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Socio-Cultural Dynamics and Women's Identity in Post-Colonial Kenya: An Interrogation of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's Coming to Birth and the Present Moment

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Published two decades after Kenya's independence, Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* are post-colonial writings that explore the struggle for both national and personal identity. Through the eyes of Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, the mentioned texts explore the construction of women's identity through social and cultural dynamics. Leaning on the Feminist Theory that seeks to provide an understanding of the women's and girls' situations, roles and responsibilities in the societies they live in, within the cultural and societal dynamics and expectations, this paper seeks to analyze the social and cultural dynamics in the post-colonial societies the two texts are set in, in relation to the individual identity of the female characters. The paper has the objective of interrogating how the social and cultural dynamics work to shape the identity of female characters. Consequently, this paper concludes that the identity of the female characters in *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* is shaped by societal social and cultural dynamics and norms. The female characters, through self-autonomy and active participation in societal aspects, reassert themselves in a bid to reconstruct and accord themselves a new image, different from that which had been shaped and distorted, given the patriarchal socio-cultural dynamics. The paper concludes that the female characters in *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* remain resolute to eventually egress from the subjective societal demands and dictates to attain cultural and social independence.

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural imperialism is experienced in each and every society, whereby the society, or a country, generally engages in aspects of culture such as traditions and rituals, politics and economics, to create and maintain unequal social and economic relationships among social groups. This aspect of unequal relationships is further propagated by the pervasive influence of patriarchy, especially in post-colonial Kenya. Social and cultural dynamics hinged on patriarchy play a critical role in the construction of an individual's identity.

To every social group, culture plays a pivotal role for it defines the social group, pointing out clearly who they are, in turn giving the people of the social group a sense of belonging, identity and stability. An individual’s identity is hence found and seen in all the areas of their social relations. These social relations are found in societal action, activities and structures the individuals take part in. These will go a long way in molding their image and identity. As individuals get socialized into the culture, their identity is shaped and molded in the process of socialization.

Wikipedia simply defines culture as “The *way of life of groups of people*”; meaning it has to do with the way the people do things in their social structures. Culture has lots of facets and meanings, but is mostly used in three ways. Of the three, two are the ones that will inform this paper. One, culture is an integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behavior. Two, is that culture is the outlook, attitudes, values, morals, goals and customs shared by a society. It is worthwhile to break down all these components of culture for better synthesis. Knowledge implies things that are true, as opposed to opinion. A belief is a firm thought that something is true often based on revelation. Behavior implies conscious

or unconscious actions. Morals on the other hand dictate what is right or wrong.

Undoubtedly, the cultural dynamics and all the facets of cultural expectations work to shape one’s identity. These cultural facets include aspects of traditions, beliefs, and taboos among others. The cultural aspects of marriage like bearing children, polygamy, and rites of passage before marriage are bound to make and shape an individual's identity. Marjorie Oludhe has made it her preoccupation to clearly and vividly bring out the socio-cultural dynamics in *Coming to Birth and The Present Moment*, and the role they play in shaping the identity of the female characters. The author achieves this through detailing women’s experiences in the text as they are subjected to the cultural dynamics, permeated with patriarchy. This in turn points us to the image of women as created and re-created by the said dynamics. The picture painted of the women changes with the passing of time, and the female protagonist gets a better picture, given growth and change over time.

MARRIAGE IN POST-COLONIAL KENYA AS A CULTURAL DYNAMIC, AND WOMEN'S IDENTITY

In the life of every individual, there are three standard life events that is: birth, marriage and death. Of the three, one has no choice and control over birth and death. Marriage however, is a matter of choice. Every individual, man and woman has the right to exercise the choice of marriage. The right to exercise this choice is established in international human rights instruments yet many girls enter marriage without any choice of exercising this right, especially on the time or age to get married and who to get married to. Just like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and other human rights instruments have found out.

