* (1996), *Chira* (1997), *The Black Hand Gang* (1997) and *Make it Sing and Other Poems* (1998). The author has also published a non-literary text, *The Story of Kenya* (1986). In addition, the author is very accessible and has given several interviews to researchers and literary critics such as Otieno Amisi (1992), Philo Ikonya (1993), Ciarunji Chesaina (1997) and Peter Wasamba. (1993 and 1999).

Macgoye has won recognition locally and abroad for the unique quality of her prose and poetry in Kenya. In 1981, the writer won "Arts in Africa BBC Series" award for her poem "Shairi la Ukombozi" (the poem appears in *Make it Sing and other Poems*) and Sinclair prize in 1986 for *Coming to Birth*. The latter prize is given for unpublished novels of social and political content. In 1995, the author came close to winning the Jomo Kenyatta Prize for

Literature when her novel *Homing In* (1994) came second to Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source* (1994). These landmarks in Macgoye's literary career suggest that, regardless of her origin, the author is an established writer of no mean repute in Kenya. With close to five decades of active writing in Kenya, her adopted motherland, the author has reached her full gestation as an English-born Kenyan writer. Chacha Mwita, a literary critic, reflecting on Macgoye's commitment to addressing local experiences in art, refers to her, as "the grand matriarch of Kenyan literature" (*Sunday Nation* April 5, 1998). Mwita's description of Macgoye comes closer to Mutuota wa Kigotho's (1988) assertion that the author is "a keen poet, a sensitive novelist and a good story teller" (54).

Macgoye does not attribute all her talent as a writer to individual effort. The author acknowledges the contributions by her father and grandfather in setting afire her fledgling imagination as a young girl. In an interview with Philo Ikonya (1994: 93), Macgoye acknowledges her father as a great inspiration on her. She remembers how Thomas often took her, in the morning, for walks in the landscape of enchanting beauty, telling her exciting narratives. This exercise stimulated and nurtured her imagination from a very tender age. It is worth observing here that in the literature on Macgoye's youth, there is no mention of the role played by the author's mother in shaping her writing life. This observation indicates that Macgoye grew up as a father's girl. As we shall see in our evaluation of the author's ideology of women's liberation, the patriarchal upbringing causes tension and at times dilemma in Macgoye's quest for identity as a woman. She is torn between the call of her heart, which is sympathetic to men and the dictates of her biology, which is female.

Apart from her European background, Macgoye's imagination is also inspired by the modern Kenyan history, an era of rapid social change during which the country was founded, colonised, achieved political independence and now confronts the issues of national identity, democracy, justice and development. Macgoye's two central and linked themes - the gradual process of female emancipation and the creation of a nation - are reflected in the constant interplay in her novels between individual and national growth (Kibera 311). Her commitment to capturing African experiences with fidelity has confounded some critics of African literature like Bukonya (1988) and Mboya (1997) who are not sure on whether to treat her as

an African writer, European writer or both. Regardless of what the critics say about her identity, Macgoye (1996) is assertive that she is a "white Kenyan" writer:

I make no apology for writing as a white Kenyan who arrived as a missionary more than forty years ago and has been incorporated for thirty-five years into a Luo family. Entering into new society forces you to review the furniture of your mind as you try to understand other points of view. (*Moral Issues v*)

As a white Kenyan writer, Macgoye argues that she can only write about Kenya:

If I am not going to write about Kenya, I have nothing to write about. Because I can only reflect a bit on England of History and of childhood experience. England to me is now a foreign country, except Kenya, to which I can say I belong. (*Sunday Standard* May 23, 1999)

In the first excerpt, the author seems to suggest that she is different from the other colonial writers before her. As opposed to her white predecessors whose main objective was to impose European perspectives on Africans perceived to be ignorant and primitive, she views Kenya as her home and depicts it with empathy as an outsider turned insider. As such, she strives through her writing to "understand other points of view" previously ignored in colonial writing. In the second excerpt, Macgoye defends her Kenyan identity because she has spent the better part of her life in the country.

Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye is not the first white woman to participate in Kenya's literary development. Some of her well-known predecessors are Karen Blixen and Elspeth Huxley. Historically, it can be remembered that the British colonised Kenya for over half a century. During this period the colonial masters systematically dispossessed and impoverished Africans in the name of 'civilizing' the 'natives'. The church and the school were the key institutions through which domination of Africans was justified as divine intervention. In that era, European perspectives, values and behaviour were the norm. This created a type of

literature written by whites about their experiences with Africans. We call this category of writing, expatriate literature.

The term 'expatriate' literature is used in this study to designate those creative works written by whites or blacks about Africa in which the indigenous experiences, feelings and folk tradition are pushed to the margins or ridiculed as backward. In our review of expatriate literature, we get insight from Senorina Wendo's (1997) incisive study of the colonial representations in the works of Elspeth Huxley and Karen Blixen, among other colonial writers in Kenya.

Elspeth Huxley was a colonial child of English origin who grew up in Kenya to become a leading commentator and writer in colonial days. She was Lord Dalesmales' biographer and a strong defender of European settlement in Kenya. Some of her famous novels are *A Thing to Love* (1954) and *Flame Trees of Thika* (1959). In her novels, Huxley argues that local women are victims of patriarchy and tradition. She depicts them sympathetically as beasts of burden who do too much for no return compared to their men folk who do too little or nothing at all. This is brought out forcefully in her indictment of the venality and laziness of African men. They are "large, black [and] more suited to prize fighting" (*A Thing to Love* 39). While the above observation suggests that Huxley writes with African women in mind, a closer scrutiny of her works reveals the author's concealed exoneration of colonialism as a factor in the exploitation and oppression of African women and men. Wendo observes that Huxley implies that local women 'are oppressed by tradition but not colonialism which is perceived to be their saviour' (Wendo 103). It is therefore apparent that Huxley's sympathy is countered by the colonist position she adopts. Her works assume the victimhood of women. She also suggests that colonialism represents "order" against native culture governed by the emotion and which therefore needs "organising" (Wendo 129). It emerges that while the author is sensitive to the gender disparity in the colonial set-up, she is removed from the African reality.

Karen Blixen, famous for her novel *Out of Africa* (1937) is another expatriate writer. She was born in Denmark in 1885 in an aristocratic family and migrated to and lived in Kenya between 1914 - 1931. In terms of setting, characterization and thematic orientation, all her

texts are European and colonial in outlook. Blixen was a colonist like Huxley. Though she socialized with the natives, it was along the lines of a feudal lord condescending to understand and salvage the primitive people from perpetual darkness. Wendo dismisses Blixen's attitude as a good example of "colonialist arrogance" (Wendo 131). This is because, in her dealings with local people, Blixen assumes that she understands the African landscape and the natives too well, which makes her arrogate to herself the right to speak for black people who are blind and ignorant. Their weaknesses notwithstanding, Wendo observes that Blixen and Huxley wrote at a time when prevailing attitudes were based on a central belief in pseudo-scientific racist ideas, in which theorists saw race as a major determining principle of natural capabilities and attitudes (13).

Analysis of Huxley and Blixen's works reveals that, as apologists for the Empire, the two failed to address the gender dynamics in the African society because of the assumed victimhood of the African woman. We therefore argue that where European writers, explorers and missionaries have attempted to write about Africa and her people in the past, their fictional evocations have tended to dwell on the peripheral manifestations of the African environment rather than the inner person. As a result, their depiction of the African character comes out as depersonalised and stereotyped. As we have noticed above, Elspeth Huxley shows her feeling for the land and awareness of detail, yet reveals her ignorance of the people themselves.

This study evaluates Macgoye's ideology and vision as part of postcolonial writing as opposed to expatriate literature reviewed above. Contrary to common perceptions, 'postcolonial literature' does not simply refer to literature that comes after colonial literature. As Ben Okri observes, the term refers to the 'literature of the descendant spirit' (qtd. in Boehmer 4). Postcolonial literature is, therefore, that literature which critically scrutinizes the colonial relationships and sets out to resist colonial perspectives. Boehmer defines postcoloniality as "that condition in which colonised people seek to take their place, forcibly or otherwise, as historical subjects" (Boehmer 3). While Boehmer perceives postcoloniality in terms of revolutionary tendencies, Homi Bhaba expands the meaning of postcolonial to include "cultural hybridity" which gives voice to the articulation of difference from the minority

"cultural hybridity" which gives voice to the articulation of difference from the minority perspectives (Bhaba 2). One of the dominant colonial features targeted by postcolonial literature is masculinity. Our treatment of Macgoye's works as part of postcolonial literature necessitates a re-evaluation of the author's ideology and artistic vision as compared to those of her predecessors.

### **Ideology and Vision**

In his critical essay *Tradition, the Writer and Society* (1967), Wilson Harris, a Guyanese novelist and critic argues that 'a comprehensive study of an author's creative works reveals that an objective process, a secret form or tradition exists, which yields itself fragmentarily perhaps, but decisively as time goes on' (Harris 7). Harris implies in his argument that vision is embedded in a writer's work and that it unravels, grows and matures gradually with the progress of a writer's productivity. Hudson (1965) concurs with Harris. He contends that for one to realise an author's social vision in its wholeness and variety, one has to consider a writer's work(s), not separately but in relation to one another:

We have to study these works together as diverse expressions of one and the same genius: to compare and contrast them in matter and spirit, in method and style, to conceive them, alike in their similarities and their differences, as products of a single individual power revealing itself, in different periods and in curiously varying artistic moods. (20)

The two critics underscore two important points with regard to a critical evaluation of an author's social vision. They observe that consciously or unconsciously, writers project alternative visions for society and that a complete picture of an individual author's social vision can only emerge after subjecting all her creative texts to rigorous analysis. It follows that ideology and social vision are not only complementary but also indispensable in any work by a committed writer. This is because more often than not, writers espouse ideological orientations that succinctly articulate their social vision.

human consciousness works" (Chung and Ngara: 28). In other words, what we see and believe largely depends on the medium through which we comprehend and interpret reality. Understanding of ideology in art is a prerequisite to a meaningful exploration of social vision because what one perceives depends highly on strong beliefs the writer holds about life. We consider ideology in literature as a lens through which an artist observes reality before distilling it to project alternative social vision for the society. Ngara conducts a detailed analysis of the relationship between ideology and social vision in African literature (1985, 1990). The critic contends that ideology alone is not enough, a serious writer must have social vision expressed and encapsulated in an appropriate style:

It seems to me that committed artists have the obligation not only to draw attention of the reader to the evils, injustices and the abnormalities of the existing social order but also to point the way to a new and more humane society. To perform this function adequately, committed artists must consistently and ceaselessly reflect upon their own social vision and modes of representation with a view to speaking more genuinely for humanity and in a manner which strikes a chord in their readers. (1990: 200)

Ngara observes that the success of creative writers depend on the significance of their social vision and 'genuine' communication of that vision through appropriate stylistic devices. We take it that contextually, Ngara is referring to a comprehensive and inclusive vision that includes the perspectives of both women and men. This is because the word 'vision', whenever it is mentioned in a literary work, as Ngara does, tends to invoke the idea of perception, not just at the level of sight but also involving the mental faculty of the person referred to. Artistic vision, therefore, refers to the influences that individuals' experiences have on the quality and scope of their imagination. In that regard, social vision does not focus on things seen with literal eyes, but rather on artistic reflections purveyed by the inner mind at the height of inspiration. Milton Obote (1989) gives a detailed explanation of 'vision' as it is applied to literature. He states that, in the event of creating, a writer intends 'to induce his readers towards an attitude of contemplation followed by change. Consequently, a visionary writer creates literary texts that project humanism and go beyond the stifling and dehumanising



aspects of social reality they deal with' (9). Kiiru (1995), in affirming Obote's thesis quotes Kuzmenko, who asserts that social vision is indisputably embedded in art. Kuzmenko contends that art does not simply reveal, embody and reflect objective reality. Directly or indirectly, it is continuously drawing a parallel between this reality and what the artist thinks feasible and necessary, which in scientific terms is known as "aesthetic ideal" (19). The above arguments advanced by Harris, Hudson, Kuzmenko and Obote suggest that creative writers are visionary individuals. Unlike historians, they do not just reproduce reality, but armed with the power of language and skills in aesthetic maneuvers, they create and shape reality through their luminary eyes to influence society in a positive direction.

As we have noted in our discussion on ideology and vision, visionary writers create literary texts that project humanism by inducing their readers towards an attitude of contemplation followed by change. Macgoye too, believes that writers are visionary women and men who are sensitive in a deliberate way to the public and personal issues of their time. The author argues that as visionary members of the society, writers should identify and communicate problems faced by members so that solutions can be found. In an interview she gave Wasamba (1999, *See Appendix I*), Macgoye singles out universality as the principle that shapes her vision in writing. She argues that a piece of work can only be considered as literature if 'it is proved by the test of time to have something universal in it, something that communicates to other people in other countries facing similar circumstances'. The author implies that a mature writer is one with a global perspective and capacity to bring humankind together by building bridges across gender, race, religion, or geographical divides. Macgoye's argument echoes Bhaba's thesis on cultural hybridity, which we referred to earlier.

## **Research Problem**

In this study, we evaluate the performance of Macgoye as a European woman writer in Kenya with a view to locating her voice, ideology and vision in the local literary landscape. In the exploration of Macgoye's social vision as it relates to the gender perspectives in her works, the study strives to scrutinize her artistic vision, and the narrative and poetic techniques used to accomplish the task. The influence of authorial ideology on Macgoye's vision is an area that previous researchers on the author such as Bukonya (1988), Mutuota. K (1988), Kihumba

(1989), Wasamba (1993, 1997), Masheti (1995), Kurtz (1996), Abungu (1997), Mboya (1997), Mutuota R. (1997), Barak (1999) and Simatei (2001) have not given serious attention. This has created ambiguity with regard to Macgoye's perspectives leading to the mushrooming of several interpretations. Looked at critically, these studies, in spite of their tremendous contributions towards understanding Macgoye as a writer, present inconsistent, and in some cases, debatable interpretations of her authorial ideology and artistic vision. In our view, the apparent confusion with regard to the authorial ideology and social vision is exacerbated by criticism that ignores the influence of Macgoye's cultural hybridity (European background and African experiences) on her works.

As we shall see in the textual analysis of her works, Macgoye's writing is shaped by a strong desire for hybridity and universality founded on the liberal notions of Christian theology and multi-culturalism. The author strives to demolish boundaries used to polarize humanity in an attempt to project a global village with a hybrid culture that accommodates all 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. According to the author, nothing is permanent in the modern world, all women and men are insiders and outsiders at the same time regardless of colour, creed, gender or nationality. Macgoye's thesis is in agreement with Bhaba's (1994) observation that the postcolonial environment is characterized by "extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations" which culminate into "cultural and historical hybridity" (21).

The main objective of this study is to investigate ideology and social vision as defining elements in the interpretation of Macgoye's creative works. A study of this magnitude is overdue because Macgoye has been an active writer in Kenya for close to four decades without a comprehensive critical attention. A detailed study of Macgoye's perspectives is timely as it will enable critics to reflect on all aspects of the author's creative works as diverse expressions of one writer. The study is grounded on the understanding that due to Macgoye's prominence as a white woman writer in the postcolonial Kenya, there is a unique perspective that emerges from her works, which readers, literary critics, researchers and scholars interested in particular aspects of the author's writing should be exposed to.

This study also attempts to fill the gaps left by the previous researchers on Macgoye by using ideology as the point of departure in the evaluation of the author's social vision. In their separate studies on Macgoye, Wasamba (1997) and Abungu (1997) propose a comprehensive study of Macgoye's social vision as a rich ground for further research on the author. At the end of his study, Abungu submits that "one area that requires further research is a comparative study of her (Macgoye) vision as a writer of European descent and that of European writers like Robert Ruark, Karen Blixen and Elspeth Huxley" (61). According to Abungu, there is an urgent need to investigate the relationship between Macgoye's oeuvre and those of her white predecessors. Abungu argues further that such a study would help the reader to know the author's ideology and social vision. Wasamba (1997) in concluding his research suggests that since previous studies on Macgoye have over-concentrated on the author's few works, there is need to conduct a comprehensive study of Macgoye's social vision as reflected in all her published creative works (100). This study has taken both recommendations into consideration by looking at the author in her totality while also comparing her works to those of her European predecessors and African contemporaries.

In this study we test three hypotheses: that Macgoye's writing is influenced by cultural and ideological hybridity. And that, as a white woman writer in Kenya concerned with social justice in the society that consigns women to the shadows of social existence, Macgoye's social vision is influenced by an ideology that is women-centred.

This study covers all major creative works published by Macgoye between 1971 and 1998. This period is crucial in the exploration of the development of Macgoye's authorial ideology and social vision as it captures the important segment in the author's growth from a literary infant to maturity. In 1971, Macgoye launched herself into the local literary scene with the publication of *Murder in Majengo* (1971) and *Growing up at Lina School* (1971). In 1998 Macgoye crowned her literary career with the publication of *Make it Sing and Other Poems*. It is pertinent, therefore, to study all the major texts produced by the author within this period to assess what they reveal about the author's commitment with regard to ideology and social vision.

This study combines field research and library research. Field research involved interviewing Macgoye to get background information about the author: her attitudes to pertinent issues in the society such as women's empowerment, what she thinks about the role of literature in society and how it is demonstrated in her published works. Through library research we have been able to identify, collect and analyse critical material on the author in various libraries using available books, journals, literary essays, conference papers and the Internet.

### **Review of Literature Relevant to Macgoye's Works**

Review of works related to Macgoye's life, writing and criticism proceeds in two stages: first, we review the concepts used extensively in this study such as commitment in Literature, feminist criticism, gender and androgyny. Secondly we evaluate critical material on the author. This section flows in three phases: critical neglect of the author in the sixties and seventies; lukewarm treatment of Macgoye's works as part of African literature in the late seventies to mid-eighties; and the final acceptance of Macgoye as a unique African woman writer from the early nineties to date.

### **The Politics of Gender in African Literature**

In this section of literature review, we delve into the theoretical exposition on feminism, gender and androgyny and their relevance to the current study. Critical evaluation of the relationship between men and women as depicted in literature is an area of increasing concern to scholars, researchers and literary critics. While gender studies have been accepted in other disciplines as an indisputable area for academic research, there seems to be a veiled reluctance to offer the same legitimacy to the criticism of African literature (Stratton F. (1994), Eagleton M. (1991) and Chesaina (1995)). This could partly be blamed on the ambiguity that shrouds the term 'gender', especially, the semantic neighbourhood it shares with feminist criticism, and the alleged threat that the latter poses to the patriarchal structures of dominance. The immediate question that confronts a researcher in gender studies is the definition of the term 'gender', its rationale as a theoretical construct in the analysis of creative works and its relationship to feminism and androgyny. We can state at the onset that the bone of contention in the politics of gender is the feminist undercurrents that colour the debate. It is argued that gender as a concept is just another form of undercover radical feminist posturing that strives

to elevate women over men. In such a situation, the term 'gender' becomes synonymous with radical feminist movement. This is not the case. Gender refers to "socially defined capacities and attributes assigned to persons on the basis of the alleged sexual characteristics. (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994: 153)

According to the above definition, gender is an all-inclusive terminology that refers to relations between women and men that are socially determined. As opposed to sex, which is determined by nature and is rarely altered, roles that people perform as women and men are inculcated in them during the socialization process in childhood based on sex. As Mutuota R. (1997) aptly puts it, "gender roles are prescribed by society. They are communicated through social roles, myths, beliefs, rituals, folklore and language" (11).

Our analysis of gender perspectives in Macgoye's works is premised on the fact that creative writers are men and women born and bred in their respective societies. As members of the society, they are nurtured to be women and men with strict gender roles. This trains them to develop certain perspectives or viewpoints regarding the power relations between women and men. Consequently, in this study, we use 'gender perspectives' to refer to viewpoints that Macgoye adopts in portraying the relationship between women and men in her creative works. Such perspectives are reflected either consciously or unconsciously. As we have noticed in Macgoye's life history, the author grew up as a father's girl. She learnt to perceive the world through the lens of her father who was an inspiration to her. It would therefore be interesting to observe how the author employs male-female perspective to empower her women characters.

In our explication on gender, we argue that any discussion on strategies to re-vision women in society, whether it is through feminism, gender or androgyny, must of necessity begin with a revision of the term "commitment" as it relates to literature in the contemporary African society. It has been argued that in Africa, literature is functional and that, writers must be committed. They must respond with their total personality to the dynamic social environment, and as vanguards of the society's wit, register accurately, conflicts and tensions in the society (Achebe: 1975, Chesaina: 1992). Our observation is that commitment in African literature has

never been total and inclusive. It has been skewed to magnify male concerns while giving total blackout, lukewarm or negative coverage to the female perspectives. Indeed, advocates of commitment in African literature have judged writers in terms of how they respond to what Achebe calls the 'burning issues of the day'. The phrase 'burning issues' has never been qualified. When interrogated, the phrase reveals that commitment in literature has been judged according to male prescriptions due to the dominant ideology. In this study, we argue that commitment in literature can only be total when it gives equal coverage to the concerns of women as it does to those of men. This is because, looked at broadly, it is not literature that requires gender-informed commitment, it is the ideas and ideals behind literature. As an embodiment of humanism, literature demands that, as moral beings, women and men commit themselves decisively and lastingly for or against certain ideas and attitudes that affect the human race - gender discrimination, being one of them. Commenting on commitment and the role of an African writer in a new nation, Chinua Achebe (1975) argues that:

If an artist is anything, he is a human being with heightened sensitivities, he must be aware of the faintest nuances of injustice in human relations. The African writer cannot therefore be unaware of, or indifferent to the monumental injustice, which his people suffer. (78)

Some of the monumental injustices Achebe alludes to are slavery, colonialism, and above all, discrimination against women. Achebe's definition of commitment as 'sensitivity to monumental injustices that people suffer' is a clear manifestation of a gender responsive content that creates room for women's concerns. To paraphrase Achebe in *Arrow of God*, we can add that an African writer who tries to avoid the gender concerns in her works using tradition or religion as an excuse, risks being rendered completely irrelevant and ridiculous like that absurd man in the proverb who left his house on fire to pursue a rat fleeing from flames. Chesaina (1992), echoing Achebe, reminds women writers that commitment to gender issues is a woman writer's professional and moral responsibility. This is because, for generations, African women have been victims of oppression in its varying manifestations: exploitation, discrimination and general social prejudice. Based on the above challenges, Chesaina argues that "the African woman creative writer, cannot be excused from the

responsibility of using her art for the social justice for herself and her fellow women" (74). The critic goes further to suggest that 'gender maturity', which refers to balanced treatment of women's and men's concerns by creative writers, should be used as "a measure of creative writer's development" (1995: 28).

Debate on the place of women in African literature is not a new phenomenon. In 1959, one year before Senegal's independence, Leopold Sedar Senghor, a renowned African poet, literary critic, philosopher and former President of Senegal claimed that "contrary to what is thought today, the African woman doesn't need to be liberated. She has been free for many thousands of years" (Stratton F. 54). Coming at the time when African nationalists were engaged in the struggle for freedom from colonial rule, this statement may have passed unnoticed by many critics in terms of its negative and complacent attitude to matters affecting women. Senghor argues that African women are "free", consequently, there is no need to talk about any attempt to improve their status. Senghor assumes that he understands the African woman too well and that he can authoritatively speak and decide for her. We share Linda Alcoff's sentiments that speaking for others, especially when they are present - even for other women - "is arrogant, vain, unethical and politically illegitimate" (Alcoff: 97). Wanjiku Kabira and Masheti Masinjila (1997) in contesting Senghor's thesis, argue that traditional and colonial societies in Africa oppressed women and reduced them to the level of "social death". Orlando Patterson (1982) defines 'social death' as existence under the authority of the master figure who determines the social space of the dominated and uses this master servant relationship to condition the dominated to live at the courtesy of the master. According to Kabira and Masinjila, the traditional society consigned women to social death because, 'women existed as appendages of the male 'bread winner' and were popularized as social butterflies whose sole responsibility was to stand behind their husbands and provide the obligatory moral support (3).

Senghor is not alone in disqualifying gender as a critical area of study in African literature. In deed, several questions have been raised regarding the relevance of gender as a pragmatic literary approach in dealing with problems experienced by women and men in Africa. In some quarters, writers and critics alike perceive gender as an imposition from the west, a neo-

imperialist ploy to create dissent in the hitherto traditionally stable and cohesive African family. Kiiru (1995) unlike Senghor believes that there is need to address the place of women in creative works through feminist criticism and not gender studies. The critic argues that the noble goal of feminist criticism is polluted by its origin in gender politics whose buzzwords are 'female empowerment', 'gender sensitivity', or 'affirmative action'. According to Kiiru, these notions, noble as they may sound, are extraneous to literature. In this study, we find it interesting that while a lot of aspersions have been cast on 'feminism' as a western generated exclusionist movement of elite women, Kiiru feels more at home with the term in African literature as opposed to 'gender'. His argument that though radical and separatist, feminist criticism is literature as opposed to 'gender', which is more of 'non-governmental organisations' password for getting donor funding, is debatable. The critic's major concern is that most of the researchers who purport to study gender dimensions in creative works are driven by financial rather than intellectual considerations. Consequently, he warns of the danger of smuggling into literature things extraneous to it in the name of gender. He terms such engagement 'gender opportunism.' While we agree with the critic that literary scholarship must preserve its purity, we find the critic's statement on gender criticism in literature biased and contradictory. This is because Kiiru's argument negates the very ideals of humanism, which he agrees literature should champion (Kiiru 1988).

It is our view that opposition to attempts to re-evaluate the place of women in society, championed mainly by male critics, can be blamed on patriarchal ideology. The concept of patriarchy, which in practical sense refers to control by men, has been put forward as a generalized term for the oppression of women (Freud S 1964), (Randall 1982), (Gerder 1986), (Kabira 1993) and (Matiangi 1999). As an ideology of power and domination, patriarchy thrives on female stereotypes. For example, women are depicted as 'inferior, formless, passive, unstable, compliant, confined, pious, materialistic, spiritual, irrational, shrews and witches' (Ogundipe-Leslie 55), as opposed to men who are depicted as intelligent, rational, strong, authoritative, reliable and natural leaders.

Patriarchal ideology, therefore, exaggerates biological differences between men and women to ensure that men always have the dominant roles while women contend with subordinate



ones. This ideology is powerful because through socialization, men secure the apparent consent of the very women they oppress. Like Senghor, men begin to consider themselves as 'everybody', especially when it comes to deciding on what is good for women. They do this through institutions such as the academy, the church, and the family, each of which justifies and reinforces women's subordination to men with the result that most women internalise a sense of inferiority to men. Patriarchal ideology stipulates that male and female roles and subsequent status have been divinely ordained and are therefore unchallengeable. This ideology, often puritanical in character, predefines gender education and advocates a peculiar pedagogy of difference (Bennaars G 28). Rosemary Tong, in a desperate gesture proposes a radical feminist approach to address the disparity perpetuated by patriarchy. The critic argues that as a system characterized by power, dominance, hierarchy, and competition, patriarchy "cannot be reformed but only ripped out root and branch" (Tong 2). In the coming chapters, we bring out Macgoye's proposal on how patriarchy can be reformed to accommodate women, boys and girls without necessarily 'ripping it out root and branch' as Tong suggests.

Based on the foregoing discussion, we would argue that any meaningful discussion of gender as a method of evaluation of creative works must of necessity begin with a thorough orientation in feminist criticism. This is because gender studies originate in the broader ideology of feminism. Feminist literary criticism developed as an offshoot of the larger feminist movement concerned with the political, social and economic equality of the sexes. It is dynamic and has many and continuously multiplying strands ranging from "left-wing, centrist, left of center, right of center, reformist, separatist, liberal, socialist, Marxist, non-aligned, Islamic to indigenous feminism" (Ogundipe-Leslie 222). Other schools of feminist movement are the French, the American and the African feminist blocks. Each of the schools above defines feminist criticism differently to suit its specific goals. In spite of the multiplicity of strands within the broader feminist movement, this study finds the definition of Murfin Ross more inclusive in terms of what brings these multifarious groups together. Murfin defines feminist criticism as:

An aspect of feminist movement whose primary goals include critiquing masculine-dominated language and literature by showing how they reflect a

masculine ideology: writing the history of unknown or undervalued women writers, thereby earning their rightful place in the literary canon; and helping create a climate in which women's creativity may be fully realised and appreciated. (260)

The above definition suggests that as an ideology and philosophy of social change, feminist criticism is a dynamic project whose ultimate goal is to demonstrate through the analysis of creative works that dominant ideology marginalises women. Feminist criticism, therefore, entails a rethinking and an interrogation of dominant ideology (in our case patriarchy) to locate women's voices. It is a conscious effort to re-examine the way certain assumptions about female characters are reflected in creative works and how such ideas shape the society's thinking about women. The foregoing polemics indicate that as a theoretical approach, feminist criticism aims at projecting experiences of women. Through the very centrality given to women as characters, the reflection of their sensibilities, and the opening up of their consciousness, feminist criticism offers a new sphere rich with female experiences. In this way, feminist criticism permits the critic to contest and revise the misconceptions and narrow representations that trap women within male literary discourse.

Ellaine Showalter (1977), in her exposition on feminism, traces the development of the women's movement through three phases: the feminine, feminist and female. She explains that "feminine" refers to the phase during which women imitate masculine tradition. "Feminist" and "female" phases refer to the periods when women start protesting against masculine standards and values leading to the assertion of autonomous female perspectives. A critical assessment of Showalter's chronology of feminist evolution reveals that the critic leaves out the last and the most crucial phase in the development of feminist criticism - gender phase. It has been our contention that feminist evolution makes a complete circuit when both female and male members of the society do away with gender stereotyping and interact as equals without fear of domination by any sex.

We have observed that patriarchy, as explained earlier, thrives on male dominance. Feminism, on the other hand, counters male exclusion by illuminating visibility and control by women.

In our assessment, the two approaches are based on extreme assumption that society can only be stable in a dichotomous arrangement in which one gender is in control or independent of the other. This study erects an ideological bridge between patriarchy and feminism by arguing that theoretically, no gender should dominate the other, and that an ideal society is one in which both male and female perspectives coalesce for hybridity and synergy.

