WOMEN’S ENGAGEMENT WITH POWER/AUTHORITY IN THE FICTION OF MARJORIE OLUDHE MACGOYE, MARY OKURUT AND ELIESHI LEMA

JOSEPH LENNOX ODIEMO

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate School in Partial Fulfilment for the Requirements of the Degree of Master of Arts in Literature of Egerton University

EGERTON UNIVERSITY
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DECLARATION AND APPROVAL

DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

This Master of Arts thesis is my original work and has not been presented for a degree in any other university.

Signed  -----------------------------------------                         Date ---------------------
Odiemo, Joseph Lennox
AM18/1781/06

APPROVAL BY THE SUPERVISORS

This Master of Arts thesis has been presented for examination with our approval as supervisors.

Prof. Emilia V. Ilieva

Signed  -----------------------------------------                         Date ---------------------

Dr. Fugich Wako

Signed  -----------------------------------------                         Date ---------------------
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DEDICATION

Phyllis
(Mama);
for looking long in your alaka’s eyes
into collapsing into the agony
of silence unto the earth.

This is another mind-print
in the memory lane of our journey
…
But, above all,
for the illumining idea that:

And,
Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye,
for enabling teleological literary celebration
in East Africa’s present moments.

Then,
Imi,
because, ‘[i]f eternal return is the heaviest of burdens, then our lives can stand out against it in all their splendid lightness.’ – Milan Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being: A Lovers’ Story. New York: Harper & Row, 1984, p. 5.
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ABSTRACT

In Kenya’s Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye’s *The Present Moment* (1987), Uganda’s Mary Okurut’s *The Invisible Weevil* (1998), and Tanzania’s Elieshi Lema’s *Parched Earth: A Love Story* (2001), engagement with power/authority in women writing in English in East Africa finds its most sustaining literary spaces. This study investigated how these writers and women characters in the texts subvert, actively resist, and engage with power and authority in the East African society. Feminist and postcolonial literary theories formed the theoretical underpinning for the study, because the women’s struggle is a feminist and gender one experienced within the postcolonial space. Qualitative research methods of document and textual analyses were employed. Primary texts, including writers’ archival material, as well as secondary texts, provided data that was critically interpreted and analysed. Data was coded and categorised into major themes and concepts in relation to engagement with power/authority and women writing in English in East Africa. Interpretive and dialogic as well as theoretical analyses of data were employed. In conclusion, it is posited that through the women characters’ employment of strategies such as learning, restorying, narrative, militancy, performative arts and silence, the three texts subvert the dominant ideologies that bestow power/authority in patriarchally defined institutions in the society, presenting oppositional and countering positions and hence imagining a gender inclusive East African postcolony. The study contributes to knowledge by providing an in-depth analysis of women engagement with power/authority. It also reads into the ongoing discourses on the location of women in the East African historiography. The study will also be useful in gender policy formulation and implementation at academic and other socio-political institutions.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION AND APPROVAL ................................................................. ii  
COPYRIGHT .............................................................................................. iii  
DEDICATION .......................................................................................... iv  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT ........................................................................... v  
ABSTRACT .............................................................................................. vi  
TABLE OF CONTENTS ........................................................................ vii  
DEFINITION OF TERMS ..................................................................... x  

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .......................................................... 1  
1.1 Background to the Study ................................................................. 1  
1.2 Statement of the Problem .............................................................. 16  
1.3 Objectives of the Study ................................................................. 17  
1.4 Research Premises ........................................................................ 17  
1.5 Justification of the Study ............................................................... 17  
1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Study .............................................. 18  
1.7 Literature Review ......................................................................... 19  
1.7.1 Women’s Writing in the East African Literary Tradition .......... 19  
1.7.2 Re/imagining the East African (Post)colonial Nation ............... 23  
1.7.3 Interrogation of Patriarchy and Gender Binarisations ............. 26  
1.7.4 The Aesthetics and Poetics of Women’s Writing ...................... 28  
1.7.5 Women’s Engagement with the Power/Authority Matrix .......... 30  
1.8 Theoretical Framework ................................................................. 31  
1.8.1 Postcolonial Theory ................................................................. 32  
1.8.2 Feminist Literary Theory ......................................................... 33  
1.8.3 Postcolonial and Feminist Literary Theories: Intersections and Conflations ................................................................. 35  
1.9 Methodology ................................................................................ 36  
1.9.1 Data Collection ....................................................................... 36  
1.9.1.1 Methods ............................................................................ 36  
1.9.1.2 Primary Data .................................................................... 37
1.9.1.3 Secondary Data................................................................. 37
1.9.2 Data Analysis................................................................. 37
1.10 Chapter Outline.............................................................. 38

CHAPTER TWO: THE PRESENT MOMENT: WOMEN’S PRIVATE/
PUBLIC NARRATIVES OF POWER/AUTHORITY............................. 40

2.1 Introduction: Reconstructing Histories from Below................. 40
2.2 The Subaltern Female’s Envoicing Narratives........................ 44
2.3 Wairimu: A Peasant Woman’s Expansionary Narrative of Learning... 48
2.4 Rahel Apudo: A Luo Woman’s Contestation of Patriarchy........ 59
2.5 Sophia Mwamba: The Subaltern Female’s Journey towards Self-
representation........................................................................ 62
2.6 Unveiling Silences: Re-memorying the Other Women Protagonists
of Moment ................................................................. 66
2.7 Building a Futuristic Women’s Space: Intergenerational Epistemologies... 75
2.8 The Aesthetics of the Narrative of Moment............................. 77
2.9 Summation: Restoring the Woman’s Voice in the Nationalist Narrative…. 86

CHAPTER THREE: THE INVISIBLE WEEVIL: INTERPELLATING
OTHERISING EPISTEMOLOGIES.................................................. 88

3.1 Introduction: Weevil and Uganda’s Problematic Post-Independence
Socio-political History............................................................. 88
3.2 Re/visioning Patriarchal Male Power in Weevil........................ 92
3.3 Women’s Liberational Epistemologies.................................. 101
3.4 The University as Space for Women’s Resistance and Empowerment…. 109
3.5 Female Strategies and/in the “Eventual Liberation”............... 111
3.6 Difficult Negotiations: Woman as Wife and Worker............... 114
3.7 The Aesthetics of the Narrative of Weevil............................. 116
3.8 Summation: Weevil and the Project of a Gender Inclusivist Uganda...... 123

CHAPTER FOUR: RE/NEGOTIATING “SOCIETAL LABYRINTH”:
PARCHED EARTH’ S QUEST TO COLLAPSE
OTHERISING PATRIARCHAL NARRATIVES................................... 127

4.1 Introduction: Earth’s Contestation of the Trap of the “Spider’s Web”.... 127
4.2 Foibe Seko: Woman as ‘the man’ of the Family .......................... 131
4.3 Internalising Woman’s Wisdom to ‘fight life with life’: The Narrative of Doreen Seko ................................................................. 139
4.4 Doreen’s Marriage, the ‘girl child as the laughter that brings tears’ .... 144
4.5 Literary Aesthetics in Earth .......................................................... 157
4.6 Summation: New Mythos of Patriarchal Power/Authority Engagement in Earth ........................................................................... 163

CHAPTER FIVE: PRESENT MOMENT’S, INVISIBLE WEEVIL’S AND PARCHED EARTH’S SPACE IN THE EAST AFRICAN LITERARY CANON .......................................................... 166

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION .......................................................... 173

REFERENCES ................................................................................. 178
Primary Texts .................................................................................. 178
Other Fictional Texts ........................................................................ 178
Secondary Texts .............................................................................. 179
DEFINITION OF TERMS

In the study, the following terms are understood as:

**Authority**: A form of power that inscripts in certain individuals rights to command and prescribe to other individuals or groups corresponding duties to obey. (See also **Power/authority**).

**Binarisation**: The investment of a first term in a series with the authority of a governing fixed point (Brooker, 1999, p. 75), for instance; male/female, centre/margin, real/representation.

**Critique**: Taking up a position within the object of study seeking to elicit its contradictory tendencies and to foreground its valid features (Eagleton, 1991, p. xiv).

**Dialectic of women’s history**: A phrase employed by Gerda Lerner (1986, p. 5) to refer to the tension between women’s actual historical experience and their exclusion from interpreting that experience.

**Essentialism**: The assumption that human beings, objects or texts possess underlying essences which define their ‘true natures’ (Brooker, 1999, p. 75).

**Feminist theory**: A reading strategy that embraces a variety of approaches to the question of women’s place and power in culture and society, ‘approaches [most of which] are allied by their critical analysis of patriarchal and phallocentric institutions and practices, and their interests in promoting women’s issues and concerns’ (Barton & Hudson, 1997, p. 70).

**Gender**: Characteristics and roles assigned to preferred patterns of behaviour based on sex.

**Narrative**: Understood within feminist epistemological usage as stories to be read in images, texts, music, events … It is at once representational and performative (Hoving, 2000, p. 356).

**Patriarchy**: A system in which men have all or most of the power and importance in a society or group.

**Postcolonial feminist theory**: An approach that broadly characterises and addresses feminist preoccupations with race and gender that focus on the formerly colonised societies. It especially engages ‘crucial issues of cultural identity, language, nationalism
and the place of women within the newly-emerging nation states, female self representation, and critical interrogations of white, bourgeoisie feminism’ (Mehta, 2000, p. 395).

**Postcolonial theory:** Theoretical and critical strategies employed to examine the cultures of former colonies of the Western powers and how they relate to, and interact with, the rest of the world. As a critical practice, it involves ‘a studied engagement with the experience of colonialism and its past and present effects at the levels of material culture and representation’ (Quayson, 1998).

**Postcolony:** The entity that ‘identifies specifically a given historical trajectory – that of societies emerging from the experience of colonisation and the violence which the colonial relationship par excellence involves’ (Mbembe, 1992, p. 3).

**Power:** A condition in which some individuals or groups exercise domination over other individuals or groups. In Michel Foucault’s conception, it is dispersed and without a specific source or agency. It is ‘something which circulates … [and] functions in the form of a chain … [it is] employed and exercised through a net-like organisation’ (1980, p. 98). (See also **Power/authority**).

**Power/authority:** Employed in the study to signal the epistemic correlation in the understanding of power and authority.

**Subaltern:** Utilised in Spivak’s (1999) understanding of those ‘others’ who occupy the space of difference; the postcolonial women being one such category.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Beginning in 1966 with the publication by novelist and short-story writer, Grace Ogot, of *Promised Land*, women writing in English, especially in the novel mode, in East Africa has been developing steadily. Women writers have continuously been setting for themselves goals of representing the woman experience in East Africa in unique ways. Women voices of the late twentieth century to the present dynamically confront such intricate questions as patriarchy, politics, history, cultural knowledge production and formulation. They aim at (re)defining the East African woman in the exercising of power and authority in the society, and in the process bring out her active participation in the public sphere. This they seek to attain by collapsing the rigid dichotomisation of the public and private spheres by demonstrating the interrelationship of the two.

Grace Ogot, one of Kenya’s leading writers, was also the first East African woman writer in English. Ogot started her writing career with short stories (and excels in this genre as is evident in collections such as *Land Without Thunder* [1968]), initially published in college literary journals, but eventually publishing her first novel, *Promised Land*, in 1966. This was paralleled by the publication of the Nigerian writer Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*, thus mapping out the entry of women into the Anglophone novel production in Africa. Andrade observes of Ogot’s and Nwapa’s creating of own literary spaces, and establishing ground for African women writers, insightfully that:

The earliest female-authored novelists seemed less “political,” less interested in relations of public social power, than were their literary successors. I suggest that in the face of the bewildering job of being the first to inhabit and claim their place in the sphere of letters (that is to say, to engage in non-traditional behaviour), early African women novelists told stories whose settings were themselves removed from the modern and urban world. ... The earliest examples of this kind of novelistic writing – *Efuru* and *The Promised Land* … appear parochial and insular and seem to be manifestly excluded from the narrative of nationalism. I say manifestly because deploying “tradition” … served as a vehicle by which to claim moral authority and more comfortably enter the very modern world of letters and publication. (2007, p. 89)
Ogot’s *Promised Land* straddles the borders of Kenya and Tanzania as a man sets out in search of material aggrandisement. The man, Ochola, however ends up with an ailment associated with what the society considers bewitchment. This may not emerge as a narrative that forcefully brings out gender issues in the society or engage the dominant theme of the period, nationalism (as Andrade holds above), but in the major woman character in the novel, Nyapol, we find an individual, as Mwangi argues, with ‘an immense potential to subvert patriarchal structures’ (2007, p. 132). Stratton, on her part, understands Ogot as ‘Portraying women as subjects of national aspiration, she constructs an alternative form of subjectivity. Ogot’s male characters are also revisions. Men fall apart in her fiction in order to make room for women’ (1994, p. 79). Stratton’s view of men falling apart in Ogot’s fiction to create room for women is rather overstretched; but she is right that Ogot constructs an alternative form of subjectivity. As Kurtz (1998) has argued, ‘In Nyapol, Ogot has created the Kenyan novel’s first complex and powerful female character’ (p. 30).

Ogot’s writing, thus, anticipates the close interrogation of women issues and what Mwangi calls ‘the self-conscious feminism associated with younger East African [women] writers’ (2007, p. 132), that predominates the literature by East African women from the 1980s to date.

In Kenya, for instance, in women writers such as Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye (one of the writers examined in the study), Muthoni Likimani, Rebeka Njau, Asenath Bole Odaga, Florence Genga-Idowu, Margaret Ogola, there is to be found a sustained creation of female characters who engage the society in order to ensure their presence in it as agents in its socio-cultural and economic growth and development. In heroines like Riana (in Odaga’a *Riana* [1991]), Akoko (in Ogola’s *The River and the Source* [1993]), Tesa (in Njau’s *The Sacred Seed* [2003]), the male order in the Kenyan society is challenged and, to a certain degree, reformulated.

The Ugandan literary scene, on its part, has been fundamentally altered starting from the 1990s with the entry into it of women authors. Prominent Ugandan women authors of this period and who continue to flourish to-date include Mary Okurut (one of the authors discussed in the study), Goretti Kyomuhendo, Violet Barungi, Ayeta Anne Wangusa and Glaydah Namukasa. In their literary corpus, women are centred in the
Ugandan society as being active participants in the country’s emancipation from the various post-independence socio-political upheavals.

And in the contributions by playwrights Amandina Lihamba and Penina Muhando (though both writing in Kiswahili), and novelist Elieshi Lema (a subject of study in this work), Tanzanian women writers as well capture the contestations of male dominance in the public space by women.

Perhaps it is in literature, more than in any other field, that the East African women have reasserted themselves indelibly in a conscious effort to re-write the history of the East African nations, at once reconsidering the spaces they inhabit and endeavouring to meaningfully situate their presences. This ongoing process has realised the production of award-winning texts across the literary genres of prose, poetry and drama. East African women’s writing straddles various thematic concerns: women’s exploitation, psychologically, socially, and economically; and the struggle for survival in the wake of internecine hostilities and scourges such as HIV/Aids as well as contesting societal patriarchal foundations, grips and retrogressive cultural practices.

Lionett correctly captures the role of literature in resistances when she conceptualises that:

Literature, as a discursive practice that encodes and transmits as well as creates ideology, is a mediating force in society: it structures our sense of the world since narrative or stylistic conventions and plot resolutions serve to either sanction and perpetuate cultural myths, or to create new mythologies that allow the writer and the reader to engage in constructive re-writing of their social contexts. (1997, p. 205.)

In this study, the focus is on the novel. As Bakhtin has argued, the novel is a genre that is ‘inherently anti-normative ... a maverick form, sceptical of all the authoritative claims to truth’ (qtd. in Eagleton, 2005, p. 7). The novel genre of literature thus becomes immediate in the enterprise of re-imagining, re-writing and collapsing. Gikandi has argued that ‘the novel is the youngest literary genre to have developed in East Africa, but it is perhaps the most important in mapping the literary history of the region and its relationship to the rest of the continent and the world’ (2007, p. 120). As a genre of immediacy in defining the ‘literary history of the region’, the novel carries the
necessary weight to enable women to position themselves into a space in many ways male defined and dominated.

Gikandi proceeds to argue that ‘[t]he prominence of the novel as a genre reflects a global rather than local phenomenon, for the genre tends to have the widest readership and to dominate the market in books and ideas’ (ibid., p. 121). For these reasons, therefore, it can be posited that through the novel, women writers in East Africa manage to reach out and hence more appropriately advance their positions on the various issues that affect the East African society. And, if the novel’s ‘special mandate’, as Wood argues, is to investigate and to remedy human behaviour in ways which other forms … cannot’ (qtd. In Macfarlane, 2004, p. 7), then it is the genre best suited to address the woman condition in the sub-region.

On women’s engagement with the novel genre in the sub-region, Gikandi holds that:

Before the 1980s, the majority of women novelists, most prominently Grace Ogot and Rebeka Njau, were not focused on the lives of women except in relation to the changing narrative of cultural nationalism and the crisis of decolonisation. In the 1980s … women novelists seemed to have come to the realisation that the narrative of nationalism, whose pitfalls were so marked in that decade, was gendered, and that women bore the brunt of political and social failure. (2007, p. 124)

Hence, in their challenge of this state of affairs, the 1980s and thereafter mark an important stage in the entry and redefining of the viewing of such issues as nationalism, colonialism, independence struggle, post-independence politics, and women and gender by women authors in East Africa. They endeavour to grapple with the questions posed by Woolf:

You have won rooms of your own in the house hitherto exclusively owned by men … But this freedom is only a beginning; the room is your own, but it is still bare. It has to be furnished; it has to be decorated; it has to be shared. How are you going to furnish it, how are you going to decorate it? With whom are you going to share it, and upon what terms? (1996, p. 226)

And they are confident in this task because ‘[they] are able to ask them … [they] are able to decide for [themselves] what the answers should be’ (ibid.).

Thus in their relative freedom, women writers in East Africa create the literary space to enable them critically examine the representation of the woman in the society,
giving her the agency necessary to engage societal prejudices and other patriarchal encumbrances. As Davies and Graves note of African literature, ‘much of the early literature deals with the social and ethical implications of colonialism and man’s struggle within, and away from, its confines. Women are usually made peripheral to all that and function as symbols or instruments for the male hero’s working out of his problem’ (1986, p. 3). Mwangi, in a way, corroborates this view when he reads within the specificity of East African literature that:

For a long time, the images of women found in the writings of major East African writers have been generally negative. In popular literature, women have often been cast as sex objects to be consumed by men, while politically engaged literature has historically subordinated women to the nationalist project, presenting them as symbols of the motherland but not endowing them with agency or subjectivity. (2007, p. 63)

In their writing, therefore, the East African women writers redeem the agency necessary in making them active voices in the East African society, as well as in its literary and other cultural processes. Writing thus offers what Vera (1999) has called a ‘moment of intervention’ (p. 3) as it repositions women in the centre of socio-cultural and economic action in the society.

Women resistances through the mode of literature stretch over to the colonial times in East Africa. East African women have engaged in various forms of resistance through the spoken (especially during the colonial times) and written word (especially after the official end of colonialism) to seek to challenge what Mazrui has called ‘the triple custodial role’ of ‘remaining trustee of fire, water and earth’ (1990, p. 190), a custodianship that ensures women’s limited participation in the public space, and thus viewing them as ‘unessential to those pursuits defined as having historic significance’ (Lerner, 1986, p. 4). Lerner’s reading is worth going into detail as she underlines a necessary concept that challenges history and its reading of women. She brings out what she calls the ‘dialectic of women’s history’, that is, ‘[t]he tension between women’s actual historical experience and their exclusion from interpreting that experience’ (ibid., p. 5). Lerner goes on to argue that:

The contradiction between women’s centrality and active role in creating society and their marginality in the meaning-giving process of interpretation and explanation has been a dynamic force, causing women to struggle against their
condition. When, in that process of struggle, at certain historic moments, the contradictions in their relationship to society and to historical process are brought into the consciousness of women, they are then correctly perceived and named as deprivations that women share as a group. This coming-into-consciousness of women becomes the dialectical force moving them into action to change their condition and to enter a new relationship to male-dominated society. (ibid.)

However, on her reading of ‘African feminism’ and especially paying attention to the work of Ifi Amadiume (*Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, 1987), Steady has convincingly argued that:

African historiography and ethnographic studies have at times represented women as dynamic and active political and economic actors and decision makers, prior to and during the colonial period. As a result, the image of African social systems is one that reveals a complexity, which defies simplistic polarisations into dichotomous models of public/private domains, nature/culture debates and even male/female categories. (2005, para. 3)

Steady’s argument is arresting, but its limitation emerges in its rooting in the West African scene. The East African historiography very much reads into the exclusion that Lerner critiques. Still, Steady’s position is vital as it cautions against some essentialist epistemologies that are in the end self-defeating.

Taking women’s resistance during the colonial period, in the Kenyan situation, for instance, as labourers on the colonial plantations, women organised themselves and protested over socio-cultural and economic exploitation by the colonial masters as well as their African male overseers. The latter were deeply steeped in African patriarchy. “Song of the Coffee Girls” in Kenya during the early twentieth century, for example, offers a representation of resistance to colonial power and other exploitative, otherising societal institutions in colonial Kenya (Lihamba et al., 2007, p. 7). In this song, we witness a ‘resistance directed toward an economic system that enabled settlers and the colonial administration to conscript men and women for cheap plantation labour’ (ibid.). The women not only respond to the call for action by the African labour leaders, but they also challenge men’s authority by defying the European authority when the African men are cloaked up in timidity.

Women in East Africa had to contest various marginalising forces springing from African traditions, colonialism, and the post-independence establishments. As Bhabha has argued:
Resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the ‘content’ of an other culture, as difference once perceived. It is the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and reinterpret them within the differential relations of colonial power – hierarchy, normalisation, marginalisation, and so forth. (1995, p. 33)

Colonialism itself, to a significant degree, enhanced the marginalisation of the colonised women by ‘reinforcing and extending some of the worst elements of African patriarchy’ (Lihamba et al., 2007, p. 36). And as Spivak has argued of the subaltern (those Others who occupy the space of difference), ‘as object of colonial historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of the colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow’ (1995, p. 28). Bhabha as well captures the colonialist condition of disempowering the (post)colonised women (and men), ‘[t]he exercise of colonialist authority, however, requires the production of differentiations, identity effects through which discriminatory practices can map out subject populations that are tarred with the visible and transparent mark of power’ (2004, p. 1174). Therefore, discriminatory and differentiating practices become major leitmotifs that structure patriarchal societies among the colonised and the subsequent emerging postcolonies.

Independence in the East African society fails to meaningfully alter the marginalisation of women; and their participation in the independence struggle and nation-formation processes goes largely unmarked. This reads into Boehmer’s argument that:

Just as the (stereotypical) mother of the Victorian middle class may have had her formal or moral power in the family circumscribed on practice by male authority, so at the state level in independent African nations, a national ideology privileging mother symbols did not in reality empower mothers; the authority of fathers had been entrenched. Far from being only an outward manifestation of colonial rule, patriarchy, the intersection of indigenous and imported forms, thus became its medium. Women in the various nations came to be subjected to a syncretic fusion of male rules, encoded as principles of law and often enforced as tradition. Taking into account that power is consolidated through gender and that successful power is self-confirming, the usefulness of this system guaranteed its ubiquity and its survival beyond independence both in national and in pan-national ideologies. (1992, p. 242)
Further, the official end of colonialism does not collapse the residues of colonial mentality, a problematic that is exacerbated by global modernity, which, according to Chatterjee, is a framework that ‘structure[s] the world according to a pattern that is profoundly colonial’ (1998, p. 3). The postcolonial East African state thus becomes a site of problematised power relations, as its socio-cultural and economic institutions rest on grounds that enhance the occlusion of women as equal partners to their men counterparts. To seek to encentre themselves, to participate in the public sphere, therefore, East African women undertake the task, through literature, and especially the novel genre, of reconstructing, at times subverting, the narrow horizons of ‘the acceptable’ to disrupt the ‘tradition’ in order to enlarge it, make it inclusive, and reconstitute power into a positive-sum game.

The East African women writers, therefore, in their works provide avenues ‘through which women may be seen not as passive or barely visible entities, but as articulate and talented producers of art and knowledge, and as heroic makers of history’ (Lihamba et al., 2007, p. 1). They, in their writing, also seek to explore, what Volet (2001) has argued of Francophone writers but which is as well the case with the Anglophone experience, the way women ‘answer the challenge of surviving in rough and often inhumane conditions, how they assess the past to better understand the future, how they devise new strategies, follow new dreams, and attempt to make do with the often limited resources at their disposal’ (p. 187). And they also enter into what has been called the new trends of women writing in Africa that entail ‘such features as iconoclasm, the deliberate repudiation of all arch symbols of traditionalism and orthodoxy, as well as women’s prescient critique of female subjugation, psychological brutality, individual inferiorisation and exclusion on gender lines’ (Uko, 2006, p. 82).

In his observation of the Kenyan (and this is true of East Africa generally) literary process, especially of women’s literature, Kurtz (1998) holds:

The development of a significant tradition of writing by women is one of the most important recent developments in Kenya’s literary history. The female characters in writing by women offer new perspectives and revised accounts of Kenyan women’s stories. Often these may be read as direct retellings of those women’s lives that are presented so very differently, usually inadequately, in hegemonic writing from men. (p. 154)
This is an apt argument that the study corroborates and demonstrates through the reading of women’s engagement with power and authority in the three texts: the Kenyan Marjorie Oluudhe Macgoye’s *The Present Moment* (1987), the Ugandan Mary Karooro Okurut’s *The Invisible Weevil* (1998), and the Tanzanian Elieshi Lema’s *Parched Earth: A Love Story* (2001).

Power, itself a complex concept (in Foucault’s dilemma, ‘... this enigmatic thing we call power, which is at once visible and invisible, present and hidden, ubiquitous [1982, p. 5]) is understood in this study as the condition in which some individuals or groups exercise domination over other individuals or groups. And, broadly, to possess power is to have the ability to achieve whatever is desired regardless of any opposition (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004, p. 115). However, as Foucault has argued (1980), power ‘must be analysed as something which circulates ... something which only functions in the form of a chain ... [it is] employed and exercised through a net-like organization … individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application’ (p. 98).

Foucault sees power as ‘a set of relations and strategies dispersed throughout a society and enacted at every moment of interaction’ (Mills, 2003, p. 30). Foucault discursively elaborates on the concept of power thus:

> the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallisation is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. (1981, p. 92)

To Foucault, then, it is inappropriate to vision power in terms of absolute ownership by individuals or group of people or institutions. Power, he holds, should be examined in the way it ‘operates within everyday relations between people and institutions’ (ibid., p. 33). Foucault imagines resistance to and engagement with power in his argument that ‘even at their most constraining, oppressive measures are in fact productive, giving rise to new forms of behaviour rather than simply closing down or censoring certain forms of behaviour’ (ibid., p. 34). It is this manner of conceptualising
power that Mills captures when she argues that Foucault’s ‘focus on the way power relations permeate all relations within a society, enables an account of the mundane and daily ways in which power is enacted and contested, and allows an analysis which focuses on individuals as active subjects, as agents rather than as passive dupes’ (ibid., p. 34). And, as Foucault admits, ‘it is often difficult to say who holds power in precise sense, but it is easy to see who lacks power’ (1982, p. 5).

Linking the Foucauldian reading of power to the feminist perception of it, Isaac argues in his formulation of what he calls the post-modernist model of power, that:

The feminist view of power highlights certain kinds of relations – typically those involving mutuality – over others … it is quite explicitly normative, purporting not simply to identify but to valorise realms of experience and human possibility previously hidden by more accepted, masculinist models of power. (1992, p. 65)

He then sees the above (feminist view) as a major point of contact between feminists and the work of Foucault, which, in his words (Foucault’s) seeks to advance the ‘insurrection of subjugated knowledges that have been ‘disqualified’ and buried by ‘received’ and more accepted discourses’ (1982, p. 5).

In this perceptualisation of power beyond the simple view of it as oppressive and repressive, new grounds are open for analysis of its operation, enaction and resistances in societies deemed patriarchal like the East African ones that are of concern to this study. Still, it cannot be denied that Foucault’s reading of power is problematic for ‘while it is important that he has focused on the possibility of resistance rather than only describing oppression, he has located resistance within power itself, thus denying agency of those who oppose oppressive [institutions]’ (Isaac, 1992, p. 123). As well, Isaac notes that in linking ‘the concept of the human subject with modern forms of domination’ (ibid., p. 66), Foucault in his understanding of “resistances” has little to say about the duality of structure and agency, and less about the way in which agents can and do transform the conditions under which they live’ (ibid.).

However, in the study, the propinquity of the Foucauldian reading of power, and generally what Isaac calls the post-modernist model, that is, conceptualisation of power ‘developed in different ways in the writing of Foucault and certain contemporary feminists’ (ibid., p. 57), is in the underpinning that engagement with power/authority is a continuous process and it occurs in virtually every relation in the society.
From this understanding of power, the dominated individuals or groups are in perpetual search for forms of resistances, consciously and unconsciously, actively and passively. Wartenburg (1990) argues that power is always mediated by ‘social alignments’ which are dynamic. In this dynamism, there are continuous shifts as subordinate agents seek ways of challenging the actions of the dominant agents. Wartenburg holds that:

The subordinate agent is never absolutely disempowered, but only relatively so ... just as the dominant agent’s actions are subject to the problematic of maintaining power by maintaining the allegiance of the aligned agents, the subordinate agent is always in the position of being able to challenge the aligned agents’ complicity in her disempowerment’ (p. 173).

To Wartenburg, therefore, ‘even in situations in which we might characteristically describe one person as having or exercising power over another, that power depends upon other persons or groups in concert with what the first person does’ (ibid., p. 106).

Authority, on its part, is a form of power (other forms being persuasion, force, coercion, and manipulation) that inscripts in certain individuals rights to command and prescribe to dominated individuals or groups corresponding duties to obey. Examining the issue of authority, Said has argued of the need to critically analyse the concept. He holds:

There is nothing mysterious or natural about authority. It is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgements it forms, transmits, reproduces. Above all, authority can, indeed must, be analysed. (2003, pp. 19-20)

The study has utilised the Foucauldian run-in thought formulation, for example in his ‘power/knowledge’ construction – the discursive understanding of how the two elements draw from each other. Foucault observes that ‘it is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power’ (1980, p. 52). Steeping in such scholarship, the study understands ‘power/authority’ as an epistemic correlate that can best be conceptualised in a loosely bounded, run-in compound. In Isaac’s argument, ‘[t]he concept of power … has close connections with the concept of authority. But the latter has a normative dimension, suggesting a kind of consent or authorisation, about which the former is agnostic’ (1992, p. 57). It is this
closeness then that has been taken into focus in the compounding of power/authority in the study. And then, as Mills has suggested in her strategies of employing Foucauldian thought in literary scholarship, ‘Rather than trying to shoehorn Foucault’s work into an analysis of literary texts, we should rather turn our attention to the way that Foucault makes possible an analysis of the grounds on which we analyse literature’ (2003, pp. 116-117).

As has been indicated in the foregoing argument, women writing in East Africa has been, to a large extent, an engagement with power and authority. The present study’s thrust however is that engagement with power and authority in East African literature in English by women is at its most sustaining and finds its most articulate spaces in The Present Moment, The Invisible Weevil, and Parched Earth: A Love Story (hereafter referred to as Moment, Weevil and Earth respectively). The authors of these texts are arguably representative of women writers in their respective East African nations; and the works are those that best demonstrate their artistic achievement. East Africa as a region is understood to refer to the three postcolonies of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.

*Moment* is Macgoye’s third novel and arguably her most accomplished thematically and stylistically. It traces the lives of Kenyan women during the colonial and post-independence periods. The novel is narrated through the voices of seven women protagonists whose sub-narratives read into the historical narrative of the Kenyan nation. The women themselves, the seven protagonists and twenty three more, are living in a destitute home for the elderly called the Refuge, a metaphorical portrayal of the desired postcolony in a mosaic human existence. The women’s stories, however, depict lack and deprivation, the failure of the postcolonial Kenyan nation to actualise the dreams of the independence struggle. The women themselves thus endeavour to make something out of this lack and deprivation by re-situating their various forms of resistance to patriarchal oppression and domination in the Kenyan postcolony’s narrative.

The Ugandan author Mary Okurut’s *Weevil*, her second novel and most mature of her literary oeuvre, focuses on the role of women in the struggle to liberate Uganda from the brutal and dehumanising conditions meted out on the nation and its peoples by successive civilian and militarist regimes. In the novel’s central women characters, Nkwanzizi and Mama, Okurut shows how women took a central role together with their
male compatriots in the process of making Uganda a more humane, less brutal society. In
the metaphor of the ‘weevil’, Okurut brings out the parallel between the banal Ugandan
politics and the Aids scourge and shows how the two ravage the country and its people to
nothingness.

_Earth_ is Lema’s first novel. It is structured around the lives of two women
characters, Foibe Seko and her daughter Doreen Seko. Through these women’s life
stories, Lema delves into the problematic nature of women’s survival in a patriarchal
African society. She shows how the woman from the very outset is weighed against
debilitating Otherising conditions and how it is an uphill task to entrap herself from the
societal labyrinth that is supposed to keep her in ‘control’ and thus make her an easy
subject of manipulation and domination. The two women, however, forge various
strategies of resistance that make them escape total erasure from the centre of the society.

For the women characters in these texts, life is a series of various forms of
challenges to the power/authority that seeks to peripherally define the woman, Otherise,
domesticate and dis-empower her. The women in _Moment, Weevil_ and _Earth_ are,
however, not passive victims of oppression; they are involved in re-working power and
subverting dehumanising centres of authority. As it will be demonstrated in the following
chapters, these texts clearly show how literary artefacts can be useful in interrogating
marginalising ideologies in the society. As Le Roux has also argued:

_Fictional texts reveal certain patterns of how power operates in society, and in
particular allow for the excluded … to move out of its hidden, occluded subject
position and become visible. This enables the construction of an alternative
discourse in the narratives of anthropology, history, and sociology, and a fuller
understanding of human experience and human behaviour._ (2005, p. 33)

_Kristeva has held that ‘it is in the aspiration towards artistic and, in particular,
literary creation that women’s desire for affirmation … manifests itself’ (1982, p. 50). The
three authors under study can be seen in Kristeva’s understanding, so that in
literature, and especially the novel genre, they find an appropriate realm for the
‘identification with the potency of the imaginary’, identification that:

... bears witness to women’s desire to lift the weight of what is sacrificial in the
social contract from their shoulders, to nourish our societies with a more flexible
and free discourse, one able to name what has been an object of circulation in the
community: the enigmas of the body, the dreams, secret joys, shames, hatreds of the second sex. (ibid.)

It is in the same vein that the philosopher Nussbaum conceptualises literature and literary understanding as being capable of ‘promot[ing] habits of mind that lead towards social equality in that they contribute towards dismantling of stereotypes that support group hatred’ (1995, p. 92). In the women writers in the study, there are indeed moments of intervention that are offered in their respective texts. These writers provide necessary intervention in the East African writing process, an intervention that seeks to purposefully position the East African woman into socio-cultural and political agency.

The authors and the key characters in these texts, the seven major women in *Moment;* Nkwanzi and Mama in *Weevil;* and Doreen and Foibe Seko in *Earth,* are interested in seeing their situations within more philosophically enduring perspectives that seek to transform East African institutions into gender inclusive spaces. In these active engagements with their situations, historical and socio-cultural, they manage to alter the imagining of the East African woman’s often patriarchally-limited space. And they are informed by a deeper epistemic understanding of the various forces and powers in operation in these societies. It is in this sense that these texts chart and reconfigure a novel path in the quest to understand the East African woman and her struggles towards revealing her fulfilled true self in the East African power politics and public sphere.

Macgoye, Okurut, and Lema represent diversity and heterogeneity in the East African literary process in their socio-cultural and national backgrounds as well as literary philosophies. Gikandi has argued of the ‘strong sense of regionality’ (2007, p. vii) that defines East African literature in English, ranging from the sub-region’s shared cultures as well as the effects of the globalised world. But it cannot be denied that there are diversities considering the socio-political dispensations in the three postcolonies. Whereas Tanzania espoused socialist political and economic ideologies, Kenya exhibited capitalist policies, and Uganda oscillated between socialist dispensations and militarist dictatorship. It is following from such histories that Breitinger has posed that a comprehensive East African approach to the literature of the sub-region is ‘no longer adequate given the different political conditions that have evolved from each country after independence’ (qtd. in Simatei, 2001, p. 26).
In as much as the argument of difference in the three postcolonies has tenability, however, as with other East African writers on such themes and leitmotifs such as disillusionment with the post-independence ruling elite, corruption, and so forth, in the women writers and their works in this study, there is a strong conflation, thematically and aesthetically. In these works, both the authors and the major women characters conceptualise gender issues and their inscription into the national history and memory within larger historical and socio-cultural thought landscapes. The study is also in line with Katrak’s argument of aiming to ‘strengthen solidarity among women with common struggles across national lines’ (2006, p. 245). Gupta has argued in consideration of the fluid nature of textual production, of the need of seeing literature worldly ‘rather than focusing simply on the content and the categories thereof’ (2009, p. 145). She holds that:

Texts and contexts are … not given in fixed relationships of locations, chronologies and categories. Rather, texts move, and the world of and around texts is composed of a multiplicity … of boundaries which are constantly traversed, which shift into and overlap and differentiate themselves from each other in a dynamic processive and contingent fashion. (ibid.)

Said himself has utilised, though focusing on the Orientalist Otherising context, ‘close textual readings whose goal is to reveal the dialectic between individual text or writer and the complex collective formation to which his [/her] work is a contribution’ (2003, p. 24). This strategy is useful in understanding the women writing project in East Africa, and more so as far as the three texts and writers in the study are concerned.

Further, Said has underlined the need to collapse separatist/nativist lenses in the understanding of literature, holding that ‘the ecology of literature’s new and expanded meaning cannot be attached to only one essence or to the discrete idea of one thing’ (1993, p. 386). His call is thus that of a contrapuntal analysis not on a ‘symphony but rather on an atonal ensemble’ (ibid.), and that ‘we must take into account all sorts of spatial or geographical and rhetorical practices – inflections, limits, constraints, intrusions, inclusions, prohibitions – all of them tending to elucidate a complex and uneven topography’ (ibid.).

Dangarembga further captures the relatedness in women writing, especially the postcolonial ones, when she posits that:
Women write about things that move them. ... Female writing comes from the consciousness of being a woman and the problems that arise as a result of that; but then again, good female writing can put that in a wider context, realising that what is particular to me or to us as a group stems from general problems in our society. (1995, p. 30)

It is thus appropriate to study the three writers in this sense of being moved and preoccupied by the legitimate concerns that inhibit East African women’s realisations of their various potentials. Furthermore, if we stretch Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality to discursively accommodate literary texts within a discourse community such as that of ‘woman’/ ‘women writing,’ then we see how:

The word’s status is ... defined horizontally (the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee) as well as vertically (the word in the text is oriented towards an anterior or synchronic literary corpus) ... each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read ... [and] any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. (1986, p. 37)

The texts, *Moment, Weevil*, and *Earth*, it is argued in the following chapters, subvert and resist monolithic institutions like patriarchy and phalocentric thought systems that perpetually seek to marginally locate women by denying them power/authority.

### 1.2 Statement of the Problem

The existing scholarship on African women writing, and on the writing by women in East Africa in particular, has dealt with various aspects of that writing, both in terms of content and of the formal features of the literary production. The emphasis in these studies has invariably tended to be on the limiting nature of all those conditions and circumstances that define the life of (East) African women and that, therefore, impose a pattern on women’s representation in literature as lacking in agency. Specifically, the exercising of power and authority in East Africa in the scholarship so far has consistently been identified with patriarchal institutions. The literary evidence, however, increasingly suggests that women can be perceived from the perspective of venturing into the supposedly forbidden realm of power and authority. This study sought to fill the existing gap in knowledge by taking up this new perspective. It investigated how East African
women writing in English contests and subverts the dominant ideologies that bestow power and authority in patriarchally defined institutions in society.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The study sought to achieve the following objectives:

1. Define the various strategies used by Macgoye, Okurut, and Lema to engage power and authority in the East African society.
2. Determine how women writing, particularly Macgoye’s, Okurut’s, and Lema’s, alters the viewing of the woman in the East African society.
3. Establish how through the employment of the novel literary mode, Macgoye, Okurut, and Lema have managed to thematically and aesthetically redefine the East African literary canon.

1.4 Research Premises

The study was based on the assumptions that:

1. Women writing in East Africa is developing new strategies of engaging power and authority in the East African society.
2. In Moment, Weevil, and Earth, East African women literature re-writes the place of the East African woman in the society as an active agent in its socio-cultural transformation.
3. East African women writing, especially in the novel genre, thematically and aesthetically re-defines the East African literary canon.

1.5 Justification of the Study

The East African society is fraught with institutions that are steeped in patriarchy. As a result of this, women are variously denied space to actualise their human potential as well as exercise power/authority. It is therefore necessary for these patriarchal institutions to be re-examined with the aim of making them gender inclusive.

The study’s analysis of East African women’s engagement with power and authority through the medium of literature, and more precisely the novel genre, is part of
the critical project to endeavour to understand the functioning of contemporary East Africa, how canons, tastes, values and so forth are established and maintained; but most importantly, how they are re-imagined and re-constructed into discourses of inclusivity.

The study contributes to epistemic production by providing an in-depth analysis of women’s engagement with power and authority in the East African society, as well as offering a socio-cultural critique of their fiction. This is deemed necessary in furthering a deeper understanding of power and gender relations in the East African society.

It is also hoped that the study will offer insights that could be utilised in gender policy formulation and implementation at the academic and other socio-cultural and political institutions. Since literature, especially the genre of the realistic novel, reflects socio-cultural occurrences in the society, the interrogation of such institutions as the school, family, marriage, etc, and how they are structured could be useful in deriving policies for both genders mutual co-existence. Further, the study adds to the ongoing discourses on the place of women in East African historiography.

1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Study

The writers considered in this study have authored other texts that contribute to defining their literary becoming. However, the study has concentrated on one text by each of the three authors: Moment, Weevil, and Earth. This selection was based on the humanities’ subject/aesthetic quality index of literary analysis that utilises the non-probability sampling method of purposive sampling in which population (in this case texts) deemed to be rich in central issues of the study are chosen.

What determines this scope, as far as Macgoye and Okurut are concerned, is the fact that Moment and Weevil offer major incisions in women’s lives and their charting of newer spaces for human realisations; while Earth enters in as Lema’s foundational literary work that also sees women lives within larger socio-cultural realms. But most importantly, it is in these texts that the engagement with power/authority is at its fullest.
1.7 Literature Review

The literature review section of the study is sub-divided into five categories: Women Writing in the East African Literary Tradition; Re/imagining the East African (Post)colonial Nation; Interrogation of Patriarchy and Gender Binarisations; The Aesthetics and Poetics of Women Writing; and Women in Engaging the Power/Authority Matrix. This categorisation is informed by the issues that structure the study: gender, patriarchy, politics, as well as other historical and cultural ideas involved in the exercising of power and authority in East Africa.

1.7.1 Women Writing in the East African Literary Tradition

Women writing in East Africa is gaining prominence for its calling into focus diverse issues that structure East Africa, and especially those linked to power relations between men and women. Subsequently, a critical and theoretical reading of women writers is exponentially expanding, particularly on major women writers in the sub-region. However, there is still a general lack in elaborate and critically sustaining studies. Most of what is available are general surveys that have not deeply focused on binding leitmotifs as well as gender, feminist and postcolonial concerns in women texts. It is thus this lacuna that the study has sought to fill up.

Wanjala in *The Season of Harvest: A Literary Discussion* (1978) is limited to Grace Ogot, and even as far as she is concerned, there is an inadequacy in extensively examining her poetic aesthetics. In a later text, *The Growth of a Literary Tradition in East Africa* (2003), a narrow reading of women writers and their participation in the East African literary tradition emerges. In this text, Wanjala notes that ‘the study of literature can only be enhanced by the production of literature whose form and content is worth serious attention in the Aristotelian sense’ (p. 85); yet, despite their literary productions, he does not see the ‘Aristotelian aesthetic’ merit of Macgoye, Okurut, and Lema in the East African literary tradition. Nonetheless, Wanjala captures the women writers’ disadvantaged position when he notes that, ‘women writers are ignored by literary scholars, book and newspaper editors, and publishers. They are humiliated by political demagogues and cultural and religious bigots’ (ibid., p. 102). The challenge for the
present study was to thus critically interrogate the various ways in which women writers in the sub-region are engaged in the task of overturning their ‘disadvantage’.

