

**CONTESTATION BETWEEN MEMORY, HISTORY AND FICTION IN**

*One Day I Will Write about this Place*

**JEPKORIR GRACE SEREM**

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## DECLARATION

This project is my original work and has not been presented for examination or award of a degree in another university.

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**Mrs. Judith Jefwa**

*Ian Kiptoo Serem, a memory.*

And to my sweet parents Mr & Mrs Reuben Kosgei with love.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The intersection between memory, history and fiction is important in the understanding of a life narrative. Memory although selective in nature plays an important role in the presentation of lived experiences; the writer remembers presented events as lived. Fiction in life writings comes in when the writer artistically crafts his lived experiences into a story. This research sought to examine the interplay between memory, history and fiction in Binyavanga Wainaina's memoir, *One Day I Will Write about this place*. It examined the presentation of personal story and the national (hi)story in the memoir. With reference to the national history I discuss the presentation of political regimes in Kenya and the political influence on the education system in Kenya. I also discuss the writer's personal story by tracing his various journeys in life.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Background to the Study

### Introduction

A memoir is a form of autobiography which entails the narration of the self and personal experiences. In an attempt to define a memoir, Smith and Watson associate it with the life writing of prominent people in the society who narrate about a particular moment in their lives. “There recollections often bracketed one moment or period of experience rather than an entire life span and offered reflections on its significance for the writer’s status or self understanding”(3-4). The definition given by Smith and Watson touches on the difference between a memoir and the autobiography. Therefore, the memoir unlike the autobiography does not span the entire life of the writer.

The difference between the memoir and, autobiography depends on the amount of self-revelation contained in the memoir. According to Jennifer Muchiri “The autobiography largely focuses on the self, but the memoir devotes more attention to occurrences around the writer. From the memoir we learn a great deal about the society in which the writer or the subject moves, but only get limited information about the writers themselves” (39). The difference is that of exposure where the memoirist exposes limited information about the self, focusing more on the outside world than the self. The memoirist, therefore, recounts the stories of others and events in which the memoirist, their other subjects or both take part in. The memoir is also limited to the memories of a place and the time of the occurrences of the events that the memoirist is narrating at that particular time of the events.

## **Memory, History and Fiction in the Memoir**

Memory is an essential element in the writing of a memoir for it is the source of information on the experiences and events being narrated. Memories are records of how people have experienced events, not replicas of the events themselves. Adeyemi Adegaju, defines autobiographical memory as “The area of memory where people store information about themselves, particular memories that centre on their identity, emotional experiences and or specific events” (127), a more elaborate definition that I consider is the one by Shelemy Kay where he says that:

Memory is an individual cognitive faculty in which resides traces of one’s personal and autobiographical experiences; some of these traces reside close to the surface of consciousness and are easily recalled, while others remain out of everyday awareness but still vulnerable to recall in respond to various types of stimulations (18).

The writer uses memory to present to us his lived experiences. Memory as a source of past events is aided by sense such as smell, touch, taste, sight and sound. These senses provoke some memories and trigger the writer to remember certain events in the past. The process of remembering is an active recreation of the past highly dependent on history and the specificities and intensity of the experiences. However the process of remembering is highly subjective to the experiences of the writer. A writer may choose to ‘forget’ some experiences in his life and deliberately ‘remember’ other experiences in his life. A literary scholar is aided by these silences or omissions in establishing the credibility of the work on the basis of truth.

There are two levels of memory in the writing of memoirs. The first one is the private memory which is individual and dependent on the writer’s ability to recall. The second one is the



communal memory which is collectively shared by communities be they ethnic, religious family, and so forth. Institutions such as government agencies and schools are custodians of memory which can easily be retrieved since they are documented. A writer of a memoir can choose to rely on both communal and private memory in the course of his narrative. This balancing act is subject for a literary critic to investigate in qualifying a memoir and establishing the credibility of the author's claims.

The memories being remembered are therefore of particular events that probably changed, inspired or uttered the narrators' life, these events could be difficult to forget, and the events are recalled depending with the intensity of the events on an individual's life. These memories could be of happy moments or sad moments in an individuals' life. The writing of a memoir involves the process of recalling and remembering past events. Smith and Watson, observe that:

The life narrator depends on access to memory to narrate the past in such a way as to situate the experiential history within the present. Memory is thus the authenticator and destabilizer of autobiographical acts. (22)

Writing of memoirs involves remembering and re-remembering. The memoirist remembers the experiences of their lives and presents an order of values that are their own. History influences memory, such that how people remember, what they remember, and who does the remembering are historically specific. A particular culture or society's understanding of events at a particular moment makes remembering possible for the subject or memoirist. While re-remembering mean 'the imaginative process that create and restore personal histories into being' (Slivka 128).

The writing of autobiographies involves creativity, imagination and the use of the various elements fiction. Polic Vanja in analyzing the fictionalization/factionalization of life writing

quotes Hayden White's idea of 'emplotment' in historical events which applies to life writing such as memoirs, he stresses Whites' idea that, "sequence of historical events can be emplotted in various ways depending on the historian's point of view" (162). To further emphasize White idea, Polic says:

White stress that historical events are turned/transformed into a story through various literary strategies: by suppression or subordination of events by emphasizing others, by characterization, motif repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies and the like- in short all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in a novel or a play (162).

Memoirs, although historical in nature, involve narration of lived experiences which entails the use of various literary strategies. Barber Rosalind says that the creation of a literary biography (autobiography and memoirs) requires an awareness both of how we construct what we believe we 'know' about a writer, and how the stories we adopt changes our reading of their works (165). He further emphasis the creativity in life writing by saying:

A number of historians have come to recognize creative fiction as a valid way of interrogating the past. The method of creative fiction allows us to escape temporarily from our received histories and bring to light the assumptions that underpin their constructions. Through fiction, we have license to construct alternative narratives, rethinking histories so widely assumed to be 'true' that they have not been properly examined in the light of contemporary scholarship...(169)

Life writings also involves the narration of lived/ the past experiences. These experiences could be individual- events unique to a specific person, in this case the writer of the memoir,

communal- events unique to a specific community or national- occurrences experienced by most people in a given nation, affecting them either directly or indirectly. These past experiences are what we treat as history. History constitute narratives about the past (often, but not always, in chronological order), “that are constructed and /or acknowledged by virtue of institutional sanctions, scholarly hypothesis or broad-based acceptance; these narratives are often revised or reconstructed in the same contexts that validate them in the first place” (Shelemay 19).

It is over fifty years since Kenya gained independence. The writing of autobiographies, memoirs and other forms of self-narratives is important and significant at this point in time especially when the narrator intertwines his or her story with that of the nation and history. The writing of autobiographies and memoirs helps in casting light on the progress Kenya is making or lack of development, since independence.

In looking at the history of autobiographies (memoirs included) in Kenya, one notes that the earliest autobiographies were written by expatriates or sympathizers of the colonial regime. However, what we may call Kenyan autobiography by Africans began when Kenya attained independence. The earliest was *Freedom and After* by Tom Mboya. Other early autobiographies included: Kariuki’s *Mau Mau Detainee*, Odinga’s *Not Yet Uhuru*, Harry Thuku’s *An Autobiography* and Kaggia’s *Roots of Freedom*. The early autobiographies of the 1960s and 1970snarrated the experiences of the subjects and that of the Kenya nation during the colonial times and the struggle for independence; most told of the Mau Mau movement and its role in liberation struggles against colonialism. Others registered their disappointment and disillusionment after Kenya gained independence, this is because leaders subjected people to neocolonialism.

The 1980s saw the appearance of more autobiographies of which one was Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Detained: A Prisoners Diary* which appeared in the form of a diary. Here Ngugi recounts experience as a political detainee. From 1990 to 2010, several autobiographies and memoirs with different motives have been published in Kenya. The most recent published memoirs include: *Ngugi's Dreams in a time of War* which covers Ngugi's childhood life in rural Kenya as the son of Thiong'o wa Nducu. In the Memoir, Ngugi is witnessing a slowly changing Kenya like the construction of new railroads and highways. It ends with Ngugi's passage into manhood after a ritual circumcision and his admission into an elite school set aside for top African students in the British colony's segregated education system. And also *In the House of the Interpreters, a memoir*, which is a follow up of *Dreams in a time of war*. Ngugi continues the story of his childhood, focusing on his time at a boarding school that shaped his intellectual and spiritual lives.

Wainaina Binyavanga was born in the year 1971 in Nakuru, Rift Valley province. He attended Lena Moi Primary school, Njoro Boys' High School, from which he later transferred to Mangu High School in Thika. He then, went to Lenana School for his form Five and Six studies. He later attended the University of Transkei in South Africa to study commerce. In July 2002 he won the Caine Prize for African writing for his short story *Discovering Home*, which some part of it is in the memoir. He was given an award by the Kenya Publisher's Association, in recognition of his services for Kenyan literature in 2003. He is the founding editor of *Kwani?* Some of his publications include, *Discovering Home*, *How to write about Africa*, *In Gikuyu, for Gikuyu, of Gikuyu* and *One Day I Will Write About this Place: A Memoir*.

## **Statement of the Problem**

The connection between memory and history is important in the understanding of life narratives. A memoir cannot be divorced from history because its function is to narrate the lived experiences; hence a memoir should always interrogate and complement history. The selectivity of memory in the presentation of a memoir definitely affects history. The study examines how memory, history and fiction interrelate in the construction of a memoir.

## **Justification**

*One Day I Will Write about this Place* is one of the latest memoirs from Kenya, and is the first major literary work by Wainaina Binyavanga. Wainaina can be considered to be a contemporary writer; his style of writing is unique and different from that of the ‘older generation’. As a contemporary writer it is important to study how he writes and present his story and also how he writes the Kenyan history.

An exploration of the intersection between history, memory, and fiction is useful in contributing to the understanding of Wainaina’s life story as it also relates to the narrative of the Kenyan nation-state. It is interesting to interrogate the linkages between these three aspects and to understand at what point they feed into the personal narrative. This research also contributes to the generation of knowledge by exploring how a memoir, while heavily relying on history and recollections (memory), may slip over and begin to read like a work of fiction.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The following are the objectives of this study:

1. To examine the interplay between memory and history in Wainaina's memoir, *One Day I Will Write about this Place*;
2. To explore the slippages in a memoir that represents it as a work of fiction.

## **Hypothesis**

The study makes the following assumptions:

1. That there is significant connection between memory and history in Wainaina's memoir, *One Day I Will Write about this Place*;
2. That Wainaina's memoir, *One Day I Will Write about this Place* can be read as a work of fiction.

## **Scope and Limitations**

In this study I limit myself to Binyavanga Wainaina's memoir, *One Day I Will Write about this Place* as the primary text of analysis. I interrogate the interplay between the memory, history and fiction in the text by focusing on the presentation/ narration of the personal and the Kenyan history. I also analyze the elements of fiction in the memoir as the author presents his story and the history of Kenya.

The study limits itself to the following theories: Narratology, New Historicism and Theory of Autobiography. These theories show the relationship between history and fiction; fiction and memoir; and memoir and history. The study also limited itself to secondary sources of information that compliment and reflect on the Kenyan historical period that is depicted in Binyavanga's memoir. The secondary materials included: newspapers, internet journals, historical books and articles.

## Literature Review

The literature reviewed in this research is on what other scholars and critics have said concerning the elements of memory, history and fiction in autobiographies and on other works of historical fiction in general and specifically with reference to Kenya. I have also considered what other scholars and critics have said on the genre of autobiography which provided useful insights for the research. In addition, I have looked at the critical works that have been done on Binyavanga's memoir, however little they may appear. But it should also be made it clear that where some scholars have presented divergent views on the area of focus, I have nonetheless taken note of such arguments.

Krishnan Madhu in "Affiliation, Disavowal, and National Commitment in Third Generation African Literature" examines the construction of third generation African literature through a comparative study of Binyavanga Wainaina's memoir, *One Day I will Write about this Place*, Adaobi Tricia Mwaubani's *I Do Not come to You by Chance* and Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*. Krishnan argues that in the studied texts:

The relationship between the individual and his or her nation of origin does not function in singular terms, reflecting the multiply-articulated imagined communities in which individual lives exist and the (re)doubled workings of filiations, affiliation, and disavowal at play in contemporary Africa . . . The idea of the nation in the contemporary African literary work is both variable and shifting, responding to its immediate circumstances and demonstrating the potency of novel paradigms of belonging. Nationalism, like the nation, thus reflects a deep ambivalence that mobilizes multiple affiliations and, nevertheless, does not preclude belonging and commitment. Rather than dismissing the nation,

Wainaina's Vera's and Nwaubani's works presents a new vision of nationhood and national belonging (74).

Krishnan focuses on nation and nationalism in Binyavanga's memoir, *One Day I Will Write about this Place*, comparing it with Yvonne Vera's and Tricia Mwaubani's work. This analysis is useful for my study as it makes a case for an understanding of Binyavanga's memoir in terms of how it feeds from and into the narrative of the nation-state. It is in this respect that the ideas of history and memory get into play in as far as they contribute to the narration of Binyavanga's life story and his society.

Berger Roger in "Decolonizing African Autobiography", examines the 'process of decolonization in African autobiography tracing a discursive shift from tragedy to comedy' in three African autobiographies: Camara Laye's *The Dark Child*, Dugmore Boeties's *Familiarity is the Kingdom of the Lost*, and Buchi Emecheta's *Head Above Water*. He interrogates how these texts 'negotiate the challenging terrains of history, language, genre, modernity and colonialism'. Roger observes that African autobiographies 'are part of an ongoing historical process – are Africanized metaphors, both human narratives attempting to construct an order from life' (47). These arguments are useful for the research project as they assist in tracing Binyavanga's construction and reconstruction of his story within the national history.

Debra Kelly in *Autobiography and Independence: Selfhood and Creativity in North Africa Postcolonial Writing in French*, explores the relationship between the writer's self and literary expressions in the works of four North African writers: Mouloud Ferauna, Assia Djébar, Albert Memmi and Abdelkerbir Khatibi to provide a space for a mediation on the act of literary creation and on the ways which that act intervenes in the world. The texts that Kelly studies were



published over a fifty-year period (the second half of the twentieth century) and they are therefore, as Kelly observes, intimately bound up with the histories of European colonialism, war, decolonization, and independence. Kelly suggests that the individuals who wrote them therefore engage not only in their personal histories, but also the collective histories of North Africa and of Europe hence bringing forth the idea that personal narrative always narrates specific national events that might have been significant in the life of the writer. It is in the same light that I consider Binyavanga's memoir not just as a rendition of personal story but also as a text that narrates, even if partly, the history of the Kenyan society. And that is why the research is useful in underscoring the relationship between memory and history, and how the two might be reconstructed to result in a text that is partly fiction.

The notion of identity is another focus in Kelly's study. She points out that the texts engage not only with the question of individual self-expression, but also with social, ideological and historical contexts and as such they provide a political as well as personal discourse. As an analysis is done on the representation of Kenyan history in the memoir we also look at how the mentioned events might have influenced the narrator's life in a particular way.

