

The Sweet Sobs of Women in Response to Anthropain

The Sweet Sobs of Women in Response to Anthropain

By

Mary Njeri Kinyanjui

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



The Sweet Sobs of Women in Response to Anthropain

By Mary Njeri Kinyanjui

This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2019 by Mary Njeri Kinyanjui

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-5275-3203-8

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-3203-8

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Chapter One.....	1
Introduction to Sweet Sobs	
Chapter Two	11
Anthropain and the Genesis of Sweet Sobs	
Chapter Three	17
Approaches to the Study of Women’s Sweet Sobs	
Chapter Four.....	37
The Stories of the Eight Women	
Chapter Five	59
Sweet Sobs and the Concept of the Feminine <i>Utu</i>	
Chapter Six	67
The Evolution of the Feminine <i>Utu</i>	
Chapter Seven.....	77
The Feminine <i>Utu</i> and Sexuality	
Chapter Eight.....	89
The Feminine <i>Utu</i> and Women’s Economic Relations	
Chapter Nine.....	95
The Feminine <i>Utu</i> and Leadership	
Chapter Ten	105
The Feminine <i>Utu</i> and Revolutionary Humanism	

References 113

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is a product of the environment in which I have lived, the situations I have observed, my lived experience, and my interaction with people in the span of years that God has granted me on this earth. I am greatly indebted to many people who either went out of their way to help me locate my respondents or individually agreed to grant me an interview. I am grateful to Councillor Nathan WohoroNyota who helped me locate interviewees Cecilia WambuiGithua of Mwea and JothamGachanja of Kairi. I am grateful to Cecilia WambuiGithua, Njüngürũ's granddaughter, whom I interviewed about Njüngürũ. I am grateful for the information I received from JothamGachanja about NjeriwaNdugo. I am also grateful to Margret Mwhaki who provided me with songs that they used to sing at NjeriwaNdugo's home. I am greatly indebted to Councilor Judy MukuhiwaKimotho and Mbatiawa Kimani whom I interviewed about Ndiko. I am grateful to NguciewaMwema who introduced me to his mother, NyokabiwaMwema. I also wish to express gratitude to Lucy Kibandi for her songs and GitahiGititi for translating the songs from Gikuyu to English. I am grateful to Josephat Juma and NguyaiwaMbari who spent a great chunk of their time with me discussing the subject matter of the book and helping with editorial logistics.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO SWEET SOBS

To truly be free, we must choose beyond simply surviving adversity, we must dare to create lives of sustained optimal well-being and joy. In that world, the making and drinking of lemonade will be a fresh and zestful delight, a real life mixture of the bitter and the sweet, and not a measure of our capacity to endure pain, but rather a celebration of our moving beyond pain.

—bell hooks

Human beings cause pain to one another. This pain that is caused by human beings to fellow human beings is referred to as “anthropain” in this book. Pain is a reality among all women. I believe that this is the reason why my grandmother used to tell me: “aciara arīra athata arīra,” (both the barren woman and the woman who bears children cry). *Sweet Sobs* is a story about eight women drawn from an African village. It is a story about their reactions to anthropain. As human beings, they are emotional. They weep but turn their tears into creative energy that generates resilience, hope, productivity, inspiration, positive change, and sustainable development.

There are many factors that make women sob. When women are reduced to commodities as a result of the amount of dowry that was paid to their parents, they most times lose their humanity and become vulnerable to episodes of abuse. There are many cases of women who have had kerosene poured over them and been set ablaze. Others have had their eyes gouged out. Some have been lucky to escape when the bid to bury them alive backfires. Others have had their limbs severed after domestic quarrels. Some have been stoned or set ablaze for developing white hair due to age and being accused of witchcraft. Some women have been reduced to

beasts of burden, covering over seven kilometres to the river to fetch water, with children strapped on their back. Some have been married in order to dig, weed, work on plantations, and keep the homestead neat with no time to rest. Most women are not allowed to pursue their career passions.

