

MOMENT OF TRUTH

-A NOVELLA-

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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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DEDICATION

To my family, for believing.

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This novella came out of the urgent need to tell a story that has long waited to come alive. I thank God for the good health and wellbeing that enabled me to complete this project. I also could not have done it without the support of a number of people who encouraged me.

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God bless you all.

SYNOPSIS

Annie the protagonist is celebrating the birthday of her first child, Jesse together with family and friends. She is too happy for she did not think this day would come. Immediately she was done with her studies, her plan was to get married and have children. She gets married to Mike whom she met through social media. They held a lavish wedding at the coast.

Her marriage on the other hand turns out to be a bit different from what she expected. Immediately after marriage, she and the husband decided not to have children immediately but to focus on building an empire first. Surprisingly, when they are ready to finally have their first child, their plan fails. Annie discovers that she has fertility issues. Luckily, Mike is an understanding husband and does not pressure her in any way.

Annie is really affected and becomes a very bitter woman. She shuts out from the society. This is after family and friends start asking her when she is planning to have children completely unaware of her predicament. She even faces discrimination for being a 'childless' woman. She loses her faith in religion too. The only hope she gets is from her two best friends Kate and Essie.

Annie gives up on her quest to conceive deciding that motherhood was not meant for her. After three years since she decided to have children she discovers that she is pregnant. She receives the news with so much joy and hope. She prepares for child birth. Upon giving birth, her whole perspective of motherhood changes. She discovers that all along she had underestimated the responsibilities that accompanied motherhood and only looked at the joys. She is a bit disappointed and she is very jealous that Mike's husband continues as usual while hers stopped and now she has to take care of Jesse.

When her maternity leave is finally over, she is happy that she is going back to work. At the workplace she is even more stressed when she remembers that she has left under the care of a stranger. She is in a dilemma. Her friend Essie loses her husband after a heart attack. She has to offer Essie the emotional support she needed in those trying times.

At Jesse's third birthday, the three women gather at a table and discuss their motherhood experiences. Essie's first born son has passed his examination very well and is about to join a good secondary school but Essie is worried that her son might be harmed in a boarding school. Kate is about to get married to a white man after staying single raising her daughter on her own for a couple of years. Annie is happy that Jesse is finally three. The women conclude that motherhood is really not as easy as it seems and that mothers are always worrying about the wellbeing of their children no matter their ages

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The twenty first Century has seen a great transformation in African writing. Writers are now moving away from certain ideologies and stereotypes that certified texts as ‘True African literature.’ Previously, writers emphasized on certain themes such as colonialism, neocolonialism and urbanization. The world is ever changing and other issues continue to emerge.

For a long time after independence, a significant number of early writers who were majorly male overly articulated the African male in their works. Soon after independence, the new African narrative insisted on disengagement from traditional land and arts. This made African literature to explore the dynamics of contemporary African existence. The colonial educational system excluded women resulting in her dislocation socially, politically and culturally. Her subsequent silence has yet to be addressed in contemporary African experience.

Writers such as Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Chinua Achebe did not really exclude the female character from the emerging culture but her portrayal became quite problematic in the contemporary setting which devised rules for her participation in the new dispensation. This task was left to the few western educated African men who themselves were not very familiar with this aspect. Later on, when African women scholars came to the academic arena, a few changes were to take place. These African women scholars opposed the silencing which seemed supported by a male dominated African literary criticism.

It is only the African woman who can convincingly explore her experience. The African woman for a long time had been romanticized and also mythic images of the African woman had been created. Writers such as Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Ba have been in the forefront of undoing this. Ngugi wa Thiongo in *Writers In Politics* claims that all art aims to evoke, to awaken the

observer, the listener or the reader emotions and impulses to action or opposition. He further says that a writer tries to persuade us, to make us not only view a certain kind of reality but also form a certain angle of vision. This means that literature is a force in society. It influences feelings and emotions. It should make people think in a certain direction and therefore change attitudes and the way of thinking.

Since a writer has enough knowledge of her society, she knows the people's values, norms and beliefs and works from this assumption towards creating a world that her readers will desire to have. In her writing, the writer changes people's attitudes and the way of thinking. She creates new values in them.

It is with this understanding that my project sprung. Women have agency and through them we are able to see the society and its transformations. Motherhood in the African setting has always been idealized. Mothers have always been expected to play the idealized mother according to social conventions which is not possible. This causes tension as women end up being frustrated. This project will explore this phenomenon in the form of creative writing – a novella. Creative writing speaks of the human condition. The novella will focus on the plight of mothers in contemporary Kenya which has become more complex and challenging in recent years. In the novella, issues revolving around motherhood will be captured. Being a mother has conventionally been associated with happiness. That is not the case however for many mothers. Mothering is filled with conflict, anxiety and maternal ambivalence. The twenty first century has also brought with it developments that were unimaginable years ago such as the digital migration which has had a great impact on Africans in general.

This novella, through the main character, (who is a mother) will take us through the journey of becoming a mother and motherhood experiences today which is challenging compared to earlier years. Because any creative work should provoke a response from the society, The writer's aim in this research project is to provoke readers to look at how the emerging trends are affecting women in society today.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Several African writers recognize the importance of the female narrative voice in literature. These writers have presented women as important entities in the narration of these stories. Some have avoided the misconceptions about women, most importantly on motherhood. Authors such as Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Ba have tried to reconstruct these female images in some of their texts. These texts are important in African literature, however there is still need to write and add onto African women writing in Africa today. This is because rapid development and globalization brought about by the digital migration means rapid change in issues and therefore change in themes need to be addressed.

A number of writers in Kenya have tackled the issue of motherhood; they include Marjorie Oludhe MCGoye, Margaret Ogola and Grace Ogot. These authors have written on motherhood in the past. Contemporary Kenya has seen a lot of changes since. Issues such as the quest for gender equality, the digital revolution and social media, terrorism and same sex relationships were unheard of at the time. The Kenyan mother today has to interact with these hence motherhood has become more challenging. The new experiences need to be captured in new stories. This is the task that this project aims to undertake.

OBJECTIVES

This project seeks to achieve the following objectives;

1. To capture the importance of the female narrator in describing societal transformations.
2. To capture the impact of societal transformation in the identity formation of the Kenyan woman.

HYPOTHESES

The hypotheses guiding this project are;

1. The female narrator is an integral voice in presenting societal transformations.
2. The societal transformations that take place influence the identity formation of the Kenyan woman and how she views herself and the world.

JUSTIFICATION

Several texts have been written all over Africa capturing motherhood. Most of these texts however present the mother in a romanticized manner which is definitely not a true representation. Most of the characters that represent mothers in these texts are expected to play a defined role according to social conventions. Motherhood too has always been associated with happiness.

Today most women work to financially support themselves and establish their own careers. Mothers are single handedly supporting and their children There is need however to break away from the stereotype of always associating motherhood with happiness. Writers need to capture the real picture as it is today in contemporary Kenya. Kenyan writers too compared with their contemporaries in Africa are still behind in telling their stories and hence this brings the need to write more and share our stories.

Therefore, my project will aim at constructing a narrative that will be useful in the study of literature and also reveal to the world how African women specifically in contemporary Kenya view the world. My research seeks to reveal the complexities of motherhood in a rapidly changing world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research project is guided by texts that look at the building blocks of creative works, texts that expound on the novella also known as the short novel as a literary genre, its aspects and the process of writing it. I will also be guided by texts that give agency to women, utilize the female narrator and the focus will be especially on the issue of motherhood.

Generally, literature is a product of society; it is a mirror that reflects the activities that take place in a society in which it is produced. As I stated earlier, the 21st century has seen great transformations in African writing. Most of the literatures written and published in the years after 1960s reflect both the dynamism of modern free Africa and the continent's problems too (Odhiambo 339). Today's authors look at Africa as it is. According to him, African literature like any other system of knowledge or institutions of culture in any modern society continues to exhibit dynamism that is reflected in both the creativity and quantity of material published over the years. The changes in the content, form and style of African literature particularly mirror the societal transformations and transitions since majority of African nations gained independence.

Viet-wild echoes Odhiambo's sentiments. He argues that since the 1900s new out lookers have emerged in the discourse about Africa. The dichotomies of the anti-colonial era have been replaced by a more complex and multi-layered perception. This perception takes into account the diversities and complexities of African reality in the post-independence era, moving from the nation-based and anti-colonialism towards a multi-cultural post colonialism (23).

A report by World Bank, *Can Africa Claim the 21st Century?* Shows that the 21st century has seen various changes in Africa. A look at the Sub-Saharan Arica indicates that there is increased political participation in Africa. Africa is also changing from an ideological battleground to a new business address for trade and development. Thirdly, globalization and information and

communication technology offer enormous opportunities or Africa to leapfrog stages of development (x).

It is clear that Africa has moved its focus from issues such as colonialism, neo-colonialism and urbanization. Majority of African writers today have moved from such themes which were previously emphasized by the authors of the time. African literature today is exploring the dynamics of contemporary African existence. But, a look at most writings of the time excluded or misrepresented the African woman.

For a long time too after independence in most African states, a significant number of writers were male thus over articulating male concerns in their works. Such writers included Ngugiwa Thiong'o (Kenya) and Chinua Achebe (Nigeria). For instance, the new African Ngugi narrative after independence insisted on disengagement from traditional land and arts.

Stratton argues that Ngugi creates a gendered theory of nationhood and of writing, one that excludes women from the creative production of the national policy or identity and of literary texts. Instead, woman herself is produced or constructed by the male writer as an embodiment of his literary/political vision. Earlier, the colonial educational system excluded women resulting in her dislocation socially, politically and culturally. She goes on to argue that, so constructed woman is, defined as her body, as her sexuality; she is an ideal virgin-mother figure and /or a prostitute [...](51). The woman's subsequent silence has yet to be addressed in contemporary African experience.

Ogundipe in her text *The Women's Condition in Africa* argues; the African woman lives in a continent that has been subjected to five hundred years of assault, battery and mastery of various kinds (109). Slavery, slave trade and focus on cash crop production threw the pattern of Africa

into a crisis. The African woman was intensely affected by this production process. She became more marginalized in the process because the cash crop became the main crop. This new economic change meant change in attitude toward women. The British colonial system for instance swept aside female political structures in society replacing them with completely male structures and positions. Modern societies continue to emulate these male dominated structures. The colonial system was however encouraging ideologies of patriarchy which already existed earlier in African societies.

Traditionally there was division of labour based on sex with contempt for women's work. Men would not serve food at the revolutionary meetings in Guinea Bissau so Cabral had to dignify this 'women's work' by appointing women in charge of food at the revolutionary councils (Urdang 251). Not only was women's work condemned by men, it was poorly regarded when not totally unpaid (Ogundipe 112).

Modern Africa has brought with it new aspects that have affected womanhood. There has been openness in sexuality, women are breaking into new industries and professions and millions of mothers are going out to work. They are also working outside their homes, having children outside marriage and they are now in control of their own sexuality. Traditionally the woman had no control of her own body and its products. Female Genital Mutilation, lack of control over her body's biology or its products such as children were viewed to belong to the man of the family. According to Ogundipe, she was but a beast that produced the man's children on his behalf (113).

In modern Africa today, men still take lightly the work of their female counterparts in the business and educational professions considering women's jobs as hobbies and wondering what

women do that makes them so tired at the end of the day. Proletarian and peasant women are known to work all day long and longer than men. Such attitudes toward women lead to discrimination at the work place.

But man alone cannot be blamed for the African women's predicament. Although women suffer oppression and discrimination, their lives are radically different. Women themselves are not united as a sex but are divided on the basis of class. Middle and upper class women share in the profits from the exploitative system. The working-class cook, clean and provide services for these women. They receive low wages and often neglect their own families.

Educational attainments, participation rates, occupational structures, private and public laws, family planning systems, technological advancements and socio-cultural attitudes are all weighted against women. Globalization and capitalism have had a big impact on the lives of women. Capitalism has created new forms and manifestations of women's oppression. The capitalist ideology for instance prioritizes the family and the subordinate role of women and children within it but at the same time forcing individual members of the family to sacrifice 'family life' because of pressures from work and migration.

