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Time for Harvest

Mukabi Kabira

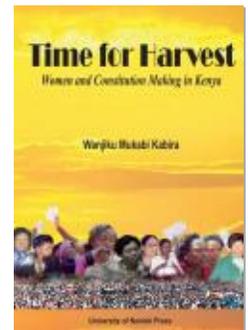
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Emerging from the Shadows

Introduction

This story of women and their struggle to ensure a new constitutional dispensation has been a long and tedious one. We pause and reflect.

In her book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) Betty Friedan notes that women often have difficulties trying to describe or explain what is wrong in their lives, that is, naming the problem. She adds that there is no particular label to name this problem in the public knowledge provided by men, who have been the sources of public knowledge on women. This is something women of Kenya are familiar with. If we want to know what women think, what their experiences with the world are, we have to look for new methods, for new ways of understanding their experiences. Friedan states:

“When a woman tries to put a problem into words, she merely describes the daily life she leads.” p.21

This is exactly what the majority of the Kenyan women were doing during the constituency hearings. In many cases, they told their own stories, their struggles of daily lives, their struggles to feed and clothe their children. They would start their presentation like this:-

“Me, this is what I want to say: we have many problems in this area. Food is difficult to get. We have no water, our children have no clothes, they are not going to school, and we have no school fees. Like me, I have five children; I just work on land and if it rains, we get food; if it does not rain, we don't get food. This mountain here, you can see it, it keeps away the rain. Women need to be assisted.” (CKRC interviews)

Women, as I have shown in Part II of this book, could even tell one story together as if they had rehearsed it. One would start the story, another would pick it up and a third would continue and complete it. The story of their daily lives is very similar.

I have found out the same thing happens even with elite women. In 2009, I sat with Dr. Achola Pala, a woman whom I had not met for years. I was with my colleagues Prof. Milcah Amolo Achola and Prof. Ciarunji Chesaina. My

colleagues had not met Prof. Achola Pala for years too. The talk at the Norfolk Hotel took three hours. We did not discuss the intended agenda which was establishing the *African Women Studies Centre*. The title of the proposed Centre created an opportunity for us to share our innermost thoughts, experiences within marriage, with children, with patriarchal institutions, with the struggle, the many failed starts, and the space in academic institutions. We told the story together as if we had been together everyday for the last ten years. As we discussed, we raised issues of identity, of culture, of tradition, of the inner struggles and of the Women's Movement. We concluded that we needed our own space where we can tell our own narrative, where we can reflect on how ethnic identities, other identities and other issues can be shared.

Naming the problems of women

W.E.B Du Bois (1904) in his *Souls of Black Folk* referring to the problems of the black people in America says;

“Between me and the other world, there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutters around it. They approach me in a half-resistant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then instead of saying, ‘How does it feel to be a problem?’ They say, I know an excellent coloured man in my town’; ‘or I fought at mechanics Ville’; or ‘do not these southern outrages make your blood boil’?” (p. 213).

This sounds very familiar to me and I am sure to many women. We have had to explain ourselves to a world that does not seem to understand us. I think of many replicable incidences of what Du Bois is saying in this essay. In some cases, men are afraid or are not sure what to ask you when you keep talking about the world of women. They look at you and are not sure what to tell you. They think it is a delicate question. They do not want to ask you how it feels to be a problem in society. Why you talk about being marginalised all the time. They wonder what your problem is and you live in a world where democracy is the norm. If you look at their faces, you can tell that they sympathise with you but are not sure what the problem is. They want to ask you how it feels to be a woman, but they are not sure how you will receive the question. So they tell you;

“I know a woman in my village who is a very good leader. She is married, has children and has clear leadership qualities. She is a mother to all around her and even the elders listen to her. You should get her involved in your organisations or groups.”

You don't even try to ask why you are told she is married and has children. You understand the message although you are not sure whether both of you are reading from the same script. According to them, she is good because she is

married and has children. In the view of men, the competent women are few and far apart. So, this woman, who is married, a mother and whom leaders listen to is competent to work for women's organisations.

I am not sure the gentlemen in question know what women's organisations do and what expertise they need or what skills they need? Another more confident gentleman will ask you:

“You have no idea how much I have done for you women. I was the only one who could raise the issue at the meeting. Nobody wanted to hear about women at that meeting.”

