



The Dreamer

By Abala J. Imali

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The Dreamer is a poetic novella about gender-based violence and female agency in Kenya and, by extension, Africa. The novella narrates the plight of women and the female postcolonial condition in developing worlds. While the novella mirrors the abuse of women in contemporary Africa, the narrative is a bildungsroman story that chronicles through the journey of a young girl, a dreamer, who is determined to overcome the obstacles placed before her by a patriarchal society. To navigate the male chauvinism that rules the social, political, economic, and religious institutions in her society, the Dreamer must embrace courage, perseverance, patience, and determination. The novella is divided into seven chapters each unravelling what it means to be a woman in postcolonial Africa and life lessons that women must learn enroute to achieving their dreams and ambitions, that is, breaching the gap between their dreams and reality on the ground.

Chapter one, “The Dreamer” narrates gender-based violence within various institutions, namely, family, church, politics, and the medical profession. The chapter highlights the dreamer’s predicaments within these institutions showing how they choke female agency. In the family setup, the dreamer’s father and sister discourage her from dreaming to be anything other than a home keeper. Her father notes that “girls don’t need to dream nor think, they do as they are told . . . they don’t need to study because they have no brain like boys to absorb knowledge and rule the world” (p. 1, 3). Women in the dreamer’s world belong to the kitchen and “work on their backs.” Men believes that education and occupying leadership

positions makes women “grow horns” (p. 2, 4). Such men are confined in a past that looks down on women as objects of pleasure. The dreamer’s sister quitted her dreams to “work on her back” and she is now enjoying the fruits of her work. For the dreamer’s father and sister, women’s dreams only materialize in their mind, but not in reality. The dreamer believes that change is inevitable even when men like her father think she has gone mad. Her ambitions have driven her father and sister insane and dead to the reality of the present. Besides even with education, women are not welcome in the political arena. Male politicians take advantage of their position to look down upon them. While questioning the space of women in politics, the chapter challenges politician who shun women from occupying leadership positions because they “are meant for the home” (p. 11). This chapter contests closure on women’s social and economic mobility and views such advances as possible and real, and not pure madness as voiced by their male counterparts.

In addition, chapter one exposes the cultural clash between traditional and western colonial perspectives regarding gender-based violence in Africa. Whereas traditional divinity views a girl child’s dreams and ambition as a sign of rebirth and regeneration of all African women, the church believes that such dreams would lead to her death. The dreamer asks the priest to help her discern her dreams, but he does not support her. The priest curses and rebukes her as a “dead, soulless creature who will burn in hell” because of her insane dreams (p. 8). Determined to reach her goals, her dreams lead her to Andigo—the traditional seer whom she begs to unravel her future. The seer encourages the dreamer that she is the fulcrum between her dreams and reality because the dreams of all women reside in her. The seer challenges her to chase her dreams and never give up regardless of the cost (p. 17). The seer notes that the girl’s dreams would transition womenfolk from an old status quo to resurrection of new realities and new generation of women who wouldn’t settle for the less that the society offers them. The dreamer never stops dreaming big, she keeps working hard to be a doctor, an engineer or a politician, which were taboo careers for women in her society.

In the second chapter, “The Dreamer’s Dream,” the novella unfolds violence that women

undergo within the marriage institution in the dreamer's world. Young girls bear forceful and early marriages, rape from old age forced-on husbands, physical violence, and in other cases, they forced to have children. The dreamer is presumed crazy by her husband and her doctor conclude that only a lobotomy would treat her illness. She yearns for freedom from her marriage, but the doctor and nurse hold her hostage in the hospital determined to remove the tumor that ails her (p. 26-30). The dreamer's cry of agency to do what she wants with her body and chase her dreams fell on deaf ears.

Chapter three, "The Dreamer's Reality and Dreams Fused," continues the Dreamer's predicaments in the hands of the doctor and nurse. Having diagnosed her hysterical, the doctor wants to "tame the Jezebel inside her" (p. 39). To the doctor, all women were prostitutes that needed to be uprooted, and silenced (p. 43). Reality dawns on the dreamer that the chauvinistic doctor is never going to listen to her freedom calls, and neither will the nurse because she is a prisoner of the system. The doctor who was supposed to save the Dreamer turns out to be her tormentor. Could the nurse join hands with the Dreamer to free themselves from this imprisonment? The Dreamer notes that although unwilling, the nurse has no choice, but to prepare her for lobotomy. In hunger for freedom, the only thought on the Dreamer's mind is how to escape the malady that is about to happen to her (p. 41).