Some women are forced to marry early when they are not physically ready to give birth. This exposes them to anaemia and pregnancy-related deaths. Some women hail from the worst places to be a mother—places where they give birth in the absence of a skilled professional, such as a midwife or doctor, in attendance. Many of them don't have the money to pay for procuring delivery services in a clinic or hospital. Many women live with obstetric fistula, a condition that sometimes accrues from extended obstructed labour. They endure additional agony when they are shunned by families who attribute their plight to marital infidelity.

Women who live with some form of disability are more likely to be abused. The abuse may take the form of neglect, psychological abuse, physical assault, sexual assault, and discrimination. Domestic violence is the most extensive form of mistreatment of women. It involves women being battered but being prevailed upon by society to remain silent. Women are thus beaten on flimsy grounds such as letting food get overcooked or saying no to sex when they are not ready for it. Many male doctors, police, and prosecutors are reluctant to assist women who report rape.

Female genital mutilation in the form of clitoridectomy or excision is practised in many African countries. Women who go through this surgery of the female genitalia are considered to be cleaner, more mature, and more feminine by some cultures. Some cultural exponents say that female genital mutilation reduces sexual desire, curtails promiscuity, and promotes chastity. They overlook the fact that the practice inflicts extreme pain, shock, and bleeding on the women. In addition, it sometimes subjects women to bacterial infection and disorders such as urine retention. During childbirth, for example, scar tissue left from genital cutting may rip.

Some women experience pain when they find themselves born in a family that only has female children. In the African setting, male children are highly valued. A family that is full of girls may not bode well for a girl child, as the situation makes it most likely that the female child will be treated as an inferior. This can be very traumatising, for example, when male children are taken to school while girls are asked to stay at home.

While women make up the bulk of the world's labour force, they earn one-tenth of the world's income. A majority are not allowed to hold title deeds. When their husbands die, some of them are chased from their matrimonial homes. Their goods are seized by their in-laws, relegating them to poverty. Widows are marginalised, robbed, raped, evicted from their homes, and dispossessed of their property. Some are blamed for the death of their husbands and ostracised. Others are labelled as witches. Some are forced to shave their hair and wear rags. Some are inherited by a male relative of the dead husband against their wishes. Others are forced to undergo ritual cleansing that involves having carnal knowledge with social outcasts to allegedly cleanse them from the deceased husband's evil spirits.

Mothers weep when they see homeless children making their homes under bridges or in the landfill sites, ruined buildings, and parks of major cities. Such youngsters are vulnerable to trafficking, forced labour, violence, and sex tourism. Women have found their lives shattered during tribal clashes, especially when the husband and wife hail from two tribes that hate each other. This has sometimes led to broken marriages and refugee status.

As illustrated above, many factors make women sob. The book *Sweet Sobs* is not meant to encourage people to live in denial. It is to make them acknowledge that while life will not always be fair, people must improve their lot and move on. It is a call for women to stop violence, gender stereotypes, and exploitative economic relations and to live creatively with agency. It is a call to turn life's lemons into lemonade. It is an encouragement to women to leave a

positive legacy. It is a call to women to offer society a shoulder to lean on.

Illuminated by Gĩkũyũ orature, *Sweet Sobs* contributes towards the understanding of the feminist crisis in corporate spheres, government boardrooms, informal settlements, the public domain, and rural households. It questions the development narrative that portrays women as victims of patriarchy.

The book is organised into ten chapters. Chapter 1 offers an introduction to sweet sobs. Chapter 2 discusses anthropain and the genesis of sweet sobs. Chapter 3 presents the approaches that were used in carrying out the study of sweet sobs among the female case studies. Chapter 4 presents the stories of the eight women in question. Chapter 5 discusses sweet sobs and the construction of the feminine *utu*. Chapter 6 attempts to analyse the evolution of the feminine *utu*. Chapter 7 discusses the feminine *utu* and sexuality. Chapter 8 discusses the feminine *utu* and economics. Chapter 9 discusses the feminine *utu* and leadership, while Chapter 10 discusses the feminine *utu* and revolutionary humanism.

I grew up in Ngethu village, which is situated in Gatundu North, Kiambu County, Kenya. The community in which I was raised mainly engaged in peasant farming. Gatundu North boasts two of the oldest schools in the region. One is Mang'u High School for boys was initially located in the area while the other is Saint Francis for girls. Kiambu County is one of the richest counties in Kenya. The first President of the Republic of Kenya, the late Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, hailed from this county. The county has also bequeathed the country the fourth president of Kenya, Uhuru Muigai Kenyatta.