Kelly's study gives insight to methodology because the research focused on a close textual reading of the memoir emphasizing on the representation of the personal story and the national history. Kelly says,

Each analysis (of the text under study) provides a close textual reading that places an emphasis on the writing strategies used by each of these writers to explore the issue of identity and that privileges the use of language and of textual structure. . . this is the thread I have chosen to follow, in order not only to uncover the complex relationship to

identity and the need for self-expression at work in individual texts, but also to try to see what unites and/ or divides these diverse creative interventions around these issues. A further aim is to explore what we might learn more generally from these writers concerning both the politics and the aesthetics of Postcolonial literature. (3)

Kelly's arguments in this context has helped my study as I examine at how Binyavanga Wainaina expresses himself as the subject of the memoir and how he treats other characters, whether 'insider' or 'outsider' in his life, in his memoir. In terms of Kelly's methodological approach, it is one area where I consider her ideas useful. My study involved a close textual reading of Binyavanga's memoir to unearth the strategies that assist him in his reconstruction of his life and surrounding events.

James Ogude in "Ngugi's Concept of History and the Post-Colonial Discourses in Kenya", argues that one can best understand history by exploring the politics of interpretation that inform a specific historical subject or phenomenon. Ogude points out that the significance of any historical narrative lies on the politics that informs the interpretation of that subject and that 'interpretation presupposes politics as one of the conditions of its possibility as a social activity'. Ogude examines Ngugi's representation of history in some of his fiction. My study focuses on a memoir and the role the memory plays in the presentation of history. As such, Ogude's work comes in handy for my study when looking at the elements of fiction and the presentation of personal and national history in Binyavanga's memoir. The study explores the author's interpretation of the events around his life and how that interpretation contributes to the writing of the history of the nation-state, even as it benefits from the same.

Carol Sicherman in “Ngugi Wa Thiong’o and the Writing of Kenyan History” observes that there is an emergence of Ngugi’s mature understanding of the role of history in African literature and his own role in the rewriting of Kenyan history. This is as a result of Ngugi’s revision of certain details and the addition of significantly new passages in his *A Grain of Wheat* where the revision includes a change in political terminologies and a correction of historical details. Sicherman points out the role of Ngugi’s fictional works in the representation of history where accuracy and facts are concerned, my research is on a nonfiction genre (memoir) and the role of memory in the presentation of history, in as much as fiction will always find its way into these types of narratives, Sicherman’s observation becomes relevant in my study in as far as the presentation of facts and history is concerned.

Felicity Hand in “Impossible Burden: East African Asian Women’s Memoirs”, focuses on the memories of three women writers of East African Asian-descent. Hand looks at Parita Mukta’s *Shards of Memory: Woven Lives in Four Generations*, Neera Kapur-Dromson’s *From Jhelum to Tana*, and Yasmin Alibhali-Brown’s *The Settler’s Cookbook* to study female migratory experiences and to examine class and ethnicity to provide clear dynamics of colonial structures. Hand’s exploration of personal experiences (what one may call ‘lived experiences’) is useful and significant in the research. It is through the same lenses that I attempt an understanding of how Binyavanga’s experiences inform his recreation of his life story and how that recreation affects and is affected by his interpretation of the nation’s history. Beyond this, I have analyzed Binyavanga’s portrayal of various characters and how different personalities are recreated in his memoir, a task which appears to be greatly aided by the author’s personal recollections.

Aleida Assmann in “History, Memory and the Genre of Testimony”, discusses the relationship between memory and history. Assmann while discussing the reliability of memory in life writing

asserts that memory and history are acceptable as complimentary modes of reconstructing and relating to the past (263). He argues that memory that had been discarded as an unreliable and distorting source came to be acknowledged as an important factor in the reconstruction of past. It is the idea of reconstruction that I am interested in so as to interrogate how Binyavanga's memoir is a reconstructed personal narrative and how that narrative embodies the history of the nation-state. The relationship between Binyavanga's story and the Kenyan narrative is apparent in the fact that the author makes references to various national events and personalities that have come to shape the history of this country. And it is this interconnectedness that my study explored.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study employed three theories: Autobiographical theory, New Historicism and Narratology. The theory of autobiography refers to the study of the autobiography and the issues that arise in the discussion of the genre. The major proponent of Autobiographical theory was the German historian and philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey. He argues that human sciences as a discipline is grounded in the understanding of human life and experiences. He, with the other scholars, emphasized historicity as an important factor in autobiographical criticism. (qtd. in Marcus 135)

George Misch, views autobiography as depicting self-consumers by demonstrating how the concept of self, individuality and personality develop through history. Misch highlights the fluidity of the boundaries that demarcate autobiographical forms emphasizing their heterogeneity. (qtd. in Marcus 147)

The analysis of the memoir is based on the assumption that every piece of autobiographical form should be as factual as possible and the writer must pass honesty and impartiality test. Truth is one feature that a memoir seeks to communicate. Establishing truthfulness in a memoir or any

form of life writing is a slippery issue, because truth is subjective and highly dependent on a persons' world view, beliefs and even background. For an idea to be true it should be based on facts and not mere emotions and feelings. Roy Pascal in *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, points out the historical and aesthetic approaches to the autobiography. Pascal is concerned with the element of truth in autobiography laying emphasis on the present moment of telling the story. Truth in autobiographies gives credibility to the text. The story must be truthful if it is to persuade the reader of its authenticity. Smith and Watson define autobiographical truth as 'an inter-subjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of life' (13). Truth in any form of autobiography can either be subjective, historical or fictional.

Subjective truth is that unique truth of life seen and understood by the individual, historical truth is that truth that can be verified through history and fictional truth is the writers' unique way of communicating and verifying truth. It is the historical truth that I am more interested in this research. The level of truth is evaluated through the seriousness and the intentions of writing by the writer. Truth whether subjective, historical or fictional can be substantiated by the use of para textual elements such as letters, pictures, speeches, communal documents, dates, events and historical happenings, use of actual names and consistency in character development; these assist in verifying facts and adds to the credibility of the narrative. The absence of these elements may bring to doubt the claims of the writer and water down the credibility of the work.

The autobiographical approach is important in this study as it allows an in-depth analysis of Binyavanga's Memoir, *One Day I Will Write about this Place*. It helped me in identifying autobiographical elements including memory, history (personal and national) and fiction in the text under study.

The second theory is the Theory of Narrative or Narratology. Narratology comprises many strands implicitly united in the recognition that narrative theory requires a distinction between a story and a sequence of actions or event concerned as independent of their manifestation in discourse and ‘discourse’ as the discursive presentation or narration of events. A narrative strategy is a device or technique that an author uses to tell a story. In *Narratology, Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Mieke Bal defines the terms, narrative text, a story and fabula as follows:

A narrative text is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee (tells’ the reader a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings or a combination thereof. A story is the content of that text and produces a particular manifestation, inflection, and coloring of a fabula; the fabula is presented in a certain manner. A fabula is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors. (5).

Bal argues that the theory analyses a text based on the three layers, the text, the story and the fabula. A text is the medium or the signs that constitute the structured whole. They can be linguistic units such as words and sentences. He goes further to say that ‘but they can also be different signs, such as cinematic shots and sequences, or painted dots, lines and blots’ (5) This gives the narrative the strands in which the story is woven. The writer of a text chooses the medium in which to narrate the story and thus the text provides the finite structure needed.

The fabula is the material or content that feeds into the story and chronologically related events. The rules controlling human behavior informs the series of events in a story thus making it easy

to understand the narrative text. In my study, I trace the fabula in Binyavanga's memoir in an attempt to understand the narrative.

There are two important elements of the fabula: the element of time and that of place or location. It is definite that an event will have its actor and will take place at a given time and in a particular place. Events, actors, time and location together constitute the material of a fabula. These elements are arranged in relation to one another in such a way that they produce the effect desired either convincing, moving, or aesthetic. A memoir is an account of events by specific actors in a specific time and in a specific place. A memoir can be said to be a narrative and it differs from the other forms of narratives in terms of its structure. In this research I find this theory appropriate because a memoir is a narrative on its form.

The New Historicism Theory was founded by the works of Stephen Greenblatt. It flourished in the 1980s and 1990s, and it was part of the general tendency towards historical approaches to criticism. New Historicism seeks to find meaning in a text by considering the work within the framework of the prevailing ideas and assumptions on its historical era. New Historicists determine the contexts in which literary texts are produced and read. In quoting Aram Veeser, Castle Gregory in *The Literary Theory Handbook*, raises five key assumptions underlying the New Historicism theory which I consider important in this study:

- (1) Every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practice,
- (2) Every critique inevitably uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes,
- (3) Literary and non-literary texts circulate inseparably,
- (4) No discourse gives access to unchanging truths nor express inalterable human nature and
- (5), Critical methods under capitalism participate in the economy they describe (119).

The New Historicism theory enabled me to go beyond the primary text, especially when I contextualize Binyavanga's presentation of the Kenyan history.

### **Methodology**

The study involved a close textual reading of Binyavanga's *One Day I Will Write about this Place, a memoir*. In the course of this project I examined the relationship between memory and history in the presentation of the memoir. Autobiographical theory was important as I discussed personal and national history in Binyavanga's text. I read the text contextually by which I mean I attempted to place specific narrative moments within particular historical moments in Kenya through reference to Kenyan history as recorded in other books of history, newspapers, academic journals and articles, the New Historicism theory helped me to go beyond the primary text in an attempt of giving a context the history presented in the memoir under study. Secondly I discussed the aspects of fiction that slips into the memoir as the author present the past events, the reading of the theory of Narratives helped me focus on the narrator, the portrayal of various characters as the major elements of fiction into Binyavanga's memoir, as he narrates his story and the history of Kenya



## CHAPTER TWO

### Political History and the Memoir

#### Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the presentation of the Kenyan political history in Binyavanga Wainaina's *One Day I Will Write about this Place*. I pay close attention to the portrayal of the political leaders, and the portrayal of past and present history of Kenya. I contextualize the history presented in the memoir through a reference to Kenyan history as recorded in other historical books, journals, articles, newspapers and other relevant sources that might have captured the events that Binyavanga Wainaina presents in his memoir. I also focus on the selectivity in the presentation of national history in the memoir in an attempt to understand the memoirists' motive for writing the memoir. I pay close attention to the narrator's age, contrasting it with the historical events and occurrences that he mentions in the memoir.

Tirop Simatei in *The Novel and the Politics of Nation Building in East Africa* asserts that "The specificity of East African Literature, like that of African Literature in general, is marked in part by its relation to history, the latter understood in both senses as events that have occurred and as the recounting of those events" (9). This does not apply to works of fiction alone the claim is also true for life writings, depending with the motive of the writer, the narration of history be it personal or national is a central aspect. I trace Binyavanga's narration of history and various events in Kenya or what is referred to as the 'fabula' in the Theory of Narrative (Narratology). Binyavanga Wainaina's memoir is chronologically structured. As noted earlier in the Theory of Narrative (Narratology), events are arranged in a sequence within a specified time of the writer's history. This feature shares the journey motif with the autobiography where there is a movement

from one stage of life to another. In the memoir the reader is taken through a journey of (hi)story from a certain stages of the writers' life but within the context of the wider (hi)story of the society she/he lives. The chronological structure of the memoir is thus parallel to history which in itself is chronological.

### **Kenyan Leadership**

Since independence Kenya has been led by four presidents namely: Jomo Kenyatta, Daniel arap Moi, Mwai Kibaki and Uhuru Kenyatta. Binyavanga's memoir focuses on the first three leaders because the memoir begins in 1978 towards the end of Jomo Kenyatta's regime, spanning through Daniel Moi's twenty four years in power (1978 to 2002), and eventually Mwai Kibaki's regime from 2002 to 2010 where the memoir ends.

In the memoir, Kenyatta's regime is presented through the eyes of a young seven year old boy, who at his age probably does not understand the happenings around him, more so the issues that are political in nature. During this period, Binyavanga also occasionally comments on the political situation in Uganda. This interest could have been triggered by the fact that the narrator's mother is a Ugandan. Moi's regime is seen through the experiences of a child growing to a young adolescent and eventually progressing into adulthood. Eventually, Kibaki's coming to power is presented by an adult narrator whom we presuppose should be able to distinguish between good and evil, and can comment reasonably about the various happenings in the community, or country, especially those that are political.

Before I analyze the history of Kenya as presented in Binyavanga's memoir, it is important to provide a brief background to the political history of Kenya since independence to 1977. The reason for focusing on this history is informed by the fact that Binyavanga's memoir begins in

1978 and captures or presents some historical events (from 1978 to 2010) whose roots/causes can be traced back the early governance in Kenya just after independence. The background information also provides a context to understanding the political history of Kenya.

Kenya attained its independence on December 12, 1964, with Jomo Kenyatta as its first president and Jaramogi Oginga Odinga as the deputy president. Odinga differed with Kenyatta and in 1966 he left the Kenya Africa National Union (KANU) and formed the opposition party Kenya People's Union (KPU) which was banned shortly after and its leader (Oginga Odinga) detained. In 1969 KANU became the only political party in Kenya until 1991 when parliament passed an amendment to revert Kenya to a multi-party state. At this point it is important to note that in 1982, a constitution was passed that made Kenya a *de jure* one-party state. Daniel arap Moi became Kenyatta's vice president from 1966 to 1978 when he became the president of Kenya after Kenyatta's death; it is during his time in power that saw the change that made Kenya a one-party state.

The most significant event in the 1970s in the political history of Kenya is that the 1970s saw the formation of GEMA, the Gikuyu-Embu-Meru Association. The GEMA is what Goldsworthy in "Kenyan Politics since Kenyatta" describes as a 'tribal association' whose main aim was to provide for the welfare of its members.

Due to Kenyatta's deteriorating health in 1975, a 'change-the constitution' campaign began led by GEMA politicians, the leading lights of the campaign included Kihika Kimani, Njenga Karume and Jackson Angaine. The main objective of the campaign was to make sure that the then deputy president, Daniel arap Moi, would not succeed the president. One of the major concerns of the GEMA politicians was that their wealth alongside their powerful positions in

government would be threatened if the seat of power shifted to the Rift Valley or any other leader from other tribes. Nevertheless, Kenyatta did not heed their call for the constitutional change.

Binyavanga's childhood experiences reveal a great deal of the Kenyan history and politics. Kylie Cardell and Kate Douglas acknowledge that "one of the central foci of life writing texts, particularly in recent decades is childhood" (1). They further observe that:

Everyone begins life as a child and whatever the age of the author, childhood has been at least in part, experienced in the past. The presence (or indeed absence) of childhood in life writings reveal something of the cultural position of the child within society and culture of the time (1).

Therefore, a life writer who begins his narrative in his childhood days, the childhood moments reveal a great deal about them; these moments play a significant role in what they become later in life.

Prince Gerald in *Reviewing Narratology* states that a text requires its readers to begin at a particular point it selects and to follow its unfolding in time up to an end it specifies (409). The memoir begins in 1978. The writer's decision to begin his life narrative in the year 1978 can be said to be a deliberate and conscious act. 1978 is a defining moment in Kenya's history; it marks the end of an era and the beginning of a new regime. In beginning the narrative in 1978, I argue that the writer specifically wants to begin his narrative with Moi's era and probably overlook Kenyatta's era by doing so, as it shall be observed latter, he manages to paint or portray Jomo Kenyatta as a good leader and Kenya as a stable country under the leadership of Jomo Kenyatta.