You get the message. This gentleman is on your side. He will defend the women's issues at the meeting. He speaks up and wants you to know it is very difficult to speak up for women. So you need to do something about it. He then advises you to lobby more, take time because this issue is very difficult and women have to do something about it. Does he believe that women's issues are important? Maybe not because, he continues, “...in that house, (Parliament) don't be cheated, your gender is not being supported.” I say, “thank you for the support,” and then promise to consult more with this particular friend and to lobby others for their support.

As a woman, you knock at the doors that have been closed to you; you speak in a language that men do not understand. They have defined democracy, ‘one man, one vote’. They have defined electoral process, “The first past the post.” They have defined constitution, “Principles that guide...” and then a woman comes along telling her stories thinking it is a constitutional matter! You are reminded that a constitution is about principles, not long stories about daily lives. You do not ask the question how come these principles have not ensured that women's strategic needs and interests have been addressed. You have asked this before many times and like grandma in the poem at the beginning of this story observed, “you have asked those who have ears but do not hear.”

In his essay, *Of our Spiritual Strivings*, Du Bois (1903) observes that it is like looking at the world through other people's eyes or through a veil. You, as a woman, are an “outsider”. You are also “Invisible”, like Ralph Ellison's (1947) “invisible man”. Sometimes, others look at you with sad eyes and wonder how they can help you. In their hearts, they can't figure out why you are not happy.

How does it feel to be a problem?

At various times when women were negotiating for their space in the constitution making process, the issue of them being a problem was among the key issues they had to deal with. Yet there were people who sympathised, to a certain extent, with the women but they had no idea what was going on in the women's souls. There were those who were direct and who raised issues such as:

- Why do women want to be favoured? Why can't they compete with everybody else? The field is open for them?
- Democracy is about competition?
- Those women in parliament contested with men and won. Why do they want Affirmative Action?
- Women always want things on a silver platter? They want things made easy for them?
- This "one-third thing?" What are they coming to do in parliament?
- Do they not know we are representing everybody in the constituency? Whom will they be representing? What is their constituency?
- What value are they going to add to parliament? What is special about women?
- They are the majority in the nation. In fact, they are more than 52 per cent so why can't they elect one of their own?
- Why can't they focus on the bigger picture?

Many women have heard those questions directed at them many times. Often, they have responded in a spirited manner, getting statistics, quoting other sources, producing comparative studies, answering every question. That is the reason this book is a testimony to how vigorously women have tried to address all these questions through research, development of materials for lobbying, and how the debate on abortion by church leaders and others was about the woman's body and how to protect what grows within her; but not about the woman herself. They had a problem with the clause that states that a medical practitioner can facilitate abortion if a mother's life is in danger. What to women was obvious, did not seem obvious to religious leaders. The contention that all women, if given a chance, would make abortion a regular activity was incomprehensible to women. The arguments gave the impression that women were waiting for abortion to be made legal to run to any doctor and abort regularly. Sometimes, as in the case of the debate on abortion, the male perspective on the issues was so strange that many women were dumbfounded. Some leaders were asking the women, "Why are you not saying anything on abortion?"

Sometimes you, the woman, get tired of explaining what the problem is. We have talked ourselves hoarse, explaining the problem: how *culture, traditions, stereotyping, economic status, women status, and the nature of institutions affect women positions in leadership*. We have explained ourselves hoarse but they just don't get it. That is why grandma in the poem that opens the story of this book says, "we are sick and tired."

Every day, you start the same song until the song becomes stale and you are left with a bad taste in the mouth. Women are outsiders in their own cultures and communities. They have lived in the shadows for too long. They have been looking at a world to which they are invisible and often incomprehensible. This book and many others on women in this country and globally is a testimony

that women are emerging from the shadows. They are breaking through the veil and insisting on being visible in all aspect of life.

Sometimes as I reflect on women's struggles, I think of Clarissa Pinkola (1992) in her book *Women Who Run Away With The Wolves: Myths, Stories of The Wild Women Archetype*, who says;

“When women hear the words ‘wild’ and ‘woman’, an old, old memory is stirred and brought back to life. The memory is absolute and undeniable, and irrevocable kinship with the wild feminine, a relationship which may have become ghostly from neglect, buried by over domestication, outlawed by the surrounding culture, or no longer understood any more. We may have forgotten her name, we may not answer when she calls out, but in our bones, we know her, we yearn towards her, we know she belongs to us and we to her. This is our essence.” (p.7)

Clarissa says that women often come into contact with this essence. For some, this taste of the wild comes during pregnancy when they feel the power of pregnancy, the power of carrying another life within them. That is why many women did not zealously contribute to the debate on abortion and the relevant articles on abortion because for most of them, carrying a life within them is joyous, it is a blessing. The church leaders were arguing as if the constitution allowed abortion and hence enabling women to run quickly to get pregnant and then abort! They have no idea what women's thoughts and feelings are. When women sleep, wake up and walk, as they feel the baby kick and play within them, what a great joy? They feel that flow of joy within themselves brought by the life that is growing within them, the life that they nurture, protect and cherish – pain and sorrow at times not withstanding – and when that bundle of joy comes into this world, their happiness is complete.