It is only the African woman who can convincingly explore her experience. In the text *Postcolonial Representations*, Lionnet focuses on how women carve their space in the literature that they write. She asserts that when women write their stories, they effectively represent the self that was mutilated by male writers who associated them with the unreasonable and as a result underwrote them in the books of history. Her quest in this text is to show how women have articulated their relationship with history through their own voices. Lionnet makes the reader

understand 'the specificities of feminine experience and women's relationship to the symbolic frameworks that define them as suffering objects' (21).

The African woman has for a long time been romanticized. Mythic images have been created on the African woman. In offering solutions to the oppression of African women, Ogun-dipe suggests that women in arts need encouragement and financial assistance. Women artists are generally few in African societies and successful ones are even fewer farther between. In the modern artistic expression such as the novel, the film, written poetry, theatre and painting, women are still fewer. Not only do educational possibilities militate against women, but women are often hard put to find capital to back their own projects or to develop them. Oppression of women basically revolves around education and provision of employment for women (116).

The focus of this project is on the motherhood issue in modern Africa specifically contemporary Kenya. As stated earlier mythic images have been created in the past but all is not lost. African female writers such as Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria), Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye (Kenya) and Mariama Ba (Senegal) are some of the few women who have been at the forefront in undoing these misconceptions. They have especially dealt with the issue of motherhood truthfully. They question and overturn some of the entire traditional attitudes to motherhood and the woman's place.

In the text *Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta, she writes a real story about women's lives in contrast to the idealized vision of the African woman as a goddess or mother earth particularly in African literature. Nnu Ego the protagonist is not fulfilled until she bears a child. She later learns that she can conceive but she feels a failure still when her son dies after four weeks of live. 'But I am not a woman anymore!' I am not a woman! She later bears more children most of

whom survive than she and her husband can possibly support. Yet, throughout the novel it is the offspring who support the mother. She looks to the existence for reassurance regarding the value of her struggles. The irony here is that Nnu Ego's life and death is a forceful lesson in the pains of motherhood. There is a distinct approach to the topic of motherhood in the text *Joys of Motherhood*. The text also views major historical and societal changes through the life of Nnu Ego. She is a village woman who is transplanted by marriage to the woman's struggles of Lagos. It is frank to women's lives and experiences especially the negative ones.

Margaret Ogola's text *The River and the Source* is set in the pre-colonial period to postcolonial Kenya. It tackles the issue womanhood and motherhood too. The protagonist Akoko is on the losing end of a male dominated society. She fought her way to earn her father's love. She did not show any shyness when she was introduced to her husband to be. The chief fell in love with her which was not a prerequisite for marriage then. It was a monogamous marriage contrary to the society's practices. Even when she is not able to conceive many children especially sons as traditionally required, it was the chief's decision to remain faithful to the wife despite the growing public outcry not forgetting insults from the mother-in-law. Akoko very daring where wives were submissive, confident where they were shy and loving where they were doing a duty to their husband.

Many women in earlier oppressive regimes had chosen to be dutiful, to ask too little, to take in as much as they could and in most cases waited until it was too late to do too little. Akoko stood before the DO and DC to fight for her grandson's birthright in Kisumu. She did what any mother would do when faced with difficulty. The novel highlights the encroachment of western civilization of African life and its impact on the growth of the woman. Throughout the story we

realize the various dynamics involved in the process of identity formation from the pre-colonial period to the post colonial period.

Mariama Ba's text *So Long a Letter* employs the epistolary form to convey thoughts and feelings of a recently widowed woman in Senegal Ramatoulaye to her longtime friend Aissatou who lives in USA after experiencing marital problems as the letter writer. The novel depicts the lives of the educated upper class urban people in contrast to the more familiar tales from Africa of the village life. The author is very frank regarding women's lives and their examinations of the causes of the various experiences especially the negative ones. Ramatoulaye's life is dominated by her children. She was an educated woman with a career of her own, a family and was financially secure. The letter she writes implies that while she was with her husband, she had to work hard in her teaching job and twelve children to take care of but she had household assistance and therefore was able to manage finding satisfaction in her marriage. When the husband deserts her for a young woman, she feels the great burden of motherhood. It is the children especially the daughters who are adamant that that their mother divorce their father when he takes a second wife. The female characters in the text represent women who attempt to and to some extent succeed to take control of their lives. I have not given up wanting to refashion my life. Despite everything- disappointments and humiliations- hope still lives within me (89). This text makes a dramatic statement about the position of women in their societies. The personality and inner reality of African women have been hidden under a heap of myths, so called ethnological theories, rapid generalizations and partial truths (Boyce 242).

The mentioned texts have contributed to stripping away these coverings and misconceptions and they display both the truths and strengths of women in African societies. In Simone De Beauvoir's text *The Mandarins*, a daughter tells her mother that all women do is vegetate. This

statement sums up what motherhood has done to many women. It sucked away women's own personal interests and independence and placed motherhood at the forefront. When these women are separated from their children, they have no purpose in life because they have invested all their time and energy in their children. Beauvoir here is warning women. She is of the idea that motherhood should be a controlled choice rather than something they have succumbed to.

In Kenya today, motherhood faces newer challenges. Today, families move great distances from each other in search of better jobs and housing. The extended family living in one place is less common. years ago, relatives were there to help in raising children. Today, this burden lies squarely on the parents especially the mother. As conditions of mothering continue to be complicated, more is expected from mothers and these mothers in turn expect more from themselves. Fierce and demanding pressures surround contemporary mothering.

It is true motherhood sucks away women's identity and independence. Women are given a role to play. A mother has to suspend her own character and adopt a second self. They are expected to play the idealized mother according to social conventions.

This project through the characters in the novella, exemplifies these struggles common to women especially in Kenya today. This will be with the aim that society will be more understanding to women and especially on the issue of motherhood. The role of a writer is very important in any given society. Writers have designated themselves with the daunting task of recreating time, the place and the characters of whatever era they live in. but this is not enough according to NgugiWaThiongo in *Writers in Politics*. He argues; what is important is not only the writer's faithfulness and honesty in capturing and reflecting the struggles around him but also his attitude to those big social and political issues, it is not simply a matter of a writer's heroic stand as a

social though this is crucial and significant –but the attitudes and the world view embodied in his work and with which he is in (72).

In a survey conducted by Genevie and Margolies, out of 1100 mothers, about 70% of all women of all ages and educational backgrounds were neither pessimistic nor realistic about motherhood but were unrealistic. About one in four women reported very positive feelings about motherhood while one in five viewed motherhood in mostly negative terms. The others imagined the joys but underestimated the responsibilities (25-26). It is evident no one had been open to these women about the pain and heartache.

Being a mother has conventionally been associated with happiness. For many mother however, mothering is filled with conflict, anxiety and ambivalence. Maternal ambivalence remains unacknowledged even today. This is the mixture of loving and hating feelings that all mothers experience toward their children and the anxiety, shame and guilt that the negative feelings engender in them. It has always been considered deviant or problematic. If one hates a sibling, spouse or friend, she is considered unfortunate, unreasonable or difficult. But if a mother hates her children, she is considered monstrous, immoral, unnatural or evil. This project's aim is for readers explore motherhood so as to view mothers in a particular way without negative judgment or condemnation.

Little critical attention has been devoted to the novella as a genre. Critics are still struggling with a definition. Clement et al argue that the term novella has in recent times been drafted to serve as one of the ill-starred literary terms whose misfortune is to be so overused and abused when it comes to signify anything and everything its employer of the moment has in mind (1). James offers a description of the novella – which he called the nouvelle. He suggests in his criticism –

the novella amounts to a kind of an ideal form which allows for unspecified triumphs of ‘shades and differences, varieties and style, the value above all of the idea happily developed (qtd in Springer 7).

James’ talk on the novella as a shapely but economically feasible form has long suggested that there was something aesthetically superior and rarefied about the form of the novella. In observing the ways in which the novella permits its ideas to become fully developed through shades and differences. He also implies an unspoken kinship between the short story and the novella. The short story is a fictional form known for its capacity to work within a restriction of length. The novella on the other hand works on partial restriction.

The novella sometimes called the short novel, shares characteristics with both the short story and the novel. Di Yanni in his definition of the novella argues, the novella accumulates incidences and illustrates characters over time in ways the short story cannot because of its limited scope (24). Like the short story, the novella relies on glimpses of understanding, flashes of insight, quick turns of action to solidify theme or reveal character. While the novella such moments are both more frequent and of longer duration than in a short story, they are rarely rendered with the leisure or richness of detail characteristic of most long novels he adds. Unlike the short story which makes its mark quickly, the short novel can allow a slower unfolding of character, incident and idea. The short story’s brevity demands a single snapshot of time rather than the collage or mosaic that can be created in a novel. The novella is distinguished from the novel by its sharper focus and great efficiency. Lacking time and space to accumulate incident, develop character and amplify theme, the novella works within a narrow compass, disavowing the novel’s panoramic sweep. Di Yanni 25). The result is a consistency of style and focus and a concentration and compression of effect that are the hallmarks of the novella form.

Another critic Timms, argues that, compared to its longer cousin the novel, the novella appears to offer aesthetic shortcomings instead of opportunities for development. Other limitations according to him, is its reduced capacity to give a sense of the passing of time. He acknowledges that novellas may span a long period of time but maintains that space does not allow the novella to enable its readers to experience the sense of time unfolding. Novellas ‘pick out only significant moments’ (104). Timms goes on to highlight a few other limitations of the novella; it is well adapted to narrow settings, finds it hard to accommodate a large cast, does not encourage psychological complexity and possesses the tendency to treat a single issue or theme.

Martha Foley who Springer suggests may be the best known anthologist of American English faced with the task of defining a novella suggests, ‘it is a beautiful form of writing, longer than a short story, shorter than the novel which authors love. Many editors including myself have to forgo it because of space limitations’ (qtd in Springer 3). Foley’s vague love for the form exemplifies a central ambiguity about the novella.

Authors create narratives using different elements of fiction. Among their important resources is plot- the sequence of events composing the narrative, the characters, the persons who play their part in the narrative. The author’s choice of setting, the place and time in which the action occurs gives the story verisimilitude. The point of view establishes a consistent perspective of the characters and their actions as the narrative unfolds. The author’s literary style, the way she uses the various resources of language also shapes the expression of the story. Finally, the author is guided by her perception of theme, the unifying idea that brings to life all the other elements of fiction.

All stories embody a personal vision when the elements of plot, character, setting, point of view, style and theme are set in motion by the writer's perception of the mystery and magic of everyday life. Authors of fiction are of free to invent and shape experience to the fullest extent of their imagination. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* is of the idea that every writer while writing undergoes a state known as inspiration. Without inspiration it is difficult for any writer to present a good story. He puts emphasis on the story telling aspect of the novel, which is also applicable to the novella. Forster says that a great writer possesses 'the primitive power of keeping the reader in suspense and playing on his curiosity.' (42)

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My research project employs the use of New Historicism (Cultural Poetics) literary theory. New Historicism is the name given to the American Branch of Cultural Poetics. Greenblatt along with a host of other scholars believe that one's culture permeates both texts and critics. Society is intricately interwoven, so are critics and texts, both to each other and to the culture in which they live and in which the texts are produced.

New Historicism believes that none of us can escape public and private cultural influences. It asserts that an intricate connection exists between a text and society. It declares the societal concerns of the author, of the historical times evidenced in the work and of other cultural elements exhibited in the text. Cultural Poetics critics find the basis for their concerns as well as some of their assumptions in the writings of the 20th century French archeologist, historian and philosopher Michel Foucault (1926 -1984).

He declares that history is not linear. For him, history is the complex interrelationship of a variety of discourses, the various ways –artistic, social, political and so on that people think about their world. Through language and thought, each period in history develops its own perceptions concerning the nature of reality, sets up its own standards of behavior, establishes its own criteria for judging what it deems good or bad; and certifies what group of people develop, articulate, protect and defend the yardstick whereby all established truths, values and actions will be deemed acceptable. Each era develops its own episteme, the episteme actually controls how that era or group of people view reality.

Foucault asserts that the abrupt and often radical changes that cause breaks from one episteme to another are neither good nor bad, valid or invalid. Similar to the discourses that help produce

them, different episteme exist in their own right; they are neither moral or immoral but amoral (Bressler, 220).

