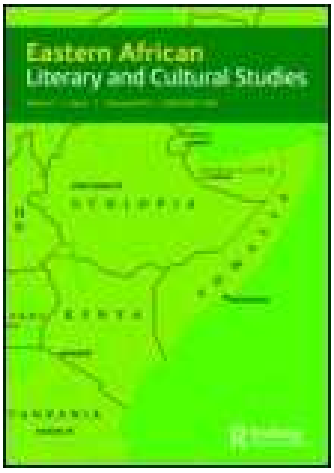

Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/real20

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Published online: 18 Dec 2014.

To cite this article: Ken Walibora Waliaula (2014) The Female Condition as Double Incarceration in Wambui Otieno's Mau Mau's Daughter , Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies, 1:1-2, 71-81, DOI: 10.1080/23277408.2014.980160

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23277408.2014.980160

Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies, 2014
Vol. 1, No. 1&2, 71–81
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23277408.2014.980160

The Female Condition as Double Incarceration in Wambui Otieno's *Mau Mau's Daughter*

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Focusing on Kenyan freedom fighter Wambui Otieno's narrative Mau Mau's Daughter 1998), this article discusses the interplay between incarceration and the female condition. It bears clarifying that Otieno's narrative of confinement was written and published forty years after the fact of her detention. The time of its writing may be relatively recent, the events it evokes are not. The prison life narrative offers useful insights into the treatment of the figurative and literal incarceration in contemporary African literature by and about women, particularly with regard to life writing genres. Given the passage of time between the narration and the occurrence of the narrated events, there are several possibilities to be deduced here: (1) She could have been too far removed from the actual events to render an accurate account of what really transpired; (2) or the passage of time would have enabled her to see things more lucidly; (3) and more importantly, her perceptions could have been tremendously influenced by the subsequent events and experiences in the intervening decades, shaping and moulding her memory and her interpretation of her detention story. It may well be that the passage of time enabled and enhanced her capacity to tell a story whose telling is like opening an old wound.

Keywords: African prison writing, women prison writing, African prison letters, literature of incarceration, tradition of female prison literature, narrating political incarceration

Introduction: Gender in Prison Writing

Writing on women's prison writing in the late twentieth century, Judith Scheffler observed: "[t]he tradition of men's prison writing is rich and established, while works by women prisoners remain scattered and largely unidentified as a body of literature with a tradition of its own" (1984, 57). Scheffler demonstrates genuine concern for the dereliction that women prison writing has endured globally. Her call for the need to explore women prison writing echoes Ama Ata Aidoo's plaintive cry that works of women writers are, "voices unheard, rarely discussed and seldom accorded space in anthologies and predictably male-oriented studies in the field" (515). Whereas Scheffler decries the failure to identify a tradition of women prison writing globally, Aidoo is preoccupied with the "absence of critical attention" regarding the works of Africa women writers in general (516).

What really ails African women prison writing is not necessarily lack of a tradition. It is not even that the women prison writers are too few and too far between. Scheffler's insistence on a tradition is germane since it lends itself towards encouraging the quest for what is *sui generis* about women prison writing, somehow setting it apart from any other kind of writing. In the introduction to her edited volume, *Wall Tappings: An International Anthology of Women's Prison Writings 200 to Present* (2002), Scheffler asserts that women prison writers are motivated by personal, social and political imperatives to write because of (1) their belief in the merit of their experiences as worth expressing, (2) the desire to vindicate themselves, (3) commitment to a political, social, or religious cause and, (4) for some of them, the sudden realization that they have untapped writing talent.

There are differences in the way men and female prison writers narrate their incarceration. Scheffler states that rather than being mainly preoccupied with a vainglorious sense of heroism and transcendence, the female prison writer is concerned with the "concrete reality of the prison

environment and especially in relationship with those who are close to her", namely affected family members (xxxi). Scheffler asserts that this is in stark contrast to male prison writers, who write about their experience of incarceration in a triumphal mode, as they are often "concerned with images of transcendence and rebellion" (xxxi).

The female prison writer, therefore, is in a unique position, because she has to contend with narrating both the literal incarceration and the virtual incarceration, which is always already there because of how society conceives of femininity. The female condition is already a form of imprisonment because of the phallocratic structures that exist in most societies; narrating literal imprisonment only accentuates the gravity of the perpetual state of unfreedom that is the female lot. The fact that the bulk of female prisoners do not write about their experience is a measure of their lack of education, Scheffler, adds, which is a testament to their marginalization or virtual imprisonment in society (ibid).