Marriage is a vital societal norm and a symbol that society accords a lot of meaning and importance. Marriage is consequently considered as a key to the happiness and success of the next generation and the establishment of a healthy moral society (Kirasu, 2007). From the assertion above as Kirasu points out, marriage is held with so much importance in the society, so much that there are a myriad of issues tied to it. In the long run, the end result is that it dictates and shapes the identity of people in marriage; both husband and wife. These chains of issues tied to marriage are norms and practices that ultimately shape and determine, in this case, a woman's opportunities and capabilities throughout their life.

On functions of marriage, (Ember, 2011) says marriage provides the framework within which people's needs are met; needs like shelter, clothing and safety among others. It is through marriage that people know for whom they are economically and socially responsible. Oludhe in both *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* has brought out the experience of women in marriage, in addition to those who did not choose marriage. Ultimately, the cultural expectations and dictates in marriage go a long way in constructing and shaping the identity of the women in the two novels, given the traditional Kenyan societies where they are set.

Coming to Birth is Paulina's story. The book, published just over two decade after independence, explores quite a number of social and cultural dynamics that are deeply rooted within marriage. The book begins with Paulina's husband Martin Were, juxtaposed to Paulina herself. He is twenty-three years old, educated, employed as a salesman in a small stationery shop, earning a hundred and fifty shillings a month, from which he paid rent and attended evening classes in English and bookkeeping. In addition to this, he is decently dressed, he is wearing a khaki long trouser with a discretely striped blue and white shirt and a plain blue tie, socks and lace-up shoes.

Martin who is decently dressed, educated employed and married is described to have

become a person in the judgment of the community he belonged to. It is clear, just as Marjorie Oludhe brings it out, that marriage is one of how an individual successfully becomes 'a person' as judged by societal standards, standards such as being educated, employed and earning a salary, all of which Martin has efficiently met. When we get to meet Paulina, she is an antipode to Martin. She is sixteen years old, seven years younger than Martin, and she is wearing a faded blue cotton dress and a white scarf. Her rubber shoes were scuffed and brown. Unlike Martin who has already become a person in the judgment of his community and would be a man indeed with Paulina around with him in Nairobi, Paulina has a lot of growing up to do for her to reach where Martin is. She is neither educated nor employed, and had to rely on Martin's financial support to purchase a train ticket to Nairobi. Through this marriage and others in the two texts, this paper will adequately explore the interplay between marriage and all the cultural and social dynamics.

This said, the numerous aspects pertaining to marriage like age in marriage, bearing children in marriage, payment of bride price, polygamy, wife inheritance, wife battering and violence against women, among others, clearly shape and construct a woman's identity. When women stand above these and fight the subjective expectations and requirements regarding the cultural aspects of marriage, they will be required to put in certain strategies and even realign themselves so as to participate and be included in societal matters. These aspects in marriage therefore are seen to accord the women characters an identity in *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment*.

THE AGE FOR MARRIAGE AND WOMEN'S IDENTITY

In 2014, it was recorded in a demographic and health survey by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics that the age of marriage for women in rural areas was 19.5 and 21.5 years for women in urban areas. A man in the rural area would marry at 19.5 and 24.8 years in the urban areas. (The Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, et.al 2015)

From the survey above, it is evident that women are married earlier or younger in comparison to men. There are several reasons that drive families to have their daughters subjected to early marriage. The reasons for early girl marriages notwithstanding, the practice has in many ways, roles to play in the construction and modelling of the women's identities.

The reasons for early marriage are, among others; a strategy for economic survival due to poverty (UNICEF, 2000). The payment of bride price is a welcome financial elevation. John C and Pat Cadwell (1977) in *Role of Marital Sexual Abstinence in Determining Fertility: A study of the Yoruba in Nigeria; Journal of Population Studies vol 31.1*, assert that early marriage is a way of ensuring that the girl is being protected by being placed under male control of a husband so that she is submissive to her husband.

In coming to *Birth*, Martin at 23 years of age marries Paulina who is only sixteen years old.