Texts are simply one of the many elements that help in shaping a culture. Cultural poetics critics believe that all texts are really social documents that not only reflect but also respond to their historical situation. They center history, declaring that any interpretation of a text would be incomplete if we do not consider the text's relationship to the discourses that helped fashion it and to which the text is a response. From this point and view, a text becomes, 'a battleground of competing ideas among the author, society, customs, institutions and social practices that are all eventually negotiated by the author and the reader and influenced by each contributor's episteme (Bressler, 222). Through the practice of their analysis, cultural poetics critics maintain that we will not only discover the social world of the text but also the present day social forces working upon us as we negotiate meaning with printed material. Like history, our interaction with a text is a dynamic, ongoing process that will always be somewhat incomplete.

From this, we can deduce some assumptions from the New Historicism literary theory. It believes that texts help to shape and are also shaped by society, secondly, it believes that one of the most important elements is discovering how a text was formed- that is investigating the historical and social moments surrounding a text's production, not its supposed interpretation. Thirdly, it believes that literature is shaped by historical moments while also shaping the individual listener or reader to these texts. Lastly, it looks at single moments in history that may have influenced a literary text produced at the time. In conclusion, it smudges the line between history and literature believing that texts (literature) and context (history) are the same and that literature has no history of its own but is ensconced in cultural history.

Ngugi Wa Thiongo in *Writers in Politics* also asserts that, A writer's subject matter is history: i.e the process of man acting on nature and changing it and in so doing acting on and changing himself. The entire changing relations of production and hence the changing power relations consequent on mutable modes of production is a whole territory of a writer's literary concern (72). Therefore, the product of a writer's imaginative involvement becomes a reflection of society: its economic structure, its class formation, its conflicts and contradictions, its class power, political and cultural struggles ;its structure of values – the conflict and tensions arising from the antagonism between those which are dying and those which are pointing to the future. Hence, literature has often given us more and sharper insights into the moving spirit of an era than all historical and political documents treating the same moments in a society's development.

Having this in mind, New Historicism is very relevant to this project research. As I stated earlier, Africans focus has moved from colonialism and urbanization to other pertinent issues affecting them today. Writers today are focusing on issues relevant to society today. This research project raises issues concerning women particularly on motherhood in contemporary Kenya. With women liberalization in the twenty first century come other challenges that were not experienced in earlier years. It is therefore necessary as a writer to exemplify these challenges for society to be more understanding to motherhood and womanhood in general. The Novella in this case is both analytic and synthetic.

METHODOLOGY

This research project is carried out by close reading of primary texts such as novels, novellas and short stories and secondary texts to have a better understanding of narration through the woman's voice. I also exposed myself to the elements of the New Historicism literary theory as well as the tenets of creative writing. My research findings enabled me to come up with a story told through the female narrative voice, a story that deals with the woman question and specifically motherhood.

MOMENT OF TRUTH

A Novella

CHAPTER TWO

Red and blue balloons drifted aimlessly on the ground as screaming, sweaty swarms of children ran all over stepping on the grass of the house compound. A rectangular white banner that read 'Happy Third Birthday Jesse' written in blue hung vertically above the main door leading to the house. Beside the door on the right hand side stood a table filled with food and drink. Hungry and curious children loomed over the table grabbing at snacks and filled their mouths with sweets. Under the table, a jug of orange juice had been knocked over and had formed a puddle on the floor. On the left hand side of the door was a stack of unopened presents that were wrapped in smooth shiny wrapping papers of all colours. A blue, Shimano bicycle stood out among the presents. Kevin was seated in one of the white chairs that I had set outside for the visitors. He fingered his touch phone with a glimmer of interest on his eyes. He was tall, with a light complexion. He wore a grey Nike sweat shirt with a pair of matching pants. He had put on white Air Max sneakers. Mike opened the door from inside the house and came outside holding a plate full of roast meat.

"Hey Kevin," Mike said walking towards him stretching his free hand expecting a handshake. Mike was an inch shorter than Kevin. He was solidly built and dark with brown eyes. He had worn a white round-neck t-shirt and a pair of blue jean trousers. He had put on brown timberland boots. "How is it going, are you liking the party?" Kevin shook his hand and nodded, "Very much. I am delighted to have been invited to attend." Mike slapped Kevin on the back. "Stop with such nonsense. You are my next door neighbor. Loosen up, don't be so formal. We all came here to have a good time." He handed Kevin the plate. "Here, have some meat." He said as he went round the house at the back where he had set up a barbeque.

I was seated in one of the chairs outside the house watching over the children especially Jesse. He was playing inside a bouncy castle that was placed near our blue fancy gate that was now a bit rusty. Jesse was in the company of some other four boys and a girl who were around his age. The girl was jumping up and down ricocheting off some walls as the boys were somersaulting all over. "Move Kelly," one of the boys shouted, "you are going to get hurt. Go and play with the other girls on the grass." Kelly ignored the boy and played on.

"It's time to cut some cake everyone! Come on now. Everyone gather around." I shouted as I left for the house to get the cake. "Jesse, that's enough for now, go and call all your friends and cousins so that we can cut your cake." Jesse and the other children ran out of the bouncy castle almost knocking each other down. I went to the back of the house through the kitchen door to invite the guests for the cake cutting who were relaxing together with Mike bonding and catching up as they watched over the barbeque.

"Hey guys, we need to go to the front and have some cake."

"Do you need any help Annie?" Kate asked standing up adjusting her polka dotted white and black mini dress. Her slender body fit perfectly in the dress.

"Sure, get the plates and the knife from the Kitchen as I bring the cake."

Everyone else followed as we all got in the kitchen and headed outside through the front door.

I placed the spider man themed cake on one of the tables outside the house. The children ran towards the table gathering around it so as to have a clear view of the cake. "Where is the birthday boy?" Mike asked. Jesse was still struggling and pushing the other children so as to have a view of his cake. He finally reached at the table. When he saw it, the look on his face was

priceless. He could not get his eyes off spider man and did not utter a word. I took three candles from the table and placed them on top of the cake. Mike took a lighter from his pocket and lit the candles. All over sudden Kate started singing a happy birthday song and everyone else joined in especially the children. Other people took their smart phones out of their bags and pockets and took pictures for the special moment. Jesse blew out the three candles and we all cheered. Kate and Essie cut the cake into pieces and went round with plates so that everyone could pick a piece.

Mike and I got Jesse a blue Shimano bicycle for his third birthday. Jesse was too excited. He was always asking for one but I was always against the idea. I did not want my little boy to get hurt. I always promised him he would get one when he was older. Mike though, talked me into the idea and I finally gave in. We agreed it would be the perfect present for his third birthday. Clearly, Jesse's day had been made. As I watched my husband teach Jesse how to ride it around our compound, I felt so proud, so proud of Jesse. The journey had not been an easy one. I was extremely emotional, happy but still gripped with fear. Every mother is proud of her own child whenever the child achieves a new milestone.

But, this is not always the case. Recently in my home town in the outskirts of the city center, a mother, thirty one admitted to drowning her two children five and two in a water tank. It was nearly impossible for me to understand how a mother could deliberately murder their own child.

"I can't believe it is already three years. Just the other day Jesse was a baby." I told Essie and Kate as we found ourselves chairs to sit on."

"True, time really flies. Very soon you will be wishing Jesse was still a baby when he starts bringing girls over to the house." Essie said and we all burst out laughing. I looked at Essie and I

thought to myself how some women seemed to have it easy, as if they were made for motherhood like her. Others like me found the challenge of mothering overwhelming, the daily routine of changing diapers, laundry and discipline very disappointing and sometimes depressing. I anticipated motherhood before getting into it. I used to see happy families and I was filled with dreams of motherhood and family. I knew I would get right into it as soon as I was done with school and gotten married but I was somehow displeased. I was not the right candidate for motherhood. I disliked loud noises and messy places.

CHAPTER THREE

“I can’t believe this is it roomie,” uttered Muka adjusting her black and blue graduation gown while looking at herself in the full length mirror. I picked my gown from the ironing table as I placed the iron box on the tiled floor. I put on my gown over my black dress and walked up to the mirror where Muka was still standing and I started adjusting my gown standing beside her. “Yep, me too, I don’t think I want to leave. I don’t want this year to be over. Nothing will ever be this good again.” I said jokingly as I tried on my cap which was not supposed to be worn until we had officially graduated. Muka tried hers too.

“This thing will ruin my hair style, she said with a shrug.”

“You are lucky. Mine does not really fit with my new hairdo.”

We all laughed. I took my mobile phone which was on top of my bed and we paused as I took our last Selfie while still roommates.

“So what are your plans next year Muka?”

“I think I want to travel and see the world. I want to do my second degree outside the country. My aunt who is an Australian citizen has promised to sponsor me.”

“You are lucky, I am not very sure if I want to go back to school but what I know is that I am ready for marriage.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I have thought about it and I think I am now ready to settle and start a family.”

“Okay roomie, good luck. Make sure you introduce me to your babies as aunt Muka.”

I smiled deep in thought as Muka walked out the room. I stood up from my bed and followed her. Although we were taking different courses at the campus, Muka had been my roommate and confidant for the last four years. I loved her as a sister but now the journey had come to an end. I locked the room and headed to the graduation square. The ceremony at the graduation square kicked off as planned. A thunderous applause from the students and guests rocked the hall when the graduand procession and the guest of honour entered dressed in special attire that signified it was a graduation day. Speeches were made by those responsible. Some dry and others pretty interesting. The Chancellor admitted to us our respective degrees, diplomas and certificates. I earned my undergraduate degree in sociology.

After the ceremony, I went to meet my brothers and parents. They hugged and congratulated me as we took pictures. I bid most of my classmates for the four years goodbyes. After I was done, we got into two cars and left for lunch. We went to celebrate at a fancy restaurant that my family had earlier made reservations. I sat by the air conditioner due to the heat I was feeling because of the graduation attire that I still had on. The waitresses sharply dressed in red and black came immediately and took our orders. Thank God, the food all came out at once. The atmosphere was also very accommodating. During lunch I said very little. My parents remarked how quiet I was. They reminded me how sad I was the day I was admitted at the university. Since I was young I had really wanted to study law but after my secondary school education I did not attain the cut off points for me to qualify for a Bachelor Degree in law. I was admitted to do sociology and I was very heartbroken. I cried when my mother dropped me at the hostels four years earlier. I was very convinced that I would not find a happy path for myself. Surprisingly, I came to love not only the course but also the campus and its people. I could not believe it was all over.

I received a scholarship and the following year I started undertaking my Master's degree in International Relations at the same university. After two years I was done. Being a very busy woman with no social life, Facebook had produced my future husband. Mike and I met on Facebook immediately I started my Master's degree. We had been arguing on a mutual friend's status update about the English Premier League Football and that was the beginning of our friendship although we had started out as enemies. Mike was not convinced that a woman would argue that much about football. He had to find out more about me, I later discovered. After a couple of chats, messages and phone calls we finally decided to meet. We went for several dates for one year and got engaged after two years of dating. The following year we got married.

Ours was a beach wedding down at the coast. The wedding venue faced the beach and the breath taking sun. Spread down the aisle was a red carpet as far as the eyes could see heading to the make shift altar where the priest dressed in white and green robes together with the altar boys stood facing the guests. The candles at the altar table flickered almost going off because of the wind at the shore. We had invited family and close friends dressed in beach attire for comfort. On either side of the aisle they sat on white chairs set up for them facing the altar on the white sand. The priest asked everyone to stand up. The time had I had been waiting and preparing for the last few months had finally come.. All eyes would be soon on me. I hated attention but on this particular day I had no choice. I was dressed in my white A-line gown which flowed to the ground. I took a few steps when my parents joined me. They escorted me down the aisle. My father was on my right hand side while my mother was on the left. Without them, I do not think I would have done it. The guests looked at me, taking pictures of us, waving at me smiling. Up ahead, I saw Mike, my future husband, the love of my life. He stood straight and looked very handsome. He was dressed in a white suit with a light blue shirt. I could tell he was as nervous as

I was. At the end of the aisle in front of the altar, my parents let go off my hands after presenting me to Mike. My father patted Mike on the shoulder as he walked to his seat. I guessed that was his way of welcoming him to the family and that he had approved of the marriage. I was overwhelmed.