Due to Kiambu County's reputation of affluence, it has not been a recipient of poverty alleviation interventions and safety nets. Despite the fact that it has yielded reputable people, their reputation has not necessarily led to an improvement in the living standards of the people in the region. This is partly because those who ascended the socio-economic and political ladder (the locals referred to them as the *athomi* or learned) cherished their privileged positions and did not want to mingle with the ordinary citizens. Most of the

athomi migrated to other towns. This disconnect elicited disquiet and a class war between the privileged and the less privileged ordinary people. The class war has not ended.

The structural adjustment programmes initiated by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in the 1990s and imposed on developing countries had a severe impact on the county. The implementation of these programmes led to the collapse of cash crop production in the region, a fall in commodity prices, a downfall of the dairy and poultry industries, and the wasting away of physical infrastructure. Ghost towns such as Makwa, Ngorongo, Kiriko, Mwea, Karurĩ, Mukurwe, and Kairi are a testimony of the aftermath of these programmes. In the academic spheres, the region currently posts dismal examination results. The very low “D” Mean Grade in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination and pathetic mean scores of below 200 in the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education examination in the region mean that the sub-county cannot generate a critical mass of teachers, nurses, doctors, or engineers. This partly accrues from the fact that the *athomi* were not available to play the part of role models. In addition, skewed policies that saw boys from Kiambu County denied the opportunity to board in boarding schools in the region and St Francis girls’ school prefer learners from other regions greatly affected academic standards in the region.

Perhaps out of disillusionment, for every three surviving businesses in the region, two are local beer pubs. It is common to see men, young and old, inebriated in the mornings and afternoons. This has left women with no choice but to work as farmhands to in order to raise the necessary income that is used to procure food, medication, clothing and tuition fees for the children, among other basic needs. President Uhuru Kenyatta’s attempts to reverse the trend by ordering most brewing dens to be shut has not yielded positive results. This is because the interventions have not gone to the core of the cause of alcohol abuse.

The stories of the eight women in Gatundu North will demonstrate that families and communities are built and sustained

by the feminine *utu* that is expressed in the concept of sweet sobs. Instead of throwing in the towel and becoming disoriented when faced with the challenges that life offers, the current generation of women should garner courage and sweeten their sobs like Phylis wa Njeri, Njüngürũ wa Githere, Rebecca Njeri wa Ndugo, Nyokabi wa Muema, Magdalene Wanjiru, Ndiko, Wairimu wa Titi, and Njeri wa Ngomi. They have to painstakingly but creatively identify opportunities of leadership to redeem their families and communities and restore them to glory.

Most NGOs and national women's movements in Kenya have been striving to remove women from peripheral positions to the male-infested domains of performance. They have attempted to do this by advocating for rights for voting, education, reproductive health, decent work, and equal pay. To achieve this, they have employed capacity building, gender sensitisation campaigns, and economic empowerment programmes involving entrepreneurial training, microfinance, and women-focused credit schemes.

While their efforts are remarkable, they have not been successful in all cases. For example, despite the many microfinance organisations in the country, most women are still trapped in disadvantaged positions while others are isolated in gendered elite enclaves of empowered women. The Kenya Women Finance Trust (KWFT) had 800,000 deposit account members and a loan book account of Ksh 22.1 billion or Ksh 32.1 billion assets and Ksh 17.2 billion deposits in 2016 (KWFT 2016). This represents a very small proportion of Kenya's over twenty million women. Women in gendered elite enclaves of empowered women have limited links with the subaltern women who have been left on their own to navigate their journey towards a fulfilling life for themselves and their children. The use of the feminine *utu* or sweet sobs is bound to counter the abrasive stance that most women activists have taken and take over the world.