The problem as far as the contemporary African literary landscape is concerned, is a lack of serious and sustained critical attention. Happily for Aidoo, her lament could be said to be somewhat dated, since the works of African women writers are not as "unheard voices" as they were three decades ago. In recent years the attention given to works by and about African women is unprecedented in critical circles, whether or not such attention is always accompanied with critical acclaim.

Unfortunately, African women prison writing is still crying out for critical engagement. That is not to say there have been absolutely no studies on African women prison writing. For example, we have Barbara Hallow's magisterial text *Barred: Women, Writing and Political Detention* (1992), and her article, "From the Women's Prison: Third World Women's Narratives of Prison" (1986), and Marilyn Booth's "Women's Prison Memoirs in Egypt and Elsewhere: Prison, Gender, Praxis," (1987), which focuses on Egypt and the Middle East.

However, with regard to critical analyses of women writing in Africa, "[t]he harvest is plentiful but the workers are few" or could it be simply the question of there being a bumper literary harvest and many reluctant workers (Matt. 9:37). Granted, prison narratives by men may outnumber those by women, but there is enough women's prison writing to merit attention. The question should not be whether or not the narratives are rich, or that they are too scattered in Scheffler's terms; the pertinent question should be what critics can or should do with those that exist. There is indeed a remarkable corpus of African women prison writing, albeit a smaller one compared to that of male prison narrators. For example, from South Africa, we have Winnie Mandela's *Part of My Soul Went with Him* (1985), Frances Baard's *My Soul is Not Banned* (1986) and Emma Mashinini's *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life* (1989); from Egypt, we have Farīda al-Naqqāsh's *al-Sijn Damcatāni .. wa-Warda [Prison: Two Tears .. and a Rose]* (1985) and Nawal el Saadawi's *Memoirs from the Women Prison* (1986); from Eritrea, Abeba Tesfagiorgis' *A Painful Season and a Stubborn Hope* (1992) and from Kenya there is Wambui Otieno's *Mau Mau's Daughter* (1998). Thorough consideration of these narratives would help shed light on contemporary African women prison narratives as a distinct writing tradition.

Incarceration and the Female Condition in *Maua Mau's Daughter*

Focusing on Kenyan freedom fighter Wambui Otieno's narrative *Mau Mau's Daughter* (1998), this article discusses the interplay between incarceration and the female condition. It bears clarifying that Otieno's narrative of confinement was written and published forty years after the fact of her detention. The time of its writing may be relatively recent, but the events it evokes are not. The prison life narrative offers useful insights into the treatment of the figurative and literal incarceration in contemporary African literature by and about women. Given the passage of time between the narration and the occurrence of the narrated events, there are several possibilities to be deduced here: (1) She could have been too far removed from the actual events to render an accurate account of what really transpired; (2) or the passage of time would have enabled her to see things more

lucidly; (3) and more importantly, her perceptions could have been tremendously influenced by the subsequent events and experiences in the intervening decades, shaping her memory and her interpretation of her detention story. It may well be that the passage of time enabled and enhanced her capacity to tell a story whose telling is like opening an old wound.

A towering female public figure in Kenya's history and collective memory, Wambui Otieno was born in 1936 and died on August 30, 2011. For most Kenyans born after independence in 1963, Otieno's rise to national prominence is more or less associated with two events in her life: the protracted legal dispute over the place to bury her husband's remains after his death in 1986, and her marriage at 67 to a 25-year-old man in 2003. Otieno fought valiantly in the court for the right to bury her first husband, lawyer SM Otieno, in their Upper Matasia home on the outskirts of Nairobi, but lost to her husband's Umar Kager clan, which had insisted that he be buried in his ancestral home at Nyalgunga, Nyanza Province. The dramatic case became something of not only the enactment of the conflict between modernity and antiquity, but also the dramatisation of ostensibly deep-seated mutual hatred between the Luo and the Kikuyu. But more than anything else, Otieno "showed Kenyan women the possibility of defiance," in one of the most famous and fierce legal battles in Kenyan history (Stamp 1991, 844).