She was sixteen and he had taken her at the Easter holiday, his father allowing two cattle and one he had bought from his savings, together with a food safe for his mother-in-law, and a watch for Paulina's father. (Birth 3)

At sixteen, Paulina is timid, shy and laid back. She has barely grown into a woman physically. On the other hand, her presence in Nairobi with Martin will make him a man indeed. (*Birth 2*)

When Rachel calls for her after Martin leaves for work, she confirms that girls get married at an early age.

"Sixteen? Yes. They are in a hurry to get you settled these days." (Birth 8)

The timid and shy Paulina blushes and nods demurely when Rachel observed that she was pregnant, advising her to be careful. Again, Paulina is naïve on matters of pregnancy and acts surprised neither does Martin have this experience.

"Yes, indeed. So skinny you are and vomiting in the mornings, I can tell by your skin. And all the upset of the journey. Still, it's the first time for him too. He doesn't know better." (Birth 8)

Early marriage for girls, as Rachel Atieno, Paulina's neighbor observes, was a societal norm for she says *"They are in a hurry to get you settled these days." (Birth 8).* 'They,' here refers to the girl's parents.

Paulina is perplexed and bewildered, she wonders where she would cook and gather firewood and do her washing. Clearly, wifely duties in the vast city perplex her, things are to be done but not in the ways she used to do them back at home, where she was notably privileged over other women for her husband had built her a square house, and she was under the guidance of her mother-in-law and the support of her sisters-in-law.

Being married was, it seemed, a whole history of getting used to things (*Birth 6*), and at her age there were a lot of things Paulina needed to get used to. Her identity created thus far, married at sixteen, is that of a bewildered and perplexed young girl. She is perplexed at how the marriage will have to operate, especially now that she is in the city, in a very small house, eight feet by ten, and with not a patch of private ground. Further, she looks under the bed and sees no mat, she is surprised that they would have to go on sharing a bed like Europeans (*Birth 6*). Additionally, she is fearful and has to bear with the fact that she will have to be all alone up to 5 o'clock in the evening when Martin comes back home. Her young age of marriage points her out as naïve and fearful woman, who needs constant assurance and support.

Marriage and aspects of marriage change the female character in both *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment*.

"And each one of them (the women) made herself into a different person to fit the situation just as she had done on marriage, motherhood and widowhood and time to time

again, conscious at each stage of identity...”
(*Moment*)

The age at which a woman gets married has a role to play in the construction of the women’s identity. Rachel who is older in her marriage seems to have garnered a lot of wisdom and experience, crucial elements that Paulina at sixteen lacks.

Conventionally, it is believed that after a certain age, mostly thirty years, women tend to have higher levels of emotional security, so that they are more independent, with less reliance on the husband for need of support. A good number of women are presently seen to have the need to complete their education and find work before marriage, so as to allow economic independence from their husbands (Hannaford and Foley, 2015). As a result, a woman married in her thirties is more emotionally mature and capable of handling matters pertaining to her marriage efficiently, as opposed to one married in her teenage or early twenties.

In both *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment*, Oludhe presents women who married at a young age. Their identity is constructed by how they behave and relate with their husband, and how they are regarded and treated by their husbands in marriage. The impact of early marriage is largely on the female characters, as is the focus of this paper. These impacts include denial of childhood and adolescence. The girls are married before they have the chance to grow and develop fully physically. For Paulina, two years later, “*She had finished growing now, her breasts were firm and her eyes knowing,*” (*Birth 33*). Paulina was denied the chance of growing fully, before her marriage to Martin.

In *The Present Moment*, Oludhe presents yet another girl who is married at the age of fourteen, two years younger than Paulina. Miriam, Sophia’s daughter, at fourteen, is sent to go and stay with the proposed in-laws. She therefore goes off as a young girl to the in-law family to finish growing up there until she is ready for marriage. (*Moment 99*) Miriam is denied the chance to grow through

adolescence, like other girls. She has to grow up under the watchful eye of her husband-to-be.