As the debate on “when life begins” went on during the constitutional review process, I used to look at the male church leaders, male doctors and politicians arguing vehemently about it and would wish that they could experience the feel of the baby playing inside them, and the baby's growth reflected in their protruding stomach. When they argued that life begins at birth, I would ask myself, “Why don't they ask the women? Women know.”

Clarissa reminds us that when we are nursing our young, and the little one looks at our eyes, touches our nose, see the baby's toes all lined up like a row of maize on a cob, touching them, oiling them, removing the dirt between toes, when we hear music, through the drum, the whistle, the cry, a poem or a story, it causes us to remember, even for an instant, what substance we are made of and where our true home is. Ironically, we have lived outside this home either at the place of birth where we are *temporary*, or at the house of marriage where we are *outsiders*. Our job is to “enlarge the clan” as the Zairean proverb says. Fortunately, this is changing as we continue to take our

place in the line of duty with those who have fought for women's liberation and continue to water the seeds of liberation.

Reflecting on Clarissa's observations makes me think about Wairimu, my step-mother, my father's third wife, a woman full of vitality. It is surprising that not even the struggle during the Mau Mau war of independence could kill her spirit. Even though my father was detained for seven years, her spirit never died. Strange too, is that, she never developed bitterness against those in the village who were home guards—the loyalists. Those who took sides with the colonialists and betrayed their people. She refused to reject her true self; she is one of Clarissa's women "who ran away with the wolves." "Kamendi" is her nickname. She was 83 years by the time of going to press. But Kamendi has always expressed herself freely and has a great sense of humour. She used to stand tall but at 83 years, she has weakened, bent but full of confidence in spite of poverty and her participation in the Mau Mau war of liberation. Wairimu calls herself "Mwarĩ wa Kanyĩrĩ" (daughter of Kanyĩrĩ). Kanyĩrĩ was her father. Like many Gĩkũyũ women, she never used her husband's name, my father's name, but adapted her father's name. When she talked to me, she would call me "Mwarĩ wa Wango" (daughter of Wango). Wango was the man to whom my grandmother was given when she was a little girl in exchange for food to her Masaai family during the Great Famine, the "Famine from abroad", as it was called. I am named after her as per the Gĩkũyũ tradition, where the first girl is named after her father's mother.

I also think of a Masaai woman, Namaisa Salempo, who I interviewed in 1986 in Nairegia-Nkare. This woman was also very beautiful. She told me her story with a smile on her face and a glitter in her eyes that was hidden by a white lace brought by cataracts. She was blind so she made me assure her that there was no man around as she narrated the story of her love life. She too was a woman "who ran away with the wolves and found her kindred spirits."

Salempo was about 80 years old when she narrated the story of her life to me; how she used to sneak out and go to sleep with morans and her husband would never know. She narrated her life exploits and the different lovers she had. She reflected on how men competed over her and how morans fought to get her. She finally concluded that if she could go back to those youthful days, she would do exactly the same.

Salempo: You see me?

Wanjiku: Yes, I see you.

Salempo: Do you see how brown I am? Look at me closely. Look at my arms, look at my legs. You see how brown I am?

Wanjiku: I can see. You are very brown and very beautiful.

Salempo: You should have seen me when I was young. I was as straight as a tree and used to walk like a giraffe. Any man who saw me desired me.

When I put on my ornaments, no man could take his eyes off me. Hey! Was I not beautiful? Old age is bad that I am the one sitting here today and have not even moved to the gate.

Hey! Wanjiku, did you say your name is Wanjiku? I was as beautiful as the moon. When I got married, my husband thought he had contained me now that I was his wife and that only those of his age could come and sleep in my hut with his knowledge. But you see, what did you say your name was?

Wanjiku: Wanjiku.

Salempo: The son of Kareso did not know who I was. He could not contain me so easily. The morans could not resist this beautiful girl. I was irresistible. If they did not come, I would just sneak out at night and look for one of them and we could go to the bush. But nobody knew. I shared a little with one of my friends. Poor girl, she is now dead but she used to do the same.