As Marshall Clough states in *Mau Mau Memoirs* (1998), Otieno's autobiography is a unique contribution to Kenya's literary history, inviting as it does critical analysis for any number of reasons, not least among them the fact that it is the first attempt ever to narrate confinement by a female insider of the Mau Mau freedom struggle against Kenya's bloody colonial history. As is so often the case, male voices narrating captivity outnumber the female ones a great deal. Indeed the male voices of victims of the horrendous atrocities visited on Kenyan freedom fighters by the British colonial administration in prisons and detention camps are many and include Jomo Kenyatta's *Suffering without Bitterness* (1968), Josiah Mwangi Kariuki's *Mau Mau Detainee* (1963), Harry Thuku's *An Autobiography* (1970), Bilgad Kaggia's *Roots of Freedom* (1975) and Gakaara wa Wanjau's *Mau Mau Author in Detention* (1988). But as Marshall S. Clough notes in his *Mau Mau Memoirs: History, Memory and Politics,* "few women are mentioned by name in the memoirs" in these mainstream male narratives (141). Otieno's narrative stands out as the one and only authentic female account of the horrors of detention in colonial Kenya. It is only Otieno's autobiography that so far stands or sinks as the sole female island in the expansive sea of male voices that narrativize confinement in colonial Kenya from an experiential point of view.

Reading Otieno's autobiography, one senses the imposing presence of a Kikuyu woman who is not only Kikuyu—she is an African woman with multiple, conflictual, and contending identities. I argue that, in a sense, Otieno's narrative is perhaps metonymic of Kenya's multiple ethnic composition, with over ffifty different ethno-linguistic groups, a multiplicity that has proven to be both a boon and a bane. Yet it is to her identification with her great-grandfather, the legendary Kikuyu leader Waiyaki wa Hinga, of Maasai parentage and whose Maasai name was Koiyaki Ole Kumale, that she attaches particular importance. In her first of a series of correctives, Wambui is at pains to exonerate Waiyaki, a familiar historical figure in Kenya, from charges of collaboration with the British colonists. Otieno inevitably adapts the Kikuyu oral history version of Waiyaki's encounter with the Europeans, which vindicates him as an intrepid and powerful indigenous leader rather than the Eurocentric historical version that applies to her ancestor the misnomer "paramount chief," for the almost untranslatable Kikuyu term *Muthamaki,* for a kind of consummate leader.

As if to add insult to injury, Eurocentric historians, Otieno laments, brand her Waiyaki a collaborator with the colonial forces. As Cora Ann Presley remarks cogently in the introduction to the autobiography, Otieno intends to "change the interpretation of the place of Waiyaki in Kenya's history" (Presley 5). Further Otieno elaborates how, according to oral tradition, the British exiled Waiyaki to Kibwezi and buried him alive after he resisted their expropriation of Kikuyuland. In this way her memoir is also an attempt to liberate the "incarcerated" history of her great-grandfather's heroism.

Presley's characterization of Otieno's family as "good" is based on its fame and role in Kenyan history. Waiyaki is still an iconic figure in the Kenyan collective memory. His memory is immortalized in the name of Waiyaki Way in the capital city, Nairobi. It is also noteworthy that Otieno's own brother Waiyaki, named after the great-grandfather, became an influential cabinet minister in the Kenyatta and Moi governments. Why does Otieno foreground her being born in such a "good" family, in Presley's terms? (5). First, this seems to indicate the premium Otieno places on her ancestry, having descended from a family of leaders and history makers. In any case, as she shows in a subsequent passage, Kenya's president Mzee Jomo Kenyatta was raised by her own great-grandmother.

Secondly, Otieno perhaps intends to imply that her own heroic acts in the liberation movement stem from her great-grandfather's heroism and shrewd leadership. She writes fondly of his apparent admonition to the Kikuyu: "You must not surrender one inch of our soil to foreigners, for if you do so, future children will die of starvation" (16). She adds that Waiyaki had "died a hero" (17). Hence, we can safely conclude that Otieno tends to suggest that her angst toward the European "foreigners" stemmed from the example of courageous resistance from Waiyaki and that she was impelled to join the liberation struggle by a desire to take vengeance upon those who buried her great-grandfather alive in Kibwezi. She is therefore motivated by commitment to a personal cause of revenge and the collective cause of Kikuyu nationalism.

The impetus to avenge her great-grandfather's death is strong. While in the movement she shares with one of the female oath-takers her "indignation that Waiyaki had been brutally murdered by the whites" (34). The life and fate of her great-grandfather seems to have sowed the seed of rebelliousness in Otieno and bore special significance for her involvement in the liberation movement and the activism that characterised her life in post-independence Kenya.