The narrator first introduces politics to the readers by mentioning Idi Amin's dictatorial regime in Uganda. The narrators' interest in Uganda and this period political condition can be attributed to the fact that Uganda is his mother's ancestry. The narrator compares the falling of Beatrice, a classmate, to the falling of his mothers' country by saying, "Uganda, my mum's country, fell down and broke. Crutch!"(16). this comment becomes a pointer to the terrible political condition in Uganda at this time brought about by poor leadership and authoritarian leaders. While still trying to comprehend the comparison between the falling of a person and the falling of Uganda, a country, the narrator says, "Field Marshall Amin Dada, the president of Uganda, ate his ministers for supper. He kept his ministers head in the fridge"(16). He further highlights the ill doings of Idi Amin by saying:

Idi Amin is Killing people and throwing them to the crocodiles. The Nile is blocked with dead bodies. We have many aunties and uncles in Uganda. My grandparents, my mum's parents are in Uganda. Baba's friend disappeared at the border, and all they found was his broken glasses in a mass grave (23).

Although the narrator fails to explain how he got the information about Uganda, considering that he was very young to understand such political happenings, one can only guess that he must have picked it up from conversations between his mother and other adults or that his mother might have tried to explain it to her children about the condition in her mother country.

The narrator then crosses the border and lands in Kenya where he introduces President Jomo Kenyatta in contrast of Idi Amin. He says "Kenyatta is our president. He is the father of our nation. Kenya is a peace-loving nation" (24).

The narrators' foregrounding of the political situation in Uganda enables us to contrast the stable and peaceful political condition in Kenya with the unstable and chaotic political condition in Uganda. The narrator also contrasts the two political leaders by extension (Jomo Kenyatta and Idi Amin). By saying that "Kenyatta is the father of our nation", the narrator implies that Kenyatta is a good leader that is why Kenya is in a stable condition, he further goes ahead to say "Kenyatta is the father of our nation. I wonder whether Kenya was named after Kenyatta or Kenyatta was named after Kenya" (25). The narrators' presentation of the president of Kenya by using the 'father' symbol or image emphasizes the president as the national hero and leader. Referring the president as the 'father of the nation' captures what Lindfors Bernth says in "The African Politician's changing image in African Literature in English" where the African politician (especially the president) in the early African literary writings was viewed and presented as a hero and the voice and symbol of African aspirations for a glorious future (14).

To further emphasize the peaceful political condition during Kenyatta's era, the narrator mentions the *harambee* slogan that was famous during Kenyatta's reign. The narrator says:

We are all pulling together, and in school we sing, *harambee*, which means we are pulling together, like a choir, or tug-of-war. Standing on the podium of the choir, waving a fly whisk, is a conductor, President Kenyatta, who has red scary eyes and a beard. (24)

From the above example, Kenyatta is metaphorically referred to as a conductor. This implies that the narrator presents Kenyatta as a president who brought harmony and peace in Kenya. At the same time, the narrator describes the physical appearance of Kenyatta as a scary being. The conductor as the image of the president presents President Kenyatta as the leader of Kenya. The people of Kenya have also been presented metaphorically using two contradicting images,

‘choir’ and ‘tug-of-war’. The choir symbolizes the state of harmony, peace and unity in Kenya while on the other hand; the tug-of-war symbolizes competition and a struggle of might.

The *harambee* notion points to, and emphasizes the peace and unity in Kenya at that time where Kenyans lived and worked together. The above example captures the fact that Kenyan’s worked together, helped one another under the leadership of President Jomo Kenyatta. *Harambee*, an Indian word adapted to Kiswahili slogan which means ‘pulling together’ or ‘working together’ was a national philosophy of Kenya during Jomo Kenyatta’s reign. The word *harambee* was popularized by late Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, who made it a national motto in 1963. He aptly advanced it as unity in all causes of national integrity and human progress, through economic independence and the value of all contributors towards this end. The origin of this principle is embedded in the African traditions and practices where community spirit and community work were highly valued. This traditional sense of unity is what influenced Mzee Kenyatta to note in a statement included in Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965 that:

Let all the people in our country roll up their sleeves in the spirit of self-help to create the true fruits of uhuru. This is what we mean by *harambee*. *Harambee* is founded on the spirit of mutual social responsibility and is indeed African Socialism in practice. The spirit has provided the guiding principles for national development as it has acted as a mobilizing force which brings the people of Kenya together to achieve a common goal.

The young narrator proceeds to give an example of what we might literally consider as the spirit of *harambee*, and what the spirit of working and living together as Kenyans is by saying:

One day, we are told, Kenyatta's Mercedes was stuck in the mud, and he shouted *harambee*, so the people would come and push and push his long Mercedes-Benz out of the mud, so we all push and pull together; we will get the Mercedes out of the mud (24).

The 'we' in the above example becomes an indicator of the togetherness of the nation and the various communities in Kenya. The act of pulling together illustrates communal unity and the spirit of helping one another. Beyond the example given by the narrator is the fact that Kenyans came together in the spirit of *harambee* to build schools, health care centers, water projects and other facilities that all members of the community benefited from.

Ironically however, beyond the surface meaning of *harambee* which is helping one another, from the above example the readers can see that beneath the *harambee* idea and practice during postcolonial Kenya existed greed, oppression and individualism, where a particular group of people (mostly the leaders) took advantage of the common man to enrich themselves and accumulate wealth. The 'Mercedes' and the 'President' in this case can symbolizes the rich in the community while the active participants symbolizes the commoners or the common man contributing funds to enrich people of a certain political class.

The narrator is probably too young to comprehend some political happenings in Kenya. This is why he strives at portraying a picture of a good president, a perfect leader without blemish and Kenya as a stable state. The narrators' young mind is carried away by the Kenya national slogans at the time such as 'harambee' 'peace, love and unity'. Being in class two it is also possible that the narrator and his classmates have been taught that Kenya is a peace loving nation. At this age he is in an environment where Kenyatta is taught as the 'father' of Kenya and a national hero, and that is what he incorporate into his memoir. But considering that the young Binyavanga (at



seven years) understood the intricate political unrest in Uganda and mentions the doings of Idi Amin through ‘hear say’, then he should also have heard and spoken about the assassination of J. M Kariuki which was political and which happened in 1975, two years earlier. This the narrator chooses to either be silent or refuses to remember. By not remembering and mentioning the ills of President Jomo Kenyatta, the writer manages to portray Kenyatta as a near perfect leader.

Jomo Kenyatta dies in 1978. His death is captured in the memoir when the young narrator says, “Kenyatta the father of Kenya is dead” (34). Kenyatta’s death is sealed in the narrators’ young mind because the events are shown on television; he is probably tired because the mourning being aired on television for days interrupts the normal programs. To register his boredom the narrator says, “The mourning for Kenyatta seems to last forever”(34). Kenyatta’s death also brings out the narrators’ childhood fear. Before announcing Kenyatta’s death the narrator says, “We are afraid to be inside the house”(34) the use of ‘we’ shows that the fear extends to his brother and sister (Ciru and Jimmy). We later learn the causes of the fears and restlessness when the narrator says, “I am hungry, but do not want to go to the kitchen. The giant portrait of Kenyatta is in the dining room. His eyes watch you, red and real”(35). Kenyatta’s portrait scares the narrator, especially now that Kenyatta is dead. The narrator brings out the childhood feeling that probably the spirit of the dead is roaming around the house and the eyes in the portrait is actually watching your every move, this feelings shows the narrators’ childhood fears.

From the memoir it can be said that Kenyatta’s death and mourning capture the then state of national unity and cohesion in Kenya as people from different communities are seen mourning the death of their leader. The narrator says, ‘Television voice: “This delegation from Nyanza Province is playing a *nyatiti*. They have come to sing for the late President Kenyatta. A *nyatiti* is a traditional Luo musical instrument’(36). This also shows that Kenyatta’s death is the loss of the

whole country and not a specific community. Beyond the surface notion of Kenyan's living together in unity, the example captures hypocrisy and pretence in the Kenyan society. It is ironical to note that that the man playing the *nyatitiis* from same community with the ones who threw stones at President Kenyatta down the history lane during his visit to Kisumu in 1966 marking the tension that has always existed between the Gikuyus and the Luos since independence.

The coexistence between various communities in the narrators' immediate environment also signifies the unity in Kenya during the narrators' childhood days. The various communities are what the narrator refers to as the *Kimay*. *Kimay* is "any language and sounds that the narrator cannot speak, but can hear every day in Nakuru" (38), *Kimay* as the young narrator further explains is:

...is the talking jazz trumpet: sneering skewing sounds, squeaks and strains, ...*Kimay* is yodeling Gikuyu women, Scottish square dancing to the accordion-playing man who wears a hat with a feather. It is a neon man called Jimmy... It is ululating Gikuyu women crying around Kenyatta's body on television. Gurgling Maasai men jumping up and down. Luo men in feathers and Kenyatta beards, *nyatitting*. Congo men speaking like women...(Kimay is) Ki-kuyu, Ki-kamba, Ki-ganda...(38).

*Kimay* therefore, becomes the people from the different communities speaking different languages and living together as Kenyans being unified by the national and official languages (English and Kiswahili). The act of all Kenyans being brought together by two major languages is well explained when the young narrator says, "English is Kenya's official language. All documents that are legal and official must be in English. Kiswahili is not compulsory in school;

it is our national language... Most Kenyans speak some Kiswahili”(50). The young narrator observes that the Kenyan constitution recognizes the two languages (English and Kiswahili), but the local languages- the *kimays* and the narrators mother tongue- is not recognized at the national level this is well demonstrated when the narrator says, “Our constitution does not name our other languages. I think it is because they want to eradicate tribalism”(50). *Kimay* therefore exists at the local and communal level and has no place at the national level.

The end of Jomo Kenyatta’s regime in the memoir is marked by his death in 1978. Daniel arap Moi’s regime in the memoir is presented through the eyes of a young child, growing into an adolescent and eventually an adult; Daniel arap Moi ruled Kenya for twenty four years. The narrator, occasionally comments on the state of affairs in Uganda during this period in the narrative.

Daniel Moi became the second president of Kenya after the death of Jomo Kenyatta in 1978; he had been Kenya’s deputy president since 1966. He led Kenya as the president for twenty four years. When Moi took over as the president of Kenya, he promised to follow in the footsteps (Nyayo) of his predecessor. He started off as a popular leader and ordered the release of all political prisoners and detainees in December 1978. These included Martin Shikuku, Jean Marie Seroney and George Anyona.

Chapter four of the memoir begins with the narrator announcing that he is nine years old which should be the year 1980 chronologically; and that he is in standard four at school. It is in this chapter that the narrator remembers to introduce to the readers the ‘new’ president of Kenya, since the death of Kenyatta in 1978. Introducing President Daniel Moi for the first time to the readers, this is what the narrator says:

Daniel Toroitich arap Moi is our new president. He is young, awkward and fumbling, but clean, tall, and sharp in a suit. He is on television, moving like an accordion, apologizing in his uncertain voice for just being here. He has found himself at the center of things and does not know what to do now that he is no longer Kenyatta's vice president. (43)

The terms 'awkward', 'fumbling' and 'apologizing in uncertain voice for just being here' betrays the narrators' attitude towards Moi. The description emphasizes on the character of the subject hidden in a crowd of superficial appearance. The claim 'awkward' and 'fumbling' far outweighs the 'clean, tall and sharp in a suit' attributes: the former touching on character while the later being superficial attributes. In presenting President Moi, there is a change in attitude in the narrator voice as the narrator shifts from referring to the president as the father of the nation to his focus on the president's personality. The narrator goes ahead to give an indirect comparison between Moi, Kenyatta and Charles Njonjo touching on their character and as if apologizing he says:

Sometimes we like Moi because he fumbles, like most of us. He isn't booming like Kenyatta, or polished and slick like Charles Njonjo. His English stumbles, his Kiswahili is broken and sincere. We have no idea what man and mind he is in his home language, Tugen. That is a closed world to the rest of the country outside his people. We are not curious about that world. We make a lot of jokes about him. (43)

From the above it appears that the narrator and his community do not like president Moi. Saying 'sometimes we like Moi' can be read as 'we' do not like Moi. The narrator then hides by using the pluralized pronoun 'we' to avoid subjectivity. Assmann Aleida in "Transformations between History and Memory", while discussing the collective memory asserts that human beings do not

live in first person singular only. He further says that, “Human beings live in various formats of first person plural. They become part of different groups whose ‘we’ they adopt together with respective social frames” (51). Assmann explains a social frame as a structure of shared concerns, values, experiences and narratives, therefore the social frames include:

the family, the neighborhood, the peer group, the generation, the nation, the culture are such large groups that individuals incorporate into their identity by referring to them as ‘we’. Each ‘we’ is constructed through shared practices and discourses that marks certain boundaries and defines principles of inclusion and exclusion (Assmann 52).

The ‘we’ in Binyavanga’s memoir can therefore, be assumed to be the people in the narrators’ immediate environment (the narrators’ parents, peers and the community at large); this revelation therefore gives us insight into the narrators’ community’s view of Moi.

In comparing the presentation of the two presidents to the readers, it is evident that the narrator views Jomo Kenyatta with lots of respect, while with Daniel Moi, he sees him from a tribal point of view. It is then not surprising that in the middle of watching a Madaraka Day Celebration the narrator says, “Gikuyus are complaining that the Kalenjins are sitting on them” (65). This comment shows the Gikuyus feelings for the Kalenjins at that time; the remark can also be taken as an indicator of the increase in tribalism in Kenya during Moi’s era but then isn’t the narrator too young to understand such intricate issues in the country such as tribalism? When at Lenana school doing his A-levels, the narrator at least stops pretending and spills his guts to freely speak for himself by saying that, “I don’t like Moi”(121). With the narrator coming out clear and saying that he does not like Moi, then it follows that he will only pay attention to the subjects’ weakness and downfalls and these might even over shadow the subjects’ good deeds.

Apart from comparing Daniel Moi with other prominent leaders such as Charles Njonjo and Jomo Kenyatta and presenting his characteristics, the narrator also gives a brief history of the school which he, Ciru and Jimmy attended which he intertwines with the history of Daniel Moi and his wife, Lena Moi:

Lena Moi Primary school used to be Lugard School, a Whites-only school until the 1960s. Now it is named after Lena Moi, the abandoned wife of our president, Daniel Toroitich arap Moi. When Moi was vice president, she slapped him during a Madaraka Day dance, in front of President Kenyatta, who laughed at him, and that made him angry and now we hear she cannot leave her farm. She comes from an important Kalenjin family, the Bometts, a big farming family, one first in the Rift Valley to become Christians and go to the mission school (48).