When a writer is successful in according equal recognition to male and female perspectives in her work, we say, the work is androgynous. The term "androgyny" is derived from Greek words for male and female. Virginia Woolf defines androgyny as "that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself" (Eagleton M. 29). In that case, androgyny becomes a cocktail that blends the two sexual perspectives - male and female. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, an English romantic poet and critic, in justifying androgyny as a mark of a refined writer observes that, for the artist to mirror a complete picture of life in its richness and variety, the mind must be fully fertilized to use all its faculties, male and female. Coleridge and Woolf in their separate texts suggest that androgyny is a union of masculinity and femininity in which harmonious coexistence is the key as opposed to domination, humiliation and exploitation. Stratton, in observing the transformation taking place in the literary scene identifies androgyny as a mark of emerging African literature. She contends that androgyny is a defining feature of the contemporary African literary tradition:

Writers of both sexes have made moves to reduce the level of antagonism in dialogue on gender. In doing so, they produce fiction that belongs primarily neither to a male nor to a female literary tradition, rather to an African one. The joint effort to transcend the Manichean allegory of gender marks a new movement in African literature. One that looks forward to the (re)emergence of more sexually egalitarian societies. (176)

Androgyny, which Stratton credits as the defining feature of contemporary African literature, is in agreement with Tong's observation that the best society is one in which the historically feminine values of love, compassion, sharing and nutritiveness are treasured just as much as the historically masculine values of control, structure, possessiveness and status (Tong 98).

## Feminist Criticism and African Literature

We have defined feminism, gender, and androgyny and their application to literature. In this section, we narrow down to feminist literary criticism and its application to African literature in particular. The state of feminist literary criticism in Africa is the direct focus of a number of the articles on images of women in African literature from 1980s to the present moment. One collection of essays, which this study finds outstanding is *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature* (1986). This text includes twenty articles, which provide an invaluable overview of the types of feminist criticism applied to African literature since the mid-1980s. With exception of one notable essay, most of the contributions do not focus on the issue of feminism as a critical method. In the collection's introductory essay Carole Boyce Davies writes of the tension found in the works of many critics of African literature, especially female critics. These critics, Davies argues, work out of a growing awareness of the requirement to balance both "the need to liberate African peoples from neo-colonialism and other forms of race and class oppression, coupled with a respect for certain features of traditional African cultures," and "the recognition that a feminist consciousness is necessary in examining the position of women in African societies" (1). Davies then outlines the issues of women writers in Africa as well as the development of an African feminist criticism.

In her treatment of the development of African feminist criticism, Davies lists four major areas which African feminist critics tend to address, namely: the development of the canon of African women writers, the examination of stereotyped images of women in African literature, the study of African women writers and the development of an African female aesthetic, and the examination of women and the oral tradition (13-14). We note that while Davies acknowledges the objections African women writers and critics have to the term "feminist" and discusses womanist theory, she focuses on the idea of developing an African feminist theory, which will not only perform the balancing act, but continue to address the major issues she has outlined. In our view, the "womanist theory" that Davies proposes in *Ngambika* is synonymous to the androgynous approach to literary criticism we introduced earlier on. The critic is interested in empowering African women without uprooting them from their cultural context.

Seven years later, in *A History of Twentieth-Century African Literatures* (1993), Davies and Elaine Savory Fido in a chapter entitled "African Women Writers: A Literary History" examine writings of African women writers, focusing especially on the styles and genres used by these writers. Included is a brief segment on "Feminism and African Women Writers" as well as a separate section on "Criticism and African Women's Writing." In the section on feminism, the two critics note the continued reluctance of many African women writers and critics to be called feminists because of the overtones of westernization which the term carries. They point out that most African women writers are committed, in the words of Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, "as a writer, as a woman and as a third world person" (339). This triple commitment encompasses much of the politics of African feminism, gender or womanism, whether the labels are accepted or not.

In the years following the publication of *Ngambika* in 1986, several journals devoted to African literature emerged. The notable one is *Women in African Literature Today* issue (Vol. 15) issue which contains many articles written from a feminist perspective. We discuss two of these articles as representative not merely of this particular collection, but of the feminist criticism of African literature.

In "Feminist Issues in the Fiction of Kenya's Women Writers" Jean O'Barr lists three main categories of feminist concerns in the fiction of Kenyan women writers as "how female children become women, what marriage means for women and where women's work fits into their lives" (57). O'Barr notes that the women authors she analyzes all write from the woman's point of view, sharply underscoring the idea that the female perspective may be different from the male perspective on the same topic. O'Barr analyzes the works of Kenya's female authors from a sociological approach and concludes that Kenya's women find themselves in a quadruple bind. They see themselves performing traditional roles 'without traditional resources, while at the same time they are undertaking modern activities without access to modern support systems' (69).

While O'Barr looks at the fiction of Kenyan women in order to locate the reality of women's lives, Katherine Frank, in the same text attempts in her controversial article, "Women without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa", to find a radical feminist future for African women. Frank places African women writers in the Western feminist mold by speaking of their work as a more radical extension of the Western feminist tradition. In speaking of "the contemporary British or American novel" she claims "our heroine slams the door on her domestic prison, journeys out into the great world, slays the dragon of her patriarchal society, and triumphantly discovers the grail of feminism by 'finding herself,'" (14). Frank finds that the "feminist" writers of Africa portray women not only as taking on active and shared roles with men, but as finding "a destiny of their own. ...a destiny with a vengeance," (15). The critic contends that Mariama Ba, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Ama Ata Aidoo's novels are, "more radical, even more militant, than [their] Western counterparts" (15). Frank stresses that in these novels, women find only pain and degradation in their relationships with men. But on their own and in their relationships with other women they find "female solidarity, power, independence" (33). In her interpretation, Frank neglects to note examples in which women co-exist harmoniously with men. For example, when Frank speaks of Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, she focuses on Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's friendship and the "world they create apart from men." (20), and neglects Ramatoulaye's daughter and son-in-law, and the hope Ramatoulaye finds in their relationship. Controversial as some of these critics are, their essays effectively outline some of the subtle feminist thoughts in the creative works of African women writers.

2

### **Criticism of Macgoye's Creative Works**

Up to mid-eighties, Macgoye was virtually an unknown writer considered against other African writers with extensive criticism. The literary limbo imposed on the author was based on the assumption that being a European by birth, her works could not capture an 'authentic African experience' and as such, did not qualify to be considered as African literature. The emerging African elite propagated this argument, influenced by a wave of African nationalism sweeping across the continent at that time. The elite argued that "if one wants to know what issues have engaged the Kenyan mind over the years, one should rely on literary texts written by black authors" (Wanjala 92).

From the mid-eighties, trends in literary theory and criticism have changed in favour of the minority writers like Macgoye. What was originally defined as "African literature" has since been found to be too abstract, complex and dynamic to be applied strictly to any category of writers, African or non-Africans, black or white in the postcolonial context. It has since transpired that critics of African literature, who for a long time considered their main task to be that of identifying the "Africanness" of a body of literary productions, have realised that in the postcolonial environment, nothing is fixed, African identity included. As Chinua Achebe observes, African literature is dynamic and complex, therefore, "any attempt to define African literature in terms which overlook the complexities of the African scene at the material time, is doomed to failure" ((1975: 56). Achebe emphasises an inclusive approach to the definition of African literature as part of the global literature. This is because any definition of African literature that excludes contributions from "Arabs and whites who are native to Africa and write out of the situation of involvement in the life of the continent is incomplete" (Bishop 34).

The inclusive approach to African literature promulgated by Bishop (1970) and Achebe (1975), opens up African literature and enables this study to treat Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye as peculiar African woman writer. Ali Mazrui, the celebrated African scholar and a literary critic envisage the inclusive definition of African literature that Achebe and Bishop propose as an indicator of the development of African nationalism towards cultural globalisation. The critic contends that African nationalism passes through three phases: imitation of the West to prove a capability to master Western culture; a revivalist repudiation of the colonising culture in order to unearth and develop an indigenous African heritage culminating in the final phase which is "cultural globalisation":

A third phase of cultural nationalism is the capacity to take pride in some aspects of African culture without feeling an urge to renounce Western (or any other foreign) culture at the same time. But when a cultural nationalist reaches this stage, ...(s/he) is beginning to accept the proposition that there is such a

thing as a global pool of mankind's cultural achievement from different lands.  
(1957: 108)

Mazrui's eclectic configuration of a "global pool of mankind's cultural achievement" fits in well with the post-colonial reality, which recognises the shiftiness of the terms such as African literature and an African writer. Commenting on the problematic nature of the post-colonial environment, Bhaba observes that: 'our existence today is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the boarderlines of the 'present', for which there seems to be no proper name other than the current and controversial *shiftness* of the prefix "post": postmodernism, postcolonialism, postfeminism which creates room for cultural hybridity' (1994: 1).

The shiftiness of terms like African, European, Asian, initially regarded as dogmas insists that critics re-evaluate the present in the light of the past and where possible, redefine old concepts anew to capture complex amalgamated experiences of the modern world. It is in this regard that we find the liberal definition of African literature by Nadine Gordimer, the South African woman Nobel Prize winner for Literature in 1991, relevant to the study of Macgoye's works. Gordimer defines African literature as:

Any writing done in any language by Africans themselves and by others of whatever skin colour who share the African experience and who have the African-centred consciousness. (Ngara 1982)

In dealing with Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's works, we find Gordimer's definition relevant because she balances Macgoye's concept of 'universality', which Bhaba and Mazrui call 'cultural hybridity' and 'cultural globalization' respectively with particularities in Africa such as 'African experience' and 'African-centred consciousness'. In our interpretation, the two terms - 'African experience' and 'African-centred consciousness' mean a thorough knowledge of African cultural practices and worldview in general, coupled with the ability to share in the hopes, fears, achievements and losses of the continent. Gordimer's definition is therefore not in conflict with Macgoye's concept of universality and Mazrui's concept of globalization.



Indeed, she enriches the above concepts to make African literature global and local at the same time.

We have noted that the first phase in the criticism of Macgoye's works is that of denial that she is an African writer. The next phase in the criticism of the author's works is informed by an unusual celebration of the author's contribution by European critics. This is balanced by a recognition by some African critics that though she is a European by birth, Macgoye's works are relevant to the emerging urban experience in Africa. Such analyses concentrate on Macgoye's *Murder in Majengo* in terms of its content and social relevance. In an article entitled "Popular Literature in East Africa" Elizabeth Knight (1987), a European critic, quoted in *Retrospects and Prospects: African Literature Today* (Vol. 10), argues that Macgoye's "own background in Nyanza helps her to create not only a convincing portrait of a white teacher (Vera) but also of her relationship with Africa and Africans" (180). Knight's evaluation of Macgoye is exaggerated. She argues that by staying in Nyanza, Macgoye acquires the ability to depict African and European characters in their 'authentic' picture. As we shall see in our evaluation of Macgoye's *Murder in Majengo*, the author scores poorly in this text in terms of characterization. She balkanises African women, girls and men characters as prostitutes, liars and murderers as opposed to a white lady (Vera) who is a devout Christian, philanthropic and untainted with the immorality of Majengo.

Teyie (1986), as opposed to Knight focuses on the relevance of *Murder in Majengo* to the Kenyan reality. The critic observes that *Murder in Majengo* effectively portrays Macgoye's concern with the emerging individualism of the African urban centres:

Macgoye's *Murder in Majengo* ... unveils to the reader a society that has been engulfed in a breakneck struggle for money and all that it can purchase. This is a struggle that is carried out basically on an individual basis. (109)

In their separate studies, the two critics mentioned above focus on *Murder in Majengo* and credit Macgoye for portraying African and European characters in her text credibly. Teyie observes further that the novel addresses the emerging individualism in urban centres. Both

critics in their respective contributions make no attempt to analyse the evolution of Macgoye's perspectives and social vision in her early works. They, nevertheless, recognise Macgoye as an African writer, which is a critical step in the constructive engagement with the author.

The third phase in Macgoye's criticism is marked by a more in-depth study of the selected texts by critics such as Bukenya (1988), Kimotho (1988), Mutuota K. (1988), Kibera (1991), Chesaina C. (1992), Mugubi (1994), Macharia (1995), Masheti M. (1995), Kurtz J. R (1995), Abungu (1997), Mboya (1997), Wasamba (1993) and (1997), Mutuota R. N (1997) and Simatei (2001) among others.

One area that has attracted most critics to Macgoye's works is the author's use of language in her poetry and fiction. As argued before by Kibera, Macgoye writes in such a way that a reader not conversant with her background may think that she is a native-born Kenyan writer. This is mainly because of the author's use of English language to capture African experiences. Wasamba (1997), in his M. A. thesis entitled "Language in Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's Fiction," argues that Macgoye's significance as a writer lies not only in the manner in which she blends history and art to reflect the experiences women go through in the postcolonial era, but more importantly, in her meticulous use of language for aesthetic effect. The critic evaluates language in Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* (1986), *The Present Moment* (1987) and *Homing In* (1994) and concludes that the author uses vocabulary, translational English, various syntactic options and symbolism to bring out fresh awareness of familiar themes in ways that show a deeper understanding of linguistic possibilities available to her. Wasamba identifies some of the themes addressed by the author in her fiction as women's empowerment, post-independence disillusionment in Kenya and the pressure of the past on the present experiences of women characters. Wasamba's research concentrates on a stylistic study of three texts by the author. It is our considered opinion that the study of language in Macgoye's texts is only vital in so far as it aims at evaluating the author's artistry. A comprehensive study that goes beyond the limitations of linguistic analysis to reveal Macgoye's authorial ideology and social vision is therefore necessary and timely as it fills a gap left by the previous studies.

In her essay entitled "Freedom of Choice: Kenyan Women Writers", Sophie Macharia identifies Macgoye as a writer who addresses the "woman factor" in her works. The critic argues that Macgoye's works 'highlight the woman's point of view as she grapples with the complexity of her reality in a fast changing world' (Macharia 41). In a comparative study of Macgoye and Grace Ogot (Macgoye's contemporary and a woman writer from the Luo community that Macgoye is married to), Macharia observes that as opposed to Macgoye's positive depiction of women, Ogot suggests that women have no choice in a male dominated society. Macharia implies that Macgoye seems to understand and depict the plight of African women better than Ogot who is an indigenous writer. This is because while Ogot presents women's situation as pathetic and irreversible, Macgoye dwells on the possibilities available to women to reclaim their freedom. In our view, we do not think that Ogot valorizes domination of women as such. In her works, she mirrors the situation as it is so that the society can be forced to rethink the situation of women. We therefore find the two writers committed to the liberation of women in principle. The duo only differ in their ideological approach and the levels at which they contribute to women's emancipation; one creates awareness about the situation while the other drums up support for action to correct the situation.

Kibera in Nasta S (1991), also conducts a comparative study of Macgoye's works with Bessie Head's, a South African woman writer who went on self imposed exile to Botswana. Kibera concludes that the two share commitment to their adopted motherlands, that is Kenya and Botswana respectively. Like Macharia, Kibera observes that Macgoye's novels, almost exclusively focus on women, "thus presenting a kind of Kenyan 'herstory' in which private necessity or inclination mesh with widening public opportunities to afford women the means of controlling their lives" (314).

Critics have argued that Macgoye by 'addressing the woman factor' and presenting a 'Kenyan her story' in her works cuts a literary figure of a gender conscious writer (Chesaina (1992) and Mugubi (1994)). Although Chesaina and Mugubi make no explicit pronouncements regarding gender ideology in Macgoye's novels, their criticisms strongly suggest that Macgoye champions the cause of women in her writing. Masheti Masinjila (1995) like Macharia and

Kibera, identifies women-centred ideology in Macgoye's writing. He asserts that in *Coming to Birth* the author comes out as a feminist:

*Coming to Birth* turns the traditional pre-colonial and post-colonial patriarchal world which unapologetically celebrated phallogentric ethos on its head by presenting a contesting feminine challenge that slowly but surely reconstructs reality as it is understood to create an alternative world view. (3)

Masheti's declaration that Macgoye is a feminist is tenable, especially when we consider that feminist criticism is about seeing things afresh through the female mind. As we shall demonstrate in Chapters Two, Three and Four, Macgoye focuses on women as central characters, reflects their sensibilities with understanding, and opens up their consciousness, thereby offering a new perspective, rich with female experiences. Though the studies conducted by Macharia, Kibera, Chesaina, Mugubi and Masheti are eye-openers to Macgoye's ideological inclination, they are limited in scope. They only hint at Macgoye's authorial ideology without analysing the social vision that such ideology projects. For example, Masheti explicitly identifies feminist trend in *Coming to Birth*, but he only focuses on one text and makes no attempt to trace the evolution of the author's social vision in the texts before and after *Coming to Birth*. This study seeks to complement the efforts of these critics by conducting a comprehensive study of all the author's major creative works to explore and evaluate how her ideology and social vision emerge, evolve and coalesce in her poetry and fiction.

Macgoye's concern with how social construction of gender impacts on women has escaped many critics interested in the historical concerns in her texts. Review of literature on the author reveals that most of her critics identify the rich historical sense in her works: Bukenya (1988), Kimotho (1988), Mutuota K. (1988), Abungu (1977), Mboya (1997) and Simatei (2001), all recognise and study historical affinity in Macgoye's texts. In their different ways, these critics argue that the centrality of historical reality in Macgoye's creative works gives them a tag of originality. Simatei, for instance, explores the way Macgoye inserts women's voices in the narratives of the Kenyan nation and concludes that Macgoye presents Kenyan

history in "a suppressed form and that this history is subsumed beneath an alternative project of emancipation which is in this case, the liberation of the woman from a masculinist supremacist ideology" (140). The critic, like others before him, does not venture beyond to explore the relationship between history, ideology and vision in Macgoye's works. This is an area that we intend to address in detail in Chapter Three.

In terms of ideological perspectives, Mutuota wa Kigotho (1988) argues that Macgoye is a "realist" with a socialist vision akin to Ngugi wa Thiongo.

Ngugi and Macgoye beg us to move out of a period of simple rhetoric into the more baffling and complex realities of our independence, when we have again to face the hard facts of human greed, selfishness, deceit and self-deceit, where the enemy is now ourselves, but where we can still find love and community if we will only stop shouting slogans and living in the past. (45)

Mutuota, in the above statement recognises Macgoye's contribution as a creative writer with a vision close to Ngugi wa Thiongo. While this study concurs with Mutuota that Macgoye offers a positive vision for society, the critic fails to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the authorial ideology and how it feeds into Macgoye's social vision. Roger J. Kurtz unlike Mutuota K. identifies, to a limited extent, Macgoye's authorial ideology. In a chapter that deals exclusively with Macgoye's vision, Kurtz observes that the author's concern is with the place of women in postcolonial Kenya. He points out that the author's vision is nationalistic and that in her novels, Macgoye endeavours to appraise the social, the political and the economic history of the Kenyan nation since independence. Valerie Kibera makes Kurtz's and Mutuota's observations clearer when she notes that Macgoye's major contribution as a writer and a social critic is the inclusiveness of her vision:

She has a humane eye, which compassionately registers the vulnerability of others whether they are violent husbands, women on the make or callow British soldiers in emergency Kenya. (*The Weekly Review* Sept. 12, 1986 p. 29)

Kibera, in Susheila Nasta (1991), asserts further that Macgoye has a compassionate, optimistic view of human beings and that "so authentic is her portrayal of the lives of African women in colonial and post-colonial times that someone unaware of her race and country of origin would readily assume her novels were written by a native-born Kenyan" (Nasta 326).

We concur with Kibera that Macgoye projects an optimistic vision for her adopted motherland. However, we find the use of the adjective "authentic" to describe Macgoye's depiction of African experiences too strong for a writer operating in an adopted motherland. *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines the word 'authentic' as "indisputable, genuine, reliable and trustworthy" (83). This adjective captures truth about something believed to be absolute and beyond any grain of doubt. Macgoye, as a woman of two worlds (European and African), blends African experience with her European heritage. She can therefore at best only depict African experiences faithfully but not authentically. It is also apparent that Kurtz and Kibera in their respective works have not addressed the relationship between authorial ideology and social vision in Macgoye's texts. This study seeks to reverse this trend. It puts Macgoye's authorial ideology and social vision at the centre of the study as a crucial step in appreciating the author's genius.

Some critics who identify ideological ambivalence in her works treat Macgoye's vision with skepticism. Tom Mboya (1997), for example, analyses Macgoye's *Coming to Birth, The Present Moment* and *Homing In* and observes that thematic orientation and character development in the author's texts reveal that she is a liberal apologist for colonialism. Mboya intimates that there is a strong sub-text in Macgoye's works, which if expeditiously interrogated reveals racial undertones that colour her projections of African women. At the end of his analysis, Mboya concludes that Macgoye suffers from racial prejudice and a Eurocentric view of the world:

Because the woman in Macgoye's fiction is a representation of the powerless lower classes, the apparent feminist concerns of the text are pretexts for Macgoye's racist project that justifies Europe's past and continued political and cultural domination of an African that is perceived to be inferior. (92)

Looked at closely, Mboya suggests that in terms of ideological consciousness, Macgoye is a racist and that she projects a racially stratified social vision. Peter Simatei echoes similar skepticism (2001). In his published Ph.D dissertation entitled "The Novel and the Politics of Nation Building in East Africa", Simatei observes that Macgoye exhibits "a certain ideological reluctance to deal with the implication of the present of the thwarted project of decolonisation" (134). According to Simatei, Macgoye emerges more as an apologist for colonialism from the way she devalues the significance of the Mau Mau struggle for freedom. The above observations, though very controversial, offer a challenging dimension to the study of Macgoye as an English-born Kenyan writer. To some extent, Mboya and Simatei, both from Moi University, are justified in their skepticism. This is because, inferring from Huxley and Blixen's attitudes to Africa and Africans, it may not be easy to trust 'the depiction of Africans through European pens' (Wanjala: 92). In this study, we contend that Macgoye treats Kenya as her home and depicts it with empathy as an outsider turned insider. With her weaknesses and strengths, she is a white woman writer who strives to capture alternative perspectives previously ignored in colonial writing and post-independent African literature.

Although Macgoye is known as a historian, it is our contention that the ideological standpoint that cuts across critical studies of Macgoye's texts is that of feminism. Works reviewed so far indicate that Macgoye is a liberal feminist. This implies that, in as much as the author is committed to the ideology of liberation of women, she navigates her thinking in a conciliatory manner, wanting to reform the situation through dialogue and human understanding like Davies, not through diatribe, division and revolution that Katherine Frank advocates. In the analysis of her creative works, we show that Macgoye illuminates women characters, detailing issues affecting them in order to sensitise the society to be more responsive to their needs.

Abungu Tawo (1997) argues that the way in which Macgoye reconstructs characters to reflect how historical events shape their worldview is ideologically mediated. He concludes that the author projects an alternative vision based on a subtle feminist ideology:

Macgoye as a feminist is a cut above others. She does not preach feminist ideology for the sake of it. She does not apportion blame unnecessarily. She does not harangue her readers into submitting to her ideology. She does not provide cheap solution(s) to complex problems affecting society. Her characters remain true ordinary mortals embracing change as a means of creating new possibilities for a better society. (60)

Abungu's thesis is an appropriate preamble to a comprehensive study of Macgoye's perspectives in literature. By recognising that Macgoye's characters "create new possibilities" as a way of fitting into the new society, Abungu reminds us of Macharia's earlier observation that the author gives her characters positive choices that make them progressive and compatible to a society going through transformation. Abungu's scope is wide enough. It is equally gratifying to note that while Abungu, like other critics, gravitates towards Macgoye's concern with the role of history in art, he identifies gender ideology as an integral tool in the development of the author's social vision. In his research, the critic reports that as a woman writing in a patriarchal social system, Macgoye has ideological differences with the likes of Meja Mwangi, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and David Mailu. Abungu does not justify this assertion. He seems to suggest that, because of their biological make-up, women view the world differently and are therefore capable of having unique ideological consciousness and social vision different from men. This is a contentious issue which this study addresses later on in this chapter. In spite of his ambitious approach to the study of Macgoye, Abungu's thesis remains broad in the number of texts covered but thin in in-depth evaluation of the selected texts in terms of the author's ideology and artistic vision.

Contrary to what Masheti (1995), Bukenya (1988), Mboya (1997), Wasamba (1997) and Abungu (1997) observe in her works, Macgoye denies advancing feminist ideology in art. She contends that she is a universal writer who champions the cause of humanity beyond the narrow restrictions of gender. She argues that writing about women does not necessarily make one a feminist:



I do not necessarily write for women. But I write about both men and women. Where I write more about women, it is because I am first and foremost a woman. I happen to know much about women than about anybody else. I know the problems they undergo, because in any case I have myself undergone those problems. I write to encourage humanity to preserve those humane values and that women may make the best of their lot (Wasamba 1997: 7)

In an interview the author gave Wasamba (1999), Macgoye reiterates that in as much as her authorial ideology is women-focused, she is not a feminist:

I am a woman. I don't call myself a woman writer, but a woman who happens to write. I know more about what happens in a woman's mind and heart and a man's heart and mind. It seems to me natural that my writing should focus on the experiences of women because I am part of that experience.

Pressed to explain why she prefers to be considered just as a writer and not a woman writer, Macgoye responds: "it is for the same reason that Achebe wants to be considered as a writer and not an African writer. You don't limit yourself." The author argues that accepting the tag of a woman writer limit's one's creative scope and audience because "automatically you become exclusive and narrow in perception. ...a writer, man or woman, should address universal values and not narrow temporal interests."

In this section, it has emerged that while Macgoye champions the cause of women in her works, she denies being a feminist writer. The author is not allied to any school of feminism as she considers such groupings elitist and not helping local women. Macgoye's denial of feminist association, to us, is not surprising. This is because as a European woman operating in Africa, her theory for women's liberation may not necessarily agree with the local women's initiatives. As we shall demonstrate in our analysis of Macgoye's texts in the coming chapters, Macgoye's texts defy her pronouncements on feminism and proceed to deconstruct the author's intended meaning to advocate for a world in which women are active agents of change in partnership with men.

As a writer who believes in universality, Macgoye argues that terms such as "feminism" and "gender" are meaningless. She prefers to be seen as a writer who "champions the cause of humanity beyond the narrow restrictions of gender, race or creed" (Wasamba 1997:7). This has disappointed feminist critics who believe that to be a woman writer and not a feminist is an abnegation of duty, a betrayal of fellow women in the struggle against overwhelming patriarchal domination. Ogundipe-Leslie, in particular, questions the sincerity of women writers like Macgoye who refuse to publicly embrace feminism as if it is a crime to accept, reclaim and defiantly celebrate female identity and destiny:

Many of the African female writers like to declare that they are not feminists as if it were a crime to be a feminist. These demands come from unlikely writers such as Bessie Head, Buchi Emecheta, even Mariama Ba. I would put this down to the successful intimidation of the African women by men over the issue of women's liberation and feminism. Male ridicule, aggression and backlash have resulted in making women apologetic and have given the term 'feminist' a bad name. Yet nothing would be more feminist than the writings of these women writers, in their concern for and deep understanding of the experiences and fate of women in the society. (ALT Vol.15: 11)

This study partly agrees with Ogundipe-Leslie that in terms of concern for and deeper understanding of the experiences of women in society, all works by women writers, Macgoye included, are feminist in one way or another. We do not, however, agree with the critic's conclusion that 'male ridicule, aggression and backlash' are entirely to blame for women's fobia for the 'feminist' tag. This is because, Ogundipe-Leslie's allegation valorizes the fallacy that women (writers) are not intelligent enough to identify what is right for them and that they can easily be confused by men.

In our assessment, Ogundipe-Leslie's censor of women writers who do not confess feminist loyalty is based on three assumptions, which are contestable. The critic assumes that all women writers are aware that they are feminists, that there is only one strand of feminism that

women must subscribe to, and that women writers' pronouncements regarding their ideological footing matter in the interpretation of their works. These assumptions go against the central tenets of the feminist movement as an ideology of liberation for all women (and men). Shoshana Felman wonders what it really means to be 'speaking as a woman: "is it enough to be a woman to speak as a woman? Is speaking as a woman a factor determined by some biological condition or by a strategic theoretical position, by anatomy or by culture?" (Eagleton M. 10). This study contends that women and men join the feminist movement out of choice and commitment and not by biology. In this regard, being a woman does not graduate one into a feminist and being a man likewise, does not ban one from becoming a feminist. Women are not feminists by virtue of the act alone of being women. 'Feminism is a social political reality, a struggle, a commitment, women become feminists', just like men (Eagleton S. 194). Though the legitimacy of male voices in feminist discourse is contentious, it is apparent that as an ideology of social change, feminism cuts across gender. Jacobus Heath agrees with Sarah Eagleton that men are also legitimate feminists just like women:

Feminism is a subject for women who are, precisely, its subjects, the people who make it, it is their affair. Feminism is also a subject for men, what it is obviously concerns them: they have to learn to make it their affair, to carry it through into our lives. Feminism speaks to me, not principally nor equally but too, to me too: the definitions and images and stories and laws and institutions oppressive of women that it challenges, ends, involve me since not only will I find myself playing some part in their production but I too I am caught up in them, given as a 'man' in their reflection, confined in that place which is then presented as mine. (Eagleton S. 201)

Jacobus wrestles with many words to justify men's legitimate niche in the feminist discourse. From his explanation, it is clear that the position carved for or grabbed by men in the feminist debate is not only narrow but also very contentious and vulnerable to attack by those who claim total ownership of feminist movement - women. We support Jacobus that feminism concerns men too, on condition that the liberation of women from patriarchal domination has a reciprocal effect of freeing men from the moral guilt of oppression and exploitation.

Her verbal pronouncements aside, a critical assessment of Macgoye's treatment of women's agenda in her texts (as we do in Chapters Two, Three and Four of this study), reveals that the author is not opposed to the empowerment of women. She is only disturbed by the rhetoric about women's empowerment which apart from assuming the victim status of women also ignores their great achievements both in the traditional as well as the modern times. The author questions the ostentatious lifestyle of a few elite women who claim to be championing the cause of the womenfolk while in reality they are cashing in on the plight of their fellow women. Regarding the Beijing Conference of 1995, the critic comments sarcastically:

We live in a society that admits that 200 of our children die everyday.... Can our society in this case afford even one air fair to Beijing for women to pontificate on their problems? (5).... It is said to have cost Kshs. 170,000 for one delegate to go to the Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995. How many child lives could have been saved with that money? What would have been the effect on world opinion if for that reason Kenyan women had decided to boycott the conference? (*Moral Issues* 87)

From Macgoye's argument, it can be deduced that her reluctance to identify with the feminist movement locally has more to do with how the whole issue of women's liberation has been handled. Feminist writers, according to Macgoye, often portray local women as frustrated and deprived. The author contends that while in some cases this may be true, it is not always self-evident:

It is true that some societies regard women as inferior. [but]...Every country has its remembered heroines, women storytellers, singers, administrators and saints. There was a way to the top for the most able, *though perhaps they had to be relatively tougher than the men folk to get there*" (emphasis mine, *Moral Issues* 73).