It is imperative to consider Otieno's identification with her great-grandfather Waiyaki in light of Mary Mason's postulate that women's life writing is invariably relational. She states:

> On the contrary … the self discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some "other." This recognition of another consciousness—and I emphasize recognition rather than deference—this grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other, seems … to enable women to write openly about themselves. (1990, 210)

Mason's theory seems to hinge on the premise that there is such a thing as a tradition of women's life writing of which acute awareness of "another consciousness" or a "chosen other" is a crucial attribute. There is a way in which Otieno's invocation of Waiyaki speaks to this notion of a chosen other, a kind of alternative consciousness, whose recognition legitimates, reinforces, and reifies her sense of self and identity. It is significant that it is with a male relative that Otieno would strike an identitarian chord, discovering the terms with which she would want to know herself and be known. In this regard, *Mau Mau's Daughter* is hardly an isolated case in the corpus of women writing in Africa. The image of Nelson Mandela, Winnie Mandela's then iconic husband as her chosen other, is ubiquitous in her mediated prison narrative *Part of My Soul Went with Him*, underscoring and validating her alterity in the larger scheme of things, despite or because of the text purporting to be the story of her life in apartheid South Africa. The relational nature of women's life writing in general, therefore, finds expression in their prison writing as well.

For Otieno her assumption of the male nickname "Msaja" is an index of her vision of herself as Waiyaki incarnate, a return from the dead in another form of her male relative. The original male ancestor is slightly different from his replacement female descendant only in substance or more specifically in anatomy; they are the same in spirit, in their mental inclination, in their resistance to oppression and exploitation. We will soon return to how this female embrace of manliness subverts the conventional concept of femininity.

On the whole, Otieno does not only valourize the rebellious spirit that typifies her life, she attempts to interpret this rebelliousness as predicated upon having descended from Waiyaki. She

swims against the current from a relatively young age, refusing to accept things uncritically from the time she was at the Christian Missionary-run Mambere Girls School in Central Kenya. She states:

> At Mambere, I started to be politically aware—the rebel in me started to emerge. First, I was of an age to start questioning some things I hated most; and also the school's version of what happened between my great-grandfather … Another reason is that I loved, and still love my name Wambui and consider it a beautiful name. But that was not the case with Miss Brownly. To her, our African names did not exist (29).

It is significant that Otieno would contest the official "school's version" of her great-grandfather's role in the colonial encounter. This is in harmony with the re-writing of history that forms part of the purpose and intent of her autobiography, as Presley correctly suggests in its introduction. Otieno contests the Eurocentric rendition of her family and national history; or put differently, she is dissatisfied with *his-story* and hence embarks on writing *her-story*. But in a display of cultural nationalism, Otieno also rejects the colonial school system's attempt to make African students disavow their cultural roots, including their names and language. In a sense, Otieno's cultural nationalism here echoes Ngugi wa Thiong'o's sentiments in *Decolonising the Mind,* in which he berates the insidious colonial scheme that was aimed at enfeebling the indigenous minds by making them self-haters. Wambui states that she was greatly disgusted by her teacher Miss Brownly's endeavours to obliterate Wambui, her "beautiful [maiden] name" and to impose upon her the alien "Virginia Tiras" (29). This account in Otieno's autobiography recalls Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), in which Viola Cullinam, a white woman "baptizes" the autobiographer "Mary" for the white woman's own convenience. In both autobiographies there is a deliberate bid to ignore or trample upon black women's agency or subjectivity expressed through the right to be called what one desires. Otieno concludes that her encounter with colonial or colonial-induced disdain toward her culture helped catalyze her hard-line stance. Otieno chose not to follow the path her Christian mother walked, where shunning things African such as circumcision songs and dances was customary. She writes:

> You will therefore understand my surprise and indignation when at Mambere I found Scottish dance being taught with pomp and glory … In my mind, however, nothing could convince me that the Kikuyu dance was inferior to the Scottish one. In defiance, I rebelliously learned all the tribal songs and dances … All the contradictions of my Christian upbringing and the cultural bias I experienced in school led me, inevitably, toward the rebellion. (31–32)

The autobiography is in a sense a history of Otieno's rebellious spirit. Rebelliousness is at work when she joins the Mau Mau movement to fight against the British colonial hegemony while in her mid-teens. She takes the first of eight oaths pledging allegiance to the movement in 1952 at the age of sixteen (33). Upon leaving school the following year when the British administration declared the State of Emergency in Kenya, she was fully immersed in the movement, working as a scout and taking the remaining nine oaths. As a scout in the guerrilla movement, Otieno learned how to smuggle arms and information from colonists, an undertaking that was at variance with her role in the Girl Guides movement in her school days. Also, she narrates how she led African female prostitutes into becoming spies for the movement as well as decoys to entrap the colonial officers and policemen who sought sexual gratification from them. Her mixed ancestry and fair skin stood her in good stead in the face of the colonial police out to restrict the mobility of African Kenyans as a way of suppressing resistance. The hide-and-seek games she played with the colonial forces meant being arrested for brief periods and released albeit with further restrictions on her mobility. Banishing any feelings of guilt was the hallmark of the freedom struggle. "The other source of inspiration is," she states, "believing in whatever one is doing and not having a guilty conscience" (43).