Miriam never got a chance to attend school for being older; she was humiliated for being with smaller children at school. Her mother, Sophia, then tried her to the sewing machine but again she was not doing well there. What followed was her spending two days away from home. This saw her being sent to live with her proposed in-laws. Marriage, despite the young age of the girl, is meant to keep her in check. Early marriage renders Miriam helpless and with no say at all. She is a young girl who must accept what her parents have arranged without question.

In addition to being denied various opportunities for growth due to early marriage, Paulina in *Coming to Birth* is faced with a series of health challenges emanating from early pregnancies. She first conceives at the age of sixteen, and she suffers a series of miscarriages, having the first miscarriage in her first week of having come to Martin in Nairobi.

The complications brought about by early marriage and early pregnancies leave Paulina vulnerable to violence and resentment from Martin. After the first miscarriage, Martin reprimands her, “*Can’t even keep a baby for me,*” (*Birth 22*). The reprimand comes after he beats her for getting lost on her way from the hospital and staying for two days away from home. During the second miscarriage yet again, Martin resents Paulina.

“And he swallowed his resentment and ran to the mission house himself, but by the time he returned with Bibi Tett, it was clear that nothing could be done,” (*Birth 35*).

Paulina’s third miscarriage came only two months after the previous one, and this time she received beatings.

“And when two months later she began to bleed again and he found her in tears because of it, he beat her and told her she was imagining things,” (*Birth 44*).

Thus, early marriage leaves Paulina vulnerable emotionally, and prone to physical violence, coupled with the loss of her early pregnancies, losses which were totally unwelcome by Martin.

BEARING CHILDREN IN MARRIAGE AND WOMEN'S IDENTITY

"A woman is nobody, a wife is everything and a mother is next to God." Spock 39

It is a norm in many communities around the world that children should be born within the institution of marriage. There remains a strong link between childbearing and marriage, despite other assertions that marriage is becoming an outmoded institution, decoupled from the childbearing process (Heaveline and Timberlake, 2004, Kieran and Smith 2003). Presently, the pressure to have a couple follow the standard sequences in marriage is dying out, a couple can cohabit, get a child or two, then get married, or choose not to get a child altogether. The need to bear children in marriage has a lot of impact on the couple.

Perelli-Harns et al (2012) say that marriage remains the predominant institution of raising children in traditional Kenyan communities, for example, among the Luo and Agikuyu, two of the major communities in the texts under study are set. Marriage and having children are intertwined and evidently inseparable. Culturally, marriage means bearing children to ensure the survival and continuity of a lineage and society.

As Spock says, a wife is everything but a mother is next to God. A woman is objectified and valued in the mother image. Her worth is realized through motherhood. Bearing children guarantees the woman security in her marriage. So valuable is the need to bear children in marriage that a woman is devalued if there is no prospect of being a mother.

"A woman would be forgiven everything as long as she produced children."

A number of African female writers have written to address issues as such that are affecting women in marriage. Flora Nwapa, the first published African female writer, has her writings focus on

women, with the aim of correcting the distorted image of women in patriarchal African societies. Her novel, *'One is Enough'* highlights among other things, the problem of childlessness in marriage. Amaka, in the novel, bears six years in marriage without children. Her husband decides to seek to get children with another woman. He eventually fathers two sons, in the long run, Amaka walks out. In the same vein, Oludhe in *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* explores what childlessness does to marriage; the image of the woman it constructs since childbearing is highly valued in the post-colonial Kenyan communities the two texts are set in. Hence, childlessness in marriage is a source of grievous disappointment and a major determinant of marital conflict, broken homes, divorce and many more. The expectation of childbearing in marriage hence in some ways, accord the woman a certain image and how she is perceived in the community.

Marjorie Oludhe in *Coming to Birth* and *The Present Moment* presents women who are faced with this cultural expectation of childbearing in marriage, so much so that it defines and shapes their identity, who they are and goes further to determine how other members of society treat them.