In the above excerpt, Macgoye accepts that traditional society was not always supportive of women. The author views this as a source of strength for which women should celebrate. This is because in spite of the insurmountable impediments under patriarchy, women of substance and quality managed to force the society to recognize their worth as leaders. Margaret Ogola (1995) supports Macgoye's argument that the traditional society was not totally opposed to women's progress. In *The River and the Source*, Obanda Akoko, the protagonist in the novel, struggles on her own to challenge the phallogocentric belief that a woman is a lesser being in a society dominated by men. Due to her strength of character, intelligence and courage, she becomes the source of the river of women's empowerment that flows from the traditional patriarchal society in Nyanza to the modern cosmopolitan environment in Nairobi. Ogola indicates that in spite of the obstacles encountered, strong women have always prevailed by seizing the windows of opportunities existing in the system to create space for the realization of their goals in male dominated societies.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study employs gender criticism as a literary theory and method of analysis. This theory is an advanced form of feminist literary criticism. As we have explained extensively in the literature review section, gender criticism, as an advanced form of feminist criticism, is an interventionary theory that harmonises extant antagonistic feminist standpoints through a workable symbiosis. Obioma Nnaemeka, a Nigerian feminist critic, justifies the use of gender theory as a means of strengthening feminist criticism and making it relevant to the contemporary thinking. The critic observes that lack of symbiosis in feminist criticism is its major undoing. By acting as a bridge that links extremist sexist theoretical approaches, gender ideology introduces a literary theory capable of achieving symbiosis in criticism (Nnaemeka 163). Culler J (1983), in evaluating the correlation between feminist criticism and gender criticism argues that, looking at gender perspectives in a creative work is a step towards humanizing feminist criticism. It aims at reversing the usual situation in which the perspectives of male critics are assumed to be sexually neutral, while a feminist reading is seen as an attempt to force the text into a predetermined mould (55). This reminds us of Sarah Suleri's observation that one of the differences conspicuously suppressed in African literature is the gender difference. The critic argues that because of the politics involved, 'the work

conducted around the theoretical intersections of feminism and gender studies is virulently subjected to popular parodies and irrational rectitude' (qtd. in Williams and Chrisman 245). Critics either trivialise the place of gender in criticism, or insist on 'patriarchal moral uprightness' that renders incisive evaluation of the gender perspectives in women and men's works pedantic and superfluous.

Chesaina (1994), like Suleri, observes that the debate on the place of gender in the criticism of African literature has been politicised to the extent that real issues have been ignored for partisan interests. The politics of gender is further complicated by extremist attitudes, which pit radical male critics against feminists with the former being dismissive of gender, while the latter is defensive of the same. In calling for sobriety in gender dialogue, Chesaina (1995) notes that:

African literature from its very past has been functional. It is in this light that the reassessment of gender relations particularly the position of women in society can be viewed as a most pertinent and relevant subject for creative writers and critics of African literature. (Introduction)

In essence, Chesaina is saying that no committed creative writer or literary critic practicing in the 21st. Century can ignore gender concerns in his/her work. Chesaina echoes the sentiments of Nana Wilson Tagoe, a Barbadian feminist critic and writer, who observes that there is a lot to be gained by incorporating gender studies in literary criticism. This is because such a study invites various perspectives and generates pertinent questions such as:

How are ideas of manhood and womanhood destabilized within a changing world? How do men and women constitute new identities in a postcolonial era? How do men and women relate to the same cultural myths? (Newel 11)

It is apparent from Tagoe's questions that gender studies in literary criticism make a deliberate attempt to enrich existing human experiences by including the perspectives of women in the critical discourse.

We will also use deconstruction to complement gender criticism in this study. Within the context of our investigation, deconstruction, as a literary theory, "dismantles binary opposition that exists in gender relations in order to demystify them" (Mutuota R. 7). This theory is relevant to our study because it is based on the assumption that writings by women reveal various perspectives, and that such writings operate within a male discourse and are in inconstant interaction and dialogue with it through double-edged perspectives and revisionists interrogations. In evaluating gender perspectives in the creative works of Macgoye, we shall of necessity deconstruct the texts. This involves questioning, subverting and destabilising the texts to reveal gender disparities encapsulated in race, nationality, sex and culture with the ultimate aim of dismantling phallogentric beacons of patriarchy.

Nnaemeka, Culler, Tagoe, Stratton and Chesaina in calling for theoretical pluralism and complementarity of female and male perspectives in literary criticism affirm gender as a fundamental theory of literature. The approach enables critics to see representations in the creative texts as mediated by sexual differences. This study demonstrates that rigorous qualitative interrogation of gender perspectives in Macgoye's oeuvre not only revises our notions of artistic representations, but also inspires a rethinking on the conceptual ground of postcolonial literary theory and the legitimacy of the female perspectives.

## **Summary of Chapters**

This study flows in the following format: Introduction lays a foundation for an in-depth exploration of perspectives in Macgoye's works. It includes a synthesised version of the proposal for the study with emphasis on the statement of the problem, hypothesis, literature review, and theoretical framework. The chapter also introduces Macgoye as a creative writer before shedding light on theoretical exposition on gender, ideology and artistic vision. Chapter One critically investigates Macgoye as a poet of the song school. The texts evaluated are *Song of Nyarloka and Other Poems* and *Make it Sing and Other Poems*. Chapter Two evaluates gender perspectives in Macgoye's short novels. It explores how the author treats young women and men, boys and girls in *Growing up at Lina School*, *Victoria* and *Murder in Majengo*, *The Black Hand Gang* and *Street Life*. This chapter explores the growth of

Macgoye's ideology and how it impacts on her vision for young women and men. Chapter Three addresses gender perspectives in Macgoye's prose fiction. It traces the growth in the author's maturity in terms of gender ideology and social vision. The texts examined are *Coming to Birth*, *The Present Moment*, *Homing In* and *Chira*. Chapter Four concludes the study. It summarises the findings of the research and compares the results against the hypotheses. The chapter also points out areas for future research on Macgoye.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have introduced Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye as an African writer of English origin. We have also looked at the theoretical debates on gender and how we can use them to our advantage in evaluating gender perspectives and artistic vision in Macgoye's creative works. In the course of our analysis, it has emerged that there is a strong justification for conducting gender analysis of Macgoye's creative works. Feminist criticism has also been revisited as the cradle of gender criticism. It has been realised that there is a strand of feminist criticism that avoids the radicalism and diatribe in favour of dialogue and survival of the family. The next chapter Chapter introduces Macgoye as a poet of the song school. The texts to be evaluated are *Song of Nyarloka and Other Poems* and *Make it Sing and Other Poems*



## CHAPTER ONE

### MACGOYE'S QUEST FOR IDENTITY AS NYARLOKA

In the previous chapter, the study introduced Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye as a Kenyan woman writer of European descent. We noted that her background as a European woman married to an African makes her identity problematic. As a European, she is an outsider to Kenya but also an insider as a Kenyan citizen and a mother to African children. To overcome her outsider status, the author advocates for a universal view of life which allows her to make home anywhere on the globe, Kenya included. The study also defined terms such as commitment, ideology, vision, gender, feminist criticism and androgyny. Understanding and contextualization of these terms in the appreciation of Macgoye's works are crucial to the critical evaluation of the author's perspectives in literature.

In this chapter we evaluate the contribution of Macgoye as a European woman and a poet struggling for identity in a new environment - Kenya. Although Macgoye gained instant international popularity for her award-winning novel, *Coming to Birth*, the writer has a long history as a poet dating back to her childhood. Since that time, the author has written a number of poems in journals, anthologies and newspapers. Most of these poems have been put together in Macgoye's two major collections of poetry: *Song of Nyarloka and Other Poems (SNOP)* and *Make it Sing and Other Poems (MSOP)*. Her poetry has, however, remained concealed from the Kenyan public for what Philo Ikonya in an introduction to *Make it Sing and Other Poems (MSOP)* terms mystic approach to verse:

A poet is many things at the same time: a creator, teacher, historian, geographer and musician. Yet, even when these qualities are taken into account, it is not possible to grasp everything about a poet. So we are told "poets are gods". (*MSOP* vii)

While this study concurs with Ikonya's argument that there is something challenging about the creative genius of poets like Macgoye, we do not agree with the critic's conclusion that, like

gods, poets are beyond comprehension. Ikonya's suggestion implies that poetry is difficult, obscure, mystical, esoteric and therefore, impenetrable. This may not be the case. In our view, poets, Macgoye included, are first and foremost men and women who have a duty to communicate their thoughts to the people. As Longinus argues in his treatise *On the Sublime*, 'the profound effect of poetry on the human mind is based neither on mystery nor impulse, but on discoverable causes such as the grandeur of thought and spiritual elevation that elicit heightened response from the audience' (Kaplan 54).

Longinus' concept of sublimity in art is echoed by Okot p'Bitek (1974). In *Horn of my Love*, p'Bitek contends that poets are the tip of the society's wit: they have "the talents which members of their social group do not have of distilling the thoughts, joy, fears, anger, sorrow and presenting these in melodic poems" (9). p'Bitek (1986) further asserts that by doing with words what politicians, scientists and historians cannot do, the poet is indeed, the ruler of the people (40). Using p'Bitek's argument, we can say that Macgoye is a special poet, but still a poet of the people. Her poetry is not a closed shop but a long script in which the post-independence experiences in Kenya are recorded through the eyes of Nyarloka.

Nyarloka, the poetic persona in all Macgoye's poems under this study, is a Luo name for a girl or "a woman who leaves her native land, perhaps crossing seas, rivers and lakes to become one with the new land where she marries" (Macgoye 1998:x). Macgoye, having crossed the sea from Britain and married a Luo man in Central Nyanza is Nyarloka. These poems therefore depict the poet as her persona. Apart from revealing to the reader the problems inherent in a society undergoing change, *Song of Nyarloka* also focuses on the poet's gradual transformation towards a more assuring cultural and spiritual equilibrium. As sketches of Macgoye's autobiography, these poems represent Nyarloka's desire to establish order by locating the cultural centre of her new society. The term Nyarloka has semantic indeterminacy in Macgoye's poetry. As a poetic persona, Nyarloka is a universal symbol of those who find themselves trapped in the confusion and rootlessness that culture contact and social transformation engender.

Macgoye considers herself as Nyarloka because she has crossed seas to her matrimonial home. While the themes addressed in her fiction such as the quest for identity and growth of women characters individually and collectively remain the same, Macgoye electrifies them with poetic sparks that make them forceful and more appealing. It is in this regard that this chapter investigates the performance of Macgoye as Nyarloka groping for identity using song style as a medium of communication.

The texts to be evaluated in this chapter are *Song of Nyarloka and Other Poems (SNOP)* (1977) and *Make it Sing and Other Poems (MSOP)* (1998). Although the two texts are separated by twenty-one years, they largely overlap in terms of content and form. For instance, **Song of Nyarloka**, the longest poem in *Song of Nyarloka and Other Poems*, is also the major poem in *Make it Sing and Other Poems*. Similarly, **Make it Sing**, the title of the latest collection is in *SNOP*. The only difference between the two texts is that *Make it Sing and Other Poems* contains a few poems written after the publication of *SNOP*. We argue in this chapter that in terms of poetic techniques and materials used, *MSOP* (1998) is a revised edition of *SNOP* (1977). This study will therefore treat the two texts as one.

Titles of *SNOP* and *MSOP* highlight song as the main medium of communication used by Macgoye. Exclusive use of song in Macgoye's poetry introduces the poet as a troubadour. This is a French word for poets who invent and sing verses in elaborate lyrics. Such artists have greater freedom of speech and exploit poetic license to address social, economic and political concerns spiced with throbbing rhythm. Ikonya identifies song style as the major poetic technique in Macgoye's poetry, and consequently calls her the "troubadour":

Marjorie's is an active soul, a searching soul, a singing soul. Song is an integral part of Marjorie's poetry, not just because the words 'song' and 'sing' feature repeatedly, but also because the poems possess an innate rhythm and vigour - much like musical performances - tempered by a firm controlled rhythm. (*MSOP* vii)

Ikonya observes that song style is an appropriate poetic technique in Macgoye's poetry because of its "innate rhythm and vigour" that brings it closer to traditional oral performances. We can also add that song as a poetic style gives Nyarloka the power of speech in her new home. Moving from silence to speech is an initial step in Nyarloka's gradual transformation from an object to an active participant in the change process in her adopted motherland. In a male dominated society, Nyarloka's song can be viewed as a gesture of defiance that makes a woman's quest for identity fruitful. It allows her to articulate her concerns without sounding arrogant or conceited. As a newly married woman curious to know the values and mores in her new environment, song gives Nyarloka 'poetic license' to question matters that native women are traditionally not allowed to do. Above all, song style ensures that her hosts positively understand Nyarloka.

In the East African literary tradition, the song school under which *SNOP* and *MSOP* fall is historically conditioned. Ideologically, the songs are dominated by African beliefs and value systems that occupied the thinking and actions of emergent African writers in the aftermath of independence from colonial rule. The poets who belong to the song school are Okot p'Bitek (*Song of Lawino, Song of Ocol, Song of a Prisoner and Song of Malaya*), Okelo Oculi (*Orphan*), Joseph Buruga (*Abandoned Hut*), Micere Mugo (*My Mother's Song and Other Poems*) and Macgoye (*SNOP* and *MSOP*). Together, these works, geared to oral performance, form a song school in the East African literary history. They borrow directly from the African oral tradition where the composers make special songs to relate their experiences. Stylistically, the songs exploit lyrical techniques to sustain rhythm and semantic cohesion. They are very subjective and dwell on individual's perception of events unfolding in the society. Song, as a style of poetic expression, also allows poets to express their attitudes to life through a great deal of emotion.

### **Nyarloka's Quest for Identity**

In *Song of Nyarloka*, the poet attempts to establish her sense of being so that her legitimacy is not questioned. It is this constant search for self-image in an adopted motherland that we treat as Macgoye's quest for identity. Consequently, one of the major themes that emerge in the

analysis of Macgoye's poetry is the quest for identity. The poet treats the theme of cultural identity through the experiences of an individual - Nyarloka.

Poems in *Song of Nyarloka and Other Poems*, mostly written in the first decade after independence, show the poet reflecting on the traditional African society in her quest for identity. In the first category we have a long narrative poem with five constituent parts called **Song of Nyarloka** from which the book derives its title. The five parts of the long poem appear under different topics as 'Kisumu', 'The African City', 'The Arts', 'Living with the Dead' and 'The Crossing Over'. All the five parts of **Song of Nyarloka** are thematically interrelated. They reflect a progressive quest for identity by the female persona, Nyarloka. This text is unique because it articulates Macgoye's understanding of Luo customs and traditions. To an extent, these poems offer a rich source of information on Luo culture as perceived by a white woman.

The second category of poems in the text is simply referred to as **Other Poems**. They are occasional poems written at different times in response to various historical and political events in the society. Most of the occasional poems comment on political happenings such as the political assassinations of important people, the poet's relationship with her contemporaries and her attitude to some traditional African cultural practices. Unlike **Song of Nyarloka** where the persona addresses the reader from a single perspective - that of a white woman trying to understand her new environment - in the occasional poems, the poetic persona adopts different perspectives. As a naturalised Kenyan, Nyarloka addresses various concerns as a cultural nationalist, a political activist, a human rights advocate and a historian.

In **Song of Nyarloka**, the persona exploits 'poetic license' of a visitor to condemn cultural confusion in the 'African City', which is Nairobi. According to the persona, the city is bedeviled with economic hardships, moral decline, widespread poverty, violence, sophistication and craze for western fashions. Cultural alienation in the city perpetuates estrangement, making life miserable. Disenchantment with the city life, is vividly brought out by Nyarloka:

People live by the clock here  
And by the calendar  
Only a month is a long time  
To wait for a little money. (SNOP 6)

References to 'clock' and 'calendar' in the above excerpt show the persona's disenchantment with modernity. Nyarloka ridicules sophistication and automation brought about by modernisation. The persona longs for simplicity and spontaneity of the traditional life, which is lacking in the African City. Modernisation has reduced people to mere robots who are slaves to time, calendar and computers. Through well-ordered parallels in the above verse, the persona evokes the monotony and drudgery of city life to dramatize its alienating effect. Nyarloka is disturbed that people should abandon their stable and practical life for the city, which is devoid of human compassion with computers as chief determinants of what people get.

We find Macgoye's criticism of uncontrolled modernization pertinent to the current situation in Kenya. Of late, the government of Kenya has been talking of industrialization by 2020, social dimension to development and poverty reduction strategies. The main concern is that majority of the Kenyan women and men who pay the price of modernization are never consulted. One may question the urgency of industrialization if 80% of the population cannot put food on the table almost four decades after independence. At one point, Macgoye's caution against the use of computers may be taken as a crusade against technological advancement. The poet, however, seems to suggest that rapid modernization coupled with indiscriminate technological transfer can be dangerous to the developing world, especially, if it ignores cultural diversity and the relevance of indigenous knowledge. We share the poet's concern that in an underdeveloped economy, computers with their mathematical rigidity only accentuate the complexity of life.

In 'The Arts' Nyarloka extols the vitality of African culture for remaining steadfast in spite of cheapening of the arts for commercial consumption. According to Nyarloka, devaluation of

please Europeans. Africans will one day realise the futility of their vain efforts and return to their cultural roots. The persona is optimistic that Africa will reclaim her cultural identity:

I shall commission  
(since this is the accepted record of human dignity)  
a series of painting by Elimo\*  
with explanatory text from Taban\*  
on the types of independence period.  
There will be the mini girl and the Kaftan girl-  
No women at all, since maturity and obligations were disguised in those days.  
(MSOP 20)

From the above lines, it is apparent that Nyarloka intends to use visual arts to epitomise the confusion that enveloped Africa as evidenced in the craze for western fashions. These fashions are as ridiculous as they are numerous. The persona cites the Yuruba-look, Muganda-look, Arab national-look, English skirt and Tweedy-look and the Moran look. All these fashions will be put into painting by Elimo Njau, a Chagga painter of international repute, while Taban lo Liyong, a Sudanese writer and satirist will offer the explanatory texts to the paintings.

Macgoye's disenchantment with cheapening of African arts for commercial gains from the west is shared by Derek Walcott, a Caribbean playwright and Nobel laureate from Trinidad. In an introductory essay to *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* entitled "What the twilight Says: An Overture", Walcott observes:

Now we are entering the "African" phase with our pathetic African carvings, poems and costumes, and our art objects are not sacred vessels placed on altars but goods placed on the shelves for the tourist.... The result is not one's own thing but another minstrel show. (8)

Walcott, in the above lines, laments the degradation of African arts, which are sacred objects of cultural heritage into goods for sale without any regard to their aesthetic and religious import. Walcott's concern complements Nyarloka's discomfort with the Masaai for cheapening their heritage. In the paintings to depict independence days, Nyarloka ridicules the Maasai for commercialising their culture to please tourists. They are portrayed as cultural comedians, who wear colourful dresses not because they like them, but to please tourists and win some coins.

Contrary to the norms that restrict the behaviour of brides in their matrimonial homes, Nyarloka does not speak as a visitor or an outsider. She considers herself a full member of the society with all rights and privileges. The poet does not beg for acceptance as an African, she proclaims it. In her quest for identity, Nyarloka disputes the criteria used to qualify people as Africans or non-Africans. She argues that one does not become an African by hypocritically donning African ornaments or clownishly aping western ways like attending cocktail parties. Doing so is a true manifestation of a culturally whitewashed mind. In launching this argument, Macgoye provokes serious thinking in terms of the criteria that should be used to identify "authentic" Africans (if at all that distinction exists). Nyarloka argues that she is an African, perhaps, even better than those who dismiss her Africanity: "I am a Luo woman -/ Do not ask me how many children I have" (*MSOP* 27). Among the Luo, it is not customary for a woman to tell the number of children she has to a visitor for fear of sinister motives. This argument is explored further in **Letter to a Friend** where the persona (a white woman) tells those who doubt her identity as an African woman, "I know my place and can recite my ancestors." 'My ancestors' in this context refers to Macgoye's Luo 'ancestors'.

Macgoye argues that the quest for cultural identity does not necessarily entail a nostalgic return to Africa's romantic past as Leopold Sedar Senghor perceived it in the hey-days of the Negritude movement (Jones E. D. 1973). The poet makes her position clear in **Letter to a Friend**. The poem is directed at Okot p'Bitek, her friend. The persona attacks p'Bitek for vainglorious adulation of Africa's past in his poetry as if there is no present to take care of and the future to look forward to. The persona questions why she should be marginalised because she is not black while those who are singing about black aesthetics are not accounting



for their blackness responsibly. Nyarloka argues that, contrary to blackness that p'Bitek preaches as the true badge of African identity, she too is an African in white skin. She pities those who wallow in the beauty of their blackness oblivious of the many serious problems afflicting the majority of Africans. The persona quips defiantly:

Why should I be ashamed?  
Not to be black, when you, who are proud  
Empty your years thinking about Africa  
And leave Lawino weeping. (*SNOP* 47)

In the poem, the persona laments that while p'Bitek sings about the beauty of the old homestead in *Song of Lawino*, "one baby dies in threes, songs and homesteads die" (*SNOP* 48) without mention or attention. Macgoye suggests that instead of showering praises on the grandeur of Africa's past, p'Bitek and his compatriots should understand that Africa is her people (the Lawinos) who have several basic needs to be satisfied. We share in Macgoye's thesis that cultural identity does not necessarily entail an escapist glorification of the past but moreso a constructive engagement with the present as Nyarloka advises:

If you want to become one (with Africa)  
Go to the bus park at dusk  
And watch the twinkling lights throwing a beauty  
Over the harsh grind of every man's city.  
(Parenthesis mine *SNOP* 9)

In the above excerpt, the poet observes that one should identify with Africa by empathising with her people, understanding their inner lives, their sufferings, their hopes and aspirations. In essence, the poet is arguing that identification with Africa should be by action and not empty rhetoric. It is for this reason that Nyarloka goes through cultural transformation to become an African woman. To create her space as an African, the persona replaces skin colour (black) with African thinking or African sensibilities as the badge of African identity. Macgoye, by suggesting that skin colour can be deceptive in deciding the Africanness of a

person, advances the debate above the narrow restrictions of race to the psychological domains where sensibilities lie.

In this chapter, we agree with Macgoye that taking refuge in the glorious past does not contribute to the assertion of black aesthetics. While we concur with the poet that a neurotic espousal of the cultural agenda in total disregard for the felt needs of the people is escapist and irresponsible, the study also identifies Nyarloka's inability, as a visitor, to comprehend the motivating forces that shape Africans' defiant celebration of their blackness. The persona argues:

Changing continent in the mainstream  
Is likely to create a mild upheaval  
There is no need to lament loudly like a woman  
Chasing a run-away sheep in a tight skirt. (*SNOP* 49)

As a visitor ignorant of Africa's past, Nyarloka trivializes p'Bitek's cultural nationalism. The persona feels that the upheavals Africa has gone through like slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism, and which have had profound effect on the Africans' way of thinking are nothing but mild upheavals not worth lamenting loudly about. The image she employs of 'a woman in a tight skirt chasing a run-away sheep' serves further to demean a poignant issue. In ridiculing p'Bitek, the poet borrows a lot from Luo anti-women oral culture. Luos believe that 'anything trivial, weak or negative is feminine' (Okoth Okombo 1992). In reducing p'Bitek to the level of a clownish woman chasing a sheep, the persona degrades a serious matter to the level of a non-issue.

Macgoye explores the theme of cultural identity further in **For Miriam**, a poem written by the poet in honour of her mother-in-law. In this poem, the persona who is an old woman gracefully embraces old age as part of life and insists that in spite of the changes she has been exposed to, she is still an African woman. Miriam displays with pride the rugged features of her body: "knobbed, harsh hands", "red eyes" and "swollen feet" (*SNOP* 26), which are signs of old age. Though old, she is dignified, tender and loving. In spite of the several changes she

has witnessed, the old lady is still "lithe, dutiful, expectant" (*SNOP* 26). Miriam has encountered the Europeans and their ways, she has acquired some of their values like going to church, getting saved, dressing according to weather, going to the hospital, and visiting relations in town without abandoning her true self. She views these changes with diffident disdain. This is dramatized by the refrain at the end of every stanza "It is still I." In the eleventh stanza, the persona proudly flaunts the African aesthetics by celebrating the beauty and resilience of Mother Africa:

Africa of your ancestry has not changed  
Is age recognised? The tissues are the same,  
The blood, guarded and grounded, feeds new life.  
.....  
Yet Mother Africa laughs,  
It is still I. (*SNOP* 27)

In scintillating the beauty and resilience of Mother Africa, the persona condemns negative ways brought about by the western values like 'tying of the womb' (the use of contraceptives in family planning) and an 'unwanted babies'. Miriam is an epitome of Mother Africa: strong, resilient, proud, sacrificing, loving, caring, determined and ever smiling. In the last stanza of the poem, the persona repudiates western ways, laughs at them and resolves to remain a symbol of the spirit of African womanhood:

Don't talk to me of change, even of freedom  
I have seen changes and I am content. (*SNOP* 27)

In the above excerpt, Macgoye seems to suggest that what is important in the quest for identity is cross-cultural fertilization informed by the identification with the "sufficient self" not race, religious groupings or political persuasions. Miriam has changed without losing her cultural base as a Luo woman. From the foregoing presentation, it emerges that Macgoye handles the theme of quest for identity at two levels, the individual and communal. She demonstrates that acceptance of the true self is necessary for a cultural rebirth. The poet in

calling for cultural hybridity asserts the need to adopt a new culture that is relative and accommodative to all members of the society, Nyarloka included.

In concluding our discussion on Nyarloka's quest for identity, we reiterate that **Song of Nyarloka** is the persona's attempt to fit in her new role as a Luo woman. Though an outsider, Nyarloka reflects the cultural shift in Luo values by giving it an outsider's perspective. In an interview with Otieno Amisi (1992) Macgoye explains that **Song of Nyarloka** was her attempt at acculturation into the world of her new life:

At the time, acculturation was my major concern. You see, I am a Luo woman bearing children. Song of Nyarloka was my assertion of this fact and an attempt to come to terms with the society (New Age.6)

As a collective persona, Nyarloka's quest is symbolic of Kenya's struggle for political stability. Nyarloka's search for her identity runs parallel to the country's search for a cultural and political stronghold. Kenya, like Nyarloka, is a young nation stumbling on her way to political maturity. Like a child learning to walk, or a bride learning about her new environment, the country makes mistakes evidenced in detentions without trial, political assassinations, land problem, cultural alienation and spiritual poverty inherent in the 'African City'. This reminds us of Macgoye's treatment of the theme of birth in *CTB*, *TPM* and *HI*, which we address in Chapter Four. In these novels, the author argues that growth of Kenya into a politically stable and prosperous country is retarded by bad governance evidenced in political assassinations, senseless murder of innocent children, abortive coup, anarchy of multi-partism, and sheer absence of pragmatic and visionary political leadership.

Complementarity between art and quest for identity that Macgoye addresses in **Song of Nyarloka** is clearly brought out by Herper quoted in Abram (1974). Citing the role of poetry in the quest for identity, the critic observes that poetry as a universal art brings humankind together regardless of race, gender or creed:

Poetry draws mankind together, it breaks down barriers, relieves loneliness, shows ourselves in others, and others in ourselves, it is the friendly art. It ignores time and space. National, racial and secular differences fall at its touch, it is the touch of kinship. and when we feel this, we laugh at our pretensions, timidity and reserves. Everything in antiquity is antiquated except in art, especially poetry. (Abram 190)

Poetry, as Harper correctly posits, is the most demanding form of art. It is unifying, beautiful, impressive and an effective way of expressing elevated thoughts. It is Nyarloka's ability to collocate artistic beauty and truth in rhythmic harmony that exalts her as a refined poet in Kenya. By bringing together beauty in musical harmony, Macgoye communicates subtle feelings and personal reminiscences of Nyarloka in a form that cannot easily be distorted or erased from memory.

### **Nyarloka as a Politician**

In Macgoye's poetry, quest for identity runs side by side with the struggle for freedom. The poet addresses freedom in its broad context ranging from social, political to spiritual dimensions. This sounds logical because a person who is alienated is a prisoner of conscience. An assertion of one's identity is therefore a manifestation of psychological freedom. Through her poetry, Macgoye suggests that freedom is an inalienable right to individuals and the society. The irony is that freedom eludes all attempts to realise it in pre- and post-independence Kenya. It is however curious to note that the poet concentrates on lack of freedom in post-independence Kenya without giving equal attention to the situation during colonialism. This selective rendition of Kenya's history gives credence to Simatei's earlier observation that Macgoye's version of Kenya's history is 'suppressed history'. **Make it Sing, A Freedom Song, A Muffled Cry** and *Shairi la Ukombozi* address the poet's concern with the absence of freedom in post independent Kenya. In **Make it Sing**, from which *MSOP* takes its title, the poet pleads with artists to use their talents to fight for justice. She pleads with them to 'make it sing':

Let the wind whistle  
Into forsaken hopes with tongues of fire  
Let the pages crinkle and smoke with unprintable truths  
of ultimate union. Blow on the ram's horn  
release for the pinioned boy.  
*And make it sing. (MSOP 2)*

In calling on the poets to sing, Macgoye seems to echo ANC Kumalo, a reknown South African anti-apartheid activist, poet and guerilla fighter. In a poem entitled "Red our Colour", the poet advocates for a revolutionary art:

Let's have poems  
blood-red in colour  
ringing like damn bells.

Poems  
that tear at the oppressor's face  
and smash his grip.

Poems that awaken man. (Feinberg B 58)

In the two excerpts, Macgoye and Kumalo suggest that poets, as visionary voices of the society, have an important role to play in the struggle for freedom. They have to create awareness about the injustices and mobilise the masses to action. Though Macgoye urges poets to transform their words into "bullets" and make their voices reverberate with songs full of "unprintable truths," hers' is a mild voice of protest compared ANC Kumalo's which is one of a declared revolutionary. The urgency and resolve to force change that one gets in Kumalo is missing in Macgoye's poetry. To Macgoye, change is gradual, immanent and evolutionary as evidenced in *Shairi la Ukombozi* in which the poet pleads for the release of Ngugi wa Thiongo after he was detained in 1978 for 'singing' about lack of freedom in Kenya. The

poem earned Macgoye BBC's "Arts and Africa Poetry Award" in 1981. In this poem the persona laments, thus:

We hear the cricket chirp, the migrant cattle lowing,  
The thunder of the tides, the feet of women going  
In ageless search of water, cowbells, the dogs at mating,  
The nightclub beat, the school's buzz, all save the voice creating  
The nightclub beat, school's buzz, all save the voice creating.  
We miss a living voice, a dour and stocky presence.  
There is a time for mourning. There is a time for singing. (*MSOP 77*)

The '... living voice' the persona is missing is that of Ngugi wa Thiongo detained for fear that his socialist ideology was a threat to state security. In interceding for his freedom, the persona argues that in independent Kenya, artists who sing about truth are endangered species. Everybody is free "save the voice creating". Incidentally, after *Shairi la Ukombozi*, a number of political detainees, Ngugi wa Thiongo included, were released by President Daniel arap Moi when he assumed office after the death of the founding father of the nation, the late Mzee Jomo Kenyatta. The poet celebrates this event in a poem entitled *Shukrani* (*MSOP 77*) which is a Kiswahili word for 'thank you'. Nyarloka proves her assimilation into the Kenyan culture by using a local *lingua franca* (Kiswahili) to condemn lack of political freedom. By using *shairi*, a form of Swahili poetry, Nyarloka frees herself from the limitations of English poetic tradition to appeal to her local audience in a language they understand and an indigenous poetic form locally enjoyed.