She consistently violated the imposed restriction orders and still ventured in and out of Kiambu district near Nairobi in furtherance of the underground activities of the Mau Mau movement. It was, however, indeed a matter of time before, as Otieno reveals, she would eventually bear the full brunt of ruthless treatment at the hands of the colonial police force for her revolutionary activities.

Her eventual arrest and detention was the outcome of an act of betrayal by someone she really trusted and loved, her own fiancé (85). She soon became a detainee of the colonial state from 8 July 1960 to 23 January 1963. This literal confinement by state apparatuses was the pinnacle of her suffering and tested her rebellious disposition to the limit. Otieno was arrested in her Kaloleni home in Nairobi and flown to the island of Lamu on the Kenyan coast where she was detained. Her little innocent children were detained with her and suffered pangs of hunger and malaria and the general deprivation of detention. Describing the Lamu-bound flight, Otieno writes: "[m]y children, who now suffered detention for no fault of their own, had only biscuits and canned beans to eat; they had to sleep hungry" (78). At Lamu a British colonial prison officer named Rudolf Speed raped Otieno, impregnating her and inflicting untold physical, psychic, and emotional pain upon her. She reports the rapist as telling her after repeatedly violating her for days during her incarceration that "impregnating me was a decision of the British government" (83).

In her explanation of the circumstances leading to her detention, Otieno does not consider herself guilty of any crime warranting the action the government took against her. She projects a self-image of innocence. As Davies remarks, invariably prison writers tend to implicitly or even explicitly raise the question: "What did I do wrong?"(44). For Otieno, her actions were far from being wrong; what was wrong was the betrayal that may have led to her arrest and incarceration. It is remarkable how other Kenyan prison writers such as Abdilatif Abdalla in *Sauti ya Dhiki* (1973) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Detained*, show similar tendencies in attempts to make sense of their confinement. Otieno therefore portrays the colonial system's antithetical reaction as excessive, unjust and unjustifiable.

In all these cases, the personae narrating confinement at once plead innocence and expose the wrongness of their confinement. In this case, therefore, *Mau Mau's Daughter* is written within the broader tradition of prison writing across gender, time, and space. Her female narrative, is in this sense, not unlike those by men. It is, however, in narrating what the female body undergoes while in state captivity that Wambui's narrative perhaps exemplifies one of its key differences from male narratives.

Male prison writers write in various details about the brutal beatings and torture of the male body. Gakaara wa Wanjau in *Mau Mau Writer in Detention* and Josiah Mwangi Kariuki in *Mau Mau Detainee* write about how they were stripped and flogged ruthlessly and repeatedly in front of other detainees, male and female, for the "crime" of writing while in the detention camps. In these male narratives, emphasis tends to be placed on their endurance of physical pain rather than unmasking the metaphysical or emotional pain. However, in narrating her ordeal as a woman detainee, Otieno attempts to deal with the trauma of the violation of her body that transcends physical pain. It is to this trauma that we now turn.

To be sure, like her male counterparts, Otieno expresses her anger and horror at being reduced to a mere number, as most prisoners are. Upon her arrival in Lamu, Otieno ceases being known by name. She writes about a vicious interrogator who, "shouted at me, reminding me that I would only be Number 59" (83). This depersonalization, objectification, and dehumanization irked her immensely as it did her famous male counterparts Ngugi and Soyinka when they were reduced to numbers upon detention, according to their memoirs. She makes references to the physical force that was applied upon her body as the "official" rapist pushed her. "He pushed me to the ground with such force that my back was hurt, causing a scar in my spine that I carry to this day" (83). Like her male counterparts in the Mau Mau era, Otieno is subjected to intense interrogation, which in itself is a form of torture as Scarry observes in her *The Body in Pain* (1985). Otieno was even branded a "terrorist" by her colonial captors just like her fellow male freedom fighters.