Paulina, the protagonist in *Coming to Birth*, is married at the age of sixteen, to a twenty-three-year-old Martin Were. On her arrival to Nairobi from the village, her neighbor Rachel Atieno who has five children can tell that Paulina is pregnant. Having been married at sixteen, and faced with the need to bear children Paulina is already pregnant at such an early age.

Early marriage certainly means premature or early pregnancy and childbearing, and this is likely to lead to a life of domestic and sexual subservience over which the girls have no control. This is according to the UNICEF Innocent Digest on Early Marriage. The UNICEF Digest further points out that pregnancies that occur too early when a woman's body is not fully mature, constitute a major risk to the survival and future health of both mother and child.

Marjorie Oludhe points out that now that Paulina is coming to live with Martin in Nairobi, he, Martin, will be a man indeed. She comes while she is three months pregnant. Her first night is a threat to her prospect of motherhood, for she starts feeling the pain that Martin brushes off as having come as a result of the journey and the strangeness until she says

“Martin, I do not fear pain but I fear for the baby.” (Birth 4)

This expectation of childbearing molds a woman into a person who can endure every pain as long as it does not threaten her noble duty of childbearing. Paulina’s biggest fear is thus for the baby, losing the baby and failing to succeed in the duty of being a mother. Having bled through the night, it was later confirmed by a Luo girl among the trainee nurses at King George Hospital that she would not get this baby. And this was Paulina’s first miscarriage and failure to succeed at becoming a mother. Her attempt to fulfill this cultural expectation sees her conceiving soon after, leading to a second loss. A miscarriage that Martin blames on the three policemen who raided their house and roughed Paulina up. Paulina takes this, happy that the blame is shifted elsewhere and keeps it to herself, the fact that she had been feeling bad before the encounter.

Paulina is barely eighteen years of age and has already lost two pregnancies. This can be attributed to the premature and early marriage; hence she was not so well formed physically and ready for childbearing. Her young age is standing in her way of earning her identity as a mother. Martin is nervous about leaving Paulina at a distance and eager that she should get a baby soon. After her two miscarriages, they went together to their homeplace for three weeks. Martin’s mother and sisters were disappointed to see no signs of a child. They however remained kind and said nothing. Getting a child in marriage is eagerly awaited by the members of society, especially the in-law family. Failure to fulfill this expectation leads to harsh and unkind treatment.

Paulina’s other unfortunate and third miscarriage comes just after they confirmed their wedding in church. This third failure to become a mother sees Martin sending her back home. It can be concluded that this third failure renders her undeserving and no longer necessary to live with Martin in Nairobi. She is therefore only fit to go home and not keep staying with Martin due to her failure to prove productive. The time she is sent home is the season of digging, Martin would hence rather have her useful at home digging and tilling land, than with him in Nairobi.

Nolim says *“being childless forced them to consent various medicine men, prophets, doctors or leaving their marital homes in frustration.”* This need to bear children in marriage is invaluable in society. It is so highly valued that the women would resort to options such as consulting medicine men, prophets or witch doctors. Paulina muses and says that she knew one woman who paid over everything she earned to a medicine man who promised to bring her a baby. (Birth 29) Buchi Emecheta in *‘The Bride Price’* has Ochia sending his wife Ma Blackie to all the native doctors he could afford, but without success. (Emecheta, 1976) Adaku in Emecheta’s *Joys of Motherhood* walks out of her polygamous marriage for she bore no sons to earn her security in marriage. Childlessness pushed women to the edge, their childlessness forcing them to consult various medicine men, doctors, prophets or leave their marital homes in frustration. Evidently, as a result of the child-hungry society.

Back at home, Paulina’s state of childlessness leaves her pained and frustrated. She was pained when friends of her age came to see her with babies in their arms. She would hug herself at night and brood herself in the afternoon time when not much was left to do. Her state of childlessness accords her the identity and image of a woman wallowing in self-pity. It gnaws her mind and robs her peace of mind.