The above description does not only capture the history of the narrator's primary school, but also provides an insight into Moi's past life; his family's background and majorly the relationship between him and his wife (Lena Moi). The narrator brings forth several personal issues touching on the relationship between Daniel Moi and his wife. The narrator emphasizes the fact that Lena Moi once slapped Daniel Moi before some dignitaries and that led to their separation and secondly Lena Moi comes from a well-off family unlike, "President Moi (whom) does not come from an important family. He was only a primary school teacher before entering politics"(49). These are claims that can be justified to have been true, but it can also be noted that the narrator is only interested in Moi's personality and that he is relying heavily on his (Moi's) past misfortunes and background focusing less on Moi the national leader. Also considering that the narrator is still young when making such observations of which others like 'Moi being slapped' by his wife could have happened in the early 1970s when probably the narrator was two or three

years old but he bring it on board when he is nine years old, then the source of information for such claims is probably that he ‘heard’ it from adults.

Whereas the narrator is insinuating that Daniel Moi and Lena Moi separated because Lena slapped Moi in front of highly dignified guests including Jomo Kenyatta, in an article published on *Sunday Nation* of November 17, 2013 by John Kamau in an article entitled “The First Lady Kenya never had” John quotes what Andrew Morton- Moi’s Biographer says about the separation:

In his book, Morton hints that Lena in fact insulted Kenyatta when he asked her for a dance. As an uncompromising Christian (Lena) believed that dancing was sinful, but the insult to the president gravely embarrassed Moi. Although they told Andrew Morton that the final breakup came after Lena publicly refused to dance with Kenyatta during a dinner dance at the Rift Valley Technical Collage, there are archival pictures to show that indeed Kenyatta danced with Lena and Moi danced with Mama Ngina during the event (9).

The narrator is more interested in portraying the past dirt of president Moi which as mentioned earlier happened in the early 1970s when the narrator was still very young. For instance, Moi separated with his wife in 1974 and divorced in 1979 as captured in the “Daily Nation” by Kamau John when he says, “The collapse of her marriage (Lena Moi) in 1974 and divorce in 1979 was a bitter blow to the ardent Christian who was being raised under strict African Inland Church (AIC) doctrines” (9).

The narration on the relationship between Moi and his wife, especially the separation part in the memoir, provides background information explaining why Lena Moi Primary is eventually changed to Moi Primary school. The change is well captured when the narrator says:

One day president Moi drives past our school in his motorcade. He stops. He donates a whole truck of orbit chewing gum... Starting today, our school is no longer Lena Moi Primary School; it is newly painted Moi Primary School. All the old rubber stamps and exercise books are collected, all stationary, anything with the word *Lena* disappears (58).

The change in the school's name signifies that Moi wanted nothing to do with his wife Lena. The phrase 'anything with the word *Lena* disappeared' can also be taken to mean that Lena disappeared in Moi's life and even in the spot light as Moi's wife.

Apart from the family problems that Moi goes through, the narrator also comments on how Moi was treated by Jomo Kenyatta's friends when he was the deputy president:

He is always ashamed. When Moi was vice president, Kenyatta's friends treated him like a child. One policeman, a Gikuyu, would stop and search his car whenever he was going home. The policeman's name is Mr. Mungai, and two of his sons are in our school. He is very short and he keeps horses. Once Mr. Mungai slapped Moi. Now that Moi is president, Mr. Mungai has left the country. President Moi wants to detain him. The school hedge runs along the road where this happened, the road to Kabarak his wife's home, now Moi's home

The revelation indicates that probably Moi was a puppet during Jomo Kenyatta's reign. He did not have any designated roles as the deputy president of Kenya and the office being represented



by a Kalenjin did not command any respect especially from the Gikuyu's who were close to President Jomo Kenyatta.

The narrator while presenting Moi's private matters and personality manages to portray Moi as a leader who is easily impressed; the narrator says that he (Moi) "likes primary school choirs and gives choir masters big promotions"(49). This implies that if you managed to impress Moi through things such as praise songs then you easily got promoted. The remark also insinuates that Moi is a giver or very generous when praised even when undeserved. To illustrate this, the narrator gives an example of their music teacher Mr Dondo, who was promoted to become a deputy head teacher.

As the narrative progresses we see the narrator experiencing a lot of changes in his body: he grows both intellectually and physically and so is the country. He becomes conscious of his body, this is evident when he says, "I grew two inches this term and my voice broke, I got kicked out of the choir because I squeak a lot" (52). Change is seen in the country in relation to the narrators' immediate environment. Through the narrator we see the sprouting of what he calls 'informal kiosks' everywhere in town selling everything including batteries and fresh vegetables. Outside their once neat school hedge are paths making their way to town. Change is also seen through the sprouting of many 'illegal' kiosks outside the narrators' school compound and also students getting to sneak their way to buy lunch in this 'illegal' kiosks, this is an indication of governments' failure in the implementation of policies in the country. Moi's regime in the 1980s is characterized by economic strains which led to the growth of the informal business and kiosks that are mentioned in the narrative. The narrator feels the impact of the change in the Kenyan economy; he observes that due to the economic strains, middle-class parents now preferred their children walking to school.

Apart from the economic strain, Kenya experienced other challenges and difficulties during Moi's regime. Chege gives a brief summary on Moi's time in power and the state of affairs in Kenya during the 1980s which summarizes the condition then:

Despite a good start, in 1982 his regime took an authoritarian turn, imposing legislations making Kenya a de jure one-state and persecuting dissidents seeking political competition. In 1988 the government banned secret balloting for legislative elections and voters were required to line up publicly behind the candidate of their choice. In 1989, Freedom House downgraded Kenya's aggregate ranking to Not Free. Corruption escalated as the regime methodologically dodged economic and political reforms. Annual economic growth declined significantly between 1990 and 2000 and poverty levels soared (128).

Some of the challenges experienced in Kenya during Moi's era that can be considered as historical happenings are captured in Binyavanga's memoir; the inclusion of these historical events can be treated as the writer's strategy of telling truth. The attempted coup that happened on 1<sup>st</sup> August, 1982, led by Senior Private Hezekiah Ochuka that led to the loss of lives in the battle between the loyal forces and the coup plotter, loss of property through vandalism and rape among other ills is captured in the memoir although the narrator does not mention the date and the year of this occurrence. The narrators' decision to attribute the source of this information as his father can also be seen as a strategy of telling truth. The narrator says:

Baba wakes us up this morning and tells us that there has been a coup d'état led by junior soldiers in the air force. There is shooting all over Kenya. We stay home the whole day. The government was taken over by an air force private. There is shooting in Nairobi all

day and rumors that the streets are piled high with bodies. Indian shops are looted. Many women are raped. There are curfews, for months, and arrests... with only a few guns and some ragtag soldiers, air force Private Ochuka is, for six hours, the president of Kenya. In the afternoon, the coup is put down, and thousands are killed. Nairobi has corpses everywhere (54-53).

Other challenges faced in Kenya that are captured in the memoir are as a result of the dictatorial and authoritarian leadership that President Daniel Moi adopts especially after the 1982 attempted coup. The narrator for instance mentions the 1992 and 1997 Kenyan presidential elections in his memoir. After finishing his O – levels, the narrator leaves Kenya for South Africa to pursue a degree in Commerce at the University of Transkei. Although far away from Kenya; in South Africa, the narrator manages to keep track of the political happenings in Kenya. The 1992 presidential elections in Kenya is a significant one as it is the first democratic elections in Kenya after the reintroduction of multi-partyism in 1991. With the 1992 presidential election, the narrator capturing the dishonest and greed seen in the Kenyan leaders says “Moi rigged the elections, and the economy is sinking”, (148). The narrator is silent on the reintroduction of multi-partyism in Kenya during this period and the fact that the fragmentation and the disorganized state of the opposition could have led to Moi winning the 1992 elections. Steeves Jeffrey in “Kenya: The 1997 elections and Succession Politics”, views the creation of opposition in 1991 through the reintroduction of multi-partyism as an advantage to the then ruling party KANU; due to the fragmentation of the opposition, Steeves observes that:

The rise of re-democratisation movement in Kenya during the early 1990s and the concession of multi-partyism by President Daniel Arap Moi in November 1991 has transformed Kenyan politics and civil society. In 1992, in the first multi-party national

elections, President Moi and the ruling party KANU re-captured power through the good fortune of a sudden fragmented opposition... Indeed, Moi won decisively in the presidential vote, beating his nearest rival Kenneth Matiba of FORD-Asili party, by 1,927,640 to 1,354,856 votes (71-72).

The political parties at this time included KANU led by Daniel Moi, FORD Kenya led by Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, FORD Asili led by Kenneth Matiba and Democratic Party (DP) led by Mwai Kibaki.

The memoir also captures the ethnic clashes that happened in the 1990s in Kenya, especially in Rift Valley, which were triggered by land disputes and politics. The 1990s ethnic clashes highlight the increase in tribalism and insecurity during Moi's era. Odhiambo Atieno in "Ethnic Cleansing and Civil Society in Kenya 1962-1992" observes that, "The advent of multiparty politics in Kenya from the middle of 1990 was characterized by state violence"(32). In the memoir, the narrator says this about the 1992 ethnic violence:

In 1992, thousands were displaced from Rift Valley Province in Kenya. The principal aggressors were Moi's militias. There are retaliations- and soon it is not clear who started what, where or when- and soon the violence spreads out of the Rift Valley, into Nyanza and Western. It seems clear that Moi's rule is coming to an end, and this serves as a sort of final solution, to rid the Rift Valley of 'foreigners' (149).

From the above description of the 1992 clashes it is clear that the narrator is suggesting that Moi played a role in triggering and inciting the Kalenjins to fight and get rid of other communities- the so called foreigners- from Rift Valley.

In 1997, the narrator once again comments on the condition in Kenya at that time. “Politics is terrible, more clashes, and the 1997 elections were rigged. Moi is back and the opposition is broken” (237). The narrator fails to mention the reasons for these clashes, and does not inform us who is fighting who in these clashes, but from the descriptions of the 1992 condition, it can be deduced that the clashes during this time were ethnic in nature and mainly politically instigated.

Moi’s era ends in 2002, and Mwai Kibaki’s years in power begin here which can be treated as the third era of political leadership and political history in Kenya since independence. It is important to note that Mwai Kibaki’s time in power is presented through the eyes and voice of an adult narrator who at his age (thirty one years) I believe, can comment reasonably on matters happening in the country especially those that are political in nature. Mwai Kibaki is the third president of Kenya who unsuccessfully challenged Daniel Moi in the presidential elections of the 1992 and 1997. Mwai Kibaki is voted in as the president of Kenya in 2002 through the merging of various political parties. In 2007 he is also announced as the president of Kenya by the ECK and this leads to the outburst of violence which has famously been referred to as ‘the 2007 post election violence’. Mwai Kibaki’s regime as presented in the memoir revolves around the 2002 and the 2007 presidential campaigns.

Mwai Kibaki’s regime in the memoir begins when the narrator comes back from South Africa in 2002 and excitedly announces that “Moi has been voted out. We have our first democratic government since 1960’s”(258). The narrators’ presentation of the 2002 presidential elections is highly selective, full of silences and to some extent presentation of untrue information. The narrators’ claim that, ‘Moi has been voted out’ to a reader who is not informed about the political history of Kenya might imply that Moi was running for the 2002 presidential seat which is not true; it is Moi’s party (KANU) and his preferred successor (Uhuru Kenyatta) that is defeated.

Moi did not run for the 2002 presidential seat as the constitution did not allow him. The narrator in the memoir also chooses to be silent, or forgets to mention who Moi's preferred choice of successor was. The narrator also conceals the role played by other opposition parties in the defeat of Moi's preferred heir: the merging of the various opposition parties. The narrator mentions the reception Daniel Moi receives during Mwai Kibaki's inauguration ceremony: "A few days later, the largest crowd in Kenya's history gathers, in Uhuru Park, to inaugurate a new president. Moi's car is pelted with mud. When he stands to speak he is booed and mud is thrown at him" (260). The narrators' decision to pay more emphasis on the treatment that Moi receives on this particular day and being silent on the celebrant of the occasion (Mwai Kibaki) shows the narrators' attitude towards Moi.

The 2002 election does not receive the deserving attention from Binyavanga. He barely mentions that it is Mwai Kibaki who has taken over from Daniel Moi. The memoir does not also capture what and who plays the major role in ensuring that Moi's heir is not voted in during the 2002 presidential elections. The narrator waits until three years later then he remembers to mention the significant role played by the opposition in the 2002 election, especially the role played by Raila Odinga. Raila Odinga played a major and significant role as the opposition leader in the 2002 elections campaign and is well remembered for his endorsement slogan which was 'Kibaki tosha'. Though Raila played a significant role in the 2002 campaigns that led to the voting in of Mwai Kibaki, nothing is said about him and this crucial role in the memoir. The merging of the many opposition parties that brought to an end KANU's reign is not also mentioned in the memoir. Three years later in 2005, the narrator brings Raila Odinga on board as a significant player in the 2002 elections; this is captured well in the memoir when the narrator says:

Kibaki is a Gikuyu, and non Gikuyus feel his government betrayed a gentleman's agreement made when a coalition of political groups came together to remove Moi's party from power in 2002. Raila, who was promised the post of the prime minister and who had proposed Kibaki for president, is given the Ministry of Roads (279).

The narrator seems to be rejoicing, for Mwai Kibaki a Gikuyu is in power, and it is now that 'many good things' that he does not mention are happening.

The narrator seems to credit Kibaki as a Gikuyu president on how better things are. He suggests that corruption is no longer a deep-rooted issue in Kenya; a Kenyan is a Kenyan and they are all treated equally this is seen when he presents his situation at the airport in 2001 and compares it with what he experiences in the same airport in 2002. In 2001, of course Moi was still in power the narrator narrates a case where he suffers in the hands of security officers in Mombasa because he did not have a yellow fever certificate and he had to bribe his way through. In 2002, months after elections there is significant change. The narrator walks his way through the airport and he is received by warm smiling officials. To further illustrate the changes in the country the narrator says "It is hard to say that things have are not better. Government departments work. There are tax collection records. You can get your national exam results by text messages. The largest bank in Kenya is a Micro-lending Bank. New sky scrapers are all over Nairobi" (308). The changes in the country include the embracing of new technologies.

Towards the 2007 campaigns the narrator gives us an insider reality of the conspiracies that goes on among the people of his community; the conspiracies of keeping a fellow Gikuyu in power, as seen from the following passage:

In the past two years, during political campaigns, text messages called on the members of the House of Mumbi (the mother of the Gikuyu Nation) to let things ‘stay at home’ *Kamucii* was whispered from cab driver to passenger, from politician to market trader. Text messages flew everywhere, John Githongo, Kenya’s anticorruption czar, who broke ranks with a corrupt Gikuyu elite, was branded a traitor. Wink wink. Nod nod. It is our season. Kibaki season (284).

It is campaign time again, elections are to be held in 2007 and the interested parties are the Luo being led by Raila Odinga and the Gikuyu being represented by Mwai Kibaki. The narrator though a Gikuyu, contrary to the message ‘they’ receive that ‘they should let things stay at home’ announces that:

I am going to vote for Raila. I don’t love him. Kibaki is sort of okay. A bit sleepy but there is no way I am voting for a second term for any president while this constitution is still alive. Too much power. I do not want to vote for a better Gikuyu land. I want to vote for a better Kenya. If I can’t trust my vote to a leader of another tribe, I may as well take a green card and not go back (312).