Yet, it is quite apparent that being a woman meant suffering in ways male detainees would possibly neither suffer nor fathom. Being female made her vulnerable to the use of rape as a weapon against her. This is not to say rape was not a possible tool used against male detainees. Indeed as Caroline Elkins claims in her *Imperial Reckoning, the Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*

(2005), rape of male detainees was a common practice in colonial Kenya. The point is that male and females do not experience rape in the same way, repugnant as the experience may be to both sexes. And even though individual victims deal with the effects differently regardless of their sex, it is a fact that only women are capable of being impregnated in the ordeal as Otieno was. Whether it is true that her rape and pregnancy was the official ploy of the British government or not, it goes without saying that the ordeal left her with long-lasting emotional wounds. Granted, male prisoners may have suffered the sexual humiliation of the type described by Maina wa Kinyatti in his prison memoir *Kenya: A Prison Notebook* in which he writes graphically about the eroticized pleasure of the male prison warders as they scrutinized and squeezed prisoners' genitals.

Kinyatti's graphic recounting of these experiences contrasts sharply with Otieno's near-silence on or muted reference to the rape she experienced. Otieno narrates how male British soldiers put her on a boat one night and ferried her to Shella Island, away from other detainees. She continues: "Although the British often harassed women, it was an unusual thing for a woman to be arrested by men alone, let alone taken to an isolated island at night. You can guess what happened to me: I was brutally raped" (81). Later on she recounts another encounter with the official rapist, who repeats his attack in the Lamu hotel. She adds: "When I awoke, I pleaded with him to let me go. He raped me two more times before he let me go" (83). What we can glean from her narrative is the places of her rape, the perpetrators of the rape, and her subsequent disorientation. We can only glean, as Otieno's narrative completely avoids the graphic details such as presented in Kinyatti's narrative. Also, it could well be said, Otieno does not consider it necessary or desirable to provide graphic details; in so much as such an attempt may only serve to pander to the voyeuristic tendencies of the reader. "I was brutally raped" sums up the nature of the rape, and it is left to the reader to imagine and fill in the gaps or better still stifle the imagination about the nature and depth of the horrific act. At any rate to reveal, as she does, that one was raped is on its own a courageous and painful act, appearing as it does like opening an old wound.

But perhaps more importantly, we may theorize on the paucity of details about the rape by locating the experience in the profundity of trauma. It would seem the trauma of rape may rob its victims of the gumption or the language to express it much less expressing it in detail. Elaine Scarry (1985) has argued that there is a way in which pain is inexpressible in language. Scarry suggests that for the one experiencing or "having" pain it is real, for the one "hearing" pain there is no pain (4). Experientiality becomes integral in the recognition as well as narration of pain. The inexpressibility of the pain explains the paucity of details regarding this extremely punitive measure.

Wambui Otieno's autobiography comes across as a uniquely feminine portrayal of self, so as to make tenable the conclusion that it represents the life of other women in similar circumstances. It is only a female consciousness such as Otieno's that would capture the essence of the female body, the essence of what David Paul Huddart aptly calls "womanbeingness" (2008, 28). Otieno indeed delineates how throughout her life the female body is a contested territory. For instance, she narrates how her mother and other adult women in her social milieu were reticent about disclosing the inevitable physiological changes she would undergo in her puberty;

> I remember when I first menstruated at the age of fourteen. I had not the least idea what was happening to me. I thought it was the eighteen-year disease mentioned in the Bible. I ran to my mother in fright but instead of consoling and reassuring me, she angrily chased me away and told me to talk to my older sister, Gladwell. When I told her of my "disease," she laughed for five minutes before she could even talk to me. This was complete cruelty (28).

Otieno views her female relatives' reactions to her search for answers regarding her body as "complete cruelty." He mother's anger and her sister's mockery only served to create in Otieno feelings of self-hate. Both mother and sister fail in helping her to accept her female body.

Otieno swims against the current not only by embracing, as we mentioned earlier, radicalism from her time at Mambere Girls School, but also adopting in her autobiography a stance that is discordant with her mother's reticence on matters sexual. This can be seen in the preponderance of

references to these physiological processes in the female body throughout her autobiography. For instance, Otieno talks about policewoman EP Heriz-Smith who "gave me cotton wool, as I was having my menstrual cycle" (78). But even more significant is the centrality of menstruation in her attempt to contextualize the oath taking through her female prism. Otieno mentions that the fact of her femininity was critical in the oath taking as the men presiding over the process asked her whether she was menstruating before administering the oath. She adds in parenthesis: "(I learned that a menstruating woman was disqualified from taking the oath at that time, as menstruation was regarded as dirty and a cause of misfortune)" (33).