“You can now be seated,” father Justus said. Everyone obeyed. After he was done with the sermon, Mike and I exchanged our vows. The guests clapped hard and applauded as we swapped spit. They cheered and we shouted. We were no longer two but one. I crossed my arm on Mike’s as we danced our way out. We left the stage for the photo shoot at The Dream hotel as the attendants followed us. We left the guests behind. When we came back to the scene, the reception had been set.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. and Mrs. Imani!” Shouted the MC on the microphone no sooner had he caught a glimpse of us. The deejay played the music as the MC commanded us to dance. I had to do it moderately because of the high heels I was wearing. Afterwards we sat at the high table for the rest of the ceremony to take place. The guests ate and drunk and the cake was cut. The gifts were also presented. I was too tired and I was glad the day was over. It was now time to fill the earth as father Justus had earlier preached in his sermon. We left for our honey moon the next day. After the honeymoon we came back and settled down. We also went back to our different work places after the long break. Mike did not stay for long at his place of work.

CHAPTER FOUR

“I am quitting employment Annie, I cannot take it anymore.”

“Excuse me, what did you just say?”

“I can’t work for those racists anymore.”

“Those racists are the ones who put food on our table everyday Mike, our health insurance and all our benefits.”

“I know Annie but I have a plan, trust me.”

“My mother always told me never to trust people who always said ‘trust me’.”

“I am very serious Annie, I want to start my own consultancy firm.”

“Running a business isn’t that easy Mike. Remember we have a mortgage to pay. What will happen if your business doesn’t pick up? I am sorry Mike. I always support you but this time I am not. I am not talking about this anymore.”

“I have already handed in my resignation letter Annie, I am sorry.”

“You like doing things your way Mike. You only think about yourself!” I walked out of the living room and rushed upstairs and sat on the bed thinking of the grave mistake that Mike had done.

Mike was an IT specialist by profession. When he was a young boy, Mike’s mother left the country abruptly and got married to a white man in Germany. He was left under the care of an aunt in their rural home. Mike’s mother used to send money to the aunt for their upkeep. The aunt did exactly that but she was too good to Mike until it reached a point that she had no control

over him. At school it was suspensions and expulsions so he ended up changing schools almost every year. He was also a very intelligent student and he had the habit of always challenging his teachers. This always landed him in trouble. The firm started on a low note but it finally picked up after a couple of months. Immediately I attained my second degree I was employed at a Norwegian organization as a public relations officer. One year into the marriage, having gathered enough resources, Mike and I decided that we were ready to raise children. We took a mortgage and bought a three bedroomed house in a gated community on the outskirts of the city center. I fell in love with the house immediately we saw it and it was within our budget. It was three hundred metres from the main road that led to the city center. It was a one storey building with greyish-black tiles for the roof. There was a huge garden at the back. I loved flowers and I thought that garden was perfect for my leisure time. There was enough light in the house and most of its interior was designed with wood. There was a fire place in the living room. When I saw the dining room, I pictured Mike, the children and I having dinner while having a good laugh. The windows were big. There was a spiral staircase heading to the first floor. The bedrooms were so spacious, each having its own bathroom. It was a perfect house for a family.

Days turned into months and months into years. We had tried our best but I was not conceiving. Where I come from, motherhood is held in high regard. One is not considered a complete woman unless she has children. The pressure was starting to get to me. Friends and acquaintances were already having babies. Some even married months after me. What was I doing wrong? School going girls were having children. They were more woman than me! I mean, there were cases of unwanted pregnancies all over. Each time I logged onto social media, someone I knew was flaunting their baby pictures. Other parents decided that their babies would make good profile pictures for their various social media accounts.

After the many negative pregnancy tests, Mike and I decided to seek medical advice. We visited a number of gynecologists in good hospitals around Nairobi to give us expert advice. Most of these doctors did not seem as concerned as we were. I took my vitamins and medication religiously but I still remained slim. I even tried some nasty concoction I bought from a certain Maasai man whom I was referred to by my mother in law. I felt like throwing up my intestines after I took that blend but the man promised me that it was the perfect medicine. I waited but it was all in vain.

I became a bitter woman. I remembered how when I was growing up we used to live near a ghetto that was a few meters from our estate. There was a dumpsite nearby and almost every month we would wake up to bodies of infants thrown away. I guess their mothers were not ready to raise children and here I was crying myself out for one. I thought about those women who gave birth and threw their babies in dumpsites. These women had gotten pregnant without even trying. I hated them with a passion. I kept my social circle small because people had started asking the question I dreaded most at that time. I always came up with excuses about work when Mike suggested we go and visit his family. I instead sent money to my parents in law through the mobile phone. That way they would forget about me visiting them. Earlier I enjoyed attending friends' baby showers and birthday parties for their children but this changed and I would find ways of not attending Church was also a no go zone for me. I was a very religious woman until a certain day I had a conversation with one of my church friends. It was baptism season for children at my church. Baptism took place only twice a year in the church so this was really important to most of the congregation. Becky was my friend and her daughter Stacy was to be baptized. Stacy always referred to me as Aunty Annie. I had been very good friends with the two since they were the first friends I made when I joined the church after Mike and I moved to our

new house. When Stacy came for the school holidays she would come visit me and play with my I-Pad as she told me stories about her school and friends. She was eleven and I could tell she saw me as a role model.

So on this day, after church, Mike decided to go to the car wash. We usually went to church on one car, mostly his. The other one remained at home. I just wanted to go home after mass so I told him to go to the car wash alone and I asked Becky to drop me at home since we lived in the same neighborhood. She was with her daughter. She agreed and off we went. On reaching at my gate I invited them in for lunch. I had some chicken and spaghetti left overs in the refrigerator from the previous night so I was just going to warm it on the microwave. Becky parked her car outside my gate as I unlocked the gate with Stacy tagging behind me. We got in the house. Becky sat on the sofa next to the door while Stacy ran for the remote control to turn the TV on. I left them, went upstairs to my bedroom to take off my shoes and put my handbag. After I was done, I went straight to the kitchen. After a few minutes lunch was served and the three of us were seated talking about how church was on that day. Our conversation went back to the baptism that was to take place in a week's time.

“Aunt Annie, will you be my godmother during my baptism?” Stacy asked excitedly.

That question caught me unexpectedly. Being a godmother according to our church meant being the other parent. One was supposed to be a role model to the child. To guide them and counsel them when need arose. I was delighted.

“Sure, why not,” I answered.

Becky did not utter a word. She appeared to be deep in thought.

“So what are we going to wear?” I asked Stacy.

“Anything that is white and beautiful.” She giggled.

We continued with our conversation as we ate our lunch and as soon as we were done they left. Becky seemed to be in a hurry. It was so unlike her. That night I got a call from Becky. She did not sound okay. She did not sugar coat anything and went straight to the point. She told me straight that she had already chosen a godmother for Stacy and that was final. She even told me the other woman was most suitable because she was a mother of three so she would know how to go about with children in case of anything in the future. Honestly, I was hurt. I was not a mother by choice. If it were up to me things would be different. I was so mad at Becky and at God too. I said to myself to hell with church and everyone in it. That was the last time I set foot in church.

I was a very bitter woman. I wondered why God was punishing me. I mean, I had lived by his book all my life. As far as I was concerned, there were worse people than me out there who had very beautiful children. Could God not find an alternative punishment for me? I always asked myself. I started questioning the whole existence of God.

I lost a considerable amount of weight because of stress. Mike was really concerned for my wellbeing and peace of mind. He was very understanding. Looking back, I thank God that he never pressured me to become a mother. I finally accepted that motherhood was not for me at this point.

CHAPTER FIVE

I always questioned my reason for living when the simple and obvious reason came to me- Mike loved and needed me with or without children. We had been married for four years. I loved my job. My workmates Essie and Kate had become very close friends to me. Essie was eight years older than Kate and I. She had been married for over fifteen years and together with the husband, they had three children. She was a plus sized woman of average height and with a light complexion. She was very conservative and very motherly. She was the voice of reason among the three of us. She was a public relations officer too. Kate on the other hand was very outgoing and a risk taker too. She was tall, very beautiful and had the body of a supermodel when I first met her. Her fashion sense too was out of this world. She was a divorcee and was raising her daughter alone. Her ex-husband had married another woman. She was the crazy one but very fun to be around. Kate worked in the IT Department. Despite all our differences, we blended in so well. These two women knew my struggles and always gave me hope when I was at my breaking point. We were the best of friends.

The day I finally realized I was pregnant we had gone for a team building exercise organized by the human resource department at a well-known high end restaurant a few kilometers from our work place. Our Human Resource manager always insisted on these team building exercises. He always reminded us that the exercises helped us to bond outside of work, improved our working relationships and they improved our communication skills with managers. I did not agree much but I loved these days since I would not be at the office. Other than providing short term fun at the moment, I did not think it had any impact on performance at the work place. When the exercise was over we went for lunch. I shared a table with Essie and we were joking around about the ambience and the great food.

“I am going to eat for three; opportunities like these do not come every day,” Said Essie.

“You know man eateth where he worketh,” I added, although I was very sure whoever came up with that saying meant a totally different thing. It did not matter at that time. Everyone was happy.

After the meal, Essie and I decided to go and have some drinks by the swimming pool behind the restaurant as we had small talk about nothing in particular. After a few minutes of talking I started becoming uncomfortable. I was feeling nauseated and all over sudden I wanted to throw up. I ran in the bathrooms where people were changing into their swimming costumes, found a sink and threw up. This was followed by a severe headache. After I was done, I heard Essie behind me laughing so hard. I looked at the mirror right in front of me and I could see her holding our bags behind me.

“You wicked woman, what is so funny?” I asked her smiling.

“I think you over did the eating Annie.” She said.

“I think so too, my head is spinning. I think I will just go home.”

She tried to convince me to stay some more but I was not feeling well. We agreed that we should inform the other workmates and then pass by the nearest pharmacy to get some Painkillers for my headache. We had come in the company vehicle. I had left my car at the work place parking lot so I had to go get it first before heading home. We convinced Njeru our work place driver to drive us to the nearest pharmacy and then from there Essie and I would know what to do. He agreed. I sat in the co-driver’s seat of the mini-bus while Essie sat right behind the driver and we took off. We found a pharmacy not very far from the restaurant. We bid Njeru goodbye as we got

in the pharmacy. I immediately went to the visitor's lounge to sit as Essie went to the counter to get the medication. I took my mobile phone from my handbag and looked at the time. It was around 3.30p.m. I logged onto Facebook to update my friends how my day started well but it had just been ruined. I put my phone back in my handbag and saw Elsie negotiating with the pharmacist as they threw glances at me.

I could not make out what they were saying so I stood up from where I was seated and went to talk to them. After explaining to the pharmacist how I was feeling he suggested that I first go to the laboratory first to get tested before buying any medication. I insisted that I was just fine, a bit of nausea, headache and dizziness but he still insisted on the tests. Essie talked me into it and I agreed. He gave us directions to the laboratory and we went. Essie took the staircase first and I followed her. As I took the stairs, I was finding it a bit hard to breath. It had been quite a while since I went to the gym. I stopped going for gym classes after Mike bought a treadmill and brought it at home. I also bought some exercise DVDS. Besides, it was too cold in the morning as I jogged to the gym. I had not been very faithful to the DVDs and the treadmill. I was always busy as I carried my work home and always tired. Besides , it was a bit boring to exercise by myself.

When we were done with the stairs, right in front of us was a light blue door with the sign 'Laboratory'. I went straight in followed by Essie as she closed the door behind her. We found a man with a white laboratory coat reading a newspaper. He took his eyes off the newspapers and looked up at us.

"Good afternoon ladies, please have a seat," he said as he stood up throwing the newspaper on his wooden desk. I handed him the note I was given downstairs as I sat on the sofa Essie had

already sat on. I placed my bag on the seat too. Essie took the newspaper from his desk and she started reading it. The laboratory technician went to one corner of the room and took his equipment from a cabinet. He came back to where I was seated, took my right arm and tied a tourniquet on the upper part of the arm. He took a piece of cotton wool and poured antiseptic on it and wiped the part he was going to inject. He threw the cotton wool in the dustbin and took a needle from his tray and inserted it into my vein to draw blood. After he was done, he told me to wait for five minutes. Essy was still reading the newspaper. I took my phone and started scrolling nothing in particular. I ended up reading the comments on my earlier status update.