The writing of this book was inspired by reflections that followed my step-grandmother's funeral in Gĩthirioni, Lari, Kiambu County. I admired her strength, creativity, and agency. She was an

epitome of an African womanhood that is not espoused in textbook feminism. Mourners described her as *hinya* (strong), *kĩo* (agency), *gũtuga* (graceful), *ngwatanĩro* (one who acted in solidarity), *muma andu* (conscientious), *mũhei andu kĩaunde* (one who gave people a shoulder to lean on), *kwĩmenya* (knowledgeable), *gũtia andu* (respectful), and *mũtungati* (with a servant spirit). Her kind of feminism makes me regret the long time I spent pursuing textbook feminism instead of spending time with her. I desire to be like her. I desire to be a woman who feels; a woman who nurtures; a woman who works in solidarity with others; a creative woman; a woman with agency; a woman who partners with men in a partnership that is defined by rules and regulations of being human.

My first article on feminism was a book chapter entitled “Mainstreaming Gender in Kenya’s Development Policy.” In the chapter, I reviewed government documents to examine whether Kenya’s development policy was gender-sensitive. I envisioned the existence of a human social order where femininity and masculinity determined how male, female, and other genders interacted and arrived at a consensus to facilitate a thriving humanity. The consensus influenced gender roles and methods of operation and complemented rather than contradicted the behaviour of each gender.

It is difficult to explain whether the inequality between men and women is socially constructed or natural. From a feminist perspective, masculinity and femininity translate into a hegemonic and subordination relationship where femininity is supposed to be subordinate and docile, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The principles that differentiate femininity and masculinity from literature

Male	Female
Sexuality: Untamed, insatiable sex drive as reflected in polygamy, sexual violence, and rape	Sexuality: Domesticated through circumcision, customs, taboos, and presence of male chaperon first by father and then by husband
Actor	Victim
Quick to resort to physical force, belligerent, hence the prevalence of domestic violence and existence of militaristic and police states	Recipient of physical violence; lives in a state of powerlessness, hopelessness, and deprivation
Beneficiary and appropriator of surplus in the household and public domain by holding land titles, owning shares in cash-crop marketing boards and cooperatives, and accessing well-paying jobs in the public domain because of their advantaged technical preparation	Loser, disenfranchised, underpaid; offers cheap labour that is not counted as work
Achievement and excellence expected in the public domain rather than in the household	Achievement and excellence expected in the domestic domain. Excellence in the public domain is viewed with suspicion
Outward physical appearance not very important. Attention given to muscle development, which is associated with strength	Outward appearance in terms of beauty and attractiveness given considerable attention
Aging associated with experience and wisdom	Aging associated with folly, loss of attractiveness, and docility
Insensitive, devious, reckless, like a plank	Caring, nurturing, docile, dexterity
Performs and acts in public domain as an individual	Performs in the household and in private as an individual but in the public domain with others in a group or organisation

Source: Kinyanjui (1999)

I have done more work on gender and economy and garnered some personal experiences that have influenced my thinking about gender. Women have a different logic of participating in the economy. As a single parent, I have travelled the road that has not often been trodden. I have bought land, built a home, educated my daughter, built an academic career, and participated in gender activism. I have been violently robbed, raped, and carjacked. In my Catholic church, I am not assigned certain church responsibilities for allegedly being a pariah and abnormal as far as church and family activities are concerned.

When thieves broke into my house in 2004, I had just moved to Kahawa Sukari estate. The thieves stole all property that could be moved easily. One taunted as he raped me: “You devil, who do you think you are? You are the women who are living off men and becoming rich!”

I discovered that I was not just a sexualised body but also a class-objectified body who was a target of anger and hate. The last thing the male thieves want to see is a woman who has defied the gender laws that position women in the private spaces under male custodians. I am now allegedly in the class of the capitalists who thrive by exploiting labour and appropriating surplus. This is the loathed class that according to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o in his book *Petals of Blood* reap where they did not sow.