Nyarloka is not only concerned with the high and mighty in society like political prisoners. She is equally touched by the plight of the common members of the society like girls, boys and women. In *A Freedom Song*, one of the most popular poems by Macgoye, the poet grieves the absence of freedom at home. This is evidenced in the exploitation of young girls employed as house-helpers. Atieno, the protagonist in the poem, works as a maid for her uncle. As a girl-child, Atieno is deprived of parental love, overworked and sexually abused. She is not paid for the services rendered because she is 'my sister's child' (*SNOP 34*). Atieno

conceives prematurely and dies of post-natal bleeding. Atieno's mistreatment is emphasized by the constant calling to duty accentuated by the refrain: "Atieno yo!"

In the poem under discussion, Macgoye satirizes the persona for subjecting Atieno to poverty, humiliation and death. His insensitivity, rapacity and hypocrisy are condemned through irony. He claims to be working for freedom and progress of the country while he negates the very ideals in his house:

Don't I feed her, school my own ones?  
Pay the party fee, union fee?  
All for *progress*? Aren't you grateful,  
Atieno yo? (SNOP 34)

The title of the poem **A Freedom Song** is ironical. While it suggests a celebration of freedom, it exposes a denial of the same to a young defenseless girl - Atieno. The poem is a plea for freedom for slave-girls "tottering under/ Babies half their own weight" (MSOP 11) like Atieno. This is a stinging satire watered by sarcasm and irony. While politicians shout in public about national freedom, in their homes, they deprive young girls the most basic of all rights- the right to a life of dignity and fulfillment. In this poem, Macgoye has highlighted the plight of girls in difficult circumstances through sustained satire of the hypocritical political elite. Masumi Odari (1990) describes sarcasm as 'an expression which always aims at wounding its objects by making bitter remarks, and thus, helps satire to seriously attack them (15). Through satire, the reader is persuaded to sympathise with Atieno and share in the ideals of freedom. While the poem succeeds in exposing the plight of the girl child, its major weakness is that it ends on a pessimistic note with fear that many Atienos will still die waiting for domestic *uhuru* to trickle down to them. The last stanza of the poem captures this pessimism:

Atieno's soon replaced  
Meat and sugar more than all  
She ate in such a narrow life



Were lavished on her funeral  
Atieno's gone to glory  
Atieno yo. (*SNOP* 34)

We find it disturbing that Atieno is just replaced by another girl to follow the same path to ignominy and death. From the above lines, there is no assurance that structures that buttress the exploitation of young girls will be shattered. Nonetheless, the poet strongly voices her condemnation of the fact that in post-independence Kenya, young girls working as house-holds still languish in domestic bondage without anybody to come to their rescue.

We have also noted that even though Atieno's uncle is singled out for perpetrating the girl's enslavement leading to her demise, it is his wife who is the real culprit. Atieno's aunt is complacent, insensitive and at times invisible when her intervention is needed to save Atieno from domestic slavery. By not performing her duties as the female head of the household effectively, the woman indirectly contributes to the enslavement, exploitation and subsequent death of Atieno. The poet therefore seems to suggest that in some cases, women are equally to blame for the problems faced by fellow females.

Domestication of freedom and accessing it to women and men equally is explored further in **A Muffled Cry**. In this poem, Macgoye attacks discrimination based on gender. The persona laments that in the past, she was respected as a woman, but now her voice has been muffled:

The anthill is ringed with buildings belonging to men  
I cannot cry my rights (*SNOP* 50).

In the above lines, Macgoye suggests that traditional African society was more sensitive to women compared to the contemporary society. In the traditional Luo society, a woman could not be forced into a marriage against her wish. If this happened, the bride was allowed to run away and stand on top of an anthill as a public declaration of her refusal. If this happened, the man was advised to look for another woman to marry. This is what Macgoye considers as freedom that girls enjoyed. According to the poet, this opportunity has been lost. Women who

are dissatisfied with outdated cultural practices in the modern society have no route of escape because men have sealed all avenues.

Macgoye's is not only concerned with girls in difficult circumstances like Atieno, but boys as well. This makes her treatment of the theme of freedom balanced. For example, in the *Song of Kisumu*, Nyarloka condemns the murder of innocent boys by state security agents:

Aice, he does not answer  
Sleep, Alnoor my son,  
Lie quietly, my baby Ochieng,  
As though those little graves did not content you  
Hush, they may hear you fidget.  
.....  
Quietly. We are grateful  
For two more hours of freedom, ask no questions. (*MSOP* 12-13)

This is a lyrical verse in the form of a traditional Luo dirge. It laments the murder of two young boys in a political riot during President Kenyatta's visit to Kisumu in 1969. The deaths are blamed on the evil that is caged within the homestead. There is no freedom in independent Kenya. Even freedom to mourn the dead is taken away from the people. This is similar to an event in *CTB* where Macgoye laments the brutal murder of innocent children after a political riot in Kisumu in 1969. Paulina in *CTB* loses her only son (Okeyo) to the gun-totting security agents in Ahero. The murder of innocent children in Ahero forces an observant old man to mourn the loss of freedom. According to the old man, the country has become a cannibal feeding on her people. In *Song of Kisumu*, Macgoye employs song style to indict the post independent regime for its brutality. This reveals that politics is a dominant theme in Macgoye's writing, especially in terms of how it affects vulnerable members of the society such as women and children. It also suggests that political consciousness of Nyarloka runs parallel to her quest for identity.

Macgoye continues with her crusade for the protection of children in the poem **For Adeola - Militant**. In this poem, the poet addresses the plight of children caught in a civil war. The persona asserts the sanctity of life and the need to preserve it. She pleads with Adeola, the combatant in the Biafra war, to spare children from civil war. This poem begins with a sharp statement 'certainly not.' This sharp negation indicates the persona's pacifist stand. She protects her children from civil war because they are innocent and do not know what the war is all about. As the poem progresses, the persona who is a mother rises higher in moral stature. She grows from a helpless mother pleading for consideration to a morally strong woman ready to act in defense of her children. The persona argues that these innocent children in Kisumu and Nigeria do not deserve to die, as they do not know anything about ethnicity, politics and power. The poet dismisses the new breed of African leaders as vampires feeding on the blood of those they claim to protect. Macgoye's opposition to war in **For Adeola - Militant** is consistent with her pacifist ideology as a Christian missionary.

The poet continues with her indictment of political banditry in post-independence Kenya in the poems that appear under the title **Living with the Dead**. These poems reveal lack of freedom evidenced in the elimination of important personalities in Kenya's political history. In these poems, Macgoye seems to suggest that uhuru (political freedom) which the nationalists sacrificed their lives for, is a hoax. Instead of lifting everybody up, *uhuru* isolates a few individuals and elevates them to the rank of exploiters, dictators and murderers. The poet refers to uhuru metaphorically as a dangerous monster:

Uhuru is like lightning  
Striking one tree in the glade  
Searing it, elevating it,  
Leaving the others,  
Awe struck, unchanged.  
Uhuru is a spray of bullets  
That may with any luck miss you.  
Uhuru is a public park.  
You are glad to enjoy it

But after 4.30 you are reminded to keep your eye on  
Your bag and your virginity.  
Uhuru is a hawk soaring  
And swooping. (*SNOP* 11)

In the above lines, Macgoye addresses the paradox of freedom. She indicates that contrary to people's expectations, *uhuru* is a double-edged sword. It ushers in freedom through the right hand while taking the same away using the left. It is like a chameleon that changes its colour depending on the whims of those in power. There is a lot of bitterness in the poem because *uhuru* has not only failed to deliver what it promised, but is also busy destroying the legacy of those who sacrificed their lives for it. This sense of betrayal is aptly reflected in **Mathenge**. In this poem, Macgoye remembers Mathenge, the only Mau Mau General not accounted for at the end of the rebellion up to the end of the century. The persona argues that Mathenge, looking at the post-independence Kenya from his unmarked grave, mourns for the country he gave up his life for asking, " Was this Kenya which I fought for?" (*MSOP* 72). In **Mathenge**, the poet reminds us that we still have Mau Mau fighters living as squatters four decades after independence. We still have the remains of Dedan Kimathi buried inside Kamiti Maximum prison, and above all, no attempt has ever been made to locate the remains of Mathenge to accord him a hero's burial.

Macgoye's interest in the plight of freedom fighters that forced the British to withdraw from Kenya is interesting, considering that she is British by birth. As Nyarloka, the poet has broken ranks with the oppressors (white and black) and joined the warriors of the freedom struggle. This is a major distinction between Macgoye and the colonial writers before her. Meinertzhagen, Huxley and Blixen considered themselves as outsiders to Kenya and therefore became open apologists for colonialism. The trio observed and depicted Kenya through the oppressor's perspective. In breaking ranks with them, Macgoye adopts an inclusive perspective as an insider and a legitimate participant in Kenya's transformation. This allows her to identify with black Africans without discarding her European heritage. Other East African personalities who have suffered for their political convictions and who are immortalised by Macgoye in her poetry are Harry Thuku, J. M. Kariuki and Janani Luwum. But the most

captivating satire on lack of political freedom is *For Tom*, a poem in honour of Tom Mboya, a cabinet minister assassinated in a Nairobi street in 1969:

The grass is trampled.  
Only vultures overhead  
Swoop, rend and darken,  
All else is down...  
Elephant fallen. (*SNOP* 21)

The poet employs gloomy images to capture a nation in mourning. The imagery of vultures descending menacingly on their prey creates a vivid atmosphere of violence, fear and death. The vultures, which in real life are birds that scavenge on dead animals, are used figuratively to condemn the leaders suspected to be behind the murder plot. Leaders who promised paradise to the masses at independence have turned into vampires, vultures and hawks. They only swoop to kill.

The tone of 'not yet *uhuru*' that the poet echoes in her collection of poems is in agreement with Ngugi wa Thiongo's analysis of freedom and after. In *A Grain of Wheat* (1964), Ngugi wa Thiongo posits that *uhuru* does not automatically take people to a New Jerusalem promised during the struggle. It ushers in another phase in the struggle known as 'the second liberation.' p'Bitek, like Macgoye and Ngugi wa Thiongo dismisses *uhuru* as a big lie in *Song of a Prisoner*. He visualises *uhuru* metaphorically as a perverted "shark" that "devours" its own "children" (65). *Uhuru* is represented as a mother that has turned into a cannibal feeding on her children. The imagery effectively enhances a sense of betrayal, fear, venality and hopelessness.

Macgoye suggests that the absence of political freedom is brought about by lack of religious tolerance. especially, the stiff opposition to Christianity. *SNOP*, for instance, begins with the outbreak of *nyawavu* (a plague) in a small village in Kisumu called Nyahera after the villager's refusal to listen to a 'mad' Christian preacher. According to Nyarloka, the villagers have failed to drive out the evil spirits because of their refusal to embrace Christianity. In Luo

beliefs. *nyawawa* is the custom of driving away the infection of the evil spirits from the village. When *nyawawa* is driven out, *ojuok* hedge must bend as a proof that the evil has been successfully expelled. *Ojuok* is a Luo name for euphorbia plant, which is a traditional medicine that protects the inhabitants of the homestead from evil-eyed people (enemies).

In 'Kisumu', *nyawawa* has penetrated the *ojuok* fence and refused to get out because of the villagers' refusal to accept Christianity. In the last segment of *SNOP*, the mood of pessimism, which dominates the earlier poems, gives way to hope for freedom and spiritual rebirth. Hope comes once the local community accepts Christianity, the religion of Nyarloka:

The cloud that was of  
Unknowing  
Uncleanliness  
Separation  
Shall be lifted like that other from the mountain. (*SNOP* 32)

The graphological arrangement of the above lines vivifies the cleansing power of the new religion. The powerful wind propelled by divine power sweeps across the homestead and expels evil spirits forever. The *Ojuok* hedge that has intransigently refused to bend to let the evil out, bows in total reverence to divine power. The poem suggests that only divine intervention can save the society that is deeply rooted in traditional beliefs. We find Nyarloka's proposal not only escapist, but also a good example of western missionary thinking. While she articulates the problems affecting Kenya as a new nation, she fails to propose pragmatic steps to tackle the vices. She takes refuge in Christianity, which promises a better thereafter. Macgoye's hypothesis that the political ills rampant in post-independence Kenya are caused by resistance to Christianity is far-fetched. This is because the economic morass Kenya is trapped in today is blamed on politicians, a majority of whom are devout Christians.

Our exploration of Macgoye's treatment of the theme of freedom has confirmed that, even if some of her suggestions are problematic, the poet is concerned with freedom in all its

dimensions. She highlights the plight of house girls, innocent children murdered out of unfounded political fears, and women consigned to marginal existence by men. By condemning liquidation of charismatic leaders of Kenya's post-independence fame and the official neglect of the freedom fighters, the poet affirms the need for political maturity in a free nation. Nyarloka has graduated not only as an insider but also as a woman politician and a human rights activist. The only weakness in the poet's treatment of the theme of freedom is that she only concentrates on lack of freedom after independence and not during colonialism. In our view, this is meant to expose African leadership as inept while giving blank cheque to colonial administrators who were worse than African leaders.

### **Nyarloka and the Art of Poetry**

As we noticed earlier, Macgoye believes that art is social and therefore functional. That is why she calls upon poets to voice their concerns (make it sing) publicly and loudly against all forms of malpractice to make the society better. In **Song of Nyarloka**, the poet moves away from utilitarian concern with poetry to the aesthetic architecture of the genre as experienced by a woman. As a woman poet, Macgoye equates the art of composing a poem to the experience of a woman giving birth. She uses the term 'birth' to refer to the biological, psychological and political coming into being and development of women characters. Macgoye suggests that composing a poem is a difficult and painful process similar to that of giving birth to a child. In a number of her poems, she pays tribute to poets, painters, sculptors and writers for their devotion to art, all the tribulations notwithstanding. **Building**, for example, is the poet's glowing tribute to Gunther Grass, a German writer who trained as a stonemason. Macgoye remembers Grass for his ability to create aesthetic beauty and imbue it with artistic immortality. Macgoye also compares an artist to a builder of monuments. Like the skilled builder of monuments, the artist labours patiently, diligently and at times painfully to give life to an abstract dream. Macgoye therefore intimates that artists have creative power only second to God: they *create life through artistic form* (emphasis is mine). Such a creative engagement is a process of 'giving birth':

Man you drop your poems  
Like calves in the meadow,

And gambol on, confident that one thrust  
Will set another going.  
Some of us plod  
The full nine months,  
Heavy, deliberate, unprotected,  
and parturition leaves us weak,  
gasping for breath, hungry  
for nourishment, satiate  
with limbs and faces. (*MSOP* 26)

In the above lines, Macgoye proudly celebrates the contribution that women make in the process of creation. Unlike men who drop their poems in a hurry and 'gambol on', women patiently nurture their poems for nine months to deliver the best form. Macgoye's argument can be extended to highlight the role played by women in the process of giving birth to young ones. While men plant their seeds of life and walk away unperturbed by the growth of the embryo, women patiently carry the fetus to term. In equating the mechanics of poetry to the process of giving birth, Macgoye recognises mothering as a respectable role women play in perpetuating life. She considers it a privileged role for which women should be proud. It is in this context that the poet compares the process of creating a poem, or any artistic form, to that of giving birth. She seems to suggest that just as women are fertile, patient, loving, caring and committed to nurturing young ones, so do their biological roles make them superb artists as they easily transfer those roles to their artistic engagements.

We concur with Macgoye that the creative process is similar to what women go through to bring life on earth (as a man, my knowledge of the extent of labour pains women go through is limited. But from my readings and oral testimony from my wife, that pain is only inches away from death). Just as the woman carries the baby to term in her womb, so the poet nurses the tender thoughts until they mature into concrete ideas sparkling with aesthetic beauty. It is not therefore an overstatement to argue that poets are 'mothers' regardless of their sex. Before a poem is realised, poets go through a prolonged pain intermingled with joy, like mothers about to deliver:



I stab

At paper with a scratchy pen, and meaning

Oozes like blood, defying all attempts

To conceal or control.

Pecking away,

I arrive - at last - at something like the form,

More gawky, penurious than I intended, but

Identifiable, sharp enough to hurt.

I heave in labour and out of the mountain emerges

A whimpering lyric (*MSOP* 3)

Macgoye is suggesting that creative engagement is not an easy task. The poet goes through a lot of psychological pain to actualise the alternative world in a "whimpering lyric". The enchanting melody that emerges from the painful process has a magic touch that heals the wounds of childbirth. This argument is revisited in **Nesting Time 1993** and **Make it Sing**. In the former, Macgoye suggests that writing poetry is both practical and artistic. like building a nest: "A poem is built like a nest/For sharing the tender eggs of thoughts" (*MSOP* 84). In **Make it Sing**, the poet concedes that the art of writing can be tortuous; nevertheless, the poet should magnify her vision by squeezing it out through song. In these poems, Macgoye employs the symbolism of 'birth' to vivify the painful engagement that artists go through to weave life-like verses. We find Macgoye's treatment of the theme of birth in her poems consistent with her gender ideology and women focused vision. As evidenced in her fiction, Macgoye does not concentrate on myths that valorize women's inferior status. She deconstructs qualities misused under patriarchy to degrade women and transforms them to illuminate women's suppressed potential. For example, to the poet, motherhood (which is the power to 'create' and sustain life) is one of the noblest roles of women. This brings them closer to God, the ultimate creator, as opposed to men who only play a secondary role. As Nyarloka struggling to convince her hosts that she is an insider, the poet has succeeded in using symbolism that is locally derived and which demonstrates that her understanding of experiences of women is in touch with local reality.

## Nyarloka and her African Friends

Apart from using locally derived imagery to demonstrate her Kenyan identity, Macgoye also acknowledges the contributions of the African artists who inspired her perception as Nyarloka. She mourns their deaths and immortalizes them in poetry. They are Okot p'Bitek (**Omera**), Jonathan Kariara (**Command Performance**) and Owuor Anyumba (**Chik Iti**) among many others. They are "individuals with whom the poet shared moments of learning and laughter, creating and criticizing. In the poems, these poets are immortalized (*MSOP X*)". **Omera** is in memory of Okot p'Bitek, the famous East African storyteller, poet, philosopher, lawyer and actor. To affirm her status as an insider, the persona calls p'Bitek *omera*, which in Dholuo means 'my brother'. *Omera* is used purposefully by Macgoye to dramatise her identity as a member of the Luo community. The poem praises p'Bitek's sense of humour, story-telling abilities and fundamental kindness. As a distinguished poet, p'Bitek cheats death and lives eternally in glory as the goodwill ambassador of poets, forever entertaining the patrons in heaven with his laughter-filled stories (*MSOP 7*). In **Command Performance** Macgoye, pays a glowing tribute to Jonathan Kariara, a Kenyan poet, dramatist and publisher. The persona remembers Kariara as one of her mentors who inspired her to sing about her experiences as Nyarloka. In death, Kariara's spirit departs with song, promoted to the world beyond, and Nyarloka, orphaned by the painful separation, goes through labour pangs struggling to immortalise the poet through song. In the two poems, there is a recurrence of the symbolism of the poet as an expectant woman in labour going through a lot of pain to deliver a newborn. **Chik Iti**, on the other hand, is a poem in memory of Owuor Anyumba who was a distinguished scholar and the doyen of oral literature at the University of Nairobi. Anyumba conducted extensive research on Luo songs from which Macgoye borrowed her style of poetry. In his text entitled *Nyatiti Lament Songs*, Anyumba describes vividly the spectacle of *nyatiti* performance among the Luos of Western Kenya.' The poet laments that Anyumba 'earned the earring though he did not wear it' (*MSOP 6*). The imagery used is unique. Anyumba gains something valuable and befitting his contribution - the earring. In the traditional Luo society, an earring was like a medal awarded to men who made outstanding contributions to society. It reveals that compared to colonial writers we mentioned in Chapter One, Nyarloka has a genuine friendship with her African colleagues and is appreciative of the

contributions to society. It reveals that compared to colonial writers we mentioned in Chapter One, Nyarloka has a genuine friendship with her African colleagues and is appreciative of the knowledge gained from her hosts. In the above poems the poet reminds us that although she is Nyarloka, she considers herself a Luo woman and her male African colleagues her brothers and mentors.

### **Nyarloka as a Historian**

In our discussion, we have established that Nyarloka is determined to force her hosts to accept her the way she is as part of them. In her campaign for acceptance, the poet is not ready to compromise on her past. Nyarloka, therefore, exploits all avenues available to assert her identity as a European-African woman. Besides learning from her African brothers, the poet also relies on history to make her perception eclectic. Macgoye is a social historian, the poet pays keen attention to historical events and the people's attitudes to them so that in her writing, what comes out is local history in art, written by Nyarloka as seen through the eyes of the people. Historical slant in Macgoye's oeuvre is not a deviation from the norms of poetry because "all works of art have a more or less direct relationship with historical developments" (Ngara 1990: 14) since "everything in antiquity is antiquated except in art, especially poetry" (Abram 190).

A critical reading of Macgoye's poetry shows the poet borrows heavily from the historical events in Kenya to create poems which manifest indubitable imaginative aptitudes. She records with precision some of the landmark events in Kenya's political history like the death of Argwings Kodhek, a Cabinet Minister, in a car crash (1969), the assassination of Edwardo Mondlane in Dar es Salaam (July 1965), and that of Tom Mboya (1969), the Bomb blast at the OTC, the murder of J.M., the detention of Shikuku and Seroney (1975). Historical slant Macgoye employs in her fiction and poetry singles her out as the poet of the historical consciousness akin to what T. S. Eliot, the English-American poet, calls 'tradition and individual talent.' In *Selected Essays* Eliot contends that a poet must exhibit a clear grasp of tradition which is individual to every artist and can never be shared or inherited. Tradition imbues a poet with 'historical sense' which is a mark of poetic genius:

literature... of his (or her) country has a simultaneous existence, and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which in a sense is timeless as well as temporal, and of the timeless and temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity. (Parentheses mine. Eliot 1932: 14)

Macgoye, by using images drawn from the local environment demonstrates, historical consciousness, which Ngugi wa Thiongo (1974) considers as a writer's moral responsibility:

The novelist, at his best must feel himself heir to continuous tradition. He must feel himself as I think Tolstoy did in *War and Peace* or Sholokov in *Quiet Flows the Don*, swimming, struggling, and defining himself, in the mainstream of his people's historical drama. (39)

As Ngugi wa Thiongo observes, Macgoye's historical consciousness enables her to condense her thoughts in verses that keep the Kenyan history alive for the posterity. By using images drawn from the local environment<sup>7</sup> and authentic historical events in her poetry, Nyarloka successfully demonstrates her understanding of Kenya's history.

In the course of our evaluation of Macgoye's contribution as a poet, it has emerged that the poet borrows heavily from Luo oral culture in terms of diction and imagery, which she mingles with fragments from her European heritage to give iconoclastic appeal to her works. An adept manipulation of language by the poet lends density to the theme of cultural synthesis she advocates. This, in turn, makes her poetry accessible to a wider audience in rhythm and intellectual sense. It can be observed that Macgoye writes under the obligation to Africanise English language to articulate her hybrid thinking. This is evidenced in the use of words from local languages like *Nyarloka*, *nyawawa*, *chieno*, *jok* and *misawa*. At another level, oral culture, which includes Luo idioms, words, folk tradition and dramatic techniques used by the poet communicate effectively to local audience by talking to them about what they understand

in their culture and history. It is also a deliberate attempt by Macgoye to open up local perspectives to outside influences for synthesis.

Our analysis of Macgoye's poems has also revealed that although her collections fall under the East African song school, her poetry is distinct from the works of her contemporaries like Okot p'Bitek, Buruga and Oculi because of her cultural amalgam. Her European background and East African experiences make her perception eclectic. Even though her lyrical style gravitates towards poetic drama with accentuated African flavour, the poems still display a strong influence from the European literary tradition in terms of diction, verse style and imagery. This is because, Macgoye, being an Africanised European woman, sieves the elements that appeal to her from the two cultures. In her early poems, for instance, she borrows confidently from Nilotic imagery, history and legend (nyawawa, ojuok etc.) to make statements about the personal as well as contemporary concerns of Nyarloka. As her poetry develops, Macgoye expands the scope of her imagery. She not only draws from Nilotic imagery, history and legend but also Bantu and European. This reminds us of the poet's inclusive vision that Kurtz and Kibera, in their separate works, point out. As Nyarloka, enthusiastic about her new environment and equally conservative regarding her European heritage, Macgoye blends African elements with her European heritage to create African poems with encompassing congruity. We have observed that in as much as Nyarloka strives to become a Luo woman in her fiction and poetry, she only succeeds partly because she is not ready to forget her past as a European woman from Southermpton. Consequently, the Nyarloka we meet at the end of the persona's quest for identity is neither a European missionary lady who arrived in Kenya in 1954, nor a typical African woman, but a hybrid of the two cultures. Macgoye's ability to manipulate her cultural amalgam lends her poetry unique quality. As we shall see in the subsequent chapters, as a cultural boarder-operator Macgoye criss-crosses from European to the African cultural backgrounds and vice-versa in search of the most effective ways of expressing her artistic vision with varying degrees of success.

## Conclusion

Our analysis of Macgoye's treatment of Nyarloka's quest for identity has revealed that the poet consciously strives to promote the integration of women as important members of the society. She gives women central roles to play in her poems without creating tension and suspicion in men. All her poems have female personae. *SNOP*, for instance, is written from the point of view of a female persona. Nyarloka is not only a woman protagonist but also a stranger in her new environment. As an outsider involved with the society, the persona observes the happenings in the society, extols virtues and rebukes weaknesses.

Chapter Two explores the development of Macgoye's perspectives in her short novels.

## CHAPTER TWO

### GENDER PERSPECTIVES IN MACGOYE'S SHORT NOVELS

In Chapter One, we looked at Macgoye's quest for identity as Nyarloka through poetry. It emerged that in as much as she tries to belong, Nyarloka cannot become a typical Luo woman because of the European baggage she carries. Although Macgoye is an established poet, the author is also a short novel writer. In this chapter we explore Macgoye's treatment of the growth of women from their youth to adulthood in her short novels. We open this discussion by defining the terms short story and the novel to demarcate the place of the short novel. This is followed by a critical analysis of how the author portrays the growth of young girls in her short novels.

#### **Definition of a Short Novel**

A clear definition of a short story, short novel and the novel are problematic because "unlike some poetic forms, the novel, the modern novella and the short story emerged without theory, rules or clear procedures. Consequently, these forms are various, elusive and hard to define" (Heath 269). In recognition of the problematic nature of the short novel genre, we base our definition on the previous attempts by critics like Henry J. (1934), Grandsaigne (1985) and Heath (1987). For the purposes of this study, we shall use the terms short novel and novella concurrently to refer to the same genre. While it may be easy to define the short story and the novel, this is not the case with the short novel because the generic strip it covers is very narrow. The term is used to refer to creative works, which are intermediate in length and complexity between the genres of the novel and the short story. Grandsaigne (1985), in an introduction to *African Short Stories*, provides an elaborate explanation of the difference between the novel and the short story. Grandsaigne's description of the difference between the two genres demarcates the narrow strip covered by the short novel genre in Macgoye's works. Grandsaigne observes that

While the novel is comprised of intricate and interweaving plots, detailed characterization, shifts in space and time, and has an ambitious scope, the short story keeps to a single narrative line, shows greater economy, merely sketches the characters, and has a very small scope. While the ambition of a novel is to create a whole world, to exhibit the complexity and the beauty of life, the short story only wants to suggest it. (Grandsaigne: 4)

Grandsaigne, in the above excerpt, identifies characteristics of a novel and a short story. However, he does not name the genre that lies between the short story and the novel. James Henry, one of the America's greatest fiction writers, in agreeing with Grandsaigne's classification calls the generic point of intersection between the short story and the novel, the novella. He contends that:

In that dull view [which did not distinguish between the short story from the novella] a "short story" was a "short story" and that was the end of it. Shades and differences, variety and styles, the value above all of the idea happily developed [in the novella] languished, to extinction, under the hard and fast rule of the "from six to eight thousand words". For myself, I delight in the shapely novella. (220)

Going by Grandsaigne and James' classification, we can argue that a short story is distinguished by its concentration. It focuses on a single event, a small number of characters, a single setting and a short narrative time span. A novel, on the other hand, is distinguished by its broader scope and depth. It contains numerous characters, events and settings and extends over a long narrative time span. The novella stands midway between the two. Heath clarifies the generic position of the novella, thus:

The modern novella balances the tight restrictions of the short story and the limitless terrain of the novel. In the novella, one typically finds more characters, more episodes, and a longer narrative time span than in the short story. (Heath 270)



When we compress various explanations of what constitutes a short story, a short novel and the novel, it emerges that in simple terms, a short story is relatively short, a novel is long, and a novella lies somewhere in between. In line with the foregoing argument, we can define a short novel as a prose fiction that is intermediate in length and complexity between the short story and the novel.

The above definition allows us to address the following texts by Macgoye: *Growing up at Lina School (GLS)*, *Victoria (VIC)*, *Murder in Majengo (MIM)*, *Street Life (SL)* and *Black Hand Gang (BHG)* as novellas. These texts act as a basis for the exploration of Macgoye's treatment of the growth of women characters in her fiction.

### **Growth of Women Characters**

In order to explore gender perspectives in Macgoye's short novels, the study revisits gender criticism to scrutinize characterization and thematic orientation in the author's texts. As we observed in the introductory chapter, the significance of the concerns addressed in a work of art, the characters created and the style employed by the author reveal the level of what Chesaina calls "gender maturity" in terms of an author's ideological orientation. One striking observation the reader makes in the analysis of Macgoye's novellas is that all the protagonists in the five texts mentioned above are women, mostly young girls in the process of growing up. Grace (*GLS*), Lois Akinyi (*MIM*), Jane (*BHG*) and Asha binti Msafiri (*SL*) are all teenage girls struggling to assert their visibility in societies that do not regard female gender as equally important, if not better. The choice of young female protagonists by the author indicates that her authorial ideology is women centred. It reveals Macgoye's awareness of the fact that patriarchal structures overshadow the potential in women from childhood, hence the need to create texts in which young women actively participate in shaping their future and that of the society as a whole.