After three minutes, the tests were done and the laboratory technician told us to follow him to the doctor's office. We stood up, adjusted our clothes, picked our bags and followed him. Essy told me she had to use the bathrooms downstairs and she left. I followed the technician. The doctor's door was written Dr. Okello. We got in and found a tall, dark man in a suit reading something from a blue file. As soon as he was handed my results and was updated about me he pushed the file aside, took his spectacles from a drawer in his desk and started reading the results.

"Please have a seat," Dr Okello said as he continued reading. The technician left. I noticed the doctor was grinning as soon as he was done reading.

"The tests show that you are perfectly fine. No sickness at all."

"That is good news doctor, but why... what could be the cause of my headache? Or maybe I am just tired, never mind. So, can I get my painkillers finally?"

"You are right. You are tired because you are pregnant." The doctor blurted out.

"What did you just say?"

“Mrs. Annie you are pregnant.”

I had waited for over three years to hear those words. My one wish was to become a mother and now the doctor had confirmed it.

“Congratulations are in order.”

I cannot explain what I felt at that moment. I was the happiest but I still wanted to cry. I could not wait to share the news.

“Thank you doctor, thank you very much. You do not know what this means to me. I have to go.” I had to look for Essie.

Doctor Okello handed me a note to take downstairs at the counter so that I pay for the tests. I stood up immediately almost forgetting my handbag and almost ran downstairs. I immediately saw Essie at the visitor’s lounge talking on the phone. When she saw me coming she bid the person on the other end of the phone goodbye and hung up. I sat beside her and she immediately inquired about the tests. I told her I would update her as soon as we were out of that place. She could read the excitement on my face. We went to the counter and I paid the cashier and I hurriedly pulled Essie out to the parking lot which was half empty. I pulled her behind shiny silver Toyota Prado that had been parked. I held her arm and I looked at her. I could not help but laugh. She looked at me as if I was crazy.

“You better speak now woman! She demanded.”

“Oh my- my- go...” I could not find a proper statement.

I shook and trembled, stuttering and stumbling on my words, I finally found myself able to come out with it.

“I am pregnant... I’m pregnant Essie. I AM PREGNANT!” I finally let out the sentence, repeatedly. The one I had hoped to say since so long ago.

“OH MY GOD, YES!” Essie yelled as she hugged me tightly.

I could not believe it. I had to call Mike. No, better yet, I had to tell him in person. It would be a nice surprise. We walked to the bus stop and boarded a *Matatu* that would take us back to the CBD to get our cars from our work place. I was in frenzy. I thanked God so much as I sat back and let the news sink in. The *Matatu* was playing ‘Love the way you lie’ by Rihanna.

Immediately I packed my car, I got in the house, went straight to the bedroom and took a shower. I had forgotten about my headache. After I was done, I looked at the mirror and saw a young attractive woman who looked back at me. She had smiling lines at the corner of her eyes and they reflected a woman with new found hope and optimism. She had these large, dark eyes, noble and loving in nature. She was beautiful.

As the sun faded behind the horizon, dark clouds rolled in. A cool breeze began. It was about to rain. It was now 7.00 p.m. I then heard the sound of his Toyota Harrier. The father of my unborn child packed outside the house just as rain drops started falling from the sky. He walked in after turning the door knob, exhausted. He dropped the car keys on the coffee table, sat on the dark brown leather sofa and took off his shoes and socks not forgetting his tie. He had to hear the news. This day was our day. The journey had only begun.

CHAPTER SIX

When I was preparing to have my first born child, I saw it as a once-in-a-life time opportunity, something I wanted more than anything to do perfectly. I wanted the safest and most positive result possible. As the person playing the most active role in the event, I felt it was my responsibility to shape those things. I had to start by organizing myself. I had to think of a healthcare provider. I had to take medical tests, vitamins and folic acid. I had actually done a lot of research on pregnancy while I was still trying to become pregnant. A few days after I discovered I was pregnant I had discussed with Essie and Kate on the best hospitals for antenatal, childbirth and postnatal care. I found one for my antenatal visits but I was still to settle on the best for child birth. I brought up the subject once more one day as we were having our tea break at the work place cafeteria. I was with Kate and Essie. We were taking tea.

“You know I have not yet told the boss lady about my pregnancy. I think it is time I did.”

“You need to Annie, it is almost three months and you know you cannot hide it forever. Very soon it will start showing.” Essie said.

She was right. Honestly, I was a bit scared of telling my Boss that I was pregnant. I was not sure how she would take it. I used to refer to her as Boss Lady while I was with my friends. She was not that approachable. She was a woman in her early fifties, married with two sons. The first born was married to a woman from a well to do family. They had a very extravagant wedding whose pictures were all over social media. They had one child but apparently our boss’ son used to mistreat the wife. The man used to beat the woman up every time they disagreed on something. A distant relative to boss lady once told a workmate that one night, the husband came home very drunk and became too irritated after being served cold food for dinner by the wife. He took the food, threw it at her and started shouting, “I earn enough money to deserve better food.”

He then started punching her and when their six year old son tried to intervene, he beat him as well. The mother and child tried to lock themselves in the bedroom but he broke the door open and beat them some more. Having endured the beating for a couple of years, she decided that that was enough and walked out of their marriage never to return again. Other than the battering, the wife had to ask for permission to invite friends and relatives over. She did not tell anyone about the violence because she was too ashamed. The girl's family decided to take their daughter together with the child to an undisclosed location never to be seen again. Rumour had it that she got married to another man somewhere in Europe. The second born to boss lady on the other hand had dropped out of college in Australia and had turned into a drug addict and an alcoholic. He was deported back to the country.

Perhaps this made her a bitter woman. She was harsh to everyone. No one dared cross her path. She was neither jolly nor fun to be with. She was extremely dedicated to her work and very determined. She did not have time to sugar coat problems. She yelled a lot in her office. She also did not believe in wasting time so as to be politically correct. Everyone dreaded going into her office. So how was I supposed to go in there and tell her? I opted to write to her an email instead but I thought otherwise. It was not easy but I knew my rights. Talking to her face to face was the mature thing to do.

“You remember how it went with Winnie?” I asked Essie and Kate.

Winnie was our workmate before deciding to call it quits. Our boss started discriminating on her the moment she learnt that she was expectant. She was required to work on an hourly rate and not on salary terms like the rest of us. The management even tried to cut her pay and then her hours. Company policy they said. She was told that her performance had dropped and they even

took away her annual bonus. When she finally went for her leave, she took a loan and started her restaurant. She actually had a passion for cooking. The restaurant is doing so well.

“She had it rough although in the end it worked out for her. You have to do it Annie no matter the consequences.” Essie said.

That night before I slept I decided that the first thing I would do the following day after work would be to go at my boss’ office to break the news. My husband told me to do it and everything would be alright. Surprisingly, the following day when I broke the news she was too calm. She even congratulated me and wished me all the best. She added that if I needed anything she would be glad to help. When I gave birth later, she even personally came at the hospital to see us and bought Jesse a very beautiful sleeping basket. I wrote a letter the same day on when I expected to start my leave and it was a done deal.

Four months into my pregnancy Mike and I were still to decide on which hospital I was to deliver in. We were still consulting with friends and mothers I knew on social media. For the first time I realized how expensive medical care was in the country. I also realized how wide the gap was between the rich and the poor. It was very affordable to deliver in a public hospital compared to a private hospital. I could not understand why because as far as I was concerned the end result was the same – a baby. I remember asking my sister in law who delivered in one of the most expensive hospitals in the country how the experience was thanks to her medical insurance. She told me for the first time in her life she ate turkey. I settled for another average private hospital that was suggested by my aunt Jessica.

Aunt Jessica was a retired nurse who had worked in almost all the government hospitals in the country. She had enough experience when it came to the subject. But this did not go without

warning. She informed me that ninety percent of the doctors in private hospitals would encourage me to go for a caesarean section so that they would make money. A caesarean section almost cost ten times normal delivery. To them it was good business. They would use scare tactics on new mothers such as telling them their pregnancy was breech and because they knew these mothers wanted the best for their baby they knew that they would agree and the doctors would end up winning.

On the other hand, after the government decided that it would offer free maternity, things got worse in the public hospitals. The same government did not bother to check if the hospitals had enough equipment and personnel before implementing this. This project was definitely bound to fail. I visited my cousin around the same time who had just delivered a baby in the biggest public maternity hospital in the country. She was sharing a bed with two other women. They all had babies. The situation was pathetic. I was not going to subject my baby and me to those conditions – I decided. No matter how skilled the doctors and the nurses at the hospital were.

A workmate once narrated her ordeal to us in the public hospital. The woman had suffered a number of miscarriages in the past but she still had hope of carrying her child one day. After having one of those miscarriages, she refused the doctors to remove the pregnancy. She was still in denial and had the hope of carrying a child. When she went back to hospital after discomfort in her tummy, the doctor told her that there was something stuck at her cervix. The doctor also insisted that it had to be removed. During the process the pregnancy was removed and the doctor placed it in a bowl. He brought it to the top of the bed where my workmate was lying.

“This was decaying inside you,” he said pointing at how she was being a ‘silly girl’.

My workmate was grieving but the doctor clearly did not care. Apparently, the nurse in the room had a look of horror on her face as the doctor was doing this at my workmate's face. She became much traumatized after that experience.

A lot of cases had been reported on the same hospital of mothers and babies dying because of negligence. The doctors alone are not to be blamed though. They were human beings and with the overwhelming number of women streaming in to get free services things like these were bound to happen. Baby business was also thriving in the hospital. The rich who could not sire their own children would come and buy children from the hospital illegally. News about a mother who had given birth to twins but later they were pronounced dead in the hospital made headlines I remember. The babies were immediately taken to the nursery after birth only for the mother never to see them again. She was told that they had died and even bodies were brought for confirmation. The mother insisted that she had a feeling that her babies were still alive. Upon further investigations by the police and DNA tests, it was discovered that the bodies did not even belong to twins and the DNA too did not match the parents'. Upon further investigation it was said that the babies had been sold to some expatriates who were already out of the country at the time of the investigation. I can't imagine the pain this mother went through. I was not going to take chances.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The previous day I woke up very early with the need to clean up the house. I spent the whole day cleaning and doing laundry. The next day, I went into labour. I was lying on the bed at night when all over sudden I started feeling strange pains on my lower abdomen and back. It was more of a discomfort. Mike looked at me and noticed I was cringing.

“What’s up dear?”

“I am very uncomfortable, you have some sleep. I think I’ll just go to the living room and watch a movie.”

“Do you want me to keep you company?”

“Not really, I am fine.” When I went downstairs I took my phone and called Essie to tell her how I was feeling. “It could be labour kicking in. Stay alert in case it gets worse. I hoped you have packed everything you might need in case the baby is coming. Call me if you need anything.” I went upstairs again just to counter check if everything was in order. Mike was fast asleep and I did not want to wake him up in case it was a false alarm.

I walked into the labour room at around midnight. I was very energetic. Besides, all I had to do was push once the pains had started. I was so ready for motherhood. Mike had driven me to the hospital. I called my mother on our way to inform her that finally I was going to have my bundle of joy. Once Mike was done with the admission procedures and I was booked at the hospital, he left promising to return later. A tall, slim light skinned nurse with very long hair carried one of my bags and showed me into a room. She wanted to check if I had dilated. I quickly lay on the bed she showed me and I let her examine me. When she was done, she informed me that I had barely dilated three centimeters but she insisted that I stay in hospital because of the contractions

I was experiencing on my lower back. I dressed up and I was taken to another room which was the ward for women who were still waiting to give birth. Luckily, the ward was partitioned with curtains so there was enough privacy. She showed me my bed and I got in my partition as she left.

I put the bags on top of a white cabinet that was on the right side of the bed. I undressed and changed into the hospital gown that had been placed on top of the bed. I sat on the bed legs stretched on top and took out my I-pad from my bag. I connected it to the hospital's free Wi-Fi. Free internet is what I needed at the moment. I sat back still feeling the contractions but they were manageable. I browsed a bit on child birth and boredom with a bit of fear started kicking in. I took out my phone and called Kate. She told me to have courage but I told her I was actually having a blast. I hung up. A few seconds later, I heard a scream from the woman on my left hand side. I dragged my heavy body out of my bed and pushed the curtain to see what was happening.