Gikandi’s “The Growth of the East African Novel” (1984), gives a general overview of the East African novel’s growth and its thematic preoccupations in his reading(s) of nation(alism) and politics, and socio-cultural deprivation of the colonial and post-colonial East Africa. Gikandi, however, does not read any woman writer into the ‘growth’, despite the fact that by the time of his writing there are inspiring novels by Ogot and Macgoye (Murder in Majengo had been published in 1972). Even in the subsequent reading of the sub-region’s literature in The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature (2 volumes) (2004), there is still deficiency in exploring the entry of (East) African women into the ‘mainstream’ literature of the region/continent. Ilieva observes that the two-volume enterprise ‘does little to advance [a] remapping of women’s place in African literary history, relegating ... the writing by women to a single paragraph or even sentence in a chapter’ (2008, p. 11). And Desai reads that for this failure to ‘devote a chapter specifically to women’s literary history’ (2005, p. 158) there is an implication ‘on our understanding of national, regional, diasporic, and linguistic literary histories and their interface with other identities, such as gender or class’ (ibid., p. 159).

Another article, Bardolph’s “The Literature of Kenya” (1984), is also wanting; possibly because of the general survey nature of the anthology in which it is included. Bardolph does not give women literature the deserved space in comparison to male authors such as Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Meja Mwangi. And yet, in the women writers that she examines, Grace Ogot and Rebeka Njau, she acknowledges that ‘[a] truly fantastic vein seems to take shape [in their creation] of tales of horror and mystery in a contemporary setting’ (p. 51).

In the essay, “Writing in English from Tanzania” (1984), Mbise grants the fact that Swahili literature has been dominant in that country but that ‘literature in English [is] equally finding steady space’ (p. 54). Mbise, besides his own works, discusses other major male English writers like Gabriel Ruhumbika, Peter Palangyo, and Hamza Sokko. Mbise’s essay was useful in providing this study with necessary background of writing in English from Tanzania. As it has been demonstrated in the close reading of Earth, the
text emerges as a foundational novel compared to what has been produced in Tanzania in English so far.

Kibera’s (2000) reading of *Moment* is engaging in the manner it situates the text into asserting the ‘authoritative’ female presence in Kenyan literature. She reads the text as being singly magisterial because ‘for the first time, a Kenyan novelist offers a multifaceted, complex women’s perspectives on Kenyan history and society over the last century [twentieth]’ (p. 161). This is also the view advanced by Mwangi (2007) that *Moment* ‘is the first East African polyphonic novel in which the major characters are women’ (p. 103) and sees this as important because ‘it helps Macgoye recover agency and voices suppressed by misogyny, colonialism and neocolonialism’ (ibid.). This study re-affirms these reading perspectives and proceeds in the exploration of the varied possibilities of genuine re-inventions in women’s lives and how they get engaged into the new world to ‘undermine’ or be ‘undermined’ by the various emerging post-independence arrangements and narratives of power and authority.

Simatei’s (2001) examination of East African literature in his reading of the novel and the politics of the East African nations, captures, among others, the narratives of *Moment* and *Weevil* and how they negotiate and engage in nation re-imagining and histories/herstories. He notes that his preoccupation is ‘with the way in which women voices insert themselves into the narratives of the nation [narratives already] appropriated by the postcolonial ruling classes to serve its economic and political interests’ (p. 132). This is a tenable reading position. However, for the reason that Simatei does not set out to study exclusively women’s writing in the sub-region, his study does not call into question the heteroglossic nature of these women voices and narratives; and the subsequent engagement in redefining the nation and its appropriation of power.

The present study, while agreeing with Simatei’s reading position, posited an elaborate exploration of *Moment* and *Weevil* to show the contradistinctions inherent in these women’s lives in their own personal narratives which metaphorically run into the narratives of the East African postcolonial nation, and their undertaking to redefine, undermine, (re)constitute them.

Another text that was useful, in the contextualisation of women’s voices, particularly as far as the reading of *Moment* is concerned, was Kruger’s *Contemporary*
Kenyan Women Writing: Independent Figures or Subdued Voices? (1998). Kruger argues that as the text (Moment) ‘unfolds the biographies of several “ordinary women”, it provides an additional dimension to the experience of colonialism and neo-colonialism, endowing with a voice those who have previously been silenced and marginalised’ (p. 31). Kruger sees the ‘many different voices and focalised perspectives intermingl[ing] throughout the novel ... [to] create a complicated and multi-layered diegetic composition’ (p. 38).

In Kurtz’s Nyarloka’s Gift: The Writing of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye (2005), a compendious overview of Macgoye’s life and critical perspectives on her work is given. Kurtz’s study of Moment is insightful in the manner history, the Kenyan nation and literature are linked. However, in the endeavour to capture the entire literary oeuvre of a complex and multi-genred author like Macgoye, the specificities informing texts such as Moment fail to sufficiently come out. Still, Kurtz sets himself the tasks ‘to present the literary legacy of [...] Macgoye, to evaluate its prominent features, and to argue that it holds a central place in the history of Kenya’s literature’ (p. vii). He partly accomplishes these tasks ‘and ... manages to open up new spaces and avenues for rethinking and re-engaging in discourses on Macgoye’s work’ (Ilieva & Odiemo-Munara, 2007b, p. 209). In closely focusing on Moment, this study aimed to be one such re-engaging.

An equally ambitious textual project on Macgoye is Bittner’s Writing the Story of Kenya: Construction of Identity in the Novels of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye (2009). Bittner reads Macgoye’s novelistic literary oeuvre with the exception of her latest novel A Farm Called Kishinev (2005). Bittner’s project is to offer an all-inclusive critical examination of Macgoye’s ‘narratives as an essential part of Kenyan national literature’ (p. 9). Her text’s ‘underpinnings’ are ‘interdisciplinary, combining elements of psychology, political history, post-colonial studies and literary criticism as to insure a detailed, prismatic understanding of the writer’s work’ (p. 12). This, however, does not insightfully emerge in the text. Nevertheless, this study benefits from Bittner’s examination of Moment and its women protagonist’s stories within the matrix of Kenya’s history (p. 97), and her argument about the centrality of Macgoye in the re-writing of Kenya’s postcolonial history.
A major re-evaluation and re-positioning of women writing in East Africa emerges with the publication of *Women Writing Africa: The Eastern Region* (2007), edited by Lihamba et al. This is a creative-critical anthology that focuses on ‘women’s work and thought, through which women may be seen not as passive or barely visible entities, but as articulate and talented producers of art and knowledge, and as heroic makers of history’ (p. 2). This text was referred to in its various creative and critical pieces that depict women’s resistance(s) to colonialism, (active) participation in independence struggles, commitment to the ideals and philosophies of a liberated East Africa, the post-independence collapse of these ideals and the residual ramifications of the collapse on the East African peoples, especially women. It, in turn, corroborated many of the arguments that have been advanced in the reading of *Moment, Weevil* and *Earth* in the study.

1.7.2 Re/imagining the East African (Post)colonial Nation

*Moment, Weevil* and *Earth* are dynamically involved in the reconstruction of the East African social, political, and cultural histories. In the critical examination of how they engage in this reconstruction, various texts were, in a critical contextualisation, referred to.

Macgoye’s *The Story of Kenya: A Nation in the Making* (1986) is instructive in the sense that as a historical text it sets the ground for the creative work, *Moment*. Because the novel draws from it, the study found it vital in the conceptualisation of necessary links in history, literature, and nation formation.

The Ugandan women’s concerted engagement in redefining their positions in that country’s various successive socio-political arrangements is brought out in Maili Tripp’s *Women and Politics in Uganda* (2000). Tripp argues that Ugandan women are no longer participating in their country’s socio-political mutations as passive observers; rather, they ‘are actively writing their own scripts which envision alternative ways of ordering political, public and private life’ (p. 27). In Okurut’s *Weevil*, and in the other two texts, the study sought to observe women’s active engagement in the ordering of their social-political milieux, and their construction of and participation in the private and public spheres in the East African society.
The interface between literature and history in this study also benefited from Zeleza’s (2007) concept of ‘the suffocating grip of masculinist nationalism’. In this essay, Zeleza at length, and closely, reads the issues of history and literary imagination. Zeleza argues that African history and literature share powerful deconstructive and decolonisation impulses (p. 11). He continues that this relationship is transcending in that ‘Both history and literature are narrative, interpretive disciplines that offer representations of experiences, images, and ideas’ (ibid.). In this correlate transcendent, it is possible to see the construction of nationalism and the postcolony in East Africa and how the texts under study seek to deconstruct the founding patriarchal notions of nationhood and nation building processes.

Darby in *The Fiction of Imperialism: Reading Between International Relations and Postcolonialism* (1998) briefly reads women writers in the postcolony and how they depict politics and their own personal relations as intertwined realms. The critic argues that to African women writers, ‘change and development at the personal level are part and parcel of creating a new political culture’ (p. 157). These reconstructions of the private and public; political and national, informed the critical reading of *Moment, Weevil*, and *Earth*.

Davies’ *Black Women Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994); and Boehmer’s *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (2005a [1995]), as well as *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (2005b), were useful in this study especially in the succinct manner they interrogate feminist theory, power relations, nationalist discourses, structuring of the woman and the feminine, man and the masculine, as well as location and positionality. As has been shown in the following chapters of the study, these are aspects that are seriously contested in the three texts under focus. Boehmer’s (1992) “Motherlands, Mothers and Nationalist Sons: Representations of Nationalism and Women in African Literature”, in which she examines nationalism and its development into a gendered system of power was also immediate in discussing the East African nationalist discourses in *Moment* and *Weevil*.

Stratton’s *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994) is important in its reading of African women under colonialism in which they faced
‘interlocking forms of oppression: to the racism of colonialism and to indigenous and foreign structures of male domination’ (p. 7). This reading, and that of the ‘mother trope’ (as is also in Boehmer, 1995, 2005a), a trope Stratton sees as being used to ‘mask the subordination of women in the patriarchal socio-political systems of African states, from which they ... [should] be liberated’ (p. 55), were recoursed to to examine women under colonialism and in the post-colonial East African societies in Moment and Weevil. However, Stratton’s essentialist readings of the woman condition have been critiqued within the frameworks of the spirited de-totalising construction of women in the three novels.

*The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (2002), by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, examines issues dominant in postcolonial studies such as nationalism, difference, ethnicity, gender and feminism, representation and resistance, and history. These issues are at the core of this study; as *Moment, Weevil,* and *Earth* are texts that seek to make ‘the cryptic bases [of canonical constructions of power and authority] visible and then ... destabilise them’ (Ashcroft et al., 2002, p. 173).

Other texts reading the postcolonial person and postcolonial theory are *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* (1995), edited by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, and *The Decolonisation Reader* (2003), edited by Le Sueur. In the Ashcroft et al. text, there are a number of informing essays on feminism, resistance, subalternisation and Empire. These were found necessary in correctly situating women’s engagement with power and authority in the East African postcolonies. The latter text is vital in the way it treats issues of (imperial) history and postcoloniality; and gender and sexuality constructions in formerly colonised cultures. The essay by Presley “The Mau Mau Rebellion, Kikuyu Women, and Social Change” in *The Decolonisation Reader* is especially useful in its examination of the Kikuyu women’s participation in the Mau Mau land and freedom movement.

The Mau Mau rebellion and the place of women in it are issues also well captured in Elkins’ *Britain’s Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (2005). In this text, through women’s own oral testimonies during the Emergency years in Kikuyu reserves, Elkins meticulously captures the brutalities and horrors visited on them in colonial-created communal villages. However, despite the villagisation (a system of forced
restriction in villages in order to block any form of assistance to the Mau Mau freedom fighters), the women struggle hard to keep the spirit of liberation alive, through various subversive activities and strong resolves to not give up. Elkins’ text is necessary in conceptualising women and their participation in nationalist movements and processes of independence as is witnessed in Moment and Weevil.

Loomba’s Colonialism/Postcolonialism (2005) in an in-depth manner examines (post)colonialism and its effects on the local knowledges of the postcolonial peoples, and how it (colonialism) created difficult identities still prevalent in the postcolony’s arrangement today. Intertwined in here with the problematic of the colonial process, are the questions of gender and sexuality, of which Loomba holds that the woman found herself peripherally defined and in a state of ‘double colonialism’. Incipient in Loomba’s thesis then is that because of this subalternisation, the postcolony’s conceptualisation of the nation, nationalism, literature, and so on, effaces the woman’s meaningful presence and thus nations should be ‘continually re-imagined’ as ‘postcolonial women’s struggles are less concerned with speaking on behalf of all the people than claiming their own place within the national polity’ (p. 173). She posits the problematic of the nation in that it ‘itself is a ground of dispute and debate, a site for the competing imaginings of different ideological and political interests’ (ibid.). The postcolonial women’s place in the postcolonial nation-state is thus that of continuous imaginings of the various paradigms of liberation; a process of ‘rewriting indigenous histories, appropriating postcolonial symbols and mythologies, and amplifying, where possible, the voices of women themselves’ (p. 191). The study drew from these analyses to build its argument about East African women re-imagining their conditions as manifest in Moment, Weevil, and Earth.

1.7.3 Interrogation of Patriarchy and Gender Binarisations

There are a number of texts which discuss the institution of patriarchy and how it compartmentalises and binarises the society privileging the male actors in it. In the process, patriarchy produces knowledge that is skewed towards the masculine and that peripherally situates women.
Ssetuba’s essay “The Hold of Patriarchy: An Appraisal of the Ganda Proverb in Modern Gender Relations” (2005) reads into the problematic of knowledge production and dissemination in patriarchally-inclined East African societies, represented by the Baganda people of Uganda. The study, proceeding from this premise, strove to see how this warped knowledge production is disrupted by the women in the texts, especially *Weevil and Earth*.

In *Feminism and the Contradictions of Oppression* (1989), Ramazanoglu engagingly discusses issues of patriarchy, class, work, power, nationality, race, culture, ideology and sexuality showing how they inform feminist thinking. Ramazanoglu then examines the inherent contradictions in feminist discourses and opines that ‘[t]he contradictions of feminist theory show quite clearly the need to struggle with men while simultaneously struggling against them’ (p. 190). The study drew from this text in the manner it closely looks at the often times ambivalent visioning of feminist and gender issues within women sororities, as well as between women and men.

On the development and institutionalisation of patriarchy, Lerner’s *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986), a phenomenal text on women’s history in patriarchal societies, was of significance. In her examination of the ‘dialectic of women’s history’, that is, ‘the tension between women’s actual historical experience and their exclusion from interpreting that experience’ (p. 5), the present study builds grounds for a deeper ingress into the national histories of the three East African nations and how they are structured in terms of gender oppositions. Though the text focuses on the Western civilisation; this study in its reading of colonialism and imperialism, in their various manifestations, draws parallels with the East African epistemological and cultural spaces.

Tuana’s *Woman and the History of Philosophy* (1992) was referred to in the way it critiques the history of (Western) philosophy in its deliberate construction of knowledge in binary terms. Tuana calls this binarisation ‘the history of dualisms of male/female, reason/emotion … public/private’ (p. 51), and which ‘is not static, nor … always consistent [and has] gender remain[ing] a basic metaphysical category’ (ibid.). Indeed binarisations in institutions of knowledge production and culture formulation such as the family, school, church, encompass problematic and otherising assumptions about male/masculine; and female/feminine. These, in turn, influence society’s perception of
being woman and being man. In the three texts under discussion, the study argues that this binarisation is contested through various strategies of subversion and resistance.

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), bell hooks interrogates the education practice in the form of creating spaces for the rediscovery of unlimited potentials to transgress various socio-cultural boundaries. She envisions the creation of ‘woman space where we can value difference and complexity’ (p. 110). Such spaces are created in *Moment, Weevil*, and *Earth*. The present study examined how in such spaces women re-imagine their lives into more fulfilled existences in East African societies.

1.7.4 The Aesthetics and Poetics of Women’s Writing

In seeking to re-define the literary canon, women writers have ingrained keenness in writing texts that are both intellectually and emotionally sustaining. And in doing this, they are guided by various artistic and creative strategies.

In the essay “Strategies of Affirming Womanhood in East African Writing” Ilieva and Odiemo-Munara (2006) argue that there are broadly two trends in the writing by East African women in their endeavour to challenge the perception of authority and contest male power. In the first trend, they trace a simplified reading of the patriarchal power reality in East African women’s writing. In the second trend, they place writing informed by sustaining principles such as ‘gender issues ... meaningfully [being] examined in literature only when they are contextualised within larger landscapes (nationalist, philosophical, historical or other); that writing by women must be rooted in intellectual depth, aestheticism and emotional maturity; [and] that women artists must be guided by the consciousness that talent and intellect are indestructible’ (p. 257). In this trend, they situate *Moment, Weevil* and *Earth*. This study drew from this reading in its examination of how in steeping their texts in sustaining historical, philosophical and aesthetic realms, the three writers make a major incision in the East African literary canon.

Nochlin’s essay “Why Are There No Great Women Artists” is informing in the way it calls on women to ‘adopt … the attributes of single-mindedness, concentration, tenaciousness, and absorption in ideas and craftsmanship’ (1999, p. 614). Nochlin continues that women should ‘face up to the reality of their history and of their present
situation, without making excuses or puffing mediocrity (p. 617). To her, the fact that women are disadvantaged is a truism that should not be allowed to pose as an intellectual position. She argues that ‘women should seek to reveal institutional and intellectual weaknesses [in order to] destroy false consciousness [and] take part in the creation of institutions in which clear thought and true greatness are challenges open to anyone, men or women’ (ibid.). This is the organising leitmotif of the central women characters in the three texts under study, as well as the texts’ authors, and hence these works have been examined within this understanding by Nochlin.

Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999) in its close and dense theorisation of various concepts in philosophy, literature, history and culture; and especially in the manner these concepts self-citationally relate to the subalternised, has been hugely recoursed to in theoretically situating the three texts in the study and how they grapple with the presumed erasure of women from the mainstream histories, literatures, philosophies and cultures of the East African postcolonies.

In situating the aesthetic uniqueness of the texts under focus, the study also read from Cassirer’s *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (1972), a monumental reading of the humanistic tradition in history, philosophy, and art in the ancient, mediaeval, and Renaissance periods; Nussbaum’s *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990); Lamarque and Olsen’s essay “The Philosophy of Literature: Pleasure Restored” (2004); and Lamarque’s *The Philosophy of Literature* (2009). These texts offer insights into the enduring realms of creation in art that contribute to the aesthetic of production. The reading in the study is that *Moment, Weevil* and *Earth* mark important artistic and aesthetic incisions in the East African literary tradition. These philosophy of literature texts were, therefore, useful in helping the study to place the literary value, and the aesthetics of creation inherent in the three texts. Further, for the reason that the study investigated the issue of women’s engagement with power/authority, these philosophy orientated texts, read intertextually with other critical-theoretical ones, provided the basis for evaluating the epistemic plausibility of the oppositional ideologies produced in the three creative texts.
1.7.5 Women’s Engagement with the Power/Authority Matrix

The women in *Moment*, *Weevil*, and *Earth* are engaged in evolving strategies of contesting and subverting Otherising forms of power and authority in the East African society. In order to adequately conceptualise these strategies, the study was informed by major texts in the power/authority theoretical and critical discourses.

Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction* (1978) and *Power/Knowledge* (1980) have been drawn upon in their discursive analyses of sexuality, power relations and their functioning in the society. Foucault’s conceptualisation of power as fluid in its employment and diverse in its enactment is the study’s driving force in the examination of women engagement with power and authority in *Moment*, *Weevil*, and *Earth*. Mills’ *Discourse* (1997) and *Michel Foucault* (2003), insightful readings of discourse in cultural, critical, and literary theories, and Foucault’s place in them, have been vital in theoretically grounding the study in its engagement with women’s appropriation of power and formulation of the various strategies of resistance.

Weedon’s *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (1997) is important to this study in the close and sustaining manner it discusses feminist and poststructuralist theories in trying to ‘understand those social and cultural practices which constitute, reproduce and contest gender power relations’ (p. vii). Weedon draws considerably from Foucault whose formulations of power, discourse and resistance this study has positioned itself in.

Wartenburg in *The Forms of Power: From Domination to Transformation* (1990) argues that power is always mediated by ‘social alignments’ which are dynamic. In this dynamism, there are continuous shifts as subordinate agents seek ways of challenging the actions of the dominant agents. Wartenburg holds that the ‘subordinate agent is never absolutely disempowered, but only relatively so ... just as the dominant agent’s actions are subject to the problematic of maintaining power by maintaining the allegiance of the aligned agents, the subordinate agent is always in the position of being able to challenge the aligned agents’ complicity in her disempowerment’ (p. 173). This perceptualisation of power relations between the dominant and the subordinate was useful in understanding various strategies employed by the women in the texts to dismantle alignments that seek to dis-empower them.
The literary essays in Nnaemeka’s *The Politics of Mothering: Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature* (1997) have been important in ways in which ‘[they] wrestle with African literature’s reimag(in)ing of certain central issues in feminism – victimhood, agency, motherhood, subjectivity, speech, silence, power, gaze, knowledge, and nation’ (p. 3). The present study’s contention is that women in the three texts are not passive victims of oppression, but are involved in re-working power and subverting dehumanising centres of authority. Nnaemeka posits that:

victims [are also] agents, and oppressors are also victims …[that] violence is not a male but a human problem, how woman-on-woman violence and abuse show women as a group suffering from self-inflicted wounds, how the broader issue of globality and imperialism intensifies gender politics in nationalist discourses. (p. 22)

This reading was found germane; because in this understanding, entry into the cautious portrayal of women and men relationships in Macgoye, Okurut, and Lema is gained.

Finally, Katrak’s *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World* (2006), presents arguments concerning the female body and the desire to appropriate it by patriarchal authorities. Katrak uses various texts, literary and cultural, to situate her thesis. This reads into the present study’s argument that women have, over time, evolved various strategies to contest and subvert patriarchal power/authority.

Overall, then, the present study builds on some of these reading positions; but most significantly evolves new frameworks of reading the contestation of power/authority by women in East African women writing as represented by Macgoye, Okurut and Lema. It is in this sense that it contributes to providing some new theoretical and critical insights into the women writing process in East Africa.

1.8 Theoretical Framework

Bressler (1999) conjectures the impossibility of a metatheory in the thinking of an overarching literary theory that encompasses all possible interpretations of a text (p. 8). Informed by this position, the present study makes use of two theoretical reading strategies: postcolonial theory and feminist literary theory (specifically the postcolonial wave of it).
1.8.1 Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory in this study is used to refer to theoretical and critical strategies employed to examine the cultures of former colonies of the Western powers and how they relate to, and interact with, the rest of the world. As a critical practice, it involves ‘a studied engagement with the experience of colonialism and its past and present effects at the levels of material culture and of representation’ (Quayson, 1998, para 2). And in its employment in the analysis of cultures of former colonies and their present socio-political manifestations, experiences of ‘slavery, migration, suppression and resistance, difference, race, gender, place, and … responses to the discourses of imperial Europe, such as history, philosophy, anthropology and linguistics’ (ibid.), are interrogated.

Quayson proceeds to argue that:

Since conditions under imperialism and colonialism proper are as much the subject of postcolonialism as those coming after the historical end of colonialism, postcolonialism allows for a wide range of applications and a constant interplay between the sense of a historical transition, a cultural location and an epochal condition. (ibid.)

In this interplay, then, it provides necessary tools to dissect the neocolonies in order to adequately understand their structuring ideologies; and how these ideologies re/configure the postcolonial people.

Postcolonial theory’s immediacy in the study that seeks to understand the postcolony and its enaction of power relations is found in what Gikandi has called:

the desire among the formerly colonised peoples … for historiographies and cultural instruments that might help demythologise the ideology of nationalism – especially the claim that the nation-state in Africa, the Caribbean, or the Indian subcontinent represents a political and interpretative moment in which colonialism is finally transcended. (1996, p. 15)

As it is argued in the study, residuums of colonialism still inhabit the space that is the postcolony and, to a large degree, structure its functioning. Hence, aspects of otherisation on gender, class and other compartmentalisations obtain.
1.8.2 Feminist Literary Theory

Generally, feminist literary theory is ‘a critical form of knowledge which analyses the role that literary forms and practices, together with the discourses of literary criticism and theory, play in perpetuating or challenging hierarchies of gender, class, race and sexuality’ (Kennedy, 2000, p. 306). However many sub-theories and approaches exist within the general framework of feminist literary theory; most of which ‘are allied by their critical analysis of patriarchal and phallocentric institutions and practices, and their interests in promoting women’s issues and concerns’ (Barton & Hudson, 1997, p. 70).

The study, without losing sight of the global women’s production and circulation of knowledge, utilises postcolonial feminist theory and approach that:

- broadly characterises and addresses feminist preoccupations with race and gender that focus on the formerly colonised societies … and engagements [with] crucial issues of cultural identity, language, nationalism and the place of women within the newly-emerging nation states, female self representation, and critical interrogations of white, bourgeois feminism. (Mehta, 2000, p. 395)

In its employment of the postcolonial feminist reading strategy, the study seeks to uncover a rational engagement of women with various issues informing the (contemporary) East African society in Moment, Weevil and Earth without essentialising the woman person and her condition. In this manner, feminist theorisation aids in the delineating of the literary value in texts; because theory should provide ‘a context in which literary value is integrated into the very conception of literature and the literary process, not merely a by-product of the reading process’ (Lamarque & Olsen, 2004, p. 203). This is also in acquiescence with Nnaemeka’s supposition that:

- The paradox of some of the existing feminist analyses of African literature is that they ignore the elaboration of the feminist ideals in the African texts and choose instead to force them [the texts] into absolutist, either or moulds. African literature’s engagement with feminist issues is very instructive … [it] disrupts the oppressor/victim dichotomy to demonstrate that agency and victimhood are not mutually exclusive, to show that victims are also agents who can change their lives in radical ways. (1997, p. 3)

Furthermore, in its utilisation of postcolonial feminist strategies of reading, the study had in view the fact that the three texts under examination resist simple
enunciations of women as mere victims of patriarchy. As Arndt (2002) has argued, ‘African women [and men] suffer not only from sexism and patriarchal social structures, but are also victims of racism, neo-colonialism, cultural imperialism, religious fundamentalism, socio-economic mechanisms of oppression and dictatorial and/or corrupt systems’ (p. 73).

As well, postcolonial feminist theory in the study runs into African feminist theory. This has been deemed necessary because of the close communication that the two engage in. African feminism has been elaborated by Steady as:

feminism that operates within a global political economy in which sexism cannot be isolated from the larger political and economic forces responsible for the exploitation and oppression of both men and women, especially in Africa and the African diaspora. African feminism is rooted in the history of trans-Atlantic slave trade, nationalism, colonial and postcolonial experiences, patriarchal ideologies and structural racism. (2005, para 1)

In Moment, Weevil, and Earth, what is manifest is a sustained and well-thought out engagement with patriarchal residuals of oppression and repression. As Griffins (1982) has argued, liberational movements should be informed by the multiple realities that inform human societies in order not to be victims of what they seek to overturn. She posits:

When a movement for liberation inspires itself chiefly by a hatred for an enemy rather than from [the] vision of possibility, it begins to defeat itself. Its very motions cease to be healing. Despite the fact that it declares itself in favour of liberation, its language is no longer liberating. It begins to require censorship within itself. Its ideas of truth become narrow and more narrow. And this movement that began with a moving evocation of truth, begins to appear fraudulent from the outside, begins to mirror all that it says it opposed, for now it, too, is an oppressor of certain truths, and speakers, and begins, like the old oppressors, to hide from itself. (p. 292)

Furthermore, in as much as the study recoursed to various global literary and critical reading processes to situate it theoretically and critically, it did not collapse the view that ‘Any epistemology or theory that is alien to the African environment must be used guardedly as a frame of reference, at best, and not as a substitute for the literary texts themselves’ (Nnaemeka, 1997, p. 22). Again, in Spivak’s understanding, the study has utilised a reading strategy that pays attention to ‘the logic of the rhetoric, not the text as cultural information’ (2003, p. 61), and which thus avoids using literature as a means
to achieve ‘too quick conclusions about gender, freedom of speech, and modernity’ (ibid.)

1.8.3 Postcolonial and Feminist Literary Theories: Intersections and Conflations

Postcolonial theory and feminist theories (especially postcolonial feminist theory) intersect and conflate at the various levels of resistance, representation, and reading of the subalternised groups. Boehmer captures it succinctly that ‘to the more general postcolonial interest in multiplicity [women writers and feminist practitioners] add the concept of women’s many-centred, constellated power, the stress being at once on the importance of diversity and on having the power to articulate selfhood’ (1995, p. 228, emphasis in the original). And as Quayson has observed, postcolonialism has affinities with studies such as multiculturalism and feminism because of ‘its source in past and continuing oppression’ (1998, para 2).

Postcolonial theory offers insightful interpellations of the formerly colonised and shows their continuing struggles to find space in the realms of the human. In its re-visiting of global discourses in culture and politics, it becomes a major field through which to read and re-examine the various human conditions of domination and resistances to this domination. And, as Ashcroft et al. argue, women ‘share with the colonised races and peoples an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression, and like them they have been forced to articulate their experiences in the language of their oppressors’ (2002, p. 172).

Thus, the two discourses, feminism and postcolonial theory, are ‘unmasking the assumptions upon which … canonical constructions [of theorisation] are founded, moving fast to make their cryptic bases visible and then to destabilise them’ (Ashcroft, et al., 2002, p. 173). The discourses also ‘link a disruptive involvement in books with a project towards a revolutionary disruption in society at large’ (ibid., p. 175). In Mehta’s reading:

If postcolonial discourse examines racialised otherness, postcolonial feminism explores women’s racialised and sexualised otherness by locating their marginality and oppression within a three-tiered structure of discrimination maintained by colonial and neo-colonial indigenous patriarchies and the academic and cultural hegemony of western feminism. (2000, p. 395)
The present study’s employment of theory, however, is cautious and guarded. Theory is also conceptualised (building from Griffins, Nnaemeka, Spivak, and others above) in Davies’ insightful view of ‘frames of intelligibility by which we understand the world, and not as reified discourse used to locate, identify, and explain everything else’ (1994, p. 33). Most importantly, the study progressed from the view that:

… the governing context of all literary investigations must ultimately be an historical one. Literature is a human product, a humane art. It cannot be carried (created), understood (studied), or appreciated (experienced) outside of its definitive human context. The general science governing that human context is socio-historical. (MacGann, qtd. in Altick & Fenstermaker, 1992, p. 1)

1.9 Methodology

This section gives a description of the methodologies that have been used in the study. It is divided into two sections: Data Collection and Data Analysis.

1.9.1 Data Collection

1.9.1.1 Methods

The study employed the qualitative research perspective. This was useful because of the immediacy of qualitative research in studies that seek ‘to understand meaning, interpretations, and/or to look at, describe and understand experience, ideas, beliefs and values’ (Wisker, 2008, p. 75) underpinning social occurrences and discourses.

In its use of the qualitative research methods of document and textual analysis, the study employed exploratory and explanatory research approaches to help in the investigation of the research premises. In its asking of both ‘what?’ and ‘why?’ questions, exploratory research approach is vital in understanding the dominant/oppositional ideology paradigm construction in Moment, Weevil and Earth. Using this approach the variables of education, culture and beliefs, status and gender have been examined as they evolve and are presented in the primary sources. The exploratory approach was bolstered by the explanatory research approach, which contextualises the ‘why’ discourses. These two research approaches thus complemented each other in the detailed examination and
contextualisation of women and power/authority engagement in *Moment, Weevil* and *Earth.*

### 1.9.1.2 Primary Data

The creative works under critique: *Moment, Weevil,* and *Earth* were the sources for the primary data. The data comprised characters’ narratives and stories, characterisation, authorial voice and other statements, themes, motifs, as well as figures and tropes related to power and authority.

### 1.9.1.3 Secondary Data

The primary data was augmented with secondary data on the three authors. The secondary data, in the form of comments and critical theoretical discussions on the primary sources, was accessed through critical theoretical texts in the form of books and refereed journals in the university libraries at Egerton and Nairobi; as well as private institution libraries at the British Council and Goethe Institute in Nairobi.

Further, international journals in literary and cultural studies were accessed on the internet through the Project Muse and the literary on-line research facilities at Literature Online (LION), as well as free online Edinburgh journals (http://www.eupjournals.com).

### 1.9.2 Data Analysis

The data analysis entailed a close, extensive and methodical reading and critical interpretation of both primary and secondary data. Both content and context analyses were employed. Data were coded and categorised into major themes and concepts on the basis of the postcolonial and feminist theoretical perspectives and also the dominant issues in power/authority interrogation arising from the three texts. The textual data was broken down into text segments: passages, quotations, images, and symbols for analysis. Analytical questions were then asked, abstractions and generalisations made, and critical commentary provided.
For the reason that this is a literary and socio-cultural research, interpretative as well as dialogic and theoretical analyses of data were employed. In the interpretative and dialogic analyses, the major themes and concepts in the primary texts have been examined, discussed and contextualised within broader literary and socio-cultural contexts of power/authority matrix mutations in the East African society. Theoretical analysis, through the employment of the postcolonial and feminist theoretical discourses, of both primary and the secondary critical material have been engaged in to historically and philosophically situate the problem of the study.

Through these research methods and approaches, the research problem has been adequately and accurately addressed. Evidence and data from the primary texts have been examined in view of the secondary critical/theoretical material to show women engagement with power/authority in the East African society.

1.10 Chapter Outline

The study is sub-divided into six chapters. The first chapter, the present one, generally introduces and situates it, and also maps the literature review and methodologies employed. ‘The Present Moment: Women’s Private/Public Narratives of Power/Authority’ makes up chapter two. In it, Macgoye’s Moment is interrogated in the way it recreates women’s narratives that counter the patriarchally inclined nationalist narratives of the Kenyan postcolony. Chapter three, ‘The Invisible Weevil: Interpellating Otherising Epistemologies’ closely reads Okurut’s Weevil within the framework of women’s participation in the liberation struggles as equals to their men counterparts and their subsequent claim of right to power/authority exercising.

In chapter four, ‘Re-negotiating “Societal Labyrinth”: Parched Earth’s Quest to Collapse Otherising Patriarchal Narratives’, Lema’s women protagonists in Earth are critically evaluated in the way they struggle with the maze of gender occluding traditions and cultures in the society. Chapter five, ‘Present Moment’s, Invisible Weevil’s and Parched Earth’s Space in the East African Literary Canon’, examines the East African literary tradition and argues that in order to accurately and adequately understand the literature of the region, it is necessary to situate the place of women’s writing in the tradition.
And, chapter six, the conclusion, gives a general summation of how Macgoye, Okurut, and Lema bestow agency on their female protagonists, enabling them to re-configure power/authority in the society and thus emerging with a new socio-cultural narrative of the East African postcolony.
CHAPTER TWO

THE PRESENT MOMENT: WOMEN’S PRIVATE/PUBLIC NARRATIVES OF POWER/AUTHORITY

... in a narrative, as you proceed along the narrative, the narrative takes on its own impetus as it were, so that one begins to see reality as non-narrated. One begins to say that it’s not a narrative, it’s the way things are.


... because all that has been written bears upon the present moment.

-- Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, inscription to The Present Moment Feminist Press issue copy to the Department of Literature, Egerton University, 2001.

2.1 Introduction: Reconstructing Histories from Below

This chapter interrogates Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye’s novel The Present Moment (hereafter referred to as Moment) to see how women’s narratives are recreated as contestations of the exclusion of women from the main narrative of Kenya’s nationalist history. In the chapter, it is argued that by giving the women voice to re-story their own lives and experiences in colonial and post-independence Kenya, Macgoye manages to map out women’s contribution to various defining moments in the country’s nation-making processes. Because these women are occluded from this history of nation-making, their own narratives in a metaphoric community of their own, the Refuge, bring out their contestation of socio-cultural and economic power/authority. Loomba (2005) has argued that:

When nationalist thought becomes enshrined as the official dogma of the postcolonial state, its exclusions are enacted through the legal and educational systems and often they duplicate the exclusions of colonialism. Women’s movements, peasant struggles or caste- and class-based dissent, both during and after colonial rule, allow us to explore the distance between the rhetoric and the reality of the nation-state. In recent years, the effort to uncover the histories and standpoint of people excluded by nationalist projects has multiplied across the
disciplines. ‘Histories from below’ have attempted to tell other stories of rebellion and struggle, as well as to interrelate them to the narratives of nationalism and decolonisation. (p. 166)

Through reconstructing what Loomba calls in the quotation above ‘histories from below’, Macgoye then attempts to imagine a more adequate and inclusive Kenyan narrative to situate the ‘reality of the nation state’, the present moment.

Further, the women protagonists themselves attain inner satisfaction upon envoicing their life stories; for as Odhoji (2000), though in a somewhat different context of restorying in autobiographies, has observed, ‘The impulse to recreate, redefine, and rewrite oppressive experiences of a life lived in the margins in terms of the main social categories of race, gender, and sexuality is a healing process’ (p. 315).

*Moment*, Macgoye’s third novel, reads from her own text book about the history of Kenya, *The Story of Kenya: A Nation in the Making* (1986). *Moment* thus issues out in the historical novel mode of narrative, and seeks to reconstruct the story of Kenya that has been, arguably, seriously skewed towards the valorisation of the male participants in both colonial and post-colonial knowledge and labour production. Zeleza (2007) has argued of the interrelatedness of history and fictional narratives (literature) in the postcolony that, ‘Their discursive affinities go much deeper. Both history and literature are narrative, interpretative disciplines that offer representations of experiences, images and ideas. The intersections between the factual and the fictional animate both history and literature’ (p. 11); and despite the difference in the disciplinary conventions:

both history and literature demand correspondence to socially constructed “reality”, history to the empirical evidence of human artifacts, literature to the existential possibilities of human life. Both are manufactured, always in a state of flux in the truths they claim, in the manner they are read and interpreted. (ibid.)

Zeleza’s argument coalesces into the historian White’s view that:

Viewed simply as verbal artefacts histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another. We cannot easily distinguish between them on formal grounds unless we approach them with specific conceptions about the kinds of truths that each is supposed to deal in. But the aim of the writer of the novel must be the same as that of the writer of a history. Both wish to provide a verbal image of “reality”. The novelist may present his notion of this reality indirectly, that is to say, by figurative techniques, rather than directly, which is to say, by registering a series of propositions which are supposed to correspond point by point to some
extratextual domain of occurrence or happening, as the historian claims to do. But the image of reality which the image thus constructs is meant to correspond in its general outline to some domain of human experience which is no less “real” than that referred to by the historian. (1978, p. 122)

White then observes as way of conclusion of the close relationship of the two (the novel and history) that ‘history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation’ (ibid.). This history/novel correlation is necessary in a detailed study of Macgoye’s *Moment*. *Moment* at once interrogates official nationalist history, showing its occlusionary, insular epistemology; and then it also endeavours for epistemic inclusivity by revisiting otherwise seemingly neglected histories such as women’s, the ‘histories from below’. Within this framework, it achieves substantially in situating the subaltern as woman but in contradistinction of the view that she is, and has always been, absolutely silhouetted, as Spivak (1999) would hold:

> Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effected. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labour, for both of which there is ‘evidence’. It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (p. 365)

That *Moment* draws significantly from the *Story of Kenya: A Nation in the Making* gives credibility to the reading of the former in the realm of author thought genealogy, a revisiting of a possible, in Spivak’s (1990, 1999) envisioning, exclusion/inclusion and self-referentially restoring (or even re-thinking) the exclusion/inclusion, the aim being to have adequate possibilities of mapping out the past, present, and future into germane organisational knowledge. But again, in Macgoye’s marking the place of her own citationality (a term appropriated from Spivak, 1990, p. 38), she also gives the fictional narrative a much more realistic authority.

*Moment* is also the novel that Macgoye favours most in her literary oeuvre. She sees it in terms of a continuum in her project of reconstructing Kenya’s ‘small’ histories that are at risk of being erased from historical and fictional memories (Macgoye, personal communication, February 12, 2010). Indeed, Mwangi captures it rightly that the text is ‘the first East African polyphonic novel in which the major characters are women’ (2007,
p. 103), and that through it, Macgoye is able to ‘recover agency and voices suppressed by misogyny, colonialism and neo-colonialism’ (ibid.). Further, as Allman has elaborately argued:

That women, by and large, are a casualty of history – that they are marginalised, diminished and forgotten ... is the foundational premise of women’s history, the primary aim of which has been and still remains the retrieving, the recapturing, and the reconstructing of women’s lives, whether they be the lives of “women worthies” ... or the lives of ordinary women, whose names have been obliterated by the dust of [post]colonial archive. (2009, p. 14)

Macgoye, then, is involved in the project of recapturing Kenyan women’s lives as a way of guarding against their being ‘disappeared’ (in Allman’s usage, a deliberate erasure of the female presence from the history of African nationalisms [ibid., p. 15]) from the (post)colonial Kenyan narratives, aware that ‘gender oppression is deeply implicated in the formation and construction of Kenyan postcolonial nationhood, with the result that some Kenyan women have been placed in a fraught relationship to national subjectivity’ (Nicholls, 2010, p. 3). This project (Macgoye’s in *Moment*) is also in line with Gikandi’s argument that:

... to read the persistence of the imperial past and to understand the continuing presence of colonial structures of domination where they are supposed to have disappeared, we have to question the rhetoric that advocates historical rupture in the name of the new nation and its antiquity. (1996, p. 16)

*Moment*, thus, in a startlingly deliberate manner, sets out to secure the space of Kenyan women in the Kenyan postcolony and examine their negotiation in the making of the nation-state in a more elaborate and all-encompassing way. And Macgoye is aware of the gender problematic of the post/colony or neocolony. As Boehmer has held, ‘[g]ender ... operates at a primary level of structuration in nationalism – its symbology is both constituted by and is constitutive of patriarchy in nationalism’ (1992, p. 234). It is thus in a sustained reflection on the socio-cultural and economic matrices of patriarchy that the space of women practitioners in the nationalist project can best be mapped out. This is evident in the thematics of *Moment.*
2.2 The Subaltern Female’s Envoicing Narratives

In *Moment*, Macgoye depicts a community of women in the Refuge, a missionary-run home for the destitute elderly; but, metaphorically, a form of a re-imagined nation in which they (re)tell their different private stories/narratives from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In these women protagonists, the domestic and national, the private and public coalesce into a larger historical narrative. As Andrade has observed, when a more open critical interpretive reading is applied:

macropolitical themes such as nationalism become more legible and will reveal themselves to be part and parcel of women’s micropolitical or domestic spheres. … Attentive reading of the macro and the micro makes visible a set of plots in dialogue with nationalism and anticolonialism as well as with domestic issues. (2007, p. 90)

These women’s narratives are thus embedded in deceptive personal simplicity for in their depths they reveal the complexities of the operation of the domestic/private and the national/public spheres. In this creation also emerges Macgoye’s legerdemain in narrative construction; at once ingeniously writerly, and cognisant of political and historical realities of the present moment.

There are thirty women in the Refuge; however, the ones who are strategically given the voice for narrative, envoiced, in a representative way commensurate with the Kenyan ethnic setting, are seven women protagonists: Wairimu (Kikuyu), Rahel (Luo), Sophia (Swahili), Nekesa (Luhya), Priscilla (Kikuyu), Bessie (Kikuyu), and Mama Chungu (Seychellois).

Kurtz has noted that *Moment* is outstanding as it:

deploys a more technically demanding structure … features a less programmatic and more personal view of the interaction of the individual and the nation, and it represents a further step in the repertoire by moving beyond the Luo experience to include representatives of other Kenyan communities in major roles. (2005, pp. 103-4)

‘Moving beyond the Luo experience’ as Kurtz argues does not aptly capture Macgoye’s pre-*Moment* creative process as that experience is basically the ‘scriptible’ from which she and the reader interpret the postcolonial Kenyan condition. However, Macgoye’s multiethnic depiction is hailed as an exceptional narrative exercise in the Kenyan literary
landscape, more so with the advent of problematised and insidious politics of ethnic exclusivism in the country.