The narrators’ stand as seen above is to show that he is not tribal, and he can vote for any leader from any tribe in Kenya as the president. What matters to the narrator is not the tribe but the country. Later, the narrator ‘refuses’ to vote and in fact tears up his voters card then proceeds to give the reason for his action though not convincing enough. The narrator says that he is tired of Raila’s party saying in rallies that their campaign is about forty one tribes versus one tribe- the Gikuyu, “I have had enough. Raila’s party is now nakedly saying in rallies all over Kenya that their campaign is about forty one tribes versus one tribe- the Gikuyu” (317) the narrator does not



provide evidence of where this was said. The narrators' act of 'tearing' his voter's card if it is worth going by it says a lot about him, it presents him majorly as an unpatriotic citizen.

When the 2007 elections are finally held, the narrator goes to Lamu and follows the results from his hotel room. The narrator begins by telling us that, "It is clear that there is rigging" (323), but does not tell us which or whose party is doing the rigging. The narrator also foresees what might come of the country after the 2007 elections when he says, "All supermarkets have run out of knives and pangas. We are worried. We are not worried. It is hard to imagine the chaos all those pangas promise"(324). The comment has some elements of exaggeration. One crucial question that lingers unanswered is: Did the narrator survey all the supermarkets in Kenya to come up with the above conclusion? Later in the memoir, the narrator announces the 2007 presidential results by saying:

We hear some rumors that some close to the president came in at night and fiddled with things. Last night, Raila was a million votes ahead. This morning, we woke up and Kibaki caught up. But we knew it would be close. People do not understand numbers, we say to ourselves... Many Key constituents have not yet delivered their numbers. The commission can't raise them on the phone. It turns out that they are waiting to see the numbers before fiddling with their own numbers and sending them in (325).

The narrator endorses the election results by giving two reasons. According to the narrator, people do not understand numbers and secondly 'they' knew it was going to be close. It is not reasonable on the narrators' part to simply view a range of one million votes as too close for a candidate to catch up a leading candidate in less than six hours. Amutabi Maurice says the following about the 2007 election results 'What is clear is that in the parliamentary race, Raila

Oding's ODM won twice as many seats as Mwai Kibaki's Party of National Unity (PNU)' (76). Amutabi illustrates this by using a table that appeared in the *Daily Nation Newspaper* on December 30, 2007; the table indicated that in the 2007 parliamentary elections results ODM got 99 seats and PNU 43 seats.

After the announcement of the 2007 election results what followed was an eruption of violence in Kenya in what is now referred to as the '2007 post-election violence', which led to many Kenya's losing lives, the displacement of many people from their homes and the destruction of property. This period is captured in the memoir but what the narrator chooses to record is a one sided affair. He insinuates that the perpetrators of post-election violence were two communities- the Kalenjins and the Luos as seen in the following observation that he makes:

Several Kalenjin militias are marching on foot to Nakuru, and baba won't leave. I am on the phone with him every hour, begging him. Paraffin and matches costs less than a dollar a day. The ants have crawled out of the logs of Kenya; some will set their own city, Kisumu, on fire, watch it burn and cheer.... In Nairobi, they will lift up your railway, the original spine, and start to dismantle it.... Last night a whole small army with bows and arrows were killing people a few hundred meters from Pyrethrum Board (326).

The narrator uses the word 'the ants' to represent the Luos and the Kalenjins and to symbolize their destructive nature as seen from their 2007/2008 actions. From the memoir, it is evident that the narrator claims that it was only the Kalenjin and Luos who were responsible for the chaos that erupted after the announcements of the presidential election results. Therefore, the narrator paints the Gikuyus as the individuals who are at the receiving ends; the Gikuyus never retaliated, they never fought back, they watched as they were killed and if this claim is true and should be

trusted what of the killings in Naivasha? Why not mention this crucial place? By being silent about these places the narrator manages to portray the members of his community as victims of the 2007 post election violence.

### **Political influence on the Kenyan education system**

Education has been among the most important issues in Kenya since the onset of independence. In the memoir, the narrator presents the history of the education system in Kenya and it is obvious that politics played a role or has always influenced the education system of the nation. Jimmy, Ciru and Binyavanga go through the old system of education; the British 7-4-6 system. In the memoir, the narrator mentions the change in the Kenya education system from the British 7-4-6 system to the American 8-4-4 system and the fact that the move was political having been proposed by Daniel Moi the then president of Kenya in 1982 and fully implemented by 1985, in the memoir, the narrator states that :

A few years ago, President Moi announced that he was going to restructure the education system. The kids who are a year behind me will abandon the British- style 7-4-6 system and do a new one, called 8-4-4, that is suppose to introduce more practical education (79).

Contrary to Binyavanga's view and claim that the education system was to be change from 7-4-6 system to 8-4-4, Buchmann Claudia in analysis the historical development of schools in Kenya mentions that ' the 8-4-4 initiative restructured the British style 7-6-3 into a more open American based 8-4-4 system' (102). Buchmann observes that the change eliminated the Cambridge O level exam that had been required for all students midway through their secondary education.

The move as mentioned earlier was political; aiming to reduce the levels of unemployment in the country. Buchmann further observes that:

The new system promoting 'education for self-reliance' consisted of a new curriculum that included more practical and vocational subjects as a means to 'Instill realistic attitudes and aspirations regarding employment in both parents and school leavers. This revised curriculum was suppose to prepare students for self employment in agriculture or the informal sector, instead of higher education and a government job (103-4).

In 1983, the narrator and Ciru sit for their national examination of primary school. They are optimistic that they are going to do well in their final exams and possibly join a national school; this is well captured in the memoir when the narrator says:

Ciru and I are both certain we will get into the best schools in the country. I apply to Alliance High School, Ciru to Alliance Girls. In the district mock exams, I am third in the district, and first in our school; Ciru is second.(79)

When the results for the final exams are out, they both perform well. Ciru is the top student in Moi Primary School while the narrator is fifth. Both as the narrator claims, appear among the top twenty students in Rift Valley province this cannot be disputed considering their consistency in academic performance since they were young as the narrator had shown in the memoir. But it is unfortunate that even after their outstanding performance; they are not admitted to any secondary school:

One day a friend of my father who works in the ministry of education calls him and tells him that he has not seen our names on the lists for any school .... Neither Ciru nor I is called to any school. No school at all. Rumors are spreading everywhere. We hear that

lists of selections, long reams from as science computer, were taken away; that names are matched to numbers, and are scrutinized, word by word, line by scientific line, for Gikuyu names in a secret office by Special Branch people (80).

This moment becomes both a low point and a turning point in the narrators' life; the moment is a typical of what Fivush et al in "The making of Autobiographical Memory: Intersecting of Culture, Narratives and Identity", refers to as a self-defining memory. "Self defining memories are typically unique, onetime events, which become personally significant and integral to individual's understanding of who they (we) are" (Fivush et al 333). They further explain that self-defining memories are often high points (stories about particular positive experiences), low points (stories about particular negative experiences) or turning points (experiences that set in motion a new direction about the self). From the memoir, it is definite that the narrator thinks that he did not get a school because he is a Gikuyu, and his claim being based on a rumor is that all Gikuyu children were ridged out of the lists of joining secondary schools. The narrator later observes that in Rift Valley, Kalenjins got places in the best state schools. This moment and experience of missing a place in a secondary school becomes a defining moment in the narrators' life for two reasons. First after doing well in the CPE exams he fails to get a place in a secondary school and secondly, it is at this point that the narrator begins seeing himself as a member of a particular tribe-Gikuyu and not a Kenyan, a tribe that has been marginalized. This is well when the narrator says, 'For the first time in my life, I call somebody because he is a Gikuyu, as I am properly discovering I am' (81).

The narrator eventually gets a place in Njoro Boys High School while Ciru joins Kapropita Girls secondary school but later transfers to Kenya Girls High school. The narrator bitterly mentions about the then new secondary schools such as Moi Forces Academy, Kabarak High School and

Sacho High School, which according to him are equipped with best facilities and best teachers, specifically constructed for Moi's people. When the narrator eventually transfers to Mangu High School which is a National school, he forgets that he had mentioned earlier that Moi reserved national schools for his people; in fact he observes that all tribes are represented in the national school, the narrator says "Mangu is a national school, and it attracts the brightest students from all corners of the country. Some rich, some very poor. Some come having never seen a faucet" (112). The statement contradicts the narrators' former observation and claims that only Kalenjins got places in the best state schools (81).

It is evident that the narrator is blaming President Daniel Moi for not getting a place in a good national school; he is also alludes the transfer of head teachers to Moi being in power. While at Njoro High School for instance, the narrator mentions about the transfer of the head teacher a Gikuyu, being replaced by a Kalenjin Mr. Kipsang, at Mangu the school head teacher is also transferred and this is what the narrator says, "Karaba our much-loved headmaster is gone. Moi transferred him". And one is left wondering, if a head of state, in this case a president is responsible for such responsibilities such as transferring teachers and school heads from one institution to another.

Another occurrence in the educational sector that is politically instigated is a move that affected the public universities in Kenya in 1990. This change affects the students and parents regarding the payment of fees. Before then, the university education in Kenya was free and the full cost was borne by the government. After one semester of being in University- Kenyatta University, the policy where students pay part of their school fees was introduced, the narrator says '... For the first time since independence, Moi announced that we had to pay for our education; our parents have to support our university education' (123).

Another issue addressed in the memoir that illuminates the political influence in schools is the regional distribution and constructions of schools in the country. There is an imbalance in the construction and categorization of schools in Kenya depending with the levels, the highest level being the National schools, followed by the Provincial schools then the district schools and at the bottom comes the *harambee* schools, these categories are captured in the memoir, with their differences when the narrator says:

National schools, usually the best schools, pick the best students from each province. This way the whole country is represented in the student body. Then there are provincial schools, and district schools, day schools, and at the bottom, there are what we call harambee schools, schools built through community contribution (80).

The narrator also claims that during Moi era, Moi constructed good schools equipped with the best facilities for his people he says, “There are some new high schools now with the best facilities, the best teachers taken out of other schools. For Moi’s people. Moi Forces Academy, and Kabarak High School, and Sacho High School” (81). The narrator comes from the point that these schools are built in Rift Valley, and overlooks the fact that fact the schools are for students from all over the country as students are admitted according to merit. The claim also indicates that there is a significant change in a region’s educational development when a member of that society is in political power, just as the case of Daniel Moi when he was in power and the Kalenjin community.

Another issue in the Kenyan education system is the discrepancies when it comes to the placement of students in secondary schools. The narrator in the memoir strongly believes that he and his sister (Ciru) missed a place in a secondary as a result of political influences that are

presented from a tribal point of view, he says “We hear that list of selections, long reams from a science computer, were taken away; that names are matched to numbers, for Gikuyu names in a secret office by special Branch people” (80). In the previous chapter we disputed this claim because it is based on rumors, but still the narrators’ failure to join a secondary school even after doing well when the CPE results are released, indicates and brings forth some of the weakness in the implementation of education policies in the country.

## **Conclusion**

I have discussed the presentation of history in Binyavanga’s memoir, with a closer look at the political history of Kenya which is narrated through three phases of different political leaders in Kenya and the political influence on the Education system in Kenya. The history as seen has been presented chronologically which is parallel with Binyavanga’s coming of age story. The political history is seen from the author’s portrayal of the Kenyan political leaders and the situation in the country during their time in power. It is evident that the author suggests that Jomo Kenyatta was a perfect leader, and Kenya was in a stable condition during his time in power. Daniel Moi was a tribal leader and regime was characterized corruption, dictatorship and tribalism, in fact the author appears to suggest that Moi’s era was the genesis of tribalism in Kenya. Binyavanga’s bitter attitude towards Moi was triggered by his and Ciru’s failure to get a position in a national school. Mwai Kibaki is presented as a symbol of positive change as seen in the rise of the country’s economy, though his reign is also marked by an increase in tribalism. Binyavanga’s memoir is selective and is characterized by a lot of silences and omissions which can be termed as deliberate and conscious. Binyavanga’s deliberately omit’s some political events that happened in Kenya and by doing so, he manages to paint his community as victims of unfair treatments in a highly tribal society and country.



In the next chapter I discuss Binyavanga's personal narrative by tracing his various journeys in life.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Narrating the self**

#### **Introduction**

The use of journey motif is one way in which life writers narrate their experiences. In this chapter I analyze the narrators' journey through the various stages of life. These include: the narrators' journey through the various institutions of learning, and his physical journey from place to place. I also discuss some characters in the narrators' life that influence him towards the realization of his dreams in life.

Binyavanga Wainaina employs the first person narrative voice in his memoir, where he as the narrator tells his story in his voice and point of view. Jennifer Muchiri observes that first person narrators "Report incidents in various ways: what the narrators have done, said or heard, that is first experience; what they have observed others do and say; what they have told them; and what they are able to construct from the information that they have" (25). By using the first person point of view, Binyavanga as the narrator and the writer of the memoir narrates his experiences. The first person narrative voice dominates the memoir however there are few instances where the author uses the second person narrative voice.

The narrator is the protagonist and the main character in any form of life narrative. According to Muchiri "The protagonist in the autobiography (memoir) is a round character who recognizes, changes with, or adjusts to various circumstances" (37). The narrator is the main character in a memoir or any life writing. In addition to the narrator, life narratives have flat characters or minor characters, people who interact with the protagonist in the course of their lives, and who highlights the movement of the narrator from one stage to another. These characters are real life

people who interacted with the narrator and maybe influenced his life in one way or the other. In this chapter I focus on two characters who play a major role in the narrators' life journey. These two characters are the narrators' mother (Rosemary Kandiki) and sister (Ciru) who acts as external forces and influence towards the narrator's realization of his achievements in life. The memoirist selects which people to include and to leave out of the memoir depending on their role in the memoirist's life. The people whom the writer includes in his memoir as we shall see, influenced him, and shaped his life towards a certain direction. These characters helped Binyavanga in realizing his goal in life.

Binyavanga's narrative begins in 1978 when he is seven years old; in standard two and ends in the year 2010. His narrative is a typical example of a coming of age story characterized by the journey motif where Binyavanga takes us through his journey in life from childhood to adulthood and from innocence to experience. The narrators' journey is inclusive of the physical, emotional, psychological and intellectual growth which eventually leads him to his self actualization. Binyavanga not only narrates about his strengths and achievements in life, but also opens up to his readers about his weakness, downfalls and embarrassing moments in his life.

### **Personal Journey in Pursuit of knowledge**

Binyavanga's journey as presented in the memoir can be divided into three phases; childhood phase, which encompasses his primary school life, adolescent phase, is seen through his high school life and finally the adulthood phrase where he narrates his experiences in South Africa and life after university though he does not complete his university education. In this subsection I trace the narrators' journey through the various institutions of learning in search for knowledge and his personal initiative toward his academic achievements.