In chapter four, "The Dreamer's Unveiling," Abala challenges African women to forge a united front in combating issues that affect them. The nurse becomes woke and begins to understand the Dreamer's pain and the dehumanization subjected to her by the doctor. She got tired of her muteness and doing what she was told without any resistance (p. 48-50). The nurse's inner voice becomes activated and reformed. Her awakening continues in chapter five, "The Dreamer's Awakening and Death," and the mummified mute in her begins to speak. The nurse's attitude change arises from her realization of the doctor's ultimate plan to "make the dreamer multiply" the same way he had made her multiply. She realizes that the Dreamer's womanhood was now on trial in the hands of the doctor (p. 63). The nurse, formerly enslaved to her job, doctor and husband breaks her

shackles and stands up for the rights of the Dreamer. It becomes clearer to her that women have for so long suffered and surrendered their dreams and ambitions to the oppression of men like her husband, the Dreamer's father, and the doctor. For so long, these men objectified women and treated them as tools of pleasure (p. 62). Women tried to resist this brutality, but in isolation, there is nothing much they could do to overcome it. Therefore, men continued to kill women dreams, spirits, and voice (p. 65). It was now time for women to join hands and say enough is enough. The doctor, like other men, had crossed the line now and the nurse ceases to take the brutality and oppression in muteness. It was now time to claim equality for both men and women. Faced with this wokeness, the doctor escaped leaving the nurse and the dreamer, free at last!

Chapter six, "The Lioness's Dream and Protest," is a continuation of the nurse's awakening and resistance to the brutality and oppression that the Dreamer, herself, and other women have endured at the hands of the doctor. The nurse opens to the Dreamer, explaining that she, too, had a dream to become a doctor and save lives, but her dream was killed by the doctor when she fell into his grand scheme of things just like the Dreamer was about to become his victim. The nurse sired three daughters from the doctor because she had no strength to resist. Unfortunately, the nurse couldn't save her daughters from the doctor. They "flounder[ed] to their destruction... [b]uoyed to the tidal waves of the Doc's unforgiving sea of deception...he suffocated their senses and killed their resolve... [t]ill they lost all their marbles and perished" (p. 79). She secretly contacts authorities and vows to free the Dreamer at all costs, including losing her job, verbally abused by the doctor, and roughed by guards out of the hospital (p. 82-83). The police do not believe the nurse when she reports the Dreamer's "abduction" by the doctor for he was a respected man in the society. The police call her crazy, but she vows to come back again if they will not save her. Left in the hands of the doctor, what had seemed liked hope and freedom for the Dreamer becomes yet another deferred dream. Nevertheless, she pledges to humanity and herself that she will keep fighting for her dreams to the very end of the struggle.

The seventh chapter, "Lucifer Crucified for his Treachery," sums up the novella with a triumphant

freedom for the dreamer, nurse, and all womenfolk. The nurse returns to the doctor's hospital with the police and the doctor is arrested for the committed crimes. The Dreamer celebrates in jubilation, not just for her freedom, but to all women, justice is served because "[t]he rat has finally been cornered ... [g]uilty as charged ... [the] unequivocal verdict: castration...the god of entrapment, caged" (p. 97-98). Shackled in unfixed captivity, the doctor becomes muted as justice diminishes his manhood. He is now the prisoner, not the women whose dreams he had crushed. As the legend finally falls into the chasm of justice, the Dreamer and the nurse bear witness to this momentous exchange of prisoners. Thus, the Dreamer's dream—freedom—becomes a looming reality. But is the doctor's fall just another of the Dreamer's dreams? Was it true that she was free at last? The novella ends in suspense as the dreamer reflects on the reality of her acquired freedom. To her, her dreams and reality were "both cojoined and disjoined" (p. 102).

In conclusion, "The Dreamer" offers a thought-provoking reality into the plight of women in contemporary post/colonial Kenya and Africa by extension. The novella exposes to the reader the brutality and oppression that womenfolk face at the hands of chauvinistic men in various social, religious, economic, and political setups. While unraveling this malice, the narrative challenges the reader to question what real freedom means for women in the post/colonial world. The novella's strengths lie in the first-person narrative point of view. The author's decision to let the dreamer narrate the oppression, brutality, and the fight for agency as it happened to her makes the story relatable and believable to the reader. The first-person narration also gives the Dreamer the agency and voice that society has denied African women for so long, hence adding authenticity to the story. For teenage readers, the pictures add to the visual effect and not only connects, but also helps them to comprehend the story. The language used is simple and can be understood clearly by upper primary school children and high school students. This novella can be a great asset to all readers interested in African gender studies, but specifically teenage boys and girls, teachers, and scholars who want to understand the plight of women in Africa and the challenges that

women go through to overcome the brutality of oppression they face in the hands of patriarchal men in the society. It is an engaging and moving story that strikes a connection between women struggle for freedom and the reality that such freedom comes with. I would recommend the novella to children and teachers across all primary and high schools in Kenya, human rights activists, and literary scholars interested in gender equity in Africa.