Macgoye’s strategy of collating women’s stories from across the Kenyan nation is appropriate as it helps in the representative examination of women’s narratives from various perspectives and Kenyan sub-national differences, in order to adequately situate and interrogate the women problematic in the Kenyan postcolony. And, as McClintock has posited, ‘[if] nationalism is not transformed by an analysis of gender power, the nation-state will remain a repository of male hopes, male aspirations and male privilege’ (qtd. in Herr, 2003, p. 142).

These women’s are stories and sub-narratives which conflate into part of the historical narrative of the (post)colonial Kenyan nation. Kibera notes that in the Refuge, the women ‘relate or recall their humble lives of privation and constant struggle in the lower reaches of a hierarchical, androcentric, and rapidly changing society’ (2000, p. 157). Once again, to get the insights into this strategy to employ various women characters in mapping/narrating the history of the nation and its adequacy, it is necessary to recourse to Kurtz who argues rightly that:

Here [in Moment] the narration is unrelentingly analeptic, with frequent extended flashbacks related through the consciousness of the various women who reside in the Refuge. By the end, we are in possession of a carefully interwoven account of the changing history of Kenya through the courage, resilience, and failures of the residents of ordinary Kenyan women. (2005, p. 153)

The Refuge, however, is not in permanent stability, the various narratives aspire to certain authorial powers, ethnic, age-wise, and religious; a testimony to the dislocated and disrupted nature of the postcolonial narrative, dislocations and disruptions that in turn produce differentiating power(s) that should be resisted and engaged with, a task that the major women characters in the novel gradually undertake. This undertaking, what has been aptly termed Macgoye’s multi-cultural project (Kruger, 1998; Simatei, 2001; Kurtz, 2005) can also be deciphered as resistance by the women of the burden of ethnic otherisation cloaked on the Kenyan postcolony by both the British colonial regime as well as the subsequent African governing elite. The women thus contest ethnic superficialities that have noxiously defined (and continue defining) the Kenyan narrative of the nation-state.
Through these women and their stories, we encounter their various resistances and subversions of power/authority, both in the public and private spheres. In engaging in these acts of resistance and subversion, they construct new idioms and paradigms of representations. The binaries in male/education and female/domesticity are fiercely contested in these narratives. The women in here have been given the voice, and hence in their various sub-narratives in the text, they manifest as powerfully en-voiced in a society that is much dipped in patriarchal vestiges. The women protagonists have, thus, been repositioned into the realm of the speaking subjects. The text, therefore, appropriately engages in ‘recover[ing], reinscrib[ing], and reinvigorat[ing] the feminine as subject’ (Decker, 2004, p. 108). In the women’s personal narratives, Macgoye is in synch with the African women writers’ demonstration that ‘change and development at the personal level are part and parcel of the process of creating a new political culture’ (Darby, 1998, p. 157).

Kruger captures Moment’s women’s transformation into the speaking subjects vividly when she argues that:

As the biographies of the characters unfold through their own recollections, often fragmented and suspended by the intersection of various voices, they paint a dense and multi-layered canvas of the historical and contemporary situation of women in Kenya. (1998, p. 31)

And thus Moment emerges as a text that ‘provides an additional dimension to the experience of colonialism and neo-colonialism, endowing with a voice those who have previously been silenced and marginalised’ (ibid.). However, as it will be argued out, the idea of the previously silenced is to be read cautiously in the understanding that having voice even at the private, rather personal level, as the case of Wairimu reveals, can just as well be empowering and power/authority bestowing.

In the seven major women characters of the novel, Wairimu, Rahel, Sophia, Mama Chungu, Priscila, Nekesa, and Bessie, and in their rendition of their various narratives during both the colonial and independence Kenya, women are ‘seen not as passive or barely visible entities, but as articulate and talented producers of art and knowledge, and as heroic makers of history’ (Lihamba et al., 2007, p. 2). In this sense, therefore, we register women’s vital roles in the Kenyan independence struggles, their commitment to the ideals and philosophies of a liberated Kenya, the post-independence
collapse of these ideals, and the residual ramifications of the collapse on the Kenyan peoples, more so women. These women’s pains of experience call into close scrutiny both the colonial and postcolonial Kenya’s enactment of socio-political power and authority, because as Boehmer has argued of the ‘disappearing’ of the women actors in the African nationalist project:

The new nationalisms married the symbolic legacies of two patriarchal systems and so man, as elsewhere, remained manifestly in charge: they defined the shape and meaning of post-colonial nationhood on behalf of ‘their’ people. Ways of representing the land or the national territory which formed a part of the colonial rhetoric of nationalism were thus transferred and assimilated to local conventions of respect for the mother and the land. At the same time, the nation as a body of people was imagined as a patriarchal family in which the leaders had the authority of fathers and, in relation to the maternal national entity, adopted the position of sons. (1992, p. 243)

It is worthy going into detail into the life stories and narratives of the three of the most representative of these women protagonists: Wairimu, Rahel and Sophia, in order to illustrate the play with power/authority in both the private and the public spheres as is presented in the novel; and in the process see how they resist the politics of being ‘disappeared’. However, in the reading of the individual narratives of these women, the correlation of their stories is not lost; as it is this affective correlation that structures the functioning of the Refuge as well as the overall narrative that is the text, Moment. Hence, even the rather non-momentous narratives of Nekesa, Mama Chungu, Bessie and Priscilla are also read as run-ins into the much more momentous ones.

Further, in the ‘privileging’ of these three, it is not assumed that the other four are less important in understanding the power/authority play in Moment; rather that in these three, the archetype of the resistance fully emerges. There is, however, a feeling of character lapse on the part of Macgoye especially when it is borne in mind that of the about thirty women characters in the novel only seven are charged with the burden of speech, the permission of narrative. A more significant representation, and narrative/textual visibility of the ‘silent women figures’ would have produced a much richer novel. This is, for instance, what one discovers in a novel of similar magnitude, albeit in a different cultural configuration, that of the African American women – Toni Morrison’s Paradise (1997).
2. 3 Wairimu: A Peasant Woman’s Expansionary Narrative of Learning

Born in 1905, Wairimu is the oldest (others, for instance Bessie, do not have memory of their age) of the women in “The Refuge”, the most pragmatic, experienced and arguably most knowledgeable. She has several sisters and a brother, but from a very early age in her life in colonial Kenya, develops a strong sense of independence that drives her actions at both the personal and societal levels. Wairimu’s memory of the Mau Mau war of liberation is active. It is this memory that helps in establishing her position in the liberation struggle, but it also brings about contestations by the other women voices in the larger Moment narrative, especially from the Luo woman, Rahel. However, these contestations convey the varied ways of Kenyan women’s resistance of and engagement with power and authority, but that concatenate into a shared narrative of power/authority deprivation. And as Kibera has argued, the women’s stories ‘constitute the skeins and strands of a shared history, but one approached from different locations, cultures, experiences and animated by differing temperaments and aspirations’ (2000, p. 175).

Wairimu is portrayed as an individual who revelled in the ability to learn (p. 24); and this opens her up to the world beyond the narrow Kikuyu life in Central Kenya as she travels as a coffee girl (working on different coffee plantations), then to Nairobi as a tea-room worker. In the tea-room in Nairobi, she is introduced by a trade unionist friend of the African labour leader Harry Thuku, Abdulla Tairara, to a Kikuyu couple who help her in the progressive and gradual learning of the new milieux. The couple, ‘would give her food and a corner to sleep in and, if she stayed, some money at the end of the month’, and ‘They supposed she must know what Nairobi was like and how men were bound to pester her’ (ibid.).

Further still, to the couple, Samson and Nduta, her interaction with the men was her own affair as long as it did not cause ‘any trouble in the tea shop’ (ibid.). She is also counselled that in the new Nairobi society, ‘they had no way to protect her, women being as few as they were and all the old rules set aside’ (ibid.). To manage to inhabit this space, therefore, she has to be the driver of her own destiny. Wairimu decides to stay on, because she is aware that work in itself is empowering, as it is bound to economically assure her, and thus make her guard her independence as an own provider of own needs.
Equally important, by leaving the limited space in the colonial Gikuyu land, Wairimu gets the opportunity to engage, albeit covertly, in the ‘rapidly changing political events of the 1920s and 1930s … in Nairobi’ (Kurtz, 2005, p. 155). Nairobi thus acts not only as an ‘exciting’ space to be in, but it also ‘introduces her to a political awareness that will progressively determine the substance of her life’ (Kruger, 1998, p. 33).

But Wairimu later on gets disillusioned with the city-space of Nairobi. She remarks, ‘I do not want to get like these sour, smelly women. I like working for you here, but in the town I see no escape from changing’ (p. 50). Yet, she cannot escape to ‘home’ as she is ‘no longer a girl in their eyes’ (ibid.). Wairimu’s dilemma reads well into Loomba’s argument of how colonialism intensified patriarchal oppression. Loomba observes:

> often because native men, increasingly disenfranchised and excluded from the public sphere, became more tyrannical at home. They seized upon the home and the woman as emblems of their culture and nationality. The outside world could be Westernised but all was not lost if the domestic space retained its cultural purity. (2005, p. 142)

This is also Stratton’s position when she holds that, ‘Under colonialism … African women were subject to interlocking forms of oppression: to the racism of colonialism and to indigenous and foreign structures of male domination’ (1994, p. 7). As well, Wairimu and such other women in her position find themselves in in-between spaces in their colonised-patriarchal societies, for in Stratton’s argument of this ‘double-bind’:

> For if, in order to improve her economic status, she chooses to migrate to the city or seek employment, she is labelled a ‘prostitute’ or singled out as the cause of national ‘indiscipline’. If, on the other hand, she elects to stay in the village or be a house wife, she is economically marginalised. The patriarchal situation also creates difficulties for men – reconciling the fact of women’s participation in the liberation struggle with that of their exclusion from national politics, and of accommodating the notions of freedom and equality upheld by the liberation movements with the actual subjugation of women in ‘post-colonial’ nations. (p. 17)

Hence, for a woman like Wairimu, there can never be a fitting space at ‘home’, because she has already defied the ‘purity’ and subservience expected of the domestic space. She is thus thrown into the task of choosing again: ‘She had chosen and so she was destined to go on choosing’ (p. 50). And, her tea-shop employer even vividly captures the
frustration of single women in the city-space of colonial Nairobi, ‘[t]he town is not yet ready for you. Unless you have a man – a husband, best, or a father to speak for you, but at least a steady man – you get the worst of the bargain here’ (ibid.).

Of how travel and the journeying leitmotifs empowered women in colonial Kenya, Kanogo (2005) has argued that:

More often than not, travel and modernity were deemed responsible for women’s unacceptable abandonment of ‘traditional’ obligations, roles and spaces. Amid rapid changes, appropriate gender spaces, roles and identities for women were formulated, a process that women themselves tried to control. In diverse situations, women negotiated solutions, outrightly violated conventional norms, or adopted novel responses to intractable problems. (p. 2)

It is through the leitmotif of the journey, in travelling and discovering new spaces and locations that Wairimu, and the other women protagonists in Moment, manage to contest limiting aspects of power and authority. In a sense, therefore, journeying in colonial Kenya enables new normative spaces for women to start opening up (ibid., p. 7). It is in travelling and the acquisition of the new normative spaces that women like Wairimu ‘acquired a sense of agency, constructed and negotiated new roles, identities, and spaces for themselves’ (ibid., p. 8).

Still, it is worth noting that even at ‘home’, in colonial Central Kenya, where Wairimu cannot contemplate of finding appropriate and accommodating space, power is not absolutely in-divested from the women. Shaw captures the position in a penetrating manner that:

Despite an ideology of male dominance pervasive in many kin relations and in an economy that valued livestock, generally under men’s control, over vegetable produce, generally under women’s control, Kikuyu women emerge in my reanalysis of colonial ethnographies as powerful political players. Women managed the distribution of food. In deciding to give food to work parties, which were important during the Kikuyus’ expansionistic late nineteenth century, women at the same time, and by the same acts, recruited followers who added to their own power and prestige, and also made “big men” of their male kin. Kikuyu women’s productivity and fertility underpinned male political success. (1997, p. 28)

Obviously these ‘powerful’ roles run beyond just what Shaw calls ‘during the Kikuyus’ expansionistic late nineteenth century’ to the twentieth century as is best exemplified in the women’s sustenance of the Mau Mau fighters during the struggle for the end of
official colonial rule in Kenya starting about 1922 with the formation of Young Kavirondo and Young Kikuyu Association.

For her marvellous experiential knowledge, Wairimu manifests as an important ‘subverter’ of the dominant authority. For instance, to get to colonial Nairobi in the first place, she had to ‘violate the norms defined by another authority [that of]… the colonial regulation that require[d] every African to be given a permit by his employer before embarking on a journey’ (Kruger, 1998, p. 33). But even before that, she had to defy the family (traditional Gikuyu) authority that required of her as a girl/woman to engage only in the domestic sphere (in her father’s home) awaiting transfer into another domestic space (her husband’s) upon marriage.

Thus aware that ‘home’ was no longer for her in her increasingly emancipated world, Wairimu gets back to the work on coffee plantations. She journeys back to her first place of work. This going back eventually gets her into playing an even more active role in the Kenyan independence struggle. To situate this role, it is worth producing at length her recollection of the engagement in the struggle:

In July [1947] the Colonial Secretary from England … came to Nyeri and told us he had been sent by the King to listen to our complaints …. I went because I hated to miss anything new, not because I wanted to draw attention to myself. But I was over forty then, though not worn down as my mother had seemed at that age. I could read well and write a little. I knew a lot of Swahili, had been to Nairobi a number of times, had been employed for more than twenty-five years. Very cautiously the foreman approached me, and in 1949 I became a full member of the chama … and a recruiter. (p. 106)

Wairimu, as it is evident from her narrative, is no longer a novice in the affairs of Kenyan nationalism. Her experience, her knowledge, her pragmatic orientation make her a valuable resource in Kenya’s nationalist movements. She has, in full, reached that level of resistance that visibly belies the categorisation of man/woman in contesting colonial power and authority. It is also necessary to examine in detail how Wairimu reaches this ‘fullness’.

The motivation to be a coffee girl, a worker, is so strong for the young Wairimu in colonial Kenya. This is so as it is perceived as a deliverer from the limiting space of the home with its attendant binarised roles for men and women. She notes of the colonial requirements for one to be conscripted as a worker on the coffee plantations:
Then you had to present yourself at the gate of the European farm and ask if they wanted workers. Usually they did. … [and] once you were taken on, given a place to sleep in the long, low buildings, a blanket and some staple food and taught which berries to pick and where to put them, they would not let you out even if your parents came to cry and shout for you. At the end of the month you got some money, and so you were like a man and could do a lot of choosing for yourself (p. 18)

Of urgency to Wairimu is to have her independence, to be able to choose freely without patriarchal restrictions. Thus once on the coffee farm, Wairimu realises that she has to create her own space, albeit small, to situate herself in relation to the other people on the farm, especially the male workers, ‘so she got along with people, sang about her work, joined in the evening dances, held her own against the men’s demands. The golden haze had never come back. None of them could put a spell on her and she always said no’ (pp. 18-19). Kurtz holds in his reading that the pilgrimage to a wage labour on a coffee farm was ‘a way of opting out of what she saw as an otherwise limited and prescribed existence – prescribed both in the sense that it is pre-scripted or determined, and that it is ordained by a superior (parental) authority’ (2005, pp. 154-5). To Wairimu, therefore, the coffee farm experience is a powerful means of securing an own liberatory existence.

Wairimu’s girl-world is one where only men and boys had the ‘authority’ to be choosers. She observes:

To go to the coffee was also a new thing. It was one way of choosing for yourself. Otherwise for girls there was almost no choice. Boys might choose school, and as a consequence they might be chosen for one kind of work or another … but for girls there were very few school places and as yet little choice: when you came home again there was still the marriage to be arranged. (p. 17, emphasis added)

To her, therefore, salvation can only lie in her own relishing of education as well as rejecting customs that allowed her to be part of such processes as arranged marriages and domestic servitude. Hers then becomes a pilgrimage into that desirable space in which custom does not hold sway over her actions. She, subsequently, has to collapse an arranged wedding in order to delight in the episteme of the wider horizons; because after her encounter with the man Waitito and his admirable ‘knowledge of the world and other ways and women’ (p. 3), she comes to, with a more liberating spirit, that ‘[t]he forest was no longer thick enough to hide divergence’ (ibid.), and thus she had to leave.
Of all the women protagonists in the Refuge, it is Wairimu who fully succeeds in ingraining the concept of choosing for herself and shaping her life on her own terms. Kibera is right in her reading of Wairimu that ‘The new world she set out to taste and master offer satisfactions for various yearnings: for independence, for participation in the anti-colonial struggle, for broadening of the mind, and for freedom to make choices and to learn about and explore her world’ (2000, p. 166). This, in turn, gives Wairimu the ‘weight of experience’ that steeps her knowledge of both the colonial and the postcolonial Kenyan nation, making her an authoritative commentator on its narrative.

Wairimu is a witness to the major events that shape the (post)colonial Kenyan nation. The ‘witnessing’ starts with Wairimu’s presence during the famous Harry Thuku riots of the early 1920s. It is during one of these occasions that, as has been mentioned above, she even happens to catch the eye of Thuku who then directs her to the tea-shop. Focussing on one of the major Thuku riots, Robertson holds that ‘The 1922 Thuku protest was one of Nairobi’s first mass demonstrations and constitutes critical evidence of the nature of Kikuyu women’s political influence in the 1920s’ (1997, p. 35). Of the often documented occurrences during the demonstration has been the action of the legendary Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru, a story that according to Robertson has over time ‘assumed a sanctified place in nationalist mythology as part of the construction of the nationalist woman’ (p. 36), who:

leapt to her feet, pulled her dress right up over her shoulders and shouted to the men: “You take my dress and give me your trousers. You men are cowards. What are you waiting for? Our leader is in there. Let’s get him”. The hundreds of women trilled their ngemi [ululation] in approbation and from that moment on trouble was probably inevitable. (Qtd. in Robertson, ibid.)

Robertson reads the episode closely in terms of the use of a curse which ‘entails displaying the buttocks and genitalia to men who are misbehaving’ (ibid.). She visions the power of the curse as resting in ‘the reference to motherhood, women’s reproductive powers; men are threatened with repudiation by their mothers and with their own infertility/impotence’ (ibid.). Hence, women resist in this case in a two-fold manner: against the colonial authorities and also the African men whom they feel have not lived to the African patriarchal expectations. Subsequently, power/authority is also challenged in
a two-pronged manner: at once the deflation of colonial authority and the African masculine authority. In turn, women themselves re-assert their own power/authority.

During the Kenyatta and other Kenyan leaders’ rally in February 1947 upon the former’s return from England the previous year, at Ruringu Stadium, Wairimu is similarly witness. And, she confidently talks of the event, ‘Of course I went. After what I had seen as a girl, I felt I had a right to be present at any political event. And I fell under the spell. From then on I became devoted to Kenyatta’ (p. 97). It is this commitment to the struggle and its presumed leader (Kenyatta) that sees her being actively involved in the Mau Mau independence war of the 1950s as an emissary ‘travelling the country to observe and report on the activities of the administration, passing messages, and clandestinely hosting undercover Mau Mau activists’ (Kurtz, 2005, p. 155).

For the fact that she sees herself a gatherer of experiences when she is still a young girl, marriage to Wairimu is viewed as a disruption in the life-long learning process. She does not want to simply wither away as wife, mother and grandmother in the village. She visions a possibility of seeing things in a newer and more fulfilling perspective, a door having been opened for her by her first lover, Waitito; a door through:

which one could see picture after picture, more lively and colourful than the black, dead pictures. … Before then there had been pictures – Wairimu, girl – Wairimu, bride – Wairimu, mother – Wairimu, elder’s wife – Wairimu, grandmother – but nothing to choose between them, only to be chosen. And if one was not chosen to have a child then the pictures became very few indeed. (p. 54)

However, Wairimu does not explicitly register dislike for the common domestic chores of ‘digging and shelling, peeling and digging again, bent under firewood’ (p. 55). She observes:

I did not despise these things, and don’t – fire, food and water, even here in the Refuge, our life centres on these three – but already, at eighteen, I had seen that it is not necessary to being a woman to be bent against the painful forehead-strap, with a little hump down on your spine and danger in bearing children because of it. (ibid.)

Implied in Wairimu’s rebellion then is the fact that one (woman and man) can still retain one’s human dignity without necessarily rejecting the chores that structure the sexes in the society. To her, what should be jealously guarded against is the tendency for the
domestic chores to turn either of the sexes into subservience that is akin to human slavery.

Wairimu yearns for bodily respect and thus convinces herself, ‘My body, too, can be respected’ (ibid.). In her wage earnings as a worker, however little amount of money there was, she relishes the incipient economic and social empowerment. She explains:

I picked and thought, picked and thought, earned enough to eat and a bit to save, made friends enough for day to day but saved a bit of myself too, undisclosed, ambitious, special. What must I aim at? First, to know Swahili, not in order to be a servant like Mr John, even a rich servant, but to enter a wider world than the Kikuyu world, to understand Nairobi, even if it were only on a Sunday, to go home with power – that meant with presents and knowledge, like a boy. (p. 54)

Thus, as her younger sisters get married away, Wairimu, ‘bearing no ill-will towards the sisters, nonetheless hugged to herself her new knowledge and her growing horizon’ (p. 95). She opts not to be collapsed by the burden of bearing children. But she can interact with partners as she wishes, and on her own terms, because she is not tied to a particular man in the confining Gikuyu traditional institution of marriage. She confides of having another dream that has nothing to do with dowry or with babies (p. 60). This dream is that of continuing to work, to enjoy her freedom; a dream that enhances her entry into the wider world, making her a knowledgeable opinion leader.

Wairimu talks of her option of the ‘dowry of learning’, in lieu of the traditional Gikuyu dowry paid by the chosen husband for a woman. She thus refuses to accept that one of the men she had a relationship with got her cheaply, for the lack of paying dowry. She argues:

He taught me to read. That is not a little thing. He taught me how to live in a cement house and keep it clean. That is also something people pay money for their daughters to learn … I could earn a lot of money if I went to work in a European house, knowing these things. But I prefer to be more free. I will go back to the coffee. And since the dowry of learning has been paid to me rather than to you, from time to time I will send you money out of what I have earned through my brother in Nyeri. It is not all you would have wished, but it is better than nothing. (p. 60)

Wairimu, therefore, takes on the responsibility of being a provider of sorts to her family; an undertaking that places her at an advantaged position in the collapsing of the provider/provided-for dichotomy as a defining feature in the man/woman relationship in
the society. She contends, ‘Because I am like a man I can choose how I live’ (p. 56). Kruger attests that:

Wairimu who has witnessed the full impact of the colonial regime and the many different efforts to oppose it, chooses to define herself within the context of war and resistance. As she remembers her life in terms of political events, she emphasises how her growing political awareness and commitment reflect her process of self-definition that public and private lives are so closely interwoven that they cannot be considered separate identities. (1998, p. 33)

Indeed, in the character and actions of Wairimu, Macgoye has woven a complicated tapestry of how ‘histories from below’, what otherwise would be deemed insignificant (sub-) narratives, have immense deconstructive powers inherent in them.

Presley (2003) captures the Kikuyu women’s participation in the Mau Mau land and freedom movement thus: ‘Kikuyu women joined the nationalist associations to improve their economic status, to gain access to the political process, to further their education, and to abet the return of alienated land’ (p. 299). Wairimu, in her narrative and other correlate sub-narratives by the other Kikuyu women in the text, embodies this participation. She says, ‘I was there at the Harry Thuku riots. We heard that there was a big meeting and that everyone was going, so of course I had to join in too. I learned early enough about terrible things’ (p. 45). She eventually comes to terms with the complex nature of the struggle for Kenya’s political liberation. She observes, ‘I understood that this was real fighting. I had seen our great hero and come close to where he was shut up in prison, and not even a great crowd of us could get him out. I learned something about power that day’ (p. 49).

Rightly then, Wairimu’s story collapses narratives that see women’s activities within the shallowness of their being ‘victims of Mau Mau or as prostitutes who, through personal contact with male nationalists, were drawn to Mau Mau while resident in Nairobi’ (Presley, 2003, p. 297). Presley continues her argument that:

The view of women as victims of Mau Mau originates from the colonial record. Women are presented by officials as the physical and psychological victims of atavism. The first type of victimisation characterises women as being forcibly compelled to take the oath of allegiance to Mau Mau. (ibid.)
In Wairimu’s case, we find the personal desire to get into the struggle and thus her entry into nationalist history cannot be taken to be ‘incidental to the main currents of nationalism’ (ibid., p. 311).

Elkins (2005), through Gikuyu women’s own oral testimonies during the Emergency years in Kikuyu reserves in Central Kenya, captures the brutalities and horrors visited on the women in colonial-created communal villages. Elkins vividly captures the trauma:

When giving their oral testimonies, many Kikuyu women struggled while searching for a vocabulary capable of describing the brutalities of the Emergency. In most Kikuyu survivor testimonies the problem of vocabulary, of being able to summon the right words to describe the past, frustrated efforts to document personal tragedy. … In their oral accounts, they had to transport the listener back in time to re-create a war-torn world that was now completely absent from the bucolic landscape. (p. 234)

However, despite the villagisation (a system of forced restriction in villages in order to contain any form of assistance to the Mau Mau freedom fighters), the women struggle hard and are determined to keep the spirit of liberation alive through various subversive activities and strong resolves to not give up. This is a demonstration of the fact that even in cases where Gikuyu women did not, as is the case with Wairimu, participate overtly, they contributed greatly on the home front to keep the struggle going.

Despite their efforts, however, when independence is achieved, Wairimu and the other women participants in the struggle find themselves isolated and in great deprivation. On the coffee plantation, after one of the emerging African elites takes over, there is rejoicing by Wairimu and other workers. This rejoicing, however, is short-lived. Wairimu says, ‘We found ourselves turned away, new clansmen brought in: they said we were too political, bargaining, counting hours. Fighting for land and freedom we had not grudged the hours, or money either. But so it was. At seventy one does not expect consideration’ (p. 113).

Wairimu’s tragic predicament, as it will unfold in the proceeding discussion, is also the fate of the other women in Moment. Postcolonial Kenya denies them spaces to celebrate their invaluable contribution in its formation. Macgoye, however, gets them this denied space in the Refuge. And as Wairimu reflects, most of her fellow mates in the Refuge may not be aware that they have been participants in the process of defining
themselves and also the formation of the nation, ‘As for these fellow-residents of hers, perhaps they were not all as dull as she was tempted to think them. When they muddled the years and answered out of the question, perhaps they were only hiding the memory of their own retreats or … closing their minds to the unthinkable’ (p. 45). Their narratives (and even reflective silences for others), therefore, give them the agency denied by the independent Kenyan nation.

After witnessing her kiosk being ‘kicked down to pieces by uniformed men doing their duty to build the nation’ (p. 114), Wairimu remarks, ‘Didn’t I tell you I was born lucky? My fairy-tale started with a hero on the forest path. It ends where the old queens live happily ever after, and sometimes dance till their slippers are worn out’ (ibid.). In here is, at once, the optimism and pride in a life courageously lived and fulfilling in its resistances, and also the irony inherent in the process of the so-called post-independence nation-building policies. Overall, the women protagonists’ (the old queens that Wairimu refers) individual narratives become major stories of engagement with power/authority and the dominant postcolonial ideologies. And, as Katrak argues, for women in the postcolony, ‘Speaking orally and writing or performing the stories … [provide] significant acts of resistance’ (2006, p. 7).

In Wairimu’s story, therefore, is an emancipating narrative that shows how an illiterate peasant Gikuyu girl sets out to define bigger things in her life and defies all else that could act as hindrance to the achievement and actualisation of what she aspires for. She goes ahead to acquire knowledge and experience through travelling, interaction with the outside world as well as through work, and subsequently positions herself as a participant in Kenya’s nationalist movement. And though not given adequate space in the emerging Kenya neocolony, her narrative situates her as a formidable participant in the making of the country’s nationalist history.

In the proceeding discussion, the study examines the other major women characters in the novel and unmasks their narratives and how these narratives aspire towards debunking the patriarchal power/authority play. Wairimu’s narrative, as it is the major one, and thus nearly archetypal, will still be revisited alongside the other women’s narratives to connect the overall project of engagement with power/authority in *Moment.*
2.4 Rahel Apudo: A Luo Woman’s Contestation of Patriarchy

Rahel Apudo, a Luo, is born c. 1915 to a colonial-era soldier father, and she herself marries a soldier with whom she bears a son and two daughters. Rahel’s son, Vitalis, also serves briefly as a soldier in post-independence Kenya before deserting and assuming a vagrant, near insane life. In the foregoing discussion, it has been noted that Wairimu is the central figure of the seven protagonist women in the Refuge. Rahel, on her part, is considered as Wairimu’s lieutenant, a sort of second in command. Therefore, in a sense, her narrative in the novel could be situated as the second most ‘authoritative’.

As is common in many East African communities, especially the post-independence East African structures, the woman had few options in voicing her concerns once in a marriage. The sequence was for one to get into the man’s domicile after the payment of dowry, and thereafter enter into the roles of being wife and mother. And in communities like Rahel’s, the Luo, in case of the husband’s death, the wife (in most cases wives) had to be ‘inherited’ by male relations of the man.

However, Rahel exercises her own power when she refuses to be domesticated by being ‘inherited’ after her husband’s death. She notes:

After the town kind of life we lived in quarters I didn’t much like the idea of being inherited by some old man in Uyoma. My co-wife had a grown-up son by then, so she was able to stay with him in our own dala. So we arranged that she would prepare the fish that end and I would collect them off the bus in Kisumu and sell them in the market. (p. 38)

And because inheritance is cloaked in the pretext of economic protection of the widow(s), Rahel and her co-wife decide to start a trade in order to empower themselves economically. This acts as a shield from the likely incessant reminders of why she has to be protected by men from her husband’s lineage. Further, the fact that Rahel and her co-wife have grown up boy children bolsters their argument about being able to make it by themselves.

To her advantage, the Christian communion accepts her, and in the process gives her the confidence to resist retrogressive Luo customs and traditions. She observes, ‘I wasn’t really a very keen churchgoer then – in any case you lose a lot if you’re not in the market on Sundays – but my church friends were pleased that I had refused to be passed on to another man, and so they tried to teach me more and I got some comfort out of it’
This, even if paradoxically, also brings in the part played by Christianity in the African women’s emancipation from the traditional roles that incapacitated their abilities to emerge as fulfilled individuals. As Lihamba et al. have argued, ‘Christianity destabilised the status quo, sometimes undermining the traditional patriarchal powers of African men while bringing new opportunities to some female converts’ (2007, p. 22).

Although ‘Christianity was not always liberating for women because it carried its own forms of Western patriarchal oppression’ (ibid.); and even missionary education, on its part ‘set[ting] out to educate girls to be good wives and mothers, discouraging them from participating in the world of politics or business outside the home’ (Katmak, 2006, p. 73), in a way they (Christianity and missionary education) allowed for space for the women and girls to reflect about their positions in the society from without the confines of the traditional African spaces with their attendant chains and desire to domesticate girls and women, in what Kanogo has called ‘bounded spaces’ (2005, p. 9).

Comparing herself to the other women in the Refuge, Rahel sees herself in a somewhat more privileged position. The narrative runs:

[She] held her peace. Since 1947 she had dealt with this Kikuyu people, their history of loss and assimilation, their long, hidden malice, their quick calculations and the terrible bent backs of their burdened women. She wanted to shout at them to hold their heads up. Was that only because she was a soldier’s wife or because she had grown up to a graceful carriage and a steadily balanced water-pot? (p. 14)

It is this perceptualisation of her culture-specific privileged position that partly makes her stand up to the traditions and customs, thus meaningfully foordering the patriarchally stereotype-informed inheritance practice among the Luo people of Kenya/East Africa. Indeed, the relatively obeisant Nekesa conceives of Rahel as belonging to ‘[t]hose black women who stood up to their menfolk and phrased themselves in terse little syllables – ok, ol, mit, mak, pok, poth … [and who] were possibly better organised than those of the fluent, long-drawn sentences’ (p. 115).

Further, Rahel strongly believes in herself and the ‘elevated position’ that the Luo women hold in the Kenyan society. Thus, she reminds Wairimu, ‘I am not saying anything bad, Wairimu my sister. I am only saying that Luo women have a certain dignity as they get older, if you take my meaning …’ (pp. 10-11). The belief in oneself in
Rahel’s case is as well a way of asserting one’s strong desire for freedom and to confound impediments to the achieving of this freedom.

Even more empowering, when Rahel’s soldier husband returns from the combat escapades of World War II, she gets the opportunity to go with him to the Gilgil Barracks in order for their son, Vitalis, to get to attend school. This incidentally affords her the opportunity to gain knowledge, ‘I also learned to read there and to look after a military house … Don’t you see I even speak Swahili as good as you people?’ (p. 13). Thus, even in Rahel’s case (as has been seen of Wairimu’s), a certain sense of fulfilment emerges in the enlightening travelling that she does, and which enables her to learn. It is this education, however limited it may be, that enables her to see the world in a wider perspective and appreciate the Luo traditions and cultures more eclectically; to be able to choose whether she wanted to be inherited or live on her own terms after the death of her husband. In her rejection of some patriarchal traditional practices, she engages in an empowering deconstruction of traditions that control the uses of the female body and which, in order to give them credence, ‘are mystified as social custom with the weight of ancient, at times, scriptural authority’ (Katrak, 2006, p. 14).

It is enlivening to realise that Rahel’s own interactions convinces her in hoping that other women from other communities in Kenya would rise up and hold their heads high. Her view of the Kikuyu women, as has been noted above, is for them to negotiate their position in the society which overburdens them (p. 14). Of course, Wairimu, the most envoiced of the Kikuyu women in the text is part of the enlightened ones who reject to live the life of ‘the terrible bent backs’, as she ‘at eighteen … had seen that it is not necessary to being a woman to be bent against the painful fore-head strap, with a little hump down on your spine and danger in bearing children because of it’ (p. 55). However, in her views and understanding of the other women and their situations, we see the space that is open for Rahel to experience the Other and thus configure out her position in relation to the Other; and in the process formulate positions of resistance as she endeavours to actualise herself in relation to power/authority in the society.

It is no doubt (and again as in the triumph of Wairimu) this inherent strength, despite the problematic of the Kenyan postcolony, that makes it possible for Rahel – when her life comes to the end, an end that also marks the closure of the novel – to ‘see
that the fearful tree was now clothed in blossom and birds were singing in the branches’ (p. 155). At the start of the text, Rahel and other young girls wandering in the woods, gathering firewood, encounter the symbol of the tree first-hand:

... they came upon the dead tree and were struck suddenly quiet, alarmed by the silvery replica of living branches and the vivid green of moss. They turned away quickly, breaking no branch, but these days the image of the dead tree lay before Rahel’s eyes and she clung to it for its symmetry, its detachment and its total recall. (p. 3)

This is a dreary image for the young girls. However, as it manifests now at the end of Rahel’s worldly existence, it emerges as the hope that is imbued in the women protagonists of the text – the triumph in managing to hold themselves up against various odds in their public as well as private spaces of existence and power and authority in the Kenya post/colony. As for Rahel, her eclectic knowledge acquisition has enabled her to defy traditions and experience her life within the wider horizons of human fulfilment. In her life narrative, therefore, patriarchy has been engaged and, to an admirable degree, deflated.

2.5 Sophia Mwamba: The Subaltern Female’s Journey towards Self-representation

Sophia Mwamba is of Kenyan Swahili origins, born c. 1912 at Mombasa Old Town. She was given the birth-name of Fatuma, but in her traumatic experiences and transformations, she, after the death of her first husband, a Muslim, marries a Christian and is subsequently baptised Sophia.

Sophia’s recognisable act of contestation of patriarchal authority comes when after her first husband’s death a Christian man, Henry Mwamba, proposes to her. The narrative runs:

Of course there was no question of going to see her father. To him infidel dowry would be an insult, and she had already been rebuked for receiving visitors too freely. Then one evening Hassan [her son with first husband] did not come home from school. He had been rude and moody for some months now. She understood the difficulty of a boy without a father. After searching frantically in the neighbourhood of the school, she found her father had collected the boy and sent him to live with her brother in Kilifi. However much she stormed, she was told, the Kadhi would uphold the transfer of a believing boy to a believing household.
Her mind had been made up for her. That night she told Henry she was moving in with him. (p. 67)

Thus, partly for the reason that she could not be allowed to have a choice in the life of her son, Sophia decides to not be part of her Muslim family. Bittner (2009) argues that Sophia ‘understands her father’s decision to take the boy away from her as a call to action, despite her rather fatalistic attitude toward life’ (p. 105). Her quest becomes that of realising the human potential outside what she sees as the restricting Islamic world order. The decision to move in with Henry and the subsequent marriage are themselves a show of defiance, a yearning to secure autonomy in her life. And as in the case of Rahel’s refusal to be ‘given’ to a man to inherit her, Sophia’s rejection to be chosen for another Muslim man as a replacement gives her the agential immediacy that she is in control of her life, even if to just a small degree. Bittner argues of Sophia cogently that:

As a mature individual she values the independence her age affords her and she is reluctant to lose it to a husband whom she has no right to choose, according to Islamic cultural rules. To avert an arranged marriage, she accepts the proposal of her late husband’s colleague [the Christian Henry Mwamba]. (p. 105)

Very fundamentally then, Sophia collapses the reigns of one of the strongest of the traditions that structure the Islamic society – that of the frailty of women concerning marriage arrangements in which men have the ‘scriptural sanction’ to marry severally, a thing denied the women.

Initially, Sophia seems to delight in the received world-view from the men in her early life, a thing that befalls women under Islamic patriarchy as is in her case. Thus, she lives a life informed by the patriarchal discourse of, ‘It was a good thing -- Ali said so, and therefore she must believe it’ (p. 30, emphasis added). And, her life was solely that lived and experienced in the home space, because she perceived the public domain to be for the men. In a way, in the early stage of her married life, patriarchy and patriarchal societal arrangements had managed to limit her to their conventions, which position themselves as, in Katrak’s formulation, ‘scriptural authority’ (2006, p. 14).

However, later on in her life, and after the men have either died (Ali) or ‘disappeared’ (Mwamba), as happens with her two husbands, her perspective of the private and the public widens. She comes to conceive of the two as interrelated, because in order for her to manage to survive, she has to take up responsibilities that define both
the private and the public. For the fact that there is no man-figure who will provide for her and her daughters, it falls on her to be that provider. And with the realisation that she has to add on another role, work becomes a thing she relishes and it does not take long before she sees the reward of her determination to fend for herself, her family.

And though still detached from the political events around Africa, embryonic interest emerges as her horizons expand. Hence:

It was the beginning of 1957. People were talking again of freedom and equality. Sophia reserved her judgement … A black man called Kwame had set up a new country called Ghana in West Africa where the cocoa came from. Sophia nursed the little red book and waited to see what would happen. (p. 106)

Sophia’s apolitical consciousness is thus touched because she realises that those political events impact on her life and that of her children. This is a different Sophia from the person who had thought of, ‘Why could not the Kikuyu stick to their own troubles in the Rift Valley’ when ‘Kenyatta turned up in Mombasa, with others, to address a big meeting’ (p. 104).

Therefore, her resolution about the future life for her daughter, Hawa, who was, ‘eight, a pretty, happy girl, near the top of her standard two class’ (p. 105), is powerfully pragmatic, ‘Let her read …let her get ahead. Let her be rich, and command the power which stops men of their work and wages. We shall not be cowed a third time’ (ibid.). With this resolution, Sophia submits fully into the process of being a provider. Thus, the narrative continues:

She took the money from the little red book … [and] she managed to build a traditional house, big enough for three (she still believed they were three) with a wide working veranda. This saved the rent, and they were able to grow their own bananas and a few vegetables and keep chickens. She was still not satisfied, and scraped and saved until she could get a second sewing machine. She employed a lame man to work this one, making school uniforms from dawn to dusk, and drove him hard. She wanted to be ready when Henry came, but two years passed and he did not come, a third, and there was still no news. She still did not know the way to his home place and a terrible pride possessed her. (p. 105)

In spite the fact that she still yearns for the presence of Henry, the labour union activist husband who ‘disappeared’, she realises that she has to work hard so that even if he were to ‘appear’, there would be ‘wealth’ and a home for him to come to. Still, she does not
value being absolutely depended on the ‘appearance’ of Henry; the pride, that ‘terrible pride’ that inhabits her, is thus a way of asserting belief in herself, in her own abilities.

Hawa, the daughter whom she wants to read and ‘command power’ does not let her down, for she ends up doing well in ‘her KAPE and left standard eight with the glory of a certificate’ (p. 106). Even though options are limited and restricting for a girl, when a man comes proposing for marriage, Hawa ‘flushed and looked away and said she wanted to qualify for a job’ (ibid.). And it is only when he offers to pay for her enrolment in a course in typing and office practice that ‘Hawa smiled and consented’ (ibid.). Through this arrangement, Sophia as well makes ‘a reasonable bargain in respect of the little red book’ (ibid.). For the fact that Hawa is going to train for a ‘profession’, Sophia can be assured that her daughter would wield some form of power in her life. Further, Sophia herself can now be contented that she has single-handedly managed to bring up a child and ensured that she becomes something. For this reason, she can economically empower herself through the ‘reasonable bargain’, again for the fact that she, a woman, is the one solely in charge of this ‘negotiation’, we see her enjoyment of power/authority.

In her ‘domestic’ work of embroidery and sewing, an occupation she finds satisfying delight in, Sophia is involved in aspects of challenging authority, as a worker and an artist. For as Venn (2006) has rightly argued, the expressive arts emerge ‘as the imaginative space that is able to keep as a trace the memory of other ways of being, or transmit a history of resistance, or give a voice to those not allowed to speak in the public sphere’ (p. 118).

From being represented by the men she marries, Sophia transforms into a woman who gradually learns to represent herself. She empowers herself through self-employment and uses the proceeds of her hard work to give her daughters an education, itself a strategy of empowering them. To Sophia, through learning, her daughters would be able to possess power and thus be individuals with their own voice in the society. Though incidentally it appears as if her authority emerges because of the problematic circumstances of her marriages, what stands out is her ability to refuse to give up when the men figures in her life die or ‘disappear’. Sophia’s narrative then becomes that of a subaltern woman’s passage into self-representation, an experience that is achieved
gradually but with astounding courage, a refusal, as she holds, to be ‘cowed a third time’ (p. 105).

2.6 Un/veiling Silences: Re-memorying the Other Women Protagonists of Moment

Silence has been read variously in literature, philosophy and other related humanistic disciplines. For feminists, for instance, it can have the implied assumptions of non-complicity in female decentring institutions, hence a form of resistance. It can as well mirror the unsayable; but even in the depiction of the unsayability, there can as well emerge a strong aspect of ‘saying’, of resistance into a position of agency. How then does silence also act as a strategy of re-memorying, of envoicing? These are some of the questions that are explored in the readings that follow of the other women protagonists in Moment: Mama Chungu, Nekesa, Priscilla and Bessie.

In these other women protagonists such as the Seychellois Mama Chungu (Mother Pain) and the Kikuyu Bessie, there is much to reflect on even in their various silences, in the grappling with the collapse of the dreams of women in both colonial and post-colonial Kenya. Kruger is right in her reading position that all women in Moment ‘embrace the idea of motherhood and marriage as focal and defining for their identity, but they debate and sometimes even resent the associated normative demands that are imposed upon their lives such as pre-marital chastity, fertility and arranged marriages’ (1998, p. 39). Therefore, even these other women who may be seen as inactive and with narratives that are not as experientially loaded such as Wairimu’s, Rahel’s, and Sophia’s, there is evidence of engagement in the deconstruction of power/authority in various ways and through diverse means.

