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رتق الجروح بخيوط وهمية: أزمة هوية في قصة "دقائق المجد" للكاتب نجوجي وا تيونجو

منيرة حمد** **نجاة وبي***

الملخّص

هذا البحث عبارة عن دراسة نسوية-ما بعد استعمارية لأزمة هوية شخصية وانجيرو كنتيجة حتمية للاستعمار المزدوج في قصة "دقائق المجد" لنجوجي وا تيونجو. يسيطر كل من القوى الاستعمارية والمجتمع الذكوري على جسد وانجيرو وعقلها مما أدى إلى تفتيت هويتها. تتجسد أزمة هوية وانجيرو في أربعة أشكال. الأول هو تحويل جسدها إلى سلعة جنسية لإرضاء رغبة الذكور حيث تستطيع المرأة المغرية التي تتبنى معايير الجمال الخاصة بالمستعمر جذب الرجال الأثرياء إلى الحانات. ثانياً، تسعى وانجيرو لبناء هوية جديدة مشابهة لهوية المستعمر من خلال تغيير اسمها وتبييض بشرتها. تحاول أيضاً التخلص من شعور الضياع والغربة من خلال إنشاء مساحة خاصة بها تمنحها الإحساس بالأمان والانتماء. تحاول بناء هذه المساحة ما بين المدينة والريف، وبين عملها كخادمة وممارسة البغاء، ورغبتها في بناء علاقة مع رجل تعتبره زبون وعشيق في آن واحد. الشكل الأخير هو مقاومتها للصورة النمطية للإناث في الأراضي المستعمرة حيث تستخدم الصمت وجسدها كأسلحة للمقاومة. بعبارة أخرى، ترمز وانجيرو إلى النساء الخاضعات للقوى الاستعمارية والمجتمع الذكوري اللواتي يحاولن معالجة جراح هويتهن المحطمة بشتى الوسائل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستعمار المزدوج، النسوية، مابعد الاستعمارية، أزمة هوية.

**مدرس، قسم اللغة الإنكليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة دمشق.

*طالبة ماجستير، قسم اللغة الإنكليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة دمشق.

Stitching Wounds with Illusory Threads: Identity Crisis in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's "Minutes of Glory"

Munira Hamad[**] **Najat Wabby**[*]

Abstract

This research paper is a feminist-postcolonial study of Wanjiru's identity crisis as an inevitable outcome of double colonialization in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's "Minutes of Glory." The colonial enterprise and the patriarchal society are accomplices who have subdued Wanjiru's body and mind leading to the fragmentation of her identity. There are four manifestations of her identity crisis. The first one is transforming her body into a sexual object that satisfies male desire. A seductive woman adopting the "white" standards of beauty is capable of alluring wealthy men to the bars. Secondly, Wanjiru strives to construct an identity that is a replica of the white colonizer by changing her name and bleaching her skin. In addition to objectification and mimicry, she attempts to elude her alienation by establishing a middle space where she can feel a sense of belonging. She attempts to construct this space between the city and countryside, being a maid and working as a prostitute and wanting to build a relationship with a man who is both a client and a supposed "lover." The last manifestation is her resistance to the fixed image of female colonial subjects. She uses silence and her body as weapons of resistance. In other words, Wanjiru resembles most female colonial subjects who attempt to redress the wounds of their broken self under the oppressive domination of the colonial powers and patriarchy.

Key words: Double Colonization, Feminism, Postcolonialism, Identity Crisis.

[**] Assistant Professor- Damascus University College of Arts and Humanities -Department of English Language and Literature.

[*] student, Damascus University, College of Arts and Humanities.

Double colonization ensnares female colonial subjects and transforms their lives into an appalling nightmare. These wretched women live in a double prison imposed on them by a vicious system. The analogous pillars of this system are the colonial enterprise and the patriarchal society that strive to exercise power over the colonized women.[1] The power of this oppressive system stems from the intersection of a plurality of hierarchies, specifically colonial and patriarchal. These hierarchies enforce their hegemony using physical and psychological violence to subordinate women in the colonial territories.[2] In other words, colonialism and patriarchy perceive women as the last colony whose mind and body they must conquer to perpetuate their dominance.[3]

Many African women struggle with the impacts of "double colonization" even after the supposed independence of their country from imperial control. These women suffer from double victimization. The brutal subjugation that women endure breeds dire consequences. One of these adverse consequences is that colonial and patriarchal enslavement preys on these women's sense of identity. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's short story "Minutes of Glory" sheds light on this crucial problem that has invaded his society. His short story tackles the issue of African female identity crisis, an inevitable outcome of double colonization. Wanjiru, the main character, is a specimen of the African and specifically Kenyan woman whose sense of self is shattered ruthlessly under the oppressing forces of colonialism and patriarchy. She constantly seeks various and hollow ways to put the scattered pieces of her identity back together. This research paper illustrates the four different but interrelated manifestations of Wanjiru's identity crisis.

First, the objectification of the female body plays the lead role in fragmenting Wanjiru's sense of self. This objectification mainly revolves around sexuality. Fredrickson argues that "the common thread running through all forms of sexual objectification is the experience of being treated as a body or (collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others" (174). The female body is dissected into several

[1] See (Ashcroft et al., Post-Colonial 66).
[2] See (Spencer-Wood 482).
[3] "The Last Colony" is a term used by Maria Mies to refer to women, specifically women of the third world, in her book Women, the Last Colony.

commodities that exist merely to quench the patriarchy's sexual desires. These female body parts are exploited in several ways. In her article entitled "Objectification," Martha Nussbaum, an American philosopher, claims that objectification consists of a number of ways by which one treats and exploits the other person. Objectification can take the form of denying women their autonomy, subjectivity and agency. Ownership and violability also characterize objectification; a woman's body is the man's possession. As a result, man has the right to violate his property when necessary. When this female property is demolished or does not fulfill men's fantasy, it can be easily replaced with another female property. The purpose of sexual objectification is to consolidate the power hierarchy in a patriarchal society.

