
MASCULINITY CONUNDRUM AND HICCUPS IN MARJORIE OLUDHE'S COMING TO BIRTH

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the contradictions in the presentation of masculine identities in African literature and Kenyan literature in particular. This is done through a critical reading of Marjorie Oludhe's *Coming to birth*. In the main, the paper examines the construction of masculinity in the society with a focus on gender roles, stereotypes, behaviour and general presentation of masculine qualities. In order to do this, the paper analyses how the rural and urban setups as presented in *Coming to birth* influence and alter the construction, maintaining and portrayal of masculinity as explored in the representative text. This approach allows for the interrogation of masculine behaviours and men's struggle to perform masculine qualities and expectations fitting their identity. It is worth noting that the portrayal of male characters' qualities in *Coming to birth* is marked by a level of frustration, anxiety, unfulfillment and hopelessness in the quest by men to show their masculine nature albeit elusive.

Keywords: Masculinity, Patriarchy, Gender inequality, Social construct, Subordination and Domination.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper interrogates the representation of masculinity in African literature as demonstrated in *coming to birth*. In Africa and in most parts of the world, there has been and still exists agitation for the recognition and objective portrayal of female characters and their potentialities. In most cases, this approach is premised on the belief that women have been left out of, not only historical, economic, cultural and political realms in the making of their societies but also in literary scholarship. This to some degree could be explained by the late entry and recognition of African women in literary production with few who dared such as Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, Grace Ogot's the *Promised land* among others. The late entry of women in literary creation is traced back into history to the colonial era in Africa and other regions that were colonised. This is because colonialists privileged the schooling of males who would later work for them at the expense of women. This scenario, therefore, could explain why women's writings were scanty compared to male writeups.

However, my focus in the paper is not on the skewed portrayal of women but the portrayal of men in literary texts. That is, what are the anxieties, struggles, performances, fears that inform and thereafter influence men's behaviour? Are men's behaviour inborn and if not, what informs such? Therefore, in order to understand masculinity, one has to take cognizance of the fact that masculinity is not just an innate and automatic behavioral pattern by men but "the process of relationships through which men and women conduct gendered lives" (Connell, 2005, p. 71) especially as portrayed in *Coming to birth*. Without this relationship, it is not possible for one to read what constitutes masculinity or even femininity.

Masculinity as a term is fluid characterized by complexities and variations in trying to give it wholesome and monolithic definition. This is because notions of masculinity vary based on culture, society, religion, geographical region, time period in which it occurs among other factors. In this way, one cannot talk of masculinity as a universal and blanket term but rather, should be thought of in terms of variations in masculinities. This is because what is considered masculine in one culture or society could be different in another. Lindsay and Miescher (2003) point out that “the term masculinity [is used] to refer to a cluster of norms, values and behavioural patterns expressing explicit and implicit expectations of how men should act and represent themselves to others” (p. 4). This paper adopts Lindsay and Miescher’s definition in the analysis of the primary text while aware of the fluidity of the definition of masculinity which is likely to be influenced by religion, tribe, ethnicity, region among other factors.

In addition, there is need to differentiate masculinity from maleness. Maleness is the biological markers of the person while masculinity are constructs and conventions that a given society designs to determine the qualities and behaviors considered appropriate for a man. Of note is that masculinity heavily relies on gender roles designed for men. In this way, masculinity is made possible through the socialization process (Mutunda, 2009, p. 18) which then makes those involved to start behaving and performing what they are conditioned to as men. On his part, Kaufman (1987) observes that masculinity should not be confused with men’s biological manhood since it is “historically specific, socially constructed, and personally embodied notions of masculinity” (p. xiv).

Kaufman further points out that “masculinity is terrifyingly fragile because it does not really exist in the sense we are led to think it exists, that is, as a biological reality-something real that we have inside ourselves” (p. 7). In an attempt to understand and define masculinity, Middleton (1992) questions as to whether masculinity is “a discourse, power structure, an ideology, an identity, a behavior, a value system or all these?” (p. 152). On this, Kaufman seems to respond to Middleton’s argument by succinctly saying that masculinity “exists as ideology; it exists as scripted behavior; it exists within “gendered” relationships (p. 7).