For Mama Chungu, the narrative provides that after she loses all means of self up-keep and is rendered helpless, she resorts to seeking alms outside a mosque (p. 5). She is subsequently rescued from the inhumanity of beggardom by being given space in the Refuge. And once there, the narrative goes:

But they were not allowed to beg once they had entered the Refuge, and each one made herself into a different person to fit the situation just as she had done on marriage, motherhood, widowhood, and time and time again, conscious at each stage of identity behind the expectant, narrow hips, the swelling breasts, the symbols of mourning and the simulation of distress. (pp. 5-6)
However, there remains some acidity (p. 27) in Mama Chungu’s worldview that in turn structures her relationship with the other residents of the Refuge. In the rare instances of her ‘finding’ speech, she discloses, for instance, ‘Some of us had losses … You may not like to be made to remember it, but it’s true. We cannot get away from it’ (p. 34). It is this response that brings out the revelation of Mama Chungu’s espousal of silence in the Refuge, for she:

had spoken so little of herself since she had been picked up from the pavement and brought to the Refuge that some of them thought she had no memory at all. No one knew where she had come from. But memories, of course, need not speak in loud voices. They may gibber at a tantalising distance like a bat in the rafters, or swoop upon you like a moth, soundless but soiling you with a residue of filmy substance. (pp. 34-5)

But then the narrative also posits that perhaps there was a rediscovery, a re-memorising in Mama Chungu, ‘Perhaps, after all, Mama Chungu was resuming shape, particularising herself, and the birth-pain of which she used to babble was not that of the mother but of the newborn child’ (p. 35). When drawn into the conversation of how she interacted with her employer when she served as a housemaid by Sophia with the hope that she could reveal more of herself, she brings in the issue of non-remembrance thus, ‘bosses are bosses … It would not help to remember them. You have your own life to live’ (p. 55).

It is worth noting that Mama Chungu’s interaction with the white soldier boss and ‘lover’, Mr. Robert, was one of being abused for sexual gratification without her really getting any significant form of respect or privilege from it. Hence, when she holds on non-remembrance, the harrowing experience in the relationship as well informs her present circumstances. Thus her silences and re-memorising only when she wants, on her own terms. As a strategy for survival, Mama Chungu thus musters the ‘experience in making herself unobtrusive’ (p. 64). Again for the reason that she is Seychellois, this ‘unobtrusiveness’ becomes a way of avoiding attention that might bring her trouble: ‘There would be wrangles about citizenship, call for papers’ (p. 79).

As for her acidic nature, we are given a glimpse into it by Priscilla as an introduction to a woman-visitor who incidentally happens to have been a sister-in-law to Mama Chungu’s boss, Mr. Roberts. Priscilla introduces, ‘She does not talk about herself.
I think she got her name [Mama Chungu translates into Mother Pain in English] because if you ask her about the children she says, “It hurt me, it hurt me”. She can talk alright about other things’ (p. 78).

Her summation of her experience is itself an insightful revelation of suffering and trauma. Mama Chungu curtly tells of her story: ‘Not much French. I come when very small [from Seychelles] my mother say. I grow Mombasa, speak a bit English, work there for white people. I get old. I forget … Two babies hurt me. I not get any more. I go Kamiti’ (p. 80). Obviously, Mama Chungu’s then has been a life imprinted with suffering that indeed not remembering becomes a way out for forgetting the pain, the suffering, the humiliation. But above all, it is the death of the children that weighs her down. She holds, ‘I cannot complain of lacking work. It is only because the babies died that I could not do better for myself” (ibid.).

To Mama Chungu, ‘memories must be kept under control’ (p. 120); as well, it was ‘necessary to protect oneself” (ibid.). In this sense, therefore, she also learns how to let the other people only know what she wants them to know, what does not open up avenues and spaces to hurt her feelings and emotions. Mimi Paul’s (as she was known previously) identity camouflaged, she hopes to engage the present in what it has for her rather than be in constant presence of the agony of the past.

After the death of her two babies, and deserted by the man responsible; and her father having disappeared (‘Mimi never saw her father again’ [p. 121]), the situation becomes hopeless for her. The narrative proceeds:

Mimi found a lowly job in the naval stores and ignored any man who approached her. She felt tangled with physical pain for a year after the operation, and what was the sense in bearing more pain when no fruit could come of it? There was no child to cherish and to seek money to educate. In any case she felt in her early twenties shrivelled, thin, shrill, dull of hair and skin. People talked around her of politics and strikes and unity coming across the country. ... There was talk of people getting their rights after the war and throwing out the foreigners. ... She was not interested in talk, but she combed out her woolly hair, spoke only Swahili and resolved to be a Kenyan. But she did not speak of this to those who, twenty years afterwards, made a conscious choice. (pp. 121-22)

For her rather unquestioning nature, when she encounters Robert again, ‘… and he told her he was married and looking for a place to settle when his wife came from England’
(p. 122), she is at first cold but later on agrees to serve him as a house servant. And ‘pretty soon she was being called to warm the bed as well’ (ibid.).

Indeed, we are reminded of her not having a ‘will of her own’ (ibid.). Further, ‘She did not even drive a hard bargain. She had never been very good at calculating’ (ibid.). Thus, even after the arrival of the memsahib, the incorrigible Robert still continues to sexually abuse her body. But this indifference to her ‘suffering’ on his part also gives her the strength to start to resist him: ‘It was not only because he took her body and her humiliation for granted that she now resented Robert’s intrusion. For the first time since the babies had died she was beginning to feel there was something of her own to respect’ (pp. 122-23). It is in this sense of the growing hatred that she agrees to the Taita man’s (interestingly the Henry Mwamba who had disappeared from Sophia), also known as Kinyozi the barber, request to deliver for him notes and packets in the enhancement of the freedom struggle in the country. Thus, ‘Of course she did not refuse or even think of refusing. She knew very well what it was about, and suddenly she knew too her need to feed the hatred that was growing in her’ (p. 123).

With this kind of personal narrative, more tragic and less joyous, Mama Chungu elates in ‘retaining part of her mystery’ (p. 127). And, ‘She would have preferred to avoid the pain of recognition, and yet it confirmed a continuity in Mimi which Mama Chungu had begun to doubt. Not that these young hussies of nurses needed to know about it, but she had been pretty once and had chosen her side’ (ibid.).

In Mama Chungu, then, the silence, the indifference to easy recognition, becomes a strategy that keeps her in the present moment; not entirely effacing the past, but giving her the strength to live the best she can on the side she had chosen for herself. Her resistance and engagement with patriarchal power as espoused in Robert may be minimal, less pronounced, late in emerging, but it is there all the same. In her, the personal growth and awareness emerge with experience and individual negotiation with the betrayals and sufferings in life meted on her as a woman and a human being.

Nekesa, the cast of characters (p. v) introduces as Luhya born circa 1920 in Nairobi and ‘lost touch with her family, except one brother. Friends and members of the Revival Fellowship, Keziah and Mama Victor, offer her help and support’ (ibid.). Nekesa’s Luhya identity is thus not much a definitional one. Her identity is fluidised and
with a cosmopolitan aura, a characteristic that partly enables her to survive in socio-cultural locations that transcend ethnic and national borders (she later on travels to Kampala, for instance, as a commercial sex worker). Nekesa confirms of her Ugandan experience, ‘I was in Kampala myself from 1953 to 1960, and I speak Luganda because my stepfather was from Uganda. I used to trade in that market at the foot of Namirembe Hill’ (p. 71).

She observes of her early life:

I’d had to look after myself from an early age, since my mother could never stick to a man. I was brought up in Nairobi, so I knew how to speak Kikuyu, and it was difficult for us women on our own to prove who we were, even though I was in my thirties by the Mau Mau time and thought I knew the ropes. … Later my mother went off to Busia somewhere, and my stepmother had no time for me anyway. So Kampala seemed a good place to go during the curfew years. It was a good place, too, with money around like dirt, fancy shops that made us blink, not much colour bar. I think it is not like that now. (p. 72, emphasis in the original)

Nekesa thus appropriates the life of existence as the other and collapses various boundaries, social-linguistic as well as border spaces, events that ensure her survival in times of strain and economic lack. Of her Luhyas descent it is narrated:

She understood Lubukusu and some of the related dialects that made up Ololuyia, but it had never been a major language of her life and never since early childhood had she visited the home village or shared in the digging of those little overcrowded plots. The language meant to her everlasting rows in the railway quarters where they lived as time and time again her father came home to find no food in the house, her mother either tipsy or still out with one of her fancy men, the children dirty and quarrelling. She was ten and her brother a bit less when they left with their mother for Dundora, beside the quarry. Her father kept the younger children and brought another woman to care for them, but these two, he said, had learned evil ways already and were too much for a decent woman to cope with. That much she had understood in the dialect called of ‘home’. But it helped her, later, to get a grasp of Luganda with its long complex greetings and its combination of grunts and hisses. (p. 115)

Nekesa’s struggle for existence and taking care of herself is thus from very early on in life. And for the reason that attachment to such ideas like ‘home’ and ‘father’ for her is relatively fluid, her terms of interaction with other people is thus that of non-commitment, a thing that does not so much weigh her down with the baggage of family and care for it. This offers her relative freedom necessary for self actualisation.
Even when in Kampala practising as a commercial sex worker, Nekesa understands that such a life should be viewed in its ephemeral nature; hence, she somehow prepares herself for the eventualities of life beyond this occupation. The narrative goes, ‘But by 1960 I was pushing forty, not able to compete with the young ones, and I’d learned how to trade in combs, mirrors, handkerchiefs, that kind of thing’ (ibid.). She thus sets forth for Nairobi when Uhuru (independence) was felt to be around the corner (ibid.). Nekesa contends that:

But in my case the Lord was waiting for me here in Nairobi. Not that I was ready to listen, though I was trading straight and fair at Machakos bus stop, but when I went to hospital the first time He saved me, and from then on I kept myself clean and decent until I was too sick to work. They brought me here three years ago when all my stock and savings were used up. (p. 73)

Nekesa’s thus manifests as a narrative of struggle for a woman to make something out of a life that sets out from the very beginning as full of deprivation, both material and emotional. We may resent her engagement in the debasing activity of commercial sex working, yet for a one who had to look after herself ‘from an early age since my mother could never stick to a man’ (p. 72), we understand the prevailing circumstances that inform the action. But above all, it is in the resilience, the fight through to live, the caution not to collapse under the yoke of bearing ‘fatherless’ children because ‘[t]hat really puts a limit on what a girl can get, living as we had to, and so people drive themselves to a breakdown’ (ibid.), that makes Nekesa’s life a narrative of resistance, a narrative of power/authority.

The other seemingly less capturing life narrative in the text is that of Priscilla. She is casted as having been born circa 1923 in “the settled area,” where her father worked as a cook in a European house’ (p. v). Priscilla, later on having been deserted by a husband who set out for education in Uganda, reminisces when in the Refuge, ‘If my old employer had taken me to England as I once asked ... perhaps I should have visited the Women’s Institutes too and built a hedge round myself to keep the feelings out of sight’ (p. 73). These feelings are of course as a result of the emotionally deprived life that she led subsequent to the ‘departure’ of her husband and the traumatic experience of losing an aged father when the Mau Mau fighters attack her employer murdering him and a small child. Upon this experience, ‘Priscilla continued to take in morning tea, cooked
breakfast ... wearing a uniform, living in quarters, attending a different church from Mrs Bateson, eating different food, buying in different shops. Because when you have gone through so much together, how can you face any more changes?’ (p. 75).

But this routine life, we are told in the narrative, could be the result of her belief in the man, Evans Njugna, ‘If it had not been for her man, she might have gone away to train as a teacher, but that man had changed everything’ (ibid.). She observes to the nurse-trainee, Gertrude, of her husband, ‘Of course, long ago. I was a big strong girl like you then. It was about the time Mr Kenyatta came back from England after the war. We were all thinking about education. My husband had gone up to standard eight. He was a clerk on a farm. But he wanted more’ (p. 86). Priscilla then waits for the man for a long time because, she admits, ‘I loved him’ (ibid.). To the man, as it has also been seen of the men in Wairimu’s and Sophia’s lives, however, it was more of fulfilling his own ambitions. After his relocation to Uganda in search of education, the narrative proceeds:

Then after about three months came a letter without an address saying the seminary offered everything to fulfil his ambition and he had now had his eyes opened to the claims of the true church. Of course a priest was not supposed to keep a wife but perhaps she also had mistaken her vocation. It would be better to keep apart for a while to test out the situation – perhaps at the end of a year they could discuss the matter. That was the last word she ever had. (p. 87)

Priscilla shares her traumatic experience, accruing from the brutal murder of her father and the ‘disappearing’ of a husband, with Mrs Bateson, the wife of her former murdered ‘Master’. In each other, the two women derive the strength and purpose to live; thus ‘[t]hey simplified their way of life to suit the strength they had left’ (p. 76). Later on, with the death of Mrs Bateson, and a stint with another employer, she finds herself at The Refuge:

The house was larger and harder to clean. There were more guests to cook for and Priscilla was finding it harder to lift and carry things. She was under the doctor herself, and after a couple of years was told that her heart would not stand such heavy work. She wrote to Susan [daughter to Mrs Bateson living abroad] ... and Susan, after enquiring round, had got her a place in the Refuge. (ibid.)

In Priscilla, therefore, is to be found first-hand betrayal by a loved one whose ‘disappearance’ leaves a traumatising experience. But then she does not collapse completely into apathy. Somehow, she understands that she has to find strength to live
her life. She notes, ‘Yes I waited, I worked. I had a good employer’ (p. 86). She may simply be a domestic worker, but the idea of work itself acts as bulwark against the helplessness of being ‘deserted’.

Then the seventh of the women protagonists is Bessie, a Kikuyu, casted in the novel as not remembering her full name or age or most of her lost family (p. v). Bessie is overwhelmed by the fact that her last-born son, Leonard, was victim of Kenya’s 1982 coup attempt. She notes to the student trainee-nurse Jane, ‘He helped me. He was in the Air Force, you understand’ (p. 84). And to further complicate matters and add to her pain, she narrates of how they took him away, ‘They picked him up like a baby and they took him away. Even they left the blood. In the Maternity they would wipe up the blood ...’ (ibid.).

To Bessie, only the son Leonard was what was left for her, thus his being ‘taken away’, actually being killed, in such circumstances contributes immeasurably to her near total collapsing. Further, for the fact this was a child born when she was in detention at Kamiti makes her attachment to him so affective. We get a glimpse of the life she led while in prison thus, ‘But she remembered, in her usual fuzzy way, being taken outside for grasscutting during that endless cleansing process for detainees that she could never understand, Leonard tied to her back – or was he still in the womb?’ (p. 79).

Bessie’s story is captured well in the narrative thus:

Bessie was the newest comer and also the nearest comer. She had lived, as long as anyone around could remember, in one of the wooden shacks on the edge of Eastleigh. She was only heard to speak Swahili and the few words of Kikuyu common to the town, and she could not tell you where she came from before or how she got her name. Even when old members came to see her in the Refuge – till most of them drifted away, in the frequent movement that marks off our cities from the place called home, or grew embarrassed when she failed to recognise them – she would only weep for her dead baby and turn away from them. (p. 81)

Initially, with the presence of the son in her life, we see a happy Bessie:

No one remembered old Bessie having a child, but there he was. He would go to the door and she would smile and start at once to chatter. And then one would see the old clutter of the house put out for airing, and sweeping and washing going on, and Bessie would put on a brand new dress or wrapper while the old one hung out to dry. He must have brought food, for she was plump and healthy, though you did not see her cooking: perhaps someone was persuaded to keep a little store
for her or make a phone call when she needed attention. It seemed a danger contained. (p. 82)

Things thus change for the worst with the 1982 coup attempt. The story tragically and memorably captures the ill-fated day that she loses her son:

And so the boy came, homing on the little shack, not seeing it the most dangerous of all places for him. And they came in the evening, those who had no need to put off their uniform, those who had not been defeated, and fought to avoid defeat, demanding to search, search, and Bessie smiled and babbled the young man, in his vest and pants, stooped at the doorway and came out, hands high but too late, a shot ripped away his mouth and they left him there where Bessie wept and mumbled, and moved to flush out the next block. (ibid.)

Thus deprived, there was no option for her other than getting to a space where she could be provided for. Hence, ‘One day a policeman led her to the Refuge. ... Sponsors were found and Bessie stayed’ (p. 83). But the memory of her ‘baby’ remains in her a constant reminder of the cause of her being deprived, and also a pointer to her inability to comprehend why the postcolonial nation was ‘eating’ its own offspring.

Bessie’s withdrawal is also associated with her coming from a past that laden with horror. The narrative goes:

She felt freer with the young than with these old people who might have knowledge of the struggle and shame which had been locked down below the layer of conscious speech in her – the fire which had engulfed her family when she, in her slow, uncoordinated way, was late in getting them moved from the homestead to the new village; the detention camp where she was herded after wandering out after curfew hopefully in search of them; the hateful guard who had engendered this last, late son upon her; the cousins who had cared for the child, as she could not, in their own, bereaved home, and taught him to be compassionate towards her. (p. 127)

Thus with such experiences in one’s life, silence becomes a route in the endeavour to place memory ‘aside’ in order, however difficult it might be, to inhabit the space of the present moment.

Wairimu holds of the women, collectively in the Refuge, ‘When they muddled the years and answered out of the question, perhaps they were only hiding the memory of their retreats or, like Bessie, closing their minds to the unthinkable’ (p. 45). In at times ‘closing their minds’, such women protagonists in the text like Mama Chungu and
Bessie, come to terms with the present circumstances and to a helpful degree resist total collapsing as a result of the memory of the often times unspeakable, because traumatising, past.

2.7 Building a Futuristic Women’s Space: Intergenerational Epistemologies

Of import in *Moment* is also the fact that the old women’s lives in the Refuge are contrasted with those of some younger women (trainee-nurses and community health workers). The younger women are made to see the opportunities open to them for acquiring knowledge in post-independent Kenya. As Wairimu observes to one of the student-trainee nurses, ‘I think I would be a nurse if I were young now. But in my day there were only two choices, picking coffee or looking after men’ (p. 15). And, Mary, the student-trainee nurse, shares with her about ‘the old, old story’ (p. 16), that is, the story of having an affair with a man who then bolts out for other amoral ventures once he is sexually gratified. Mary confides in Wairimu, ‘I’m still a student and … last month I did think I was pregnant. Thank God I am not. But what I do know is that I wouldn’t have had any help if I had been. He didn’t even answer my letter’ (p. 15). Of course this is equally the path that Wairimu trod in her first encounter with Waitito who subsequently ‘vanished’ to later on ‘come to arrange his marriage [with Miriam]’ (p. 17). It is this sharing then that acts as a warning to the younger women to be cautious in their relationships and undertakings. They are made to carefully re-think the ‘old, old story’.

The other women protagonists in the text too have the opportunity to closely interact with the younger women: Bessie with Jane, Priscilla with Gertrude, and Nekesa with Judy. In each of these interactions and opening ups, the older women see in the younger ones some resemblances to their own lives, and thus set out to share in a spirit of sisterhood. For Bessie and Jane, the tragedy of losing loved ones (Bessie her Air Force soldier son, and Jane a close boyfriend) as a result of the 1982 Kenya’s attempted coup d’état brings them together. Thus Bessie’s counsel is for the younger woman to learn to endure and move on. Bessie experientially opines, ‘I know you are sad. But you get used to it in time’ (p. 128).
And Priscilla shares her story of abandonment by the man he loved, Evans, who ‘went away to get more education’ (p. 86) to never return back to her, with Gertrude, herself engaged to a brother of a student female nurse colleague, Mary. In Gertrude, Priscilla sees ‘her own younger, robust, and passionate self’ (Kibera, 2000, p. 169). Indeed, in Gertrude’s physique, Priscilla sees her younger self, ‘She [Gertrude] was a long-limbed, round-cheeked girl, just like Priscilla, who, at the same age, had loved games at school and taken a great pride in her own strength’ (p. 85). Thus, in opening up to Gertrude, a thing she seldom does with the old ladies in the Refuge (p. 86), she issues a cautionary tale to the younger woman who is still bathed in naivety concerning men/women relationships.

As for Nekesa and Judy, the bond is established because of Nekesa’s early life as a prostitute. Consequently, she wants Judy to aspire to a new life and redemption just as she herself sought. She submits, ‘…the Lord saved me. Me, a cheat, a prostitute, a drinker. True I was getting old, but if I’d had my eyes open it might have happened years earlier. For you too’ (p. 134). Hence after listening to Nekesa’s narrative of her prostitute life in Kampala and the shattered dreams when she returned to independent Kenya and set up as a small trader in Nairobi, Judy, reluctantly though, concedes to Nekesa’s call for her seeking salvation, ‘Come now, I will take you to someone who can explain better than I can’ (p. 140). This is bound to be a turning point in the young woman’s life; and a form of moral accomplishment, a salvational engagement, on the part of Nekesa.

The structuring leitmotif in these relationships is the desire to create women’s space in which generational differences do not transform into the in-ability to evolve epistemologies of women’s liberation from Otherising patriarchal narratives. Hence, the older women envision more liberated futures in the younger women.

Kibera has argued of the old women in the Refuge that:

… in recalling their past lives, the[y] … re-create themselves, give shape and significance to what most would regard as lives of most meagre import or interest. With their stories and memories, the old women build a figurative structure around themselves – a structure which confers dignity on them even as it creates an inviolate interior space for meaning, privacy and peace. (2000, p. 177)

In their interactions with the younger women, therefore, the women protagonists in Moment enable the younger ones to weigh their options as they prepare to engage the
private and public spaces in the Kenyan postcolony. In this counselling on various issues ranging from love and men/women relationships, prostitution, to the general life experiences, their engagement in resisting patriarchal otherisations and related decenterings is expected to be more sustained, more forceful, less epistemically vacuous. This is the resistance that Mohanty envisions as ‘lying in self-conscious engagement with dominant, normative discourses and representations and in the active creation of oppositional analytic and cultural spaces’ (qtd. in hooks, 1994, p. 22).

Furthermore, the women in the Refuge have been successful in creating a ‘woman space where they can value difference and complexity’ (hooks, 1994, p. 110), and hence making it possible for ‘sisterhood based on political solidarity [to] emerge’ (ibid.). This is of importance to the younger women in their interrogation of women exploitation and Otherisation in the society. Hence the intergenerational interactions produce and circulate epistemologies of gender empowerment.

2.8 The Aesthetics of the Narrative of Moment

In its rendition of the nationalist historical narrative of the nation and the place that women, especially the subalternised other, occupy in it, Moment utilises various literary devices. In the employment of such devices as dialogic mode of narration, flashbacks/flashforwards, stream of consciousness, and capturing tropes, the content coalesces with the form to give birth to an arresting text.

In the dialogical mode of narration, the women protagonists’ experiences are exposed in the contradictions and self-references. This brings out at once the idea that the national narrative itself cannot be monologic, and that the nation, especially the postcolony, is a space of diverse contestations. The heterogeneity of the Refuge then depicts the ethno-cultural mosaic nature of the Kenyan postcolony.

In the women protagonists’ life stories, captured by Macgoye in the women’s own ethnic and other speech peculiarities and idiosyncrasies, there is an interweaving of a narrative that reads true to the realities that the women find themselves in. The aptness of Macgoye’s narrative is that it collapses the idea of postcolonial history being monolithic. Thus, memory, experience and history are interwoven to create the text that is Moment.
Macgoye depicts the lives and experiences of the text’s protagonists in the apt symbology of:

... each of them had woven through the years a framework of shelter, as the Boran woman keeps the folded structure of her house on camel-back beside her, so that the tent fabric of the Refuge or any other person’s home could stretch above it without encroaching on the private place within. (p. 150)

It is this ‘weaving’ as well that the author utilises to make the various sub-narratives coalesce into the tight-knit Narrative of the women’s experiences in the Kenya (post)colony.

In Moment, Macgoye as well creates a tapestry of linkages among the various characters. As the story unfolds, the reader realises the closeness of the different actors in it, so that in the whole, the Refuge becomes a community bound together by a complex connectedness, a demonstration of how individuals’ life stories are linked in a postcolony such as Kenya. The many links, most of them emerging as coincidences, at face value may seem to be overstretching the narrative. However, a close examination unravels how they aid in giving the novel the necessary complexity to carry the burden of narration of a multi-layered history, temporally and spatially.

Despite the fact that the women protagonists’ stories are being recollected, they read into the present moment, into the immediate realities. As Kibera (2000) observes:

As the narrative shifts from the storytelling site of the Refuge, in the novel’s “present,” to the places and scenes of the women’s event-filled past lives, the young women within the old women come alive in all their complexity, and mesh with the present of the Refuge. Time becomes multilayered in the Present Moment, without sacrificing realism, authenticity and vitality. (p. 175)

There is the structuring metaphor of ‘the Refuge’. At the surface level, it is an institution, a ‘home’ for the destitute elderly women. At a heightened level, ‘the Refuge’ microcosmically reads postcolonial Kenya’s ethnic heterogeneity. Macgoye’s understanding of ‘home’ is therefore that of an expansive, ethno-inclusivist entity. This is what was envisaged for the post-independence Kenyan nation, but never realised. ‘The Refuge’ thus becomes a potent metaphor of the failure of the post-independence Kenyan nation to live up to the aspirations of independence. As the women narrate their stories, we realise that for all of them entry into the Refuge is as a result of lack and deprivation in the society.
Macgoye’s choice of this metaphor is important as it enables her offer a sustained criticism of the independent Kenyan nation in its treatment of its citizens; and simultaneously provides a view of what the postcolony should ideally be: a space of diversity into oneness of purpose.

In Macgoye’s language usage, Moment gains another layer of aesthetic weight. One of the ways through which this is achieved is in the utilisation of superb description infused with flashbacks, flashforwards and stream of consciousness. For instance, to gain entry into Wairimu’s past, the narrative goes:

Wairimu turned a bend in the path which brought the morning sun almost to dazzle her eyes, and there the young man was standing. Her head was not bent because her load was so light, and his eyes seemed to catch hers as she paused in the middle of a step, conscious of the weight on her forward foot pressing down the valley path, the yellow haze of morning light, the air caressing her braceleted arm, the birdsong overhead and the rustle of some small animal making for the river.

She turned, and the turning was slow and painful, stretched her left arm and found the bracelet gone, the wrist bony and the fingers hard with old burns and scars. Her eyes were still dazzled a bit and sore from the forward heat. (p. 2)

In the flashback in the first paragraph we are vividly introduced to Wairimu in her younger life. There is a recollection of an event that is so significant in her life: her first encounter with a young man who had already seen the ‘outside world’ – an important trigger to Wairimu’s own struggle to discover the world outside the narrow horizons of traditional Gikuyu society. Then the second paragraph, again in similar arresting description, simultaneously transfers Wairimu and the reader into the present reality of an old woman in a home for the destitute. This juxtaposition aims at relating the past to realities of the present moment.

The above is also seen in the introspective recollection of Rahel’s story, so that as she lies dying, the narration travels back to her younger self:

But Rahel too was wandering in the woods, gathering firewood with her friends, and as they found themselves far away from the homestead they sang louder and more wildly, practising among themselves the marriage songs and other forbidden chants … until far from the usual path they came upon the dead tree and were struck suddenly quiet, alarmed by the silvery replica of living branches and the vivid green of moss. They turned away quickly, breaking no branch, but these days the image of the dead tree lay before Rahel’s eyes and she clung to it for its symmetry, its detachment and its total recall. (p. 3)
The image of the tree is again recoursed to when Rahel is on the verge of death. We thus again note the juxtaposition of life and death in the image of the tree. Further, the image keeps on reappearing to her in life, ‘I keep remembering the dead tree, Wairimu the dead tree’ (p. 43). Whereas the recollected image is a dreary one, the one of ‘these days’, of the present moment, is a salvational one. Hence as the text comes to close:

Rahel’s shoulders creaked as she fell back across the pillow, and the pain was too intense to turn. The bawdy wedding-song felt silent behind her slack lips and she was overcome with fear. They had reached the awesome place and the others should have known better than to go on singing. She tried to force her eyes open and seemed to fail, but that could not be, for from where she lay, the petticoat indecently rucked up, the sprawling arm dusty, withered, unoiled, she could see that the fearful tree was now clothed in blossom and birds were singing in the branches. (p. 155)

The image of a tree is also brought out when the student trainee-nurse, Jane, is communing with Bessie. Jane thinks of getting to the convent when she has completed her training. She notes, ‘After John died, I just wandered about at home, when I had time off, and I always seemed to come on a tall tree, with branches like a cross, calling me’ (p. 128). Then Bessie relates this to Rahel’s experience, ‘But this one, Rahel, when she could talk, would always speak of a dead tree. She saw it when she was young and it changed her’ (ibid.). The tree thus emerges as at once dreary and also salvational. It becomes a strong image in the text. It this sustained, insightful handling of tropes in the novel that partly brings out Macgoye’s creative dexterity.

There are also other central images that emerge in the text related to other characters. In the narrative of Wairimu, we encounter the image of the fairy-tale (p. 16), as well as that of the golden haze (pp. 16, 18-9). These two images serve to bring out the feelings that surge in young Wairimu on meeting Waitito and how this becomes for her an everlasting experiential moment. The narrative captures it, ‘Wairimu thought the young man would take her to Nairobi. Years afterwards she saw how foolish that had been, but when a fairy-tale figure appears in your life, do you not expect the surroundings also to burst into a fairy-tale? (p. 16). Of the golden haze, the narrative proceeds:

Wairimu was a strong girl, though not tall, and used to working hard. She was not shy – ever since that morning on the river path she had known that she could not go back to childish behaviour again – so she got along with people, sang about her
work, joined in the evening dances, held her own against the men’s demands. The golden haze had never come back. None of them could put a spell on her and she always said no. (pp. 18-19)

Through these images the narrative of the life of Wairimu is captured in her encounter with what promises to bring new experiences in life and outlook; but at the same time also an imaginary, near ephemeral phenomenon (in the person of Waitito) that cannot be easily achieved and thus which keeps on making hazy appearances.

Wairimu recourses back to the originary Hebraic story of Adam and Eve:

It was many years later that she saw children creating a fantastic world of drama in their playground and acting up to it. Then she realised how it had been with her in those few passionate days. Or like the film of Adam and Eve which she had seen in some outdoor church arena, with the serpent wriggling up all over again and someone in a seat behind her shouting out loud, ‘You fool, don’t eat it – don’t EAT it!’ and subsiding with a hiss of despair as the sempiternal wrong was enacted once more. (p. 16)

In the brief days of encounter with Waitito, Wairimu loses her childhood sexual innocence, a grave sin as sexual purity is supposed to be preserved till the time when she is ‘given’ away for marriage. The allusion to the Originary Sin is thus apt in foregrounding the kind of wandering life that Wairimu undergoes as a result of the experience of the ‘fairy-tale’ and the ‘golden haze’. Wairimu thus wonders of the primaeval mothers, in the Hebraic tradition and her own Gikuyu one, Eve and Mumbi, and their epistemic in/abilities, and thus the conundrum of ‘how could she know that the serpent was not one of the good gifts she was surrounded with?’ (ibid.). And she comments, on the difficulty of these differentiations, that ‘Perhaps the first Eve found these things only when she was put outside the garden, but Mumbi had the whole mountain’ (p. 17). In here is thus the string that she sees as connecting her to the other women in the desire for rediscovery even as an after-process of ‘sin’.

The flashbacking, flashforwarding and reveries run through the text giving it a strong oscillation between the past and the present. Thus, the narrative is imbued with a sense of timeliness and also demonstrates life’s intricate continuum.

In Macgoye’s adroit usage of language even sentences are loaded to convey the information more powerfully. For instance, it is narrated:
Boys might choose school or be marshalled into school, and as a consequence they might be chosen for one kind of work or another – in the time of the Great War, recently ended, many boys and men had been forced to go either to work or to fight – but for girls there were very few school places and as yet little choice: when you came home again there was still the marriage to be arranged. (p. 17)

In its complex construction, this sentence metaphorically reads the societal binarised relationship between boys and girls. Related to this, it is also in the power of ‘loaded’ statements that symbolically *Moment* achieves beauty. For example, on the suggestion by one of the community nurses that Rahel could be moved to the hospital, Matron observes, ‘[t]he community has a strength of its own. Some of them have not much else to live for. Rahel’s leg was healed, as far as it can be, in hospital, but you do not have a cure for her years and losses’ (p. 8). Implicit in her observation is the notion that The Refuge provides a commodious space for necessary interactive communion for the women. The Refuge has become their ‘home’ in which they derive material and psychological sustenance.

These powerful and loaded statements that structure *Moment* validate the idea of women’s engagement with the various human and natural disasters in the postcolonial societies that they occupy. For instance, the vicar notes that ‘To be eighty years old in Africa is to be tough. Particularly for a woman, because she has learned from childhood to look after others rather than to be looked after’ (p. 38). And Rahel quips, in her explanation of her son Vitalis’ collapsing of the family’s military valour by deserting the army, ‘As you grow older, you find loyalty is more complicated than you used to think’ (p. 42). There is more to Rahel’s statement as it also revisits the various loyalties exhibited by the women protagonists in the novel. The realisation is that these loyalties, especially the ethnic ones, seem to dissipate or to take on new signification because of the experiences that the women have undergone in their ‘home’, the Refuge.

The Reverend Andrew posits, ‘And the Christian love was always ministering to the present moment, not to past sorrows or future fears’ (p. 70). This statement issues out in free indirect discourse. This mode of delivery is necessary as it emphasises the moral nature of the Macgoyean narrative. In the statement, we get the structuring leitmotif of the novel, the bearing on the present moment. Hence, the narration goes, ‘They [the women in the Refuge] nodded assent. This was a message that came close to them …’ (pp. 70-71).
And Nekesa notes that ‘… if a man saves you out of a well it is good to know how far you had fallen when you thank him’ (p. 72), in reference to her fallen life as a commercial sex worker before her salvation. In these aphoristic statements, therefore, Macgoye presents philosophies that structure the content of the novel.

The use of rhetorical questions emerge as illuminating especially when they are posed in circumstances of epistemic aporia. Rahel, for instance, wonders of the Kikuyu people and what she thinks is their failing to ‘rise up’:

She wanted to shout at them to hold their heads up. Was that only because she was a soldier’s wife or because she had grown up to a graceful carriage and a steadily balanced water-pot? Was it because her ancestral land had been protected by the mosquito and the tsetse fly or because plain speaking, back in her father’s time, had matched the British in their own stiff-necked way? (p. 14)

As it has been argued out in this chapter, in the Refuge, the various protagonists’ narratives also aspire towards and are part of a greater constellation of ethnic affiliations. In such rhetorical questions then can be seen that sense of open-endedness, a demonstration of non-knowledge of the other and hence the inability to conclusively talk about their condition.

Another act of creative beauty is in the way Macgoye brings into characters’ narratives other ideas as afterthoughts to enliven them. The following examples elucidate this. Of Sophia, it is narrated:

She did not go to the madrasa with her brothers, but learned at home to read a little in the old script and count for trading purposes. So when long afterwards, they wanted her to read the Bible (she who had a memory like Scheherazade and could have driven them crazy with story-telling from the five books and the ancient memories) it was not too hard to learn the new letters with their intrusive a-e-i-o-u, all starting unpropitiously from the left side. (p. 28)

Or

But keeping a job was no joke in those days, and Ali was always having to pay out to assist some less fortunate colleague or sometimes, she suspected, to protect his seat in the rickety office where there were fewer and fewer invoices to write. (But in retrospect the old crafts and diets of the island survived in perpetual sunshine, as they had survived many another trial of history.) (p. 30)

And, in the case of Rahel’s narrative:
Young men don’t talk all that freely to their mothers, but he told me some things that seemed to haunt him, feeling he was taking it out of his own people. (Not that anyone spoke of freedom fighters then. Not where we lived, anyway. We were taught to feel superior to them and with their jobs and houses falling our way it wasn’t too hard.) (p. 35)

Then in Wairimu’s case, ‘In Kavirondo (that is what we used to call Nyanza and Western – you know it’s true, Rahel, so don’t shake your head at me) …’ (p. 46).

What is captured in these texts in parentheses, besides the further illustrative information, is the complexity of the immediate narration as other informing inter-texts and narratives are brought in. In this Macgoye demonstrates the interwovenness of textual narratives, the inability of a single narrative to tell it all. And, this is in line with strategies utilised in the text such as polyphonic narration.

In recreating the moments of the protagonists’ lives, Macgoye also utilises poetic lyricism in her narration. In the event of Ali’s death, the narrative proceeds:

Everyone was busy. Everyone was tired. There were long queues for goods in the authorised shops, high prices in the others. Routes, and so manifests, might have to be changed at the last minute, documents delayed to reduce the risk of careless talk. One morning a load slipped and crashed down from overhead. Ali was crumpled, reduced, died on the way to hospital. He was buried, as is customary, at sundown. Overnight, order was reversed, and all Fatuma’s faiths disintegrated. (p. 32)

This lyricism is also evident in the case of Sophia when she is closely examining her new dress. Thus:

But this was neutral. It held no perfume of other days, no fragment of shell or fish scales, no healthy smell of babies bathed at sundown, of hard soap or new cloth redolent of dress, of coconut oil and peppers, cloves or rough sticks of cinnamon that were good to chew. No kohl, no hennaed patterns on the skin, no moist, milky breasts, no mystery here behind curtained windows where clerks and technicians and their lumpy wives lived in bland discomfort as the whites had taught them. (p. 33)

As well, the grisly murder by the Mau Mau fighters in the Bateson family is captured in poetically moving description:

Then Priscilla’s father had come running from the kitchen in his cook’s apron, a carving knife in one hand and a heavy iron range poker hot in the other, short-sighted, grey-haired, utterly pitiful – they had jumped upon him in a moment and, knowing she could do nothing for him, Priscilla had run into Anthea’s bedroom –
Anthea whom she had cared for since babyhood like the child she had never had. There was no key, but she had shoved furniture against the door, pushed the child into the wardrobe and herself stood trembling in front of it, but of course to no avail. The men had knocked down the flimsy barrier, pushed her aside and dragged the screaming child from the cupboard. One blow, mercifully, had been enough, a slash across the throat, gurgling blood and then the police whistles had begun to sound and the men had run off into the night, leaving maid and mistress alive and sobbing in one another’s arms. (p. 74)

These poetic descriptions vividly and picturesquely capture the various episodes and events in question. The diction chosen is sharp and strong; the sentences lyrically run into each other. This arouses a range of emotions in the reader, and the sense faculties are as well signalled into alertness to the narration.

In the various narratives by the women protagonists, there also emerge utilisations of ironical comments that act as critiques of the failure of the postcolonial Kenyan nation to actualise the expectations of its citizens. Rahel muses: ‘… her husband was a DC before he retired, and he has a big farm nowadays. But of course he does not have to help his wife’s relations. His responsibility is to the nation’ (p. 44). In Wairimu’s case, when her kiosk is being flattened she as well laughs at this service to the nation by the City Askaris. She notes, ‘And one day I saw my little kiosk kicked to pieces by uniformed men doing their duty to build the nation’ (p. 114, emphasis added). And thus as one who had practice in ‘watching’ (p. 113), Wairimu observes, ‘Rather than weep, I coughed myself into collapse’ (p. 114). Earlier on, she notes in this ironic tone of the freedom that soon collapses into nepotistic bargains, ‘We found ourselves turned away, new clansmen brought in: they said we were too political, bargaining, counting hours. Fighting for land and freedom we had not grudged the hours, or money either. But so it was. At seventy one does not expect consideration’ (p. 113).

It is worth noting Macgoye’s interweaving of the personal narrative/s and the national narrative. In a narrative like that of Wairimu, we see a signal to the becoming and growth of the postcolonial Kenyan nation, a development fraught with various challenges, betrayals and hopes. *Moment* then becomes a text that aptly reads both the nation and the individual(s), showing how history itself is constructed at the personal and the communal/national levels.
The philosophy that carries the burden of the weight of Moment comes as the text progresses to closure. The narrative postulates:

They did not forget, for when so little happens how can you forget any of it? But they did not speak, for when you have been so much hurt you do not open your sore place to any conceivable enemy. You suck up kindness where it comes and let some out when it gives you ease. But you see, as in your young years you never saw, that all your experience presses bitterly upon the present moment and the things you have shared are separately enfolded in someone else’s life. The tug at the cord, the split seed and the customary places around hearth fall away, and sharing becomes a chance neighbourliness or a dangerous revelation. (pp. 153-154)

In this postulation, we get to engage the central philosophy of the narrative of Moment and the intricate web of the interrelatedness of its characters and sub-narratives, the weaving together that in the end generates a text that is, in Poyner’s phraseology, ‘a complex knit of aesthetics and thematics … neither aspect being compromised by the other’ (2009, p. 7). In the tropes, the narrative itself, the language utilised, the concrete, poetic description, Moment manifests strongly in the East African literary tradition.

2.9 Summation: Restoring the Woman’s Voice in the Nationalist Narrative

Moment manifests as an interceding text in the epistemic violence of the erasure of women in the East African historiography. Spivak has argued that ‘Between patriarchy and [post]imperialism, subject constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the “third world woman” caught between tradition and modernisation’ (1999, p. 368). Moment interrogates this ‘displaced figuration’ by closely examining the women’s lives, deceptively rather simple ones, and through their various narratives, maps out their contestations of the official narratives and histories of the making of the Kenyan nation.

Macgoye has given her women characters the voice in order for them to confront the exclusivist interpretation of Kenyan nationalism. These women engage in what Boehmer (1992) has termed ‘telling their own histories, countering the monologic with multi-vocality’ (p. 244). This becomes possible for Macgoye through the utilisation of the historical novel genre because the ‘novel in Africa has been dominated by historical and
hence nationalist themes; it thus offers itself as a pre-eminent site for active confrontation and contestation’ (ibid.).

Even more strikingly, through the narratives, in the strategies of education and learning, art, silence, (re)storying, and small scale trade, the women critically engage power/authority as manifested mostly in patriarchal narratives of the making of the Kenyan nation. The ‘histories from below’ are subsequently centred, and made to read into the history of the nation, into the ‘official’ narrative of nationalism. *Moment* thus provides the necessary space for Kenyan women’s active resistance and engagement with power/authority, and the correlate imagination and representation of the public province, in which they demand to be accorded human respect as well as dignity as their male counterparts.

It is from this situating of women’s resistance and engagement with power/authority, as is especially manifest during the colonial period and the first decades after, that the next chapter then enters into *Weevil* to show how the struggle in post-independence East Africa, as represented by Uganda, evolves. The Chapter draws attention to Uganda’s violent post-colonial history and examines how women actively participate with their men counterparts in the struggle to free the country from the dehumanising state of affairs that the Ugandan postcolony is immersed in by the post-independence political elite.

Thus, in a continuity of the struggle that *Moment*’s Wairimu is involved in, stress in *Weevil* is also placed on what becomes of the nation that emerges after the official end of the colonisation process and the kind of space the woman occupies in the new socio-political and economic alignment. This reads into the Spivak’s formulation of, what happens to the subaltern as female within the ambit of both colonial/postcolonial historiographies fraught with epistemic violence and closure of the female agency? (1999, p. 365).
CHAPTER THREE

THE INVISIBLE WEEVIL: INTERPELLATING OTHERISING EPISTEMOLOGIES

… the stereotype is at bottom a form of opportunism: one conforms to the reigning language, or rather to that in language which seems to govern (a situation, a right, a struggle, an institution, a movement, a science, a theory, etc.); to speak in stereotypes is to side with the power of language, an opportunism which must (today) be refused.


A text, literary, filmic, or otherwise, can contribute fully, even centrally, to how a community defines itself and understands its future, especially after situations of trauma and war.


3.1 Introduction: *The Invisible Weevil* and Uganda’s Problematic Post-independence Socio-political History

In this chapter, Mary Okurut’s novel, *The Invisible Weevil* (hereafter referred to as *Weevil*), is closely examined to show its portrayal of women as gaining entry into the public space, and hence their exercising of political power/authority, as equals to their men counterparts. The chapter sets with the contextualisation of Uganda’s turbulent post-independence socio-political history and then proceeds to show how writer Okurut situates women and their struggles in the attendant liberational processes. The argument takes into consideration the complexity of this negotiation, as the society itself is enmeshed in gender stereotypes as well as a history of erasure and deliberate disappearance of women from the annals of valour; because as Boehmer has correctly argued:

Woman as actor or equal participant is strangely absent from this drama [that of nationalist valour]. She is rarely assigned a role alongside that of the male actors, neither does she set the scene or swell a progress. External to the ‘serious’ affairs of the nation, she is most often found in the form of inviolable ideal or untouchable icon – that is if she is not excluded from the action entirely as an
unknown subversive quantity and a threat. Her role is that of emblem, two-dimensional and either tainted or sacrosanct. Even if she is granted the part of single glorified heroine, she is seen as superhuman … once again removed from real life, once again inviolable. (1992, p. 233)

Still, the women protagonists in Weevil struggle with these stereotypes and, to a degree, manage to overturn them. The aesthetic value of the novel is examined in line with how it enhances the subject matter. The chapter concludes that it is through their active participation – their agency – in Uganda’s post-independence freedom struggle that the women in that country manage to come out as major players in the power/authority exercising in the emerging liberated Ugandan postcolony.