This is a telling point in *Mau Mau's Daughter*, because it tacitly suggests that although women fighters were valued in the political struggle, their bodies were still largely held captive in the "prison house" of patriarchy. Thus her story exposes the incarcerating tendencies and strategies of partriarchy and, as a consequence, demonstrates how in their life writing women are engaged, as Bart Moore-Gilbert has opined, in "an articulation of their continuing needs and demands as unequal citizens in a patriarchal society" (xxiii). In other words, although women would be an integral part of the struggle, they were still women, deemed to be perpetually encumbered by and consigned to the prison house of their own "dirty" female bodies. It seems to me this is Otieno's implicit indictment of the patriarchy of the *Mau Mau* movement, the kind of patriarchy whose shadows loom large over her account of politics in postcolonial Kenya, and particularly her husband's burial saga.

The atypically defiant female presence that pervades the construction of self in *Mau_Mau's Daughter's* recalls Ifi Amadiume's militant Igbo "women who wanted to become not men, but males" (15). In other words as Amadiume observes the flexible gender configuration among the Igbo not only allowed for "matrifocality within a patrineal society" but also pointed to the interplay between gender and power (15). The manliness epithet inscribed in Otieno's nickname Msaja (Man), as in the case of the Igbo militant women, gestures towards decoupling sex and gender roles. Yet, if the female "militancy of the Igbo women" which made them virtually "female husbands and male daughters" was socially and generally endorsed, Otieno's militancy and striving for "maleness" was frowned upon by the strictures and structures of the heavily patrifocal Kenyan and Kikuyu milieu.

One could also argue that Otieno's nickname Msaja, therefore, at once suggests acknowledgement of her militancy and her deliberate transgression of gender barriers. Embedded in the "maleness"of the nickname is the power and privilege that men enjoy or enjoyed and the courage and temerity that Otieno displays in her attempt to attain such power and privilege against many odds. However, her embrace of a quasi-maleness bound up in the nickname is not a negation of femininity, but an insidious subversion of what Baart Moore-Gilbert would call the "masculinist notions of Selfhood" that pervade her society (2009, xviii). This male nickname is also in harmony with her subversive identification with the rebellious spirit of her male forebear, Waiyaki wa Hinga. Thus the monument of herself that Otieno constructs in the memoir depicts her as an extraordinary woman doing extraordinary things.

Her family was by any standards materially well endowed, and possessed hundreds of acres of land. Her father was, as she states, the first African chief inspector of police, a position that ensured a steady and reasonable income. Yet she seems to have somehow grown up under the ravages of rural poverty, including having to fetch water from the stream located in a difficult terrain. She writes:

> The worst childhood memory I have is of the many hours I spent carrying water to our homestead. Since there was no piped water system, we fetched water from a nearby stream known as Kiharu. The path to Kiharu was very steep, rough, and winding, yet we made as many as ten round trips each day carrying big-gallon tins full of water … I came to dislike Kiharu so much that I have not returned there since I left home in 1954. (26)

Otieno can therefore identify with millions of toiling women within and without Kenya from an experiential point of view. Significantly, it is her autobiography that perhaps has the most

comprehensive list of female Mau Mau detainees. In the main, male writers frequently list their fellow men, and rarely mention women by name or elide them entirely. Also, Mau Mau's Daughter is the only Mau Mau memoir that devotes tremendous space to the activities of female freedom fighters. By resisting subjugation throughout her life, she seems to be telling other, less resistant women that it is possible and necessary to move women's concerns from the back burner to the front burner. In her autobiography she often connects her own experience with the plight of other women. She tends to see her experience as exemplary to other women. It is important to her that "my case [the burial dispute regarding her husband] helped bring attention to the plight of other women. For example, it encouraged Flora Braganza of Tanzania, who sued her deceased husband's relatives in the Tanzania supreme court on the right to bury him" (124). In a sense, Otieno projects her experience as emblematic of women's problems worldwide.