Rethinking Traditional and Modern Constructs of Masculinity in *Coming to birth*

Masculinity in the African society is traceable to patriarchal structures that dictate how men behave. Patriarchy is a societal organization characterized by a power structure that heavily relies on gender inequality relations which in most cases privilege men as opposed to women. As such, gender inequality over time is normalized to justify why men or women should behave in the manner they behave. Among the Luo culture (which forms part of the setting of the text under study) in Kenya, boys and men are socialized to act and behave in a particular manner deemed masculine. For instance, men are supposed to take on particular roles that define them so. However, in reading *Coming to birth*, this paper opines that the construction of masculinity in the society is characterized by some missteps and silences that I hereby refer to as conundrums and hiccups. I approach this through the analysis of male characters and characterization in *Coming to birth*.

In patriarchal societies, men are socialized to be heads of their households. This requires that one has to marry and provide for his family. The assumption of such responsibilities as a married man distinguishes men from boys and qualifies one man enough. This is well captured in *Coming to birth* where we are told that Martin Were is happy to have been able to marry without much trouble. In relation to the expectations of the society, he was well placed to

embrace adult life as he had met all the requirements for such transition. In a stream of consciousness, Martin allows us to partake and be privy to his thoughts that:

He was twenty-three and the world was all before him. Five feet ten, a hundred and fifty pounds, educated, employed, married, wearing khaki long with a discreetly striped blue and white shirt and a plain blue tie, socks and lace-up shoes, he had already become a person in the judgment of the community he belonged to. (p.1)

The excerpt above affirms the masculine responsibilities that Martin is supposed to fulfil for the society to see him as a man. In fact, he is educated and married so he has become a person in the judgement of the community. By saying this, Martin unconsciously amplifies what his community expects of him and that he is simply projecting himself as a social construct. Martin's behavior is not out of his own volition and satisfaction of his achievement but to prove that he indeed is a man. By pointing out that he has become a person, Martin seems to suggest that the contrary to what he has done will definitely disqualify one to be considered a "person" and at best a man. One is inclined to ask whether the use of the term "person" in the excerpt also takes into account a man with less material privileges or even a woman? From the narrative voice, one can easily tell that the statement is exclusionary in its reference. You only become a "person" (man) if you perform what the society expects of you. The fact that he is employed is a clear demonstration that he can fully take on the responsibility of a man in his household. In this case, a man's financial stability plays a crucial role since Paulina's parents did not have issue with him as they obliged to give her hand in marriage to Martin:

She was sixteen and he had taken her at the Easter holiday, his father allowing two cattle and one he had bought from his savings, together with a food-safe for his mother-in-law and a watch for Paulina's father. They had made no objection to his marrying her then, on the promise of five more cows to follow. He had built a square house for her in Gem -square was more fashionable than round - and bought her a pair of rubber shoes. He could not then have afforded the fare to Nairobi or the things to set up house with, but now she was coming and he would be a man indeed. (p.2)

Based on the excerpt above, it is therefore instructive to point out that the social and economic status of Martin work in his favour in marrying Paulina. Since Martin had made a mark for himself, he could afford most things that his peers were not able to such as building a square house that was more fashionable than a round house.

Another quality of masculinity is the ability to control, subdue and where necessary cause pain. In most African societies, a man who is able to control and subdue his spouse creates room for total obedience from the person being controlled. One way of controlling is through physical and psychological violence. Physical and psychological violence are tools used by a dominant entity to force the one being controlled into imposed subjugation. For instance, in *Coming to birth*, Martin shows this by beating up Paulina for having been lost on her way from hospital. Martin is preoccupied with what people will say about him when they learn that Paulina is lost. According to him, people especially his friends will think he is not able to take care and control his wife. This scenario paints Martin's masculine perception of himself in the face of his peers and not the well-being of Paulina and why she got lost. At this point, Martin's recourse to violence is aimed at masking his inner emotional state of weakness associated with fear and self-doubt. When Paulina eventually traces Martin's house and finds Martin leaving for work, we are told that:

As the door opened, he gave her a hard push over towards the bed so that she fell to the floor, grazing her knees and knocking her forehead on the wooden frame.

‘Slut! Whore! Is that what you came to Nairobi for?’

His hand slapped across her cheek and again across her shoulders.

‘Want to come and live in Nairobi as somebody’s wife, do you - do you?’