Wanjiku: Were you not afraid of the animals?

Salempo: What animals? Wanjiku, the lions and other animals do not come near the homes and if they do, you know they are there. Like leopards, you don't run away from them. You talk to them and show them you are a friend. When you are not afraid, animals do not attack you. The morans used to compete for me and it made me feel very happy. I also did not hide when my husband's age mate came and put a spear outside my home. Those whom I did not want, I just told them so and told them to sleep and not touch me.

Wanjiku: Your husband never found out?

Salempo: He used to think that I was in my hut all the time waiting for him, poor fool. He had many wives and we as women knew from his behaviour where he intended to spend the night. I always knew when he would spend the night in my hut and I stayed put.

Salempo reflects thoughts of many women who can tell you the story of their love lives, their lives in the shadows of tradition if you become very close to them. You can see the joy in their eyes, the smile on their faces, and the song in their hearts when they let themselves go.

But we also know that women live a life of disconnect. Very often, they look tired, fatigued, depressed, confused and are unable to express their desires, to explore what is in their hearts, to express love, joy and contentment. Some women will not buy anything for themselves in order to save for the family, will not eat ice cream or drink wine. They must not be seen to indulge in good things. The basic nature of women – their natural psyche – has been held hostage; their soul has not been allowed to emerge from the shadows, to come to the open, to roam the universe in freedom. Many of them will identify with

Laura Good Wilson (1992:722) in her poem, “*I am becoming my mother*” presented below:

I am becoming my Mother
Yellow /brown woman
fingers smelling onions.

My mother raises rare blooms
and waters them with tea
her birth waters sang rivers
my mother is now me.

My mother has a linen dress
the colour of the sky
and stored lace and damask
table cloths to pull shame out of her eyes.

I am becoming my mother
Brown/yellow woman
Fingers smelling always of onions.

Earlier on in this book when discussing women’s voices, I referred to Akinyi, the 24 year old young woman who considers herself an old woman. Married with three children and in a polygamous home, she has now turned into her mother. The cycle of a woman’s life continues. Her dreams are now transferred to her children. Her ambitions, except those of looking after the children, are over. She lives in the shadows, her dreams no longer real and her hopes and aspirations transferred to her children.

Clarissa (1992:13) in her book again notes:

“...a healthy woman is the incubator. She is intuition, she is a far-seer, she is a deep listener ... she is fluent in the language of dreams, passion and poetry ... she is ideas, feelings, urges and memory.”

That is, she is not timid. She is the woman whose emotions flow, who is surrounded with not only emotions of sadness but with love emotions. She is much like my step-mother Wairimu, and the Masai woman, Namaisa Salempo. The native woman is a woman who carries stories and dreams, words and songs, signs and symbols. “She is both vehicle and destination.” She wants to walk out at night and see the moon, the stars, the sun, to sing and create poetry, songs and dance. She is a female soul, she is intuition, she is foreseer, she is a deep listener, and she has a loyal heart.

“She whispers from night dreams and memory. She has been lost and half forgotten for a long time. She is the source, the light, the night, the dark and the daybreak.” (p13).

This quotation describes women like my stepmother Wairimu and Salempo. Women who in their hearts and souls are full of life, have desires that have

been locked up in their bodies by culture and tradition, by a patriarchal structure, ideology and philosophy; women who will express themselves when space is created for them or create for themselves; women who, like Betty Bayo, a Kenyan Gospel singer at the age of 20, in 2009 sung the song “*Eleventh Hour*” as if she had experiences of a sixty year old woman. At the eleventh hour when you have lost hope, God knocks at your door. Women never give up.

It is this essence of “a woman that ran away with the wolf” that emerges when young girls meet men young or old and their poetic nature, their passion and love consumes them and like the Akinyi we saw earlier already old at 24 year, get into relationships which are short lived. Culture, tradition and patriarchal myths conspire to destroy their true selves even before they have time to grow. They are driven to the shadows. Marriage becomes the end of the story. Often in the marriage, women stop seeing the stars in the sky, hearing the birds sing and stop walking like the gazelle, like Akoko, the daughter of Chief Odero Gogni of the Yimbo clan (Margaret Ogola, 1994).

