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Struggle for Survival: Female Masculinisation as Presented in Macgoye's *Coming to Birth and Victoria and Murder in Majengo*

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Abstract

In the patriarchal world, courage, vigor and strength are qualities often ascribed to men. In her two novels, *Coming to Birth* and *Victoria and Murder in Majengo*, Marjorie Oludhe MacGoye seeks to demystify this assumption by assigning these qualities to her female characters. This paper therefore aims at juxtaposing the female characters with the male characters in view of identity formation and fight for equity in society. Of major interest is how the female characters rise against the odds to live a life that rises against the societal misconceptions and limitations to a full life of value to the men and society at large. This is in the light of their contributions to fellow women and the society they live in. The tenets of deconstruction, a theory proposed by Jacques Derrida which seeks to unravel the various meanings of given texts, is used in the explication of the given texts.

Keywords: equity, masculinisation, patriarchal



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1.0 Introduction

Raewyn Connell in his research that culminated in the 2nd edition of his book *Masculinities*, observes that masculinity is almost always seen to proceed from the male body. He further observes that the main contest in society is not about men dominating women but about the masculine dominating the feminine (2005, p.13). This puts to light the social construct of gender. One is not born masculine or feminine but the society designates these basing on what it expects from its members. In the patriarchal world courage, vigor and strength are qualities that are often considered fit for the males. Submission, weakness and dependence, on the other hand, more often than not considered fit for the females. This dichotomy sometimes leads to the oppression and suffering of the feminine gender. Kowino Hillary in his article 'Rethinking Motherhood and Feminism' (2013) is of the opinion that in the spirit of revolution, women are simultaneously victims of oppression and agents of change. This revolution is what this paper seeks to put into perspective. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines masculinization as giving chiefly masculine characteristics to a female or causing a female to take on male characteristics. Marjorie Oludhe MacGoye in her novels *Coming to Birth* and *Victoria and Murder in Majengo* masculinizes her female characters in their quest for identity and equity in the patriarchal society they live in. This paper thus investigates the struggles women go through against all odds to have a full and fulfilling life while fighting the debilitating misconceptions as propagated by patriarchy. It also looks at their contributions to the society and how they add value to the lives of both the men and women in the society they live in.

2.0 Female Masculinisation as Presented In *Victoria and Murder in Majengo*

At the beginning of the novel, Victoria, the main character, is a suave and shrewd business lady in her shop in Nairobi's Majengo. Though successful by the area standards, there is a story behind her steely look. Among the displayed documents and photos on the wall is her certificate from the Women Progressive Center. As is the case of many female protagonists in Oludhe's texts, she had to learn something to build up herself just like Paulina in *Coming to Birth*. It is this self-improvement among other things that leads to the self-confidence and role they play in the texts. The coming of Lucas, an alleged nephew from Kano, opens up a bit of Victoria's past. Victoria was once married in Kano and Lucas is specifically sent to her so that she can get her a job. This is because his uncle Odero 'Magereza' told Lucas she had an 'obligation':

'Odero-is he a big man, then? Still, he cannot give people orders.'

'No, but you have an obligation, he says.

'What obligation?'

'You were married there.'

'Yes, but I was bought back. The marriage is gone, long ago. Nothing remains of it.'

'I would work hard. And I would not speak of these things.' (p.5)

Peter Childs and Roger Fowler (2006) observe that deconstruction is more of a criticism of traditional concepts and hierarchies which 'achieve their status by repressing and forgetting other elements' which surprisingly have a way of shaming the propagators. The gender relations and coding as controlled by patriarchy is put to question through the actions as viewed through the parameters of deconstruction. Lucas exhibits the behavior of men in this patriarchal society. Traditionally, in the Luo community where the story is set, a woman is bound to do what the husband and his people tell her to do. She should be submissive. Submission is a feminine trait while the masculine gives the orders. This is why Lucas comes with an air of entitlement and even assures Victoria he would not speak of 'those things'. He is trying to manipulate Victoria into doing what he and his uncle Magereza want. His lackluster and laidback demeanor made Victoria wonder when he will ever get financial independence. He is not as aggressive as most boys who come to the urban areas. They would always find something to do, but not Lucas. Victoria even feels that Magereza is trying to get her involved as a way of getting a hold on her again (p.14). However, Victoria is not just going to take orders from any man. She was once married but not anymore. This is because she was 'redeemed'. Redemption occurs when a woman who was once married is 'set free' from the marriage and the dowry she paid had been returned to her former husband's people. Victoria had to work, as a prostitute, and saved enough to pay back the dowry because her ailing father could not afford. Basically she redeemed herself: she bought back herself and is actually saving her people's face when she says she was bought back.