The memoir begins with the narrator introducing himself and his family to the readers. He is seven years old, his brother Jimmy is eleven years old and Ciru is five and half years old. Later in the memoir his mother gives birth to a baby girl whom they call Chiqy. His father a Kenyan, is the managing Director of the Pyrethrum Board of Kenya (24) and his mother who is a Ugandan, owns a salon which the narrator at his tender age considers it as “the only proper salon in Nakuru” (22). It is 1978; this definitely tells us that Binyavanga- being seven years old- was born in 1971.

The narrators’ academic journey and pursuit for knowledge begins at home. The narrator makes keen observations about his immediate surrounding including the people he interacts with at this tender age. The narrator just like any child at seven years is observant, curious and imagines wild ideas concerning his environment and these ideas are confided in his mind. This is well illustrated when he says “I am captured by an idea. The sun does not break into pieces. It does not break up into disembodied parts when it falls into trees and things. Each piece of the sun is always a complete little sun ”(13). This for sure is a wild idea which does not make sense to an adult, but then it goes to show how the narrator and in this case a child, is very keen and observant about the daily patterns and routines of his immediate environment.

Binyavanga narrates his childhood experience which signifies his early knowledge acquisition by trying to define himself in relation to others. The narrator learns through imitation: he strives to be like his brother and sister by imitating their moves and actions. At the beginning of the narrative we see the young narrator trying to understand himself and his immediate environment; he is keen to every sound, taste, movements and general body feelings. For example, when playing the childhood games with Ciru and Jimmy the narrator observes and listens to every movement and sound in his environment and reports these to the readers:

I stand still between the metal poles we use as a makeshift goal mouth watching Ciru and Jimmy play. Warm breath pushes down my nostrils past my mouth and divide my chin. I can see the pink shining flesh of my eyelids. Random sounds fall into my ears: cars, birds, black mamba bicycle bells, distant children, dogs, crows and afternoon national radio music. Congo rumba. People outside our compound are talking in languages I know the sounds of, but do not understand or speak, Luhya and Gikuyu (12).

The narrator strives to be like everybody, just like any other child at his stage. He strives for recognition and performs some things to either impress Ciru and Jimmy or to gain their attention. He learns through imitating what others do. For instances, he laughs because Ciru is laughing, he is thirsty because Jimmy and Ciru are thirsty and he says hi to Zablou because Ciru and Jimmy say hi to him. The narrator observes Jimmy and Ciru pour water from the glasses down their throats and the shapes it forms when it spill off their cheeks, later when he is alone he tries to imitate what he had seen earlier, he gulp a glass of water down just as Jimmy had done it.

At the age of seven years old, the narrator is at the stage of knowledge acquisition which is seen through his vocabulary development. The narrator struggles with his vocabulary and when he lacks the proper words to use when narrating some events he simply states to the readers or describes what he sees. For example, when describing the Mwela's house he simply says, "Their house has an upstairs" (19) probably the term 'a storey house' is too big a word for a seven year old narrator to use, or he has never come across it. Another typical example is when the narrators' mother becomes expectant, all the narrator could do is to observe and report to us his mother's physical appearance. The narrator simply says "mum's stomach has started to swell with a new baby". The word 'expectant' is definitely not in his vocabulary; his level of vocabulary development does not allow him to say that his mother is expectant being in class

two he could be too young to know and use the word *expectant* because he has never come across it.

The narrator also strives to make meaning out of words and feelings from his own initiative. He experiments with words and through this he manages to develop and advance his vocabulary. For instance he asks, “What is *thirst*?” (14). To answer his own questions therefore, satisfying his curiosity and gaining more knowledge he says, “this word, *thirst, thirst*. It is a word full of resolutions. It drives a person to quick action”(14). The narrator thereafter realizes that ‘thirst’ is a word that explains a certain feeling, and when a person has that feeling or experiences that feeling he is propelled to drink cold water.

The narrator also expands the horizon of vocabularies by comparing similar words and objects together. For instance, when they are on the way back home from a family day in Molo and they are eating biscuits, the narrator narrates about his classmate called Beatrice who broke her leg and it was covered with a plaster. The narrator is quick to compare Beatrice plastered leg with the water heater in their house, he says, “The water heater is a squat cylinder, covered with stickyhard, like Beatrice’s new leg. She has crutches” (16). He realizes that the breaking of the biscuits; that they are eating ‘to release crackly sweetness’ is to *crunch* while ‘*crutches* are falling down and breaking’, as for the case of Beatrice, his classmate and Uganda, his mothers’ ancestral land. The situation in Uganda is well captured when he says “Uganda, my mum’s country fell down and broke. Crutch!” (16), this demonstrates the political unrest in Uganda, hence ‘crutch’ according to the young narrator can also refer to, and symbolize instability.

More development is seen when the narrator struggles to use new words in his childhood descriptions which includes using words that he cannot spell correctly. For instance, when the

narrator finally becomes number one in his class he says, “I do not *concentrate* in class, but I read everything I can touch” (42). The word ‘concentrate’ has been wrongly spelt, this indicates the narrators’ growing vocabulary at the same time his desire to use words that are advanced and beyond his level.

As the narrator is advancing in age and class level, so is the development of his practical skills. The narrator at nine years old and in standard four is able to learn through actual practice and experimentation; he puts into practice the various ideas that he learns. With the help of Jimmy, the narrator at nine years old can make a kite. He explains the process of making a kite as follows:

Take a newspaper.... Cut one page off its twin. Use a knife to split a stick of old bamboo from the fence. Tape sticks, diagonally, with cello tape. Three holes in a triangle, in the right place. Make a long, long newspaper tail. Run. Run run(42).

The narrator struggles academically to emerge among the best students in his class with the hope of being like his younger sister. The fighting spirit brings out the narrators’ persistence and endurance towards the realization of his academic goals and achievements. The narrator admires everything about Ciru and he wishes he could be like her, this is seen when he compares his physical appearance with Ciru’s and later mentions about Jimmy’s physique which can be treated as an indication of a low self esteem. This is why his mother keeps on reassuring him of his physical appearance. The narrator is not comfortable with his physique, his weight. He even compares himself with his brother and sister by describing their appearances too. The concern about the narrators’ physical appearance is well captured when he says, “You are not fat” that is what mum says to me all the time. “You are plump” (11).

This concern is immediately followed by a brief description of Ciru's and Jimmy's physiques, "Ciru has the ball. She is small and thin and golden. She has sharp elbows, and a smile as clean as a pencil draw. It cuts evenly into her cheeks. She runs towards Jimmy, who is tall and fit and dark" (11). This is an indirect comparison between the self (the narrator) and his brother and sister. The body description indicates the narrators' lack of self confidence and to some extent his low self esteem.

The narrator progresses well academically at the primary school level. The desire to be like his sister eventually makes him an achiever. Ciru, his younger sister, whom the narrator paints as a genius since she was five is still leading in her class. When the narrator is in class four he leads in his class for the first time and this surprise everyone including the narrator. This achievement becomes a defining moment in the narrators' life. It is at this point that he realizes that being among the best students in class is not a very special occurrence.

The narrator in class four is exposed to new subjects that are more complex and advanced such as English composition and Geography which signifies his intellectual and academic advancement. It is at the Primary level of education that the narrator becomes exposed to story books and novels and this interest intensifies through secondary school and University to an extent that the reading habit eventually becomes an addiction.

When the narrator finally writes his CPE and the results are released the narrator and Ciru perform well. The narrator becomes position five in his school though he had expected to be the best student in his school. His sister (Ciru) takes the first position. They are among the top twenty students in Rift Valley province; they anticipate joining good national schools. Unfortunately the narrator and his sister are not admitted to any school; not even a district



school. The narrator becomes very bitter about the turn of events; he even blames Moi, the then president of Kenya for their misfortunes. He gives a wanting explanation for this as captured in the following passage:

And the tribe was made flesh, and dwelt among us. Neither Ciru nor I is called to any school. No school at all. Rumors are spreading everywhere. We hear that lists of selections, long reams from a science computer were taken away; that names are matched to numbers, and scrutinized, word by word, line by scientific line, for Gikuyu names in a secret office by Special Branch people. (80)

He goes further to say that, “In Rift Valley, Kalenjins got the best schools in the best state schools” (81) but he fails to give evidence to support his claims. This moment as noted in the previous chapter becomes a significant turning point in the narrators’ life.

The narrators’ childhood journey is also seen through his physical and social growth especially during his latter primary school years and secondary school life. The growth and the awakening of the narrator’s consciousness on the sexual life and sexuality demonstrate the narrator’s advancement in life. This is seen when at the age of eleven years he finds a woman in Cleophas room. The narrator listens to what was going on in the room and says that, “Their voices are floating on wet parachutes”(56). This shows that he had an understanding of what Cleophas and his woman were doing in the room. The narrators’ body also reacts to the sounds produced in the room as seen when he further says:

My neck is hot....the metal safari bed keeps banging against the wall. I can’t move... I want to leave but can’t. The lumps wriggle under the blankets. Cleophas moans loudly; his head leans up and back. I jump up and shout something incoherent (56).

When it comes to sexual developments, the narrator opens up to the readers and admits that he used to masturbate since childhood. For instance in 1983 at twelve years old and in standard seven, he says, “When I masturbate in my bedroom, I do not like to think about the people I know” (329). The narrator does not tell us the time he began masturbating but it is obvious that by this time he had already made it a habit and to some extent he feels that if does not masturbate there are consequences, this can be illustrated well when the narrator says, “I am suppose to be studying. This is why I masturbate. If I don’t masturbate, I will have to spend the day hiding my hard-on and never know if people can see it or not...” (331) the narrator therefore feels that if he does not masturbate he cannot concentrate in his studies.

The sexual desires, I believe, are brought about by the kind of books the narrator reads without his parent’s knowledge and approval. At twelve years old, for instance, he is reading *The Black Stallion* by Walter Farley. The narrator even confesses that he is not good with pictures; or rather, pictures do not evoke emotions from him as words do:

Any kissing or touching in any book is very powerful. I don’t feel the same with television or movies... the novel’s erotic world is not alive on a screen- on glass and plastics and metals... the whole world of a novel unfolds inside the head, entangled with the stinging eyes, the tight chest, the galloping belly. It is fully mine, 100 percent private. When they touch and kiss, the kiss belongs to me, it does not belong to other readers, to the author, to the couple. If it is a well written kiss, it will be carried in a small, coiled place under the hard bone below my nipples. (332).

The words in the novels that the narrator reads evoke these sexual emotions that eventually make him to explore his sexual fantasies through masturbation, therefore awakening his sexual awareness.

The narrators' journey is also seen through the physical changes and growth which occur in his body with the changing times. As he progresses academically, he also becomes conscious of his body moreover his appearance this is seen when he says, "I grew two inches last term and my voice just broke and I got kicked out of the choir because I squeak a lot" (52). This remark becomes an indicator of the narrators' self consciousness and self awareness of the changes in his body. Later when the narrator joins high school we meet an individual who is very conscious and worried of his appearances especially facial, he announces that, "I have one huge pimple on my forehead" (85). The pimple on the narrator's face signifies growth and self awareness on the part of the narrator. Like most adolescences, it can be said that the pimple on the narrator's face is a real bother and a sign of change and growth. With time the pimples multiplied and on a later date, the narrator says, "I have five pimples" (101). These as observed earlier is an indicator of the narrator's growing self awareness and consciousness with issues pertaining his body and the various changes occurring in his body more so the changes that are physical. The narrator is bothered by these changes and probably worried about what other people might be thinking about him. These changes also signify the narrators' advancement in age and ushers the narrator into the adolescent phase.

The narrators' primary school life rotates around educational/ academic achievement, which is triggered by the desire of being like his sister, Ciru. Most importantly is that he learns a lot of things through personal initiative and curiosity. His failure to get a chance in a secondary school of his choice especially a national school becomes a defining moment in the narrator's life,

because when he eventually joins secondary school the desire of becoming an academic champion as we shall see fades away slowly. In secondary school the narrator hardly mentions anything about his academic achievements.

The narrator's experiences at the secondary school level take a different dimension. Being in school to him is no longer about getting good grades and becoming the best in his class. In fact during this period the narrator rarely mentions about his academic performance; the narrators' secondary school experience is more about exposure and high school adventures. The narrator at Njoro Boys High school grows and develops especially in the social aspect. This is seen when the narrator gets new friends and gets used to the boarding life.

The narrators' secondary school life and stage revolves around the latest songs released by their music idols and the latest dancing styles. Through the narrators' eye the reader is able to see high school as a place of experimentation and remodeling of youngsters lives. They place their lifestyle on the celebrities within their world value. One example of the idols mentioned by the narrator is one Ray Parker Junior:

Ray Parker Junior is the coolest man in the world. We all want his hair. Ray Miaw Miaw, we call it... Then I spend an hour with sugar and soap and a hard brush trying to push back my hair into a Ray Miaw Miaw. I keep getting it perfect, but then when it dries a little, it starts to crack (91).

It is while in secondary school that the narrator gives the readers a glimpse to his sexual orientation, he says that he is "not sure what a homosexual is"(85). This opposes his recent announcement that he is gay and the release of 'The Lost Chapter' which was not included in his memoir, *One Day I Will Write about this Place*. 'The Lost Chapter' is Binyavanga's account of

him coming to terms with his sexuality where he says that he had known that he had been a homosexual since he was five years old. In the essay he says:

I am five when I close myself into a vague happiness that asks for nothing much from anybody. Absent-minded. Sweet. I am grateful for all love. I give it more than I receive it, often. I can be selfish. I masturbate a lot, and never allow myself to crack and grow my heart. I touch no men. I read books. I love my dad so much, my heart is learning to stretch. I am a homosexual.

At Njoro Boys High School narrates his experience with the head boy called George Sillaga who was a gay. He gives his encounter with George Sillaga when he was a new student at Njoro Boys High School:

He leaned in and sat next to me on the bed. He started to rich up my thigh. I froze. The hand moved higher. I gulped down, the coffee and stood to leave. He caught me at the door. “don’t tell anybody. If you tell anybody...!” (88)

This is the narrators’ first encounter with a homosexual who happens to be the school head boy. Many students, including the narrator, confess to other prefects that Sigalla the head boy had “sexed them”(86) and they received several favors from him as the school captain. While the narrator claims that he does not know what being a homosexual is, he leaves traces that show he actually had some sexual feelings and attachments for George Sigalla. When George is finally demoted the narrator says “I often want to wave, say something. I never do. I try hard to stay close to the line, keep myself inside myself, and be some public person who fits in” (89). This indicates that the narrator actually was a homosexual, maybe he had not come in terms with it and he preferred being silent about it due to the stigmatization that was associated with being a homosexual especially during the 1980s and 1990s.

The narrator later in the year transfers to Mangu High School. His life at Mangu High School is characterized by exposure, mischief and more adventure. He, with his peers, can dance to the latest music and tunes and dance the latest dancing styles such as break dancing. The narrator confesses that he and his friends would “sneak away from school on weekends to drink” (118). This brings out the reckless, outgoing nature and the thrilling life style that the narrator adopts which was possibly triggered by peer influence during high school life. The narrator also mentions of the several rumors they hear while in high school which keeps their days in high school interesting. One event that occurs while the narrator was in Mangu High school that is worth mentioning is the demonstration and destructions of the school property which they (the students) did due to the poor diet and the general poor management of the school.