The choice of characters by gender and the roles assigned to them, no doubt, influences thematic concerns addressed in any creative work. It is not surprising, therefore, that themes addressed in Macgoye's short novels put women's concerns at the centre. One of the major

themes that cut across Macgoye's short novels is the progressive development of women protagonists. Growth of women characters is multidimensional, ranging from physical growth from girlhood to womanhood and psychological naivete to maturity. At the social level, growth is reflected in the emergence of women from social limbo in traditional enclaves to visibility in urban centres. It is not by coincidence, therefore, that the first short novel written by the author in 1971 is entitled *Growing up at Lina School*. As the title suggests, the text addresses the theme of growth of young girls through education system. Through Grace, the protagonist in the short novel, the reader is exposed to the girls' attitude to education, their vision, and above all, their physical and psychological development.

At the commencement of *GLS*, Macgoye depicts Grace as a sheep among goats. She is innocent, vulnerable and unsure of herself. She has to rely on her brother Michael for advice and decisions. But as the plot develops, Grace matures both physically and intellectually. She asserts herself among her friends, begins to question things and vocalize her concerns directly. Her perception of issues broadens and matures. At the height of her development, she becomes not only the voice of reason in the society, but also a strong defender of western Christian values.

The remarkable transformation that Grace goes through in *GLS* is in agreement with the title of the text, which suggests that girls 'grow up' at Lina School. A critical look at the development of girls in the text reveals, however, that their growth is stunted. They do not mature psychologically and intellectually. They develop within the perimeter set for them by the society that is male-dominated. Generally, girls at Lina School are not interested in science and technical subjects because they have been brought up to believe that science and technical subjects are for boys only. Consequently, they go for Arts-based subjects, which are stereotypical. It appears to us that the title 'Growing up at Lina School', is ironical because in spite of the author's attempt to prove otherwise, the growth of girls through formal education is neither complete nor liberating.

The theme of growth of young women is further revisited in *Murder in Majengo* (1971), which is the second short novel after *Growing up at Lina School*. It is set in Majengo, a slum

in Kisumu. Lois Akinyi, the protagonist is a young schoolgirl. She is the daughter of Victoria, the proprietor of a public bar and a brothel in Majengo. Lois is a young and innocent schoolgirl unimpressed by the depraved environment she has been brought up in. Like Grace in *Growing up at Lina School*, she is determined to get formal education, realize her ambition, tear herself away from the squalor of Majengo, and live a dignified life in the society. In this novella, Macgoye has used the term 'Majengo' metaphorically to refer to a slum settlement that thrives on immoral activities as its mainstay. In Kisumu, Majengo is a slum known to be a haven for commercial sex workers. Over the years the name has acquired a negative metaphor for any slum area in a major town where skin trade is a predominant occupation. As such, we have Majengo in nearly all the major towns in Kenya, from Mombasa to Kisumu and Nairobi to Eldoret.

At the beginning of *MIM*, Macgoye depicts Lois as a promising young girl capable of liberating herself by getting formal education. In this context, the author considers education as an opening through which awareness, empowerment and resultant freedom of women can be achieved. This is exemplified in Lois' plea to James, her cousin, to assist her with school fees:

I am the first of us ... to get away from all this. ... For one of us to get out and have her own house and a decent job and money and a clean name, isn't that something? (*MIM*: 115)

It is apparent from the above lines that Lois is reluctant to associate herself with the brothel life. She would want to liberate herself from that prison of immorality. This explains why she uses the phrase "all this" to dramatize the pain of a young girl forced by circumstances to sell her conscience, body and dignity to men in order to live. We sympathise with her because she is like a caged animal fighting for freedom.

Macgoye, through her sympathetic depiction of Lois' predicament, persuades the reader to empathize with women in similar situations. In her youthful innocence, Lois does not deny her past as a product of prostitution. She accepts it in order to overcome it. This explains why

she is determined to get education that guarantees her a respectable job and a morally acceptable life. At this juncture, her innocence and moral strength is inspiring. By creating the protagonist (Lois) as the daughter of a commercial sex worker, Macgoye succeeds in giving the reader the prognosis of what it means for a young girl to grow up in an environment that condemns women to a life of vice from childhood. Due to Lois' life in the brothel, she grows up grappling with insurmountable obstacles that she can hardly overcome. It seems to us that Macgoye wants the reader to see through prostitution, for which women are harshly condemned, to the forces that sustain it in the society.

It is equally inspiring to note that in spite of her predicament (her mother is arrested, forcing her to fend for herself in the brothel, including looking for her own school fees), Lois clings to her dream of living a dignified life far from the brothel. Lois suffers a temporary setback when Obonyo, a man who presents himself as her benefactor, shatters her shield of moral probity. Nonetheless, Lois defies male dominance to become an autonomous woman in a cosmopolitan environment. The young protagonist resembles her mother Victoria in (*VIC*) who grows steadily from Abiero, a timid village woman into Victoria, a modern cosmopolitan woman actively engaged in shaping her own destiny.

In her early stages of development, Victoria is shy and naive but through her own effort, she learns how to read and write, discovers her potential and begins to grow rapidly. She is transformed from Abiero, a naive village woman, to Victoria, a modern and enlightened businesswoman. In her traditional role as the second wife to the old Odhiambo, Abiero (Victoria) only anticipates the benefits she can reap from polygamy. Later as a mature woman first in Kisumu and later in Nairobi, Victoria is in control of her destiny. She is aware of her goals in life and how to score them. Macgoye seems to suggest that for women to realise their potential, first of all, they must identify obstacles to their fulfillment and then pursue their goals with consistent commitment like Victoria.

Our evaluation of Macgoye's treatment of the theme of growth in *GLS*, *MIM* and *VIC* indicates that the author is aware of the need to question some of the cultural practices and beliefs that keep women down. This is evidenced in the challenging roles she gives to young

women in her texts. It comes out clearly that even though young women in the novellas are ambitious, they are incapable of revolutionizing the gender divide because the change process, which basically entails an awareness of the fact that women too deserve a dignified life, is at its youthful stage. We argue that, in her short novels, Macgoye's women protagonists develop physically and psychologically, albeit slowly, because of the patriarchal impediments they have to contend with.

### **Polygamy and the Growth of Women**

Apart from the overall development of women protagonists, another related theme that comes out strongly in Macgoye's novellas is the relevance of polygamy to a changing society. Polygamy as a gender concern has attracted intense debate from feminist critics and women writers interested in gender studies in African literature (Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), Chesaina (1994), Nnaemeka (1997), Newell (1997) and Mutuoata R. (1997)). While one school considers polygamy a badge of the African family, the other condemns it as a practice perpetuated by men insensitive to women's concerns to justify their domination. In African literature, Grace Ogot and Mariama Ba, both respected women writers from East and West Africa respectively, represent the two contending voices on the relevance of polygamy and its impact on the advancement of women.

In her analysis of the portrayal of women in Ogot's short stories, especially *Land without Thunder*, Rose Mutuota observes that by creating women protagonists who feel comfortable within the system Ogot supports polygamy. The critic argues that women who support polygamy do so from a weaker position:

[They] depend on their husbands for everything perhaps even life. They consider polygamy an advantage to them. It absorbs many of the women who would otherwise remain single and be rejected as outcasts. It also provides women with security against any form of harassment in society. (Mutuota R.60)

Mutuota posits that polygamy is only beneficial to traditional women who are not able to decide for themselves and take full control of their destiny. Mariama Ba in her Noma Award winner *So Long a Letter* takes the other position. Ba condemns Islamic religion for promoting polygamy. Through Aissatou, a woman character in the novel, the author argues that polygamy is tailored to accommodate men's quest for variety. It does not consider the pain women go through as they try to live with husbands who betray them openly. According to Ba, women in polygamous marriages are not only made to share their love but also compete for their husband's attention with co-wives young enough to be their daughters, something they find very demeaning. It cannot be denied that those who condemn polygamy do so out of the common sense assumption that love may not be shared while those who support it argue that before condemning it, polygamy should be looked at within its cultural context.

As a naturalized African woman writer, Macgoye's perspective on this contentious topic in her novellas is unique as she takes the middle ground by not condemning or wholly supporting polygamy. In her texts, the author seems to intimate that, contrary to feminists' condemnation, polygamy is not so detrimental to women's progress. In *MIM* and *VIC*, Lois, and Victoria, are second wives with co-wives who are not against sharing husbands. As a young girl in Kano, Victoria is married off in Gem to Odhiambo who is an old polygamist. Her aunt, Anyango, urges her to accept the position of a second wife so that she can keep the old man from roaming about in search of young girls. Abiero accepts the marriage offer because of 'company in a big home and plenty of food expected' (*VIC*: 11). We find the above justification for polygamy demeaning because it trivializes women's concerns by hinting that 'company' and 'food' are the only key concerns for women, and that it is only men who can effectively mediate their provision. By not condemning polygamy, Macgoye tolerates it. Her cautious approach to polygamy is similar to that of Ogundipe-Leslie, a Nigerian feminist critic:

One of the most persistent myths is that polygamy is the greatest form of oppression from which the African woman suffers. ...And that the existence of polygamy is the proof of the chattel status of the African women. These views derive from a lack of understanding of the structures and motivating forces in

African societies. Polygamy is not always oppressive to women. It has its economic role of guaranteeing women the autonomy and human dignity they need. (52)

Macgoye's perception of polygamy in the African context and which is in agreement with Ogundipe-Leslie's views, in part, explains why young women like Victoria and Lois, tolerate polygamous marriages. Ogundipe-Leslie argues that in some African communities polygamy ensures economic autonomy and dignity for women. The thorny issue that Ogundipe-Leslie fails to address is the root-cause of women's loss of economic autonomy and dignity, which they condescend to achieve through polygamy. In our view, the blame lies on patriarchy. Patriarchy thrives on male dominance. It restricts women by creating man-made crises for which only men claim the monopoly of solutions. We argue that necessity for polygamy is a creation of patriarchy. The male-dominated society using various strategies of containment such as myth and religion, deny women basic human needs to ensure they only get them through polygamy. This is a point that Obioma Nnaemeka fails to recognise in her support for polygamy. Nnaemeka (1997) shares Ogundipe-Leslie's views on polygamy. According to her, polygamy in the African context is a demonstration of freedom of choice by African women:

The major argument against polygamy is that it dehumanizes women who are compelled "to share" one man. What such argument ignores is that much more is shared - friendship, companionship, expertise, time, childcare, loss, misery, happiness etc. Above all, there is a central question of choice (sometimes even women choose to become co-wives), an issue which is at the core of feminist theorizing and activism. (188)

Nnaemeka talks of 'benefits' due to women under polygamy. We do not dispute that in some cases polygamy is an insurance against loss, hard work and loneliness. But the major concern that Nnaemeka, like Ogundipe, fails to identify the real architect and beneficiary of polygamous arrangement. Nnaemeka assumes that African women choose to be in polygamous marriages. While this cannot be ruled out, the critic ignores that, in majority of cases, when women like Abiero are married off to old men like Onyango, it is because the

society has denied them other dignified alternatives. In this study, we contend that choice dictated by lack of alternatives is no choice but concealed coercion. When Abiero is married off to an old man, it is not because the senior wife Anyango misses a co-wife, but rather, it is to make sure that the husband, who is already too old, does not roam with questionable women who might bring disease into the family.

It emerges from our analysis that, in as much as Macgoye tries to tolerate polygamy as African, the sub-text in her short novels negates her intentions. The texts affirm that polygamy does not promote the growth of women; it only perpetuates their inferior positions in marriage. It comes as little surprise that women characters in Macgoye's short novels are either forced to walk out of polygamous marriages (like Victoria) unfulfilled, or persevere marriages of docility and invisibility like Lois.

### **Gender Awareness and the Growth of Women**

In her short novels, Macgoye suggests that apart from education and the traditional practice of polygamy, the other factor that determines the growth of women is their awareness of power relations between women and men, and the need to equilibrate the two. This awareness is not based on the exclusionist thesis of radical feminists or the male chauvinists. It is driven by the humanistic values of equity and equality. We have observed that women and men characters who attain a high level of psychological and intellectual growth in Macgoye's short novels manifest a critical awareness of gender relations in society. As we stated in the previous chapter, gender awareness is a demonstration of the fact that women and men populate the society and that both have specific concerns that must be considered when making certain decisions. Through Victoria (*VIC*), Macgoye attempts to create space for female perspectives in public thinking and activities.

The author depicts Victoria as a woman who is aware of the difficult circumstances faced by women in a male-dominated society and strives to overcome them. As a single mother who has struggled on her own to survive, Victoria believes that there is no difference between women and men, save for their biology. This is evidenced in the episode where James, a taxi-driver, picks a child abandoned in his car by a young couple. Victoria tells James that even if



an expectant lady delivers in a car, the crew (men) should tidy the place because "the line between women and men is getting ruled out. I wouldn't have believed it once, but it is happening (*VIC*: 15).

Considered against the strong patriarchal undercurrents in the text, Victoria's advice to James to be prepared to perform tasks traditionally reserved for women demonstrates her developing gender awareness. What Victoria advocates in this context, is not a reversal of roles so that women and men change positions. It is a 'leveling' or sharing of roles based on necessity and common sense. It is also interesting to note that the awareness of the need to build bridges across the gender roles is not restricted to women. Men like James Owino, a relative and business associate of Victoria, also share the idea. The narrator comments that:

James had wide sympathies and could see without too much dismay a day when the claims of the women's progress people might come true. Certainly, in his own family, the women folk were daunting in their abilities. His own two wives, also, were competent to be left on their own with the excuse that he did not think the constantly disturbed life of a taxi driver would be good for the children. (*VIC*: 13)

From the above excerpt, the reader is tempted to believe that Owino is aware and supportive of the need to liberate women from the shackles of patriarchy. Owino's portrayal is, however, ironical. A critical assessment of the above excerpt reveals the opposite about Owino. He has 'wide sympathies' and anticipates the day when women's liberation will be achieved. It is ironical that a man who is aware of the special needs of women like Owino should keep his two wives at home under the pretext that 'the constantly disturbed life of a taxi driver would not be too good for the children'.

Macgoye, through the foregoing argument, indicates that gender awareness by some characters is not only cosmetic but also a survival mechanism. This is particularly so for male characters who find that they have to relate to women as their superiors. In this context, Owino feigns gender awareness for material gains in the business they run with Victoria. It

also raises the thorny question as to whether it is possible to have genuine 'male feminists'. As we observed in our discussion of feminism in Chapter One, this concept has been bandied in some feminist circles, at times, derogatorily to vilify men who express solidarity with women in their quest for empowerment. The scope of this study, unfortunately, does not allow us to validate or dismiss the concept of male-feminists with all its connotations. Nevertheless, it is the contention of this study that women's concerns are human concerns, and as such, the principles of inclusivity, tolerance, and empathy should prevail to humanize the gender-monocled world.

The ambivalence about women's issues that Macgoye reveals through Owino equally applies to Victoria. Although she grows up to become a respected businesswoman, Victoria has little grasp of women's agenda. As a businesswoman driven by the profit motive, she supports women's agenda only when she stands to benefit. At heart, she remains a conservative woman who encourages women to submit to male demands. She believes that women are born to be married and exhorts Joyce, her servant to perfect the skills in household chores like cleaning pots because: "Lazy ones (girls) do not get husbands at all" (*VIC*: 8).

As the head of the brothel, Victoria takes the process of dehumanization of girls to the hilt. She reminds commercial sex workers quarrelling in the brothel that their duties are to welcome male prostitutes and make them feel comfortable instead of screaming like old wives who haven't had any sugar for the last three months.

In our assessment, Macgoye uses the term "traditional woman" in the above context to refer to submissive women who are comfortable in their roles as subservient and supportive partners to men. Because she believes in the stereotypical roles for women, Victoria trains girls under her care in "basic bedwork" which translates into organized prostitution (*VIC*: 62). She singles out Jennifer, a young intern in the brothel as 'a clever girl' because of her success in luring an honourable Member of Parliament (MP) into the brothel. By depicting Victoria as an agent of continued marginalisation and exploitation of women, Macgoye seems to suggest that women can only liberate themselves from the shackles of ignorance and domination by morally challenging the stereotypes that have been used to keep them down. Such stereotypes

are over-reliance on men through marriage, misuse of appearance to attract men, and involvement in immoral activities as a rebellion against society.

Evaluation of gender responsiveness of Victoria and Owino reveals that characters socialized through a patriarchal system find it difficult to internalize gender awareness as adults. We have deduced from the foregoing argument that while it is difficult for adults to internalize gender concerns in a patriarchal society, the reverse is true for young boys and girls. This is evidenced in the latest short novel by the author, *The Black Hand Gang* (1998). Macgoye creates a short novel in which a gang composed of young men and a girl (Jane) recognizes the injustices including historical marginalization of women in society and works to correct them. Jane, the only girl in the group transforms the gang's vision. Even Onyango (the gang leader), originally opposed to the inclusion of Jane in the gang is confounded by the girl's intellect. Jane defines the agenda of the gang thus: "We are called the Black Hand Gang because we are an African Gang. We want to do things we are proud of. No one is proud of being dirty" (*BHG*: 1). Through Jane, Macgoye contests the erroneous assumption that boys are intellectually superior to girls. Compared to male members of the gang, Jane is intelligent, resourceful, assertive and convincing. Above all, Jane is aware of her African identity and proudly celebrates it.

The gender awareness we register in young Jane is lacking in adult women in *BHG* and *VIC*. For example, Mrs. Onyango (*VIC*), a teacher, goes abroad for further studies so that she can be a hostess. According to Lois, the course is useful to women as it makes them more acceptable to men for marriage (64). In the same text, the Head-Teacher of Odiewuor School uses her position to discourage young women from aspiring for higher positions in society. The narrator argues, "if the school produced intelligent wives and mothers ... she (the head teacher) for one was not going to worry if they (female students) missed the new craze for secretarial courses and expensive fashions" (*MIM*: 183). To the head teacher, modernization spoils young girls by exposing them to foreign values and lifestyles. Macgoye suggests that since society is constantly changing, women must strive to locate their niche in the new dispensation without necessarily losing the benefits from the traditional set up.

We have observed that in her short novels, the author does not invest hope in the old women. She creates young girls who are courageous enough to lead the struggle for recognition of the potential suppressed in women. In our view, this could be because adult women are already casualties of the very structures they seek to change. The author seems to suggest that the struggle for recognition by women begins by questioning everything that has been done or said about them by the society. Such questioning leads to an enhanced awareness as a woman. The new breed of young women Macgoye invests hope of liberation on is against the restrictions that society places on women. Jane and Rachael in *BHG* negate the socialization process that impedes young women's drive to compete with men. Rachael, Onyango's sister, like Jane, is conscious of the need to shatter the myth of male superiority. She argues that: "Daughters are not only for cooking, mama, these days, boys do their share too" (*BHG*: 30).

Submission of adult women to the patriarchal control and the questioning attitude of young girls reflect the impact of patriarchal ideology on girls and women. This variance confirms our earlier assertion in the introductory chapter that the way girls and boys are socialized determines how they perceive the world and relate to one another as adults. This study contends that it is also a reflection of the author's quest for a gender responsive ideology that is capable of liberating women from the shackles of societal domination. At this juncture, we can argue that the role of a gender aware writer operating in a patriarchal society is to demystify myths used to legitimize male superiority over women. This is crucial because patriarchy relies on myth as a lobbying tool to normalise or downplay the domination of women (Barthes R. 1972: 109, Kabira W. 1994, Janeway E 1991). Myth does not challenge or deny injustices - it talks about them in an accommodating way. As Roland Barthes aptly puts it, myths make contentious practices "innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them clarity which is not just that of explanation, but that of a statement of fact" (143). One of the contentious practices defended by myth is the marginalization of women. It is made to look like the natural order of things, which should not be interfered with.

Unlike other writers who blame women's predicaments on patriarchy alone, Macgoye sees through patriarchy some internal weaknesses inherent in women, especially those in

leadership positions like Victoria. By portraying women characters such as Onyango's mother (*BHG*), Victoria, Mrs. Wasere and Lois (*VIC*) and (*MIM*) in their stereotypical roles, Macgoye suggests that, in some cases, women leaders have never done enough to better the lot of the womenfolk. Instead, they have tended to explain the situation to favour the status quo.

The foregoing evaluation of the development of women characters in Macgoye's short novels reveals that, women protagonists are constructed as victims of patriarchy because they have been trained to believe in the myth of female inferiority. Instead of reclaiming their space within the social system, they only re-create and re-enforce its patriarchal pattern among themselves. This contradictory scenario validates Gerda's thesis that women are equally to blame for the existence of patriarchy because "the system of patriarchy can function only with the cooperation of women" (Gerda: 217). Gerda's assertion agrees in part with Macgoye's thesis that in a society where self worth of women is ignored, women ought to lead the onslaught instead of expecting liberation from men. We take Gerda's statement as more of a challenge to women and not an affront. It provokes women to challenge hitherto unquestioned male authority, assert their humanity and reclaim their position in society. It is for this reason that Macgoye invests a lot of hope of liberation of women in young girls brought up in cosmopolitan societies.

### **Marriage, Birth and Entrapment**

The development of women characters in Macgoye's short novels is also affected by their marital status. This makes marriage a central concern just as education, polygamy and gender consciousness. In *GLS*, *VIC*, *MIM* and *BHG*, a majority of women characters crave for marriage or cohabitation with men for support. Schoolgirls over-concentrate on improving their physical appearances to attract men with the ultimate goal of landing in marriage. They feel incomplete and insecure without men in their lives. Atieno, Mary and Rebecca in *GLS*, for example, think about marriage in their adolescence. Macgoye exposes us to the young girls' perception of marriage to refute the patriarchal notion that marriage is a favour advanced to women to the extent that being a senior and single woman is seen as a punishment from

men who have slighted the woman.' This idea is developed fully in Chapter Four where we evaluate Macgoye's treatment of the theme of women's liberation.

Through Victoria's tribulations in her short-lived marriage, Macgoye indicates that marriage is not always a bed of roses for women. Traditional marriage, which gives the man and his community complete control over a woman, stifles the woman's development. It dislocates, disorients and inferiorizes a woman, more so, in situations where dowry is given. While women's acquired status as permanent members in their marital homes is not assured, they cannot at the same time, be accepted back by their parents. For instance, when Victoria runs away from her old husband, the best she can hope for is to find a man who can condescendingly take her in with the baby as *ochodororo* (Luo word for a prostitute), "and only a poor man was likely to do that" (*VIC*: 18). Women characters like Victoria anticipate marriage so that they can find men to support them. Macgoye suggests that where women are consigned to social invisibility, marriage becomes a poor but the only moral option in life. Such marriages only allow women to survive but not to achieve complete autonomy and control of their own destiny.

One way in which women try to survive in marriage is by having children. Women in Macgoye's short novels, crave for motherhood as the ultimate fulfillment of womanhood. They are insecure without children because men demand children as compensation for their dowry. Pregnancy is therefore something that women and the society at large anticipate with a lot of anxiety. If a woman is not able to mother, she loses her status drastically in her house and in the society. Even fellow women rebuke her. In our view, such a lopsided perception of the role of women narrows their aspirations and limits their potential to that of childbearing.

Apart from the desire to have children, women in Macgoye's short novels prefer baby boys to girls. They believe that boys are the 'pillars' and security in old age as opposed to girls who are birds of a season that fly away to enrich other communities. The twin-themes of childlessness and child preference, which Macgoye introduces in her short novels, are explored in detail in her novels. We shall therefore revisit the author's treatment of

childlessness and male-child preference in the next chapter where they are dealt with exhaustively.

In our evaluation of Macgoye's treatment of the theme of marriage especially in the traditional setup, it emerges that the institution of marriage generally limits and demeans women. Women are reduced to commodities that can be sold and bought back at the whims of men. When a marriage breaks up, as it happens in the case of Victoria, emphasis is on the economic loss that such a situation portends for the girl's parents and the estranged husband. Consequently, deliberations that follow marriage break-ups are not on support, reconciliation and counseling, but rather, on how male stakeholders (former husband and the male parent of the woman) can be compensated. The punishment meted on the woman is always harsh because it is assumed that whenever a marriage collapses, it is the woman who has chosen to go against the authority of her husband.

Victoria's predicament in *MIM* shows clearly that the society does not understand women who opt out of marriage. They are made to marry (old) men they don't love because such men can offer fat dowry. Women trapped in such marriages are also not expected to divorce or complain even if the marriage is incompatible. And if they divorce, the punishment meted is harsh. They are declared *persona non grata* in their homes of birth and are forced to 'buy themselves out of old marriages' by paying the equivalent of the dowry to their former husbands.

Victoria's parents demand her immediate return to Odhiambo or full dowry from her new husband so that the original dowry offered by Odhiambo can be given back (*MIM*: 29). As a sign of defiance, Victoria refuses to remarry and instead, works hard to buy her freedom out of the 'patriarchal prison of marriage'. She saves two hundred and fifty shillings, which she gives to her father to compensate him against the dowry he had forfeited because of her divorce. After paying back the equivalent of her dowry, Kano (her birthplace) relinquishes its control over her. To Gem (her matrimonial home) Victoria becomes a stranger. Macgoye indicates that the act of securing her freedom without support from any man marks the beginning of a new chapter in the growth of Victoria. It is an affirmative step towards the

reclamation, consolidation and assertion of her identity as a woman in total control of her identity.

Macgoye seems to suggest that any marriage contracted without active involvement of the bride is a violation of the woman's right of choice. The author is, however, optimistic that women can still reconstruct their lives out of ruined marriages by walking out and becoming single mothers like Victoria. Victoria marvels at her status as a single mother and the freedom it accords her. She accepts that she was once married in Gem but 'she was bought back':

I was bought back. The marriage is gone, long ago. Nothing remains of it... I was redeemed, you see, with cattle, and Akech's husband died but she is redeemed too. (*VIC*: 5)

The words 'bought' and 'redeemed' have Biblical overtones. They remind one of the blood of Jesus that was shed to purchase spiritual freedom and eternal life for humankind. Victoria talks of having been "bought back", which to her is a redemption from the shackles of patriarchy. In this context, Macgoye seems to suggest that contrary to what we hear in sermons, Christianity does not support women's domination. Indeed, Christianity, as portrayed by Macgoye, opens the eyes of women to the oppressive patriarchal system.

Nevertheless, we do not find the author's argument convincing, especially when it is clear that Christianity introduced pedagogy of difference in the African set up as explained earlier by Benaars. It is also not true as Macgoye suggests that a divorced woman "buys" her freedom back because in her short novels, such women still remain answerable to the clans in which they were previously married. For instance, in *VIC*, Odero Magereza (Victoria's former-brother-in-law) sends Odhiambo (not the old man she divorced in Gem), to live and be employed by Victoria in Nairobi because, although Victoria divorced, she is still considered as having obligations to her former husband's people.

The question that the above episode raises is whether there is divorce in the African setting the way Macgoye treats it, or it is just separation? Divorce is a situation where a wife and



husband become legally and permanently separated while in separation. the estranged couple lives apart temporarily with the possibility of reuniting. In Macgoye's short novels, women divorcees are demonized, terrorized and stigmatized by their people as we see in the cases of Victoria and Chelagat, yet the very people follow them and enjoy the proceeds from their labour. What comes out in this context, is that while Macgoye, as a European woman explores divorce and single parenthood as avenues to women's freedom in her short novels, the terms do not capture the contextual nature of divorce or separation in an African setting. Nevertheless, the author demonstrates that women are trapped as powerless in and out of marriage.

The failure of Macgoye's protagonists to assert their identity through marriage can be blamed on entrapment, which is a pervasive phenomenon in the author's short novels. Macgoye's treatment of the theme of entrapment gives credence to Ogundipe-Leslie's observation that there is need to look for other causes of the predicaments of the African woman instead of over sentimentalizing marriage as the greatest evil buffeting the African woman. Ogundipe-Leslie laments that

The literature on African women, however, continues to focus solely on marriage as evidence of the inferior status of African women. It seems most difficult for outsiders to understand and accept that African women's relationship with men, within and outside conjugality, are not central to their self-inscription of our stories, lives and desires. (13)

Ogundipe-Leslie asserts that African women are more than wives and that to understand their multifaceted identities beyond wifehood, we must look for their roles and statuses in sites other than that of marriage. The critic's broader perception of the identity of the African woman beyond marriage is in agreement with that of Macgoye. We concur with Ogundipe-Leslie that marriage is not the only area where women can find fulfillment. It can also be a trap that impedes their advancement in life, especially in societies blind to the existence of women as complete and autonomous human beings. In *Growing up at Lina School*, *Murder in Majengo*, *Victoria*, *Street Life* and *Black Hand Gang*, Macgoye suggests that regardless of

whether they are married or single, women are trapped. This is the predicament that Grace and her friends (*GLS*), Victoria, Lois (*MIM & V*), Jane (*BHG*) and Asha binti Msafiri (*SL*) find themselves in.

While it is common to blame women's restricted space on male control, Macgoye suggests that at times, the sense of imprisonment that women characters experience is caused by internalized feelings of inferiority. Lois, for example, surrenders to Obonyo's blackmail without a fight because she believes that as a woman she does not have any space of her own and therefore cannot defend herself from abuse:

The only thing seemed to be to offer herself to the lawyer unless she could find a way to pay the money back, which was too unlikely to be seriously considered... If the worst came to the worst, the pregnancy would not become obvious till the end of the year, and with three years in secondary school, and a good record she would stand a good chance of getting into a course or training. And of course, a good job was the surest way to a good marriage. (*MIM*: 120)

This episode dramatizes Macgoye's concern with the vulnerability of girls and women in their quest for meaningful lives. As we pointed out in our discussion of gender awareness and the growth of women, Macgoye does not spare women in her attempt to better their situation. She points out their vulnerabilities to make them rise to the challenge of women's liberation. In the above excerpt, the author portrays Lois as a helpless victim of circumstances. The protagonist gives up too early without any resistance. She is fragile, vulnerable and only keen on how to get money and the power that comes with it. Unfortunately, these are male prescriptions of success, which contribute to moral decay in Majengo. We have observed that when Lois fights for survival as a young woman with a vision, she is focused and determined. But when she begins to compete according to the male standards, she loses the urge to fight on and surrenders. From a strong and promising lady we meet at the beginning of the story, Lois degenerates into an upcoming prostitute who yields easily to Obonyo's sexual blackmail. This reminds us of Macgoye's message in her poem "For Miriam" that, like Miriam, women should

accept and manage change to their advantage without losing focus of who they are as women and their individual and collective destiny as a marginalised group.

The entrapment of girls epitomized by Lois is more visible within the traditional home environment. Young schoolgirls fear home. They enjoy their stay in school not because of thirst for education, but as a refuge from the oppressive male-run home environment. At the end of the term, Alice, one of the students at Lina School shivers with the thought of what awaits her at home. She is only in her first year of education but 'she is supposed to be married off because her fiancée cannot wait any longer' (*GLS* 22). Her predicament is compounded by the fact that her parents have already used the cattle (offered as dowry) from the prospective husband to buy a piece of land.