During the review process, particularly during the women-specific sessions, we looked at the women whose great expectations of a better social order was in the offing. We noted that in all these women, you could feel the essence, the ideas, and desire to be free to sing, to laugh, to break the chains. It is clear that the free woman has been buried by tradition and is struggling to come out of the shadows and into the world, to be heard, to sing and to move the world with her intuition, her love, her dreams, her song and dance. Kenyan women demonstrated this by giving their views during the review process. The voices of the Kenyan women are a clear testimony that women are moving from the shadows. That is why this new constitution breaths the spirit of women, of youths, of minorities, of the marginalised. It has ignored the usual lawyer tradition of having a short document in order to accommodate people’s views. Women and other groups had said “NO, – our wishes must be reflected too.”

Women’s resistance here and elsewhere follows in the tradition of Harriet Tubman of USA, Mekatilili wa Menza of Kenya, Mariama Ba of Senegal, Wangari Maathai of Kenya, and many other great daughters of this world who have similarly struggled for freedom in one way or another. They are a travelling people and are created in the image of God. They are, as grandma says in her poem at the beginning of this book, “not children of Indemili, the lesser God of the Ibo people of Nigeria.”

The people of the family of Kizi, the daughter of Kunta Kinte in Alex Hailey’s *Roots* (1976) still roams. The people of Kunta Kinte of the Mandika people and many others from Africa still continues the spirit of Kizi, the mother of Chicken George, great great grand mother of Michelle Obama, the wife of the first black president of the United States of America (USA).

The spirit of Toni Morisson, Angela Davis, Sojourner Truth, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou and all those great men and women in the African Diaspora lives on. The spirit of those who have struggled for liberation, liberation of the black race, liberation of women, liberation of all those who live under oppression in the land of the poet Laureate of Madison, Fabu Mogaka, whose link with her people, the African people, is reflected in her collection of poetry under the title “*In My Own Tongue*” (Fabu, 2011). Like Cokarine and prophetess Moraa, Fabu has continued to be in the line of duty like many African women, watering the seeds of liberation. “We are a travelling people, a wondering people, the people of God; so every day, we are on our way,” as I learnt from a Catholic nun by the name Mother Fidelis Shiel, a woman of God; a wonderful woman who has now gone to God. That is what it has meant for many women in this country and in Africa. They have continued to travel, sometimes wandering, but always towards their goal.

Akinyi, the 24 year old woman we met earlier in the book is a living testimony to an acknowledged fact that poverty, oppression and tradition, among other ills, kill the spirit of a woman and isolates her from her true self. That woman in her, the woman who could walk with a song in her heart and glitter in her eyes, that vibrant kindred spirit, disappears. This is the woman who, in African Oral Tradition, makes a decision to marry a hawk for example, “Nyanjiru and the Hawk,” in Wanjira’s story in *Reclaiming my Dreams* and just say the “hawk is my choice” (Kabira & Waita, 2010:125). It is the woman who as a young girl in the Luhya community resists marriage where she is “treated like a stranger and her people as locusts,” as Joseph Muleka would say.²² It is the spirit of the Kĩrĩro (lament) among the Agĩkũyũ where girls refer to marriage as loss of freedom; the fact that they would no longer be free to be with their age mates. The lament-singing goes as follows:

Oh dear!
You of Gicui village
You came to greet Waceera
She came here. She drowned in the river
When the river dries up, the singer also dries up.

I do not remember anything
When you, our children come in and go
Waceera did you leave that boy and Njeri well?
And now I the lone child
You singer when you reach Aceera clan

Greet Kĩgotho my father for me
I know he did not come
You greet Njeri

²² Dr. Joseph Muleka’s unpublished thesis on Bukhayo Oral Poetry (2008).

Me, I died alone
 You know I will not be able to move freely.

I died alone
 Me the lone child of Wangari
 You know I am no longer able to move freely
 I the daughter of Kĩgotho
 Kĩgotho (my father) may God be with you.
 (Kabira and Nzioki, 1994, p. 28)

There are many narratives and poems that reflect the women spirit of resistance, even as they live in cultural and historical contexts where patriarchal ideology governs the way they live and interact with themselves, society and even the state. In the review process, women's focus on political participation to inherit land from their parents, to have joint ownership of title deeds by husbands and wives, to outlaw all traditional practices that negate their lives, to outlaw violence and ensure harsh punishment for rapists, for example, is a testimony to their desire to emerge from the shadows. This is the spirit of Mariam Ba (1980) who says in her letter to her very close friend, Aissatou, in *So Long a Letter*:

“My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows. I know that the field of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquests difficult.”(p.88).