The narrator and his classmates writes the fourth form exams, he fails in the Sciences and does well in all the Arts in fact he says, “I am one of the best students in English in Kenya”, (120). This performance brings out what the addictions for reading novels have made him be. It reflects the narrators’ love for reading novels that perfects his English, probably at the cause of reading novels the narrator neglected other subjects.

From Mangu high school, the narrator moves to a new school (Lenana School) for his A-levels; he studies French, Literature and History, his choice of the courses is dictated by his O-levels performance. The narrator says that he spent most of his time in his A-levels making plays and novels, with his best friend Peter Karanja. The most successful is when he staged a courtroom drama called *The Verdict*. At this level the narrator is done with sciences and he manages to fully concentrate on what interests him. Being at Lenana School for the A levels brings out the narrators’ slow initiation to adulthood and maturity. The narrator takes control of his life with

regards to his academic performance. It also reignites the narrators' interests in his academic path.

After finishing his A-levels he joins Kenyatta University to study for a degree in education majoring in French and Literature in English after a semester, he decided to go to South Africa to join the University of Transkei, this decision is informed by two reasons. One, the narrator does not get a chance to do the course he wanted to pursue in Kenya. The narrator wants to do law but he ends up getting a chance to do an education degree. The second reason that he gives is that in 1990, Moi announced that students should pay their own fees at the university; hence parents have to support their children for their university education. The move to South Africa is significant in the narrators' life. It is interesting to note that he goes to pursue a degree in commerce, which is a complete contrast to his initial interests after all he had stated earlier in the novel that he was not good in Mathematics and Sciences. It is surprising to note that he chooses a course that is somehow Maths oriented. The choice could have been the narrators' only avenue of going outside the country. This poor choice could further explain the reason the narrator did not manage to complete his undergraduate studies.

The narrators' life in South Africa changes drastically. He is no longer interested in his education this is probably because he took a course he is not interested in. The narrator gradually stops attending classes, and all he can do is spend time in his room reading novels and smoking, he also spends time visiting and drinking with friends. Ciru on the other hand maintains her seriousness in education, she is about to graduate, teaching at a local collage and working at the university computer center, she is willing to help the narrator at times especially by giving him pocket money. The narrators' stay in South Africa as I shall discuss later becomes a turning point in the narrator's life, after spending many years without attending the commerce classes he

comes in term with himself, and realizes that he is can be good writer and he can do better in arts than mathematics and sciences.

Throughout the narrative, there is a consistency in the development and portrayal of the narrators' reading nature and habits. The narrator loves reading novels and this grows into an addiction. It all began when he was very young, by the time he was nine years, in standard four, he says, "I am reading a new book. I am reading a new book everyday now"(41). He says that he loves reading because the words in the books he read have the power to control his body in the world. When his parents realized that he had managed to spend the whole year avoiding Mathematics, they become stricter on him, he is not allowed to go to the library instead he studies from home where he can be monitored, but still he managed to read novels. Mathematics is definitely not his area of study he once even defended himself by telling his father, "If I had 10 percent in math's and I am among the top five students, it means I did well"(184).

Throughout high school the narrators' love and addiction for reading novels intensified. At Mangu High School for instance, he went to an extent of using his pocket money to buy more novels. He even sneaked out of school to get new supply of novels and he claims that each book he had to read had to be more bigger and more melodramatic to keep him more interested, at this level he said, "I read two or three of them in a day" (111). This I suppose explains why he fails all Sciences and does well in Arts especially in English when the form four results are released, he says, "I am one of the top students in English and probably at the bottom in physics"(120). He accepts that after all he is not good in Mathematics and Sciences, and his area of specialization is English. With his good performance in English the narrator proceeds to do his A- levels at Lenana School where he does French, Literature and History.



In high school the narrator becomes completely silent about his family members; nothing is heard about his mother, not even his lovely and outstanding sister Ciru. He dedicates this period in telling us more about himself, his love for reading, his high school friends and generally high school life- the naughty things they did while in school, and of course it can be note that the narrator is not only an observant to the high school daily activities such as learning new dancing moves, listening to the latest songs, sneaking out of school during weekends among others but also a participant to all this activities.

### **The Narrator and the Significant Physical journeys**

The physical journey in this sub-section means the movement of the narrator from place to place. There are certain journeys the narrator takes that are significant in his life. These journeys are not only marked by the geographical displacement/movement but also certain changes in the narrators' life, specifically in his perception of life. The physical journeys analyzed in this sub-section include: the narrators' first journey and stay in South Africa, the narrators' journey back to Kenya where he spends one year and visits his maternal grandparents in Uganda, and the narrators' second journey to South Africa with the hope of completing his undergraduate studies.

### **The narrators' first journey to South Africa**

The narrators' first move to South Africa is necessitated by circumstances. The narrator travels to South Africa in 1990 to pursue his degree in commerce at the University of Transkei. The irony beneath this journey is the course the narrator does at the undergraduate programme. The narrator is poor in Mathematics but he selects a course that is mathematically oriented, it is not a surprise when the narrator fails to complete his undergraduate degree.

The narrators' life in South Africa during this time is characterized by carelessness, irresponsibility and a reckless attitude towards life. A serious case in point is when the narrator stops attending classes and indulges himself into drinking alcohol, partying and making friends at the expense of his studies. The narrator does not exercise self discipline and control with regards to directing his life. This is seen when the narrator says, "I have failed to let myself disappear into the patterns of a school where there is no punishment, no bell, no clear timetable, no real shame, for I am not at home, and don't much care for the approval of people" (149). It is the narrators' reckless behaviors such as not attending classes that contribute to his general failure and the failure to graduate within the stipulated time.

The 'don't care' attitude that the narrator adopts extends to his family members. This is seen when the narrator avoids meeting his sister –Ciru and avoids communicating with his parents back in Kenya. The new attitude towards his family members indicates the narrators' self alienation that is triggered by his academic and social failures and the fact that his younger sister is achieving more than him. The self alienation is captured when the narrator says:

Ciru is about to graduate. Computer Science. She is teaching at the local Collage and working at the computer center on campus. Sometimes she comes and knocks and knocks. She slips money under my door, even brings food sometimes (149).

The alienation extends to the family members in Kenya where the narrator avoids communicating with them. It is possible that the narrators' failure and the new identities that he adopts such as being a drunkard and the recklessness is triggered by his lack of interest in the course that he is taking.

## **The Narrators' journey to Kenya**

After the narrators' unproductive stay in South Africa he decides to come back to Kenya. Before travelling to Kenya he foresees how his one year stay in Kenya will be like "I hope to be in Kenya for nine months. I intent to travel as much as possible and finally to attend my grandparents' sixtieth wedding anniversary in Uganda this Christmas" (155).

The journey back to Kenya and the one year stay is significant in the narrators' life. It breaks the daily monotony of his drinking habit giving him a chance to focus on his life. It also illustrates the narrators' growth and maturity in taking control of his life. The narrator during this period explores Kenya by travelling to different parts of the country enabling him to appreciate the diversity of Kenyan's and other peoples' culture.

When the narrator lands in Nairobi after many years in South Africa he is surprised by the changes going on in the city (Nairobi). To some extent the narrator thinks that the country is deteriorating instead of progressing:

To look down the tunnel one sees swarms- people and small stubborn constructions climbing up the skyscrapers like termite mould on a tree. Secondhand clothes shacks, vegetables, wooden cabinets, behind which whispered watch repairs take place in Dholuo... A *matatu* swerves past my feet, almost crashing me. The driver winks, hoots, reverses back, a short funky beep beep;... There are potholes everywhere. Even the city center, once slick and international looking, is full of grime (172-173).

The description given by the narrator captures the recklessness, disordered, and the state of confusion in the city. The changes taking place are due to lack of implementation of policies and

to some extent the narrator suggests that the government is not doing its job in restoring order in the city.

As much as the narrator wants to feel at home by trying to assimilate into the daily disordered ways of the city, he feels alienated by his own people- Kenyans. This feeling is prompted by his looks (the dreadlocks on his head) “some people look at my budding dreadlocks and hurry away. I smell trouble: too loud looking and visible” (173). The narrator does not fit into the country immediately he is seen with a lot of suspicion; in this society his looks /hair probably symbolizes evil deeds. The feeling is louder when the narrator goes into a shop then observes that:

I have ducked into the doorway of a shop, and stand and watch as an old Gujarati woman looks at me suspiciously. Her eyes follows my body. I am sure she is about to scream for the police, but she will pay them too. I reach into my pocket, and a hand full of notes come out. I buy a *Khanga*, which sits on the wall. She starts to chat as soon as I have paid (174-175).

The narrators’ hair makes him be alienated in his home country and be seen with suspicion. To the Gujarati woman, the narrator looks like a thief, a robber or worse off is a killer.

The journey and the one year stay in Kenya bring out the narrators’ maturity as he takes up various responsibilities. One major example that signifies and highlights the narrators’ change towards maturity is the description of the change in the ‘Nandi woman painting’ on the wall at their home. During his childhood days the painting used to scare and terrify him “I was terrified by her when I was a child” (180), as the narrator progressed into adolescence the painting of “the Nandi woman became my (his) Tigritude” (180).The narrator during his adolescent phase viewed the woman in the painting as adorable and beautiful. He had some sexual feelings for her,

but the reality is the fact that he knew he “could never love” (181). Now as the narrator stands before the portrait years later, he realizes that he is the one who has grown old “She is younger than me now; I can see she has girlishness about her” (181), this observation symbolizes the narrators’ growth and maturity.

During his one year vacation the narrator gets a temporary job as an agricultural extension officer. The job gives the narrator an opportunity to explore various parts of the country and interact with people from different communities hence learning, understanding and appreciating their ways of life. His first assignment as an agricultural officer is to visit Mwingi. It is during this visit that we find the narrator contemplating about his future life and expressing doubts about his future career. The narrator expresses interests of being a writer but at the same time he is not sure if he will make it, this brings out the ambivalent character of the narrator he says “I am afraid. If I write and fail at it, I cannot see what else I can do” (198). To the narrator, writing is the only possible career that might make him successful in life and if he fails he has nothing else to try.

Another significant journey in the narrator’s life is the one to Maasai land where he learn a lot about the traditions and culture of the Maasai people which he admits he “don’t quite understand” (204). This is the tradition the Maasai where women are released from all the domestic duties for after giving birth. They are also allowed “to take over the land and claim lovers that they choose” (204). This is a weird culture to the narrator, but he strives to understand it. Later in the memoir, the narrator encounters a young and outgoing Maasai girl called Suzannah who is a student at St. Teresa Girls in Nairobi. Suzannah appears to be an exposed character in the Maasai community but still holds on to the cultural aspects of her community such as circumcision and early marriage. Suzannah is presented to us as a mixture of tradition

and modernity, her first encounter with the narrator is well captured in the following description given by the narrator:

I spotted her (Suzannah) this morning staring at me from the tiny window in their *manyatta*. It was disconcerting at first, a typically Maasai stare, unembarrassed, not afraid to be vulnerable. Then she noticed that I had seen her, and her eyes narrowed and became sassy- street-sassy, like a girl from Eastlands in Nairobi (206-207).

During the one year stay in Kenya the narrator and his family travels to Uganda to visit the narrators' maternal grandparents. The journey to Uganda is significant in the narrators' life as it unifies the narrator with his maternal relatives.

### **The narrators' second journey to South Africa**

After spending one year in Kenya, the narrator travels back to South Africa in 1996 with the hope of finishing his first degree in commerce. With the encouragement from his parents and family, the narrator becomes enthusiastic with the thought of finishing his remaining courses in one year. When the narrator goes back to university we realize that his new energy is short lived this is when he says "I am back at the University of Tranakei. It is January 1996. My new confidence lasts exactly one week"(225). As much as the narrator tries to concentrate in commerce he realizes that the course does not fascinate him. The end in the struggle in commerce comes when the narrator says, "Accounting, they say is the textbook, is a perceptual framework. Debit line, credit line, debit line. That is the last class of any kind that I attend"(225). The journey is symbolic as it marks the beginning of the narrators' self discovery. When the narrator makes up his mind to be a writer he becomes committed and dedicated. The dedication, commitment and the new zeal in the narrator is captured when he says, "I am writing everyday

now. Sometimes I write through the night”(226). This shows the narrators’ seriousness towards the career path he has chosen and also illuminates that being a writer is more than a hobby, it is a demanding task/career that needs a lot of sacrifice.

The narrator acquires the full confidence of becoming a writer during a late night chat with an online friend called Charlie Sweet who after reading a section on the narrators’ story based on their family trip to Uganda encourages him to start publishing his work “This is beautiful ... you really should publish this somewhere big”(238). This is a significant moment in the narrators’ life, he acquire more confidence in himself and his work. After the encouraging advice from Charlie Sweet, the narrator begins thinking of a place to publish his work. The narrators’ first piece of writing to be published is his story on their family trip to Uganda to visit their maternal grandparents:

I work through the morning. Cut and shape it. I spent some time looking around the Internet for newspapers and magazines... The Sunday Times is South Africa’s biggest and richest newspaper. I read the weekend magazine travel section. Yes, I could try for that. I attach the story... I am about to shut down the computer when a reply arrives (238).

The moment marks the narrators’ journey into being a published writer. The joy and happiness at that moment is well captured when the narrator says, “I am a writer. I am now a published writer”(239). This is a dream come true because the narrator finally achieves what he have always wanted in his life.

It is during the narrators' second journey to South Africa that his life takes a different dimension. With the help and influence of his friends, the narrator takes step in life towards the realization of his dream- the dream of being a writer.

### **The Narrators' Journey as a Writer**

The narrator takes us through his journey in the writing career which is characterized by satisfaction and fulfillment. The narrator's break through as a young writer is seen through his publications in the local magazines. At the beginning of his writing career the narrator faces some difficulties which reflect the challenges faced by young upcoming writers in Africa. The major challenge that the narrator faces and highlights as it is faced by other beginning writers is the difficulty they experience in getting a publisher or getting their works published. Another major challenge faced by the young writers is the financial constrain. The narrator seems to suggest that writing as a career is not well paying; this can be well illustrated when the narrator says "Rod can't afford to pay me a hundred dollars a week anymore, so I can't even afford to live in this slum"(254).

It is during the beginning of his writing career that the narrator meets other writers online such as Chimamanda Adiche (a young Nigerian woman), Muthoni Garland and other Kenyan writers who latter become his friends. The union and online meeting assist in as far as critiquing each other's work and advancing their writing career.

Despite the challenges the narrator faces, he manages to publish one of his short stories titled *Discovering Home* that is based on their family trip to Uganda. The short story gets shortlisted for the Caine Prize and eventually wins the prize "I win the Caine Prize, and cry, bad snotty tears, and come back with some money. A group of writers and I start a magazine called



*Kwani?*- which means so what?”(255). The narrators’ decision to start the *Kwani?* Magazine depicts his dedication to writing and to some extent his willingness to help the young writers get published quickly.