“Lord of Israel, please help me! Jehovah! The devil is a liar!”

The nurse came inside, examined her only to tell her she had a few hours to go. She left. I spent the next two hours listening to her sing almost all the songs I sang at my high school assembly from the Golden Bells hymn book. I had had enough. I took my earphones plugged them in my ears connected them to my laptop and put on Adelle's *21* album so as to forget what was happening around me. I convinced myself that I was going to brave the pain and avoid such embarrassments when it was my turn.

I cannot recall what really happened to me but I remember letting out a very loud scream after feeling a very sharp pain at my lower back. That marked the start of my painful labour journey. My neighbor at the ward had already delivered her little bundle of joy and had been taken to

another ward. Each time I felt the pain that came after every three minutes; I would grab the window curtains and call on my mother. As time went, the pain became more intense. I thought that the moment I started screaming the nurses would come running but I was wrong. One nurse came after a few minutes and told me to stop screaming and save that energy for delivery because I would need it. I wanted to slap her so hard. It reached a point and I decided I had had enough.

“Doctor, take me to the theatre! I want a caesarean section now!” I shouted.

The nurse came back and put something which I later came to learn was inducement in my drip. In less than ten minutes, I started jerking and I was rushed to the delivery room where I was told to push. It was not as easy as I assumed. I tried to push but my energy was gone. I started praying to God so hard silently. I recalled how I had stopped going to church when God had denied me a child and I asked him for forgiveness. I even promised God that if I delivered safely, I will never miss church. The two doctors who were in the delivery room as I lay on the bed one on my right the other on the left held my tummy on both sides. They helped me to push as I looked at them not making out what they were saying to me. I stared at them almost passing out. Then I heard a cry. It was my baby boy! I was too happy that I regained my strength. One doctor took the baby and showed him to me and took him again. The other doctor was still holding my tummy and he was pushing something out again. I let out another scream.

“What is it now? I do not have twins.”

“Placenta!” He yelled back.

“Why are you removing my Placenta?”

At the time I thought the doctor was messing with my womb. He laughed so hard and told me to relax. The other doctor and the nurse were cleaning my baby. It was around two in the morning.

I took a lot of classes on child birth and care the months I was pregnant but it turned out that there was a whole lot of things that happened before one left the hospital. I did not learn these things in the classes and also no one ever mentioned them to me. I guess most people figure that once you have actually had the baby you have already seen hell and come back and there was no reason to point out these things. My visions of meeting my baby were straight out of Hollywood movies that I watched on my flat screen TV whenever I was free. Push, a cry, it is a boy! A perfect six month baby in a soft blanket is handed to the mother.

I was laying helplessly when the doctor put squirming wet Jesse on my naked tummy. I felt as if I was supposed to scoop him up in my arms but I was so weighed down by the equipment and so freaked out that a small person had just come out of me. I stared at him not knowing what to do. The trauma was added with what had come out of me after the baby. I was so surprised at how huge the placenta was. It looked like a fat cow's intestines on a big tray. It is at this point that I respected all mothers all over the world.

I had to hand over Jesse back for the doctor to confirm if I was okay. After he was done, Jesse was given back to me bundled in a blanket and I hugged him tightly. I was all sweaty, exhausted and half naked in the bloody hospital gown but too excited. The nurse helped me to hold Jesse on my breast for his first nursing. It was a bit awkward. I was scared that he would not know what to do but I realized that you cannot mess with nature. He had an instinctive latch on while he was still fresh from the womb.

“He is such a natural,” the nurse said looking at us smiling.

“You think?” we all laughed.

I fumbled to hold him. The hospital had the laboring women in a different room from the recovering mothers and babies so I had to be moved. I dragged myself into the bathroom, blood flowing mercilessly. Jesse was asleep. The nurse assured me it was fine and it will end on its own. Since I felt weak, a nurse pushed me in a wheel chair while another nurse carried Jesse for me. I had to get some sleep. After showering I laid Jesse by my side as he faced upwards and me facing him for protection. We slept for a couple of hours and then I woke up with the biggest adrenaline ever. I called Mike and my mother with the fantastic news.

I felt energetic most of the first day. Breakfast was brought and I ate every bit of food on that tray. I told Mike on phone to bring some more. I thought eating for two had ended with child birth but I was wrong. Jesse finally woke up and was staring. I would have sworn he was able to see everything around him. I tried to breastfeed him but I made all typical mistakes like leaning over to the baby instead of lifting him to me. His latch on was gone. He actually seemed skeptical about the whole thing. The more I tried to nurse him, the more he would cry. I was heartbroken. This made me feel defeated. After talking to the nurses and listening to them I began to get the hang of it. He napped a lot on day one. In the afternoon I started feeling muscle aches. I kept switching positions in bed so as to be comfortable. The nurse gave me some painkillers. The recovery process and the beginning of milk production made me too thirsty. Mark had visited earlier and left too excited. I took a lot of tea, porridge and water. Other relatives and friends started streaming in the hospital to welcome the little bundle of joy.

In the evening I was too tired but still very grateful to be a mother finally. I breastfed Jesse at around 7.00p.m and we settled to sleep. I was in for a rude shock. Jesse having napped all day

was in no mood to sleep. He was nursing after every two hours. I had expected sleepless nights of course but this was boot camp. He cried a lot and I took a lot of tea to keep awake. I would have preferred my coffee but I was warned against it when breastfeeding. My bottom was feeling sour where the stitches I received earlier were located. This made both walking and sitting very uncomfortable. The night nurses were very encouraging though. One took Jesse at some point for routine checkup and I slept the few minutes he was gone. By the time they were back, I was awake in a sleep deprived stupor. The stupor lasted the next several weeks.

The next day I was released from hospital. Mike and his sister came to pick us up. My doctor stopped by to see how Jesse and I were doing. He reminded us to come back after six weeks for a post-partum checkup. I was not aware of what awaited me. We took Jesse to his newly decorated nursery which was mostly blue.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Two weeks before I had Jesse, I had visited my parents in the country side. I travelled alone because Mike needed to be at work. He had tried to convince me to wait until the weekend when he would be free but I would hear none of it. He was not comfortable with me driving myself in my condition. I assured him everything would be fine. Besides, pregnancy was not a disease. He had to let me go by myself. I visited for two days and when it was time to go back home, my mother walked me to the car, worried too.

“You are sure you do not need help with the driving? I wonder how you even manage to fit in the car. The baby might pop out any minute now you know.” She said.

I assured her that I was just fine. Besides, it was only a two hour drive. I had carried baby stuff and my medical records in case of anything. I was set to go to the nearest hospital. She did not look convinced anyway.

“Parenthood rarely goes as planned, whether it is your first, third or last born. This does not mean you are doing anything wrong though. You have to be prepared always. You also need to figure out how to adjust. Babies will turn your life upside down so you and Mike better be prepared Annie.”

It took me a few seconds to think about what she had just told me but I could not really figure so I just let it pass.

“I will be fine Ma! I am not your little girl anymore.” I said as she walked me to the car. She opened the driver’s door for me as I got in throwing my handbag on the co-driver’s seat.

“Okay, drive safely and call me as soon as you get home.”

I later came to learn the meaning of my mother's words the last time we were together a few days after I had Jesse. While I was pregnant, I had kept a calendar on my bedroom wall strictly for the purpose of counting how many days had been left before I finally held my baby. Actually, the main aim of this calendar was for me to count how many days I had left for my troubles to end. I was too tired and I just wanted to get the baby out for life to go back to the way it was previously.

I used to rearrange my wardrobe each and every week because I was gaining weight each and every day. I thought about reducing my food intake but I thought otherwise. I was doing it for baby. I was fat. I had gained over fifteen kilograms. Stretch marks too had formed on my previously thin waist, my tummy, arms and even breasts. I also experienced the worst acne ever all over my face. I visited several dermatologists but no medication worked for me. One doctor suggested that the only solution I had was to wait until I had delivered my baby. The more reason I wanted the nine months to be over. My breasts were really sore and bigger. My bladder had become loose that one day I peed on myself at work. Essie had to go to the nearest store and buy me clothes to change into. I had to watch what I ate because I was constipated most of the time.

As miraculous and joyous motherhood sounded, I disliked the whole pregnancy thing. I had to let go my favorite designer clothes most of which I had not worn for long since my pregnancy came unexpectedly. They would not fit even months after I had Jesse. Mornings before work were really stressful. Clothes that fit a week ago would not fit the following week. I was always shopping around for clothes that I would wear for just a few months. My shoes too no longer fit as my ankles were swollen. I had to buy bigger flat shoes. Letting go of my high heels was heartbreaking. The fashionista in me was dying a slow death.

One day as Mike and I were preparing to go for work, I was combing my hair in the bathroom. Mike needed to brush his teeth so he asked me to pass him his toothbrush and toothpaste from the bathroom shelf because I was blocking his way. I passed them to him and as soon as he opened the toothpaste and pressed the tube, I threw up immediately. I hated the way the toothpaste oozed out of the tube. I felt nauseated. Another time I was at the workplace and I thought about chicken. I threw up on my office desk. It was too embarrassing.

I was too emotional, irrational and messy. I cried a lot too. On my birthday that year, I cried for an hour because Mike had asked me what kind of cake I wanted. He had given me two options. I was to choose between a black forest cake and a red velvet one. I could not decide. I called my mother and told her that Mike was being mean to me. I had terrible cravings especially at night when everyone was asleep. One night I craved eating fish so much that I could not sleep. I woke Mike up and insisted that the baby wanted to eat fish. Mike had to dress up at 1.00p.m to go and get fish. When he came back with the fish, I had no appetite to eat it. When I finally had Jesse, Mike and I were happy that this craziness was finally over. We were wrong.

The first few months after he was born I was on an emotional rollercoaster. I cried every day for one month after he was born. I could not explain the cries. I was not sleeping enough and my body felt like it had been run over by a truck. I later came to learn these were baby blues. My new role as a mother brought with it some intense feelings of bonding, over protectiveness and fear too.

My relationship with Mike had changed since we had Jesse. I was so hormonal and crazy. Mike had a hard time because he did not know how to help. I used to snap at him a lot more than I used to. I even started resenting him a little for going to work while I was at home with the baby.

We did not talk about how things were going to change once we had a baby. Sure, we talked about diapers, nannies, discipline and medical insurance, things like that. When he came from work in the evenings, he would want my attention but he had to wait or talk to me over a crying baby. He would get hurt but I could not help it. All I wanted to do was to be around Jesse. I clearly loved Jesse more than him but it was not intentional. Sometimes I even forgot Mike existed. This caused friction between us. We bickered a lot more than we used to. The time we had for each other where I would just lie on the couch with him for hours at night watching a fake reality show was gone. That to me became time to clean up and prepare things for the next day such as feeding bottles.

Motherhood had frozen my sexual response. A few months after I had Jesse I believed that I had to look a certain way in order to entice Mike, to make him desire me. I discovered that he really did not care if I was a few kilograms overweight or did not look like a music video seductress. Also, lust was not the emotion that I really wanted from Mike. I just wanted a back rub or a leg massage but that was too boring for him.

Jesse's first year was both good and bad I guess. Despite all the challenges, he made me happy. He made me laugh, smile and worry like I have never had before. When Jesse was almost a year old, Mike and I were too excited because he could finally stand on his own while holding onto something. Mike arranged for a vacation for the three of us to celebrate this big transformation. He decided to take us to the Coast of Kenya for four days where we would all unwind since it had been a crazy year. We left the nanny at home to take care of the house while we were away. It was mid-September and it was hot down at the coast. Mike drove us there.

Mike had made prior arrangements on what hotel we were going to stay at. It was around eight thirty in the evening. When we arrived at the reception, the receptionist smiled at us as some attendants helped us to carry our luggage inside. The interior of the hotel was especially white with colourful lights flickering through gold chandeliers on the ceiling. The lights were not too bright nor too dull. The hotel was situated on the beach side. We could see the waters outside our window when we were shown into the room and I could not wait for day time to have a better view. A very friendly lady attendant knocked at our door and when I opened it, she got in and took our dinner orders. She left and immediately I took a shower in the fancy all-white bathroom. The bathroom had a nice rosy scent and they had an assorted collection of bath-gels. Mike was next and I bathed Jesse. He was too cranky since we arrived. He had never travelled that far. There was a relaxing area in the room where red leather seats and a small glass table had been placed. We all sat there waiting for dinner. The lady who took our orders came back pushing our food in a trolley. It was a three course meal neatly presented in the plates. Jesse refused to eat and fell asleep immediately sweating heavily. I turned on the air conditioner. I placed him on his bed and I was left with Mike. We took our dinner and went straight to bed. The high density mattress was exactly what we needed.