The circumstances that led to her marriage also shed some light on her father. Victoria was married off as a second wife at the age of fifteen. This was after hunger ravaged her home after the death of the cattle and the rotting of the crops. Usually, when floods came one was to move the cattle and the crops to save them. However, she reckoned that her father was not a very far-sighted man. He just sat there and did nothing as things went haywire. This led to the big loss forcing her mother to let her be married off. This her mother did reluctantly as Victoria was a hard and good worker. This trait and fore-sightedness is what is now distinguishing Victoria as an astute business-lady. Also, she would have waited longer for the redemption if she depended on her father to get the dowry back. Men, in this regard as represented by her father had failed in their ascribed masculine roles.

Lucas is trying to re-establish the traditional hierarchy when he says that he had come to remind Victoria of things (p.7) but she reminds him that he had come to her to look for work and 'learn to be a man'. This is a contradiction in the social narrative. Contradiction and double logic is at the very heart of deconstruction (Brooks, 1984). The

irony and twist in the tale is a criticism of the untapped potential that women carry yet never been brought to use in the traditional societies. 'Being a man' meant working, among other things. Magereza was not able to get a job for Lucas so he had to use the connections of his former sister in law to do it. Victoria 'acts the man' and gives Lucas a job and where to live while working. She even learns that Lucas had 'inherited' the plot she used to cultivate back in Kano. Inheritance traditionally comes from the fathers but this is an indication of the changed or reversed roles in society. This is a perfect illustration of what Connell opines in *Masculinities*, that the internalized sex roles are social facts which can be changed by social processes. This happens when the agencies of socialization embedded in the family, school, economy and mass media transmit new expectations (2005, p. 22). Victoria does what it was that Magereza was to do for Lucas. She even feels that Lucas is an 'uncouth and untaught' youth. This is the conflict that arises when one is moved from the village to the urban reality which may not be so strict on some things the traditions vouch for.

Most of the men in Victoria's life failed her. It was her father's lack of initiative that pushed her to an early marriage. She was not fulfilled in the marriage. She did not have a child but felt that going out of marriage would in a way sort this out. This she did, and got pregnant. She felt that the man who impregnated her was still a boy (p.18). However, she preferred him to her 'old, cold and fumbling Ochiambo (her husband)' who could not give her a baby even after two years and did not seem he ever could. The aggressive nature of Victoria pushed her outside marriage and later running away from hospital leaving the child behind. She was initially of the idea of getting any man; especially a poor man who could take her in with her child but this thought was overtaken by events. She ran away from hospital and with time was rescued by Chelagat who introduced her to prostitution. Unlike Lucas, she went for it and that was the turning point in her life. Chelagat a shrewd businesswoman and brothel owner, in some way gives Victoria more than just a chance in life. While Victoria's liaisons with men had led her to her present predicament, a fellow woman fixes it. The profession she introduces her to may not be the most noble but at least it puts her feet on the ground. She takes over after Chelagat and runs the house while opening up other ventures finally settling on the shop.