The mistreatment that girls and women suffer within the traditional home environment begs a re-evaluation of the meaning of 'home'. Macgoye suggests that 'home' means different things to women and men, boys and girls. In *BHG*, for instance, the debate over the meaning of 'home' is reduced to a semantic quibbling between the young boys and Jane. Onyango, the gang leader argues that 'home' is the ancestral land of his parents. Jane reminds Onyango that she has no home to go to outside Nairobi. Onyango responds by arguing, "Home is where your father comes from. It is where we shall have land when we are old enough" (*BHG*: 27).

The patriarchal connotations that go with the term 'home' reveal that like marriage, home is also a prison for women. It ensures their exclusion in the ownership and decision-making in the society. This leads to alienation, desperation and degeneration into immoral activities such as commercial sex as a means of survival and a statement of rebellion against the society.

We argue that women characters engaged in commercial sex and other immoral activities in Macgoye's short novels do so because they dread going home. Home is not for them. In Kisumu, Victoria thinks of going home, but it is a girlhood picture of home with heavy tasks for girls. Sarah, one of the commercial sex workers in Majengo says that she cannot go back home because among her people, a *malaya* (prostitute) is an outcast. Many of the girls in Victoria's brothel "had run away from home with boys who later abandoned them, and dared

not face their mothers again or the restrictions that home had put on them (*MIM*: 53).” Through the above episodes, Macgoye reiterates that the social vice rampant in society, especially Majengo, is a creation of male-domination.

Macgoye highlights gender imbalance in the society through the use of contrasts. Men and women evidence this in the tasks performed respectively. Men are the detectives, judges, lawyers and prospering businesspeople. Women are allocated inferior and immoral jobs like brothel operators, prostitution, harbouring criminals and passing messages between political activists and their clients. These tasks are lowly rated by the society and are neither well remunerated nor recognized. For instance, Fatima (*MIM*) rises up in society by taking over the ownership of Victoria’s brothel and the adjoining Welcome Friendly Bar, a notorious joint for criminals and prostitutes. Victoria is also depicted negatively in her mid-life. She has money and power that comes with it, but the source of this fame is grounded on her immoral activities. The narrator explains that Victoria’s wealth was “a worthwhile fruit of a lifetime’s skillfully organized prostitution” (*VIC*: 8).

We find it ironical that Victoria, an epitome of the struggle by African women for autonomy in Macgoye’s short novels should only succeed through unethical practices. She is a willing prostitute without any guilt conscience. Jimmy, the white man who takes Victoria treats her as a sex object to which she submits willingly:

He didn’t want a drink or a dance. He had been weeks out in the mines and all his hunger was to be appeased on her. And as he was hard, and energetic and kind - he asked her name and complemented her in Swahili terms that made her laugh very much - she found her hunger rising to meet his, and shuddered to remember Odhiambo (old husband) flapping about her. Perhaps it was true that she was going to be a better *malaya* than a wife. (*VIC*: 28)

The above episode, in our assessment, is the most loaded passage in Macgoye’s short novels. In it Macgoye addresses the special needs of women represented by Victoria. Victoria is forced into prostitution by deprivation she suffers in her marriage to an old man. She begs to

be understood not just as a prostitute, but a woman with passionate hunger, which finds fulfillment in prostitution. Victoria acknowledges the virility of a white man who goes with her: 'he is sexually hungry, hard, kind and energetic,' a total contrast to old Odhiambo who used to flap over her. Macgoye seems to suggest that women, like their male counterparts, have a right to sexual fulfillment, and that where society ignores this fact by marrying young women to old and often sexually inactive men, then the female victims have a right to look for that satisfaction elsewhere.

### **Portrayal of White Women Characters**

We have observed that, Macgoye maps out the progressive growth of women protagonists in her short novels, in spite of the obstacles placed on their path by patriarchy. We have also noted that whereas the author deals with

Kenyan women, European women and Asian women, the picture she paints indicates that Kenyan women are more oppressed and that they gain considerably by associating with their white counterparts who are more enlightened. Consequently, it is the indigenous Kenyan women who develop towards the level of their European and Asian counterparts.

In this section, we focus on Macgoye's treatment of the European women characters *vis-à-vis* the African women in her short novels. One striking observation we have made is that, while African women survive marginally in Macgoye's short novels, the opposite is the case for white women characters or black women who are visitors to Kenya. When one reads *MIM* and *VIC*, one gleans a latent innuendo that it is the African women and girls who are morally depraved and intellectually deprived. This is evidenced in the contrast between Miss Vera Willet (*MIM*) and other women teachers and students who are African. The narrator depicts Vera, a young European volunteer teacher, in a positive almost adulatory light. She is a devout Christian who spends her time helping Kenyan girls to grow up as confident and independent people. Vera is also depicted as a humble, reasonable, intelligent and morally upright woman who suffers for trying to help Lois, an African girl on the brink of sliding into the moral squalor of Majengo. Vera is arrested and charged with the murder of Obonyo, the lawyer who sexually exploits Lois, but this does not change her focus on assisting girls in difficult situations like Lois. Instead, she "became doubly convinced of the need to prepare

girls more accurately for a society that does not give a high rating to intelligent wives and mothers" (*MIM* 184). As opposed to Vera who is angelic, Lois is depicted as a moral vegetable who schemes to frame Vera her benefactor. By depicting Vera as a martyr and the liberator of the young girls, the author is suggesting that African women's only hope of regeneration lies with their European sisters who are Christians. It emerges that in trying to bridge the gap between white women and African women, Macgoye ends up widening the divide. This is the catch-22 Martha Minnow describes as the "dilemma of difference" whereby "both focusing on and ignoring difference risk creating it" (Loomba: 17). As a European woman writer trying to bridge the racial and gender gaps in post-independence Kenya, Macgoye ends up revealing how different European women are from their black counterparts. This is a contentious issue which Mboya (1997) raises in his analysis of Macgoye's major novels, and which we shall revisit in the next chapter.

Due to Macgoye's sympathetic portrayal of Vera, it does not come as a surprise that compared to African women characters, the white woman is the voice of liberty and reason. Above all, Vera is sensible, morally upright and keen in observing family values. Unlike Lois, Vera determinedly rebuffs Obonyo's sexual advances. On the fateful night of the murder in Majengo, Vera tears herself away from the unfriendly gathering in Victoria's pub and escapes to freedom. Macgoye seems to suggest that the discrimination that Vera suffers in the course of the investigation into the murder of Obonyo is racially and sexually motivated. This makes the author hypothesize that a white woman can never be considered an insider in an African society no matter how much she tries to identify with the local community:

Till now, in the terrifying questions of examinations, committees and charitable donations, she had believed herself attached though not grafted, to the community, entitled to options, friendship and reward. But in the matters of life and death she found herself detached, isolated, so deranged that she could no longer touch or comfort the lesser derangement of others. (*MIM*: 198)

In the above excerpt, Macgoye uses the plight of Vera to suggest that women who happen to be foreigners face double discrimination, first as women and secondly as outsiders in their

adopted motherlands. Like Vera, they can only be attached to the societies they reside in but not grafted. The term 'outsider' is applied by Macgoye to refer to women who have migrated from their ancestral lands and formed new settlements away from home like Nyarloka. European women like Vera Willet are therefore outsiders. Vera suffers a lot at the hands of the detectives investigating the murder of Obonyo because she is a woman and therefore cannot be trusted, and worse still, she is a European woman. Macgoye depicts the plight of Vera sympathetically because she too is an outsider, having moved from England and settled permanently in Kenya as Nyarloka.

In our view, Macgoye's depiction of the precarious position of women in the Kenyan society is not representative because it emanates from her perception of an 'outsider' as a woman who is a stranger in a community. This definition assumes that African women who grow up and marry in their communities are 'insiders', and that compared to Vera, they are better off because they are operating from their motherland. In this context, Macgoye fails to recognise that due to the retrogressive cultural beliefs and practices, African women too, suffer multiple discrimination just as their European counterparts. Due to taboos and tradition they are rendered 'homeless,' as they are outsiders both in their parental and matrimonial homes. When we compare the two scenarios, we find the position of the African woman more pathetic contrary to what Macgoye would want the reader to believe. Vera has a number of options, which Lois does not have. She can either choose to go back to Europe and feel at home or stay in Kenya and be restricted. But for the African women, it is a permanent situation. They can never be at home in any part of the world because they are born homeless.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have traced and analysed how Macgoye treats the theme of growth of young women in her short novels. It has come out that Macgoye illuminates the experiences of young women growing up in a young nation. The author has closely observed the pain of growing up as a woman in a society that perceives and directs life through the male norms. Consequently, she has molded characters in her short novels who express these feelings vividly. The critical evaluation of gender perspectives in this chapter has revealed that Macgoye, as Nyarloka, is still struggling to get her artistic voice, ideology and vision in her

adopted home. Her attempt to depict traditional African practices such as polygamy using European values, though deficient, offers hope for the empowerment of women in society. We have also observed that the author is biased towards white women characters where they exist side by side with African women characters. This has led critics like Tom Mboya to insinuate that Macgoye is a racist. Further, we have noted that in her attempt to empower women and girls, Macgoye excludes men from her thinking. This may explain why women protagonists do not achieve much in their quests. The above weakness notwithstanding, it is important to note that critical issues of gender concern emerge in the author's short novels. These include growth of women, polygamy, marriage, birth, entrapment, gender awareness, and race. Another significant theme that has emerged, and which we intend to follow keenly in the next chapter is Macgoye's ideology of liberation of women.

Having identified the emergence of gender perspectives in Macgoye's short novels, we proceed to evaluate the maturing of the author's perspectives in Chapter Three where we trace the coming to birth of Macgoye as a novelist. The novels to be evaluated are *Coming to Birth*, *The Present Moment*, *Homing In* and *Chira*.



## CHAPTER THREE

### 'COMING TO BIRTH' OF MACGOYE AS A NOVELIST

In Chapter Two, we explored and evaluated the emergence of gender perspectives in Macgoye's short novels. We noted that even though the scope of the shorter novels does not allow for an in-depth representation of the gender concerns in Macgoye's works, the author manages to highlight pertinent issues that affect women in society as seen through the eyes of young girls. It also emerged that the author's major interest lies in the physical and psychological growth of women protagonists. Even though the women protagonists do not achieve much in terms of ideological maturity with regard to women's empowerment, they demonstrate an enhanced level of awareness and a progressive quest for greater autonomy and visibility in public life.

In this Chapter, we explore Macgoye's artistic contribution as a novelist. As we explained in the previous chapter, the novel genre, as opposed to the short novel, offers limitless opportunities to a creative writer in terms of breadth and depth in characterization, thematic development, setting and narrative techniques. It is therefore intimated that by employing the novel genre, Macgoye attempts to transcend the structural limitations of the short novel genre to articulate her artistic vision clearly through the medium that is inclusive, flexible and detailed. It can also be interpreted as Macgoye's attempt to assert herself in a genre traditionally regarded as the male domain.

The novels we are going to look at are *Coming to Birth* (1986), *The Present Moment* (1987), *Homing In* (1994) and *Chira* (1997). In the above novels, Macgoye explores critically the challenges faced by women in a changing society and creates women characters who embody such experiences. Apart from the novels mentioned above, the study will also make references to the author's literary essay *Moral Issues in Kenya: A Personal View* (1996) in which Macgoye gives her individual perspective on social, economic and political issues prevalent in the contemporary Kenyan society.

We proceed by surveying the plots of the four novels in question before analysing the various perspectives that emerge and grow in each of the texts and how they coalesce to give us Macgoye's perspectives in literature. The chapter ends with a critical assessment of the 'coming to birth' of Macgoye as a novelist.

### **An Overview of *CTB*, *TPM*, *HI* and *Chira***

*Coming to Birth* is the novel that earned Macgoye international acclaim as a unique writer from Africa. The historical scope of *Coming to Birth* is limited to twenty-two years in the life of a single woman - Paulina, in the years before and after Kenya's independence. The story revolves around the development of Paulina from an ignorant, fatalistic and invisible Luo woman chained to poverty and domination by tradition in rural Nyanza to a self-educated, autonomous, assertive and influential woman in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. Through individual effort and support from fellow women, Paulina realizes her dreams and comes to birth economically, psychologically, politically and socially.

The story of *The Present Moment (TPM)*, on the other hand, treats the theme of history and its impact on aging women. In this text, Macgoye offers a multifaceted women's perspective on Kenyan society before and after independence. Macgoye achieves this by presenting, through their memories, the stories of seven women in the Refuge for homeless elderly women. One of the women is a Luo, one Swahili, several are Gikuyu, and one is French/African. Their lives cover a wide span of Kenya's history from the early years when British colonial rule was establishing itself, through two world wars, local labour unrest, violent anticolonial resistance, and into the problematic postcolonial period.

The novel begins with the old women stubbornly separated from each other, pointing out ethnic and religious differences. As the story develops, they begin to tell their stories to one another and to a younger generation of women who come to nurse them. The book recounts not only their personal struggles, but also the political struggles across the breadth of the nation from the labor strikes in Mombasa to the Kisumu incident and the abortive coup in Nairobi. What the women discover over the course of the novel is that their paths through life have crossed in various ways so that one woman knows someone another woman knows, one

woman has been to a place another woman came from. and so on. What the characters discover is that "all your experience presses bitterly upon the present moment and all the things you have shared are separately enfolded in someone else's life" (154). By targeting senior citizens revered in African society for wisdom, the text illustrates how women from different ethnic backgrounds struggle against the injustices of taboos and tradition in the precolonial and postcolonial Kenya with mixed results.

*Homing In (HI)*, compared to the two novels reviewed above, is unique. In it, Macgoye addresses the relationship between white women and their African counterparts. She does this by creating a white woman protagonist living happily with her African woman servant. The novel tells the story of Ellen Smith, the wife of Jack Smith, a European settler and Martha, a Kikuyu widow who is her househelp and friend. When the novel begins, the racial divide is too wide and there is no hope of whites and Africans coexisting harmoniously as evidenced in the 'operation anvil' and Mau Mau atrocities. In the later stages of the novel, Macgoye demolishes the racial wall and allows the two women from different backgrounds to live in happiness through female friendship and mutual support. Ellen and Martha realise that, alone, they are vulnerable hence the need to support one another to survive. Interwoven with the narration of Ellen's and Martha's past is their steady progress towards sainthood through the simple life they lead, detached from the worldly concerns and dedicated to the good of their fellow women. When the novel ends, friendship between Martha and Ellen has extended and encompassed their friends and relatives in Kenya and Europe. The two characters become representatives of the two races. This reminds us of the symbolic meaning of Athol Fugard's play *The Blood Knot*. In the South African play, Fugard satirizes the venality and hypocrisy of apartheid. We have two blood brothers; Morri, white and educated exploiting Zack, black and illiterate. This parasitic arrangement is encouraged by the apartheid regime. Unlike Morri who relies on his whiteness to exploit his black blood brother Zack, Ellen recognizes the interdependence between all races and works to enhance it by encouraging African women to aspire to higher goals in life through girl-child education and female solidarity. In *III* Macgoye seems to suggest that while male colonial masters perpetuated racial stereotypes to dominate Africans, white women and black women worked together to eliminate the vice. In essence Macgoye insinuates mildly that only white men should shoulder the blame for the sins of colonialism because white

women were also victims of the regime. This is a contentious issue that we explore in detail later on in this chapter.

*Chira* is the last major novel to be written by Macgoye. The novel is about the Aids scourge in Kenya. In the novel, Macgoye demystifies Aids by explaining what it is, what causes it, what spreads it and how to combat it. Samuel and Josefina, cousins, commit incest in their adolescence. In the process, one of them infects the other with the HIV, which manifests into a strange wasting disease. Their parents refuse to accept that the two are suffering from the new disease - Aids. They call it *chira*- a wasting disease among Luos caused by breaking taboo. Samuel dies of Aids and Josefina follows shortly after. The narrator comments that efforts to combat the disease are hampered by the denial that it exists. It is for this reason that the society refuses to accept Aids as a disease and instead insists that it is *chira*, a common condition they know and which has a cure. In *Chira*, Macgoye raises pertinent questions on contraception including family life education. Equally the author suggests various ways in which the Aids scourge can be contained, the most controversial of her proposals, as we shall see in the analysis of this text, is that homosexuality should be tolerated and abortion criminalised. Finally the author suggests that women and men should go for the Aids test before marriage to curb the spread of the disease.

When we look at *Coming to Birth*, *The Present Moment*, *Homing In* and *Chira* chronologically, it transpires that Macgoye dramatizes how twentieth-century Kenyan history set in motion changes that have contributed to the process of women's emancipation in the country. Macgoye focuses on women struggling to make a better living for themselves and a modest level of autonomy within a rapidly changing society. Macgoye's major concerns in these novels are the empowerment of women, aging, interracial relationships, politics, history and Aids pandemic.

## Women's Emancipation

In our analysis of Macgoye's short novels in the previous chapter, we noted that the author is very particular with the development of girls into responsible and autonomous women in the society. This theme is explored at a deeper level in Macgoye's major novels. A closer analysis of *CTB*, *TPM*, *HI* and *Chira* reveals that the theme of empowerment of women is Macgoye's major fictive symbol as evidenced in the recurrence of the symbolism of birth, journey and growth in her novels. Like girls at Lina school all her women characters struggle to realise their dreams in a society going through rapid transformation. Growth in Macgoye's novels is symbolically reflected as a journey undertaken by women who have faith in the rediscovery of the true essence of womanhood. The journeying motif marks a symbolic struggle by women to emerge from the shadows of societal invisibility by asserting their self worth as invaluable participants in public and private affairs. It marks the beginning of a process of liberation from the shackles of patriarchy to a supportive and tolerant environment in which women can successfully achieve their goals.

A critical evaluation of the theme of empowerment of women in Macgoye's novels reveals points of intersection between patriarchy and invisibility of women. Patriarchy, as explained before locates men at the centre of the management of the society while women are pushed to the periphery. Marginality and invisibility therefore become the identification symbols of women before they grow to maturity in terms of self-awareness, confidence and political consciousness. In this study, we treat invisibility as a condition of social insignificance where a woman or a group of women play virtually no significant role in society. They are mere drifters in a gigantic scheme in which they hold no special duty and only wallow in the limbo of social marginality.

We argue that the invisibility women characters fight in Macgoye's novels is not natural; it is a creation of the dominant sex to impersonalize women for the convenience of gender-based exploitation. To conveniently effect this, the society immerses women into what Franz Fanon calls a "zone of non-being, an extra-ordinary sterile and arid region" (Fanon 10) of social, political and economic eclipse. We notice this in Macgoye's women characters before they liberate themselves from male domination.

Chinyere Okafor in Newell (1997) argues that male writers who depict it as normal perpetuate invisibility of women in creative works. The critic observes that in the works of Wole Soyinka, for example, women are objectified as sex symbols. Female experiences are confined to their relations with men as foolish virgins, mistresses and matrons: "They are not given other rooms to explore other possibilities for self-fulfillment outside these sexual roles. ...They are usually parasites who are 'lovers, wives, or blood relatives of the central male figure" (83). This is evidenced in Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* and *Trials of Brother Jero* where Sidi and Amope are demeaningly depicted as a piece of decoration and a shrew respectively.

Social marginality of women painted by male writers compels committed women writers to deconstruct male perception of womanhood to illuminate feminine qualities suppressed, assumed, ignored or ridiculed in male writing. This explains why Macgoye is interested in the growth of women in her novels. Growth of women characters physically, psychologically, politically, economically and socially epitomises a symbolic liberation of women from the shadows of men into the active zone of inclusive participation. In fact, women characters only begin to live once they realise that trusting what the society (read men) says and does cannot assure them of their fulfillment individually and collectively.

One of the female protagonists that lead the struggle for the empowerment of women in Macgoye's novels is Paulina in *CTB*. She struggles for freedom and recognition on her own without support from any man, and as mentioned earlier, she succeeds in coming to 'birth' in several ways. When the protagonist makes her first appearance in the novel, she is totally an invisible woman, pessimistic, resigned and feeble in spirit. Martin her husband, equally immature, exploits his position as the provider in the house to intimidate her, assault her and at times even send her to the rural home as a punishment for not conceiving fast enough. Kimingichi Wabende (2000) in highlighting gender injustice that Macgoye attacks in *CTB* observes that in the alleged infertility of Paulina, "nobody seems to point a finger at Martin. Yet there seems to be greater probability that it is Martin rather than Paulina who is impotent given that she had conceived with Simon" (Wabende 26). Mistreatment by Martin compels

Paulina to liberate herself. She thinks seriously about her situation and discovers that her weak and precarious position in the family is a consequence of illiteracy and economic dependence on the husband. Consequently, she starts pursuing education informally while at the same time engaging in small income generating ventures. The suggestion that Macgoye seems to flout here is that for women to assert their visibility in society, they must first of all study the environment they operate in and identify the short falls in order to evolve appropriate liberation strategies. In the youthful stage of her development, Paulina separates from Martin, her husband and lives as a single mother, first in Kisumu and later in Nairobi. Her effort is rewarded when she manages to settle in Nairobi as a literate, economically stable and politically conscious woman. Life in Nairobi exposes her to the challenges of modernity, which in turn harden her resolve to be free (CTB 46).

From our brief review, it emerges that Paulina grows from a timid rural girl into a bold, courageous and mature no-nonsense lady. She sets herself free from Martin's control and moves away from the rural environment to a cosmopolitan city, which is conducive to her development as a liberated woman. At the height of her growth, Paulina becomes a political activist, championing the cause of women regardless of her husband's aversion to politics and the plight of women (CTB 113). Her growth makes her more human and tolerant to Martin, her estranged husband. She allows him into her house and educates him to recognise and respect women's space and contribution in society.

It is our observation that while Paulina matures in all spheres of life, Martin remains stagnant and gradually becomes irrelevant as the male head of the household:

He did not see himself as maturing but as deprived of the chance of maturity, a childless man who could not keep a wife, whose house at home was shamed and whose house in town could never be home. (CTB 78)

Contrary to Martin's irredeemable disintegration, Paulina is intelligent and has the will and power to do anything in the manner she wants it done. At the height of her growth, Paulina becomes the epitome of the emergent Kenyan spirit of womanhood. She symbolizes its values,

embodies its history, struggles, fears and triumphs. Her sorrow as a despised childless woman is the sorrow of the Kenyan society, and her triumph in coming to birth, as an autonomous woman is a collective victory not only for women but the whole society committed to social change. Paulina's transformation raises the following controversial questions regarding women's empowerment.

Contrary to our observation above, it has been argued that Paulina fails to grow to maturity and that when the novel ends she is still "Not cautious... it reveals her (Paulina) as not having learnt from her experience" (Mboya 35). If the above statement is true, then Mboya's observation implies that Macgoye creates women characters who are incapable of realizing their potential in life. We do not share Mboya's position because while it cannot be asserted that Paulina grows into a perfect woman, it cannot also be ignored that she records a marked improvement in all spheres of life. The Paulina we meet at the beginning of the novel is an inferior picture of the woman we meet at the end of the novel. At the beginning of the novel Paulina is young, illiterate, untraveled, politically ignorant, economically dispossessed and a punching bag for her husband. However, when the novel ends, Paulina is expecting a child, is self educated, politically conscious, economically independent, and above all, a mentor to her husband, Martin. The narrator confirms this positive development by reporting that compared to Martin, it was Paulina who was always, "demanding to grow, to get out to do things, and he (Martin) was tired and disillusioned" (CTB 112). At the height of her growth Paulina reaches out to assist women and children in need. In assisting street children, Paulina shows empathy for human suffering which cuts across class, religion, race and gender. It demonstrates her maturity as a rounded person whose "consciousness has now superseded the question of women to incorporate human suffering" (Wabende 70).

We encounter a new Paulina in her employment with Mr. and Mrs. M. Her lady employer, Mrs. M, unlike the woman in *Freedom Song*, inculcates in her the philosophy of making the best out of impossible situations. Astonished by the incredible transformation Paulina has gone through within a short period, Mrs. M refers to her as a "New Woman" (CTB 147). In this context, the term 'new woman' is used to refer to that woman who accepts her outsider status, expands its scope and turns things to her advantage to become an insider on her own



terms. Instead of taking what is given by the society and trying to make the best out of it, they create what they want and make the best out of it. This is captured in the dialogue between Paulina and Amina in the final episodes of *Coming to Birth*. Reflecting on the gains women have made in their quest for empowerment in the postcolonial Kenya, Paulina states: "We have learnt to *take* what comes and *make* the best of it" (*CTB* 146 emphasis mine). Amina corrects her friend Paulina and presents a pro-active interpretation of women's empowerment to read we have learnt "to *make* what comes and *take* the best of it" (*CTB* 146 emphasis mine). This tacit statement indicates that women have changed with the society. They are no longer passive recipients of favours but active participants in shaping their destiny and that of the society.

We reiterate that, considering the effort she has invested in bettering herself against all obstacles of tradition and taboos, Paulina has indeed come to birth. By ignoring the development in Paulina's character, Mboya falls into the trap of many male critics of women's writing. He places higher standards for evaluating Macgoye's writing which only eclipse the author's creative contribution. This is not to say that women's writings should be given special treatment compared to male-authored texts. We only advocate for fairness, tolerance and intellectual sobriety in appreciating women's works as opposed to arrogance and ignorance displayed by majority of the male critics.

While we recognise Macgoye's effort in liberating Paulina from Martin's domination, one cannot fail to trace a strong feminist undercurrent in the author's ideology of liberation. It is apparent that while one (Paulina) is liberated from the shadows of invisibility to an autonomous existence, the other (Martin) is denied the ability to grow and change with time to the extent that Martin is relegated to the shadows of existence similar to those Paulina languished in the early episodes of the novel. This reminds us that contrary to her declarations, Macgoye's texts defy her proclaimed androgynous posture to articulate a women-centred vision.

The theme of empowerment of women introduced in *CTB* is further explored in *Chira*. Helen the protagonist in the novel, like Paulina in *CTB*, develops faster than her fiancée Otieno in terms of critical awareness. She is an enterprising hairdresser in Nairobi and a devout

Christian of Tanzanian origin. She makes known her views on sensitive issues in the society like reproductive health rights without fear of condemnation from conservative religious leaders and male chauvinists. While Otieno is introduced as an ignorant, traditional Luo man with loose morals, Helen is depicted as a morally upright, enterprising and intelligent woman.

The narrator comments:

She knew how to abstract: when she saw a film, she saw it all in one piece. "It is about a girl who leaves her boyfriend because she is attracted by a gangster, but she finds they are very bad people and in the end she escapes and goes back to her boyfriend and they help the police to defeat the gangsters. (*Chira*: 66)

Like the girl in the narrative who changes for the better, Macgoye creates Helen with a restless mind. She questions things, conceptualizes issues and suggests radical proposals without fear of male condemnation. Helen is the opposite of Abiero (*MIM*) and Paulina (*CTB*) before she has come to birth. She is one of the few characters who are open about the HIV/Aids pandemic. She accepts the disease as a reality and floats pragmatic proposals to control it. Helen is opposed to the Catholic Church's stand on reproductive health rights which preaches abstinence and condemns the use of condoms. It is Helen's confidence in herself and her pragmatic approach to the control and management of HIV/Aids that facilitates Otieno's growth as a responsible man and a devout Christian.

Before his encounter with Helen, Otieno is a man full of hollow pride. He believes in having an edge over women by being 'tuff'. One of the ways of demonstrating his superiority as a man is by engaging in multiple romantic liaisons. For example, after luring Julia, a young househelp to bed, he walks away feeling victorious:

Gabriel was feeling a bit more cheerful. He had got the better of somebody, though not anybody of significance. And though she would do, it was a poor enough victory, leaving no scent or glitter in his room, no conquest to boast of. (*Chira*: 20)

In the above excerpt, Macgoye seems to suggest that Otieno behaves the way he does because he has taken after his father. We are told that Otieno's father was a traditional Luo man who enjoyed terrorizing his wives and children like Okonkwo of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. His food was always served first and women in the house including visitors, unquestioningly obeyed his orders. Otieno inherits the traditional way of life that considers women lesser beings. He argues that:

A man is answerable to himself. He is not supposed, once he has become a person, to take orders from a woman. Only if it is a matter of paid work you try to see the boss as a person, not a woman, and you hope to God that she will not be a Luo woman anyway. (*Chira*: 73)

In the above excerpt, Macgoye reveals Otieno's moral mediocrity. While he is opposed to taking orders from women because he is 'a man', he is ready to work for a woman and take orders because money is involved. His only prayer is that it should never be a Luo woman. Otieno's reservations about working for a Luo woman can be blamed on ego and guilt conscience. To Otieno, taking orders from a woman would be a painful acceptance that he has sacrificed his manhood for paid employment, and considering how Luo men lord it over their wives (remember how Martin treats Paulina in the early stages of their marriage), Otieno fears that it is most likely that a Luo woman in a position of authority can do likewise to the man. Macgoye seems to suggest here that patriarchal domination is harmful to men who perpetrate it as it is to women. The only difference is that women's suffering is public while men's wounded conscience is psychological. This observation proves true the dictum that empowerment of women indirectly liberates men from the psychological guilt of domination.

In *Chira*, Macgoye repeats the thesis advanced in *CTB* that women characters are capable of emerging from the shadows of invisibility imposed by men. Paulina (*CTB*) and Helen (*Chira*) defy all odds to illuminate their visibility in the male dominated world. The positive aspect of the women protagonists' empowerment in Macgoye's novels, and which is missing in her novellas, is that they support their male counterparts to emerge from the psychological prison

of patriarchal dictatorship and exploitation. Martin (*CTB*) and Otieno (*Chira*) gradually become tolerant, responsible and supportive of their female spouses. In deed, they become more human but not as empowered as their wives are.

It is apparent from Paulina and Helen's development in *CTB* and *Chira* respectively, that Macgoye tries to strike a balance between the traditional ways and the modern life. As products of traditional African communities who have opted for modern life in Nairobi, the women protagonists exhibit dual identities. Neither do they reject the past nor unquestioningly appropriate modernity in order to redefine their identities. Instead, they accept the difficulties of dual identity that combines elements of traditional and modern. This explains why Paulina is keen on family values to the point of forgiving Martin who humiliated her because of her alleged childlessness.

In addressing the theme of women's empowerment, Macgoye's novels echo Margaret Ogola's celebration of the spirit of womanhood in *The River and the Source* (1994). Ogola's novel is about the epic struggle by women to reassert their worth in society. The struggle by women is symbolically represented by the flow of a river which begins with Obanda Akoko in 19th Century and ends with Professor Wandia in the 20th Century. In one of the few mentions of the Kenyan novel (*The River and the Source*) which won the 1995 Kenyatta Prize for Fiction, Nici Nelson notes that:

Throughout the novel, women fight, strive and work to keep the family together in the face of weakness, venality and stupidity of husbands, sons and brothers. (Nelson 167)

Even though Nelson sounds quite abrasive in her dismissal of male characters, the critic successfully deconstructs the invisibility of women by illuminating the pivotal role they play in society. Nelson observes that in Ogola's novel, women protagonists record marked growth as opposed to men who remain dormant. This is similar to Macgoye's portrayal of the sea-saw effect in the growth of women and men. The point of convergence between Macgoye and Ogola is that both writers seek to allay the fear that empowerment of women spells disaster

for men. The two writers, in their separate texts, assure readers that an empowered woman is not a threat but an asset to the man, the family and the society at large. Macgoye like Ogola treats her female characters with a lot of understanding. She gives women protagonists central positions in her novels, reflects with fidelity their sensibilities and opens up their consciousness while taking great care not to alienate their male spouses.