Uganda’s history, more than that of any other East African country, has been intricately problematic in the various manifestations of Milton Obote’s reductionist politics and latent authoritarianism (1962-1971, and the period 1980-1985, referred to as Obote II); Idi Amin’s outrageous and anomic militarism (1971-1979); various intervening weak caretaker regimes; Museveni’s National Resistance Movement (NRM) dispensation of ‘no party democracy’ (1986 to-date); and the myriad brutal Northern rebellions (Odiemo-Munara, 2008, p. 8), of which the current one is the Joseph Kony led Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). Essentially, the Ugandan case very much reads into Mbembe’s conceptualisation of the postcolony, especially the African one, as couched in banal production and exercising of power; and that ‘The signs, vocabulary and narratives that [the postcolony] produces are not meant merely to be symbols; they are officially invested with a surplus of meanings which are not negotiable and which one is officially forbidden to depart from or challenge’ (1992, p. 4). Subsequently, in order ‘to ensure that no such challenge takes place, the champions of state power invent entire constellations of ideas [and] adopt a distinct set of cultural repertoires and powerfully evocative concepts … [and as well] have resort … to the systematic application of pain’ (ibid.).

Analysing the entire Ugandan postcolonial problematic under its various political and military regimes, Rubongoya (2007) argues that the country provides:

- a laboratory of inordinate magnitude for a discourse on the intricacies concerning [political] power, its use and misuse. It’s a country with multiple ethnicities and traditional political systems. The Ugandan state has died, been buried and resurrected. This not only makes for a multifarious political narrative but is also a process with insightful lessons for the continent. (p. xi)
Rubongoya continues his argument that with such abuse of socio-political power and authority by the successive Ugandan regimes, generations of Ugandans have remained ‘without the normative structure vital for normally functioning society. Values such as trust, patience, patriotism, unity, and, most importantly, democracy were effaced by institutionalised violence’ (ibid., p. 50).

Hence, such violent history, as has been and continues being the case in the northern parts of Uganda, scripts in blood the lives of a country’s citizens, particularly women. Dangarembga captures the Ugandan women’s ordeals thus: ‘Their hopes are not often made explicit, and there is a sense of desiring ... to stay alive in the impossible conditions of their worlds, where war is not an event, but a condition antithetical to love to be lived through, with all of its horrendous consequences for the women’s lives’ (2006, p. vii).

And, conceiving it poetically, Oludhe Macgoye (1998) bemoans in “In Memoriam: Archbishop Janani Luwum”:

Uganda – slow fires flickering,
heat haze under a sulphurous sky,
bodies forming and reforming,
here a severed head, there a limb
gnawed by a crocodile, women grovelling,
arched patrician features, ingrowing smiles,
falls plunging into a mist of spray,
green, lush, a yielding marsh,
mush of banana, heady fermentation
-- this the world saw. (p. 97)

It is this violent history, and the constant struggle by women to disrupt it, that Okurut explores and closely engages with in Weevil. This text examines the annihilistic nature of the different regimes in Uganda’s political and socio-cultural history from the time of independence to the ascension of Yoweri Museveni’s NRM in 1986 and shortly after; and depicts how these political establishments sought to de/construct the nation-state. Using individual as well as larger societal narratives and leitmotifs, Okurut brings together characters, both women and men, who challenge the sorry state of the degeneration of the Ugandan postcolony into violence, corruption and banality. The Ugandan nation is also put under lenses in the wake of pestilences such as HIV-Aids,
itself a metaphor of the degeneracy of the society; an ‘invisible weevil’ that noxiously renders the individual and the state abhorrent entities.

In his *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha has posed:

> How are subjects formed ‘in-between’, or in excess of, the sum of the I parts of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable? (1994, p. 1)

These are some of the conundrums that *Weevil* interrogates especially with focus on gender difference. Okurut, however, aware of the inherent gender antagonism in her society, visions a world in which both men and women engage in resistance in order not to let the idea of the Ugandan nation-state collapse completely. Their ‘shared history’ of suffering under military and political dictatorships thus becomes a catalyst for gender collaboration in a worthy cause. Thus, in terms of constructing gender issues in the Ugandan society, we see:

contextualis[ation] within the larger objective of national reconstruction. The aim [being] not to speculate about the possibilities of a female utopia … [but] rather to demonstrate how the contribution of women to the overthrow of dictatorship was effective in so far as they acted as equals and not subordinates. (Simatei, 2001, p. 292)

Further, as Ilieva and Odiemo-Munara (2011) have argued, ‘Okurut particularly focuses on the violation of the national morality and ethos, and the tough circumstances that subalternised groups such as women, children and the elderly find themselves in’ (pp. 186). They proceed that ‘However, these “underprivileged” groups, especially the women, are shown to be in a perpetual struggle to create a society ruled by justice and moral orderliness [and that] this is an important undertaking on the part of Ugandan writers who seek particularly to encentre women in Ugandan history’ (pp. 186-187). The urgency of encentring women in Ugandan history becomes clear when the reality dawns that the then military regimes in that country had little space for the country’s women citizens.
Reading the most macabre of the various Ugandan military regimes, the Idi Amin dispensation, Mamdani argues:

The regime tried to use the mantle of morality to mask policies and practices that were destructive to women physically and psychologically. It created an atmosphere that caused women to be perceived as the enemy of national morality, and this paved the way for groups and individuals to inflict violence on women. (1983, pp. 54-5)

The infliction of violence happened through, among other forms, the brutal rape and mistreatment of girls and women in the Ugandan society by illiterate and ill-trained soldiers thus sustaining immense fear among women in the country. And, as is always the case, in such instances of collapse of the rule of law and basic moral ethics, even the male civilian population become sanctioned to perpetuate acts that humiliate women such as rape and other forms of physical as well as emotional violence, perpetually circling women in the mantra of vulnerability. Paradoxically, the regime (the Idi Amin one) that was the basest in terms of moral authority could claim to instil moral penitence in the society (Mamdani, ibid.). In a sense, therefore, the military regime(s) in Uganda sought to create a subservient woman person, a one who is perpetually under control and surveillance in virtually every aspect of her life.

3. 2 Re/visioning Patriarchal Male Power in *Weevil*

In *Weevil*, we encounter intelligent women who revisit the patriarchal ideological dominant view that seeks to relegate and centre them from the main narrative of the struggle for Uganda’s liberation from post-independent despotic regimes. To achieve their desired results, they employ empowering strategies and tactics. They become non-peripheral in the post-independence liberation struggle itself, by participating in it ideationally and militarily as intellectuals, students, workers and mothers. These women’s sense of understanding of femininity is that advanced by Ogundipe-Leslie, ‘a fiction invented by men, assented to by women untrained in the rigours of logical thought or conscious of the advantages to be gained from compliance with masculine fantasies’ (qtd. in Stratton, 1994, p. 64). Such patriarchal construction of femininity has thus to be revised and even destroyed altogether. Subsequently, when the dictatorships are overturned, and a new alignment envisaged, their entry in it is envisioned as that of
equals. However, this is not an easy entry. It still requires sustained negotiation as well as tact on the part of the women. As Ogundipe-Leslie has posited:

Women are ‘naturally’ excluded from public affairs; they are viewed as unable to hold positions of responsibility; rule men or even be visible when serious matters of state and society are being discussed. Women are viewed to need tutelage before they be politically active; politics is considered the absolute realm of men; women are not considered fit for political positions in modern African nation-states, though their enthusiasm and campaign work are exploited by their various political parties. (Qtd. in Stratton, 1994, p. 15)

In Okurut’s estimation, however, for their time and participation in the struggle, the women protagonists in *Weevil* are experientially equipped to question masculine-informed excesses by men, an endeavour they manage well, because the success of the liberation struggle logically required the interpellation of the simple binarisation of masculine/feminine and domestic/public. It is thus in their active involvement in the narratives of liberation that they dynamically write ‘their own scripts which envision alternative ways of ordering political, public and private life’ (Tripp, 2000, p. 27). But again as Tripp futuristically cautions, as the Ugandan women seek fulfilling ways of situating themselves in public office and engaging in politics, ‘whose play gets produced, who produces and directs it, and how it is produced remain to be seen’ (ibid.).

Furthermore, and in line with Tripp’s concern, the properly rural Ugandan women find themselves victims of what Kyomuhendo and McIntosh have called the Domestic Virtue Model (DVM), a conceptualisation of women in the limited terms of domesticity, its structuring premises couched in the warped logic that they do not act ‘with inappropriate and dangerous freedom’ (qtd. in Snyder, 2008, p. 620). This perhaps then leads to the positing of the question of whether the subaltern can actually be en-voiced. As Spivak has cogently argued ‘both as subject of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant’ (1999, p. 287); thus, ‘If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow’ (ibid.). Kyomuhendo and McIntosh note that the DVM continues its (male power/authority) grip on the rural Ugandan women way into the present moment. It is in this understanding that they advocate for sustained efforts to free women from ‘domestic virtue assumptions’ (qtd. in Snyder, 2008, p. 621).
To recourse back to Spivak’s conundrum, can these subaltern others (the subaltern as female) then be represented, and, if so, how? Spivak again notes that ‘There is no virtue in global laundry lists with “woman” as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish’ (1999, p. 308). The women protagonists in the text, if the female intellectual is broadened to be inclusive of the women who dare revisit Otherising epistemologies, thus have the responsibility of ensuring the non-disappearance of the rural subaltern female in Uganda. This is partly achieved by the inclusion and encouragement of Ugandan women to be part of the process of the liberation struggle and hence gain the right to later demand for their space in the free Uganda.

In the two central women characters in the novel, Nkwanzi and Mama, Okurut’s controlling vision is that of the liberated woman participating in rebuilding Uganda as a nation that would guarantee gender equality, among a whole spectrum of other freedoms (Ilieva and Odiemo-Munara, 2006, p. 258). Nkwanzi, Mama, and other women heroines of the Ugandan post-independence struggle in the text understand the cenotaphic nature of political institutions in their ‘saturat[ion] with highly problematic, often dangerous, ideals and practices of womanhood [and in which] concepts such as freedom, political power, and property are defined in terms of masculinity’ (Brown, 1998, p. 12). However, they are also consciously aware, as is evident in their actions and ideas, that ‘disadvantage may indeed be an excuse but not an intellectual [or philosophical] position’ (Nochlin, 1999, p. 617). These women serve as best examples of Nochlin’s argument that ‘women must conceive of themselves as potentially – if not actually – equal subjects, willing to look the facts of their situation as an institutional and objective problem not merely as a personal and subjective one, full in the face, without self-pity or copouts’ (p. 605); and also that ‘they must view their situation with that high degree of emotional and intellectual commitment necessary to create a world in which truly equal achievement will be not only made possible, but actively encouraged by social institutions’ (ibid.). This is also another of Okurut’s controlling visions in Weevil.

Still, they do not find it easy to negotiate through the ‘disadvantage’, because as Boehmer (1992) has posed:
However much the new age of nationalism was regarded as a break with the past, nationalism whether as ideology or movement was not *sui generis*; it relied on what was available, and what was available in this case were the formations of the old dynastic state and the patriarchal family. (p. 240)

*Weevil’s* women protagonists are however aware of this state of societal arrangement, an awareness that can then position them in advantage in their undertakings to collapse the old, patriarchal ways of visioning the society.

Nkwanzi, the heroine of the text, manages to grow up into a fulfilled human being intellectually and economically. She is raised up in a fairly enlightened family that does not categorically see the place of the girl and the woman being in the private realm of the kitchen/home as her father did not excuse the boys from the so-called girls/women chores. She says:

Papa always insisted that both boys and girls had to do the same household chores. … And so work like peeling matooke and covering it with banana leaves was supposed to be girls’ work. But because of Taata’s ruling, the boys had to take turns with girls in doing it. Winnowing millet, grinding and mingling it was another chore which was traditionally for girls and women but Taata made sure the boys did it too. The girls too would do such work like splitting firewood which was supposed to be for boys. Later on in life, the boys especially appreciated the fact that Taata had involved them in such chores. (pp. 28-29)

This endeavour to collapse gender roles is necessary and empowering to both the girls and boys. Devor captures this in the argument that:

Members of society might be taught to value adaptability and flexibility rather than obedience to gender roles, so that the most respected and socially valued personality types would be those which were able to make use of any behaviours which served their purposes in any situation. … Men and women, masculinity and femininity, would be seen as immature stages in the process of reaching a blended gender identity and display. (Qtd. in Tripp, 2000, p. 16)

Nonetheless, there still are various patriarchal residuals that Nkwanzi, as a girl in the family, is confronted with. Tingo, her brother, for instance, often affects the air of superiority traditionally associated with masculinity despite the fact that they both qualified in the same primary school examination and are joining secondary school. Tingo thus reminds her and their mother, ‘I am a senior one boy now, and everybody should hearken to my call’ (p. 64). There are resemblances here with the portrayal of the boy child in Lema’s *Earth*, the subject of discussion in the next chapter. Hence like
Godbless, elder brother to Doreen in *Earth*, Tingo conceives of himself going further and further away from home for higher things and callings in the public domain. He informs their mother:

> From now, you’ll begin to see less and less of me. From senior school, I’ll move further away from home for higher studies. Then you’ll only see me for a few weeks during the holidays. After that, it’ll be for a few days, then later for a few hours. If I go abroad, you may not see me for many years. (p. 65)

Tingo cannot envision Nkwanzi, a girl for that matter, achieving such a ‘feat’. But, perhaps, the desire to domesticate girls and women is best exemplified when a teacher is invited in their home to talk to them, both Nkwanzi and Tingo, about their future and give them ‘career guidance’ in preparation for possible university enrolment. Yahya-Othman has noted that ‘Girls are inhibited or discouraged from pursuing career paths that teachers consider too ‘challenging’ for them, such as those involving the sciences’ (qtd. in Lihamba et al., 2007, p. 44). This is evident in Nkwanzi’s encounter with the teacher. Thus, when Nkwanzi holds that she wants to concentrate on Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Literature, Geography and History, the teacher points out that she should choose subjects which will ensure she wins herself a big man for a husband, ‘... we have to think about your future. The future for any good girl lies in a good marriage. You must be a good wife. Therefore, the subjects you offer should shape you, mould you into a good wife’ (p. 90).

The teacher then goes on to prescribe English Language, Home Economics and Divinity for her. English language is preferred for the reason that the wife of a big man must be able to communicate with foreign visitors; Home Economics, on its part because a good wife must be a good cook; and finally Divinity because a good wife must be religious (p. 91). This combination, the teacher holds, would ensure she is ‘moulded into a perfect housewife ... who will be smart to entertain the visitors of her VIP husband’ (ibid.). When she insists that she wants to be a lawyer, she is deemed absolutely unrealistic, because for a woman to be a lawyer, that would mean she will argue with her husband (p. 92); and, that is unfathomable. Practically then, the education that is envisaged for Nkwanzi is that which, in Guèye’s phraseology, ‘involves defining women exclusively in their roles to men to the detriment of their individual subjectivity’ (2010, p. 168).
In the understanding of women as able only to pursue ‘domesticating disciplines’ that see them becoming ‘perfect’ housewives and mothers, women are denied agency and even made to feel inferior in the society. Hanrahan and Antony argue that:

Another thing that makes the assumption of authority dangerous for women is that it feels transgressive to claim authority. Persons who have been socialised to accept subordinate status may well have internalised the view that they cannot be legitimate authorities in whatever they do, that they have no right to set themselves up as authorities. (2005, p. 76)

And for this internalisation of their supposed in-ability, they thus enhance the stereotypes created by the society to keep them at the lower rungs of power/authority play matrix. This is what Nkwanzi and others like Mama in *Weevil* vehemently contest.

On the contrary, Tingo is counselled to concentrate on Commerce, Economics and Political Science (p. 92), so that he can become a permanent secretary or a minister, and hence the reason he needs political science; whereas commerce and economics would help him know how to make money and be a ‘big man’ (ibid.). To Nkwanzi’s hold that she too wanted to be a ‘big woman’ (ibid.), she is told that she would achieve that through her husband. This husband, therefore, should wield immense power upon her, because she is only a sort of appendage to the real source of power/authority. This distorted logic reads into Loomba’s positing that ‘Arguments for women’s education in metropolitan as well as [post]colonial contexts rely on the logic that educated women will make better wives and mothers. At the same time educated women have to be taught not to overstep their bounds and usurp authority from men’ (2005, p. 182). For these reasons then, women have to be engaged in labour relations that are, to read with Gürtler, heteronomous, that is, those which have ingrained exploitative tendencies and hence able to ‘prevent the development of personal autonomy and the realisation of individual potential through work’ (2005, p. 123).

However, because of Nkwanzi’s determination to want to ‘use my knowledge to work’ (ibid.), she subverts the prescription of the domesticating subjects, passes well to enrol for A-Levels and later on is admitted for Law studies at Makerere University. Tingo, on the other hand, fails to perform well and hence ends up in a technical school to train in carpentry. Still, to never accept the fact of being ‘trodden on by a girl’, he vows to ‘go for an upgrading course later on in life’ (p. 93).
The limitation of the girls’ upward movement in the society through education is also captured well in the text, *Weevil*, by the experience of Goora, Nkwanzi’s village friend and secondary school mate. She is impregnated by her Chemistry teacher, infamously known as *Equation*. Goora narrates her tribulation with the teacher to Nkwanzi:

You know how poor I’m at Chemistry. He told me to go to his house some months ago so that he could teach me Chemistry. Then he did it. I could not stop him because he is a teacher. He said if I screamed, he would kill me. I did not know until today that my illness was caused by pregnancy. (p. 83)

Thus for wielding the power and authority by the virtue of being a teacher, *Equation* shatters the dreams of young Goora. And, as Katrak posits:

As unmarried and pregnant, women face social prejudice and often cannot attend school. This is an example of social violence that actively prevents women from being independent. Uneducated, or undereducated, they remain dependent on men. This scenario perpetuates poverty and keeps women downtrodden. (2006, pp. 223-224)

It is from such devastating experience that Nkwanzi aspires to ‘authority’ so that both the teachers and school boys who ruin the girls’ education aspirations should be made accountable for it (p. 83); just as the girls are exposed to suffering where ‘you find people looking at you as if you’re a prostitute or the first person to get pregnant outside marriage. As if you drank the pregnancy from a glass of water or made yourself so’ (ibid.). Goora is subsequently expelled from the school ‘so that she does not infect the others’ (p. 86). However, the man responsible, the immoral teacher, *Equation*, ‘… was there looking holier than St. Peter … he had solved his lustful equation for a few minutes … poor Goora’s equation would remain unresolved for ever’ (ibid.).

And, reading the same societal patriarchal script, Goora’s family rejects her, labels her a harlot, and because of the ‘shame’ she has caused she can no longer be a respected family and society associate. Goora writes of the option that she is offered, ‘the only way out for me is to get married to a man of many villages away from home where people will not know that I’m already pregnant’ (p. 88). The husband who is chosen for her is another physical and psychological torture altogether:

A short stump of a man, with mean, cruel eyes. … He came to take me away one chilly evening. He had rolled up his torn trousers and the calf of his leg stood out
like the head of a hammer. The flesh of his buttocks peeped out of two gapping holes in his trousers. His whole body seemed to be a granary of dust. I doubted whether it had seen water in the past decade. ... When he opened his mouth to speak, I looked into a long dark tunnel. His teeth were coated with millet of yester-years … (ibid.)

This husband-to-be might emerge caricatured, and here Okurut’s construction of male characters tends towards reading the so-familiar feminist scripts of the beastly nature of men and especially those older ones who marry young girls to add to the brood of wives that they already have. However, it seems that the central idea Okurut intends to communicate is that for society’s blindness to the plight of the girl who gets herself a victim of its in-built patriarchal oppression, the same society as well gives her no option to be a chooser of her destiny. And if not with the strong resolve like that witnessed in Wairimu in Macgoye’s Moment or Foibe in Lema’s Earth, then the girl’s dreams for a fulfilling future are brought to nothing.

Goora’s thus becomes the absurdity that befalls those young girls who have to live with untamed power and authority that seeks to collapse the weak and the ‘subaltern as female’ in patriarchal East African social institutions. As a ‘married’ woman, she becomes part of the commoditised other. Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi (2003) capture it well when they argue that, ‘young married girls are a unique group, in that they are under more pressure on a number of fronts: to show evidence of their fertility, to be responsible for the welfare of the children, and to do a disproportionate share of domestic chores’ (p. 44). Goora narrates of her ‘new home’: ‘my ‘‘husband’’ has four wives and about thirty children. I am just an addition to the free labour in his house. Labour that neither complains nor is paid … the unpaid labourers’ (p. 90). It is this kind of being mere labour that Nkwanzi resists; thus, her hard work at school is a way of freeing herself from the burden that befalls those unfortunate ones like Goora who fall ‘by the wayside’ (ibid.).

Goora’s narrative of suffering becomes a cautionary tale for Nkwanzi, because it at once alerts her of the imbalance of authority in the socio-cultural milieu she inhabits; and motivates her to endeavour to see to the balancing or even overturning of this authority exercising. This she partly achieves through her liberational education and
sexual discipline, as well as in her interactions with resistance movements to authoritarian political power.

Katrank has posited of education as both empowering and disempowering for the postcolonial women of the third world. She argues:

Education as an important aspect of socialisation is mediated, complicated and complex, often paradoxically empowering and disempowering for women. Women’s texts explore female resistances to a contradictory empowerment through education where protagonists face ostracisation from family, community, and at times, from their own bodies. Education does not lead necessarily to women’s personal liberation. (2006, p. 15)

Okurut in Weevil indeed brings out the fact that education per se is no panacea to women’s disempowerment; but rather that it is in the intelligent eclectic utilisation of the skills obtained through education, formal or informal, that in the long run ensures women empowerment. As Foucault (1977) has argued of the interconnectedness of power and knowledge (power/knowledge):

Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of ‘the truth’ but has the power to make itself true. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has effects, and in that sense at least, ‘becomes true’. Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practice. Thus, there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations. (p. 27)

The acquisition of knowledge for Nkwanzi is at once liberational and also a challenge to power stratification in patriarchal institutions. Hence, with the necessary knowledge, women are in a better vantage point to negotiate and even evolve liberational epistemologies for a just society. This is because they inhabit the space of ‘knowingness’; for as Felman opines, to ‘occupy a blind spot is not only to be blind, but in particular to be blind to one’s own blindness; it is to be unaware of the fact that one occupies a spot within the very blindness one seeks to demystify’ (qtd. in Sorensen, 2007, p. 74). The next section of the chapter then examines some of these liberating epistemologies that are acquired and propagated by the women in Weevil.
3.3 Women’s Liberational Epistemologies

What provides further empowerment for Nkwanzi and also defines her space for resistance of the rooted patriarchal power/authority in her society is her interaction with the paternal aunt, Ssenga, who is supposed to initiate her into the ways of being a woman when she commences her menses. However, before examining in detail these life-lessons or what in *Earth* has been called ‘women wisdom’, it is deemed appropriate to discuss briefly the onset of menses and how Nkwanzi is socialised to perceive her body. This is necessary because the female body itself is a major site of resistance of various disempowering forces (Beauvoir, 1989; Spivak, 1990; Katrak, 2006).

De Beauvoir (1989) argues that from the onset of puberty and throughout the years of birth-giving, nursing and motherhood, the biological demand of the human species powerfully reasserts itself against the will of the individual female, and her body becomes the site of this inexorable takeover (p. 28). Beauvoir posits, ‘Woman, like man, *is* her body but her body is something other than herself’ (ibid., p. 29). She continues to read of the monthly ‘curse’ of menstruation as a rupturing event that makes the woman feel her body ‘most painfully as an obscure, alien thing … the prey of a stubborn and foreign life that each month constructs and tears down a cradle within it’ (ibid.). Thus, commencement of the age of menses becomes a period of unsettling anxiety, a period of indecision and loss of self-esteem. The girl-woman, therefore, needs to learn how to negotiate this phase of entry into being woman and value her body not as an alien thing but as part of her. How then is Nkwanzi helped to negotiate this process and see her body as a possible site of resistance to oppressive inscriptions? This is the question that is briefly addressed in the proceeding discussion.

In negotiating the process of growing up, Nkwanzi has to grapple with the idea of a dirtied reference to a woman’s private parts. Thus, it is narrated in *Weevil*, ‘They had been told that the private parts [women’s] were the *shameful* whose real name they should never say’ (p. 33). And, even later on, ‘As she [Nkwanzi] grew up, they started referring to private parts as *kooko* rather than the *shameful*. Her friend Goora had told her to stop referring to them as the *shameful*. She had said that there was nothing shameful about it (p. 54). However, even in the supposed ‘better term’, stigma manifests. Thus, ‘Nkwanzi wondered how *kooko* was a better word when it actually meant animal’ (ibid.).
It is partly because of this female body problematised socialisation that Nkwanzi cannot open up to her family when she, as a young girl, is being sexually abused by the herdsman, Matayo. In a way, the girl is denied the voice to freely and without a feeling of shame talk about her body; because it carries that which is deemed ‘shameful’ and thus to open up about what is being done to the ‘shameful’ is in itself a shame. For this reason, she even ends up with gonorrhoea from Matayo. It takes her parents long to realise what has been happening to their daughter.

With such problematised perception of the female body, then, how does a woman define her possibilities, and, more so, in a definition that is in ways that expand those possibilities in the future? (Beauvoir, 1989, p. 34). In Beauvoir’s view, the need for a woman to have confidence in her body is paramount. She argues, ‘not to have confidence in one’s body is to lose confidence in oneself. One needs only to see the importance that young men place in their muscles to understand that every subject regards his body as his objective expression’ (p. 332). It is thus worth noting that Nkwanzi refuses timidity as she grows up and faces the world respecting her body, but using it to get out of tight situations in the wake of Amin’s violent regime. Through this respect of the female body, seeing it not as a hindrance to the participation in some duties in the society, that even getting to be part of the struggle for the freeing of Uganda from the fetters of postcolonial dictatorships becomes possible for women combatants like Mama.

Beauvoir visions the transcendent power of female body asserting, ‘Let her swim, climb mountain peaks, pilot an airplane, battle against the elements … and she will not feel the timidity’ (ibid.). Inherent here then is the collapsing of masculinity privilege that visions women as incapable of some tasks because of the perceived bodily weaknesses. Further, the female body and its biological functions (what Guéye has aptly called female biological determinism [2010, p. 167]) ought not to be seen as shameful phenomena. Manion has argued of shame as involving ‘a painful, sudden awareness of the self as less good than hoped for and expected, precipitated by the identification by others (imaginary or real), or simply by the ashamed self, of a seemingly significant character shortcoming’ (2003, p. 21). Manion then proceeds to hypothesise that ‘the social contexts that fashion masculinity and femininity influence what counts as “good” instances of shame for women, and that such standards may erode and not support a woman’s moral agency’ (p.
As is evident in *Weevil*, this state of socialisation ‘into shame’ can be destructive if not checked by the women themselves. The women have to come to a critical understanding of how, as Scott (1999) has argued, political discourse uses gendered terms and references to create meaning, by defining occupations and familial, political, and social roles as masculine or feminine to create natural hierarchies or oppositional relationships (p. 3). It is thus necessary to be aware of how ‘gender hierarchies are constructed, legitimated, challenged, and maintained’ (ibid.).

Okurut’s idea then, in line with the conceptualisation above by Scott, is to endeavour to deconstruct the societal expectations by letting the women characters see beyond Sigmund Freud’s conceptualisation of anatomy as destiny. In addition, as Bhabha has argued:

> It must be our aim not to deny or disavow masculinity, but to disturb its manifest destiny – to draw attention to it as a prosthetic reality – a ‘prefixing’ of the rules of gender and sexuality; an appendix or addition, that willy-nilly, supplements and suspends a ‘lack-in-being’.” (2000, p. 102)

Getting back to *Ssenga* (the female superior figure who should induct the young women into the ways of ‘womanhood’), she may seem another relic of patriarchal authority at first glance; but in her, on close scrutiny, is a major force that deconstructs masculine power and its hold on women. And, in her construction, Okurut as well aims at challenging the stock-character presentation of aunties in East African societies as those patriarchal appendages whose function is to ‘prepare’ young women into the familiar narrative of being good wives and mothers. *Ssenga* counsels Nkwanzi:

> Men and boys are crafty. They can trick a young girl like you. Worse still, they can try to rape you. Sometimes even you can like a boy so much that you’ll want to sleep with him. But don’t. Because when you become pregnant, he will leave you immediately you tell him. If a man ever tries to rape you, pretend that you are giving in. Even sing a little song. Praise him and then when he’s about to penetrate you, raise your knee and hit his manhood and testicles, hard, very hard. Squeeze the origin of his seed: the testicles. Squeeze them hard and he’ll cry for his mother … (p. 57)

*Ssenga* thus revisits what Wairimu in Macgoye’s *Moment* has called ‘the old, old story’ (p. 16) of men’s and boys’ denial of taking responsibility upon desecrating women’s bodies. It is in Nkwanzi’s ingraining of these lessons that she later on manages to outwit sexual vermin that form the dictatorships that define the Ugandan political space. The
odious Rex, for instance, as a minister in the Opolo regime (the Obote II administration, 1980-1985), the Honourable Minister for Turbulence Affairs, is more preoccupied with the defilement of young school girls and the rape of women in their vulnerability as they seek the release of their loved ones who are under torture. He, however, gets it tough with Nkwanzi:

Like a cat making a leap for the milk, he got ready for the thrust and as he heaved towards her very being, she raised her knee and jammed it between his legs. She squeezed, squeezed against the organ of his seed. Shocked surprise mingled with pain sprung into his eyes. And then in an agonised, strangled voice, he cried out “Maama” and clutched at his now shrunk manhood before he doubled over and spewed all the contents of his stomach on the presidential bed. Quickly she jumped from the bed and put on her shoes. She cast a last look at the form groaning with pain, unable to utter a word. The form coiled like a foetus, would probably not be able to walk or do anything for the next two days. (pp. 188-189)

Momentarily, Nkwanzi has defeated the power of the phallus and the attendant authority. She belies the dominant terminology of women being *chakula ya wakubwa* (food for big men), a parlance used disparagingly by the soldiers during the problematic eras of Uganda’s socio-political history in belittling women by commodifying them into sexual tools and raping them; or making them objects with the allure of money and material wealth as the *Mafuta* (the wealthy soldiers and other close allies of especially the Duduma regime) specialise in. Earlier on, as a university student, she had had to confront one of the semi-illiterate *Mafuta* who insists, ‘I boughts you drink and goods and danced you. I carries you in my Benzi and with my peterori and now you says no sleept wiz me? You must gave me the goods’ (p. 130). She is only saved when ‘Quickly, she stabbed his hand with the *empindu*’ (ibid.)

Hay has argued of how sexual harassment objectifies the woman and also denies her autonomy. She writes:

The harm of sexual harassment should not be underestimated. When a woman is sexually harassed, or sexually objectified more generally, she has not been treated as a moral equal. This means that she has not been accorded the respect of an autonomous agent. But sexual harassment is not merely *evidence* of a lack of respect for women’s autonomy; it also *undermines* their autonomy. It makes them less autonomous. How? Sexual harassment does not just occur within the context of women’s oppression under patriarchy. It also simultaneously entrenches this oppression by participating in, and thereby reinforcing and legitimating, certain sexist attitudes about women’s inferiority to men and about the sex roles that it is
appropriate for women to occupy. That is, sexual harassment is not just a manifestation of the sexist attitudes of patriarchal society; it also contributes to, entrenches, and legitimates these attitudes. These attitudes, in turn, reinforce patriarchal oppression. Because oppression limits the autonomy of those who are oppressed, insofar as these sexist attitudes contribute to patriarchal oppression, they constrain, limit, and undermine women’s autonomy. Thus the moral harm of sexual harassment goes beyond any individual instance of a woman having her autonomy respected. Rather, the moral harm of sexual harassment is that it actually makes women less autonomous. (2005, p. 97, emphasis in the original)

It is has been worth going into Hay’s argument in detail here as it mirrors the violation that Nkwanzi and other women in Weevil are exposed to. Rex, at last, manages to rape Nkwanzi, and to worsen the pain, this occurs on the day of her wedding to a childhood colleague, Genesis. This so much unsettles her:

Filled with the deepest loathing and hatred she had ever felt for any living being, she pushed him away violently and he fell on the floor with a thud. ‘Scream, Scream!’ an inner voice urged her. But something held her back. How could she announce to the whole world, a few hours to her wedding that she had been raped? (p. 202)

In a way then, it appears as if Rex has succeeded in ‘conquering’ her, making her realise that she is only, after all, like the other women and girls that he has severally violated before. And the violation of Nkwanzi is a thing he has been strategising about over a long period. To Rex, then, the rape of Nkwanzi is another of his victories in the exercising of authority over women. As Loomba has argued, ‘from the beginning of the colonial period till its end [and beyond], female bodies symbolise the conquered land. This metaphoric use of the female body varies in accordance with the exigencies and histories of particular colonial [and postcolonial] situations’ (2005, p. 129).

After this desecration, Nkwanzi feels trapped. At first, she is hesitant with Ssenga (and to the latter this is on the principle of societal ‘normative’ considerations) to Mama’s view that the matter be reported to the police. To an extent, and more so as Ssenga sees it, this hesitancy runs into Hay’s observation that in some circumstances, ‘women actually internalise their oppression: because patriarchal social factors function illicitly to influence women’s actual preferences, women end up with preferences that are inimical to their own interests’ (2005, p. 97.). It is only after some time that she agrees to let the police handle the matter. Still, it is the logic, in Spivak’s sense of representation of the
female subaltern, that Mama advances which makes her see the point lucidly. Mama observes: ‘… remember, you and I should show the way. We must be role models for the youth, we must fight traditions which doom women to passivity. We must fight against outmoded ideas and prejudices …’ (p. 206). Furthermore, as Hay maintains in her reading of the in-divesture of woman’s autonomy:

It is primarily a moral obligation to confront and resist behaviour that undermines one’s ability to be morally obligated at all. It is a special case of an obligation to preserve and protect one’s moral agency … a woman’s obligation to confront the men who sexually harass her is primarily an obligation she has to herself. (2005, p. 105.)

Indeed, action seems to follow by the police under the new Kazi (Yoweri Museveni) regime as ‘Rex [is] arrested and put behind bars to await for his trial’ (pp. 206-207). On the larger socio-cultural plane, the rape episode is a reminder of the much that still needs to be done to give women insularity against opportunistic male counterparts who still cannot imagine the occupation of the woman of the public space on equal terms; but rather as beings who can be molested any moment to purge sexual desires. Still, the reaction to this ‘dehumanisation’ by the three women is a pointer to Leps’ understanding of the Foucauldian genealogical (genealogy in Foucault’s formulation of ‘a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc’ [1984, p. 59]) knowledge/truth construction that:

Multifarious local strategies, emanating from below and cutting across various locations (in class, family, sexual, racial, religious, military, educational relations) ultimately consolidate the many diverse privileges, the wealth and strength of the few – and conversely, revolutions could result from the ultimate integration of multiple resistance points. (2004, p. 279)

And, these are points of resistances that see to genealogy ‘generat[ing] new objects of knowledge, other subject positions, and alternate means of resistance’ (ibid., p. 280).

As preparation for Nkwanzi to cope with the life of being a wife and mother, Ssenga tries to impart her age-old knowledge on how to be a good wife. Nkwanzi is advised to, among other things, never turn her back on her man, and to always consent ‘No matter what time of the night it is’ (p. 199). The counselling continues that, ‘Always go to bed in the same way you came from your mother’s womb’, because if she goes to bed dressed, ‘it means you’re telling your husband not to touch you’ (ibid.); and, further
to never argue; as well as perfuming her womanhood with herbs so that she may be liked better by her husband. Of course, with her education, Nkwanzi contests this age-old ‘wisdom’. However, it is in Ssenga’s closing advice that at once shows the secret power in her wisdom, and the ingrained feminine resistance to men’s authority. She strongly holds: ‘Lastly, never, ever trust a man. They’re all the same. They all go to the same school when it comes to how they treat women. Don’t trust him and tell him all your secrets. Don’t make him your pillow and blanket’ (p. 200). And when Nkwanzi questions how she should marry a man whom she cannot trust in her belief that she trusts the man she is about to marry, Genesis, completely, she is told: ‘You’ll live to regret it. It is better not to trust him so that in future when he goes with another woman, you’ll not be surprised’ (ibid.). Then Ssenga submits:

My gift to you is a sheep. Go and keep quiet in your home like a sheep. Be humble like it. Lastly, I want you to be as proud as a leopard. You know, the leopard’s so proud of its beauty it cannot allow anybody to spoil it. So, when it is wounded, rather than bleeding outside and spoiling its beauty, it bleeds from inside. Child, like a good woman, you should bleed from inside when problems come. (p. 200)

In this allusion is to be found the encouragement to develop strong mechanisms of resistance to power and authority, a resistance that ensures a woman’s coming out strongly to defend her ‘beauty’ and human dignity without necessarily being seen as overtly collapsing the dominant norms and ideologies that structure African societies. And, in this sense, the resistance advocated for reads into Katrak’s argument that:

As with the histories of other oppressed groups, covert rather than overt expressions of agency generate situations of possibility. ... What is more significant are the many ingenious strategies of working from within institutional structures rather than defying them outright, which can have fatal consequences. This covert action is not less radical than an overthrow of the system; it is often more courageous to conform on the surface while devising resistances from within accepted institutional, such as marital frameworks. (2006, p. 159)

Nkwanzi’s struggle is thus more likely to succeed because she does not outrageously reject the ‘traditional knowledge’. Indeed, in Katrak’s view, she realises that she can ingeniously operate from within institutional structures to achieve her objectives. She understands that it is in carefully examining ‘the traditional knowledge’ as well as other institutional structures in relation to her own acquired liberatory knowledge that she can
come to terms with the dominant reality and hence accurately and in an informed manner interrogate it.

She, for instance, defends the practice of dowry payment to her family in the best way she understands it, despite what would have been expected of her as a university-educated woman. Genesis appears shocked by the fact that she insists on dowry being paid, because, to him, ‘it transforms women into slaves’ (p. 198), and ‘some men batter their wives on a daily basis simply because they paid bride price for them’ (ibid.) To Nkwanzi though, ‘these men who batter their wives do so not mainly because they paid dowry [but] are just beastly’ (ibid.). Genesis will thus have to pay dowry as a token. She reasons out that, ‘in our culture, part of the cows you pay are sold and the money used to buy gifts for our home. The bride’s people too buy a lot of things for the young couple. So it’s not as if it is a one-way traffic’ (ibid.). Nkwanzi, therefore, to a degree, demystifies the woman objectifying idea of dowry payment.

In her balancing of the traditional knowledge with modernity, she evolves an argument that seems to be appreciated by even the older generation in the society. It is partly for this reason that once married, she strikes a very close relationship with her mother-in-law, and she even collapses the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law presumed enmity in most East African societies. Indeed, the narrative substantiates: ‘Many married women have problems with their mothers-in-law. But Kaaka and Nkwanzi got on very well. Nkwanzi loved Kaaka as her own mother and Kaaka loved Nkwanzi as her own daughter’ (p. 4). Nkwanzi hence, to Kaaka, becomes Bacureera, a ‘woman who is quiet, calm and collected’ (p. 5).

In the respect bestowed on Nkwanzi because of her ‘calm and collected’ character, she also manages to get the society to re-think its views concerning women as the Other. Watson posits that ‘The social markers that serve to place one in the category of that race, that gender, or that sexual orientation are often worn like scars, as they are continuously experienced as reasons to fear, to hide, to shame’ (2007, p. 106). Nkwanzi skilfully deflates these social markers and aspires (her actions as well making others in the society take her cue) towards what Spivak has perceptualised as the ideal relation to the Other informed by an ethical singularity that visions the Other in non-essential, non-crisis terms, an engagement with the Other that is an embrace, an act of love (1996, pp.
In sum then, for her appropriating the ‘ethical singularity’ of reaching out, Nkwanzi manages to, in praxis, confront societal stereotypical ambivalences to her own advantage and as a result authoritatively locates her position in the society.

3.4 The University as Space for Resistance and Empowerment

The university is a space of liberational possibilities. This is so because as the institution inherently mandated for the task of engaged with epistemic production and subsequent dissemination, it seeks to see to the enlightenment of the society. And because it is ‘the place designated for the training in deep objective change’ (Spivak, 2004, p. 107), it emerges as the right space to interrogate the ills accruing in the society in which it is situated. The university thus should seek to referentially penetrate, to use Derrida’s formulation, the various frontiers, be they external (relation with the world, the state, civil society and fields of power) or internal frontiers (disciplines, hierarchies and fields of knowledge) (2002, pp. 115-6).

The intellectual inhabitant of the university space, on his/her part, aims at being an ‘individual endowed with a faculty of representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, a philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public’ (Said, 1994, p. 11). She/he is guided by the principles that ‘all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behaviour concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent violations of these standards need to be testified and fought against courageously’ (ibid., p. 12). It is in these senses of understanding the university space, that the struggle to put to a closure the humiliating dictatorships of Idi Amin, Obote II, as well as other intervening caretaker regimes, in the Ugandan postcolony, gains serious sustenance from the intellectuals (both students and their lecturers) who inhabit the country’s premier university, Makerere. They become part of a regime involved in sustained ‘epistemic effort’ in the project of ‘detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural within which it operates’ (Foucault, 1984, p. 75). The university, thus, becomes a space for deep practical and theoretical reflection on the Ugandan society’s prevailing condition.

Still, for the women, and especially in a violent society such as the one Okurut depicts in Weevil, even at the university there is a feeling of insecurity and threat. As
Lihamba et al. observe, ‘the security precautions in place are not sufficient to give them [women inhabitants] the confidence and freedom they need in order to maintain matriculation at these higher education institutions’ (2007, p. 46). This is witnessed by the incessant rape and bodily violence that the soldiers mete on the female students at Makerere whenever they get chance to do so under the disguise of quelling student riots.

The university years for Nkwanzi are also the years that the military dictator, Duduma, despoils Uganda’s socio-cultural and political ethos to the core. Mzee, a student colleague of hers, bemoans:

We are losing a whole generation. There are no health facilities to talk of. There are no drugs in hospitals, the only medicine there is only for the rulers. Roads are long gone. Most of the potholes are as deep as graves. Morality is in prison. Sex orgies are the order of the day. They have sex with the women, bayonet them and drink their blood. Firing squads are also another order of the day. A man of the ruling clan only has to covet your woman, land, house or car. He then labels you a guerrilla and you are put before a firing squad. (p. 134)

Consequently, the idea of the Ugandan nation-state has been buckled as ‘Duduma has brought a weevil that will take years and years to remove: the weevil of bribery and greed, of rape and inhumanity’ (p. 134). Duduma’s regime, therefore, has to be fought in order to restore the sanctity of the Ugandan postcolonial state.

And, for the scare of the ability of the intellectual community to initiate a revolution, the regime is always ready to suppress the students and their lecturers. It is narrated in Weevil:

There was no love lost between the Makerere University community and the government [as it] viewed the university community as enemies and the trigger happy soldiers were always itching for an opportunity to teach the we-know-it-all university lecturers and students a lesson that they would never forget. (p. 136)

The university thus becomes a major space of resistance to Duduma’s military dictatorship, and ‘constitutes the reservoir from where the Movement working to overthrow [the] regime recruits its guerrillas’ (Simatei, 2001, p. 155).