The following day we decided to go for swimming first thing in the morning after breakfast. We preferred the beach water to the hotel's swimming pool. This would be Jesse's first swim. We carried a picnic with us and sat by the beach. The beach was very calm and not many people had come since it was morning hours. The coconut and palm trees were swinging from side to side. Waves formed in the water and disappeared almost immediately as other waves formed. The sun was already up, perfect weather for swimming. Jesse was enjoying the sand. He was playing with it and rolled over it. I took my I-phone from my bag to capture these great moments. I stood

up, walked a few steps from him and his father who was seated next to him scrolling his phone. I walked a few steps from them to capture perfect pictures with the beach serving as the background. After taking a couple of pictures and selfies, I heard an incoming call. It was Essie checking on us. We talked for over two minutes and when she hung up I walked back to where Mike and Jesse were seated.

Jesse was now seated amid of the picnic stuff. He had been gurgling and all over sudden he went quiet. I was still standing looking for a spot to sit. I did not know it at the moment but he had picked up a piece of a pear on one of the plates and put it in his mouth. He was choking! At that moment everything went slow. I looked at him and his skin had completely changed colour. He being light skinned like his father, it was so evident. Everything became so strange. Then it hit me again that he was choking. I picked him up very fast, placed him on my left hand facing downwards as I wacked him on the back using my right hand but the pear would not come out. Mike stood there more shaken than I was, with no idea on what to do. I finally hit him again and the piece of pear came out. He started crying. I have never been so glad to hear a child cry. He cried for some time probably from the shock of me hitting him. After one hour he was playing again.

The incident made me to be more careful on how I look after Jesse. I became overly watchful around children. The thought of the guilt I would have felt if we had lost him is one of the things that frightened me most. It is still my greatest fear. I can easily recall Jesse's accomplishments and struggles. At an early age, he exhibited a great enjoyment of numbers and memory of words. He loved to sort things such as playing blocks and pegs. He would also line up his toy cars by colour. He was also too curious. This always landed him in trouble if not danger. When he was one and a half he ate an unknown number of petroleum jelly. He was also tall for his age and

enjoyed hanging out with older boys. He loved to practice TV commercials in front of the bathroom mirror.

When it was time to transfer him from his baby cot to a bed, it was a bit tricky. He would wake up at around 2.00 am every day and sleep between me and Mike. I agreed because I loved him. He would lie silently staring at the ceiling in darkness for five minutes where I would be drifting back to sleep because I needed to wake up for work the following day. Unfortunately, he would softly ask me if I was asleep and I would sleepily tell him that I was and he should too. He would go back to staring at the ceiling for two minutes and tell me that he needed to pee. I would drag myself out of bed, turn on the lights and take him to the toilet then go back to bed. Immediately we are back in bed, he would start talking or singing his favourite song and he would force me to sing with him. I would tell him to sleep and he would challenge me with a “why?” this would go on for at least two hours until I promised to buy him something the next day. As soon as he agreed he would say he was thirsty. Sigh! I would get out of bed again and walk to the kitchen as he followed me. As soon as I gave him the cup he would start telling me stories again. I had to pretend I was listening or else he would repeat again and again. That meant at least five minutes of drinking the water which was half full. By the time we would go to bed it would be around 4.30am. I would be left with thirty minutes only to sleep before work.

When he was two, I was really trying hard to toilet train him but he really would just not get the hang of it. I felt terrible. I always imagined him going to kindergarten in diapers when it was time. This really freaked me out. At times, I shared my frustrating moments with Mike and he would offer me advice on how he would handle the same situations.

“Tell him what you want him to do.”

“Put him on the toilet seat.”

“Tell him to eat.”

He made it to sound so simple but he did not seem to understand the feelings I experienced. Bath time was the worst time of the day. That is when we had our biggest fights. I used to spank him a little and sometime this would leave marks on his fair skin. I felt so terrible after doing this. I was a bad mother. One day, Jesse refused to obey what I had just told him and I pushed him really hard on the floor. I hated myself. Everything was out of control and I felt so guilty. This was the child I had wanted so bad. One day, when he was almost hitting three, I was arguing as usual and I was screaming. He knew I would hit him any minute so he got scared. He took a knife that was on the dining table and pointed it at me. I did not want him to grow into a delinquent.

I talked to Essie and Kate and I realized I was taking out my frustrations on Jesse. Actually, Essie had noticed something was not right when one day she came at my place to visit and she noticed a mark on Jesse’s right cheek. Jesse off handedly said, “That is where mummy hit me.” Essie turned to look at me eyes blazing.

“You know you could be reported for child abuse,” she said. I looked at her with uncertainty and guilt. She reassured me that most mothers were going through stress when they struck their children. I knew I had to take it easy on Jesse and I.

CHAPTER NINE

When time to go back to work came, I gave the evolution not much thought. I always found great satisfaction and passion in my career. A number of women had told me the first days at work after maternity leave would be a bit hard so I went prepared for the worst. Surprisingly, the first days were not that hard. My workmates told me how great I looked because the last time they saw me I looked like a trailer. For the first time I wore nice shoes and I did not smell of milk, baby wipes and diapers.

After going to work for a few days, the excitement ended when I came to the realization that I was leaving my child. I felt so empty and vacant. Being at work was a bit disturbing and being at home was not fulfilling enough. I was in a dilemma. I was burning the candle at both ends. During the four months I was at home, I was looking for the perfect nanny who would still be my house help. She was supposed to look after Jesse while I was at work. Before Jesse, I used to get random women who would come on the weekends, clean the house and clothes, get paid for the day and leave. The routine would be repeated the following weekend. After Jesse I now needed a live-in nanny who would help me in taking care of him. I did not know babies were so much work! In the four months I had already fired three and I was now on the fourth one.

Back in the day while I was growing up, our parents had it easier when it came to raising children. My mother was a housewife and my father made sure we did not lack. Staying at home was not an option for me. Mike and I also needed the money to pay our mortgage so we both had to work. Back in the day when I was young, when my mother wanted to leave us children behind so as to go run an errand, she would leave my siblings under the care of relatives especially aunts or grandparents. I would have wanted the same for Jesse but it was not possible.

My own parents were working and my mother in law was outside the country. She left Kenya and decided to settle in Europe. Jesse's aunts too were living in different parts of the country and most of them were working anyway. Therefore, it was not possible for Jesse to be left under the care of a relative. Also, even if a relative was available at the moment, they would still demand for pay at the end of the month for work done. Now, paying was not a problem but you just cannot correct your own blood the way you would a stranger if they did something wrong in the house. Most probably it would make your relationship odd and you would be branded the bad one by the family members. The only option was to hire a stranger for a nanny.

These nannies came with their share of problems too. Before I had Jesse, I would hear Essie and Kate complaining at work how their nannies at home did something bad and they needed to be fired. I always thought they were being petty. I even used to tell them they should start treating their nannies right and they would reciprocate. I was in for a rude shock. During my four months leave, I had already fired three and I was now on the fourth one, Kanini.

The first one I employed was too dirty. She could not clean anything right. She was always rushing when doing the house chores and ended up doing them badly. I was not going to leave Jesse with someone who could not clean his feeding bottles. I fired her after a month. The second lady on the other hand was very clean but would always get distracted from her work by her mobile phone. She was always talking on phone and I could tell from her body language most of the people she was talking to were men. If not on phone she was always chatting with friends on the internet. I could not take it anymore when one day I found her chatting on phone while Jesse's milk was boiling and pouring all over the kitchen floor. She must have turned on the cooker, put the sufuria with milk and forgot about it. I let her go the following day. The last one I let go was too controlling. I felt like a slave in my own home. She was two years older than me

and had two children who she left under the care of her mother. She would dictate what we should eat in the house. She also had the audacity to tell me to switch channels while I was watching TV to channels that she preferred. Mexican soap operas and Nigerian movies were her favourite and I could not stand them. I found an excuse and fired her after a month.

Mike's employee had recommended Kanini. She was his cousin. She was my age mate but she did not look like it. She looked older, beat by life. The first time I saw her I almost took her back to wherever she had come from. She looked emaciated and her clothes would not fit. She had these sunken eyes and seemed deeply in thought. I interrogated her for almost an hour to know what the deal was. Apparently she decided to look for any job so as to support her three children who were all in primary school and her parents. She had gotten married while she was sixteen years and was staying in Ukambani with her mother in law while the husband worked in Nairobi. After a few years the husband stopped coming home on the weekends and stopped sending money. She decided to go to Nairobi and look for him after almost a year of him not visiting. She found another woman in the husband's house in Nairobi. When the husband came in the evening he chased her away. She went back to their house in the countryside, took her children and left for her parent's home.

As if that was not enough, her elder brother who used to support the parents financially had mysteriously disappeared at his work place for six months now. He had been employed by a Chinese firm who had been contracted by the government to build the new railway that would help in easing the traffic congestion in the city. His phone had gone off for two weeks and when the father went to look for him at the work place, he found his house door locked from the outside. Neighbours said they had also lastly seen him two weeks earlier and assumed he had gone home. Since he worked as a casual in building the railway, the workmates assumed he had

found a better job and had gone to do it. The police were informed, notices were placed all over even in the newspaper but no news on his whereabouts came. He disappeared just like that, without a trace. Kanini had lost a husband and a brother. I felt so sorry for her and after hearing her stories I could not take her back to her home. She needed the money.

The reason I was always hiring and firing was because I wanted the best for Jesse. I had heard stories of nannies that had stolen from their bosses, killed the children they were supposed to take care of, kidnapped them and even assaulted their bosses. It was actually scary. I knew a woman from church who had lost his son through a nanny. She was a high school teacher by profession and her two year old needed to go to hospital for his measles jab four days after the coming of a new house help. She was a single mother. On the day of the job, she decided not to miss work and instead send the house help to take him. The hospital was just a few kilometers from their home.

On arriving home in the evening after work, she found her house door locked from the outside and when she peeped in through the window, she could tell there was no one in the house. She tried to reach the nanny through her mobile phone but she was unavailable. She decided to go to the hospital and check if they were still there. The hospital records showed that the son had received his jab but in the morning hours. Night came, they did not come back. She reported to the police in the morning. Investigations were done in the bureau she had been picked from but it was discovered the woman had given fake information. She was just a criminal masquerading as a house help. The boy was never seen again. My heart still aches for this woman.

Around the same time I was employing Kanini, my sister in law had sent me a very disturbing video on my mobile phone. It was later all over the news that the video was released by a woman

who had employed the ruthless nanny in the video harassing her little girl. In the video, the girl not more than two years old and the Nanny are in the living room. The girl refuses to eat and the nanny strikes her hard until she falls from the sofa to the floor. The nanny then eats all the food while the girl is crying on the floor. The little girl then vomits. The nanny takes a torch from the table and starts beating the girl with it as she still lies on the floor. She then kicks her and stamps on her torso. That must have been the saddest video I had ever watched. I cried a lot after watching it. The nanny was arrested and later charged with attempted murder.

How I wished I could carry Jesse to work but it was not possible. Kanini took very good care of Jesse as if he were her own. She was very experienced on the job too having raised three children on her own. I was relieved. I prayed to God to make Kanini stay until Jesse was of school going age which later came to happen. The ladies too, Essie and Kate approved too that Kanini was a good one. They used to check on me and Jesse weekly where we would catch up and I would get the latest news on what was happening at the work place.

“Jesse has finally found a good aunt,” said Kate. She was referring to Kanini.

“I agree!” added Essie.

“How do you know? You two sound so sure.” I asked them. Kanini was now in the kitchen preparing tea.

“Look at her; she is straight from the village, meaning she is not very exposed and very skinny too.” Kate said.

“What has skinniness got to do with raising children?” I asked. This was new to me.