In this context, Macgoye and Ogola in their respective texts, champion what Ogundipe-Leslie terms 'womanist feminism' (Ogundipe 12) and which we refer to in this study as gender criticism. Macgoye strives to create women characters who are independent but not separatist or adversarial to men. This approach is not antagonistic towards the opposite sex. It advocates for an inclusive growth that incorporates the woman, her family and her male relations. Without being confrontational, Paulina (*C'TB*), Ellen (*HI*), Wairimu (*TPM*) and Helen (*Chira*) tackle various problems without the help of their male partners. This reveals another dominant feature in Macgoye's works - androgyny. As we explained in the introductory chapter, androgyny in literature refers to the concept of perceiving the world using a sexless perspective, where characters exhibit both male and female qualities - a world in which no sex is inferior as both qualities reside in each person. As we mentioned in the introductory chapter, Macgoye argues that, in her creative works, she does not subscribe to the exclusion of men from the women's world. And that the world of Macgoye's stories is a free world shared by all, in which women strive to redefine their space in spite of all obstacles.

The androgynous slant in Macgoye's novels is influenced by the author's interpretation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Jane Tomkins. In an interview with the author in 1998, she pointed out to this researcher that "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the greatest book ever to be written." Incidentally, Jonathan Culler, a European literary theoretician and critic also refers to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as "the most important book of the (20th) century" (Culler 56). Macgoye argues that in addition to an attack on slavery, the novel is reputed to have changed the hearts of many of its readers, as it attempts to bring on, through the same sort of change of heart, a new social order. In the new society envisioned in the novel, man-made institutions fade into irrelevance, and the home guided by the Christian woman becomes, not a refuge from the real order of the world, but the centre of the meaningful activity. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* shares

thematic orientation with Macgoye's novels in illuminating the creative potential in women. The inclusion of women like Paulina (*CTB*), Ellen Smith (*HI*) and Helen (*Chira*) at the centre of social activity is the most radical component of Macgoye's vision of a gender-informed society. Her ideal society, like that of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is one solidly rooted in the traditional values of religion, motherhood, home and family with women playing their roles alongside men.

Our discussion on the growth of women characters has revealed that Macgoye has a women-centred ideology and vision. Inasmuch as she tries to be inclusive in mirroring the transformation the society goes through, she suggests that compared to men, women undergo transformation from weakness to strength. They take decisive steps in redressing their perceptions of unfairness as opposed to their male counterparts who stay trapped in bigotry.

### **Marriage and Women's Empowerment**

As we saw in the previous chapter with regard to Lois, Victoria and Mrs. Onyango, Macgoye indicates that marriage in the traditional society consigns women to 'social death' from which they can only resurrect by walking out and beginning life afresh as autonomous beings. At the same time, we have noticed that Macgoye as a staunch Christian strives through her works to salvage the family institution from rapid disintegration and collapse without necessarily locking women in cells of sour relationships.

Macgoye is not alone in questioning the role of marriage in the empowerment or disempowerment of women. It has been argued in feminist circles that women in African societies are consistently domesticated. They are expected to be obedient and submissive, and that they occupy themselves with trivia only looking to marriage as their only escape. This has led to calls for women to stay out of marriage as it only contributes to women's invisibility. In *TPM*, a majority of women in the Refuge are destitute because they rebelled against the traditional practice of marriage. Wairimu, for example, struggles in vain to assert herself in the patriarchal Kikuyu society. As a young Kikuyu girl, she has a burning ambition to pursue her goals without inhibitions from tradition, but the parents are impatient to marry her off to get dowry. On the eve of her wedding Wairimu rebels and runs away from home to

the coffee plantation and later to Nairobi where she participates actively in the struggle for Kenya's independence. She explains to her mother later, that she ran away from marriage to follow her dream: "It was not the boy's (Waitito) fault, mother. It was first that I had another dream, let us say, not to do with dowry or with babies" (*TPM* 60). Through Wairimu, Macgoye condemns the insensitivity of the traditional Kikuyu society to the plight of girls. As Wairimu remembers in her old age, the society did not give women a chance to realise their potential. Girls grew up to be "initiated, manipulated, screened, divided with categories" (*TPM* 45). By creating Wairimu as one of the first Kikuyu women to question the hypocrisy, orthodox teachings and policies of patriarchy, the author plants the seed of empowerment of women in a society that unquestionably accepted male domination in the past.

As evidenced in her treatment of marriage, Macgoye suggests that marriage under traditional arrangements is detrimental to women's progress. She makes this clear in her literary essay *Moral Issues in Kenya: A Personal Perspective* where she observes that: "an African man loves his mother, talks to his sister and sleeps with his wife" (*Mor*: 20). According to the above statement, a wife is three times removed from her husband, save for the matrimonial bed, which in some circumstances, is also shared by other women. This portrayal of men's meanness, sarcastic as it may read, is true about many marriages today as it was in the traditional past. A man will always adore his mother, empathise with his sister and deal with his wife contractually. This is what we see in the relationship between Martin and Paulina (*CTB*).

In the novels under discussion, Macgoye suggests that marriage within a patriarchal setting hinders women's empowerment and that success in women's struggle can only be achieved if women reclaim their space within marriage, work together as sisters, pursue education and nurture old values that do not bog them down. Nana Wilson Tagoe shares this view in her study of the feminist perspective in Flora Nwapa's creative works. Nana Tagoe observes that 'Nwapa's vision of a stable and fulfilling marriage is one in which economic independence of the woman is promoted alongside the forging of monogamous relationships based on love, trust and mutual understanding' (Newell: 103). It can therefore be argued that Macgoye encourages women to enter marriage as equals to their male counterparts by maintaining

positions of strength and autonomy. The author contends that by entering marriage as underdogs, women serve to valorize the phallogocentric notion of male superiority. In *CTB*, Paulina is married as a traditional wife and is not allowed to realise her full potential. She walks out of the original marriage and re-enters a new contract with Martin. The new marriage recognises Paulina's autonomous existence and enables her to come to birth. Similarly, in *HI*, Ellen fights against domestication by Jack who believes that a woman only needs a good car, a large house and plenty of food. In her struggle to reclaim her space within marriage, Ellen emerges as an autonomous white lady capable of running her home without the assistance of her husband. As a result Ellen feels strong at the death of Jack. She argues that she had been a widow all a long as Jack had abandoned most of his responsibilities to her when he was still alive (*HI* 118). Like all the marriages discussed above where men begin as the centres of authority banking on the myth of male power, Jack is no exception. Gradually, the myth is demystified as their hidden weaknesses are revealed which in turn empower women to effectively take control of the homes. It is in *Chira* that Macgoye shares with the reader her vision of an ideal marriage.

In addressing the theme of marriage in her novels, Macgoye singles out dowry as one of the causes of the dehumanization of women. To Macgoye, it serves to enrich male parents of the girl while reducing the wife to a chattel with monetary value. The author does not advocate offering dowry in marriage because she considers it as commercialization of human relationships. This explains why the author creates women protagonists who either refuse to be married or enter marriages without dowry. Wairimu (*TPM*) refuses to be purchased and runs away from home. Helen (*Chira*) too, refuses to be bought and marries Gabriel Otieno without traditional ritual. Victoria (*VIC*) walks out of the marriage in which dowry is given and gets her freedom back by returning to her parents the equivalent of the dowry (Shs. 250). Sophia also refuses to accept second marriage after the death of her husband Ali and instead marries Henry, a Christian considered an infidel by Muslims (*TPM* 65). Rachael, like Sophia, refuses to be inherited after the death of her husband. All these women protagonists decide to make choices instead of honoring choices made for them by the society. It is our view that payment of dowry as a cultural practice is not oppressive to women, it is the attitudes attached to it that makes it a source of women's degradation and oppression.



Macgoye seems to suggest that the turmoil created by modernization has destabilized women's traditional identities. Men have failed in their duties as traditional heads of households and women have stepped in as agents of necessity to fill up the vacuum. This transformation is registered in women's lives both as loss and as opportunity. With the coming of the new colonial order, the old village support networks and familial relationships fray and snap under the strain. The chaotic new world of the towns mushrooming everywhere provides little safety for women as it throws them back on their own resources. This changing world presents women with possibilities in the form of an expanding arena for work, mobility, autonomy and choice, which are both a blessing, and, especially for earlier generations of women like Victoria, a curse. This reminds us of Jean O'Barr's observation we referred to in Chapter One that Kenya's women are trapped in a quadruple bind. They perform traditional roles without traditional resources while at the same time they undertake modern activities without access to modern support systems. Accordingly, women protagonists in Macgoye's novels are forced to individually search for ways of restoring the emotional, social and moral equilibrium originally provided by the traditional roles. In the process, they are forced to rebel in order to stay focused in pursuing their goals.

Though controversial, decommercialization of marriage that Macgoye advocates is in agreement with Buchi Emecheta's theme in her novel *The Bride Price* (1976) in which she condemns the greed that accompanies demands for dowry when women marry. The story of Akuna is similar to that of Wairimu in *TPM*. Okwonkwo wants her niece Akuna to marry a rich man so that he can get a fat bride price and become an important member of the society. This does not materialise as the girl elopes with her lover Chike who is a slave. Okwonkwo does not want Akuna to marry Chike because he is a slave and therefore poor and inferior. Akuna marries Chike and the bride price is not paid as it is too condescending for a respected man like Okonkwo to receive bride price from a slave. Due to her strength of character and informed defiance of taboos, everybody including her mother who rebukes her for not acting "womanly" ostracizes Akuna. Acting 'womanly' in this context translates into being a "good woman" who knows the place demarcated for her by patriarchy and complies without question. Macgoye's women characters, like Akuna, increasingly become aware of the

incompleteness of their lives under patriarchy and consistently push for their own space and their own definition of a "good woman." For example, Wairimu in *TPM* resists attempts to trap her in male prohibitions through marriage thereby compelling the society to realise that women are not only born for labour in coffee plantations and marriage but also higher goals like active involvement in the struggle for freedom.

Apart from the bride price, Macgoye suggests that another impediment to women's empowerment in marriage is the stigmatization of childlessness. The author indicates that a number of women are locked out of marriage because they cannot give their husbands children. Apart from Wairimu who refuses to marry because she does not want children, other women characters are single because their attempts at having children have failed earning them the wrath of the society. Priscilla (*TPM*) is abandoned by Evans, her husband, because she is childless. Mama Chungu (*TPM*) is unhappy because although she gave birth to two children they both died leaving her without any proof of fertility (*TPM* 78). Nekesa is childless because of the complications she developed as a consequence of prostitution. Like Priscilla, she too does not marry because of her inability to give birth. In *CTB* Paulina struggles to come to birth biologically to the extent of engaging in an affair which gives her desire. However a stray bullet kills Okeyo, the child born out of wedlock during a political riot in Kisumu. This does not deter Paulina from coming to birth. Paulina's story ends positively because she is expecting Martin's child. The same can be said of Victoria (*VIC*) who throws her first child away and turns to prostitution in Kisumu. She realizes that she is incomplete as a woman without a child. When she conceives and gives birth to Lois, her stature in the brothel rises and people respect her. The above episodes suggest that birth of children, preferably male, is a dominant theme in Macgoye's novels as they are in the author's short novels.

Does it therefore imply that Macgoye condones inappropriate behaviour among women and men by making women protagonists like Paulina conceive out of marriage? No. The author punishes the culprits. For example, both Martin and Paulina engage in extramarital affairs in a fertility contest but all come out losers. Martin has a series of affairs that only widen the gap between him and Paulina besides causing economic havoc to his income. Paulina's affair with

Simon also ends tragically when the child born out of the liaison is killed in a shooting incident. We can argue that Macgoye as a moralist with a strong Christian background abhors immorality in the quest for freedom and identity. As long as Martin and Paulina are engaged in immorality, they do not get what they desire most: peace in marriage and a child to crown the union. Once the couple grows up, accepts their past mistakes and forgives one another they enjoy a harmonious marriage and make a child.

By creating women characters who suffer the wrath of the society due to their inability to give birth, Macgoye, in our view, is not valorizing male misnomer. She deconstructs and reconceptualizes female infertility as a feminist strategy to challenge conventional male representation of women. Through the lives of Paulina, Mama Chungu, Wairimu, Nekesa and Victoria, the author challenges the male fallacy that women can only survive in marriage by giving men what they desire most - children. Macgoye testifies to women's commitment to improving their own lives and those of their family members by creating female characters who are full of life, power and knowledge with or without children. For example, after joining the homecraft class in Kisumu, Paulina considers her childless status not as a handicap but a blessing in disguise. It enables her to focus her attention to the improvement of her home (CTB 42). It is also worthy to note that the above women choose to have children when they are ready for motherhood and not to please men as symbols of fertility. Simatei (2001) recognises Macgoye's attempt to liberate women from what Katherine Frank calls "domestic prison" (13). The critic argues that the author redefines motherhood to mean more than just the ability to rear one's own biological children. Motherhood means "social responsibility towards the less fortunate youths like the orphaned street children who Paulina administers to, an act that symbolically portrays her as a mother regardless of her childless status" (143).

To address the patriarchal obstacles to women's empowerment within and without marriage, Macgoye proposes women solidarity through sisterhood. To achieve this, the author creates women characters who are supportive of one another, the key principle of sisterhood being sharing. Women come together to share personal life histories, and their sorrows and triumphs. The narrator in *TPM* observes that the old women in the Refuge:

Were all masked here for the sake of sharing, since they had been brought up to see sharing as the ultimate goal and there remained this sisterhood of constraint to share with. (TPM 6)

The theme of sisterhood that Macgoye introduces in her novels is similar to what Kathleen Frank calls 'Female Friendship' in the writings of Mariama Ba, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Ememcheta and Ama Ata Aidoo. In an article entitled "Women without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa", Frank argues that in the creative works of the above mentioned West African women writers, women find only pain and degradation in their relationships with men, but on their own and in their relationships with other women they find "equal measure of love, support, respect and admiration (Frank K 19). These are the guiding principles of "female solidarity, power, and independence" (33). Frank's perception of sisterhood within the African context is controversial, radical and divisive. This makes her idea of female solidarity slightly different from Macgoye's sisterhood. While Frank declares war on men and edits them out of women's existence, Macgoye's sisterhood seeks to reconstitute the society with all members intact. For instance, the friendship that exists between Ellen and Martha (*HI*), Mrs. Bateson and Priscilla (*TPM*), Priscila and Mrs. Batira (*TPM 76*), old ladies in various homes for the aged and Paulina and Mrs. M. (*CTB*) is symptomatic of the female solidarity that does not seek to antagonise or taunt men. Ellen (*HI*), Mrs. M. and Paulina (*CTB*), Wairimu (*TPM*) and Ellen (*Chira*) share Ba's vision. Ba argues through Ramatoulaye "My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows" (Ba 88). Macgoye's women protagonists, like Ramatoulaye rejoice in liberating themselves and the womenfolk from the shadows of men through sisterhood. Wairimu, for example, remembers that it is the spirit of sisterhood that sustained the struggle for freedom during the state of emergency: "We used to say *Guturi wiathi no wathikaniri* (There is no independence only interdependence)" (*TPM 110*). Macgoye seems to suggest that while men discarded the spirit of brotherhood soon after independence, women nurtured theirs'.

From the foregoing deliberations, we can assert that in her novels, Macgoye does not prescribe what is good for African women. She lets them make choices, which can improve their lives. She preserves their dignity regardless of whether they are single women, married

women, commercial sex workers, petty hawkers, mothers or childless women. What the author defends is the right of women to make choices in matters that affect their lives without pressure from the society.

## Care for the Aged

In the previous chapter, we observed that Macgoye pays keen attention to the growth of young women in her short novels. In her novels, Macgoye shifts attention to old women. The author suggests that women live longer than their male counterparts. Physically, old women are described as dry bones drained of the sap of life. They are "a lot of hollow shells together producing a moaning noise" (*HI* 198). In *TPM* and *HI* Macgoye, explores extreme mental states of the old ladies such as nightmarish dreams, fevers and reminiscences brought about by old age. In their youth they break away from traditional society to reclaim their humanity. In old age, they emerge complete, united and independent of men by relying on the warm companionship offered by fellow women.

Macgoye considers aging as an inevitable phenomenon that affects women more than men. The author advocates for descent treatment of the old people, especially women in society. She indicates that such people can be cared for in special homes removed from their natural environments. This explains why *TPM* is set in a Refuge for old ladies situated in the East lands, Nairobi. There are several such homes in *CTB* and *HI*.

The concept of charitable homes for the aged that Macgoye proposes is European in origin. We noticed from Macgoye's background that there were several such homes in England of her youth. Thus her proposal of assisted homes for old members of the society is un-African because Africans take pride in looking after their elderly, venerated as sages. Indeed, aged people are resourceful in any African society to be removed to a secluded place away from kith and kin. The society therefore considers caring for the aged an honour and not a burden. However, it cannot be denied that modernity, craze for wealth and hardships in life have alienated young breadwinners from the old people who need their company, compassion and material support which can only be achieved if the senior citizens are given a forum where they can recreate their youthful days through reminiscences.

In his analysis of *TPM*, Mboya observes that by creating homes where the aged are looked after by white missionaries, Macgoye suggests that Africans are not capable of taking care of their own and that they have to rely on Europeans for assistance. He dismisses Macgoye's concept of homes for the aged as deceptive philanthropy:

The not so clear suggestion is that there is something wrong with the African way of doing things, if not the African's very nature (sic). And that even long after their independence, Africans have to be led and even encouraged to take care of their own helpless. That the Europeans take the initiative to sponsor the refuge is a justification of the neocolonialism. (Mboya: 64)

Mboya's reservation is not directed at the concept of uprooting old people from their local dwellings and grouping them in a secluded shelter. He is uncomfortable with who does it - white people or Kenyans themselves? The concern raised by Mboya is nationalistic especially when it comes to the running of charitable homes. Most of the charitable homes are run by church organizations with foreign funding. Africans should demonstrate their commitment by also contributing resources and ideas in addressing the plight of the aged. Nevertheless, we do not agree with Mboya's conclusion that having Europeans running charitable homes is a justification for neocolonialism and that it is meant to show that there is something fundamentally wrong with the African.

Macgoye's interest in the plight of the aged, contrary to Mboya's assessment, is not a cover-up for racist tendencies. We mentioned in Chapter One that Macgoye's grandparents lived with her family in the same house and that England of her time had several homes for the aged. This makes us surmise that the author is just transferring a European concept of care for the aged to a Kenyan situation. In *Moral Issues* the author explains that she had a wonderful mother in law who spent her last days under her care:

I had a marvelous Christian mother-in-law who was able to ignore custom and spend the last two years under our roof. This helped us to look after her, and

the children understood very well that her needs had priority because she was getting near the end. (*Mor*: 40)

The warm relationship between Macgoye and her aged mother-in-law is recreated in a powerful poem "For Miriam" in which Nyarloka pays a glowing tribute to the old lady as an epitome of an enduring African womanhood. According to Macgoye, what the old people need most is not food, but company. We agree with Macgoye that the society must find ways of comforting its senior citizens. We only differ with the author on where this should be done. We argue that the best place to look after the aged is within the African homes where love and care from those who are close to the aged is assured.

### **Historification of Characters**

The historification of significant themes and characters is another dominant feature of Macgoye's fiction. History has been synonymous with far-reaching social change in African communities such as those of pre- and postcolonial Kenya. These societies were profoundly shaken, broken, and irretrievably changed by the intrusion of technologically superior European imperial powers. In her novels Macgoye captures the effects of colonialism and continuing change on the lives of African women and men. As a social historian, the author uses historical events as the basis of her writing. Some of the events the author refers to are: the Mau Mau war, the state of emergency in Kenya, independence and political assassinations of Tom Mboya and J. M Kariuki. She reflects how local political events shape women protagonists' hopes, fears, aspirations and struggle for a better life. In the novels under consideration, the author concerns herself with a multiplicity of themes which conform to the historical development in Kenya right from colonialism, struggle for freedom and post-independence disillusionment.

In *Coming to Birth*, *The Present Moment* and *Homing In*, Macgoye employs history as the engine of societal change that does not feature the exploits of "great men" only as found in the works of male writers. History in the novels is not a mere enumeration of significant dates and events about the domestic lives of the women protagonists. Rather, Kenyan history, both colonial and postcolonial, is the very platform within which the women protagonists struggle,

aspire, suffer, act, and endure. In *The Present Moment*, history is the precise location where individual characters' choice, desire, and hope coalesce with the opportunities, tragedies, and possibilities created by radical social, cultural, and political change. Indeed, the weight of the past experiences "presses bitterly upon the present moment" as the women protagonists struggle to come to birth against all odds. This explains why the women protagonists cannot help revisiting their past. Priscilla in *TPM* argues that the past should be left undisturbed because it rekindles painful memories; "'Can't we leave it alone?' asked Priscilla, the emergency finished twenty years and more ago. We are free now. Let us not keep chewing over it" (*TPM* 34). According to Priscilla, nobody can change the past. What is done is done. It emerges from Macgoye's portrayal of characters that however painful it is, the past presses heavily upon the present moment and must be uncovered to help explain the present, heal the wounds and facilitate the coming to birth of women, men and Kenya as a country. By telling history through the voices of women characters who have never been given opportunity to voice their experiences, Macgoye restores women's historical personality by heralding their "return to history" (Boehmer 194), crucial for their coming to birth as autonomous beings. In essence, we are saying that Macgoye tells "herstories" of Kenya's history (Simatei 146). The unique slant of the author's herstory is that colonialism, in spite of its evils, at least had one major advantage: it loosened "the traditional system by creating an alternative centre of power to the village through urbanisation and money economy" (Simatei 141). This change, which in many ways contributes to the death of traditional society, empowers women like Paulina (*CTB*), Wairimu (*TPM*), Ellen (*HI*) and Helen (*Chira*) to take personal charge of their destiny, which ultimately liberates them from patriarchal bondage.

The major historical event that cuts across Macgoye's three major novels is the state of emergency in Kenya and the women's experiences throughout the ordeal. Considering that a lot has been written about Mau Mau war by male writers like Ngugi wa Thiongo and Meja Mwangi without bringing out a female perspective, Macgoye's initiative is complementary. In her novels, Macgoye documents heroic deeds of women in the struggle by depicting vividly the nightmare that women went through during the dark days of the Mau Mau. The author indicates that women participated actively and often sacrificed more than men in the struggle for freedom as fighters alongside men in the bush, recruiters in the reserves, spies, and



Suppliers of logistics for the freedom fighters. Above all, women kept the homes running in the absence of men.

Macgoye's treatment of Mau Mau and emergency experiences differ from other Kenyan writers of the freedom struggle like Ngugi wa Thiongo and Maina wa Kinyati in terms of tone, emphasis, and perspective. Ngugi, using a revolutionary Marxist approach, focuses on events which justify violence against whites for the sins of oppression and exploitation. Macgoye, on the other hand, adopts a perspective that allows her to give an alternative picture of how the emergency affected all categories of people: women and men, collaborators and fighters, Africans and whites. In *TPM*, Macgoye suggests that during emergency, a majority of those who suffered were innocent women, men and children from both sides of the racial divide. This is evidenced in her detailed description of the brutality of the Mau Mau freedom fighters on the innocent men, women and children:

The hammering had come at the door and the clang of *pangus* until at last the wire frame had given way. They had stabbed at the Master first - he had ordered Mrs. Bateson to the other room on the pretext of locking up what heavy tools they had. Then Priscilla's father had come running from the kitchen with his cook's apron, a carving knife in one hand and a heavy iron range poker hot in the other, short-sighted, grey-haired utterly pitiful - they had jumped upon him in a moment and, knowing she could do nothing for him, Priscilla had run into Anthea's bedroom - Anthea whom she had cared for since babyhood like the child she had never had. ... The men had knocked the flimsy barrier, pushed her aside and dragged the screaming child from the cupboard. One blow, mercifully, had been enough, a slash across the throat, gurgling blood and then the police whistles had begun to sound and the men had run off into the night leaving the maid and mistress alive and sobbing in one another's arms. (*TPM*: 74)

In the above extract, Macgoye openly voices her sympathy with whites and their African collaborators by vilifying freedom fighters as a bunch of blood thirsty, and heartless brutes. It

is apparent that in *TPM* Macgoye sympathises with Europeans and their African servants as opposed to the freedom fighters who are portrayed negatively as rascals hiding under the guise of fighting for freedom to achieve their devilish aim of murdering innocent children and old people.

In *CTB*, Macgoye again voices her sympathy for colonial administration by condemning in a polite manner its insensitivity, rapacity and overreaction to the nationalists' demands for freedom. In this novel, emergency is symbolised by watchtowers, homeguard posts, new villages, burnt old homesteads, and barbed wires everywhere. This creates a prison-like environment for women left in the villages. When Paulina arrives in Nairobi in 1954, the city is like an open concentration camp with barbed wires everywhere and the movement of Africans tightly controlled. Martha brings out the impact of emergency on African women vividly:

The fire - any fire - took her (Martha) mind back to those emergency days when you stood in the new village after curfew trying to make out which of the old homestead it was you could see burning. When you went back to hoe your fields, the blackened shell of the house might still be standing but you did not expect to find anything left that you had not managed to carry away the first time. The family hearth and the evenings of story telling lay far away beyond that. (*HI* 181).

Macgoye seems to suggest that emergency destroyed everybody; the white perpetrators and the Africans alike. The major victims and victors in the struggle for freedom were the women who stoically defied all odds to keep the community alive. It also emerges that Macgoye negates violence as a strategy of liberation and instead appeals for non-violence. In her novels, she asks whether murdering innocent people regardless of whether they are white or black 'purifies man' as Ngugi posits. It can be remembered that Ngugi wa Thiongo, the Kenya's most famous creative writer and critic, in his novels and critical essays, contends that Mau Mau violence was just:

Violence in order to change an intolerable, unjust social order is not savagery: it purifies man. Violence to preserve an unjust, oppressive social order is criminal and diminishes man.... Mau Mau violence was anti-injustice, white violence was to thwart the cause of justice. (*Homecoming*: 28)

Macgoye offers a pacifist angle to the freedom struggle by propagating the philosophy of non-violence in her novels. Even in the midst of hatred, destruction, racial pride, suffering and death, she illuminates love and hope in reconciliation. Macgoye implies that harmony and development for the human race can only be achieved through unity and understanding across all races.

Macgoye's proposal reveals the European that is deeply ingrained in her subconscious. The liberal humanism she preaches exonerates Europeans of colonial violence and suppression in Kenya. The begging question is why universality, humanism and non-violence are only advocated by when Africans have been offended? Why is it that Macgoye concentrates on violence committed against whites as opposed to the majority of Africans? We argue that inasmuch as the author tries to adopt a dual perspective to reflect on emergency with objectivity, she gradually slides into her role as a European trying to explain the malpractice of the colonial administrators. This does not negate the fact that Macgoye locates women's perspectives in Kenya's historical landscape to the extent that the historical growth of Kenya is parallel to the growing empowerment of women.

### **Interracial Relationships**

Macgoye, in her novels, tries to play down the racial tension between Africans and white people. In our analysis of *Murder in Majengo* in the previous chapter, we noticed that Macgoye depicts Vera, the white European volunteer teacher in an angelic light. Vera is an epitome of all the cherished values of civilised Christian world that African girls need to become autonomous women. In this way the author is like Karen Blixen who likes Africans, not as equals but as inferior beings. In *CTB*, *TPM* and *HI*, Macgoye moves out of this lopsided characterization in her short novels by creating white characters who are more credible with their human strengths and weaknesses. For example, in *CTB*, the narrator

commends white people who are well intentioned like the white police officer who releases Paulina from wrongful confinement and assists her to find her way home (CTB 20).

It is in *Homing In (HI)* that Macgoye pays special attention to the relationship between white women and men and their African counterparts. The novel tells the story of Ellen Smith, the wife of Jack Smith, a European settler and Martha, a Kikuyu widow who is her househelp and friend. The two women from different cultural backgrounds overcome their racial differences and live in harmony. It is suggested that this cross-racial fertilization catalyzes the women's growth, as they are able to blend European and African values to fit in a globalised postcolonial environment. In *HI*, Macgoye seems to suggest that while male colonial masters perpetuated racial stereotypes to dominate Africans, white women and black women worked together to eliminate the vice.

Ellen Smith (*HI*) is portrayed as a good European woman. She stands in solidarity with African workers agitating for better pay, refuses to reduce the food rations to Africans as demanded by the colonial administration and supports Kikuyu women who demonstrate to the DC's office in Fort Hall to complain about terracing. Ellen wonders why women should be sent out to work when they ought to be looking after their homes and babies. She empathises with the Kikuyu women mistreated by the colonial administration:

She could picture them, wiry, short women with prominent features and wide range of skin colour, one shoulder bared over the cloth (dyed yellow with Brooke Bond tea packets as like as not), rings massed round the head on strings, ears fantastically looped, the crowns of the older ones shaved and shiny to show (Njoki told her) that they had married children and were of an age to give counsel. (*III* 86)

The positive portrayal of European women characters indicates the author's concealed feeling that white women were more humane compared to their male counterparts like Jack.

Jack Smith in *HI* is depicted as a white chauvinist, an arrogant and husband. He is opposed to the education of Africans because that will make them equal to Europeans and increase

competition for jobs. Jack considers Africa and her inhabitants as backward. In one episode Ellen tells Jack a touching story of an African woman who delivered a child that died on the way to the hospital. Jack responds in an inhuman manner that shocks even Ellen his wife: "Probably walked straight home again. Tough as old boots these bints" (*HI* 34). The implication is that African women do not feel pain, and if they do, it does not matter because they are tough as boots.

From our assessment of Macgoye's treatment of the relationship between white and black women and white and black men, it emerges that under colonialism, white women suffered in the same way as their black sisters. The author blames all the evils of colonialism on white men and radical nationalists. The Western white male, like Jack in *HI* is presented as a colonizer not only of faraway countries but also of the woman "occupied" and colonized by him. In this context, colonialism is equated with the relationship between men and women in which the woman is forced into a subordinate position. She is deprived of her voice and, like those colonized, she is called unreasonable and emotional, thus representing everything that rational men are not or do not want to be. Her situation and that of colonized peoples are linked in joint martyrdom.