Chelagat paid dearly for her choice of profession. Her father never wanted to see her again. Her mother still came but secretly. She even so had paid dowry for her brothers' marriages. This was her way of redeeming her image. She became quite aggressive in the city and always paid the council people when they threatened to run her out of town. Thus she survived and employed even more girls. She could feel lonely sometimes and felt like getting a poor man to marry her (26). It is an assumption that poor men would put in very few demands if any. And with the changing society, women

were actually getting their way in terms of financial independence. Chelagat encouraged Victoria to get some education for herself as she seemed to have a good head. This is the kind of knowledge that later helped Victoria even in her business still, the society felt that was not enough to make her be treated the same way as a man:

...you've got a good head, you know. Maybe you could even learn to read. They won't let you live like a whole woman but perhaps you learn to live like half a man. But don't say I made you. I gave you food and a place to rest, that's all. You did the rest yourself.' (p.27)

A woman can never be equal to a man in the society. The best she can be, after some education, is half a man. This is the society's verdict on women. However, Chelagat knew that there is a way women build up themselves. One has to work extra hard and be aggressive enough. She does not want to take the glory because she led the way but Victoria did the rest for herself. Prostitution, to her, was a better way out than being in the house of a husband who did not value you (27). In order to succeed after taking over from Chelagat, Victoria had to undo some things and instill others:

What she wanted to instill into such women was a certain insight into the workings of the male mind, which was still dominant, an appraisal of the value of information, a reasons survey of pressure points where this knowledge would be well applied ... (p. 62)

Prostitution is in this case metaphorical of how women use men despite men's dominant position as given by the society to their advantage. To work with a man in this society one has to know how his mind works. This is the only way they could either be neutralized or the women be better than them in whatever they did. This was a sure way of thinking and acting like a man. It is a way that as Victoria later on comes to learn, Chelagat used to get information from people, mostly men and give it to the authorities. Chelagat was a spy. With the number and type of clients coming to the establishment she was better placed to gather information on behalf of the authorities. The women were now doing what could have been seen as the work done by men. The danger and intrigue that was to go with espionage women could easily handle and give the authorities, often men. This reduces the men working as spies to reporters because what the women were doing was the main thing.

Mr. Alibhai was the owner of the shop that Victoria got her supplies from. She knew some things about him that she came to use in manipulating him. When Leah was left with the responsibility of taking care of the children when Wasere, her husband was in exile, she needed money to be sent to her regularly without raising eyebrows from the

authorities. Victoria manipulated Mr. Alibhai to help her send the money from abroad in the pretext of getting it for a relative. Mr. Alibhai had to lie and this is one thing that makes Victoria a powerful enough woman to make a man lie. Even Leah, the wife to the exiled political leader Wasere, herself did not understand how the things were working but just followed the way things were conducted by Victoria. Despite the many challenges they faced, women loved and took care of their families and other women. Lois, Victoria's daughter, never lacked anything even when Victoria was jailed later in the *Murder in Majengo Sequel*. Victoria made sure she protected her so that she would not end up as the prostitute Victoria herself was. Victoria had to make sure Lois went to a good boarding school and had an ample time to study. Victoria also made a journey to the Ugandan border to check out an old friend who was 'thrown' due to leprosy. Atieno had been neglected because of her condition and even the clan members did not wish to associate with her. Victoria felt it was in order to visit her and make her feel appreciated and loved. She lied to Lois, her daughter, that she was going somewhere as she did not want Lois to know that she was going to visit the leper's place. This was when she had visited Lois and family in Kisumu. She encouraged Atieno to go back to her family in Kisumu:

'Atieno,' urged Victoria, suddenly moved beyond measure, 'You must try. They will be glad to see you. But even if they aren't- you are brave enough to deal with new things. You have found that if you thrust your hand into the fire to pick a tin mug it doesn't hurt as I would expect it to.' (p.95)

Even in sickness women are still brave. It is their way of survival after being rejected by society and specifically their husbands. In the face of social changes women are encouraging other women to take heart and be brave. Victoria was not the only one encouraging Atieno as Anna, Atieno's room-mate, was pushing her towards trying to move to her family. When Victoria was arrested in, Lois is sent home for fees. As her mother is not in at the moment she goes for help from James the proprietor of Friendly Bar in Majengo. James connects her to Obonyo, a shrewd lawyer who is later murdered. In all these Lois comes out as somebody who is too bright for her age. Being the daughter of Victoria and having lived in Majengo she was deemed a very good witness on Obonyo's death inquiry. She was very articulate and clear. She found herself in this muddle after she made a deal with Obonyo who paid her fees and was to get some services from her during the school holidays. With the knowledge that Obonyo could be up to no good and his second wife was abroad, Lois manages to convince one of her European teachers to go with her to Obonyo's. She presents Obonyo as an uncle and the teacher, Ms Vera Willet is a way of her dissuading Mr Obonyo from doing some things to her. When Obonyo is killed, Ms Willet becomes a prime suspect because of the circumstantial evidence she was alleged to have and also being with Obonyo on the material day he died. While in protective custody, Ms Willet's aims and plans on girls come clear:

Suddenly deprived of her home and job, Vera began to realize the magnitude of what had happened to her. At least she became doubly convinced of the need to prepare girls more accurately for a society that does not give a very high rating to intelligent wives and mothers (p.184).