As shown in this book, many women, are emerging from the shadows. They are taking their place in the line of duty and watering the seeds of liberation so that the woman of vitality resounds in all of them. Even a very restrained and non-assuming woman like the maasai woman, Salempo, whom we described earlier, keeps a secret within her. She may not say it but it is there in her soul, sometimes locked up and properly guarded. Often, however, women are unable to express themselves. They have been trained to contain their emotions, to wear the mask, negate the self. Some of them have done this so well that they no longer recognise their true self. They only need re-awakening and they will discover their beautiful self, their poetic self, their kindred spirit. Every woman knows this but for many, the burden of poverty, of culture and tradition does not allow this to emerge. Many remain preoccupied with basic needs as Akinyi, the 24 years old who is already an old woman, does.

I have told the story of a mother's red dress to my children many times. I first heard this story from Prof. Helen Mwanzi, a woman who, like my step mother Wairimu and Salempo inspires one with her love for song, dance and poetry. She comes from the land of *Mwana wa Mberi* (the first born) a song that has in many ways become the National Anthem for Women's Movement in Kenya.

My mother's red dress is the story of a mother who was bought a red dress by her daughter to wear for special occasions. The mother cried with joy when she

got this dress. She kept it in her wooden box, nicely folded, awaiting that day, a special day when she would wear the dress. The mother, like many African women, like many who appeared before Constitution of Kenya Review Commission (CKRC) to give their views in preparation for the new constitution, was a struggler, one of those who seemed to have sworn loyalty to life and whose only occupation was to work for her children. That occasion for her to wear the red dress arrived when her life had already left her body. She was buried in her red dress. Death came before the mother had an occasion to celebrate.

There are millions of women in this continent who can identify with this story. Clearly, many who came to present their views to the commission were the poor. They have had no occasion to wear their red dress. The women who have been on the line of duty and who are emerging from the shadows would want this story to go to the archives so that when we tell it, we shall begin with this opening formula of oral narratives: “long, long time ago, there was a poor woman...” It is my prayer that in the African continent such red dress stories will no longer exist. Every woman will be able to celebrate, to get in touch with herself, with that kindred spirit because poverty, oppression, disease, corruption and violence will have been put in the archives.

As mentioned in Part I, this is a long journey and for any long journey, you need to bend your back by the roadside and rest. As you rest, you take a moment to reflect on the journey. You energise yourself too. I will now take a moment to reflect on Grandma Naitera who never got a chance to emerge from the shadows. My grandmother’s story is one woman’s story but it represents the lives of many women in Africa and many other parts of the world. The following is her story:

It is now about sixty years since my grandmother Naitera left this world and went to that world where she must have met her maker. I hope He/She has been able to explain to Naitera why this life was hell to her. He/She must explain why Naitera was born a Maasai, in a third world, in a nation under colonial rule, at the time of struggle for liberation of the black people; and most of all, as a woman. If He/She has not explained to her, we need to ask Him/Her to do it.

She was a woman who was born a Maasai, was exchanged for goats and food to the Agikūyū, married to a man with many wives, was buried by a Luo labourer from Uplands Train Station and then went to meet her maker without saying goodbye to her two sons whom the colonial government kept in chains in detention as she struggled to stay alive; at least to say goodbye to her sons before exiting from her life’s path.

Grandma must have been ten years when she was handed over to Wango, the man who got her in exchange for food and goats to save her family. Her son, Njoroge,

who is also my uncle, wept as he told me the story, the story of a ten year old girl, frail from hunger, fair, brown in colour with small searching eyes but with firm feet that gave the impression that she had walked long distances. She had walked long distances in search of water, of pasture for her father's goats, in search of firewood among other chores. She had been booked for marriage to an old man the day she was born and a bangle was put on her wrist to indicate that she belonged to someone. The job of her mother was to bring her up, have her circumcised and make her ready to move to the would be husband to produce more little Maasai boys and girls and expand the clan. But then she, like other Maasai women, must have said this prayer as recorded by Naomi Kipury (1983:207):

My God do not leave me at the mercy of the man,
 At his habitually moody whims
 He that roams the village
 Arriving when loneliness has filled the house
 Setting on the walls as well as on the bed
 Not at the mercy of a wanderer with unsteady affection
 He whose mother had completed all the rituals due to him
 He to whom guests come saying
 My friend my dear, where will you spend the night?

For Grandma Naitera, destiny had it that she was to end up in another home of a different clan, a different community. She was to be the mother of sons who would later be taken away by colonialists. As for daughters, she only had one who never lived to talk about her mother. She passed on as an infant. Her two brothers, Duncan Mūkabi (Maasai) who is my father, and Njoroge, my uncle, never got over her departure.