His fist was pummelling into the small of her back and he began pulling at the bed as though to overturn it on top of her. (p.21)

Martin beats Paulina despite the fact that she is unwell and still traumatised by her failure to locate Martin’s house for two days. The excerpt above shows physical, psychological and verbal violence meted on Paulina. The use of both physical and verbal abuse in this excerpt is employed as a tool to subdue his wife. Martin does not give her an opportunity to explain herself instead he rains blows on the hapless Paulina. The same can be read as a means employed by Martin to maintain his masculine identity that the society expects of him. In the main, Martin is stamping his authority as a man of the house which best manifests itself through violence. Accordingly, the excerpt above shows Martin’s struggle to acknowledge and make an imprint of his own social status as a married man. This is a fundamental social status that Martin must guard with what it takes if at all he has to maintain the position as the head and provider of his family.

However, Martin’s choice of violence seems to point at his desperate but elusive clinging to some authority as the head in his household. The verbal abuse as demonstrated through the use of terms such as “slut” and “whore” are instrumental in this scenario. The reader and even Martin knows that Paulina is neither of the two words used. The question here is why use them? The point that Martin is trying to communicate here is that he has power and therefore can conquer, control and dominate those under him using any means available to him. However, Martin’s actions seem contradictory. If at all he has power, then there is no need to be violent in order to communicate the same to Paulina. In this way, Martin’s actions are read as his struggle to ward off his insecurities of being minus manly qualities of domination.

In addition, I underscore the fact that Martin’s seizure of violence as the only way out of his fear of loss of dignity is a pointer to his desperation to demonstrate his dominance while at the same time reinforcing Paulina’s inferior position. Paulina does not defend herself from Martin’s beatings yet Martin beats her mercilessly. This scene paints the position of a woman as a subordinate member within the family set up. In fact, Ahoya advises Paulina that every woman who comes to Nairobi has to be beaten. Ahoya’s complacent understanding of violence within marriage captures the normalization of immoral and inhuman acts exercised on women in the society. In this way, Paulina is expected to accept it as the norm and move on.

As a married man in the traditional Luo culture, Martin is expected to carry himself around in accordance with the responsibilities that come with such change of status. For instance, Martin is expected to be in control of his household especially his wife. This ensures that the woman automatically assumes the subordinate position of serving and taking care of her husband. When Paulina gets lost from hospital, Martin is worried but does not want to show since he is a man. His biggest worry is with how people will view him as someone who cannot take care of his wife. This then raises the question: is his show of masculinity innate or a performance of what the society has socialized him to be and expects him to do? The answer to this question is that Martin’s performance of masculinity is a construction of the society.

Martin's struggle to show that he is a man demonstrates a disconnect between Martin as a biological being endowed with innate potential and Martin as a social construct. When Paulina finally locates Martin's house, Martin beats her up and locks her in the house. However, upon arrival from work, he expects to find food ready. On this, Paulina informs him that that:

'There is no water and no charcoal,' she replied meekly.

'No . . . You employ me as a bloody coolie to bring you water?' he shouted.

'Don't you know where the water is?'

'But you had the key, Martin. I couldn't get out.'

'Carry my own key, fetch my own water, cook my own food! What the devil am I married for?' (p.25)

The excerpt above captures the inequality that exists in marriage. It is clear that Paulina is not equal to Martin who is the head of the family. Since Paulina belongs to the domestic sphere, she is supposed to ensure that her husband's needs are catered for without any excuses. In this way, taking care of household chores is her duty. In fact, Martin wonders why he is married. In doing this, Martin reduces Paulina to an object used to satisfy his ego as a man.

To show that he is in control of his family, he uses violence and unorthodox means such as locking Paulina in the house yet expect her to cook. To this end, Martin is desperately struggling with the burden of proving that he is a man. In his attempt to prove himself, Martin has, whether consciously or unconsciously, embraced the role of a traditional African man and husband by apportioning a subordinate role to Paulina. In fact, the narrative voice informs us that:

Martin was still in essence the Luo boy he had been when he got married seven years before, whose whole world picture revolved round an idealised 'home' to which he would return in plenty and comfort after making his mark on the big world. The fact that Paulina was herself an important person at 'home', despite his disappointments, reinforced that picture, and she had made the house itself far more fitting to his expectations than most of his friends' wives (p. 51).