Hearing of my plight, the women in the neighbourhood visited me to express their solidarity with me and pray for me. They brought me assorted foodstuffs. Some gave me some money. They encouraged me to forgive and not to give up in life. They employed the feminine genius of gifting, negotiation, nurturing, soothing, and persuasion to calm an otherwise tumultuous situation. This is the true spirit of the feminine *utu* where two wrongs do not make a right. It is this strategy that women need to adopt while encountering the street and the public space. I learnt not to be angry with the thieves who molested me and took off with my hard-earned property, but rather to be angry with the society that produces thieves, rapists, and killers. The culprit is the skewed

economic order that creates one millionaire who is surrounded by millions of poor people—not a short dress or that my house is situated in an isolated place. Kenya is now a middle-income country. Has this changed the lot of ordinary citizens? We must come up with an economic system that will lift the majority out of poverty and squalor.

We need balanced approaches that recognise that men and women are connected. Holding conversations that help men and women acknowledge their differences does not mean dominance. It means creating a social order where men and women depend on solidarity, gifting, sharing, generosity, and reciprocity. It also means creating rules and regulations that govern an individual as well as a group to allow humanity to thrive and transfer life to the next generation.

Pain is universal. It is bound to manifest wherever there are human interactions. We need to cry but laugh at the same time for healing to come. We should not be held captive by events or people, because *mũheria ngĩa ndagiragia gũkĩe* (holding a vulnerable person at ransom does not stop daybreak).

CHAPTER TWO

ANTHROPAIN AND THE GENESIS OF SWEET SOBS

One time, when I was passing by Gatunda bus terminus in Gatundu North, I was captivated by the behaviour of four women. This behaviour, to me, best illustrates the ongoing feminist crisis. The first woman was young, probably less than 20 years old. She was headed to Kairi, a baby strapped on her back. She was playing loud music on her phone. In olden days, she would have been in school or at home singing a lullaby to her young sister or brother. I imagined the sobs she was undergoing as a result of the disruption of her young life due to early pregnancy and childbearing. The second woman was probably in her fifties. She was walking towards Ngorongo. She had a plastic *kiondo*, an imitation of the traditional bag that was made from sisal or mĩgio. In the bag, she had nappier grass cuttings that she was probably going to plant. She was coming from *kũrĩmia ibuti* (servile farm casual labour). She represented the de-peasantised women with no access to land. In the old days, the bag would have been full of foodstuffs such as *ngwaci* (sweet potatoes) bananas, maize, or yams. The third woman was probably approaching her fifties. She was extremely restless. She would stand, sit, stand again, and sit. She was perhaps going to see the area chief, visit a police station, or attend a medical appointment at Ngorongo hospital. In the old days, she would have been accompanied by her *mũiru* (in-law) or neighbour. The fourth woman was in her early forties. Her hair was exposed and plaited. She was wearing denim jeans. It was unusual in olden days to find a woman with an uncovered head wearing denim jeans. These signs were an indication that she had returned to the village from the city. The empty plastic *kiondo* is an indicator of a looming feminist crisis affecting the women at grassroots level.

What has happened to women in the last fifty years? Some have been impoverished and de-peasantised, become over-anxious, and have developed an identity crisis. They are uncertain about their future. They have no tools or skills to strategically position them in Kenya's widely touted Vision 2030 of making the country attain a middle-income status. The women are likely to be sobbing as they worry about how to go about their daily life and personal encounters. They are different from the urban woman with make-up, tight-fitting skirts, trousers, high heels, polished nails, and artificial hair, confidently going about her business on the street.

Pain and bitterness are factors of life. Unexpected outcomes, betrayal, violence, loss of livelihood, exploitative economic relationships, shootings, bombings, drug addiction, patriarchy, natural disasters, and death cause weeping. Sobbing transcends geographical boundaries, race, religion, age, or sexual orientation. While adverse circumstances and bewildering outcomes crush and dampen spirits, some women have decided to take life as it comes and navigate around it to allow individuals, families, and communities to flourish.

The edited volume *African Women Writing Resistance: Contemporary Voices* by Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez et al. documents how women express their pain. Chogugudza (2010) narrates the experience of Paidia, a woman freedom fighter whose husband abandoned her following her decision to return to school. Paidia decided to further her education so that she would be gainfully employed in the new Zimbabwe. Her husband was opposed to this and abandoned her. When this happened, Chogugudza observes: "Then the crying started. The sounds she made were deep and violent ones. She went to her bed and sobbed in her pillow, shaking. She tried to sleep but could not doze off for even a moment" (2010: 125).