It is clear that women are not given the same opportunities as men even when the women are educated. Even so, to survive, they are out to help each other. Ms Willet wanted to see the girls in the school amount to something without necessarily being used by men like Obonyo. She even wondered why Lois had to get into any kind of agreement with the lawyer yet she could have been easily helped in the school setting. In the course of investigations it becomes clear that women are very central to the case. The deceased fought with a wanted person over a woman and this may have been among the many reasons why he was actually killed. Obonyo and Rapar were in disagreement over some things among them the dalliance of Rapar with Obonyo's wife. Obonyo shouting at Rapar to stop the dalliance was the last thing heard from him. The women suspects who may have known much did not break to give information under the grilling. Fatima knew much but was keen to cover herself as she was extorting money from Obonyo. She is painted as a very aggressive woman who would use anything at her disposal to gain some mileage. It is Jecton who speaks and leads the detectives in the right direction. This leads to the unraveling of the hitherto mystery but brings out the men as more of cowardly and not as long suffering as the women.

3.0 Female Masculinisation as Presented In *Coming to Birth*

Marjorie also elevates some of her female characters to take roles traditionally perceived masculine. To clearly capture this, she juxtaposes her male and female characters to elucidate the exchange of the gender roles that informs the idea of masculinization. The gender roles in the patriarchal society in *Coming to Birth* are clear cut as exhibited by some of the characters. The men are the providers in the society. They make sure nothing lacks and at the same time tradition is adhered to and propagated. They pay the dowry and sire children to 'grow' the society. This is made even much easier for them as they are allowed to be polygamous. Any errant behavior in the wives is dealt with through beatings. Men are even encouraged to beat their wives during the wedding day so that in case they die and the wives are inherited, they (women) will not say that they should not be beaten by the new husband as the one who died did not beat them! (24) On the other hand, women are on the receiving end doing what the men bid them to without question. Paulina arrives in the city as a naïve and very submissive 16 year old wife. Despite the long journey and fatigue she carries her luggage and Martin, her husband who comes to pick her helps place the luggage on her head but not in carrying it. Tradition does not allow him to carry the luggage. In the house, she does not want to lie on the bed with the husband because

traditions do not allow. When she is rushed to hospital and she has a miscarriage she gets lost on her way home. This losing her way home earns her a thorough beating from Martin though also helps her in that she finally makes her first decision as a city woman (25) and many more follow with time even as she transformed. In the society in *Coming to Birth* it is the duty of women to give birth. This is a source of frustrations to both Paulina and Martin. After several miscarriages, their frustrations began to show. Paulina felt that she was to take an initiative to actually get a child. This is the consolation she held even as she began her affair with Simon:

...for the first time broached the logic of it- she was a married woman denied a married woman's right and respect, in custom she should seek a child where she could. She had the right. (54)

Paulina knew her rights and acted on them. This affair earned her another beating from Martin who denounced her for disrespecting him and having to put up with her infertility (56). All this time Martin does not talk of the Swahili wife he has in the city. She moved to Kisumu and continued with her affair with Simon. However, she made her stand with Simon, a married man, very clear:

'I thank you for the child, Simon,' she said. 'It is what I wanted. Whatever quarrels may come no one can doubt that the child is mine. You also have had what you wanted, and there is no need to be involved in my quarrels. A child of mine does not have to look at a father who will not stand up for him. Go now.' (68)