Spock asserts that *“A woman is nobody, a wife is everything and a mother is next to God.”* The pursuit of being both everything and next to God is what the major Kenyan societies in Coming to

Birth and *The Present Moment* have tasked the female characters with, as a cultural dynamic. Being married is not enough, the equation is complete when a woman gets a child. In *The Present Moment*, Wairimu, after two years of living with James and no sign of a child, let it go, knowing that no one would approve a marriage after that, and now she was sure she was barren. Similarly, Nekesa having realized she was barren understood that there would be no betrothal offer for her.

Thus, the cultural dynamic and expectation of bearing children dictates that a woman is only worthy if she has the fruits of the womb. She may be chosen by the husband to be the bride and then-wife, but she has to earn the title- mother- for it to count. But this however, did not come easy. It was not as seamless as expected for childbearing was riddled with cultural aspects of child birth that the society did not fathom. Twinning was unacceptable, as was bearing children to grow with the wrong tooth order. Thus, the woman is not only under pressure to bear children in marriage but also to have perfect single births, with perfect and culturally acceptable body formations.

In *The Present Moment*, Marjorie Oludhe presents the picture of children born with imperfections physically, or twin births rejected culturally. Twins were abandoned into the forest just as the children were born with the wrong tooth order or born of mothers who died soon afterward by some sort of evil. Such children were rejected and the mother left in turmoil.

“The Roman Catholics would even pick up the babies if they were in time and somewhat nurture them without a mother’s milk, not caring to find out whether they were survivors of twins or to examine the tooth order, let alone speculating what evil had brought death upon the mother of a perfectly formed child.”

This cultural practice and dynamic give the woman an identity of a woman helpless and wallowing in suffering, denied the chance to

nurture her twins or her child with supposedly wrong tooth order. The woman is thus doomed if she fails to give birth and doomed if she gives birth to imperfect children, as per the societal standards.

GETTING A CHILD OUTSIDE THE MARRIAGE TO ACCORD THE WOMAN AN IDENTITY.

Remaining childless in an African marriage, as depicted in the major Kenyan communities in *The Present Moment* and *Coming to Birth* was unacceptable culturally. The marriage thus would be really strained due to childlessness and the woman would do all in her power to fulfill the expectation of bearing children even if it means seeking it from another man other than the husband. Infertility and involuntary childlessness often have a devastating impact on the people concerned, in particular in non-western settings where parenthood is culturally mandatory (Van Balen and Gerrits, 2001)

Practice Communities of American Society for Reproductive Medicine, 2013 defines infertility as the failure to have a clinical pregnancy following a period of 12 months or more of unprotected timely intercourse. After Paulina’s failure to bear a child for Martin following her three miscarriages, Martin sends her back home. Having stayed at home for six months, Paulina went back to Nairobi to her husband’s house. she comes back only to be taunted by Fatima on account of her childlessness. Being a wife is evidently not enough, a woman better be a mother and secure her place firmly in the marriage. To Fatima, Paulina proudly announces that she is Mrs. Were glorying in the foreign name that had once sounded odd. (Birth 34) To Fatima however, being Mrs. Were is not enough. Being a wife is ultimately not enough, so Fatima taunts her further, *“Oh yes, Mrs. Were... and you are the mother of who?”* Remaining childless is unsavory even to the women themselves. Fatima ridicules a fellow woman on her account of remaining childless, several months into marriage.

Several female writers write to address this thorny issue, as whatever it takes ought to be done to

make it right, even if it means either of the spouses get out of marriage to seek a child. Flora Nwapa, the first published African female writer, has several of her writings highlighting issues affecting women culturally and attempts to reconstruct their distorted image. Her novel *'One is Enough'* highlights the issue of childlessness in marriage. Amaka bears six years of marriage without children. Her husband becomes adulterous and seeks to get children with another woman. He successfully fathers two sons. Amaka is forced to walk out of this marriage. Similarly, Buchi Emecheta in *Joys of Motherhood* has the character Adaku, who walks out of her polygamous marriage for she bore no sons to earn her security in marriage.