Winning the Caine Prize becomes the narrators’ breakthrough in the writing career. It opens up his chances to other writing careers as the narrator is called upon by magazine publishers to take up some writing assignments. The writing assignments give the narrator a chance to travel around and tour some African countries such as Nigeria, Togo, South Sudan and Ghana. During these visits the narrator meets a lot of people of whom he interacts with. It is during these visits that we see the narrator striving to learn and appreciate other people’s culture; this brings out the narrators’ friendly personality and his ability to adapt easily to new environment and cultures.

It is in this journey that the narrator experiences happiness, satisfaction and a fulfillment in his life. As he progresses in his career he gains stability in his life, this is seen when the narrator says “Years are flying now, my writing career starts to take shape”(287). The narrator prospers more courtesy to his writing career especially when he becomes a teacher at Union Collage “I have finally become acceptable to a respectable institution. For the past few months, I have been teaching creative writing and literature at Union College in Schenectady, in upstate New York”(303).

### **The Insider Influence on the Narrator**

In this context the ‘insider’ refers to the characters and close family members who play a major and significant role in the narrators’ life. In the narrators’ movement from one stage of life to another certain people: family and friends play a significant role in his life. Family and other external factors play a major role in shaping Binyavanga’s life and propelling him towards his

realization of certain goals in his life. In this subsection I discuss the two major characters who act as the narrators' model and guide in his entire life are Ciru (younger sister) and the narrators' mother.

June Wanjiru Wainaina (Ciru) is Binyavanga's younger sister whom they grow up together attending the same primary school. The distance between them begins when they join secondary school, though we meet her later when they attend the same university in South Africa. We first meet Ciru when she is five and half years old. Ciru though younger defines the narrators' world especially during the childhood period. The narrator views her with a lot of admiration. He admires everything about her from her physical appearance, personality to her intellectual abilities and achievement right from childhood.

At the beginning of the memoir the narrator contrast his appearance with that of Ciru. Through the physical description that he gives it becomes obvious that the narrator is not comfortable with his appearance this is why his mother constantly reassures him about his appearance, " You are not fat" that's what mum says to me all the time "you are Plump" (11). This information about his physical appearances is immediately followed by a brief description of Ciru's physique; which is a complete contrast of what the narrator is '... she is small and thin and gold. She has sharp elbows, and a smile as clean as a pencil drawing' (11).

The narrator admires Ciru because she is an achiever, intelligent and generally a whole rounded girl. The whole roundedness is seen when the narrator says, "In school, it is always Ciru number one... It is always Ciru in a white dress giving flowers to the guest of honor- Mr. Ben Methu- on parents day" (12). Ciru is outstanding in her class work regardless of the fact that she is the youngest in her class and having been in class two for only one term, "she is the star in her

class... Ciru was moved a class forward. Now she is in standard two, like me in the class next door. Her first term in standard two, she beat everybody and topped the class. She is the youngest in her class. Everybody else is seven”(11). Ciru becomes a performer and excels throughout the memoir. Her academic performance motivates the narrator especially during his childhood days to do well academically. When the narrator finally manages to emerge among the top students in his class he says, “Ciru has been number one in her class every term since she was five. Last term I surprised everybody, including myself, and beat Ekya Shah and was number one in my class” (42). This registers the narrators’ excitement for eventually he achieves what he had always longed for, being at the same level (academically) with Ciru.

Ciru’s outstanding performance is consistent throughout the memoir. For instance during their final year in primary -1983, the narrator says “Ciru and I are doing well. Sometimes she is first in school. Sometimes I am first in school. She is the youngest in the class, but her confidence gives me confidence” (76). The climax of her performance is when the CPE results are released. Ciru tops in Lena Moi Primary School while the narrator becomes fifth. Although the narrator does not mention the points they score and their positions in the province - Rift valley Province he claims that they were among the top twenty students, “but we are among the top twenty students in our province, Kenya’s biggest province”(80). The narrators’ good performance in primary school can be attributed to Ciru’s influence.

Ciru is a jovial girl and this explains why the narrator enjoys her company. She is the source of joy and happiness in their family, and the centre of attention. The attention is from her parents and the narrator as seen in the following passage, ‘Ciru is running around with a yo-yo from the same American carton of goodies. When Ciru laughs, everybody laughs, and when she is running and laughing, everybody is warm and smiling’ (42).

As Ciru grows into adolescence a new character, Wambui, is introduced into her life (and Binyavanga's). Wambui becomes Ciru's and the narrator's eye opener. Although Wambui is at times his guider, mentor and counselor, her existence distracts the relationship that exists between Ciru and the narrator. The narrator observes that the two are friends and their closeness makes him feel left out because they discuss 'girly' things that makes the narrator feel out of place as is seen from the following, "Wambui told me beads are for making men happy in bed. I am not sure how. Wambui is winking at Ciru. These two have secrets, and I don't like it. I miss Cleophas" (60). Most importantly is that Wambui and Ciru acts as the narrators' eye opener to the women's world during his childhood days. This is evident when the narrator says, "Wambui told me that beads are for making men happy in bed" (60).

When Ciru finally completes her primary education she joins Kapropita Girls Secondary School and later transfers to Kenya High Girls School. The narrator becomes silent about Ciru's life in high school. We meet her years later when she is travelling to South Africa to study computer science at University of Transkei.

Throughout her university period, Ciru is presented a responsible character. The narrator admits that Ciru is more responsible and organized despite the fact that she is younger than him. When travelling to South Africa, the narrator using the second person voice says, "your sister Ciru , who is travelling with you , to study computer science, is more sensible and keeps her dollars in her pocket" (129). This statement shows that Ciru is more organized and responsible than the narrator. She takes charge of her education and completes her degree programme in time. Ciru exercises her maturity with regards to taking control of her life in South Africa, she also tries to be close to the narrator but during this period he does not open up to her.

Rosemary Kandiki is the narrators' mother. She plays a major role in the narrators' educational life by pushing him to achieving his goals in life. Binyavanga dedicate a whole chapter (chapter 25) in his memoir to narrate to us about his mother's history, her educational background and how his father met her. This inclusion indicates and emphasis Binyavanga's love for his mother. It also signifies the attachment the narrator has for his mother.

Rosemary is the third daughter of Cosma Binyavanga and Modesta, a sister to Damian, Rosalie, Kamanza and Henry among others. Regarding her educational background, she excels in primary school and joins Mt. St. Mary's Namagunga in Uganda, she does not join University due to inadequate family finances so she takes a secretarial course at Kianda College in Nairobi. It is while in college when she meets Job Wainaina. They then get married and are blessed with four children: James, Binyavanga, June and Melissa and two grandchildren; Paul Muigai and William Wainaina.

From the history that the narrator gives, he emphasizes the fact that his mother is stern and strict. This personality becomes the driving force in making her children especially the narrator become academic achievers especially at the primary level of education. The narrator also gives other attributes about the mother which are captured in the following passage:

Modesta is very close to her daughter Rosemary who at sixteen is already dangerously beautiful. Rosemary is quiet and dreamy and can be stern, like Modesta. Among the children, it is Rosemary who helps enforce Modesta's rules. She does all her work on time....like her mother she can be strict and get into no mischief...she is very stubborn; when she believes something, nobody can sway her. (243)

Her strict nature is seen when she punishes Ciru and the narrator when they misbehave. She is also strict with their performance in school. When she finds out that the narrator has not been doing Mathematics the whole year, she ensures that she monitors his reading and study from home:

One day after school, I am bored and do not have anything to read, I am twelve. Mum won't let me go to the library because she found out that I had managed to spend the whole year avoiding maths homework and reading novels in class. We writing national exams this year, Ciru and I mama and baba are strict (55).

The narrator portrays his mother as protective. She stands against all odds to protect him for instance when the narrator sneaks out of school, she does not ask him the reasons for his actions. She takes him back to school and the narrator is not punished, he says "I do don't know what she says to the headmaster. I am not punished"(98). Even though the narrator is not aware of whatever goes on in the headmaster's office, it is evident that her protective nature prevails. She also protects the narrator from his father's wrath when he comes back from South Africa without completing his university education. This protective nature show that she understands her son and she is giving him a chance to go for what he wants in his life, the narrator says "I am avoiding Baba. He has been gracious so far – has said nothing, but a chat is looming. Clearly mum has insisted on taking care of my situation so, maybe he won't say anything" (182).

To her the narrator is still a young child who needs protection and guidance; in fact she avoids mentioning or bringing up the subject on his university progress and his stay in South Africa. When his father eventually manages to bring up the issue on the narrators' educational progress his mother's reaction makes him stop midway:

Last week, at breakfast, I was going on and on about some theory or other and Baba burst out, “I do not understand, I don’t understand, you are so intelligent I don’t understand why you are so....” mum sent a sharp warning to him across the table and he stood up and left. (189).

The writer uses the story to illustrate a point that in his schooling there was a contestation between the ways his father dealt with issues and the way his mother did. He juxtaposes his father and mother to reveal the fact that he believed that his mother understood him better than his father. One would have expected that his father would be in control but a reversal of roles is portrayed. This also shows that she understood her son and wants him to be ready before going back to school, this is illustrated when the narrator says, “mum asked me if I thought I was ready to go to school. I said yes, “are you sure?” She was looking straight at me. I did not flinch. “I am ready, mum,” I said. She smiled”(211). Deep within her she knows that when it comes to education it is the preparedness of an individual that actually matters.

The narrator portrays his mother as understanding, loving and caring. At the beginning of the memoir the narrator tell us what his mother says to him, “You are not fat....you are plump” (11). This is a voice of a person who understands her son very well; the voice gives the narrator a sense of acceptance and reassurance. The love and affection is further seen when she tells the women in her salon, “he is my second-born. The shy one” (27). The comment she makes shows that she understand the narrators’ personalities. This caring, loving and understanding spirit runs throughout the text in as far as the narrator is concerned. His mother is always there for him no matter the circumstances. Even when narrating his mother’s history the narrator mentions that his mother defends him more than she should.

Her actions towards the narrator speak for themselves. For instance while at the salon the narrator describes a situation where her mother reached out her hand towards him, licked her fingers and smoothens his eyebrows, then her finger reached towards him and pulled him to her chest. Such actions speak loudly of her love and affection towards the narrator. The actions do not end in Binyavanga's childhood it extends to his adolescent life and even to adulthood. To illustrate this further is the time when the narrator sneaked out of school and his mother finds him asleep in his bed, what she does demonstrates her love towards him he says:

Mum finds me asleep in my bed. She sits there, runs her hand across my forehead. I can hear her there, quiet and I am not afraid; I just want her to keep her hand right there. She runs it through my hair. Her hand. I keep my eyes closed for the longest time and listened to her breathing. (97).

Later on when he is awake she takes his hand and turns it and with lots of concern she asks him "what happened to your thumb?"(97). The narrators' thumbnail was bleeding "mushy and bleeding with pus" (97). These scenes and actions are repeated later on in life when the narrator is back home from South Africa as seen in the following description "We sit in the dining room and talk from breakfast to lunch. Every so often she will grab my hand and check my nails. She will lick a spot off my forehead and smooth my eyebrows."(179). All these actions speak out her love towards the narrator.

Apart from all the attributes the narrator gives us about his mother, she functions as a source of information for the narrator especially when he was young. He learns a lot about Uganda and its condition during Idi Amins reign from his mother because his mother used to talk about it especially with Mary, a Ugandan who was her mother's assistant at the salon. "Mary is chatting



with mum about Idi Amin. They always talk about Idi Amin in Mary's language, Luganda, which mum speaks even though it is not her language."(23). Her endless session on the telephone communicating with her relatives in Uganda gives the narrator an idea about situation in Uganda.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have discussed Binyavanga's journey through various stages of his life, and his journey through the various institutions of learning in an attempt to achieve his dreams in life. I have also focused on some characters in the narrators' life (especially his mother and Ciru) that influenced and propelled him to achieve his goals in life; by this I did a character analysis of the two influential characters in the narrators' life. Ciru (sister) and Rosemary (mother) plays a major role in shaping the narrators' life. They influence his decisions which eventually make him to achieving his goals in life.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

The project was structured in two broad phases: The first intention was to examine the interplay between memory and history in Wainaina Binyavanga's memoir where I examined how Wainaina remembers his past/ uses his memory to present his personal story and national history. The second was to explore the slippages in the memoir that make it appear as a work of fiction. As I examined the (re)presentation of national history and the narration of the personal story, I explored the elements of fiction and some of the literary techniques that come into play in the memoir as the narrator narrates his personal story and the Kenyan history. The elements of fiction in the memoir included the narrator who is telling his life story and the characters who are the actors in this life narrative. The presentation of the characters was also seen in two broad perspectives hence the grouping of the character into two categories: the insider and outsider characters.

The writer consciously and artistically selects the historical events and the personal experiences that he includes in his life narrative. The historical occurrences captured in the memoir are those that affected him at the personal level while the personal experiences are those that propelled him to achieving his goals and aspiration.

The (re)presentation of the Kenyan history in the memoir can be divided into three phases of Binyavanga's life: the childhood period where a seven year old Binyavanga narrates his daily life and some occurrences in Kenya during Kenyatta's regime. The state of Kenya during this time as presented in the memoir is good and stable as compared to the chaotic condition of Uganda. Jomo Kenyatta is also presented as a good leader and a national hero as the narrator constantly

refers to him as the ‘father of the nation’. The second stage in Binyavanga’s life is seen through the eyes of an adolescent growing to an adult presenting Daniel Moi’s regime and the situation in Kenya during this time. This period as seen in the memoir is majorly characterized by the rise in tribalism, ethnic clashes, corruption, dictatorship and instability in the country. By presenting the changing (deteriorating) state of the country during Moi’s time the writer manages to majorly portray Moi as tribal and a dictator. The last is the adulthood phase which is dominated by the presentation of Mwai Kibaki’s period of leadership in Kenya, the writer at this stage seems to be suggesting that though tribalism is still a major issue in Kenya; the economic and political atmosphere have at least changed to the better as compared to Moi’s regime. The presentation of his characters has some elements of biasness; he presents his community- the Gikuyus- as victims and always in the receiving end with regards to the evils in the society. The writer also presents the leaders from his community as good leaders, overlooking their weaknesses and presents the leaders from other communities, especially Moi by associating them with all the evils and overlooking his good deeds during his time in power.

As the writer tells about the occurrences in Kenya by highlighting major events, presenting national figures and his personal story he manages to employ various elements of fiction in his memoir such as the use of the first person narrative voice, plot, setting and characterization. Other literary devices include descriptive language, symbolism, imagery, metaphors and parallelism in presenting the national occurrences and his lived experiences to the reader among others in the memoir. In the narrative, Binyavanga Wainaina takes us through the journey of his life; he moves from innocence to experience, childhood to adulthood and all his experiences which eventually lead to self actualization.

The study was limited to discussing the intersection between history and fiction in Binyavanga Wainaina's memoir. As such, a more intensive and dedicated study on Binyavanga Wainaina's use of language is necessary in order to offer a full appreciation of his prowess, mastery and creativity in the use of language.

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