In most cultures in Africa, masculinity is premised on the ability to sire as many children as possible. A household with children not only enhances a man's self-worth and confidence but also social prestige among peers as it is a demonstration of fertility, virility and manliness. For a long time, Martin battles his pain, emptiness and struggle of being childless despite having been married for over 20 years. For him, he has nothing to look forward to as a man since his house is deficient of children. In the Luo culture, which forms part of the setting of the text, having children is fundamental in underscoring Martin's identity as a man. However, Martin's identity as a man is in limbo just because he lacks children and therefore contrary to society's expectation. Such a worldview portrays masculinity as socially constructed because society expects one to behave like a man and not otherwise (Connell, 2005) which sometimes leads to one resorting to acting to be what society expects. Martin is always preoccupied with thoughts of not having children and to him, this has denied him transition to develop as a man since:

He [Martin] did not see himself as maturing but as deprived of the chance of maturity, a childless man who could not keep a wife, whose house at home was shamed and whose house in town could never be home. He had long since ceased to wear the silver-

gilt wedding ring he had assumed that day at St John's, Pumwani. It could provoke too many questions. (p.78)

And that:

Martin had loss of dignity to avenge indeed, and felt very sure that he had been patient with his wife's ignorance and infertility. That she should now be so ungrateful as to deceive him was provocation intolerable to any man.

The above quotations underscore the place of children in accentuating a man's dignity amongst men and society at large. According to Fuller (2001), the ability to sire is "something that every man must do in order to be respected as man" (p. 96). This is a justification that having children augments a man's self-assurance, social stature and above all, it is an indication of manliness.

In addition, the second excerpt above is pivotal as it probes the fragility and fluidity of masculinity in the society. Martin is ready to avenge because rumour had reached him that Paulina was cheating on him with Simon. What is interesting is that Martin himself back in Nairobi had intimate relationships with a number of women such as Fatima, Fauzia and Nancy yet Paulina did not have issue with him. Perhaps Paulina's acceptance of Martin's macho behaviour is partly as a result of patriarchal structures that allow men to practice polygamy but prohibit women from doing the same. Note that I am not in any way condoning what Paulina is doing neither do I support what Martin has done. The point here is the glaring inequality predicated on gender and used in determining what is right and wrong in marriage.

Martin is infuriated about Paulina's infidelity simply because his sexuality as a man has been put to test. Martin is unable to impregnate Paulina and even the women he has a stint with back in the city fail to get children for him. Martin's "impotence" has "othered" him among his fellow men. In most cultures especially in Africa, men's sexual prowess and ability to sire as many children as possible is used as a tool of control and dominance. Men who have such ability are respected especially among the peers and society at large. Therefore, when Paulina cheats on him, Martin is emasculated as a man and is the reason he cannot bear the double disempowerment: childlessness and the thought of another man having his woman. Mate (2017) observes that "sex is a powerful tool used by men to assert their sexuality" (p. 103) and their dominance.

Therefore, Paulina's body is conceptualised in form of a battle field where male sexual power and identity is exercised and realized. In this case, Martin's loss of Paulina to Simon signifies his loss of control, disempowerment and emasculation by a fellow man. As a result, Martin cannot fathom this but seek to avenge this loss through the only means he knows better-violence. We are told that Martin Were disowned Paulina and chased her out of his house. Interestingly, it is the same Martin who had chased Paulina away that moves to Paulina's house towards the end of the text. Therefore, moving in with Paulina is symbolic of his desperate attempt to redeem himself from his powerless and emasculated position as a man. In doing this, he reclaims his manly power as embodied in his sexuality. In fact, he impregnates Paulina and he is excited about the thought of being a father though belated.

In patriarchal societies, a responsible man must have his own house whether in the rural place or urban centre. Such a responsibility ensures that the family has both physical, psychological and financial security. A man who owns a house is in a position to make decisions as the head of the family. However, Martin has failed in this aspect as he shares a house not once but twice

in Nairobi. House sharing does not give him the monopoly of decision making as a married man. Accordingly, house sharing denies Paulina the privacy that she deserves from her husband as the woman of the house. This is well captured in the following excerpt that:

Once a year during recess Paulina travelled to Nairobi, but there she was more like a visitor than a wife. Martin had moved to share a single room with a friend and had all his meals out to save the expense of entertaining. The friend obligingly found another place to sleep when Paulina arrived and she cooked for the three of them.... (p.45)

And that:

Martin was glad enough to get away and enlisted the help of the firm's van to take his things to Kibera where a cousin of his, a very junior clerk, had got into desperate financial straits during his first Christmas in work and was glad enough to share the house and expenses through the coming lean months. (p. 58)

Of note in the above quotations is the social construct that a mature man should have decent abode to himself. In fact, inherent in such socialization is the breadwinner viewpoint bestowed upon men especially with the changing demands in the modern society. Life in the urban setting with its unceasing financial demands leaves Martin with no choice but stay with relatives and friends to make ends meet. However, this is a contradiction of how men are socialised as providers for their families. In this way, the constructed social image performed by men and Martin in particular to show their masculinity falls short of the social reality lived by the very men signified through Martin.

