



## Coming to Birth (Women Writing Africa)

*Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye*

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Marjorie Macgoye is among Africa's most distinguished novelists, highly praised by critics and often regarded as the "mother of Kenyan literature." In this quietly powerful and eminently readable novel, Macgoye deftly interweaves the story of one young woman's tumultuous coming of age with the history of a nation emerging from colonialism.

At the age of sexism, Paulina leaves her small, traditional Luo village in western Kenya to join her new husband, Martin Were, in the bustling, multiracial city of Nairobi. It is 1956, and Kenya is in the final days of the Emergency as the British seek to suppress violent anti-colonial revolts.

Paulina knows little about politics and even less about city life. On her second day in Nairobi, she is naive enough to think she can easily find her way home across the vast city, as she always could in her village. Her traumatic journey, which in fact takes two days and two nights, earns her a beating from Martin. Marriage, too, is new to Paulina, and while she is anxious to learn the ways of a proper wife, Martin's clumsy attempt to control her soon lead to a relationship filled with silences, misunderstandings, and unfulfilled expectations. "Being married was, it seems, a whole history of getting used to things," Paulina thinks.

Soon Paulina's inability to bear a child effectively banishes her from the confines of a traditional women's life. As her country at last moves toward independence, Paulina manages to achieve a kind of independence as well. She accepts a job teaching women at a community center, which will require her to live separately from her husband, and she has an affair that leads to the birth of her first child. But Paulina's hard-won contentment shatters when Kenya's turbulent history intrudes once again into her private life, bringing with it tragedy-and a new test of her quiet courage and determination.

Courage and determination infuse every aspect of Paulina's struggle for survival and identity, as revealed through Marjorie Macgoye's keen and humane vision. Taking in real events and historical figures as well as the inner journey of one remarkable woman, this vision extends to embrace the whole of a nation and a people likewise struggling to find their way.

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