Marjorie Oludhe in both *The Present Moment* and *Coming to Birth* explores the issue of childlessness and how further it pushes the women to. In African society the main purpose of marriage is to bear children, in turn, childless marriage is a source of grievous disappointment and a major determinant of marital conflict, broken home, and divorce among many more. Additionally, childless women are pushed to the edge, their childlessness forcing them to consult various medicine men, and doctors or leave their marital homes in frustration.

The first wife remaining childless was a ticket for the husband to be polygamous. The man is allowed, culturally to marry another woman with or without the wife's consent or to go ahead and get a concubine who will bear him children for he has to do any of these to restore his ego and prove his manhood. (Orabuoze, 2010)

Martin in *Coming to Birth* kept a mistress-Fatima in Paulina's six months' absence with the hope of getting a child so that Fatima might succeed where Paulina failed. When she returns to Nairobi, she is saddened by this, her heart sank and she did not sleep well. Fatima jeers at her further a number of times even in Martin's presence, and she bore it all. Paulina's marriage is thus strained due to her failure to bear children. The eight months passed uneasily in this way and with no sign of another baby after her miscarriage.

Societal culture and customs have created this dire need in both men and women to have children in marriage to the extent that it is all right to seek elsewhere. While at home, Paulina's sisters-in-law and a giggly friend of hers persuade her to have a baby with another man. If within the marriage the couple has failed to get a child, then somehow, they have society's and relatives' full support to seek it elsewhere, outside marriage. This is so because, without a child, there is no respect. Women at the Homecraft cold-shouldered Paulina because she had no child.

The societal expectation notwithstanding, Paulina on her part remains faithful to Martin, knowing well that it is not her fault, she faithfully twists her wedding ring and feels revulsed at the idea. She felt a revulsion that it should ever be mentioned (Birth 9).

After Fatima, Martin takes on Fauzia in his attempt to get a child. Martin justifies this and says "*After all she was a young clean girl who might give him a child (Birth 48)*". However, Martin insists that he will not pay dowry again unless he is sure. Fauzia hence will only be valuable enough to him to enable him to fulfil his cultural expectation of paying dowry. The value will be seen in her ability to bear children and it is only then that Martin will seal it. Meanwhile he was non-committal on her.

"... and he had no serious thought of taking this butterfly creature home to mud floors and the care of heavy children. If he had any plan at all, vaguely to retain the child and let her go away." (Birth 49)

Martin's ultimate objective with Fauzia is to have her bear a child for him, and that's all.

To assess the identity of the woman thus created by the cultural dynamics further the question "What does culture expect of a woman in marriage?" is asked. The answer clearly is, a woman is expected to remain faithful and submissive in her marriage bearing children to her husband, despite the fact that the marriage might be unfulfilling and unhappy. On the other hand, culture expects the marriage to fulfill a man by

having his submissive and faithful wife bear him children. The husband- is allowed to go out of his marriage in pursuit of this fulfillment. To this effect, Martin's pursuit for fulfillment sees him first getting involved with Fatima who jeers at Paulina's state of childlessness, then Fauzia-Fatima's younger sister, who rejects his proposition of settling down and having children, for she wants to enjoy herself a little longer, then thirdly to Nancy who walks out of his house when he went out with his friends to mourn the death of Tom Mboya. All these three women fail to bring him the fulfillment and satisfaction that comes with having a child.

"You can resist an invading army; you cannot resist an idea whose time has come," Victor Hugo. In the long run, Paulina finds herself warming to the idea of getting a child, not with Martin, but with another man. She then finds herself in an agreeable position to seek a child elsewhere. For the first time, she broached the logic of it.

"She was a married woman denied a married woman's rights and respect, in custom she should seek a child where she could, she had a right... there would be no shame in this." (Birth 54) "And she knew that there would be no shame but not for a barren woman, the public evidence of shame, and she bridled his comfort and cast her eyes down and ceased to resist."