Grandma was to be brought up in a different culture, the culture of the Agikūyū. She was the sacrificial lamb for the survival of her clan. For their sake, she was exchanged for maize and beans and some goats. She was separated from her twin sister. She was sacrificed like Jesus "so that her people may live." I don't know whether Grandma prayed to the Maasai God or to the Gikūyū God after her sons were detained by the colonialist. Or was she just blank and in pain, the pains of a mother in a foreign land and with her children taken away by colonial government. How did she deal with this pain? Who consoled her? Did she give up in life? Was she given an explanation by the God of Ibrahim, Isaac and others as to why the Maasai God and the Gikūyū God could not let her see her two sons again when she went to heaven? Did God explain to her why she had to go through so much pain? Why she had to be born a Maasai, in a third world country, colonised by the whites who finally took away her two bundles of joy to detention? Sixty years down the line, even her grandchildren; I being one of them, do not understand why she underwent such pain. Did she have to be born to be exchanged for food? To marry

someone she did not choose? To give birth to a girl who died and then two warriors who would be taken away from her? What is that God like? What does he say was the lesson we were supposed to learn from her life of suffering?

Sometimes, I want to ask Grandma if she had a dream. What could it have been? Was it a dream of returning to her people in Maasai land? Was it a dream of seeing her mother and father again? At the age of ten, what kind of dream did she have? Was the dream deferred? I ask like Langston Hughes. What happens to a dream deferred?

Like many women in cross ethnic/racial marriages, Grandma lived in a foreign land; in an alien land; praying to an alien God. How did she learn to answer to “*Wanjiku wa Mathaai*” or *Mwari wa Wango*” instead of her name Naitera? How did it sound? What did she feel? Was she scared being an alien soul, answering to an alien name? These and many other questions need answers. Although my grandma died in mid 1950’s, her story is the story of the many girls forced to early marriages that women told during presentation of views. The story of poverty, of alienation, of the desire to have a better life. The woman in them must have a chance to develop; their *Id* must be released from jail.

I hate to imagine the day my grandma was told she was going to be Mahinda’s wife, a man who had six other wives. As a little girl, then about 14 years old, she was going to be the seventh wife. Wango the man who brought her from Maasailand, had looked after her for four years before handing her over to Mahinda. How did she feel? I cannot talk about love! Or should I? Did she love this man? Or she had no idea what love had to do with marriage. She was supposed to come to the homestead, get her piece of land, have her hut and Mahinda would come to her if and when he chose. He must have come to her hut because she became the mother of two warriors. Warriors that she brought up and taught the courage of Maasai warriors, but warriors who wept in old age when they talked about Grandma, their mother, Naitera.

Naitera’s son, Njoroge (my uncle), used to say that he could not forgive God for letting his mother die when they were in detention. “That is why I don’t go to church. I was not present to even bury my mother when she died. My mother, I was told, was buried by a Luo man. Mother of Ndegwa requested him to help bury my mother. How could God have allowed both of us to be detained and not be there to bury our mother?” He would weep when he remembered this. He wondered why God was in a hurry to take his mother. Could He not have waited until they came from detention?

I need to take a moment and talk to my Grandma.

Dear Grandma, what greater sacrifice could one make than this. You went to a land of farmers, men and women of the hoe, men and women who were cultivators of the land. You left the life of your wandering people; life of movement with your animals; going up the hills when drought came and back to the Valley when the rain came; a life of people who believed that, cattle were created for them; a life of Morans and warriors; a life of bright colours of red, blue, magenta, orange and gold; a life of decorative necklaces, bangles and head laces. Grandma, you left the life of a different rhythm, different songs, different beats, different history and different cultures.

Grandma, you came to a land of strangers; people of different culture for whom meat and milk were luxuries; people of maize and beans, of porridge and arrow-roots, sweet potatoes, cassava, bananas; people of brown colour scheme; people whose customs and traditions were alien to you, whose language was incomprehensible to you. Grandma, you must have spent nights of fear and loneliness. Did you cry at night? Did you dream about your home? Did you feel lost as the people you lived with spoke a different tongue?