The soldiers’ desecration of the university space itself is crude and obscene:

There was commotion everywhere. All the students were facing the same fate. Many other soldiers stayed behind in the rooms ripping mattresses and pillow cases on the pretext of looking for grenades and bombs. They loaded their trucks with students’ belongings. They vandalised books, they defecated in the rooms and corridors and smeared faeces on walls. The students were ordered to walk to
the Freedom Square. The unlucky ones were made to “walk” on their knees on the tarmac! By the time they got there, their knees were masses of bleeding flesh. All the students had been rounded up and were at the square. (p. 140)

With this violation, the university community clearly sees the affront and this, in many of them, reaffirms the spirit to join the subversive forces that are struggling to overthrow Duduma’s militarist regime. And because the affront is to the entire Ugandan society and cannot be read within the framework of the exclusivist men/women dichotomy, Nkwanzi and other women students are fully involved in the ensuing struggle to restore sanity in the Ugandan society.

Thus, Nkwanzi and Atim, a female student colleague taking education, easily get inducted into the underground movement by Mama. The induction rite itself is a pointer towards the collapse of some patriarchal practices in the society: ‘Atim and Nkwanzi were made to sit in the middle of the room. Mama passed the chicken over to them as she chanted some words, the blood dripping on their heads’ (pp. 145-6). That it is a woman, Mama, who is in charge shows the extent to which gender role stereotypes are being re-examined by Okurut. And upon the extensive initiation ritual process to fully involve them into the rebellion, as well as with their new identities in the struggle as Nguvu (Strength) for Atim and Udongo (Earth) for Nkwanzi, they are given the duty of helping in pamphleteering which involved ‘writing anti-government literature and throwing it in parts of the city and posting it to all government departments in order to cause panic in government’ (p. 148). This is an assignment that the two women, Nkwanzi and Atim, embark on wholly once on campus.

Nkwanzi and Atim as university students, therefore, become integral to the struggle. In the space that the university affords them, they find themselves also advantaged with the epistemic empowerment that they happen to enjoy, and hence able to formulate learned and workable strategies of engagement in the public space with the men compatriots.

3.5 Female Strategists and/in the “Eventual Liberation”

Mama, the underground woman figure and organiser of the struggle among the Kampala elite, and a teacher by profession, emerges in Weevil as a true leader in the
struggle for change. Through her disguise as a crude spirits seller, she would get information from General Duduma’s soldiers, information necessary in strategising on how to outmanoeuvre the despotic regime. Nkwanzi’s first encounter with Mama is revelatory of her organisational abilities:

Nkwanzi peered at Mama closely. ... She had a strong, square chin and her eyes were sharp, missing nothing, always focused, alert. Later they learnt that she was a teacher in one of the primary schools in the city but in the evenings she disguised herself and sold crude spirits. Most of her customers were soldiers who usually shot their mouths off after drowning glass after glass of the fiery liquid. She would then get information from them and this would assist in strategising for the underground movement to topple the regime. (p. 143)

Mama comes out not only as a chief strategist, but also as a committed revolutionist and intelligent militant. She is always in charge, even in circumstances where presumably masculine voice and authority would be necessary. This can well be illustrated through an experience that is narrated in the text, ‘They were in a small Renault and Mama was at the wheel’ (p. 178), and then they encounter a roadblock, a ‘kaali roadblock’ (ibid.). This is a roadblock manned by the dreaded government soldiers, Mama tells the other occupants, who include two men: Mzee and Genesis, to ‘Just relax and do not show any tension’ (ibid.). And assuring herself with ‘snatches of militant church hymns, mixing her own words with those of the original: Stand up for freedom //Ye soldiers of the bush//Lift high the flag of freedom …’ (ibid.), she manages to outwit the soldiers and drive to safety.

In the forest, Mama’s strategic role is even more pronounced. It is narrated in *Weevil*: ‘The fighters in the bush fought relentlessly. Mama, who was put in charge of the women’s wing welcomed all. She would talk with small groups of women in the fields as they cultivated fields together, weeded gardens or harvested’ (p. 182); and ‘The women nodded in agreement and the struggle continued’ (ibid.).

In Mama’s case we realise her ‘obvious’ inhabitation of power/authority. However, this does not mean that she does not have oppositional forces working against her (and this is also true of the other women in positions of power/authority in the text such as Nkwanzi). Hanrahan and Antony argue that:

when the impossible is accomplished and a marginalised individual does come to occupy a position of authority, the oppressive structures that bind this individual
will undermine their ability to wield this authority. Historically, from Aristotle on forward, women (and members of other marginalised groups) have been charged with a failure to be fully reasonable. If wielding authority involves (among other things) making decisions that are – appear – not to be based on reasoned arguments, then women who assume positions of power are stuck in a double bind. On the one hand, we have to prove to others that we are rational in order to establish that we are worthy of whatever authority we have been given. But, on the other hand, our willingness to prove that we are rational undermines that very authority we wish to preserve. When we defend every decision we make with a reasoned argument, we are conceding that we don’t wield authority per se. We are conceding that we aren’t, by ourselves, reason enough for others to think and act as we do and instead we are tacitly admitting that our decisions have to be legitimated by some outside entity. (2005, p. 74)

This is the ‘double bind’ then that has to be grappled with even in situations where women are seriously and convincingly in control as has been argued of Mama.

The Opolo II regime is subsequently toppled and a new dispensation envisaged. The new regime, however, does not bring the desired change and hence the struggle has to continue till its overthrow as well. In the Kazi regime that eventually takes over, women are depicted as heroic soldiers who endured much to bring forth the required change in the Ugandan society. This is well depicted in the narration of the moment of triumph:

The people looked with awe at the women soldiers, smartly clad in their uniforms with AK 47 slung on their shoulders. The women combatants were something like a tourist attraction; the eighth wonder of the world, for never in the history of the country had women been combatants. After a few minutes, they heard the noise of many jeeps and in the lead was Mama driving one. She parked it and jumped out quickly, briskly. The other open jeeps arrived and Mama was already at the side of one saluting Kazi who was clad in military fatigues. (p. 191)

This may seem a little bit overstretched and an attempt on Okurut’s part to over-value the women participants in the struggle. However, the narrative itself is convincing with a good measure of realism to logically lead to such depictions as ‘The women combatants were something like a tourist attraction; the eighth wonder of the world, for never in the history of the country had women been combatants’. Okurut herself reads into that category of women writers whom Boehmer (2005b) considers having ‘confronted the symbolic inheritance that is the peripheral figure of the postcolonial national daughter’
(p. 106). She has made the national daughter visible, collapsing the narrative of the female child as ‘the non-subject within the national family romance’ (ibid.).

Mugambi (2007) has observed that ‘Ugandan leaders have, since 1986, pursued a consistently vigorous policy of affirmative action in the area of gender equity, largely owing to the demands of Ugandan women, who participated actively in the protracted armed liberation struggle that rid the country of a tyrannical dictatorship’ (p. 297). The affirmative action is thus not an undertaking in itself, but rather a logical conclusion. Therefore, women like Nkwanzi and Mama duly occupy political positions alongside their men counterparts. And even despite many women ‘mainly [being] given positions of deputies, an exercise that made the whole thing look like mere tokenism’ (Weevil, pp. 220-221), it is partly through this that the stage is set for women’s entry into the public space, and hence formulate modalities for their encentreng as self as well as collective realisation as women and the society at large.

### 3.6 Difficult Negotiations: Woman as Wife and Worker

The problematic of negotiating life as wife and worker emerges once Nkwanzi gets married and is established as a fellow worker to her husband, Genesis. She has then to confront the conundrum of a married woman-worker vis-à-vis an equally working husband. Genesis is placed under the Kazi administration to be in charge of the secret service, his work is thus internal and does not require international travel. Nkwanzi, on her part, is appointed Deputy Foreign Minister, the implication being that she has to travel abroad as well as interact with various people in the course of her duty.

As Elia (1999) has argued:

> the traditional division of labour within the household allocates the bulk of the chores to women, thus placing extreme time constraints on working women. Wife-beating euphemistically referred to as “correction” is still seen as a husband’s right, to be exercised should a woman fail to perform to expectations. (p. 137)

In Nkwanzi’s case, the marriage progresses well despite the suspicions over the fatherhood of their daughter, Ihoreere. Genesis is hailed as ‘a fantastic father and over the years, his life revolved around mother and child’ (p. 216). But when Nkwanzi, as Deputy
Minister, has to fully actualise the demands of her job in travelling, a new domestic order develops. The metamorphosis in Genesis comes when an uncle ‘poured a drop of blood in a pot of milk as the saying goes, and then the blood and the milk could not be separated’ (p. 221). The uncle questions: ‘I’ve been here for two weeks and I’ve not seen your minister-wife all this time. Everyday, she is away, on the road or in the air. She’s not here to cook for you, to look after the child and the home. You’re married to air, embracing your pillow at night …’ (ibid.). This then, with time, is the ‘attack’ on Genesis’ masculine authority that drives him into infidelity. And upon her knowledge of his infidelity and betrayal, ‘she swore that he would never have her in the flesh. So when he approached her one night, she faced him and told him bluntly that he would have to use a condom’ (p. 224). Her stand that he has to use protection in their sexual interaction elicits violence. Thus:

Genesis continued with his behaviour and as time went by, he started battering her. In his drunken stupors, he would come home and demand for sex. She would feel repulsed but because she wanted to maintain the family for Ihoreere’s sake, she would try to put a condom on him. Then he would rage and hit her. (p. 226)

However, when she is just about to make the decision of leaving him, ‘he went down with malaria and she could not abandon him. He was listless, he was unhappy. He stayed in and out of bed for many months and meanwhile, his weight was going fast’ (ibid.). Of course Genesis had already contracted the Aids virus; for he ‘started on the TB drugs and began to improve but after a few weeks, he went totally down’ (p. 227); and thus ‘There was no doubt in anybody’s mind [that] he had the accursed weevil’ (ibid.). And, it is only the resolute resolve by Nkwanzi that saves her from being a victim of the ‘accursed weevil’, HIV-Aids. In his time of helplessness, she does not leave him. As Ilieva and Odiemo-Munara (2006) hold:

Nkwanzi’s forgiveness to her husband Genesis for his betrayal of their love, and her devotion and care for him as he succumbs to AIDS, are possible because she has recognised that men’s violence, unfaithfulness and weakness are due at least in part to the failure of national politics to guarantee dignity and basic human rights to all. It is this crucial understanding that has propelled women of her kind to the forefront of the crusade to transform national politics in such a manner that would ensure the granting of full human rights to all. (p. 260)
This gesture is a sign of a sustained understanding of the play of power relations by Nkwanzi. On Okurut’s part, we realise a philosophical control of the narrative in *Weevil*. Okurut visions the problem in the society within the larger spectrum of collapse of socio-cultural and political ethics. Thus, Genesis’ ailment and eventual death does not read into the simple perceptualisation of a necessary come-uppance for an immoral man who betrays his wife.

3.7 The Aesthetics of the Narrative of *Weevil*

An outstanding feature in terms of literary aesthetics in Okurut’s *Weevil* is the adeptness in capturing the everyday local idioms and parlance of her characters. This makes the language in the novel sound real and in synch with the characterisation. In the usage of local idiom, the meaning of phenomena and occurrences is brought out vividly and with localised immediacy. Such diction like ‘ekyenkokora’ (p. 2), ‘omujungu’, ‘Bacureera’, ‘suuka’ (p. 5), ‘Diisi’, ‘Naikondo’ (pp. 14-15), ‘matooke’ (p. 29), ‘dipendensi’, ‘kitanga’ (p. 40), ‘puresidenti’, ‘tonto’ (p. 44), ... reveals appropriately the local Ugandan people’s way of reading their socio-cultural and political realities. In their salutations, for instance, the narrative captures:

“How passed the day?” they greeted.
“The sun has gone down, and the patient’s breathing,” the old man replied.
(p. 229)

In their general communication, the villagers are depicted in their age-old idiosyncrasies, hence when a neighbour visits the sick Genesis, she wails, “Oh death is really cruel! Look at Rwenzigye’s arm!” And she lifted the skeleton that was Genesis’ arm. Look at his arm! As tiny as a reed. These bodies of ours’re only good when we’re oiling them. Look at him! Very near the grave. He’s dead, it’s only his heart that’s disturbing him ...’” (pp. 20-21). The narrative explicates this thus, ‘[w]hat was funny was that such a woman did not mean any harm by talking in that manner. It was just their way.’ (p. 21). This ‘way’ of the villagers can also be seen when after young Nkwanzi has partaken a local brew, ‘tonto’, gets drunk and on getting home she is falling in the process of greeting the older people in the compound. An elder present offers ‘counsel’:

Eh, Mr Erinesiti, why didn’t you tell us before that the child has got the falling disease? My own son had it. Whenever people gathered together to feast and
make merry, my son would fall. But I gave him medicine and he’s now all right. If you had told me about your girl, I’d have cured her long ago. Poor girl! And she is so beautiful and clever! But now who will marry her when they hear that she has the falling disease? (p. 51)

As well, Okurut’s capturing of the ‘broken’ English employed by General Duduma and his soldiers, and that occupies a significant part of the novel, is revelatory of the decayed state of affairs in postcolonial Uganda under military dictatorship. The soldier who demands for sex from Nkwanzi because he has bought her ‘rare commodities’ holds, ‘You malaya. I spending my money on yours, buy clozesi and shuuzi. I boughts you drink and goods and danced you. I carries you in my Benzi and with my peterori and now you says no sleept wiz me? You must gave me the goods’ (p. 130)

In his address to the nation, the president, General Duduma speaks:

Ladies under gentlemen, Saasa I am bery happy completely and also to stood here and undress you on this suspicious ocazion. I not politician, I professional solder and man of few wards, brief wards. No ambition man your Daddy, buta very good man completely and throughout ... (p. 99)

In the near malapropian and antiphrastic use of words like ‘under’ in lieu of ‘and’, ‘undress’ in lieu ‘of address’, ‘suspicious’ in lieu of ‘auspicious’, ‘solder’ in lieu of ‘soldier’, ‘wards’ in lieu of ‘words’, the address to the nation, an event that should be viewed with hope and anticipation, becomes one to be loathed. It is fraught with incomprehensibility, a sign of real danger lurking ahead. This is in line with Simatei’s argument in his reading of Weevil that:

While constructing the idiom of the illiterate soldiers turned managers of the nation, the writer takes advantage of the absurd and contradictory meaning which often issues from a grammatical deficiency in order to reflect in the speech of the military rulers the bizarre situation their action has created for the nation. (2001, pp. 155)

And when he is awarding Makerere University graduating students degrees as the University Chancellor, Duduma admits them thus:

“By de otority entrusted to me, I confer upon you the Degree of Bachelor of Ants”
“I confer upon you the degree of Master of Sugarly”. (p. 136)
The worth of the degree conferment is ridiculed and lost. This is a foreshadowing of how the university space is bound to be desecrated by the military regime. Thus, despite the obvious illiteracy of General Duduma and his soldiers, Okurut deliberately invests in their speech an ironical tone that bemoans the destruction of the nation.

It is the metaphor of ‘the invisible weevil’ that carries the structuring leitmotif of the novel. This metaphor is at once at the level of the effects of the all-consuming pandemic of HIV-Aids; and also at that of the socio-cultural and economic decay that the Ugandan postcolonial society has degenerated into. The metaphor thus acts as a call into the re-examination of the tenets that hold the Ugandan postcolonial society with a view of altering the problematic state of affairs.

Kaaka notes dejectedly:

I know what it is. I know what this plague is. It’s like a weevil. The weevil eats up a bean. When you look at the bean, you think it’s healthy. Then when you open it, you find that the weevil ate it up a long time ago and inside, the bean crumbles to dust. It’s nothing but dust inside. (p. 6)

And then the old man Runamba, Genesis’ father, bemoans the tragic postcolonial occurrences in Uganda, ‘My son came fighting with the new army. The army brought peace to this land which had been torn apart by the weevil of bad leaders for many years’ (ibid.). Further, with the coming of Duduma into power through a military coup, and the immense destruction of both life and property, the people cry, “‘This is terrible, what kind of president is this? This is a monster! How can he kill people like this? Innocent people? A weevil has entered our country’” (p. 103).

In these three postulations by Kaaka, Runamba and ‘the people’, we get the conflation of the ‘weevil’ as a disease (the HIV-Aids pandemic) that ultimately kills its victims; and also its manifestation as socio-political autocracy and corruption in the Ugandan society. At the end of the text, with the advent of a new socio-political dispensation, a question disturbs Nkwanzi, “Yes, a mustard seed had been planted in the land, but would it survive the invisible weevils?” (p. 232). This question, posed as the text comes to closure rhetorically points to the non-closure of possibilities, and it very aptly captures the many lost hopes that have been evident in the narrative, Weevil. Good literature, as Bennett and Royle (1999) have argued, ‘offers at once an imaginative experiencing and a critical questioning of the end, and it does so in ways that can be both
at once exhilarating and terrifying. Literary texts, and particularly the end of literary texts, open onto the future’ (p. 258). Okurut’s *Weevil* refuses ultimate closure, a strategy that aptly reads the various events that the narrative has depicted about the non-narrative reality of the Ugandan postcolony.

Another concentrated imagery in the novel is that of Genesis’ dream prelude to the Ugandan military coup of January 25, 1971. The narrative reveals:

... Genesis was dreaming about the dry season. He was walking after his father as they herded the cattle in search of water. The sun sent her fire relentlessly on earth: there was no cloud cover and Genesis was alarmed that any time the earth would catch fire. The hot earth scorched his naked feet. Stepping on it was like walking on live charcoal.

Skeletons of cattle littered the caked earth and the further they trudged on, the more skeletons they saw. The meatless jaws of those carcasses seemed to hypnotise Genesis and his eyes would get glued to them. The huge black vultures would descend and pick on these jaws and cackle away. Genesis would try to avert his eyes to no avail. (p. 94)

In the images of the ‘dry season’, ‘skeletons’ ‘carcasses’, ‘vultures’, Okurut prophetically captures the impending collapse of the Ugandan postcolony under the brutal dictatorship of General Duduma. And, implicit in these images is the fact that there would be deaths and immense suffering of the citizens of Uganda.

In utilising the old people’s sagacious thoughts, the weight of the tragedy that is HIV-Aids is brought out clearly. For instance, Kaaka asks Nkwanzi, ‘Child if an elder wanted to curse a person who had wronged him, the curse would be: may you see baaya! Do you know what baaya is?’ (ibid.), or the old man Runamba’s enaction of the narrative of an ant who met her colleague carrying a dead body and on being asked why she was labouring alone she responds, ‘The one who would help me carry it is this very one who’s dead’ (p. 7).

The usage of oral tradition resources by Okurut is also worth to note. In Kaaka’s own story of her traditional marriage to Runamba, for example, there is skilful infusion of oral tradition resources. There is, for instance, the narrative about the bride who was caught stealing locusts (p. 24), and to give it maximum effect, a song is incorporated,

You people who are digging,
You people who are digging,
Come and see it is the bride eating locusts.
She said Kakwisi have some
And I said, no; dogs don’t eat them. (ibid.)

Further, there is also a proverb included, ‘A good looking person cannot be without a fault. When he doesn’t steal, he commits adultery’ (ibid.). Okurut thus makes her novel to be rooted in the culture of her people. She also captures their performative arts clearly. Indeed, proverbs and sayings permeate the story and help give it a cautionary, pedagogical beauty, ‘They say a bad name bewitches its owner’ (pp. 25-26), ‘Don’t you know that a stick is bent while it’s still young?’ (p. 28).

Okurut as well utilises parallelistic constructions in the novel very aptly. The following example can illustrate this:

She could see the group registering the message but already some of them were weeping and trying to control the sobs that threatened to wreck their bodies. She felt with them what they were going through, having the knowledge that Genesis was dying and yet having to face and hide it from him. She had lived with it for four months and for every minute of those months, a knife seemed to pass through her heart. She tried hard to smile at Genesis, pretending that things were alright. (p. 2)

In this, she captures the effect of the ailment and the prevailing feeling among those close to the ailing Genesis. And in such construction in short sentences like, ‘There are brown grasshoppers which look like dry grass. Then there are green ones which are as green as the leaves and grass. Then there are those whose colour is a mixture of green with streaks of purple’ (p. 46), the episodes in the story are made to build up in syllogistic beauty. This can also be seen when Nkwanzi is expecting the worst to happen after the drunken escapade mentioned above. The narrative goes:

That night, there was absolute silence in the house. It was as if somebody had died. Everybody avoided Nkwanzi. Even Agatha, who usually slept in the room with her, did not appear. Nkwanzi could hear her father walking up and down in his wooden clogs – clonk, clonk, clonk. (p. 52)

Or again when she feels let down by Genesis at the University and the pastoral allure of home is so strong:

The quiet of the evenings, the gentle wind rustling through the banana leaves. The spirals of smoke from the kitchen fires and the music from the grinding stones. The sound of rain on the iron sheets which seemed to sing a lullaby, sending everybody into deep sleep. (p. 135)
Such descriptions, among others in the text, give momentous episodes in the narrative anticipatory mood. The reader is hooked in the emotional pleasure of reading or into the drama that is bound to occur. And when Okurut is describing occurrences that are macabre in the text, the description itself, just like it has been noted in Macgoye during times of annihilative disaster, is lyrical and laden with sharp images. Thus:

They extended their fingers and pressed the red button in each lorry, hard. They felt the springs of the tippers creak and slowly, like a horror picture in a slow motion, the back part of the tippers went into the air and threw their contents over a hanging cliff. Screams rent the night air as the occupants of the tipper lorries found themselves in space with nothing to hold on to. Their arms beat the air like birds whose wings had been severed, plunging deeper into darkness and emptiness before they hit the dark, swirling waters of Lake Victoria. Lake Victoria, shaken out of her peaceful slumber, sucked them in, her waters angrily lashing out at humankind for sacrificing her own.

The lake birds, their slumber interrupted, woke up and flapped their wings in anger, their cry of protest mingling with the human cries of extinction ... Lake Victoria took in the children of Adam and Eve and covered them with her cold blanket, enveloping them in an eternal embrace. Then a calmness descended on the waters below once again as the echo of the cries faded away. (pp. 102-103)

It is in the creation of such near eulogistic mood that makes Weevil stand out as a text that examines the problematised Uganda’s postcolonial condition. The prose is moving, poetic and capturing the state of disaster that the nation has become.

Okurut equally employs satire in portraying what may be considered absurd events in the novel. One such episode is when students are being ‘lured’ into confessional penitence in the school and then there are also those, especially the staff, who basically want to make a spectacle out of the process (pp. 77-79). A representative ‘confession’ is that of the school cleaner, Zabulooni:

Then Zabulooni, the cleaner got up. “I also thank the good Lord for what he has done for me this week. He has caused the good rain to fall and the good sun to shine. But I want to confess to the sin of lust. On Wednesday, the devil tempted me and I slept with the cook’s wife,” he said and he wept.

The Cook flinched and his wife looked down. The group shook their heads and burst into Tukutendereza. When they finished, Zabulooni went on with his confessions, “I’ve had this devil of lust ever since I was a small boy. I want God to forgive me. Yesterday, the devil led me to sleep with a chicken,” he cried. (p. 77)
This indeed sounds ludicrous, but then this is what satire aims at doing while conversely offering a stinging critique of the ills in the society. And in the Ugandan postcolonial state such ills can be seen to infiltrate the entire fabric of the society as can be clearly seen in what the soldiers and banal politicians such as Rex are capable of doing to innocent civilians, especially women and girls.

The employment of the ‘witness voice’ is also capturing in the novel. This is done through two ‘omnipresent’ characters: Old man Yakobo and Dombo. These are characters who are witnesses to major events in the novel and by extension the Ugandan postcolony. They have been there when the country was gaining independence and marked the event and also witnessed many other subsequent political occurrences. Hence when General Duduma has been deposed, their brief conversation is reflective:

“Is this crowd bigger than the one that came to see Duduma sworn in nine years ago?” asked old man Yakobo.

“It’s definitely much bigger and more mixed in terms of tribes,” replied his friend Dombo.

“This thing of crowds. I hope they’ll not change soon. For remember how we saw crowds milling to go and witness Duduma’s numerous firing squads?” (p. 153)

And with Opolo’s second swearing in, the narrative captures the two witnesses:

“Well, my friend. Is this crowd bigger than Duduma’s or Polle’s?” asked old man Yakobo of his friend.

“I don’t know what to think. I’m now confused,” Dombo replied. (p. 176)

At last, with the seemingly stabilising and salvational regime of Kazi coming in, old man Yakobo avers to his friends that it was the ‘biggest crowd ever in the history of Uganda’ (p. 194). The two men have been major witnesses of it all, and are thus given the ‘authority’ of witnessing the ‘truth’ of the narrative in Weevil. This is a workable strategy that has been utilised well by Okurut, though it would perhaps have come out strongly, more finely if they had been given more space in the process of witnessing, through flashbacks, stream of consciousness and in-depth utilisation of memory.

There are moments of inadequacy in style that emerge in the text. For instance, the intertextual utilisation of the reading into Weevil of John Milton’s Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained (p. 148), as given to Genesis in his woes with Nkwanzii seem superficial and not holding even if it was to be understood as capturing his unstable
epistemic mind and thought process. However, this pales in the strength of the vivid and moving descriptions, sharp and loaded symbology and imagery, as well as recourse to oral traditions and other village conversation parlance in the text.

3.8 Summation: *Weevil* and the Project of a Gender Inclusivist Uganda

From the foregoing discussion, it is deducible that women’s visibility in the Ugandan public sphere is assured because of their active participation in the struggle to free the country from oppressive political and military administrations. Simatei reads Okurut’s gender agenda in *Weevil* that ‘it takes women’s participation in the process of national reconstruction to have their interests reflected in the national ethos’ (2001, p. 156); and that this ‘Participation is [only] possible when women first overcome inhibitions created for them by retrogressive gender attitudes’ (ibid.). The women have to collapse the shallow understanding of man/woman relationship like the one held by old man Runamba, ‘A woman to question my authority! I’ll not hear of it. A woman listens to her husband and goes wherever he goes’ (p. 170).

Indeed, the major women actors in *Weevil* as it has emerged from the preceding discussion aim to collapse the various attitudes and gender stereotypes that limit their full realisation of their academic and other socio-political potentials in the society. In Nkwanzi, we see an astute student and later on worker, practical and committed; and in Mama, a complex revolutionary strategist and pragmatist. These women do not outrightly reject association with their male counterparts, but they see their interaction as building up into bigger projects of emancipation. Okurut shows how ‘Female covert resistances are undertaken with self-consciousness and remarkable creativity that decides to take risks and confront domination selectively and strategically in the interest of self-preservation’ (Katrap, 2006, p. 3).

Still, as in other African postcolonies, the Ugandan women’s position in the country’s political dispensation is bound to be ambivalent despite their effort in the post-independence liberation struggle. Tripp has argued that:

The rules, structures and practices continue to promote an older, more exclusionary vision of politics, making it difficult for women to assert their interests. The problem for women is not just one of representation and voice;
rather, it is a matter of whether they will have a say in making the rules that determine how politics is conducted. (2000, p. xvii)

This underscores the necessity for the women to be always on guard in order not to let the old order emerge, over time, as the defining arrangement in power/authority exercising in the new society.

The women in *Weevil* contest power/authority not to superficially possess it, but to restructure it and bestow it into institutions that are inclusively accessible to both men and women in the Ugandan society. Ilieva and Odiemo-Munara (2006) observe that ‘Okurut does not find reason to bemoan the plight of women or to fantasise about their empowerment. She confidently brings out the authority that women actually possess and the power they wield, while emphasising that a lot still remains to be accomplished (p. 260). This observation links well into Katrak’s argument of the postcolonial women writers that:

Much of the enterprise of women writers involves imaginative explorations of deterritorialising – not simply to gain freedom from an external coloniser, but to clear a space – physical, psychological and emotional – for female autonomy. Postcolonial women writers do not advocate a separatist utopia without men; rather, they undertake a much more difficult struggle to forge frameworks (even if fluctuating) of equality and solidarity. They attempt to create structures of support for cultural work, and to work toward building a better future for their societies. (2006, p. xxvi)

It is in the above senses then that *Weevil* manages to authoritatively interrogate the formulation of contemporary East Africa’s power politics. It does not set itself the goal of overthrowing governance and rule by men, because such a project is not realistic, rather it imagines a gender inclusivist society that bestows on both men and women power and authority in the exercise of duties and responsibilities to re/claim the Ugandan postcolony into a workable nation-state. So that, as Ilieva and Odiemo-Munara hold, at once the women in *Weevil* ‘have overcome inhibitions imposed on them by retrogressive gender roles prescribed by the patriarchal system … [and] have been able to identify viable components in the heritage bequeathed to them by women who functioned entirely under patriarchal patronage’ (2006, p. 259). It is thus these women’s eclectic reading of gender and patriarchal realities that enables them to understand the working of the society
that they inhabit. Subsequently, they propel themselves into a vantage stead in the process of situating their positions in the society.

As the text comes to closure with the death of Genesis, Nkwanzi’s husband, of HIV-Aids related illnesses, a new era opens for the woman-protagonist, Nkwanzi, as well as her country’s men and women. Thus, Nkwanzi hears on the radio, the happy voices of school children:

> For a number of decades now
> More dead than alive we were
> Africa’s pearl a laughing stock
> …
>
> But now in openness we live
> The gun demystified
> And Aids no longer a mystery.
> It too shall be conquered. (p. 231)

Even as this gives her hope, Nkwanzi still wonders whether the mustard seed that had been planted in the land would survive the invisible weevils (p. 232). She realises that there would be much required of the participants, both men and women in ensuring the nurture of the ‘mustard seed’, in responsible exercising of power and authority. And the great hope is unmistakable: ‘The sun bathed the land with its increasing warmth as the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs [Nkwanzi] entered her car, with Mama on the other side and Ihoreere cushioned comfortably between them’ (ibid.). In this hope, Okurut also envisions the future and the sustained participation in it of women in Uganda’s private and public spaces. In the two women, who have been integral in the re-birth of Uganda, Okurut envisages a promising future. Thus, these are ‘protagonists who courageously resist … and whether they win or lose, survive or die, their very resistances offer models for social change’ (Katrák, 2006, p. 208). Further, in the young Ihoreere, Okurut predicts the continuity, even though delicate, of the space of the future generation of women in Uganda’s public sphere. *Weevil* thus manifests as a novel that creatively and philosophically locates the women of Uganda in the country’s socio-political revival after its various post-independence collapses.

This chapter has explored the entry of women in the public space as equals. It has shown that women engage various patriarchal attitudes that seek to peripherally define
them and subsequently devoice them. The strategies employed in the envoicing process have been shown to be various, ranging from education, skilful and eclectic utilisation of traditions, basic self-defence techniques against masculine defilement, as well as militancy. Through these strategies, women endeavour to gain entry into the mainstream socio-political space and actively participate in its reconstruction. And in this process, power is decentralised and distributed, even if not equally, between the genders, in significant proportions between both men and women; hence affording its check so that it does not degenerate into an instrument of gender oppression.

In the next chapter, the study examines how women re/negotiate a labyrinthined socio-cultural space that is patriarchally couched. It proceeds to unravel the various tactics employed by the rural subaltern female in their quest to ensure gender inclusive public socio-cultural space(s) in which they can realise their potential as human beings and agents of their actions and lives.
CHAPTER FOUR

RE/NEGOTIATING “SOCIETAL LABYRINTH”: PARCHED EARTH’S QUEST TO COLLAPSE OTHERISING PATRIARCHAL NARRATIVES

Yet far from launching themselves into a dialogic free-for-all, which might give very little sense of social context, many postcolonial women writers are concerned to bring to the fore the specific textures of their own existence. … In their work they retrieve suppressed oral traditions, half-forgotten histories, unrecorded languages, moments of understated or unrecognised women’s resistance. To the more general postcolonial interest in multiplicity, therefore, they add the concept of woman’s many centred, constellated power, the stress being at once on the importance of diversity and on having the power to articulate selfhood.

-- Elleke Boehmer, Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors, 1995, pp. 227-228, emphases in the original

Grandmother says that a woman cannot point to the source of her pain, saying, it is here and there. A woman finds her sorrow in her dream and everywhere. She is wounded even in her awakening.

-- Yvonne Vera, Under the Tongue, 1996, p. 40

4.1 Introduction: Parched Earth’s Contestation of the Trap of the “Spider’s Web”

In this chapter, Parched Earth (hereafter referred to as Earth) is closely evaluated in its portrayal of women protagonists as they endeavour to re/negotiate the societal labyrinth that is ideationally and practically patriarchal in orientation. In this society, therefore, the women have to fight for their desired space of comfort in order not to risk being consumed in the maze of gender Otherising traditions and cultures. The women’s struggle involves formulating strategies that ensure their survival and existence, even if not the much desired one, in the society. In strategies such as forming women communions, educating themselves through formal schooling or through age-old tested ‘woman wisdom’ or both, and involvement in art as a cathartic venture, they manage to ‘fight life with life’, ingrain a strong desire to live and hence offer resistances to the
dominant power/authority arrangement that seeks to domesticate as well as de-authorise, de-voice them.

Elieshi Lema’s *Earth* is arguably the first serious novel in English by a Tanzanian woman writer. It thus occupies a central location in that country’s literature in English. And since the novel is a genre that is ‘inherently anti-normative ... a maverick form, sceptical of all the authoritative claims to truth’ (Bakhtin, qtd. in Eagleton 2005, p. 7), Lema uses this mode of narrative to bring out the lives of ordinary women and their dynamic contestations of patriarchal societal arrangements in the Tanzanian society. In this enterprise, therefore, Lema endeavours to invest narrative power in women, an otherwise dominated category. As Finnegan (1998) has argued:

> In any given society there exist a wide range of social scripts involving conformist as well as deviant modes of behaviour. These social scripts translate into multiple narrative strategies with which gender norms are mediated. However, only some, i.e., dominant, cultural scripts are invested with the official power and authority to sanction behaviour and to ensure narrative circulation. (p. 168)

By representing the most-often dominated, women, *Earth*, in a way disrupts the dominant ‘cultural scripts’ and also opens up narrative circulation to the ‘other’ scripts. In it we witness the subaltern as women emerge with definitional narratives that are open-ended, able to engage as well as inform the dominant (patriarchal) cultural scripts.

Through *Earth*, Lema makes a unique contribution to Tanzanian literature (as well as East African literature generally) in English; as writing in English in Tanzania is not a well developed tradition. This non-development is partly as a result of the country’s strong writing tradition and culture in Swahili, the authority of Swahili as the national language having been established as official doctrine in the Arusha Declaration of 1967. Because of the stress on Swahili, ‘in the domain of literature what followed after independence was the production of a substantial body of Kiswahili literature’ (Mbise, 1985, p. 54). And the Arusha Declaration itself ‘determined the direction of cultural activities’ (ibid.); as a result ensuring ‘Commitment to a socialist goal was given expression, whether implicitly or explicitly, in the prolific corpus of Kiswahili literature’ (ibid.). Therefore, with the privileging of Swahili, whereas such women writers from that country like Peninah Mhando and Amandina Lihamba have written moving texts in
drama that confound the plight of women in the Tanzanian society as can be seen especially in the former writer’s works such as Tambueni Haki Zetu (Recognise Our Rights) (1973) and Heshima Yangu (My Respect) (1974), and collectively with May Balisidya, Harakati za Ukombozi (Struggle for Liberation) (1982), when it comes to writing in English, not much by women writers can be accounted for. It is thus in these circumstances that Lema’s Earth becomes at once an urgent intervention and an intertext that takes cognisance of earlier texts by other women writers such as Mhando in the enterprise of grappling with gender issues in Tanzania.

Earth is presented as a love story. However, aptly, it is the search for the comfortable space of human relations, realisations and fulfilments that much preoccupies the women protagonists of the text. These women protagonists: Doreen Seko, her mother Foibe Seko, and great auntie, Aunt Mai, are struggling with being and existence in typical rural African socio-cultural milieux with all the attendant limitations on the person of the woman. Theirs is a patriarchal society in which they have to devise various schemes and strategies in order to cope and survive. It is in what is conceptualised metaphorically as the spider’s web, an intricate arrangement in which a woman can be easily trapped, that they have to negotiate their spaces and hence endeavour to situate themselves with agency. As Doreen reiterates her condition and that of the other women in the text: ‘Sometimes we get lost in the maze, but always moving, trying to find our way towards that spot, that warm, keenly desired area of absolute comfort. Always searching. It is like a curse’ (p. 4). Hence, to negotiate the labyrinth, they need, as women, to internalise woman’s wisdom (p. 163), a spirit of sagacious existence as espoused by the great Aunt Mai. This, both Doreen and her mother Foibe find out and it is what cushions them from annihilation in the societal maze as they engage in their respective ‘love’ stories.

Perhaps what is most unique in this novel is the portrayal of men/women relationships that is steeped in social and psychological maturity. As Ilieva and Odiemo-Munara note of the novel, ‘[it] both celebrates and it is itself steeped in emotional intelligence ... [and is] a startlingly new realistic portrayal of the man/woman relationship in East Africa’ (2006, p. 268). In Earth, there are to be found men who are senselessly fixated in culturally determined patriarchal residuals of power and authority; but there are
also those who are in constant quest for new forms of enlightenment that seek to collapse retrogressive societal practices.

The text’s major women characters: Foibe, Doreen, and Aunt Mai, are driven by a strong sense of survival into newness. They are creatively and intelligently interpreting Aunt Mai’s life philosophy that a woman is a ‘social orphan’. And, incipient here is that as women in a deterministically patriarchal society, they have to always be searching for the space of the comfort of true and meaningful living. They endeavour to do this by methodically and deliberately seeking to re-engage the power in their various social spaces, both traditional and modern.

To escape oppressive, Otherising societal processes, what is metaphorically defined as the ‘spider’s web’ in the novel, the women have to continuously evolve strategies to help them escape being trapped. This they do through outright rebellion against the patriarchal societal expectations and reformulating paradigms of woman’s life and existence. Doreen, the co-heroine of the text, reflects:

The image of the spider comes to mind, the way it spins its web from the very inside of its stomach, for itself, and for trapping others into its power and into death, which is life for itself. Death for one, life for another. The spider spins its power web from the secretions of its stomach in order to survive ... (p. 4)

The lives of these women are thus a succession of contestations of the effects of the ‘spider’s web’. Right from the elder Aunt Mai, to Foibe, to the younger Doreen, the preoccupation is the search for the ways of negotiating through and endeavouring to collapse institutions that enhance their decentred existences and Otherising societal narratives.

The study proceeds then to dissect how these resistances are engaged in by the three women protagonists of the text: Foibe Seko, Doreen Seko, and Aunt Mai. Whereas Foibe’s and Doreen’s narratives will form the crux of interrogation of their resistance strategies, Aunt Mai’s room in the resistance is evaluated in relation to her wisdom imparting philosophies to the two younger women, to show how in the end these women do not form a sorority of suffering but rather a communion of resistance in a dialogue that is empowering to them and that also gives them voice in their interaction with their male counterparts in the society that they inhabit.
4.2 Foibe Seko: Woman as ‘the man’ of the Family

In *Earth*, Foibe Seko comes out as the quintessential example of how through their own determination, the subaltern rural can en-voice themselves as well as articulate their lives purposefully. Hers is also a demonstration that even in cases of their (the subaltern rural women) silence, when speaking itself becomes painful to the memory of the past, that silence manifests as a liberating strategy; for as Nnaemeka has argued, ‘One exercises agency when one *chooses* not to speak; the refusal to speak is also an act of resistance that signals the unwillingness to participate’ (1997, p. 4). And hence silence issues out as ‘a refusal to talk and an invitation for talk’ (ibid.).

Foibe’s, therefore, is the typical African rural woman’s space, difficult to negotiate and create a desired room of her own. Yet, she enduringly weaves through it and in the long run overcomes the many hurdles involved to raise her children as a single mother.

Foibe Seko from very early on in life makes up her mind to live as ‘the man’ of her house, provide for her children and herself, despite the difficulty that this resolve involves. When it is found out that she had been having an ‘illicit’ affair with a man, Sebastian Shose, and she is subsequently pregnant, her mother convenes a meeting of other women to dig to the root of the matter and mete out appropriate punishment. The women start by ‘talk[ing] to her about how girls are supposed to live a chaste and Christian life until they are given to a husband in marriage’ (p. 112). Thus, in the society’s ‘acceptable’ behavioural ethics, the girl has no choice for whom she opens up to. It is the society’s responsibility to determine which man is fit enough to husband her, and hence relationships before marriage cannot be tolerated because ‘All girls who are brought up well do not repay their parents with unkindness by behaving like mangy dogs’ (ibid.). Yet, when Foibe is asked whether she knows a man called Sebastian Shose, she declares that she loves the man. And this she does with a sense of stubborn defiance, for, it is narrated in the novel, ‘… no word would have matched the defiance in her eyes’ (ibid.).

For the reason of defying traditions and the acceptable norms on behaviour of unmarried girls and their relationship with men, Foibe has to be ‘disciplined’. Foucault has usefully related discipline to power in his conceptualisation that ‘it [discipline] is a
type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a “physics” or an “anatomy” of power, a technology’ (1984, p. 206). We thus realise the exercising of power relations through the discipline that is meted out on Foibe, which is aimed at inflicting as much harm as possible to her body and also demeaning her sexuality. The narration runs:

… the women got angry and spanked her thoroughly. They used the blunt and curved end of kyindo, the banana peeling knife, warmed under hot ash, to hold the skin between the knife and the thumb, as if to peel it away from the flesh. It burned and scraped her skin, the burnt lines on the flesh where the knife held the skin rising immediately. …They told her how this treatment will teach her to close her thighs, how it will be good medicine for her shameless, wanton love for sex. (ibid.)

Through this most severe and dehumanising ‘disciplining’, Foibe, at the end carries ‘sadness like a tarnished sheen underneath the youthfulness of her face’ (p. 113). In this disciplining, there emerges what Foucault has called the exercising of power ‘that insidiously objectifies those on whom it is applied’ (ibid., p. 209). But this sadness, the objectification also form part of the memory that is never erased in her life and thus helps to shape her philosophy of life as a woman who has to fend for herself and her children without expecting intervention from anyone, man or woman. Furthermore, Foibe goes ahead upon being re-rooted from the family home to have three other children. This marks another level of resistance on her side, the refusal to ‘close’ her body after having been taught through its violation to ‘close her thighs’, and thus her body acts and simultaneously becomes an important site of resistance and agency (Musila, 2007, p. 53).

And given that the man responsible for her predicament, Sebastian Shose, is married and belongs to a family whose head is a church elder, adheres strictly to the Christian teachings, and thus one who should not let in his son ‘any feeling for a woman surpass the obligation to follow the way of the Lord’ (p. 110), Foibe, at a very tender age, realises that she has to be keeper of herself. According to the warped dominant societal logic, it is the girl, Foibe, who is to blame for Shose’s shaming of his family: ‘It was said that the young girl had bewitched him, had made him loose all sense of who he was’ (p. 111).
Still, it is not absolutely the case that Sebastian Shose is impervious to her pain and suffering. In actual sense, he feels for her as is evident when he meets her after the disciplining ordeal and he sees the ‘fresh scars all over his lover’s thighs’ (p. 112). However, he realises how he is helpless in coming to her aid within the society’s rigid traditional code of men/women socio-cultural relation:

He knew that he could not soothe her pain no matter what he did or said. She had suffered alone, without him to defend her, to put up a case of her innocence. They cried together, and sat for hours without speech. There was no place for them to go. The place behind the flowering shrubs was almost their home, but they could not sleep there all night, every day, they could not live there. Their trysting gradually withered like a plant denied water, but the curtailed passion remained with them, reducing the man to a state of sombre and detached quietness. The girl carried sadness like a tarnished sheen underneath the youthfulness of her face. (p. 113)

This, thus, is not the common and stereotypical case of a man misusing a girl/woman for selfish sexual gratifications upon which the girl/woman is let to carry the burden of motherhood; rather it is a situation where traditions in their inexorable logic define gender relations in Otherising premises. In this cautious treatment of men/women relationship, without the easy labelling of men/women; oppressor/oppressed, in a way, Lema, as has been also noted in the foregoing chapters of Macgoye and Okurut, achieves distinctiveness in the portrayal of gender relations in East African literature by women. This distinctiveness partly rests in the manner in which these writers reject simplistic understanding of gender relations and societal violence; so that the problematic of victimisation and oppression is seen as being multi-layered in its enaction. As Nnaemeka (1997) has argued:

victims [are also] agents, and oppressors are also victims … violence is not a male but a human problem, how woman-on-woman violence and abuse show women as a group suffering from self-inflicted wounds; how the broader issue of globality and imperialism intensifies gender politics in nationalist discourses. (p. 22)

In showing how the older women participate in secluding Foibe because of the ‘shame’ without any recourse to their place in the socio-culturally gendered society they inhabit, Lema thus refuses to endorse the cheaper, often times vacuous celebration in feminist circles of the portrayal of men as beasts and defilers who have no recourse to
remorse and a sense of humanity. For as Ilieva and Odiemo-Munara have argued in their
reading of the broad distinction of the two trends manifest in women’s writing in East
Africa, the first trend, that which ‘assert[s] the authority and the acquired power of the
African woman through the demarcation and display of a space which she has fully
conquered … [and] truly arrived … [as well as] break[ing] out of the patriarchal trap …
or lament over the inescapability of the trap and the supposedly martyr status of its
victim’ (2006, p. 256), is lacking in both literary aesthetics and realism. It is in this
refusal to cheapen her understanding of man/woman relationships that Lema manages to
portray oppression multi-dimensionally. At once she shows how patriarchal institutions
impose suffering on women; and also how these institutions are not solely enclaves of
men, but that even women themselves help in (un)consciously rooting them.