As women go into the public domain, they are exposed to incidences that increase sobbing. Examples abound of a number of women in senior positions in the Kenyan government who either have fallen from grace or are on the verge of doing so. The fall of

Nancy Baraza, a former Deputy Chief Justice in Kenya whose star seemed to be rising and shining bright, was dramatic. She allegedly assaulted and pinched a woman's nose in a shopping mall. In addition, she is reported to have demanded preferential treatment in a city hospital. Gladys Shollei, Anne Waiguru, and Charity Ngilu lost their plum jobs for allegedly indulging in corruption. Prof. Olive Mugenda, the former Vice-Chancellor of Kenyatta University allegedly planned to remain in office after the expiration of her tenure. Kalpana Rawal, a Supreme Court judge, fought a lone battle over her retirement age. She felt that she was being discriminated against by being forced to retire at age 70 instead of age 74. While all the women mentioned above put up a spirited fight in public, there is no doubt that they had intense sobs in private.

In North America, the pain caused by personal tragedies or accidents has forced women to rethink success and achievement. After collapsing in her office due to exhaustion, Arianna Huffington (2015) of *The Huffington Post* came up with a third metric of success which involved wellbeing, wonder, and giving. Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer at Facebook and writer of *Lean In* was extremely affected by the death of her husband. In her commencement speech at the University of California in Berkeley, she explained to the graduates what she had learnt from her husband's death amidst sobs.

Anthropain—pain caused by fellow human beings—is indeed a factor in many people's lives. It is experienced when children who are shopping in a mall are bombed, a car ploughs into a crowded street full of tourists, and a newlywed couple is murdered. It is experienced when farmers are not paid their dues, a family cannot afford to get food, patients in hospitals die due to negligence, a priest celebrating mass is stabbed, and a woman sets herself on fire because her husband is promiscuous. All the mentioned incidents elicit sobs. The writings inscribed on a Buruburu *matatu* in Nairobi that reads “good at doing all that is bad” succinctly expresses the extent to which human beings in today's world are determined to inflict pain. Another writing on a Rongai *matatu* reads “Don't lose

your temper; nobody wants it,” which shows how people are keen to agitate others but don’t expect the agitated people to react.

Technology has to a large extent helped humanity deal with the pain that emanates from the physical environment. The car has reduced the pain of walking long distances. Central heating has solved the problem of chilly weather. Instant coffee machines have reduced the time taken to prepare coffee. Milling machines have solved the pain of grinding on a stone or the painful use of a mortar and pestle. While pain that emanates from the physical environment has largely been addressed, solutions for eradicating anthropain are limited. Women and female movements should aim at minimising anthropain in this century through human-centred solutions based on the fact that we are inextricably connected to each other (Tutu 1999). Our survival should not be based on a mode of production that pits people against each other. The “other” individuals should not just be useful to us only when they are serving our interests. The feminine *utu* (humanness) can take us out of this dilemma.

The sweet sob is an attribute of the feminine *utu* that has helped women overcome tragedy, exploitative economic relationships, and patriarchal biases. It consists of resilience, reproduction, freedom of choice, happiness, care, commitment, hope, forgiveness, healing, solidarity, and transformation. These attributes cannot be obtained through technological apps propagated in empowerment models.

While sobbing and bitterness are a common response to anthropain, resilience, focus, hope, composure and ability to use the causes of sobbing as the tapestry from which to weave agency and positive outcomes in life will turn bitter sobs into sweet sobs. An understanding of how women sobs are constituted and performed is key to bringing light to women’s positioning in the global movement of women liberation and empowerment.

Sweet sobs can be reconstituted to make women identify the sources of anthropain and use their agency and resilience to control and deter the perpetuation of pain in their lives, family and community. The book attempts to answer the following questions: Why do women perform sweet sobs? How do they perform sweet

sobs? Is their performance of sweet sobs a gender constituted phenomenon? How can the ideology of sweet sobs be reconstituted? How can solidarity be built between different categories of women in addressing sweet sobs?