The story of Grandma is the story of many women in Africa. Sometimes I want to tell Grandma that she never died. She lives in the memory of her children, grand children, great grand children, and great great grand children. We want her to know that the women of this country continue to struggle not only for their own liberation but for the liberation of all African people. Liberation from oppression, oppressive culture and economic injustice. She should stay in peace and continue to intercede for women while up there. We must not let my Grandma, Fabu Mogaka's Grandma, Harriet Tubman, Alice Walker, Sojourner Truth, Mary Nyanjiru, Mekatilili wa Menza, Maggie Gonna, Rahab Wabici, Mariama Ba, Wanjiru wa Kang'ethe, and all other great women who have passed on be forgotten. The struggle for women liberation and for the liberation of our African nations must continue, a struggle to transform our societies, a struggle to make our society better for men, women and our children, a struggle to make life worth living for all of us. That is what the women who gave their views continue to tell us. They wanted a new constitutional dispensation that would help women emerge from the shadows of traditional and economic, political and social deprivation. We must create a new earth. The stories from Bondo, from Garsen, from Wajir, Mandera, Ijara, from Bomet, from Nyando, from Kilifi, from Nyeri, Nyandarua, West Pokot, Kajiado, Narok, Kuria, and other areas are all but one story told many times. This story must be expressed—the story of women's struggle for a better social order.

My grandma, the mother of two warriors – my father and my uncle – must have taught them about girls and their place in society for they love their daughters. They educated their daughters and even gave them property. My father, her young warrior, whose name is Mukabi – “meaning from the

Maasai” – decided not to take dowry when his many daughters were getting married. He argued that his daughters were priceless. Their price was so high that nobody could afford it. All he needed was for them to be happy and prosper within marriage. He remained a role model for his daughters and sons. The advice he gave to the men who married his daughters was always, “Treat her with respect and let her and your family live in peace and prosperity. If you feel you cannot do this, let her come back home.”

He brought up his daughters encouraging them to break the silence of tradition, to break the barriers and excel; to release their spirit and grow. He told them they had to have dreams and pursue them. In detention, grandma’s son, my father, was known to talk about the dreams of his daughters and sons. For Naitera’s sons, the girls had to be released from a life of insecurity, of timidity, of indecisiveness, to a life of self-confidence, of self-determination, of courage, of commitment to pursue their dreams. It is no wonder then that when he was sick and ready to join his mother in heaven, he kept seeing his mother in his dreams as well as his daughter, Wariara, who had passed on before him. On his death bed, he used to say, “Wariara was here.” Wariara, his daughter, whom he used to call Mũthoniwa (in-law), had passed on eight years earlier, but he kept seeing her in his dreams and in his reflections.

But the story of the sons of Naitera, who educated their daughters and encouraged them to break the yoke of tradition, and who adopted their step sisters, Muthoni wa Willy and Esther wa Wilson (Kabira, 2006) to be their blood knot is also the story of many men in this continent. Naitera’s two sons are men who have responded to the call to lead the way and be companions of women on their journey towards their dreams. Many other men in the continent have led the struggle from the front among them being; Mwalimu Julius Nyerere who set the pace by introducing Affirmative Action of 15 per cent women’s representation in Tanzanian parliament in the eighties. He recognised that the status of women in society, the social-cultural barriers as well as lack of economic power would not provide a fair playing ground. We thank this great Son of Africa. Under the leadership of Mkapa, the 15 per cent went to 20 per cent. Rwanda, the country where tears have flowed until eyes have dried, has also done Africa proud. They have the highest number of women in parliament in the world at 49 per cent. When Nelson Mandela, that great son of Africa, took power in South Africa, Affirmative Action for women’s representation in parliament was implemented. President Mwai Kibaki was not left behind as we have discussed earlier. One can only say: ‘Keep it up sons of Africa and shake up the reluctant ones so that they can follow you and help women emerge from the shadows.’

We women are a travelling race; a wandering race, but we are also “the people of God” as proclaimed by one religious singer. The lyrics of the song state that when women get their basic needs, together with their children, families and

communities, the life within them will explode. They will see the stars, the moon and the sun. They will feel the baby within them and wait in expectation for the birth of a new one whom they have prepared for. They will bring him/her into a peaceful prosperous and friendly world. They will not live in fear of giving birth to another one that they cannot feed. They will celebrate womanhood; breathe the air of confidence; break into song and poetry for they will no longer be the children of Indemili, the lesser God. They will have emerged from the shadows and taken their rightful place at the centre of the universe. This great continent will then be a land of great joy and celebrations, for its people too will have emerged from the shadows. Women all over the continent are marching towards the centre. They are marching towards the centre in order to move this continent forward and create institutional and policy frameworks that take on board the potential and interests of all members of our society. They will move together towards creating a better social, political and economic order for the people of our continent.