In addition, men are expected to be economically endowed which then allows them to accomplish the breadwinning role. As earlier on discussed in this paper, a man is expected to provide for his family. This is informed by the fact that he is the head of the family hence the sole breadwinner. However, in *Coming to birth*, we see Martin's expectation and hope that Paulina will help financially. Mate (2017) refers to such a situation as a case of "reversed gender roles caused by women becoming increasingly economically independent" (p. 109). Martin looks forward to Paulina shouldering some of his responsibilities once she finishes her training at Homecraft College. This comes to pass especially when Paulina buys "a new bed and mattress, a food cupboard and some upright chairs as well as helping her mother-in-law, out of her income from the club" (pp. 45-46). As a result, Martin is elated since his social status among his agemates is outstanding and that:

All 1960 Martin waited in hope. Paulina would finish the course. She would be a credit to him. She would have an income and then, surely, as a grownup person, she should have a child. (pp. 46-47)

Based on the above excerpt, instead of Martin assuming his provider role as envisaged by society, he hopes to be helped by Paulina. This reversal of roles by Martin could be as a result of the changing modern times where women are becoming more and more economically stable. Martin's hope in Paulina coming to his aid financially signifies the contradictions and overambitious expectations placed on men. Martin seems to suggest that he needs a woman's input to ease the financial responsibilities and roles expected of him as a man and husband. In fact, Martin's responsibilities as a man is comparable to Babamukuru in Dangrembga's *Nervous conditions*. As the elder son and having received good education, Babamukuru is expected to provide not only for his nuclear family but also the extended family. In order to accomplish most of the responsibilities, he uses Maiguru's salary without her consent.

Therefore, just like Martin who hopes Paulina will help financially, Babamukuru is using Maiguru's money to sustain his role as the provider. As such, one is inclined to wonder whether this reversal of roles is inability for the male gender to sustain their masculinity or is a result of the changing social times.

Another aspect of contradiction in as far as masculinity is concerned is the idea of reconciliation and eventual revival of a marriage after a break up. Among the Luo community in Kenya, when a couple separates, it is expected that the woman will return to her husband's house but not vice versa. Therefore, when Paulina walks out of marriage, we expect that she is the one to go back to her husband. This is what the society expects of her as a wife. However, in the text, it is Martin who decides to go back to Paulina and even he stays in Paulina's house. In fact, the manner in which he returns is peppered with some humor. He starts by paying a casual visit to Paulina's house then the visits increase and he starts leaving behind some of his belongings:

A few weeks later Martin, on a Sunday afternoon visit, asked her to look after his briefcase and a box of books while he was on a selling safari. He dropped in from time to time to take what he wanted and would bring a couple of shirts for her to mend and iron. Once or twice he stayed the night because he did not feel up to the journey back on the late bus, and the first time she left him her bed and made up her own in the children's room as she would if their parents were away. But soon it was an understood thing that he would stay when he wished. Within six months he had moved all his things to her room. It would be prudent to move in with her for reasons of security and economy. (p. 96)

In moving in with Paulina, Martin subverts what is expected of a man in most societies and Africa in particular. The above excerpt is a clear indication of the diminishing traditional masculinity in the face of modern demands of life. This is because, as observed earlier, if Martin was still keen on preserving his dignity as a man, then moving to Paulina's house would have been out of question. However, I underscore the fact that the city is open to a host of cultures hence nobody questions Martin's decision. Martin's action foreshadows the weakening hold unto strict dictates of what a man should do as the times can no longer hold and accommodate.

2.CONCLUSION

This paper has examined readings of masculinity in the African society through a close reading of Marjorie Oludhe's *Coming to birth*. The paper has established that the social constructs of masculinity is marred with contradictions and challenges as exemplified through the primary text. These challenges have in one way or another impacted how men behave in given situations away from the traditional readings of masculinity. The changing behaviours by men then leads to contradictions as to how men are defined especially in the African context.

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