Cognisant of the unfruitful sense of holding on to a forbidden relationship, Foibe,
with stubborn dignity, vows, ‘My children will find laughter in my house’ (p. 134), an
avowal that she believes in fully as she says it ‘over and over to other women in a tête-à-
tête’ (ibid.). And, true to her resolve, this laughter, though amidst difficulties, her children
do find. With the loaded but authoritative role of the provider, her commitment to her
family is absolute and she does everything including denying herself food in times when
there was too little of it (p. 84).

Therefore, with the resolve to give her children everything she possibly can,
comes a resistance in her that is also a strategy that gives her daughter, Doreen, reason to
aspire towards her own freedom. Doreen observes, ‘They had threatened to chase love
from Mother’s heart, wanting her to be guided by social norms instead. She said, no, love
will stay, and so she carried the shock of being unloved by her parents like a boulder on
her shoulders’ (ibid.). A rebellious Foibe goes on to become ‘the unusual one, the one
who did not get married … the strange one who gave her children her own name’ (ibid.).

Subsequently, Foibe disrupts authority, and redefines power and its enactments
within the society. Within this framework of freedom, she re/negotiates her life in both
the private and public domains on her own terms. This freedom, understood in terms of
privileging of personal choice, makes it seem surprising that when Doreen announces her
marriage to Martin Patrick to her and the family, she feels disappointed and let down.
The news is at first greeted with a ‘flat disinterest’ (p. 82), and then, Doreen recalls, ‘I
saw her eyes silently fill with tears that trickled down her face. She did not fight them, nor wipe them away. She looked down on her plate, trying to hide her face from the younger boys’ (ibid.).

Foibe’s circumstances leading to her choice of not involving family in her love relationships are different from Doreen’s. In the former case we get a young woman who has completely been rejected by family, the only option out then is to chart out her path in life on her own with occasional interventions from an aunt, Aunt Mai. It is in this sense that we understand her disappointment in Doreen. Godbless captures the family’s uneasy feeling about the non-involvement in the marriage arrangement when he emotionally reacts, ‘Yaani [you mean], you just decided to go to a husband. You just decided to go! Yaani, we don’t matter! (p. 87). In Doreen, there arises a sense of desperation and betrayal, a breaking of the bond of woman solidarity that her mother had so much in her growing up tried to impart in her. She thus notes, ‘I felt as if I had wronged her somehow, had betrayed her by going away with a man without her knowledge and approval’ (pp. 82-83).

For this entry into the world of ‘wifehood’ without the older woman’s ‘knowledge’ and ‘approval’, Doreen charts her own path, but which in the long run proves how shallow she was in thinking of marriage as solely an event that one woman just engages in without the counsel of other women, who, perhaps, know better. And her mother should know because of her own experiences as a naive young girl. Hence even for Doreen, it is the ingénue naivety that does her in when later on she realises the unpredictable premises that configure the ideas of love and marriage in a patriarchal society. But in here also rests the seed of continuously evolving strategies to escape from the ‘societal labyrinth’ for the two women as it is going to be discussed in the proceeding argument.

In the evaluation of Foibe’s ‘love’ life, we encounter the problematic of gender and sexual roles in the traditional African society. It is a society in which the routine of work does not give any base for ‘discovering’ oneself, as village inhabitants are more often destined to walk ‘the dead end street of their dreams’ and eventually fall ‘into the order of village life’ (p. 105). Thus:
They cultivated the fields according to the dictates of the season, planted, weeded and harvested. The men, as well as the women, went through this known routine, all their lives. Women did more; they cut fodder for the cows, collected firewood and fetched water, looked after the children, catered to the husbands and the homes. (ibid.)

In her rejection by family for daring ‘shame’ it at a tender age and violating the norms governing the society, Foibe is at once denied the much desired parental support; but this also serves as release out of ‘the known routine’ that hardly give women in this society rooms of their own to reach out to the wider world. The expulsion, therefore, in lieu of being resisted with the view of rescinding it so that she can get back home, is constructed as a way of gaining her liberty from the confines of male-supervised domesticity.

Thus, in her own world and in her own terms ‘she worked hard and slept at night. Her personal life was cocooned within her, well contained and managed’ (p. 90). Foibe’s relationship with her children is thus simultaneously that of father and mother; she has to re-invent herself into both the masculine and feminine roles. She establishes a strong attachment to her children and goes to great lengths to ensure that they find a home space to call their own, albeit shrouded in poverty. A special relationship is particularly established between her and the daughter, Doreen. This is not because she wants to exclude her other children, three sons, but to create in her, in the best way she can, the awareness of the weight of existence that confounds one as woman and mother. Thus, Doreen confides, ‘My mother always encouraged me to ask her questions about girl things or woman things, things that I thought I needed to understand’ (p. 48). Of urgency is her (Foibe’s) view that girls ‘aspire to learn and know new things of the world’ (ibid.), as well as work very hard, for it is only in hard work that they can acquire salvation. And, philosophically, she counsels her daughter that ‘the world has very little to give girls for free’ (p. 49), therefore, girls ‘should never, never let people walk on their heads and kill their spirit before they know who they are’ (ibid).

Foibe’s counsel is thus not just only aimed at her daughter but rather to women/girls in general in the knowledge that within the confines of the traditional code as the one she finds herself in, it is only in such strategies like education and learning, working hard and never letting their ‘spirit’ wither, that they can emerge as fulfilled
human beings in the society. It is thus a desire to create a communion of women and to form a common salvational frontier. From this learning and mother’s guidance, Doreen internalises the knowledge that women have to form communions in order to avoid individual collapse. She notes:

I came to know that my life as a woman would be realised ultimately, and in so many ways, in relation to other women. She meant that my life would always be a landmark for a girl growing up, or for others needing a role model. She was telling me that my life must strive to give meaning to others needing it. (pp. 49-50)

It is in such broad understanding of the ‘life of a woman’ (p. 49), that appropriate strategies can be devised to grapple with the societal norms that seek to trap the woman into the spider’s web and hence suffocate her growth. Hence in many of her stories to Doreen, Foibe aims at igniting in her the spirit to fight on and carve a space for herself even if it meant in the absence of the help of a man/husband. And as Doreen later realises in connection with her mother’s narratives of women lives, ‘Human life was like an onion, and I had not known that one does not know the onion without the knowledge of its layers’ (p. 51). For Doreen, implicit in this metaphor is the fact that it is necessary to be well rooted in the various intricacies of human relations and know how they shape gender interactions as well as one’s own life.

Foibe’s relationship with her other children, the boys, especially the first-born, Godbless, is equally of interest in examining gender relations in the society that she inhabits. As the son who came out of the incident that led to her being reviled and rejected by her family, she sees him as a reason for her resistance to Otherising norms and traditions in the society. Thus, she hopes for Godbless to ‘grow up’, start off on his own and ‘let the man [his absent biological father] go’ (p. 121). It is necessary quoting in detail the kind of relationship that exists between mother and son as narrated in the novel:

… it was not anger she used to keep her son away from the father who did not want him. Both wanted to belong to a world, a friendly world. Hers, the one she had created, and the son’s, the social order that defined a definite place for a man, but in which he felt excluded. She just had to fight the son’s desire with hers. It was a fierce battle for the reclamation of place and love denied … her son would have to be the seminal seed, the beginning of a line, his line, tied to her alone, outside her father who chased her away like a mangy dog, and the lover who had abandoned her love. (p. 121)
Foibe’s then is a strategy of tactfully ‘fighting back’, that of getting even with those men in her life who in one way or another betrayed her trust in them to defend her. And, in her own son, whom she had managed to raise without any help from either the biological father or her own father, she envisages an opportunity of being both father and mother of a lineage. To her, this is a worthy achievement for one who had been despised and humiliated by family and the society. Earlier on, after being denied space in her father’s house, we are told of Foibe in Doreen’s voice:

Mother had already tasted the poison of social cruelty and knew that she could brace herself for a war only when she lived alone. That must be when she readied herself for the life long struggle with her daemon. The presence of her that would push her on to defy the rules set by the male order against her femaleness. But female she loved being, so she learned to live in the world of men, so that the death of passion for the one love of her life left only a thin layer of ash upon her heart. Her spirit was of a nature too wild to tame and strap into conformity. (p. 118)

Thus, the acme of the defence for herself is in the endeavour to triumph over the two men, her father and lover (here representative of the patriarchy that they espouse) by managing to bring up Godbless to maturity and bestow him a piece of land ‘a place, his own soil and rocks and trees. A place where he could settle where the spirits which love life more than systems would be warm and friendly. A place. His own piece of earth that would finally accept his bones’ (p. 122). In this achievement she rests assured of fulfilling both the demands of motherhood as well as fatherhood. It is in this way then that she manages to deconstruct the binary bifurcations of woman as the essentially provided for and man as the essentially provider. She stoically refuses to collapse under her abandonment by her family; what is related in the text as the ‘abandonment of the girl, and woman, like a heavy baggage of no or little value’ (p. 134). Therefore, for a woman who had ‘been expelled form the home’ (ibid.), she manages to create her own home, and in which despite odds, she endeavours to grant herself and her children laughter, a sense of belonging and feeling of value. She formulates a plan for Godbless’ earning of income that would help sustain him as ‘man’ on his own. A small shop is to be opened at the house, and, she is ‘confident that the shop would be a source of income for Godbless’ (p. 137). As a matter of transcendence on her side and in her struggles to build a meaningful life for her children and now with the son in the plan of marrying, and the
girl in gainful permanent employment, she can manage to revel in ‘authority as she talk[s] of her children’s future’ (ibid.).

Her children, on their part, realise and appreciate her struggles to ensure their upbringing. Doreen affirms:

Were it not for mother, the master architect who gave us all the name Seko, meaning laughter, Godbless’ story and mine would have joined here; I who would have to emigrate from home upon marriage, and he, the child come to this world carried on the head … Both of us without a place, without a home. (p. 134)

As ‘master architect’, Foibe manages to create for her children the story of hope and endurance. This, to a certain degree, prepares them well to grapple with and confound the challenges that they may encounter in their various negotiations with the world. For Doreen, this is even more immediate because as a woman her narrative and that of her mother are bound to conflate on various planes; thus it is only in her internalising her mother’s wisdom, and making it even more workable through her introduction into it of other aspects of modernity ingrained through her formal education, that can make her survive in a society fraught with both aspects of traditional and modern patriarchy. It is Doreen’s narrative and her ingraining of the notion of fighting life with life then that the next section of the chapter examines.

4.3 Internalising Woman’s Wisdom to ‘fight life with life’: The Narrative of Doreen Seko

Earth is the narrative that unfolds in Doreen Seko’s mind as she revisits her life as a child raised by a single mother through primary school and eventually teacher training college, to become a teacher. The narrative then delves into her experiences as a teacher, her married life and the attendant woes as a mother of a girl-child, to her final discovery of the strength to ‘fight life with life’ and strive to get love and respect from the painter and former diplomat, Joseph. Interlinked with her life processes are the life experiences of her mother as well as the interceding role of her great aunt, Aunt Mai.

Doreen as the only girl child in her mother’s household has to carry responsibilities from a very tender age. She narrates:

As a girl child, my mother would leave me in charge of the house, going out for the whole day. She would simply say, “Doreen, look after the home,” and would be gone, often very early in the morning. I would have to organise my brothers,
even Godbless who was older ... Later in the day, I would look for something to cook so that my brothers would not starve. I managed to rummage through the farm looking for potatoes and vegetables that grew randomly among the maize, bananas, beans and coffee. In the course of following behind my mother as she worked in the farm, I had learned to identify plants and vegetables that were edible. My mother would sometimes point them out to me, casually, making me harvest them behind her, correcting me if I did the wrong thing. (p. 11)

In the fact that the most important people she knows in her life are her mother and great aunt, Aunt Mai, she learns from them schemes of existence in a male-dominated society. From the experiences of the older women, she realises that often times, as women, they are destitute in the society, but they resist being trapped in the societal labyrinth that entraps women in the traditional East African societies, what is referred to in the text as the spider’s web.

As in the case of Nkwanzi and her brother Tingo in Okurut’s Weevil, even in Earth Doreen has to endure the lofty conceptualisation of life that her brother envisions. She yearns to get to secondary school, but because her grades could not allow her, she manages to enrol for a primary teaching course. Unfortunately for Godbless, he does not manage to acquire grades that would enable him enrol for either secondary school or primary teaching college. To Doreen, her accomplishment is a chance to aim to make something out of her condition. Thus she postulates:

Being a teacher was the only available opportunity, which I took with gratitude to God and felt luckier than my brother Godbless who got no chance at all, having failed his exams. He is still in the village working on the land. He has never liked it, never forgiven fate for that raw deal. (p. 6)

Godbless, subsequently, finds it difficult to ‘reconcile himself to the fact that he is a villager’ (ibid.), because he had dreamed of ‘becoming a big person in some office doing very important jobs and wearing suits and neckties and talking in a foreign language’ (ibid.). It is necessary going further into Godbless’ lofty dreams in order to unravel the socialised referentiality that most patriarchal East African societies inscribe in the male children:

When as children, my friends and I played mother, Godbless drove a big car he made from the soft pith of a banana plant around the courtyard. The noise of the engine he made told of the road he was travelling, climbing hills in high gear or moving smoothly over flat tarmac. He fashioned a necktie for himself out of banana bast, tied it round his neck and made believe he was a minister, speaking a
language he believed was English. He felt important even in acting. When he got out of his car, his one hand would be in his shorts pocket, his head held high and his face creased with serious intent. He knew just what he wanted to be. (p. 7)

In this society, therefore, the boy child ‘performs’ his supposed superiority because he is made to really believe in it. He as well internalises the view that power and authority are necessarily part of his inheritance by being a boy and later on growing into a powerful man in the society. Godbless assumes power and authority early on in his life and cannot even stop to think of it not being possible to attain the ‘big-man’ status. Hence, his failure (just like Tingo’s in Weevil) could be partly because of the perceptualisation and thought of economic and socio-cultural power/authority as givens and not phenomena to be acquired through strenuous work. It is in this way that when his big dreams are shattered he cannot reconcile himself with the turn of events.

The socialisation that Doreen and other girls in such societal settings are given is aimed at making them see ‘empowerment’ through their husbands who would be big men in the society. The teacher-counsellor brought in by Nkwanzi’s and Tingo’s father in Weevil to guide them on the subjects to choose for their careers reiterates this view when Nkwanzi stresses that she too wants to be a big woman (Weevil, 92); he dismisses her with “‘You will through your husband’” (ibid). Tingo, like Godbless, equally becomes excited with the ‘revelation’ of being a big man: “… I can imagine myself seated at the back of a black Benz, with an askari in the front. And when the Benz stops, the askari will open the door and salute me. A Minister … and everybody would be looking at me with envy … Nkwanzi, I am happy’” (ibid.).

In Doreen’s circumstances, again informed by the dictates of the society, a formidable dream could not form because ‘All I could imagine was cooking, washing and taking care of my brothers’ (p. 8). And for the reason that such imagination could not measure to the ‘flamboyancy of being a minister’, she ends up trying to believe in her brother’s dream. Thus she observes:

When he acted as minister, I wanted to be someone going along with the minister. I would try to do things that would include me in the aura, but often that part was mute. It was Godbless who spoke and knew just what to do. He knew how to be authoritative, and in the make believe, he made me obey him. I believed his dream could also be mine, that if he became the minister, I would be some one too. (pp. 8-9)
And because ‘the dream’ had been so much internalised in Godbless’ mind, he becomes indifferent to Doreen when she goes ahead with her education and earns a job with a salary as compared to his farm life. Doreen contends, ‘My letters to Godbless, talking about the good life of teacher education, must have crusted his hurt to a stone. That life was supposed to be his! He was the man of the house, the male child of the family, the name carrier’ (p. 9). Somehow then, to Godbless, it is like a kind of dream denied and bestowed on the wrong individual.

Even with the collapse of the dream of proceeding with education and actualising the desire of being a ‘big man’, Godbless still talks of ‘My house, my wife, a man must have money’ (p. 136). Doreen conceptualises this knowledgeably in a wider gender matrix: ‘It occurred to me that his desire to be a separate entity, to identify with the father, to belong to the world of men, distinctly apart from the mother, was a thing beyond the decision of the conscious mind. It was the logical route of the thread in the matrix of maleness’ (ibid.).

Still, Lema controls the stereotypical presentation of male/female relationship in the Foibe Seko family. It is not the case that Godbless is begrudging his sister’s advancement. He is simply reading the unfathomable patriarchal script that structures the society he finds himself in. In a sense, he too is a victim just as his sister is. Throughout the text we see a genuine relation of concern between brother and sister, a relationship that is fortified by a common background informed by their familiar grappling with the idea of being children of a single mother in a patriarchal society. This is best seen when Doreen’s husband to be visits the family to formalise the relationship with her people, Godbless opens up to her like never before, and because he is also thinking of getting a wife, there is established ‘a binding love between siblings whose lives are at a crossroads’ (ibid.).

Despite the conflations alluded to above in Okurut’s and Lema’s textual treatment of gender relations, there are also obvious disparities between *Earth* and *Weevil*. In *Weevil*, there is the near absolute closure of Tingo’s dreams when he fails to secure good grades to enable him enrol in the university. From then on, he exits from the narrative, so that henceforth it is the triumph and triumph of Nkwanzi. Still, Okurut depicts other male
students, Mzee and Genesis, who get to the university with Nkwanz, in a way showing how female students can satisfactorily compete with their male counterparts. This depiction is also that of respect as they all take subjects outside the stereotyped categorisation of male/female courses.

The collapsing of the ‘big man’ dreams in *Earth* and *Weevil* by Doreen and Nkwanz is a mark of hard work on their part, cognisant of the basic realities on the ground that are informed by the fact that boys and men are supposed to occupy seats of power and authority, some form of reserves for them. As Doreen’s and Nkwanz’s cases attest, education becomes a strategy of shattering the big man and big man’s wife Otherising categorisation and consequently offering an enlightened platform to resist and negotiate power/authority in the East African societies. This was as well the desire during the pre-independence East Africa by Wairimu in *Moment*.

And for Doreen particularly, her ‘migration’ in the form of enrolment in the teacher training college opens up for her new perspectives of understanding life and the world. She notes that the ‘sojourn at a teacher training school had helped to clean off my habits a bit, lessening the rural-ness in my behaviour so that I blended into the new post [as a trained teacher] without too much effort’ (p. 15). And for the reason that from early on in her life she had been exposed to hard work by her mother as a way of survival, once posted as a teacher, she ‘volunteered to run school projects, planning, organising and mobilising teachers to ensure that the projects were successful. That made me happy, working, managing, and thinking only of achievement’ (ibid.). Hence, through work, she gains a certain level of fulfilment and actualisation of her potential as a human being, and not as a woman in the gendered space that the lack of salaried work would have condemned her to in the village. The education, the work experience, as well as the women survival lessons (aptly referred to as ‘women wisdom’ in *Earth*), prepare Doreen well in her endeavour to engage the patriarchal narratives of women Otherisation in the society.

The following section of the chapter examines her marriage, and how she negotiates it in the gaze of myriad societal expectations concerning the sex of children to be born and the relationship of a married woman to her husband. It also closely
interweaves Aunt Mai’s experienced understanding of traditional gender relations with the increasingly modern understanding that Doreen espouses.

4.4 Doreen’s Marriage, the ‘girl child as the laughter that brings tears’

Doreen’s entrance into the male/female relation circuit starts to manifest clearly once she is posted as a teacher and a staff mate, Zima, declares his feelings for her. She, however, does not see him as the right man to share her love with. Hence, she is confused with the man’s persistent pleadings. She reflects:

Whatever he felt about me was not the same as I felt about him. But how could I tell him that the exterior happiness I showed did not come from that place where love was found? How could I tell him that the happiness we felt together did not make my spirit fly, floating in the lightness of fantasy to let me distinguish the peculiar magic in bird cries or let my mind move, as in osmosis, into the alternate reality in which art and the power to love grows and thrives into existences larger than life? Was that his definition of what he felt? No matter, I couldn’t speak the truth. Zima loved the vulnerability I felt so helplessly. How could I protect him from that? (p. 22)

For the fact that after examining her feelings closely and realising that she does not feel love for Zima, he feels betrayed and even slighted. To him, in the usual masculine self-referential power, the thought is that, with patience, the ‘stubbornness’ in Doreen will dissipate and they would end up being husband and wife.

Doreen, however, decides to follow the dictates of her heart, ‘my inside remained quiet to his request [for marriage] without any stir, and my body felt nothing’ (ibid.). So in the daemonic (as in the life leitmotif that drives her into actualisation of what she feels is the right action and hence the strength to resist what is in opposition to it) conviction of the ‘power of your own love, which has the potency to surmount death and impatience, so you can make real what you desire’ (pp. 43-44), she resolves in her mind to ‘put a stop to the intrigue’ (ibid.) by telling Zima that it was another man, Martin Patrick, she felt love for and not him.

Zima cannot fathom how Doreen could defy his love declaration, yet he is an employed member of the society, a teacher, and who thus wields power/authority. Subsequently, Zima reacts by accusing her of behaving like a common prostitute with little sense of what is good for her (p. 44). However, what is important to Doreen here is
that she had scored and on her own terms; so that when she is maliciously indicted to the
headmaster of skipping classes by Zima, she stands by her version of the story and what
she considers the reason for the malice: ‘… he stood by his story and I stood by mine …
He relied on the moral support of a fellow man to understand his case. He was sure the
Headmaster would believe his story and so whatever punishment meted out to me would
please him’ (p. 45). The Headmaster, fortunately for Doreen, reads through the
superficiality of the accusation and thus does not write a warning letter or even ‘punish’
her. However, she does not escape without an admonition, albeit a veiled one, of ‘I do not
want to hear of your skipping classes again’ (ibid.), of which, assured of her own
innocence, she notes, ‘I did not respond to that and he did not push me further’ (ibid.).

With Martin in her life, Doreen feels a new surge of strength. He, at first, is frank
and open thus making it easy to create an interactive familiarity. Further, his own family
of neglect by the father reminds Doreen of her own family and experiences. He holds that
women are ‘resilient in ways that are quite different from the men’ (p. 27), and also
confesses, ‘It was by pure miracle that I got an education’ (ibid.). This is a background
that Doreen can identify with as a child of a single mother. With this ‘shared history’, one
would think that Martin would be more cautious and critical of societal practices that
peripherally read women. This does not become the case as the marriage progresses and
Doreen is unable to get a baby boy.

Aunt Mai’s statement that ‘a girl child is the laughter that brings tears’ (p. 84),
emerges as prophetic when Doreen becomes officially married to Martin Patrick and
assumes the title of Mrs Patrick. Perhaps unbeknown to her is the daunting reality that in
putting ‘under erasure’ her identity as Doreen Seko, she is entering an arrangement that
would endeavour to maintain the erasure to justify its own existence within the
framework of the acceptable in the society. As a wife, she lets the door of her soul open
to him so that he could come in and out as he wished (p. 67). Gradually though, she starts
being domesticated:

Before I had time to look and see where Martin had gone, I was grazed into my
place in the kitchen while the man of the house was run from the home to bars
and those other places where real men go to talk about running and managing
affairs of substance. I started looking after the home, had to make sure that all the
people ate and the house was clean and the guests were made happy. (p. 72)
The public space is thus shrunk on her and it is required of her to learn to be contented with the private space, in which ‘affairs of substance’ cannot be run and managed. During the period of her pregnancy though, there still glows ‘love’ in the marriage as he ‘came home on time … beaming and talking of the challenges of his job as if they were not challenges at all … I served him, I sat with him as he ate and he insisted that we take a rest together’ (p. 143). Then the girl child, Milika, is born and as with first births there is joy. But this joy becomes ephemeral as the search for a boy child commences and appears elusive. With this boy child obsession, Doreen notes, ‘I forgot the determinate one was he. I tried without knowing how, having nothing to hold on to, nothing to use to pry the male seed from him’ (p. 146). Therefore, aware that she is not singly responsible for the inability to get a boy child, Doreen refuses the stereotypical scapegoat excuses; ‘I refused to take the blame. I refused to be a scapegoat. My body felt fecund, warm, and secretive’ (p. 149). And because Martin does not want to end up like his father who only had one son by his mother, he cannot stand the absence of this boy child from his wife. Thus, Doreen narrates:

... withdrawal started like a thin crack on the wall of our life. I watched it grow and widen. I was helpless, unable to mend something that I did not determine alone. He started coming late, armed with excuses – the workload in the office; the friends with a problem that only he could solve; the tiredness, first generally, then in bed; and finally, outright indifference. Passion, that was like a tonic in our life, withered. It felt like an ugly, shrinking part of my body. The absence of it singed like fire on the skin. (p. 150)

With this painfully dissipating love, Doreen has to recourse back to the guiding ideas of her mother and great aunt, Aunt Mai, in order not to allow depression to consume her. Hence:

Looking at my mother’s life as it passed before my eyes, I again recognised how she had refused to let the apathy home in her flesh like a disease. Mother had fought life with a keen love for life. Fight life with life! Don’t let them refuse you now! I could here her voice as if she was standing right beside me in that minute.’ (p. 168).

This becomes a new daemon that drives her on into the refusal to collapse, wither away as just another domestic object, a housewife. She subsequently devises and internalises a strategy of overcoming the neglect by her husband. The salvation, she realises, lies in feeling nothing when he is away, when she sees him, when she hears his voice, when he
is near her, because ultimately, ‘When you feel nothing, you are free’ (p. 152). She also re-discovers the necessity of women communion in helping one resist collapsing into insidious ennui:

*River Pebbles Club* had taught me that maintaining friendship with colleagues at work was as important and delicate as keeping lovers, so I trod carefully. I spent time with fellow women teachers, inviting them to my house, going window shopping together, going to the tailors and to the goldsmith. (p. 154)

Through Aunt Mai, Doreen revisits and internalises the Socratic philosophy of the unexamined life not being worth living, thus she realises the necessity to reflect about life carefully. Aunt Mai advises her, ‘Sit down until your buttocks touch the grass and think. Look around you’ (p. 164). From this counsel and in deeply engaging the metaphor of the spider’s web, she conceptualises as well as crystallises the woman’s place in the labyrinthined social and gender matrix:

I draw lessons from the spider’s web, woven from the very juices of its stomach to attract others to the web, and kill them – for itself! How do women fit in the social web, in the norms and traditions perpetuated and maintained to keep order, strengthen identity and maintain peace? In this web, she must learn to hide exuberance from her inner feelings because the expression of it may be unacceptable; she must be able to have children; she must have a male child; must be a proper Mrs someone; she should *never* have a child before marriage; she must bear the right number of sons, and on and on … (158)

Within the framework of this ‘gender code’, woman is a being to be dictated to by the society in its male-devised norms of acceptable behaviour and traditions. Consequently, failure to fulfil these traditions or adhere to the behaviour ostracises her.

On the phenomenon of tradition and women’s sexuality Katrak has elaborately argued that:

Tradition often mystifies actual control over female sexuality. Tradition is often problematically ahistoricised, so that cultural traditions are presented in dominant ideologies as timeless and totalising, whereas, in fact, tradition is dynamic, as well as historically and culturally specific. Female sexuality is controlled effectively through a reifying of tradition. Tradition is gendered so that the same elements of tradition, such as religious belief, education, dress codes, freedom of movement are enforced very differently on males versus females. A struggle over what is tradition is a battle over the female bodies – how to control it and keep it familiar within recognisable and legitimised patriarchal codes. (2006, p. 159)
As a young girl in the process of growing up, Doreen wonders about the hold of ‘tradition’ on the society she and her female relations inhabit when Aunt Mai tells her about her mother, Foibe, that, “‘She was too young to understand tradition’” (p. 101), when confounded with the fact that she was pregnant before being ‘given off to a man for marriage …’ (ibid., emphasis added). Paradoxically, the boys and men in this society (the same as we have observed of Goora in Weevil) are not ostracised in any significant manner whenever they make unmarried girls pregnant. The Otherising binary is thus already established and ‘tradition’ is only applicable to the girls and women. Doreen narrates:

Mother found out that she was different from her brothers. That if they both engaged in sex, nothing would happen to them, because their bodies did not hold and nurture babies, and in so being, nature had exempted them from shame! And then, mother further learnt, that by just being pregnant, her own parents could be ashamed of her and because they could not relate to shame, they could chase her away without remorse. (p. 94)

The woman’s body, therefore, becomes an object for the men to control and subdue as their own bodies cannot show obvious signs of the degeneracy that is brought about by nurture as is the case with the women. And because of the ‘helplessness’ of the women in the whole male/female matrix, Foibe’s mother could not protect her as she (the mother) ‘had closed herself inside the house and let the father chase his daughter away’ (ibid). Foibe’s mother’s condition is thus another predicament of the ambivalence inherent in the society, so that despite the fact she is aware of the nature of the oppression of women and girls, she remains ‘closed in’ because of the fear of being accused as being part of the ‘shame’. Aunt Mai captures Foibe’s mother’s predicament when she says that she (the mother) ‘was too frightened by the time all came to light’ (p. 101).

It is appropriate to recourse back to young Doreen’s and other young girls’ perception of the world of men and boys in the society in the text, as this offers necessary insights in understanding the society’s gendered discourse edifices:

One day in school, close to end of term, one thin and shy girl said, “Sometimes I hate home.”
“Why?” several girls chanted.
“Agh, I just hate it,” she said again. And the girls started hazarding guesses, pestering her until, in order to refute the strange allegations, spurted, “Its [sic] my father. He demands all the meat in the food and only gives some to my brothers
and never to us girls. Mother does everything he says. It is not really the food as such, but, I just hate it.” (p. 84)

To this particular girl, therefore, it is also the larger system that manages to create men and boys as superior and in the process precludes her that she loathes. And in this revelation of ‘hate’, we realise that it is an echo that rings true with most of the girls; ‘The sharp edges of her statement knocked against the total silence that followed. Then the echo of that declaration opened a flood. The dormitory came awake: ‘Men have such big stomachs! They are gluttons. They are unkind. So selfish! (ibid.)’ But this also puts under focus the participation of women in this process of decentring girls in the family. Kabeer (2004) is right in her reading of the problematic of negotiating forms of gender inequality that seem to have been chosen by women themselves (p. 24). She goes on to hold that:

... women’s adherence to social norms and practices associated with son preference, discriminating against daughters in the allocation of food and basic health care to the extent of compromising the survival chances of the girl child ... are examples of behaviour in which women’s internalisation of their own lesser status in society leads them to discriminate against other females in the society. (ibid.)

In Doreen’s case it becomes even more disturbing. Even though her father was ‘absent’, and thus she could not participate much as the other girls ‘took over the conversation, discussing the matter hotly, each citing varying examples and situations’ (pp. 84-85), she notes, ‘A window of understanding opened in me, and I knew; o, yes, boys are as special as fathers’ (p. 85). At play in this society is thus a system that is well entrenched and ‘that deprived some people for the benefit of others’ (ibid.). Doreen questions the root of the tradition or doxa (in Bourdieu’s understanding of the unexamined culture and beliefs that have been ingrained by society’s members and thus are often undiscussed, unnamed, admitted without argument or scrutiny [1977]) thus:

I lived with great Aunt Mai’s statement [Mai’s observation that Foibe was too young to understand tradition by the time she was chased away from home by her father] throughout my youth, wondering about society and tradition. How could it acknowledge the nature that ensured its survival as crime? How could it gang up against its own kind, suddenly finding worthlessness where before there was pride and ownership? What caused that shift of value? (p. 101)
To confront the traditions that define her and the women folk within parameters that are female occluding, therefore, Doreen struggles with the strategies employed by the women she has come into contact with, and thus who hold influence on her, for her own survival. She believes that, ‘the stories of motherhood are what marks women and shape their lives. And when these stories are traced within the matrix, they are found to loop the lives of all women’s children, female and male’ (p. 93). She examines these stories of motherhood by focusing on the societal constructed ‘crimes’ of having only one son (as is the case with Martin’s mother) or having a child outside the confines of the accepted in the society (as is the case with Foibe). Then she contextualises these women’s stories, ‘Martin’s mother had her story start with abandonment, Foibe Seko’s started with love, naively and abundantly given, cured and wrapped in the seeming warmth of man’s incessant lust, then later betrayed’ (ibid.).

Informed by such knowledge, she sees her survival as hinging on grappling with these women’s narratives of engagement with the society in order to live, not to be erased from the collective society’s memory. She, in turn, visualises ‘three reactions from which to choose a way for my salvation: Great Aunt Mai: adapt and master the skills of survival. Mother: rebel and have enough steel in yourself to survive. Martin’s mother: corrode your inside with bitterness and use it as poison’ (p. 158). In all these women, therefore, are to be found various ways of grappling with power and authority in the society and a determination to collapse the trapping maze of patriarchy that makes a woman to be a ‘social orphan just by being born a woman’, as Aunt Mai variously holds in the text. However, these reactions may be destructive even to the womenfolk themselves as in the case of Martin’s mother; and, therefore, it also calls on Doreen to eclectically examine each of them in order to purposefully re-orient her own path of action and live a value-laden life.

It is in Aunt Mai’s woman wisdom that Doreen registers what seems to be enduring solace and strength to engage power and authority. Doreen may have the notion (as also do the younger women who interact with the older women protagonists of Moment, or Nkwanzi about Senga in Weevil) that Aunt Mai ‘was already outdated’ (p. 81), yet in her ‘outdated’ logic is to be found the profoundest propositions concerning
men/women relations in the text. To her, the girl child is ‘the laughter that brings tears’ (p. 81). She continues to expound that:

When a girl is betrothed, she is made to sit down until her buttocks touch the grass and told: A suitor is good, always good before he lures you into bed and enters you between your legs. A suitor is good before then, because, he hungers for you. His tongue hangs out with desire and he sweats to please you so you can reveal the precious secret you carry with you. (p. 81)

To Aunt Mai, the ‘precious secret’ should be a treasure for the girl to guard in order to prevent the would-be husbands from abandoning her once gratified with the deflowering of the unsuspecting girl. Aunt Mai’s reasoning is that ‘a man’s love is simple and short-lived. A man’s memory of love is shorter than his index finger, so you must be his by having you in his house, because then he can neither forget nor abandon you’ (p. 81). This may indeed appear fossilised thought in modern times. Yet in this ‘outdatedness’ lies a strategy for resistance that Doreen comes to utilise later on as her marriage to Martin crumbles and she realises the short dewy nature of a man’s love. She comes to the understanding that in order to fulfil herself and at the same time avoid the socialised stigmas of divorce and single parenthood, she must appropriate the concept of ‘being his’ and employ it to her advantage. Hence, Doreen continues being the ‘timid’ Mrs Patrick in the house, but constructs other own spaces of human fulfilment, as we see in her relationship with her body, with the painter-former diplomat, Joseph, fellow teachers, and, most importantly, her daughter.

As her marriage relationship with Martin takes a down-turn, Doreen badly neglects her body. She observes:

I ate everything, including the stuff I prepared myself, and that which I bought when I went out of the house. It was as though I needed to smother the churning in the body with the pile of food. I ballooned everywhere, my stomach swelled, my breasts, ankles, hands fattened. My whole body sagged, overrun by too much weight and the gravity of abandonment. I developed a hatred for mirrors! (p. 151)

It is the image of this ‘abandoned’ body that gives her the tacit knowledge that she was allowing herself to collapse. Hence, ‘One day, I looked at myself in the mirror, by accident really, because I didn’t mean to, and I saw something too obese to be me!’ (ibid.) It is upon this that she resolves to ‘let the heartache lie ...’ to ‘[a]rrest the passion’
And for this resolve she frees herself from the trap that she was partly contributing to lay for her own destruction.

It is also remarkable how Aunt Mai managed to rescue Doreen’s mother, Foibe, from the ‘system’ upon the rejection by her family for the shame of being pregnant when not ‘officially given out’ for marriage. Doreen narrates the intervention of Aunt Mai who became the women’s saviour:

who helped Mother cross the shaky bridge to independence. As her custodian through a loop-hole of the same social code that chased her away from her parent’s home, Aunt Mai, tended motherhood in my mother. She knew the psychological harm that came to girls treated like that, she watched out for the signs, averting them tactfully, indulging the young girl like a doctor who knows her patient well. (p. 118)

It is this compassionate attitude and thoughtful wisdom in Aunt Mai that eventually sustain Doreen and her mother. Thus, when Doreen thinks she needs counsel from the women in her life about her increasingly difficult marriage, she decides on ‘Aunt Mai, the more practical one, more down to earth Mai who did not step on a hurt to feel the harshness of its thorn before she could know how to deal with it … [and who] went around a hurt, advising you not to step on it too long, if you must (p. 162).’

Concerning the issue of a woman’s ability to understand events of conception, Aunt Mai holds that a woman would always know, ‘because she has knowledge of her man, and she has knowledge of her body’ (p. 163). Aunt Mai, therefore, reasserts the power inherent in women’s close knowledge of their bodies and ability to control their sexualities to their advantages in a male-dominated society. Thus to Doreen, the ‘woman wisdom’ given to her soul, is couched in Aunt Mai’s statement: “Sit down until your buttocks touch the grass and think. Look around you. Now, go to your husband’” (p. 164).

Indeed, these lessons free her from insidious ennui, and in Joseph she revives her spirit to confront the public spaces and, inside them, make value-laden meaning and purpose for her life. She also learns how to paint; transforming her inner feelings into public subjects to be interrogated and re-evaluated.

It is in Joseph that Doreen is sure to find a liberal humanist voice that would much embolden her to engage in the possibilities of altering patriarchal social codes, for as
Cudd has opined, ‘humanism cannot begin without the presence of some who are already persuaded that there is some oppression and that it can be changed. These are the persons with whom we must work and whose work we must follow in order to end the oppression of women’ (2005, p. 180). With Joseph, therefore, there is bound to be a revolution in ideas; a revolution that critically dissects the assumed gender divides that she has been exposed to in her various encounters with men, especially the two previous men who have been part of her love story, Zima and Martin. Once in Joseph’s house, she encounters the beauty of art and that transformatively transfers her into the various spaces created by art that leave open possibilities of the interpretation of human existence and gender interactions.

The reflection on the paintings is worth quoting in detail as it provides us with the significance of the relationship that is bound to form between the two; as well as the salvational and cathartic function of art in freeing the woman’s (Doreen’s) mind and bringing her to her situation in a more informed view.

The paintings were done in oil, the artist achieving a spectacular harmony between the colors and the subject: the women. The women were almost color itself, brilliant red, yellow and green. I observed the painting for a long time, trying to discover something unique that was expressed in the women’s eyes, but I saw only what they were doing. I looked at the land in limbo for a long time, at the roots cutting through stone, wandering through a parched earth so totally blind to their need! (p. 173)

It thus remains to be seen whether in the end Doreen will be able to find water for the ‘parched earth’ that her being was increasingly becoming. She wonders whether the searching for that space of comfort would ever stop. But most of all, she concedes ‘[t]he effect of the painting created in me a sense of urgency, a kind of unease I could not immediately understand’ (ibid.). The urgency is in her endeavouring to situate herself, recovering her increasingly shrinking degree of agency.

Joseph thus manifests as the one, in his liberal humanist philosophies, who would help her, in part, realise agency and human freedom. This male shepherding may appear problematical in the wider project of women empowerment. And as Katrak has argued, ‘[i]f male privilege and authority are reconfigured only through the goodwill of exceptional men … then this is hardly the only way to bring about social change’ (2006, pp. 244-245). However, it cannot be denied that it is in the concerted effort of both men
and women in the society, especially the postcolony like the one Doreen inhabits, that there can emerge a meaningful co-existence of both genders. And it is this co-existence without necessarily over-privileging any of the genders that Lema brings out in her introduction of Joseph in the narrative. Here, the narrative itself may sound stretched by the over-reliance on didacticism such as Joseph’s explication of patriarchy:

He explained the meaning of patriarchy. “It is a social system which has defined how men and women will relate in all spheres of life, including private life, right down to the way we love and have sex. It has determined how a father, brother, husband, uncle will treat the woman – the wife, sister, mother, and daughter related to them. It is an ideology that has given the man the authority to decide, to act, to give or withhold, to access or retain anything, really, almost everything. It is complex. It is a web in which, ultimately, even those privileged can become victims … like myself. (p. 182)

In this explanation, perhaps the presumed naivety of Doreen is unwarranted given that all through she has been battling ‘such a system’, hence the unconvincing nature of the astonishment, ‘I was agape. “A system! You mean who designed it? What is ideology anyway?”’ (p. 182); and, ‘He laughed, Joseph laughed at me that day. A hearty, racy laugh that transformed his face’ (ibid.). Still, in Joseph’s wider view and that draws from various experiences, there is the realisation that she stands to fortify her understanding of society’s gendered expectations and politics. This is necessary as it, coupled with her education and interaction with the other women such as Aunt Mai, is capable of enabling her to forge more pronounced means of resistance.

After the encounter with Joseph, and in perceptive refection, she rethinks her relationship with her husband:

It was not his fault, I resolved. It was the fault of this system that taught him how to be a man, that gave conditions for being a man, giving him criteria which did not apply. It was his relatives, the keepers of tradition who played with his mind, toyed with his heart until Martin thought the desire to have a male child was his, that his wonderful girl child who he loved was inadequate qualification for acceptance into the cult of manhood! (pp. 185-186)

In this enlarged awareness, she comes to ingrain the more Aunt Mai’s counsel of ‘Look around you, carefully, and give your man the child he craves for! It is women who look for a child, not men’ (p. 186). She observes:

That good old woman wisdom which had thrown my mind in total disarray had been used as a strategy to beat down the male order! Honestly! A woman is a
dangerous guerrilla fighter. Fight life with life. My mother had shown me all the time. Smart women. Oh, I am so thick, how could I not even have sensed it? (ibid.)

Ultimately, she regains agency in her life, as she notes, ‘My resolve acted on my mind like warm, soapy water acts on dishes’ (ibid.). Her mind is thus opened up for serious engagement with Otherising systems; she becomes a fighter, as well as learns how to resist her husband, Martin, without necessarily having to get out of the marriage arrangement. What is evident though is that the relationship between the two would no longer be solely anchored on systems that de-centre the woman. Doreen would be an active agent in the new relationship.

*Earth*’s portrayal of Joseph is also unique in the way it espouses a relationship that is enviable between men and women in the society. Lema’s Joseph-Doreen sub-narrative is thus a discourse that privileges the humanness of people in the society and not that which creates binaries between men and women. As a result, Doreen realises how in her life she has been denied the agency and power as well as authority of voice: ‘In most of my life, I have listened to men talk, say things to me that they believed in or did not like; things they did or planned to do and how. They have wanted me to listen but not comment or give my opinion and I have obliged. …They have always talked to me’ (p. 187).