Sweet sobs are an alternative model of realising success, self-fulfilment, and actualisation in the context of tragedy and socio-political and economic crises. The majority of subaltern women have used sweet sobs to negotiate patriarchy, colonialism, and neo-liberalism. Sweet sobs can redefine gender rules in the family and community and be incorporated in corporate and government boardrooms as strategies for breaking the glass ceiling.

CHAPTER THREE

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF WOMEN'S SWEET SOBS

This book uses Gīkūyū orature and the written works of womanism and feminism to analyse sweet sob. In Western societies, women's paths for advocacy are illuminated by womanism or feminism. While feminism focuses on patriarchy as the organising principle that subordinates women's engagement in the community and livelihood negotiation, womanism acknowledges the role of men, class, spirituality, and race in determining the positioning of women. Gīkūyū orature calls for the advancement and preservation of the feminine *utu* in society and livelihood negotiation.

Womanism

Womanism has been constructed through the eyes of African American women writers. Alice Walker (1982, 1983), a leading proponent of womanism, defines womanism in the following passage:

1. From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in great depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious. 2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength.

Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.” 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (Walker, 1983: xi–xii)

In this passage, Walker attempts to define a woman’s frame of reference to issues based on her physical state, emotional state, sexuality, environment, community, and logic of doing things. Womanism describes the physical state of maturity and the emotional state that exudes audacity and courage. It also describes a woman who is flexible, warm, responsible, in charge, loving and social. Despite race, class, and patriarchal stereotypes, the woman realises the importance of universality and inclusion.

Alice Walker argues that African American women and white American women have different race, class, and gender experiences. As a result of these experiences, they react to issues of domination differently. Womanism recognises that both African men and women have been victims of slavery and class relations hence they have to work together to resist oppression, define themselves, and chart their course of wellbeing. Womanism, according to Alice Walker, comprises the characteristics of wilful determination, generosity, selflessness, gender cooperation, motherhood, and spirituality. She argues that society is a whole and discourse should not put a wedge between men and women, for they are closely linked by their past and present as individuals or community.

Alice Walker’s perspective on pain helps us understand women’s sweet sobs. The black woman has experienced significant pain as expressed in the following passage:

"The black woman," [Coretta King] says, "has a special role to play. Our heritage of suffering and our experience in having to struggle against all odds to raise our children gives us a greater capacity for understanding both suffering and the need and meaning of compassion. [. . .] Women, in general, are not a part of the corruption of the past, so they can give a new kind of leadership, a new image for mankind." (Walker, 1983: 152–53)

Women should not be brought down by pain. Alice Walker knew pain. Early in life, her brother shot her in the eye. She experienced rejection and isolation. Her predicament captures other women's physical, emotional, and spiritual pain and sobs due to rejection, racism, female genital mutilation, slavery, rape, and violence. This sobbing is not just an expression of their pain and bitterness: it is also a factor of their liberation. Walker demonstrates how her mother sweetened her sobs from the worst form of poverty by planting flowers:

Like Mem, a character in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, my mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in. Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms—sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena . . . and on and on. (Walker, 1983: 241)

Black women of the 1920s experienced unfathomable pain. Remembering the painful experiences of black women in the 1920s, Walker writes:

Their spirituality was so intense so deep, so unconscious, that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held. They stumbled blindly through their lives: creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope. In the selfless abstractions their bodies became to the men who used them, they became more than "sexual objects," more even than mere women: they became "Saints." [. . .] Who were these Saints? These crazy, loony, pitiful women? Some of them, without a doubt, were our mothers and grandmothers. (Walker, 1983: 232)

The black women of the 1920s sweetened their pain and bitterness by use of intense faith and spirituality. This helped them overcome the physical and sexual abuse of their bodies that caused a lot of emotional pain. The fact that they endured pain and nurtured family and community led to the existence of black women today. They were part of the chain of connections that make today's women celebrate life.

Western and African feminism

Twenty-first century feminists have preoccupied themselves with an attempt to take women out of the private domain and bring them into the public domain. These feminists aim at enabling women to have money, power, and control over their bodies as well as overcome patriarchy. They believe that patriarchy generates a masculine frame that lords over women in livelihood and societal organisation. Butler (1988) notes that the masculine frame gives a secondary position to women and determines the allocation of resources to women. Consequently, democracy in feminism is about fighting for equal rights with men even if it means adopting violent protests and resistance to gain rights.