It seems that Macgoye, like other Western middle-class women, has applied this comparison without taking into account the contradictory position of being "both colonized patriarchal objects and colonizing race-privileged subjects" (Donaldson 6). Donaldson argues that on the one hand white women were privileged beings in the colonial set up, on the other hand they were extensions of their husbands. Because white men colonized and white women profited from it, it cannot be denied that white women also connived with their husbands to dominate, oppress and exploit African women and men. In essence, we are saying that Macgoye's suggestion that wives of colonial administrators suffered in the same way as African women at the hands of patriarchy is a vain attempt to exonerate white women from the evils of colonialism.

The above weakness notwithstanding, Macgoye's exploration of the bright and dark sides of the European settlers and administrators exposes with varying intensity the evils of

colonialism and the stereotypical conceptions of some whites with regard to other races. Her intention is to affirm that behind the bloody history left behind by the colonial administration in Kenya, there were also some well-intentioned, clear-minded and morally upright whites, especially white women. Nevertheless, we have noted that even though the author tends to be objective in depicting the relationship between whites and Africans, she still gives more colour to white women as opposed to white men and African women and men. This confirms the revolutionary truth that in a game of power, it is not possible to be non-partisan forever. You have to take sides or the sides take you. Macgoye, without noticing it, has no doubt been reclaimed by her white culture and history.

## The Aids Scourge

In her latest novel, *Chira*, the author shifts gear from her traditional concern with the conscientization of women, history and race relations to one of the scaring tragedies of the modern world - Aids scourge. In *Chira*, Macgoye addresses the Aids pandemic, its causes, symptoms, and misconceptions about it and how it can be contained. The novel addresses the role of tradition, religion and family life education in curbing the spread of the Aids. According to the author, tradition and the hypocritical denial of its existence accelerate the spread of aids, which is also blamed, on the economic, moral and spiritual poverty that is rampant in the society. Poverty, for instance, pushes young girls like Julia from their rural communities in search of better conditions in urban centres as househelps where men expose them to sexual exploitation. Gabriel, the protagonist in *Chira*, for example, takes advantage of Julia (*Chira*: 19). The event introduces Julia to the immoral life of the city, which culminates in her death from HIV/AIDS. In this novel, Macgoye suggests that the dreaded disease is spread by traditional beliefs and practices, which misrepresent the pathology of the Aids as a common wasting disease known among the Luo as *chira*. *Chira* is believed to be a punishment from the ancestors for not complying with the norms. Samuel, for instance, believes that he is suffering from *chira* which is caused by his sinful nature: "*Richo e makelo chira* - it is sin that causes the wasting disease" (*Chira*: 49). The sin Samuel alludes to is incest:

When I was living at auntie's I did have a go at Josefina, just like they say: my mother's sister's daughter, my own sister as near as may be. They say they know I did it but they still maintain in public that I didn't, so if I confess they would lose face, you see. No, she didn't get pregnant. And I did try to be careful. But, don't you see, it's not natural - *chira, chira, chira*. (*Chira*: 50)

Macgoye indicates through her protagonists that the major cause of fear for Aids is its mysterious nature. Since it cannot be explained, the society feels safe considering it as strange *chira*. The mysterious nature of Aids makes it inexplicable using folk wisdom or clinical knowledge. The community therefore responds by ostracizing those with Aids which leads to their withdrawal and lonely deaths. Gabriel tells us that Samuel, 'just sleeps in the *simba* (cottage) and does not eat or talk much to people. He is also thin like a person eaten up by TB. He hides because there are spots on his face' (*Chira*: 45).

Samuel is forced to hide because the society treats him like a leper. There is no sympathy or encouragement, only shock and pity. Njoki, like Samuel and Josefina, is stigmatized because of her condition as an Aids victim. This makes her withdraw from the society. 'She lives in isolation and tries to avoid the people she had known when she was Rocky's girlfriend' (*Chira*:149). Macgoye, by cataloging the psychological torture and public humiliation that Aids victims go through, advocates for creation of mass awareness and compassion towards such people.

The author describes with clinical precision, the destructive nature of the dreaded disease Aids. Through the painful faces, wasted and sore-punctured bodies, the reader is made to encounter the blood-curdling nature of the disease. The author solves the mystery surrounding Aids by giving it concrete existence in words. Samuel, the first victim of Aids in the novel is described candidly: "Sam was emaciated and his skin looked clammy. His legs, in shorts, appeared to be lacerated" (*Chira*: 48). The same description is repeated for Josefina with a feminine touch. She is "so thin, the skin drawn tight over the bone and rough with sores" (*Chira*: 55). The most touching episode in the novel, however, is the gradual, painful and the most shameful death of Julia from Aids related infections. Abandoned by those who knew

her, she drags herself along the roadside at night, pleading for compassion from good Samaritans:

"I am hurt. I am hurt." came the feeble voice - a girl or a very young boy's. Stooping cautiously, Gabriel saw the tiny figure wrapped in a *shuka* and tugged gently to uncover the face. Spotty and emaciated as it was, he could not help recognizing it as Julia's. The stench was terrible. She had been too weak to part her clothes when the diarrhea struck her and even the wrapper was wet through. She trembled with cold, her legs were a mass of sores and Gabriel sensed, though he could not see, that her protruding bones scrapped on the hard ground. (*Chira*: 162)

Julia is lucky to be picked by Gabriel and his friends who comfort her in her dying moments. Pastor Theodore in his philosophical reflections regarding Julia's death notes that Aids is like a vicious boxer. It eliminates its opponents by first of all, depriving them of the power of resistance before sending them to their painful deaths using fatal fists that dig holes into their hitherto beautiful bodies (*Chira*: 169).

Macgoye suggests that the major step in dealing with the Aids pandemic is accepting its existence, talking about it publicly and living positively with the knowledge instead of denying it. She condemns society's habit of stigmatizing those suffering from Aids related infections. By describing the gory details of Aids symptoms, the author manages, through empathy, to erect the bridge of compassion between Aids sufferers and members of the society. This ensures human solidarity against the common enemy and the need to fight the scourge collectively with every tool available.

Macgoye suggests that another way of fighting Aids is by talking about it publicly. This is epitomised in the dramatic dialogue between an old man and an old woman on whether people should use condoms. Helen who overhears the discussion is forced to interject by dismissing the old woman's opposition to the use of contraceptives as "stupid":



"They used to tell us at the clinic that there are better ways," said an old man in the crowd, but now the condom is not so much to stop the baby as to stop the infection. Even people who think they are not fertile should use them."

"Oh, shut your dirty mouth," protested the woman walking behind him. "These are not the things to talk about in public. Embarrassing, I call it".

If you saw the state people come to our clinic in, that would embarrass you a lot more than just talking about it."

.....

"Me, I obey the priest but I don't go shouting in the road about it."

"Stupid," announced Helen to the world in general, apparently unaware how obscene the word sounded to the Kenyan Luo ear. (*Chira*: 33)

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In the above dialogue, the author reveals how parochial the reasons advanced by the church against contraception are. The fundamental question Macgoye raises is: Do we keep quiet, turn blind eyes to the painful reality around us and dogmatically preach abstinence even if it means sacrificing a whole generation to the dreaded Aids? The author indicates that doing this is not only a sign of irresponsibility but also a disease of the proverbial ostrich that chose to burry its head in the sand with the hope that refusing to see stopped things from happening around it. The Aids is a raw reality, it is decimating the prime population at an alarming rate, and therefore, to downplay its impact is "stupid" as Helen contemptuously announces to the world.

The author contends that another way of controlling the spread of Aids is by encouraging spouses to voluntarily go for HIV screening before marriage. The test is necessary because it is impossible to detect a carrier of the Aids causing virus: "many of the young men he (Pastor Theodore) tried to counsel did not look like Aids victims at all. Jeans clad, strikingly

bartered, some of them, indeed, went in for long loose jackets concealing the long thin ribs within" (*Chira*: 152). To this end, the author gives us a number of episodes in which individuals and couples voluntarily go for Aids test. For instance, Njoki, a former mistress to a senior politician and her fiancée' Kamau go for the Aids test before they marry. Njoki tests positive and the marriage does not materialize. She dies of Aids. Mak'Owuor, Njoki's former boyfriend, goes for Aids test and proves Negative. Theodore, and Elizabeth go for Aids test and prove negative. Gabriel Otieno and Helen also agree to go for the Aids test before registering their marriage. By creating characters who willingly go for Aids screening, the author indicates that the mysterious nature of Aids has been demolished and people no longer fear to know their status. We have noted that whereas Macgoye suggests that the Aids pandemic affects everybody, women and men, the statistics from the novel confirm that women are more vulnerable to the disease. While only one man (Samuel) dies of the Aids, a number of women like Josephina and Njoki perish.

Apart from voluntary HIV screening, Macgoye supports any approach that can save the youth from this tragedy. It is due to her open-ended approach to the Aids control that the author differs with the Catholic Church and its pro-life movement. The church insists that there should be no abortion or use of condoms and that the only safeguard against unwanted children and the spread of the Aids is abstinence and fidelity in marriage. Macgoye observes that due to modernity, marriage as a sanctified institution is under intense threat more than ever before. This is because 'the ideal of virginity at marriage is hardly taken seriously. Everyone has suddenly acquired "sexual needs". This has led to moral decadence on a wide scale as evidenced in increasing promiscuity among married and single people. The author blames this scenario on 'the culture of reticence which pretends to ignore the sexual deprivation of couples living apart and which in turn, contributes to the moral and social malaise of our society' (*Mor*: 25).

In dealing with the issue of sexuality in society, Macgoye proposes 'cohabitation' (staying together of a woman and a man before marriage) if it can keep the women and men from loose sex:

Cohabitation is not in accordance with the God's law but it is surely better than casual sex. It is also better as a preparation for marriage than sleeping together clandestinely, which is what "trial marriage", might have meant fifty years ago. (27)

The above proposal is interesting coming from a devout Christian. To push the argument further, Macgoye comes out explicitly in favour of contraception to curb the spread of Aids and forestall abortion, which she condemns as murder. She agrees with the Church that abstinence may be the better answer to overpopulation and the spread of Aids. Nevertheless, she argues that it would be absurd in an environment so inflamed by sexual desire as this to doubt that more and better contraception is one of mankind's most urgent needs:

Encounter with a person with AIDS spells death. Surely it is better to be safe than sorry. We all know abstinence is the best prevention. Never crossing a road is the best prevention against getting knocked down by a vehicle. But even as we teach little children not to wander in the road, we also teach them the traffic rules because a time will come when they have to account for their own safety. (*Mor.* 35)

In her liberal nature, Macgoye does not like taking extreme positions unless it cannot be helped. In this context, the author is arguing that nobody wishes young people to be promiscuous and that the ultimate goal of contraception is to save lives. This can be achieved through family life education in schools.

Contrary to the pragmatic approach proposed above, the author is conservative when it comes to abortion, which she strongly condemns as murder. Macgoye denies women the right to have control over their reproductive health rights through abortion because it is murder: "Contraception is not abortion. Abortion is murder. There is no doubt about that" (*Mor.* 36), the author asserts.

The hard-line adopted by the author against abortion is relaxed when it comes to what she terms "unnatural (sexual) acts" where she sympathises with homosexuals and pleads for understanding on their behalf:

The Bible clearly forbids what are called "unnatural acts" (Romans: 1: 26-7). Many people find this repugnant and it is obvious they run counter to the primary end of sex, procreation. In a society that increasingly separates sex from procreation, that is not a very strong argument...it is surely better to acknowledge consenting adult behaviour, homosexual or heterosexual, than to drive it underground and risk mystification, blackmail and violence. ... It seems clear that some people are conditioned to divergent needs. It is right and compassionate to acknowledge this. (*Mor.* 34)

In the above excerpt, Macgoye argues that homosexuality should be tolerated in the society because it is a 'consenting adult behaviour.' Homosexuals are men while those who abort are women. The author suggests that men have a right to divergent sexual orientations while women are chained to traditional thinking, which outlaws abortion in all its forms. It is the contention of this study that the author should be more understanding to the underlying causes of abortion as she is to homosexuals. This is because banning abortion only leads young girls to quacks who perform illegal procedures resulting in many deaths annually. The debate on contraception should therefore include legalising abortion to save women from unwanted pregnancies.

### **Coming to Birth of Macgoye**

In concluding this chapter, we can assert that Macgoye creates room for a female subject position in her novels. Even if she dwells on the historical issues in Kenya or HIV/AIDS pandemic, she never loses track of her concern with the development of women from objects to subjects. She writes to empower women while at the same time liberating men from patriarchal prejudices so that they can play their roles alongside women. There is no tragic vision in Macgoye's texts: with little or no support from their male spouses, women protagonists struggle until they come to birth. We have assessed Macgoye's treatment of the

themes such as empowerment of women, aging in women, and their role in Kenya's political history, interracial relationships and how to combat the Aids pandemic. The author projects a brighter future for Kenyan women and men and humanity in general. In this context, Macgoye shares the vision of the famous Russian socialist writer, Maxim Gorky. In *Literature and Life*, Gorky, one of the architects of socialist realism, contends that the great purpose of literature is to humanise the world:

When we look at the mighty creative energy incarnated in images and words, we feel that the great purpose of this stream is to wash away forever all differences of [gender], race, nationality and class. (Parenthesis mine. Gorky 44)

Macgoye, like Gorky, offers a communal vision by affirming values, which the reader can supposedly accept and share: compassion and generosity across races, religions or geographical boundaries. The only difference from Gorky is that Macgoye brings out, more forcefully, the women's agenda in her works.

We have also noticed that the author succeeds in pushing women's agenda in a patriarchal society by making her novels subversive. They are subversive in the sense that at the surface value, they seem to reflect the powerlessness of women protagonists while at a more critical level, they celebrate women's mystic power of survival. Even though some female characters verbalise their insignificance and impotence in the world of men, in the later stages of their lives, they demonstrate their suppressed strengths and competence as women. By creating female characters full of life, power and knowledge, the author projects an inclusive vision for the society: a society in which "the historically feminine values of love, compassion, sharing and nutritiveness are treasured just as much as the historically masculine values of control, structure, possessiveness and status" (Tong 98). It is therefore true, as Mutuota Kigotho correctly observes that, Macgoye's artistic excellence does not only culminate in the liberation of her women protagonists as rounded women but also the grand rebirth of the author as an accomplished writer:

If *CTB* marks the growth of Paulina into a mature woman, and the nation of Kenya, it is also the coming to birth of Macgoye as a writer. ...She commands the stage with accustomed ease. She responds with her total personality to a social environment, which changes all the time. (Mutuota: 8)

Mutuota assertion indicates that Macgoye's novels act as autobiographical prisms through which we delineate the author's artistic growth from a timid writer of short novels and occasional poems into a full-fledged writer of novels addressing contemporary issues with a historical slant. The author has indeed come to birth as a naturalised Kenyan woman writer of European origin. (subtle colonial ideology that runs subterranean to her feminist agenda.)

Chapter Four concludes this study. It puts together our findings in all the areas we have studied, compares the result with the hypotheses and then provides other areas for further research on the author.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONCLUSION

The basic concern of this study has been the exploration of the ideological relevance of gender in the interpretation of Macgoye's creative works. This study has introduced Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye as a Kenyan writer of English origin. We have noted that though English by birth, Macgoye has adopted Kenya as her home and proceeded to reflect local experiences in the background of her European world-view. The author, therefore, emerges as a cultural boarder operator who employs her knowledge of African and European traditions to create art that appeals to women and men across race.

In her works Macgoye argues that she is a Kenyan woman and that in some cases, she is more Kenyan than even some black Africans. This claim is ambitious because, as we have demonstrated in our analysis of her works, the European heritage is deeply ingrained in her thinking to assimilate Kenyan sensibilities. While we agree that the author interprets some African customs well and that her African characters are full of life, it is apparent that due to her cultural amalgam, the author cannot pass as an indigenous Kenyan writer like Ngugi wa Thiongo or Grace Ogot. At best, Macgoye remains a naturalised Kenyan woman writer of European origin.

In our discussion on gender as an emerging theoretical concept in the criticism of African literature, we have demonstrated that in spite of the perceived differences, liberal feminist criticism, gender criticism and androgynous criticism are theoretical approaches that seek to transform society by rethinking the role of women in society. It has been our argument that Macgoye, by consistently championing women's empowerment, is a liberal feminist. This brand of feminism, by working to empower women within the family, is relevant to the African situation as it domesticates Western generated feminist concepts to fit within the African cultural environment.

We have noted that Macgoye successfully employs the song style in her poetry to advocate for Nyarloka's acceptance in her new society. To prove her case, Nyarloka delves into the history, myth and customs of the Luo, her hosts, to prove that she is a Luo woman. Through poetry Nyarloka comes out as a social historian and a political satirist who condemns mistakes made by Kenyan leaders after independence such as the murders of Tom Mboya, J. M Kariuki and Pio Gama Pinto. The poet also pleads for the release of political prisoners like Ngugi wa Thiongo, Seroney and Martin Shikuku. Nyarloka also remembers some of the architects of African literature in Kenya like Owuor Anyumba, Okot p'Bitek and Jonathan Kariara and immortalizes them in poetry. As Nyarloka, Macgoye does all these to prove that she is more Kenyan than European. However, the poet remains a woman of two continents - Europe and Africa. This is evidenced in the historical slant she takes. The poet avoids talking about atrocities committed by European settlers and administrators before independence and instead catalogues Mau Mau and post-independence malpractices. This omission reveals a deliberate attempt by the author to avoid the history that incriminates her mother country in the colonial plunder of Kenya.

Our analysis of the emergence of gender perspectives in Macgoye's short novels has revealed that Macgoye is sensitive to the plight of young girls in society. Through the lives of young women like Victoria (*VIC*), Lois (*MIM*), Jane (*BHG*), Asha Binti Msafiri (*SL*) and Grace (*GLS*), the author introduces critical issues of gender concern such as the plight of the girl-child, entrapment of women, physical and psychological development of women, and race relations. The author is optimistic in her vision, in that, disillusionment and helplessness that characterize young women's struggle for liberation only motivate them to challenge patriarchal domination to emerge victorious like Victoria. The major weakness that emerges again in this section is Macgoye's bias towards European women characters. They are portrayed as morally upright, trustworthy and religious as opposed to native Kenyan women characters who are cheats, schemers, liars and prostitutes. This indicates that inasmuch as Macgoye insists that she is more Kenyan than the natives are, in her subconscious, she remains totally loyal to her native land with her values and her race. This is not to say that Macgoye is a racist. We are only acknowledging the problematic nature of the quest for identity by a white woman in the colonial Diaspora.



We have observed that in her novels, Macgoye creates room for a female subject position in her novels. With little or no support from their male spouses, the women protagonists emerge from the shadows of male domination and struggle until they 'come to birth' as important members of the society. For example, Paulina (*CTB*), Wairimu, Rachael, Priscilla (*TPM*), Martha, Ellen (*HI*) and Helen (*Chira*) all begin their lives as underdogs but end up as autonomous women in control of their destiny. These women characters grow physically, psychologically, economically and politically until they 'come to birth.' In her novels Macgoye corrects the racial bias evidenced in her short novels by bridging the racial gap between white women and African women. At the end of the chapter we record that by overcoming the racial, cultural, religious and political barriers in Kenya to project a positive vision for women and men, Macgoye has matured as a novelist writing from an adopted motherland.

We have also noted that a crucial feature of Macgoye's writing is the intermingling of forms derived from the indigenous and European literary traditions. As a cultural boarder-operator, she criss-crosses from European to the African cultural backgrounds and vice-versa in search of the most effective ways of expressing her artistic vision. Even though her lyrical style in poetry gravitates towards African drama, her poems, though African in setting and content, still display a strong influence from the European literary tradition in terms of diction, verse style and imagery. At times, the poet even experiments with the sonnet.

Macgoye's narrative structure is equally complex and at times cunningly subversive. The author uses female characters as reflectors and narrators of her works. She employs the female point of view, which makes her narrative techniques outcry against sexism and other forms of discrimination. Her texts are subversive in the sense that at the surface value, they seem to reflect the powerlessness of women protagonists while at a more critical level, they celebrate women's mystic powers of survival. Even though some female characters like Victoria (*VIC*), Lois (*MIM*), Mrs. M (*CTB*), Ellen (*HI*) and Mama Chungu (*TPM*) verbalise their insignificance in the world of men, in the later stages of their lives, they demonstrate their resilience and competence as women.

In addressing the theme of childlessness, the author, for instance, reconceptualizes female infertility as a feminist strategy to challenge conventional male representation of women. Through the lives of Paulina, Mama Chungu, Wairimu, Nekesa and Victoria, the author challenges the male fallacy that women can only survive in marriage by giving men what they desire most - children. The same applies to prostitution. The author treats prostitution as a metaphor for men's degradation that depicts women as agents of moral contamination. The author opines that by denying women avenues of dignified and autonomous existence, patriarchal society forces women to seek freedom in vice.

In the exploration of Macgoye's social vision as it relates to the gender perspectives in her works, we have discovered that Macgoye's concern with the plight of women in society is central to her vision. We have noted that Macgoye deliberately creates room for a female subject position in her novels. Even if she dwells on the historical and political issues in Kenya, she never loses track of her concern with the development of women from objects to subjects. In this case, the author manifests what Valerie Kibera calls an "inclusive Vision". Macgoye writes to encourage humanity to preserve those humane values so that women may make the best of their lot alongside men. This has led us to the conclusion that due to its inclusivity, Macgoye's vision is androgynous. The author envisions a society in which the historically feminine values of love, compassion, sharing and nutritiveness are treasured just as much as the historically masculine values of control, structure, possessiveness and status.

Due to her desire to appeal to both European and African audiences, Macgoye manifests ideological ambivalence, which opens up her works to multiple interpretations. The author argues that, like Christopher Okigbo, Chinua Achebe, Claude McKay, T. S. Eliot and Ben Okri, she would want to be considered, not a woman writer, European writer or African writer, but just a writer - a citizen of the world not tied down to particularities of gender, race, continent and religion. We have demonstrated that even though she insists on universality, the particularities in her life, like her European missionary background, impact heavily on her ideology and vision as a writer. As we have mentioned before, Macgoye's vision is of a society grounded on Christian values in which women have space to realise their potential

without necessarily marginalising men. This explains why the author's ideology of women's empowerment is liberal and inclusive.

Above all, Macgoye has proved that with commitment, Europeans in postcolonial Africa can correct the negative impression created by white colonial writers and rewrite themselves meaningfully in postcolonial literary history. This is why we contend that compared to white colonial writers in pre-independence Kenya, Macgoye is a unique writer. Her artistic excellence does not only culminate in the liberation of her women protagonists but also her grand rebirth as an accomplished English-born Kenyan. Her texts act as an autobiographical prism through which we delineate the author's artistic growth from a timid writer of short novels and occasional poems into a full-fledged writer of novels and poetry addressing contemporary issues from a feminist perspective.

One area that still requires further research on Macgoye is a comparative study of the author's artistic vision and those of other European writers in Kenya like Robert Ruark, Karen Blixen and Elspeth Huxley. Such a study can illuminate the similarities and differences between Macgoye and her predecessors in terms of political consciousness, racism, religion and empowerment of women.

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## APPENDIX I

### MARJORIE OLUDHE MACGOYE INTERVIEWED BY PETER WASAMBA ON 3/3/1999 IN HER HOUSE

**WASAMBA:** Good morning Majorie. When we met in 1993, I was conducting research on your poetry as an undergraduate student. At that particular time, I was only interested in thematic orientation in *Song of Nyarloka and Other Poems*. When we met last in 1996, I was doing research on language in your fiction for my Masters thesis. I am still continuing with my research because I want to discover what makes you tick as a naturalised African woman writer. It is in this regard that I have embarked on my Doctoral research which basically aims at exploring and evaluating perspectives projected in your creative works, right from the time you started writing short novels, to poetry and lately, award winning novels. That is why I have visited you again today.

**MACGOYE:** That is good to hear, but what is it that you want to know now?

**WASAMBA:** I would be happy to know your perception of the nature and functions of literature in the contemporary society.

**MACGOYE:** Peter, I keep on saying the same things over and over again. What you write is a book. It is not a piece of literature. But a writer writes because he has something to share with others. Whether you choose to say something in the form of a novel or a poem, that piece of writing will only, in my mind, turn to be considered as literature if it is proved by the test of time to have something universal in it, something that communicates to other people in other countries facing similar circumstances that are addressed in your book. In that sense, the letter to a Member of Parliament is not literature. It may be evidence of something, it may be more or less persuasive, and it is not literature. Your novel may also turn out to be something very useful without being literature.

It seems to me that the teaching of literature is the study of the means by which perceptions have been concealed into a form which continue to be useful and interesting to people across time places. It is not a study of how many books have come out of the press in a certain amount of time because in part, because those texts which are going to be seminal in the long run may not raise a stir when they are new. Or they may raise a stir, which has nothing to do with their literary quality so that historically in times of political and social enlightenment, one of the greatest novels ever written is *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Jane Tomkins. This novel helped to revolutionize the American society. I don't think anyone with a fair stretch of imagination cannot say, as a literary text, it is a good novel. But it did fulfil a purpose.

**WASAMBA:** In that sense, you are suggesting that literature should be functional, universal and revolutionary...

**MACGOYE:** No. That is not what I said. What I said is that functional writing is not necessarily literature because literature is that text which has a quality of universality. And that is why I said that in as much as Jane Tomkin's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* helped to transform the Americans' thinking, it fulfilled that function with very little literary merit. I am sure there are many people who can read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and weep for slaves without giving equal feeling to the house-helpers who suffer daily in their midst. The connection between the immediate course and the ongoing course is not made. This is why I am questioning whether it is viable to conduct doctoral research on a living author

like me. My work is finished but not perished. It has not stood the test of time although there has been wide exposure outside our boundaries.

**WASAMBA:** What governs your perception? Many critics interested in your works continue coming up with various interpretations. In one of the most recent studies, Tom Mboya (Moi University) has noted that, looked at critically, your novels project a racist inclination by highlighting the superiority of white people over black people. Can you comment on this?

**MACGOYE:** As I have said before, when I write, I strive to share with readers some of my strong feelings about life. How my writing is interpreted by critics like you or Mboya is not my worry. As an author, my goal is totally different from that of a critic who is interested in dissecting the existing work as a reflection of what the writer is thinking about. There is nothing wrong with it. Not that there is a great moral virtue in writing a novel. Any novel can be analyzed at serious and less serious levels. Unless you claim a level in which you are operating then there is nothing wrong with it.

**WASAMBA:** Reading your novels from *Growing up at Lina School* (1971) to the latest *CTB. Chira*), there emerges a consistent concern with the place of women in a changing African society. Is this a conscious authorial ideology?

**MACGOYE:** That is right. It is partly because I am a woman. I don't call myself a woman writer, but a woman who happens to write. I know more about what happens in a woman's mind and heart and a man's heart and mind. It seems to me natural that my writing should focus on the experiences of women because I am part of that experience.

**WASAMBA:** Did you say that you would be happy to be considered just as a writer and not woman writer?

**MACGOYE:** It is for the same reason that Achebe wants to be considered as a writer and not an African writer. You don't limit yourself.

**WASAMBA:** So, according to you, accepting the tag of a woman writer limit's one's creative scope and audience.

**MACGOYE:** Yes. It is limiting, especially in this sort of hysterical feminist strand that we have. It is extremely limiting because once you set yourself to be women's organization for so and so, automatically you become exclusive and narrow in perception. As I said before, a writer, man or woman, should address universal values and not narrow temporal interests. Feminists assert that women can do everything men do to prove their equality. I find this ridiculous. Imagine a woman attempting to be a mason climbing ladder chipping stones on a high wall (laughs heartily), yes she can make it. But we must remember that form is not easily compatible with what a woman can do whereas writing is something compatible because you can do it day and night in a small space.

**WASAMBA:** You seem to have a bone to pick with feminists. If we take feminism to be a movement genuinely concerned with improving the visibility of women in society then all women writers, and men of goodwill should embrace it. In fact, Masheti Masinjila, in analyzing your portrayal of Paulina in *CTB* concludes that you are a feminist of the liberal humanist school. In what way does feminism as a literary movement conflict with your authorial ideology, which you admitted earlier on, is for elevating women in society?

**MACGOYE:** Peter, to me the terms feminism and gender are all meaningless. We are human beings, that is all. We live in a human context and once we start making distinctions about ourselves as

women and men, then we invite problems. I hope you have read my book *Moral Issues in Kenya: A Personal Perspective*.

**WASAMBA:** Yes I have.

**MACGOYE:** I have stated clearly in that book, my views on feminism. Unfortunately, it has not come out as I intended it because of editorial pressure. The publishers wanted other issues highlighted so such issues were highlighted at the expense of others.

**WASAMBA:** In principle, you want your art to illuminate the true essence of humanity by not taking sides based on gender, race or religion. Your stand reminds me of Virginia Woolf who argues that art should be androgynous - art should step above gender and address issues without compartmentalizing them. Have you by any chance been influenced by her works?

**MACGOYE:** I am sorry I have not read Virginia. I have not been influenced by any writer that I know of. To me, it is just a question of self-respect. When I read in the papers people saying "this will assist the disadvantaged poverty stricken children and women", it is a statement that shows that there is something drastically wrong with our society because something that affects the mother has a trickle down affect on the children and the father. It can't therefore be restricted to one gender or a section of the society. But if we do not respect ourselves then we perpetuate exclusion by compartmentalizing issues.

This reminds me of Jews. In the Jewish worship, there is a time when men on one side of the synagogue stand up and say, "I thank God that I was not born a woman". I am sure that equally the women, although they are not saying it, given chance would say, "Thank God I was not born a man".

**WASAMBA:** Considering the context within the synagogue where men stand up and say publicly that they are grateful to God for not making them women, and assuming that you were a Jewish woman who is a writer, don't you think you would address that open discrimination against women in your work?

**MACGOYE:** I am not quite sure. If you go into any typically American Jewish home, there will automatically be no doubt as to who is the boss in the home. The woman is the boss. May be, this is why men are reacting to the strong personality of women in the home by praying that they were lucky to be born men.

**WASAMBA:** Now, Marjorie, when we look at your novels and by this I mean *CTB*, *TPM*, *HI* and *Chira*, it emerges that your women characters emerge heroes in their struggle to become visible in societies traditionally dominated by men. This indicates that your writing has a gender slant towards women in as much as you say you are not a feminist.

**MACGOYE:** You are making a big assumption here: first, that there is inequality between women and men. and secondly, that the society deliberately consigns women to the shadows of social existence. This may not be the case. For example, *TPM* was a very conscious effort on my part to portray life among the Kikuyu society.

**WASAMBA:** What are the sources of your materials?

**MACGOYE:** I am a firm believer in the newspaper evidence. It tells you not only what happened but also people's attitude to the events at that particular time. Apart from newspapers, I also talk to people and seek to understand their worldview.

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