This realisation then brings her to reflect generally about the woman condition as well as her interaction with the men counterparts:

I have observed that while women tend to talk with each other, men talk to women; they tell them things. Men think about what is best for women, they generate ideas which women internalise. Men create a life for women to live in and enjoy themselves and this makes women get attached to them. I suppose that is how a woman’s voice is killed, gently, so that there is no resistance or complaint when they find themselves voiceless before men. (p. 188)

As Spivak has argued of ethical singularity, the engagement of the Other in non-essential, non-crisis terms, ‘when we engage profoundly with one person, the responses come from both sides: this is responsibility and accountability. …The object of ethical action is not an object of benevolence, for here responses flow from both sides’ (1996, pp. 269-70). This, then, is the relationship that is envisioned between the man Joseph and the woman.
Doreen. It is also the relationship that *Earth* hopes to instil in the society’s collective memory. As Troemel-Ploetz (1998) has commented:

Men are used to dominating women; they do it especially in conversations: they set the tone as soon as they enter a conversation, they declare themselves expert for any topic, they expect and get attention and support from their female conversational partners, they expect and get space to present their topics and, above all, themselves – their conversational success is being produced by the participants in that conversation. … Women, on the other hand, have conversational obligations: they must not disturb men in their dominating and imposing behaviour; they must support their topics, wait with their own topics, give men attention, take them seriously at all times, and above all, listen and help them to their conversational success. (p. 447)

This is the socialisation that Doreen has been exposed to. However, in her new enlightenment, in a way, she rediscovers her voice, and in this rediscovery, there is the resistance needed to recapture her own authority. She, subsequently, accepts Joseph into her life. Similarly, she re-visits her communication with Zima, who is now married, and who in the communication reminds her that in the River Pebbles Club endeavour, she had left a legacy at her former school and thus ‘Women teachers and even the men talk about [her] all the time’ (p. 209). This ‘reminder’ should, to a small degree, register in her a sense of self-confidence, ability and authority in her activities and actions. And though with the acceptance of Joseph into her life she is ‘scared by the thought that I could find love in my heart for two men’ (ibid.); it is the engagement with these men as an agent and not in the binary of subject/object that issues out as a form of resistance to men’s power and patriarchal systemisation of existence in the society. As well, she collapses the ideology of victimhood that had started eating her away. In hook’s argument, ‘To name oneself a victim is to deny agency’ (qtd. in Elia, 1999, p. 144). Thus, Doreen seeks to become a more active subject in her interactions with the society, because, in hooks reading again, ‘Despair and a feeling of hopelessness are central to the formation of a psychology of victimisation’ (ibid.).

The opportunity of learning how to paint opens up space for Doreen to free her mind and body. Thus, she notes, ‘I took my mind away from everything. It put expectation into my life. I waited for the opportunity to go back to the studio, to handle paint, to hold a brush’ (p. 210). The freeing of the mind enables her to also re-memory her relationship with the men who have been part of her being. She holds:
In the beginning, I used to feel nervous, thinking of Martin in Joseph’s house, in his presence. But, more and more, as time went on, I relaxed and let my thoughts flow freely, whether they were of Martin or Zima or mother and Godbless. I would think of these people as I mixed colours or painted or framed the canvas ready for work, and I was amazed at how easily my mind released them. (p. 212)

The release of mind is necessary as it assures her of her own worth, the assurance that emboldens her into a sense of struggle towards self-fulfilment without undue recourse to the Otherisation in the society and relational definitions, in this case, her worth being measured as per the dictates of the men she has interacted with.

4.5 Literary Aesthetics in Earth

Part one of Earth is configured with the epigraph quoted from Joseph Jastrab’s book Sacred Manhood, Sacred Earth (1994), ‘Remember there are many paths, but the only one that matters is the path with heart. Stay true to its lead, and walk its full length’ (p. 2). This epigraph appropriately serves the function of indicating the central concern of the text. It cogently captures the aspirations, struggles and hopes of the women protagonist characters in the novel as they struggle through the labyrinthine that is the patriarchal society they inhabit.

In the formative pages of the novel, Lema, through the narrative voice of Doreen, brings forth the idea of narrative and narration. Doreen informs the reader:

And all the time my mind is telling itself stories. My stories, your stories. Our stories. Silently, it extracts these stories from the raw matter of living, matter coughed up like lava from the melted core of existence, mine, yours, ours. There is no timeframe to the stories, to their evolution, they are always there, always bubbling up and sinking back into the lava. (p. 3)

The beauty of the story then is foregrounded and the reader invited into the story, the narrative and its narration. At once the reader and the narrator are asked to identify with each other, but also the narrator has to lay out the story that is Earth.

One of the arresting features in Earth is the manner in which the stories of the protagonist women characters, Foibe and Doreen Seko, conflate and even at times act oppositionally. Bennet and Royle (1999) have argued that, ‘... it is the relation between narrative and ‘non-’ or ‘anti-narrative’ elements that fascinate and disturb. Aspects such as description, digression, suspension, aporia, and self-reflection, temporal and causal
disorders are often what are most compelling in narrative’ (p. 61). The ‘story’ thus carries the potency for liberation to Doreen and her mother, Foibe, as ‘narrative power ... may be the only strategy left for the weak and dispossessed: without narrative power, they may not be heard’ (ibid., p. 60). It is through this aspect of all the time the mind telling itself stories then, and these stories being artfully infused with the ‘non-narrative’, that we get the novel’s narrative emerging as cautionary and liberatory.

Outstanding in the text is also the utilisation of structuring tropes that informingly run through it. These figures and symbology include: the spider’s web (pp. 4, 5 ...); the concept of the social orphan (pp. 5, 120 ...); the onion and its layers (p. 51), so that ‘Human life was like an onion ... and one does not know the onion without the knowledge of its layers’ (ibid.); daemon (running through the text); and parched earth (p. 173...). These give the novel a connectedness of the subject/theme and controlled, measured sense of narration.

The ‘daemon’ symbol as it runs in the text (pp. 26, 29, 43-44, 57, 58 ...) invokes the Socratic idea of the inner voice that brings forth inner self-searching reflection necessary in arriving at sound judgement. Doreen may not so much be encrusted in deep-probing Socratic thought, but in the ‘daemon voice’, we see a successful attempt on the part of Lema to aesthetically ornament the narrative by infusing in it a controlling perspective of narration that gives it epistemic as well as epiphanic power. In the voice of the daemon, we visualise the Socratic quest-mottos of ‘know thyself’ and ‘the unexamined life is not worth living’. Indeed, Doreen reflects, ‘The daemon laughed. Know yourself, it whispered’ (p. 156).

The metaphor of ‘parched earth’, as best exemplified in the painting by Joseph, brings out the necessity for Doreen as a woman to constantly endeavour to seek human comfort and nourishment in order not to dry up emotionally and physically. It is narrated in the novel:

The paintings were done in oil, the artist achieving a spectacular harmony between the colours and the subject: the women. The women were almost colour itself, brilliant red, yellow and green. I observed the painting for a long time, trying to discover something unique that was expressed in the women’s eyes, but I saw only what they were doing. I looked at the land in limbo for a long time, at the roots cutting through stone, wandering through a parched earth so totally blind to their need. (p. 173)
Previously, she had observed, There was another painting of a land in limbo, a land threatened by severe drought, of parched earth needing rain. The light was focused on the roots, shrivelled and gnarled under the ground, searching for water’ (p. 172). The metaphor of ‘parched earth’ issues out in the novel as a major trope, and is adroitly handled to read into the key search for the protagonist women characters in Earth: ‘trying to find our way towards that spot, that warm, keenly desired area of absolute comfort’ (p. 3). No wonder then that the diplomat-painter’s wife, Justine, when leaving him for her seemingly more affectionate lover, only accepts as gift the painting ‘Parched Earth Needing Water’ (p. 215).

There are also in the text some powerful similes such as ‘The girl carried sadness like a tarnished sheen underneath the youthfulness of her face’ (p. 113). This appropriately mirrors the kind of dehumanisation that Foibe encounters on discovery of her society ‘unsanctioned’ liaison with Sebastian. Equally powerful is the simile that is used by Doreen in summation of the story of her mother and which contextually reads into the one above, ‘That was my mother’s story, gathered from people’s words and gestures, from the silent language of her eyes. A story strung together, like a necklace of gemstones in different colours’ (p. 116).

There is as well in Earth the usage of captivating aphorisms and symbolic phrases especially as employed by Aunt Mai. For instance, in her hold that a girl child is the laughter that brings tears (p. 81), Lema seems to be offering a cogent summation of the underprivileged socio-cultural space of the girl child in the male-dominated societies like the one that the narrative captures. And in her admonition of Doreen when she goes to her for counsel on how to cope with a husband fixated on the idea of a boy-child, she holds, ‘Sit down until your buttocks touch the grass and think. Look around you’ (p. 164). Then on the issue of the problematic of woman in a patriarchal milieu, she tells Foibe that a woman ‘becomes a social orphan just by being woman’ (p. 120). In these, Lema has captured the basic thematic leitmotif that she is advancing in the novel: the problematised space of women and girls in a patriarchal societal set-up, and that they have to be cautious in how they negotiate through.
Lema’s creation of the character of Foibe is also remarkable. Foibe is given to short, pithy responses in her dialogue/monologue. Doreen says that she only acknowledged things with few words (p. 86). Thus: ‘I thank you God’s child’ (ibid.); and on Godbless’ anger at the fact that Doreen could just ‘sanction’ marriage proceedings without informing the immediate family, she consoles him ‘Sit down child and rest your soul’ (p. 87); and on being informed by Doreen that the man in question, Martin Patrick, would be coming to visit, she responds ‘It is your affair. You will see what to do’ (p. 89). Even the questions that she asks whenever faced with some unexpected realities, as in the case when Godbless is hell-bent on knowing the identity of his father, are measured, loaded and self-reflexive. In this case she poses: ‘What is this he seeks?’ (p. 102). And whenever she was asked about her ‘illicit affair’ with Sebastian, the narrative informs us that she would reflect, ‘What did people want from me?’ (p. 104). In these responses, in their measured speech, Lema brings out aporetic reflections that give the novel the idea of perpetual search, a thing that her major characters are indeed engaged in.

The philosophical reflections and psychological insights that are at times recoursed to in the novel also beautify its prose:

But the common, the banal, the embodiments of great appetites which feed into our life of matter surrounds us like the thin translucent sheath marking the immediate boundary of fetus space within the mother’s womb. Often, because of this sheath shrouding our mind’s eye, we never see the magic when it comes. We are always, as we live the every day life, on the threshold of truth. Always on the threshold of knowing love, or magic or God, because magic lives in the midst of our life. (p. 23)

And when these reflections are couched in parallelistic constructions, they emerge even more finely turned out. In reflecting on the ‘daemon’s’ counselling, the narrative renders:

Believe in the power of your own love, which has the potency to surmount doubt and impatience, so you can make real what you desire. Believe in the essence of your feelings, in their meaning, now in the realm of the Spirit. Believe in the reason for their being and the necessity for their realisation. (p. 43-44)

Or when Doreen is re-memorying her childhood:

I never would dare use salt water to clean a scrape, so I left it uncleaned, the rest of the day, looking at it every so often, feeling a wave of self pity come over me. I wilted, because of the unsatisfied urge that hurt like a scald. I never could fill that void with anything, all the way into adulthood. (p. 19)
It is also important to note Lema descriptions especially when they involve introspective reflection. For example, Doreen, prior to the visit by Martin, ponders:

I became the underground stream seeking an outlet, struggling to push towards open air, towards the crack in the earth through which it must channel its own current, spring out and flow upon the earth, to be drunk, to cool, to elate ... I floated with the daemon inside me, I burned with it, and in that time, I understood its restlessness. (pp. 47-48)

And on the institution of marriage:

Marriage is like walking in the rain, in the cold, wet season, without an umbrella. You get soaked through to the skin before you know what’s happened. You get possessed by the rain, by the wet clothes which cling to your body, marking its curves out like a claimed territory. Then, you are imprisoned in that state, that of the rain falling on you and the clothes possessing your body like a territory. (p. 141)

And there is also the poetic rendition that comes into the narrative:

Godbless got a piece of land, a place, his own soil and rocks and trees. A place where he could settle, where the spirits which love life more than systems would be warm and friendly. A place. His own piece of earth that would finally accept his bones. (p. 122)

In such concentrated and vivid description, Lema manages to give her characters and their circumstances a sense of immediacy in their fulfilments (or lack of), aspirations and desires.

One may take aesthetic exception to some epigraphic quotations such as the ones that set out part two (p. 62) and three (p. 140) of the novel, from Andrea Dworkin’s *Intercourse* (1984), and Joseph Jastrab’s *Sacred Manhood, Sacred Earth*, respectively, for their ‘over-theorisation’ of the narrative, making the story in some episodes seem strained towards justifying feminist theory.

As well, at times the narrative lapses into some ‘reportage’ that is unconvincing:

The waiters were surprised to learn that it was a wedding, with a record crowd of four people. We told them that it was all we had money for. We were so happy; they changed their minds about the relevance of big weddings and later told us that ours was a good idea. (p. 68)
This ‘reportage’ is also evident in the scenes that tell of the coming of Martin to get Doreen’s hand in marriage (pp. 125-126). The traditional chanting itself by Uncle Simbo and Aunt Mai would have given the event and the narrative more flavour compared to the reporting that is recoursed to and the summation, ‘The rituals, the food, the drinks, the friendship, it felt truly like a celebration’ (p. 126).

But then even in such lapses and narrative deficiencies, there are interspersions of interesting prose. This, for instance, is an appropriate counter-example to the one given above (p. 68 of *Earth*):

We explored the landscapes of our bodies, travelling over the plains and up the mountains and through the forests. We swam in the rivers, frolicking in the deep ends like the blessed fish. We basked on the beaches, encouraged by the softness of their curves and mounds, shining like oiled guards under the sun of laughter and kisses until the skin tinged with tension and heat from touch. (p. 69)

Or even more reflexively ‘But still, the memory cushions my hurt with warmth, it soothes my parched soul so that the stories that live in my head are released, coming alive to pry the heart, looking for an act of grace in it all to enable me to continue living’ (p. 72).

In the utilisation of the epistolary mode of narration especially in scenes where speech may seem dauntingly difficult because of the emotions involved, Lema manages to capture the attention of the reader. This is best done when Joseph brings out the letters his wife’s lover was writing her (p. 194), and Godbless’ letter about his preparations in getting married and also having at last ‘confronted’ his father (p. 190). In these two instances, we come to realise the prevailing psychological orientations of the characters involved.

The infusion of poetry equally advances the central thematic of the text, so that in Fe’s, Joseph’s son with his erstwhile wife Justine, poem, ‘Grandmother & I’ (pp. 200-201), there emerges a conversational communion about the hallowed space that a woman should inhabit in the society because of her role in various aspects of nurturing the essence of being and existence. Fe writes:

She said, the source of the river dried up
when they starved her centre
Now, the riverbed is scorched and parched
The stones burn like her own ache
where her bones meet. (p. 201)
In *Earth*, Lema manages to fuse form and content for a whole that is satisfying. It is partly for this reason that the study has posited the text as occupying a central space in the East African literary tradition.

### 4.6 Summation: New Mythos of Patriarchal Power/Authority Engagement in *Earth*

As *Earth* comes to textual closure and after an interactive communion between Doreen and Joseph, we vision a love story that is full of empowerment for the woman, one that bestows on her power and authority as agent and active narrator in the grand narrative of men/women relationship. Thus, Doreen recollects of their intimate presence at Joseph’s home, ‘I think everything stood still as I sobered up, as if to find my bearings, my anchor in a strong current. In that very brief instant outside time, the voice rose again; *It’s up to you. It’s all up to you, Doreen… to find your own path…’* (p. 223). But, above all, it is her new awareness that is most capable of transforming her. Batliwala frames it appropriately when she notes that:

… the exercise of informed choice within an expanding framework of information, knowledge and analysis … a process which must enable women to discover new possibilities, new options … a growing repertoire of choices … to independently struggle for changes in their material conditions of existence, their personal lives and their treatment in the public sphere. …The process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power. (Qtd. in Kabeer, 2004, p. 28)

Doreen’s circumstances are somewhat different compared to those of the other two women; her mother and Aunt Mai. She is educated and is a teacher, and thus is able to provide for herself as a professional woman. Spaces for her entry into the public sphere are also more open, because as a teacher her ‘opinion’ has some strength and voice. Still, her story and that of the two women is one in a way. As Aunt Mai had told Foibe on her expulsion from her father’s home, ‘A woman becomes a social orphan just by being a woman’ (p. 120). Nnaemeka has argued that:

The question of women’s subordination and oppression is a reality that faces women in their quotidian lives. The female characters are victims of multiple oppressions that are internally generated by oppressive customs and practices and externally induced by an equally oppressive, inegalitarian world order. (1997, p. 21)
The relatedness of women’s circumstances that Aunt Mai alludes to in her logic of woman as social orphan is underscored by Nnaemeka. It is, therefore, to a large degree, the communion with these women and the internalisation of their philosophies of existence that makes Doreen to rediscover herself, strengthen her ‘opinion’.

Aunt Mai’s philosophies may sound out-dated, but they continue emerging with newer strengths and realities all the time Doreen revisits them. Thus, Doreen’s understanding of Aunt Mai evokes one of the greatest moments of women resistance, resilience and communion of purpose in the text:

… my mind is used to travelling, everywhere, places I have been and have not been, crossing future times and past times, spinning webs like the spider, trying to weave a life which is not a death trap like the spider’s. Aunt Mai long adapted to living in the social web, seemingly not disturbed by the questions it raises would probably tell me, “That is just how things are.” I came to learn that she knew so much more than the way things were, but it was her way of telling me that I cannot know all things at once, every knowledge has its time. She told me once, “A woman is a social orphan truly”, referring to my mother, but Aunt Mai had proceeded to wear down the silk threads, by doing the things that gave the social orphan a parent. I realised as I talked to her more, that Great Aunt Mai was shrewd but a very loving woman. She became our pillar of strength, for mother and especially for me. She would say, “that is how things are, but would then undermine, in her own subtle way, that law which made things that way. When I became a teacher and went home with presents for her and Uncle Simbo, as well as my mother and all my brothers, she said, “Ah, truly, God’s child, you have got a husband now. This job of yours is the real (emphasis in the original) husband. Hold onto it like life.” (pp. 5-6)

Aunt Mai is involved in the subversion of ‘the way things are’, the status quo, and particularly as it involves the woman condition in the society. In her wisdom, she manages to ‘parent’ both Doreen and her mother, Foibe, and thus lessening the outsider experience of a woman as ‘social orphan’. In Doreen’s attainment of economic self-sufficiency by gaining a job as a teacher, Aunt Mai visions the job as a major preoccupation that should be guarded jealously, because of its liberational potential, it is the real husband. Thus, to Aunt Mai, true emancipation from the societal structures and codes that enhance the perpetuation of the status of woman as social orphan can only come through gainful employment and work by the woman and not through marriage to a man (if her thought could be stretched, man becomes the nominal husband). This is the realisation that Doreen comes to once her marriage slowly disintegrates and the ‘power’
in being Mrs Patrick manifests as useless and with no guarantees for protecting woman as a social orphan; it rather exacerbates the orphan-hood.

The independence of her mother, on the other hand, remains Doreen’s guiding leitmotif in life. She notes:

By the time I grew up to recognise things, Mother was a woman who had reached a realisation that her strength, and the basis for her life and happiness, was in the value of her labour. She nurtured us to believe the same. She had learned also that a woman’s sexual life must be hers, to own and control, utterly. So, the men she slept with were not, could not, be part of our life. (pp. 120-121)

It is thus, among other things, in the lesson that a woman’s sexual life should be hers to own and control that she, Doreen, manages to free her sexuality and body from the debilitating demands by the patriarchally informed society that she inhabits. She contests the society’s hold that she can only be defined meaningfully as a worthy member by having a baby boy and limiting her presence to issues domestic.

In their timeless search for expansion, these women reconstruct the meaning of womanhood, marriage, sexuality, and masculine/feminine binary. In this reconstruction, the resultant new mythos is that of seriously engaging patriarchal authority, and disrupting its unbearable excesses at their own volition and on their own terms. The text, Earth, does not lend itself to essentialist feminist preoccupations, but rather maps women’s self-determination to create useful spaces, both private and public, of communication and existence. Patriarchal narratives of women subordination and disempowerment are at once disturbed and placed in continuous restorying. Therefore, Earth illustrates the ‘usefulness of the literary and aesthetic as evocative avenues for imagining social change in women’s lives’ (Katrak, 2006, p. 245).

In the next chapter of the study, Moment, Weevil and Earth are situated within the East African literary canon as art that helps to re-configure power/authority matrix in the East African postcolony; as well as shape the region’s literary tradition, helping to adequately understand the literature in English of East Africa which has for a long time been couched in the male writing repertoire.
CHAPTER FIVE

PRESENT MOMENT’S, INVISIBLE WEEVIL’S AND PARCHED EARTH’S SPACE IN THE EAST AFRICAN LITERARY CANON

There is no such thing as a literary work or tradition which is valuable in itself, regardless of what anyone might have said or come to say about it. ‘Value’ is a transitive term: it means whatever is valued by certain people in specific situations, according to particular criteria and in the light of given purposes.

-- Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction, 1983, p. 11

This chapter re-examines the East African literary canon and situates The Present Moment, The Invisible Weevil, and Parched Earth: A Love Story and their authors in it. The argument advanced is that the East African literary canon has from the beginning valorised men writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong’o in Kenya, Okot p’Bitek in Uganda and, though writing in Kiswahili, Ibrahim Hussein in Tanzania. It is not that these male authors have not produced worthy literary works besides being pioneer East African literary practitioners, but the thesis emphasised is that to accurately and adequately understand the literature of the region, it is necessary to see the place of women’s writing in it over time from the pioneer period of the 1960s to its moment of significant flourishing in the 1980s to the present, both in terms of content and form. The chapter concludes that especially through the novels Moment, Weevil and Earth, in their aesthetic and thematic richness, Macgoye, Okurut and Lema, manage to gain valuable space in what may be called ‘the great tradition’ of East African literature. Theirs, thus, is an achievement on two fronts: they envoice the East African women, and also make value-laden impact in a social and humanistic process, that of writing, that is very crucial in the project of representation.

The Zimbabwean writer and critic Yvonne Vera has argued that ‘A woman writer must have an imagination that is plain stubborn, that can invent new gods and banish ineffectual ones’ (1999, p. 1). This is indeed evident in the three women authors in their texts discussed in this study. It is in this sense of having and cultivating potent imaginations that these writers can be said to re-imagine and alter the East African
literary canon. Macgoye, Okurut and Lema thus revoke women writers’ perceived ‘absence’ from the East African literary canon.

Literature, in its various genres, has had a growth and development in the sub-region, as is also generally the case in other colonised countries, which has been gendered in exclusionary terms. Boehmer (1992) has argued that:

... nationalist ideology or ideologies which inform African literature (especially that of the immediately pre- and post-independence periods) have worked to limit representations of and by women. The idea is that nationalism generally, both in its past and its present manifestations, bears a clear mark for gender, and that this gender marking, rather than being referred to a monolithic or trans-historical concept of patriarchy, can be explained as a specific historical development of gendered power. (p. 229)

From the very outset then, we grasp the problematic portrayal of women in the institution of African literature, an institution that does much in creating the picture to be recoursed to in understanding society generally, and more importantly in the project of representation. As Iser has observed, ‘literature turns into a dividing rod, locating our dispositions, desires, interactions, and eventually our overall make up’ (1989, p. 3).

It is worth going into the details of Boehmer’s reading of the pre- and post-independence African literary canon to steep the occlusion of women’s voices:

In literature, too, the ethos of literary authority transmitted to the (in most cases male) colonised in university colleges and via literary canons was explicitly masculine – writing was presented as instituting and forwarding a male tradition, establishing or challenging rights of paternity, mastering an art. Were he a writer, then, a nationalist’s maleness could not but be confirmed and enhanced: his two roles were mutually reinforcing. Yet this reciprocity also announced precisely through its structure of equivalence the non-presence of women. Clearly, if both writing and nationalism involved the articulation of being and of consciousness, then women were barred from both kinds of activity. ... [Thus,] whether in nationalist literary iconography or in nationalist literary practice, if she refused the mother title, woman had neither voice nor name. (1992, p. 243)

Manifest in Boehmer’s argument is the relationship between African nationalisms and the discipline of African literature, in that precisely because nationalism was constructed in terms absolutely gendered, a masculine affair, literature was as well constructed on similar precedents and premises. And because literature is a vital apparatus of representation, then women, to some degree, became the nationalist other whose participation could not be configured on similar grounds as their male counterparts.
Julien argues of literature being a gendered practice, ‘not because gendered lives are its referents. … Rather it is through the workings of material worlds of publishing, teaching and criticism, through narrative processes of selection and omission and strategies of representation, that literature is gendered’ (2007, p. 205). She thus holds of readers, teachers and critics to be conscious of the logic of gender in order to be able to ‘foreground both critical aspects of texts that typically are overlooked and the conditions that push certain texts into the limelight while obscuring others’ (ibid.). This, as well, is Said’s hypothesising that ‘Texts are protean things; they are tied to circumstances and to politics large and small, and these require attention and criticism … reading and writing texts are never neutral activities: there are interests, powers, passions, pleasures, entailed no matter how aesthetic or entertaining the work’ (1993, p. 385). It is, therefore, with this awareness (of the exclusionary nature of nationalist literature, the gendered as well as nuanced nature of narrative) that the study delves into the positioning of women’s literature in the East African literary canon.

The literary canon can be understood as ‘those books which get repeatedly taught in schools, colleges and universities, those books which come to represent their historical moments and the cultural values of the so-called heritage of their readers, generation after generation’ (Landry and MacLean, 1993, p. 84); and also as the ‘designation for the corpus of secular literary works implicitly or explicitly endorsed by established cultural authority as worthy of preservation through reading and study’ (Alter, 2000, p. 1).

Barnet and Cain (2001) hold that some texts manage to enter the canon and remain ‘permanent fixtures’ there partly because ‘these books are rich enough to invite constant reinterpretation from age to age, that is, to allow each generation to find its needs and its value in them’ (p. 399). As questions of gender relations, nationalism and nationalist history, and narrative representation are revisited in the twenty-first century, it is the proposition of this study that texts such as *Moment*, *Weevil* and *Earth* will remain major references in understanding them.

But then the idea of the canon is a contested one. Bennett and Royle (1999) pose insightful questions in their discussion of the canon. They ask:

Is literary value eternal and unchanging or is it contingent and dependent on readers and the institutions of criticism? Are we simply constructing new, exclusive canons when we discover ‘neglected’ writers, or are we rethinking the
whole idea of ‘the canon’ and canonization? Is there such a thing as literary value? If so, how can it be described and defined? What are we doing when we make such judgements? (p. 50)

These are valid questions that as well read into this chapter’s epigraph from Eagleton. In this study, it has been demonstrated that Macgoye, Okurut and Lema address very salient issues regarding men and women relationships in contemporary East Africa. Issues of power/authority, patriarchy, culture and tradition have been examined in terms of how they define the society and also in how they are being contested by women (and men). It has as well been established that these texts stand out in their fusing of form and content to bring out a whole that is satisfying. In Eagleton’s postulation above, therefore, the study has provided avenue for situating Moment, Weevil and Earth in the East African literary tradition on the account of value ‘according to particular criteria and in the light of given purposes’ (1983, p. 11).

Thus, in spite of the fact that the canon itself is ever in flux and also open to ‘manipulation’ by interested authorities, the yardsticks of literary greatness in a nascent literature such as the East African one are easily discernible. As it has been argued out in the preceding chapters on the respective texts, the novels in the study stand out in both their content and poetics of creation. As such, Moment, Weevil and Earth, arguably show the presence of women writers in the East African literary canon. The three women writers have gained adequate space in the literature curriculum (especially the East African universities’ one), as well as the general appreciation of the worth of their works by the communion of readers and critics.

For writer Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, for instance, her work, in a span of four years, has elicited two full-text critical readings. These are: Roger Kurtz’s Nyarloka’s Gift: The Writing of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye (2005) as well as Petra Bittner’s Writing the Story of Kenya: Construction of Identity in the Novels of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye (2009). For Macgoye as a writer, perhaps this is an achievement only compared to that of the foremost East African male writer, Ngugi wa Thiong’o. In addition, there are various literature theses at both doctorate and masters levels that have been, and continue, being carried out on the author’s creative œuvre across the world.
Mary Okurut and Elieshi Lema are similarly literary household names in their own respective countries as well as in the East African literary circles, and they are being read widely as important voices in the East African literary process. At the University of Dar es Salaam’s Literature Department, for instance, Earth is not only a major text on various course reading lists, but is also among the most likely texts for dissertations and theses (Rajabu, personal communication, October 15, 2009). This is as well the case with Weevil at Makerere’s Literature Department and the Institute for Gender Studies (Mshimiza, personal communication, March 15, 2010).

In Lindfors’ argument in his ‘The Famous Authors Reputation Test’, ‘[t]he unexamined literary career is not worth much in a noisy marketplace of ideas. To be famous, to be reputable, to be deemed worthy of serious and sustained attention, an author needs as much criticism as possible, year after year after year’ (2006, p. 118). Macgoye’s, Okurut’s and Lema’s creative output have entered into the discourse of ‘examined literary careers’.

There is acquiescence in the study with Gikandi that ‘a careless incorporation of the “other voice” into a literary tradition can, if it is only appendative, function simply as a mechanism of covert marginalisation’ (1996, p. 5). These women writers’ art is in line with the aesthetic illumination found in a sustaining literature, for as Cassirer has posited, ‘[w]hat we feel in art is not a simple or a single emotional quality. It is the dynamic process of life itself – the continuous oscillation between opposite poles, between joy and grief, hope and fear, exultation and despair’ (1972, pp. 148-9). This ‘dynamic process’ of life is discernible in Moment, Weevil and Earth.

Stratton (1994) argues, though rather essentially, that ‘works by women writers have been trivialised, distorted, and maligned as a result of their non-conformity to standards that are both Euro- and andro-centric’ (p. 6). This is also the argument that Wanjala (2003) advances, in his case of East African women writers, when he writes that ‘women writers are ignored by literary scholars, books and newspaper editors, and publishers. They are humiliated by political demagogues and cultural and religious bigots’ (p. 102). Smith on her part has held that: ‘Since those with cultural power tend to be members of socially, economically, and politically established classes (or to serve them and identify their own interests with theirs), the texts that survive will tend to be
those that appear to reflect and reinforce establishment ideologies’ (qtd. in Lamarque, 2009, p. 276). The argument in the study is that these states of affairs are now being thoroughly re-imagined and altered as has been observed of these representative women writers from East Africa.

Thus, through these women writers’ texts, the East African literary canon is indelibly being expanded. In their texts under study here, spaces are opened for the adequate understanding of the East African literary process. As Ashcroft et al. (2002) point out, generally of the world literary process, the classical texts are continuously being revisited by feminist and postcolonial critics ‘to demonstrate clearly that a canon is produced by the intersection of a number of readings and reading assumptions legitimised in the privileging hierarchy of a “patriarchal” or “metropolitan” concept of literature’ (2002, p. 173). And yet as it has been demonstrated through the discussion of the various structuring elements in these texts in the study, the writers do not confine into the idea of being valorised for the one-dimensional reason that they are part of the ‘marginalised’. As Lamarque has argued:

If recognised literary values reflect class and gender interests then there can be no objective grounds for literary evaluation. Any purported reasons for giving a high evaluation to some particular work will turn out simply to be self-serving or self-justifying rationalisations. (2009, pp. 277-78)

These texts, *Moment, Weevil* and *Earth*, enter into the ongoing global process of reformulating women’s history by engaging in what Scott has called ‘critically confront[ing] the politics of existing histories and inevitably begin[ning] the re-writing of history’ (Scott, 1998, p. 27). Again, perhaps most important, is the fact that these texts enhance the literary value necessary in making them endure the test of time. As Budd has argued:

The value of a work of art as a work of art is intrinsic to the work in the sense that it is (determined by) the intrinsic value of the experience the work offers. … It should be remembered that the experience a work of art offers is an experience of the work itself and the valuable qualities of a work are qualities of the work, not of the experience it offers. It is the nature of the work that endows the work with whatever artistic value it posses; this nature is what is experienced in undergoing the experience the work offers, and the work’s artistic value is the intrinsic value of this experience. So a work of art is valuable as art if it is such that the experience it offers is intrinsically valuable. (Qtd. in Lamarque, 2009, p. 266, emphasis in the original)
It may not be the case that these works demonstrate the intrinsic value and the artistic quality inherent in the classics of all times, but in a region such as East Africa, in which, as I have posited above, great literary tradition is still in formative stages, theirs is a major step already.

*Moment, Weevil* and *Earth*, belie the easy categorisation of women’s feminist literature of resistance. Through these texts we see literature ‘as a practice that redirects and reproduces, disarticulates, and recompenses the social discourses’ (Angenot, 2004, p. 223). These texts thus mark an important incision in the East African literary tradition. They enrich it as well as expand the various social discourses that define the East African societies.

In the next chapter, the conclusion, it is posited that in narratives that are both thematically and aesthetically satisfying, *Moment, Weevil* and *Earth* adequately engage power/authority in the East African society.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Instead of resuscitating and resituating the fetishised tropes of motherlands, some women writers have chosen to revise the family dramas that structure the national narrative, including the male *Bildungsroman* and nationalist autobiography, by focusing on the roles and character of daughters. ... They have dramatised her negotiated bid for selfhood and status within what might be called the national house, that is, within the inherited and correlated structures of both family and nation state.


In the foregoing chapters of the study, it has been argued that in *Moment*, *Weevil*, and *Earth*, writers Macgoye, Okurut, and Lema bestow agency on their female protagonists to enable them meaningfully participate in the re-examination of power/authority enactment in the East African society, and seek to create a society in which no condition, woman’s or man’s, is undermined or underprivileged. In their close interrogation of the East African society, they manage to ‘reveal institutional and intellectual weaknesses [in order to] destroy false consciousness [and] take part in the creation of institutions in which clear thought and true greatness are challenges open to anyone, men or women’ (Nochlin, 1999, p. 617). And in this endeavour, the three authors have utilised the novel genre; for in Watt’s reading, a convincing novel stands out because of ‘the amount of attention it habitually accords both to the individualisation of its characters and to the detailed presentation of their environment’ (1957, p. 240). Indeed, in the women protagonists in the three novels we get not only to adequately understand their individual selves, we also vividly see the socio-cultural milieux that they inhabit and how they seek to transform these into comfortable spaces for women’s (and men’s) co-existence as human beings.

The imagining of the institutions of marriage and family, history, politics, education, and art, has been altered in the three texts. In Wilson-Tagoe’s positioning, ‘[b]y redefining and reimagining the social signs of culture and everyday communication, art can transform cultural and gendered meanings even if such transformations are
achieved more through style and mode of narration than through the actual representations of alternative societies’ (2007, p. 226). Through such a metaphor as ‘the Refuge’ (in Moment), Macgoye creates that alternative position, a space in which women achieve the liberty of thought and action otherwise denied them in the Kenyan post-independence nation. And in the imagery of ‘the spider’s web’ (in Earth), Lema’s aim is to demonstrate how, despite the difficulties involved, women seek to transform the society into an all-inclusive one by making important breakthroughs in its cultural relics. These texts, therefore, bring out the power of, and in, women to search for appropriate spaces for their personal growth and at the same time be true to culture in the true sense of it as ‘life-enhancing artifact in the service of all those who craft and use it as a source of pleasure’ (McFadden, 2004, p. 70).

As it has been argued out in the respective chapters, Moment, Weevil and Earth are also texts that are sensitive to literary value. Thus, in this sensitivity, the writers endeavour to create literary artefacts that fuse form and content to communicate strongly about the space of women in power/authority enactment in the East African society. As Lamarque and Olsen (2004) have posited, ‘literature cannot be cut off from value, for to attend to literature as literature is already to submit to an expectation of value, to an assumption, defeasible of course, that a work will reward literary attention, that there is interest to be found and pleasure to be gained’ (p. 209). Hence, the pleasure we gain from the reading of Moment, Weevil, and Earth goes beyond the narratives themselves. Through the various metaphors and imagery, allusions and narration, we get the true ‘value’ of these texts.

Moment endeavours to encentre the women in the processes of the Kenyan postcolony formation. Theirs, as is manifest in the seven women protagonists in the Refuge, may seemingly sound as simple narratives, histories from below; but they carry the potency of thoroughly interrogating the ‘grand narratives’ of the nation that are couched in patriarchal discourses. The narratives by these women help us to redefine colonialism, independence and other relational discourses by offering necessary interruptions in the official patriarchal narratives; hence collapsing the ‘official history’ that seems grounded in artificial socio-political stereotypes capable of narrowly constructing the Kenyan postcolony.
Weevil, on its part, comes to a close thus: ‘The sun bathed the land with its increasing warmth as The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs [Nkwanzi] entered her car, with Mama on the other side and Ihoreere cushioned comfortably between them’ (p. 232). There is a degree of certainty that the Ugandan women have attained a socio-political presence that is bound to last, despite the fact that the land still has many ‘invisible weevils’ (ibid.). And, the attainment of this presence has been constructed on grounds that are tenable because the two women protagonists have rightly earned their transcendence to ‘actually occupy the centre, to be relevant in the schema of things and take control of crucial events’ (Uko, 2006, p. 93).

And, in Earth, the heroine, Doreen Seko, reawakens more forcefully to the inner voice that ‘It is up to you. It is all up to you, Doreen ... to find your own path ...’ (p. 223). This path, like that of the other women protagonists in Moment and Weevil, is a liberational one, it gives women ample space to speak, to think independently, and to create new mythos out of their situations.

The texts thus manage to make implicit the ‘presence and voices of women silenced by a history that discounts them and fails to consider their agency’ (Donadey, 2001, p. 143). Granted that the postcolonial nation is ‘itself a ground of dispute and debate, a site for the competing imaginings of different ideological and political interests’ (Loomba, 2005, p. 173), the narratives in Moment, Weevil, and Earth, thus usefully re-imagine the East African postcolonies to uncover the erasure of women’s stories. They also engage in the project of ‘recoveri[ng] and reinterpret[ing] the lives of women under [post]colonial rule’ (ibid., p. 185), and thus ably manage the ‘re-writing [of] indigenous histories, appropriating post-colonial symbols and mythologies, and amplifying, where possible, the voices of women themselves’ (ibid., p. 191). This is not only a crucial enterprise, but it also ensures that women enter into the nationalist histories as individuals belonging to a long line of other women heroines who have participated (and continue participating) in them.

Again, for these East African women writers, in managing to envoice their women characters, situating them in the position of ‘speaking for themselves, telling their own histories, countering the monologic with multi-vocality’ (Boehmer, 1992, p. 244), they adequately engage in ‘addressing the quietness of their gender in text: recounting
national and what might be called ante-national experience from their positions on the sidelines of public life and on the margins of accepted national traditions’ (ibid.). And in this enterprise of ‘vocalisations and rewordings’, they endeavour to ‘bring out shifts and changes in the canon of nationalist texts, the exploration of new generic forms, possibly new versions of ‘tradition’ (ibid.).

In these three texts, the cryptic bases of canonical constructions of power and authority are made visible and then destabilised (Ashcroft et al., 2002, p. 173). The women in the texts manage to admirably create ‘woman space [in which] they can value difference and complexity [hence making it possible] for sisterhood based on political solidarity [to] emerge’ (hooks, 1994, p. 110). We realise that it is partly in this creation of women spaces to ‘destabilise’ the status quo that women manage to confront Otherising power enactments in the various East African postcolonial discourses; and, in the process, they re/write the East African postcolonial narrative.

Narrative at once represents and also performs acts. Hoving (2000) has argued that for the representational and performative functions of narrative, ‘the new narratives created by women writers and artists should not just be analysed as alternative forms of representation, but rather in terms of affection, intervention, and address’ (p. 356). This has been manifest in the argument on reading the narratives of Moment, Weevil and Earth in their endeavour to re-imagine and re-write the ‘narrative’ of the East African postcolony. In the three narratives and the various sub-narratives, individual and collective, there is deep reconfiguration of the East African society. To recourse to Hoving once again:

Narratives by women writers and artists reinvent a communal historical past in which women appear as agents, as much as men. Since women’s histories have not been well documented … and since parts of their histories have been deeply traumatising, the reinvention of their history occurs through the intense blending, deconstructing and re-imagining of images, silences and narratives into a new narrative. (ibid.)

In the emerging new narrative, there is equally a new epistemic agency that has been bequeathed the East African woman and that ensures her inhabitation of the various institutions of power/authority in her own way and on terms acceptable (even if in some cases latently) to her. Conscious of their operating within the paradigms of the dominated
and peripherally defined groups, these writers are thus actively engaged in the production of oppositional ideologies to counter the dominant ideologies that are informed by patriarchy.

There are various strategies employed to contest power and authority in the East African society depicted in Moment, Weevil and Earth. These range from education and knowledge acquisition, narrative and art, armed resistances and struggles, women organisations and communions/women spaces; to silence, work and profession. In and through these, women seek to find voices necessary and capable of confronting patriarchal East African societies.

Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye’s The Present Moment, Mary Karooro Okurut’s The Invisible Weevil and Elieshi Lema’s Parched Earth: A Love Story, subvert the dominant ideologies that bestow power/authority in patriarchally-defined institutions by presenting oppositional and countering strategies in order to evolve a gender inclusive society. In narratives that are well constructed through the fusion of thematics and aesthetics, the three women authors re-write the East African postcolony.
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Primary Texts

Other Fictional Texts
Secondary Texts


186


Women’s Engagement with Power/Authority in the Fiction of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, Mary Okurut and Elieshi Lema

Joseph Lennox Odiemo
Department of Literature, Languages and Linguistics, Egerton University, Kenya
jlodiem@yahoo.co.uk

Thesis Summary

From the relative absence of serious women’s writing in the early mainstream East African literature in English, starting the last quarter of the twentieth century, women’s writing has flourished to dynamically interrogate the exercising of power and authority in the society. The exercising of power and authority in East Africa in the scholarship so far has consistently been identified with patriarchal institutions. The literary evidence, however, increasingly suggests that women can be perceived from the perspective of venturing into the supposedly forbidden realm of power and authority. This study sought to fill the existing gap in knowledge by taking up this new perspective. It investigated how East African women writing in English contests and subverts the dominant ideologies that bestow power and authority in patriarchally defined institutions in society. It focused on three novels: Kenya’s Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye’s *The Present Moment* (1987), Uganda’s Mary Okurut’s *The Invisible Weevil* (1998), and Tanzania’s Elieshi Lema’s *Parched Earth: A Love Story* (2001).

The study utilised feminist and postcolonial literary theories because the women’s struggle is a feminist and gender one experienced within the postcolonial space. Qualitative research methods of document and textual analyses were employed in the coding, categorisation and interpretation of data from the primary as well as secondary texts.

The study is sub-divided into six chapters. The first chapter generally introduces and situates it, and also maps the literature review and methodologies employed. In Chapter two, ‘The Present Moment: Women’s Private/Public Narratives of Power/Authority’, Macgoye’s *The Present
*Moment* is interrogated in the way it recreates women’s narratives that counter the patriarchally inclined nationalist narratives of the Kenyan postcolony.

Chapter three, ‘*The Invisible Weevil: Interpellating Otherising Epistemologies*’ analyses Okurut’s *The Invisible Weevil* within the framework of women’s participation in the liberation struggles as equals to their men counterparts and their subsequent claim of right to power/authority exercising. In chapter four, ‘Re-negotiating “Societal Labyrinth”: *Parched Earth*’s Quest to Collapse Otherising Patriarchal Narratives’, Lema’s women protagonists in *Parched Earth* are critically evaluated in the way they struggle with the maze of gender occluding traditions and cultures in the society.

Chapter five, ‘*Present Moment’s, Invisible Weevil’s and Parched Earth’s Space in the East African Literary Canon*’, examines the East African literary tradition and argues that in order to accurately and adequately understand the literature of the region, it is necessary to situate the place of women’s writing in the tradition which has for a long time been couched in the male writing repertoire.

The study concludes in chapter six that through the women characters’ employment of strategies such as learning, women organisations and communions/women spaces, re-storying, narrative, militancy, work and profession, performative arts and silence, the three texts present oppositional and countering positions and hence imagine a gender inclusive East African postcolony.