Feminists have fought for the right to vote, right to education, right to reproductive health, right to decent work, right to equal pay, and the recognition of care responsibilities. While gains have been made in areas such as voting rights, right to education, right to reproductive health, right to decent work, right to equal pay, recognition of care responsibilities, and proscribing harmful cultural practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and domestic violence, the world is still not secure for either women or men. This is because humanity is mobilised around a contradictory patriarchal logic of accumulation and rights that has generated anthropain.

Feminism in the twenty-first century should use the feminists' activist strategies of bringing in the feminine *utu* as the logic and worldview of dealing and solving humanity's problems. This means bringing to the fore the logic of solidarity, waiting, and nurturing as

the mobilising principles of humanity. Just like the bird builds a nest to nurture her offspring in a safe and secure environment, women should endeavour to make the world a nest for humanity to thrive without pain and bitterness. This means creating spaces where everyone is safe and secure so that they can thrive with resilience.

In her book *Lean In*, Sandberg demonstrates how femininity is subordinated to masculinity both in society and in the corporate world (Sandberg, 2013). Noting that women are largely absent in the high echelons of corporate bodies, she proposes that women should overcome this by supporting each other, articulating their concerns and working with their male counterparts. Huffington (2014) critiques feminists for focusing too much on the acquisition of power and money as measures of success, instead of wellbeing. After a successful career of building *The Huffington Post*, she collapsed in her office due to exhaustion that accrued from her lack of sleep.

There is a need to rethink the positioning of women and the definition of success in the culture of money and power in corporations. How suitable is the masculine frame in corporations for women? How suitable is the culture of money and power to women? Should women continue grafting and propagating themselves in the corporation? The answer to these questions lies in understanding feminine logic and norms in everyday struggles and bringing it into corporations.

Using the masculine frame, norms, and values to gain entry has left most women wounded. In the Kenyan context, Wangu wa Makeri, a colonial chief from Weithaga in Murang'a, was appointed to assist Chief Karuri in administration. She was born in the second half of the nineteenth century into the traditional Gikūyū society. In 1901, she was appointed the "headman" of Weithaga Location, the first and only female headman of the entire colonial period. Men's backs acted as her seat, as she lorded it over both men and women, dispensing the white man's decrees and collecting taxes. No longer able to withstand her tyranny, men tricked her into dancing naked, a

factor that led to her downfall. Before she joined the male dancers, some men adjusted the ceremonial sword tied to her skirt. The sword cut the strings of her skirt making the skirt fall down. Wangu's nakedness was revealed as she danced elatedly. After the disgraceful dance, Wangu became the subject of derision and was forced to resign. This ended her decade-long rule of terror.

A similar betrayal happened to Charity Kaluki Ngilu. Charity Ngilu made history in 1997 when she became the first woman in Kenya's history to run for president. Her presidential candidature in 1997 was largely the brainchild of the women's movement led by Professor Maria Nzomo. The goal of the women's movement was to have a woman president who would champion the rights of women. However, she did not win in the 1997 multiparty election but remained active in politics. In 2002, she was hoodwinked with the title "Mama Rainbow" to drop her presidential bid and join a super alliance with the male presidential aspirants, Raila Odinga, and Mwai Kibaki.

Women need to come together in solidarity and work towards bringing the feminine *utu* in both the public and private domain. It is not by leaning in that women will triumph; it is by demanding a change in the institutional framework that privileges masculine norms and values at the expense of female ones.

African feminism

A debate is doing the rounds on whether African feminism, whose actors experienced colonial subjugation and dehumanisation, can be put on the same platform with feminism among white women. Some African feminists argue that unlike African feminism, white feminism destroys the close-knit African family, ignores men in the struggle for liberation and aspires to westernise Africans. Rejecting white feminism is seen as key to preserving African culture. The quest for African feminism has also been bedevilled with the survival and poverty debate. African women are too ingrained in the struggle for survival to pursue the feminist desire for equality, freedom, and dignity (Gwendolyn, 1997).