But is Wambui Otieno's story a kind of national allegory in Fredric Jameson's terms? Jameson (1986) proposes the reading of non-western texts as national allegories. He states: "[a]ll third world-texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way; they are to be read as what we will call national allegories" (69). While not endorsing Jameson's use of the contentious term "third world", it is germane to acknowledge the validity of his claim in light of the interplay between Otieno's private destiny and the destiny of the general Kenyan public, notwithstanding Jameson's emphasis on the novel. Otieno's plural heritage encompassing the Ndorobo, Maasai and Kikuyu blood and her marriage to a Luo man presents Kenya's own national character. Kenya is made up of more than fifty different ethnic groups, assuming a kind of plural heritage. The Western media's attempt to characterize the post-election violence in Kenya between December 2007 and February 2008, as simply pitting the Kikuyu against the Luo, was too facile. It ignored certain concomitant factors at play in the Kenyan crisis such as the conflict over resources; the colonial origins of the tensions between communities emanating from the divide-and-rule British colonial strategy; the large-scale despair among unemployed youths making the poor turn on the poor in an orgy of self-destruction; the upsurge in criminal gangs capitalizing on the anarchic ambience; and the general greed for power among the political elite that made fanning inter-ethnic violence a steppingstone to power. At any rate the similarity between Otieno's story and the story of the Kenyan nation lies in the fact that in both cases plurality has proven a condition of possibility for cohesion and tension; for certainty and ambiguity. Otieno, for instance, invokes her multiple ancestry with pride and certainty. But for the most part, when she talks about "we" in her narrative, she means the Kikuyu, as in "We Kikuyu have a saying, 'Rui rutiumaga mukaro' (Once a King always a King") (17). Otieno's "we" may also refer to all women, all Kenyans, all Africans and all humans; with all these various references imbuing the "we" with ambiguity.

Conclusion

We should remember that the map of Africa, as is the rest of the formerly colonized world, was the arbitrary work of the European colonists who brought together peoples who were largely "strangers" under the alien name and alienating concept of "nation." "Alien" because any and all definitions of nation, including Benedict Anderson's oft-quoted idea of nation as "an *imagined* political community—and imagined as both *limited* and *sovereign*" fall flat in characterizing Kenya's incongruous and contestatory polities (1983, 6). The more than fifty different ethnic groups in Kenya found themselves lumped together in a Kenyan nation state without their consent and without necessarily having a sense of "we" or commonality that is often associated with nationhood. Following Walker Connor (1994), I suggest that Kenya is a supreme example of a "nation state that contain[s] more than one nation" (37). That the Kenyan nation state fails to live up to being a true nation is because of historical factors from pre-colonial and colonial times. Inter-ethnic conflict existed in the pre-colonial era. Yet when they held sway over what came to be known as Kenya from the late 19th century, the British colonists exacerbated matters by their divide and rule policy that either sowed the seed of discord and suspicion between various

tribes or intensified tensions that were always already there. The tendency of the British to at best divide and rule or at worst rule and ruin, is exemplified and highlighted by the effective colonial propaganda that was aimed at creating antipathy toward the mainly Kikuyu Mau Mau detainees amidst other ethnic groups in which the camps were located form Lodwar to Lamu from Manyani to Kisumu. Regarding this issue, Otieno writes:

> Colonial officials then saw how dangerous our fight had become and decided to use the usual tactics of divide and rule. Having realized their propaganda had failed, they began circulating lies, saying, for example, that the Kikuyu ate human flesh and killed women and children (51).

Hence in its ethnic underpinnings of its conception of itself as a nation, Kenya is a constellation of multiple and sometimes incompatible nationalities. That ethnic identity comes first, before Kenyan identity, seems innocuous on the surface yet it has within it the very potent and pestilential forces that negate nationhood. So strong are ethnic ties that the choice of where to live, particularly in the countryside and often in poor urban settlements, voting, and the allocation of jobs, and national resources are almost always contingent upon ethnic considerations. To a certain extent even the choice of a marriage mate depends on ethnicity. That is why Otieno's choice of a Luo man for marriage was antithetical to her mother's wishes with the combination of Wambui (Kikuyu) and Otieno (Luo) names assuming a certain oxymoronic incongruity. It was a form of ethnic suicide that perhaps Kenyans can or should commit variously to forge a sense of nationhood. Her story is therefore also the allegory of the nation, with its ambiguities because of multiple identities, tensions between ethnicities, and possibilities for national cohension if individuals and groups embraced diversity and built bridges.

Wambui Otieno's autobiography is her endeavour to narrate herself, her nation, her metonymic female condition, and her bid to break free from both the literal and figurative imprisonment. Moreover, it is also readable as a call to Kenyans to break free from the jailhouse of ethnic purity. Indeed, to claim that *Mau Mau's Daughter* is a typical female life narrative is to deny it its intrinsic uniqueness and attendant eccentricities. Yet it would be foolhardy to gainsay the importance of reading her autobiography, with its thematization and narrativization of incarceration, as an instance of unravelling the largely unexplored and critically invisible tradition of women prison writing in Africa.

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