Marjorie Oludhe presents Paulina to us, at first this cultural dynamic gave her the identity of a submissive woman, a faithful woman who was revulsed at the idea of getting involved with another man in an effort to get a child. Not so long after, Paulina has grown to have this new identity. The identity of a woman is certainly convinced of what she wants and she seeks it confidently. She rightfully seeks to make herself acceptable and agreeable in the eyes of society by getting involved with another man to get a child. And so Paulina's journey in pursuit of a child begins on the day she misses the Lucky Bus from Kisumu back to Kano and spent a night with Simon, a clerk at Town Hall in the health department, who had

schooled with her elder brother. (Birth 54) After this first encounter, Paulina,

"Knew without words being said that she would come again. She could not pretend, she could any longer do without it." (Birth 54)

Thus, this journey begins her relationship with Simon grows and they have numerous encounters, *"But her hunger was now so great that she could forget other people as soon as she had taken her place on the bed that was so generously provided for her benefit." (Birth 56)*

These encounters leave Paulina satisfied for she felt less tired these days and more sure of herself. This satisfaction gives her more than she ever had felt with Martin.

Beyond this satisfaction, Paulina gets a child, that which she had been seeking all this while.

"I thank you for the child Simon... it is all that I wanted." Simon these days "Took her quickly and carelessly"

Paulina makes it clear that she neither wanted to be Simon's second wife, after Martha nor to force him into being responsible for the child.

"A child of mine does not have to look to a father who will not stand up for him."

All she wanted was a child and having gotten it, she was peacefully done with Simon.

From where she stands, Paulina has fulfilled the greatest responsibility and passed the cultural test for her to be assimilated back into society. The psychosocial perception of childlessness is reported to cause anxiety, emotional stress, hostility and guilt. (Petok, 2008) Paulina successfully gets into the clear and out of the woods for it is confirmed by her pregnancy that she is fertile and Martin can as well take her back. So valuable is the presence of a child that it can mend a broken marriage. *"After all no one could blame him for wanting a fertile wife and he might even wish to claim the child. (Birth 68)*

Culturally, the wife is to give her husband the ideal identity in the eyes of society by bearing

children for him. This cultural dynamic in the woman the identity and the responsibility of the sole determinant of the husband's manhood and maturity.

At this time when Paulina is more sure of herself, and more satisfied, Martin's image is contrasted to hers, physically, he has grown thinner, with a receding hairline. In addition to moving from one woman to another seeking fulfillment. First Fatima then Fauzia and finally Nancy, all of which ended unsatisfactorily, for he fails to get what he was seeking - a child.

"He did not see himself as maturing but as deprived of the chance of maturity, a childless man who could not keep a wife whose house at home was shamed and whose house in town could never be home." (Birth 78)

Paulina culturally has failed to perform her crucial role of giving Martin the desired identity. A woman being a mother is crucial to according the husband and ideal identity. This responsibility rests solely on the woman's shoulders.

CONCLUSION

As discussed above, the cultural dynamics and expectations play a major role in according the woman an identity, especially in the backdrop of the patriarchal nature of the post-colonial Kenyan societies. The silver lining, however, is that the women can embrace self-autonomy, which has it that each and every individual as an agent, has the right to make up their mind, make decisions and remain assertive. Thus, one can choose to challenge or comply with the given socio-cultural dynamics and structures. In both *Moment* and *Birth* self-autonomy is an interplay with political involvement. A majority of Marjorie Oludhe's female characters choose to rise above the patriarchal expectations, and make the best out of themselves.

Paulina's self-autonomy is witnessed when she assertively stands by what she believes in contrary to Martin's outlook in life, Paulina was more assertive and focused on getting things done. She always was the one demanding to grow, to get out,

to do things. Unlike Paulina in *Coming to Birth* who remained resolute in her quest to have a child, Wairimu in *The Present Moment* had however achieved a balanced and contented life without the blessing of children.

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