She is the one giving Simon the orders, and he obeys. He goes and little is heard from him in the entire text. She got what she wanted and is ready for any questions that would arise. She managed where her husband had failed even in his many liaisons with the coastal women. She gives birth to a son whom she names after her husband Martin as a sign of respect for him. This is in the face of Martin calling her a slut and a whore. She worked to bring up the child single handedly. She did not have or need any external help from a man. Just like Victoria in *Victoria and Murder in Majengo*, Paulina went back to school and improved her life. She joined the Home craft school in Kisumu and by the time Kenya got independent she was a supervisor. This of course came with its own challenges but economic empowerment was among the many benefits she got. At her father's funeral she met most of the financial needs. Even the brothers, who were supposed to be at the forefront in providing for the funeral were not there. She bought whatever was needed and even left instructions that in case of anything she would come later to pay. When implored by the mother to spend some more time, Paulina reiterated

'I know, mother, but you must see me as a man who has to go back to work. I have no one else to support me, and I have given the customary time. My brothers' wives are not working. They will have to help.' (66)

Paulina is now doing what Martin as a husband was to do- support her. She has to go to work and whatever else that is to be done at home the brothers' wives will do. That is the role of women in the society but she is different. She is performing the masculine duties. The death of Martin, Paulina's child brought so many changes in her life. She took leave of Kisumu and went to work for some politicians. By this time her marriage with Martin was as good as dead. She started living by herself while working as the general factotum of Mr and Mrs M. Martin started looking for her and eventually found out where she lived. He visited her where they used to talk about politics. He now had some respect for her and treated her as an equal. Little by little he brought his things and moved in with her. Sometimes seeking financial help from her. Paulina was now the provider and in a way Martin was a dependent- a role exchange. Asked by Martin why she took street children out for lunch, Paulina reminded him that whoever he took for lunch was her decision. She could decide on whatever she wanted. So many other female characters in the text have to take masculine roles in the face of the circumstances they find themselves in. When Paulina's father died, her mother mourned him for some time. This is because they had been married for over 30 years. However, she was 'ennobled' by her husband's death:

It was as though after thirty years in that homestead, seventeen of them in which she reigned supreme, her father-in-law and his wives now dead, her husband constantly away, the decision hers to plant, to harvest, to store, to sell (only once he had renewed the house in that time and arranged about the dowry cattle) she had momentarily become the household head, a person to be consulted and deferred to... (64)

Paulina's mother was to behave like a man now that the man himself was missing. She is happy that the sons are now grown enough. They would take care of her in a way even if she would be inherited the as traditions demand. Even so, she still hopes that she would retain some part of the estate so as to be able to support herself and her youngest child should things move in a direction she did not anticipate. The absence of the husbands also affected Paulina's classmate Rhoda. She went on with school after Paulina dropped out. She now worked in a bank. She felt life was hard in Nairobi. Rhoda was married to James who worked in the ministry. More often than not he was away like on the day Paulina went to visit her in Kariakor. Rhoda was not picked in the family car that day because James was away. She complained of how life in the city was hard but she was lucky she was working and earning her own money (126). Education has empowered her in a big way. When asked why she was complaining yet she had a car, Rhoda was of the opinion that one either had a car or a husband. This means that in a big way the husband may not be there most of the

times and she was the one taking charge. The search for money and education has moved her from the traditional roles that women are to play in a docile and submissive manner.

4.0 Conclusion

Though many odds are against the female characters in Marjorie Macgoye's *Victoria and Murder in Majengo* and *Coming to Birth*, the female characters rise to be 'the men' they never got but wished for. Amina is a single and childless woman in *Coming to Birth*. She adopts her househelp's baby when she gives birth and could not take care of it. She works hard to fend for herself and her family and works towards a partnership and ownership of a hospital that would deal exclusively with women. This is after acquiring a shop and furnishing her apartment. She gives Joyce, the adopted girl an education to help her in future (p.145). Paulina also helps other women and many people in society right from the time she teaches the women in the Homecraft School to the time she helps feed the street urchins. As seen earlier, Victoria is an employer and quite dependable woman in *Majengo*. She has also educated her daughter and raised her to be better than she (Victoria) was herself. She visits Atieno, a leprous woman who feels neglected and seeks to make her feel at home. Masculinised women are a boon to the society they live in as witnessed in the female characters in the two texts under study.

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