“Annie, curviness should always lead to a direct disqualification! Men will always be men. I always recall my late mother’s advice – Do not be that foolish woman who thinks she is too beautiful to be replaced by anyone. You are replaceable even by house helps!” Kate added with a tone of finality. We all burst out laughing forgetting Jesse was asleep. He started crying, we had woken him up. Kanini ran from the kitchen into the bedroom to get him.

“Personally, I only hire women that are fifty years or older. Those ones would not tempt my husband. They do not entertain monkey business like serving your husband breakfast dressed in bikers or revealing night dresses in your absence.” Essie said resolutely. We all burst out laughing again as Kanini brought Jesse to me. The conversation helped me in trusting Kanini as I left for work. I also became very prayerful. I was always praying to God for my family’s safety. Kanini too was now family.

CHAPTER TEN

Essie had met Lewis fifteen years earlier. They had just settled in their home which they had started building a year ago. Essie called it their 'hideout'. They had only stayed in it for a few weeks. It was not yet complete. A few touch ups still needed to be done. The couple decided it was best that they wait for the school holidays for the finishing to be done. They moved in too soon because they decided that the children were growing up too fast hence they needed more space. Unluckily, Lewis did not live in the house for long.

According to Essie, it was a perfectly normal morning with the usual routine of waking up and reporting at work for both of them. Little did Essie know she was seeing her husband for the last time. They drove to work together as they usually did where Lewis would drop off Essie at our work place and then drive off to his place of work. That morning as they drove, Lewis had mentioned a twinge that he felt on his chest. They agreed that as soon as he got out of work he would go for a checkup at the hospital. Essie was dropped at the gate and started work. At lunch time while we were on our lunch break at the cafeteria, Essie received a phone call.

"This is strange," Essie said picking up her phone and answering. "Hey, is everything okay?"

It was Lewis colleague who had called. He informed her that Lewis had fallen ill while working and had been rushed to the hospital by an ambulance. Essie requested me to cover for her so that she could rush and see her husband. She received a call again informing her in which hospital the husband had been admitted in. Within less than an hour after Essie left, I received a phone call from her phone but it was not her voice on the other end the voice sounded familiar. It was her sister's. She gave me the saddest news ever. Lewis had passed on, just like that. I could not believe it at the moment. I thought my ears were playing tricks on me. I hung up the phone just to decipher what I had just heard from the other end.

I called the number but no one was picking the phone. I informed Mike what I had just heard and told him to call Essie just to confirm. Her sister picked up the phone and confirmed that it was really true. We agreed to meet at the hospital. On my way I was thinking of what to tell Essie when I saw her. I did not think my words would make any difference to her. I arrived a few minutes before Mike. When I arrived at the hospital's reception area at the hospital's entrance, I saw Essie seated between her mother and her sister. Her sister's arm was around her neck while her mother was holding Essie's hands inside hers. Essie was looking down. She seemed to be very deep in thought. I went nearer and when she looked up, her eyes were really red from sobbing.

I really did not know what to tell her when I saw her. I bent to where she was and hugged her placing my handbag on the floor.

"It is okay Essie, I am here for you," I said.

"I can't believe he is gone Annie, this is not happening."

"It is going to be alright. God usually takes the best ones," I said

Mike walked in and greeted us all. "I am so sorry Essie," he added. After the paper work and Lewis' body had been taken to the mortuary it was time to go home. Essie's mother and sister took her home. All this time as she later came to tell me, she was thinking how she would break the news to her children. At home, she called the children to her bedroom and told them the saddest news in the whole universe. The days that followed were gloomy. Essie was broken, moments of despair, heartbreak and longing. Family and friends had to comfort her hoping that one day she will get over it. She would call me sometimes in the morning and tell me that she had no strength of getting out of bed again. I would remind her that her children needed her and

nobody else would take care of them other than her. She would immediately get up and find the strength to take care of them. Being a project manager by career, she focused on things to get to the end goal. She had to juggle everything. She had no time to feel sorry for herself. That was not an option. She had children, she had responsibilities.

We left the funeral home at around ten o'clock in the morning. I was in the company of Mike and Kate. We were all dressed in black. The casket was put in the black hearse and a few family members got in. The rest of the people, us included got in their cars and we left for church. Essie was crying her heart out. We reached the church and the men carried the casket inside. A special mass was held by the priest in Lewis' honour. When we got to The graveyard, a few kilometers from the church, everyone said their goodbyes. The casket was set above the hole. The priest asked us to place dirt on the casket as it was being lowered on the ground.

“Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The lord bless him and keep him, the lord make his face to shine upon him.” Said the priest.

Flowers were placed on top of the grave after it was covered. When the ceremony was over, we were invited for lunch. Essie's family got together one last time and talked about Lewis' life and other things. Mike, Kate and I left. Kate had actually cried. I could not believe that was the last time I was going to see Lewis. I imagined the kind of pain Essie must have been going through. It had happened so fast. After the burial ceremony, family and friends often visited Essie but she always told me how lonely she felt.

“At the end of the day, there is nothing like that partner, your soul mate.” She always said.

“I am making all the decisions all by myself.”

Elsie also felt a sense of guilt that Lewis was not around to see his children grow. Kate and I tried as much as we could to divert her mind from him. We even started talking to her about dating again and we all ended up laughing, at least.

“It’s not going to be easy but I know I have to be strong for my children. How am I going to pay their college fees by myself?”

“Don’t think about that now Essie, we’ll cross that bridge when we get there.” Kate said.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When Jesse finally turned three years old, Mike and I decided to hold a birthday party for him. We were now done with the terrible two stages and this called for a celebration. I planned the birthday party. We held it outside our house in our compound. The compound was perfect for the children to play because of the grass. I was also not going to let the children ruin my carpet and seats. We pitched up a tent to protect us from the sun. Tables and chairs were arranged under the tent. Most of the guests were children accompanied by their mothers. Jesse was delighted to see so many people at his home. Food and drinks were in plenty. Jason's spider man themed cake was inside the house safely kept in the refrigerator awaiting time for it to be cut. Essie and Kate came accompanied by their children. Kate was dressed in a white jumpsuit with black flowers and black flat open shoes with a sun hat. Essie on the other hand was dressed in a pair of jeans trousers, a yellow silk top with matching yellow loafers. She had hung her sunglasses on her blouse. They all arrived in one car together with the children.

"You guys are late." I said as I hugged each and every one of them together with the children as they got outside the car. You were supposed to be here two hours ago! The other guests are going to be here in no time and I am not done with the preparations."

"Sorry Annie, traffic!" Kate said as they took their presents outside the car.

How have you been Nathan? You have grown so tall. Just the other day you were this short." I said, demonstrating with my hand Nathan's height a few years back.

"Mummy, look! Can I go play inside the bouncy castle?" Essie's last born said pointing at the direction of the bouncy castle."

"I am not sure, I think we need to ask the birthday boy."

The children ran into the house to look for Jesse who was busy helping his father to arrange some chairs at the back of the house.

“Jesse, you have some visitors, I shouted for him to hear from where he was.” He came inside the house running. “Jesse, can we go and play in the bouncy castle?” Jesse looked at me as if he was waiting for my reaction. ”Okay guys, you can go but be very careful in there. Nathan you are the eldest so you are responsible for the young ones.” “Okay aunty,” he said as they all ran outside the house.

After the preparations and the guests had already streamed in, Essie, Kate and I sat at a table as we watched the children. We reflected on life in general and counted our blessings. Personally I could not believe Jesse was already three. It was just the other day that I was angry at God for not giving me a child. Essie was now taking her first born child to a secondary school. It was such a great milestone and we envied her. Her son had passed very well in his Primary Certificate examination and had qualified to go to one of the best national secondary schools in the country. Essie did not seem as excited as we were though. I asked her what the matter was.

“Most of these national schools are known for bullying and homosexuality, I am scared for my little boy.”

“Nathan is a big boy now Essie, just pray and hope for the best.”

“I agree. Nathan can take care of himself. Besides, he can always report to the teachers if anything happens to him. Have some faith and be happy that your boy is going to a good school.”

We tried to console her. I was left thinking of how the fears of a mother never really come to an end until death. Mothers will always see their children as babies no matter how old they were.

“You know I was reading the newspaper yesterday on how the famous terrorist group in the country is now recruiting children in their group. They are now going to schools and entice the other children with money to be one of them. Before you know it, your child disappears mysteriously and he is taken out of the country.”

“What?” Kate was shocked.

“True, I also read the story and honestly I was disturbed. I think it is only God who can protect our children at this rate,” I said with a tone of finality.

Kate on the other hand was back in the dating scene after seven years. She was dating a white man who she met through a mutual friend. Their relationship looked serious. The man had suggested marriage. He was willing to hold a dream wedding for her but she had not made up her mind after what she had experienced with her ex-husband. They had now dated for six months. Kate stood up and excused herself after the conversation.

“Let me go and get some more food and drinks.” Kate said.

“You realize at this rate, your clothes will stop fitting.” Essie added.

“You are right Essie, that *mzungu* guy must be taking very good care of her!” I said.

We all laughed as she left. Kate was once married to the father of her eight year old daughter. They held a grand wedding from the pictures I once saw in her house. A year into the marriage, she went through her ex-husbands mobile phone after her house help brought to her attention that the husband was seeing Njeri. Njeri was their next door neighbor. She was a very kind-hearted

lady who did not talk much. From Kate's description she was very beautiful and lived by herself. She was a student who sold second hand clothes whenever she was free.

Kate's house help at the time gave her every painful detail of how her husband would spend the entire night at Njeri's house after Kate and her one month old baby went to sleep. He would tiptoe back home at 4.00 a.m. in the morning before they woke up. It all made sense a day later. After Kate put her baby to sleep, she pretended to be deeply asleep. The husband left as usual. After a few minutes, Kate tiptoed to Njeri's house and just as she got to the door she heard her husband's drunken voice singing some Congolese tune by Koffi Olomide to her and that is the day reality hit her hard.

She did not know what to do or how to behave after the shocking discovery. A week later, one Sunday morning, Kate's husband was begging her to take the house help and the baby to a fancy restaurant to have some fun. Kate sensed he was planning to do something. He was planning to spend that time with Njeri as she later came to discover. While at the fancy restaurant, the house help filled Kate in with more details about the relationship. She called him but he did not pick up his mobile phone. Kate decided that they should go back home. On getting back home, she went straight to the bedroom and found that he was not home and had left his phone on top of the dresser. She picked it up and scrolled through the messages and found many from Njeri. What she gathered was that they were planning to move in together so that they would have all the freedom and time they needed. Kate cried herself a river. When the husband returned, she confronted him but he denied about the relationship. Kate called it quits and went back to her parent's home with her baby. She did not want anything to do with the husband and decided to raise her daughter by herself. She also looked for a job and that is where I met her. She had already worked for the firm two years before I joined her.

As we were waiting for Kate to come back, Essie decided to go where the children were playing and see what they were up to. I was left at the table by myself so I took my phone and started browsing. Mike's sister had attended the party and had come with a female friend who had a daughter. The friend and her daughter were seated on the next table from ours.

The girl was not interested in playing with the other children. She was such a talker. From the time I noticed they were seated next to our table, she would not stop talking. I heard her a couple of times telling her mother, "When I grow up I want to be a nurse." She repeated the sentence at least four times hoping for a response from the mother. I was assuming the mother would be interested and excited about what the daughter wanted when she grew up. Instead, her mother was glued to the screen of her smart phone. She never made eye contact and she never even responded. The little girl was disappointed. You could tell from the slump of her shoulders as her eyes looked on the ground.

She continued to try to talk to the mother about different things that were happening and that she even got a star the previous day at school. Again, the mother never looked up. The girl sipped her juice as she swung her legs on the chair. I was crushed. This was such an eye opener to me. I put my phone away immediately and thought of how many times I did that to Jesse. I wondered how many conversations I had missed because I handed him my I-pad so that he would not bother me as I concentrated on my work which I carried home. I swore that day never to carry my work home and I always put my phone away until I tuck Jesse in bed. I do not think he needs to compete for my attention with technology. At that moment I thought to myself how motherhood is sometimes a very painful growth experience. It is not as tender as many people perceive it to be. But with the pain I have learnt that there is growth, challenge but most importantly great elation.

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