Moreover, patriarchy prevails the Kenyan society and mentality resulting in the objectification of women. It perceives these emotional beings as inhuman slaves with no genuine feelings; they are born into this world only to be a tool for exercising male dominance. It also views women as malleable objects easily molded into the shape that appeases its appetite. Ngugi wa Thiong'o skillfully weaves his short story around this savage treatment of women. In "Minutes of Glory", he portrays the bars as a refuge for men wanting to escape the turmoil of life by immersing themselves in drinking and sex. These bars are also wrestling arenas. Men compete against each other by exercising their "money-power over girls;"[4] the higher the number of girls flocked around a man, the greater his social and economic status is. Therefore, the proprietors use the barmaids' bodies as traps to allure these foolish, money-wasting men. They hire women who fulfill male fantasies.

However, Wanjiru is not as beautiful as the other bar girls are, and "nobody seemed to notice her". The bar owners in Limuru found that she "was not attracting enough customers," so they "would sack her without notice and without a salary" (Wa Thiong'o, *Secret* 82). They do not care how she is going to manage without a job or money. All that they are interested in is employing gorgeous women to beguile well-paying customers craving the sweet taste of flesh and beer. These male bar owners also demonstrate their superiority by controlling and limiting the movement of their objects of seduction. For example, the owner of Starlight Bar and Lodging treats his barmaids as if they are a herd of animals. He regulates their schedule and

[4] Short quotations in this research paper that do not have an in-text citation are from the short story "Minutes of Glory."

confines them to the walls of this rotten place. He does so because he wants "the girls to use their bodies to attract more lodgers" (Wa Thiong'o, *Secret* 85). He advertises this place of sin using his female commodities.

Men also sexually objectify women by imposing the ideal standards of beauty on them. Most Kenyan men believe that an appealing woman is one who adopts the white criteria of beauty. Although they are against copying the colonizer, they drool over any woman who has a fair complexion and wears "a wig made in the imitation of European or Indian hair" (Wa Thiong'o, *Secret* 84). The belief that the whiter the better is deeply rooted in the minds of these men to the extent of corrupting the African female identity. They treat females who fulfill their perverted, sexual fantasies as queens, while inflicting on those who do not the feeling of being unworthy. The problem lies in the fact that objectified women "adopt an observer's perspective on their physical self" (Fredrickson 177). They strive to please the male gaze because their sense of worth is derived from men's opinion.

This male gaze does not only dwell outside the female body but also within it. Bartky argues, "a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: They stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment. Woman lives her body as seen … by an anonymous patriarchal Other" (72). This inner, male judge continuously reprimands Wanjiru for her appearance. She loathes her African features. Her appearance disgusts her because it does not fit into the image of the ideal woman. She always compares herself with the other girls who she views as true models of beauty. This comparison "between her actual body and the mythic ideal is a recipe for shame" (Fredrickson 181). She is ashamed of her African identity, of her African body and most of all her black flesh. She applies Ambi, a whitening cream, to her skin with "vengeance" to "rub out her black shame". She perceives blackness as an obstacle hindering her way to contentment and success.

Furthermore, men in a patriarchal society are the superior sex. They consider themselves as the supreme power. Nevertheless, some women disobey men's orders; such incidents of defiance puncture men's inflated egos. In order to reclaim their self-pride, they violate the female body; they use the female subject as a "vessel" to pour in all their indignation. Two men use Wanjiru's body to heal their wounded egos. The owner of Starlight Bar and Lodging is a pious Christian, a dutiful father and a hardworking man. Such an image is a mask veiling his lust for women. He attempts to woo Nyaguthii by

pampering her and showering her with gifts. Nyaguthii pierces his arrogance by refusing his advances. Consequently, he approaches Wanjiru and "grab[s] her, struggle[s] with her potbelly, grey hairs and everything" (Wa Thiong'o, *Secret* 85). Wanjiru does not surrender her body to the revolting beast. He releases his built up anger by dismissing her in front of the rest of the girls; thus, reassuring himself and everyone else that he is in charge.

The other incident occurs at Treetop Bar, Lodging and Restaurant. A regular visitor attracts Wanjiru's attention. This visitor endeavors to be recognized by the "big shots" of the country, but he is "met with defeat" and humiliation. This negligence bruises his ego, especially because his fellow men have caused it. He exploits Wanjiru's body and treats her as a "one-night receptacle" of his "man's burden", and pays for her body "as he would pay for a bag of potatoes or a sack of cabbages" (Wa Thiong'o, *Secret* 91). He views her in such a degraded image only to elevate his manly position. In brief, the men in Wanjiru's life rupture her fragile identity by manipulating her body to fulfill their needs.

Secondly, Wanjiru aggravates her identity crisis by obliterating her true African self and attempting to appropriate a new white identity. She embarks on the quest for a novel identity by trying to mimic the white colonizer. Mimicry creates a being that "is almost the same, but not quite." (Bhabha, Of Mimicry 126). The colonial subject who dares to adopt the characteristics of the colonizer will never fully resemble this white being because this new identity is merely a camouflage that veils the colonial subject's repressed self. To put it differently, Wanjiru's dream of attaining a new self that duplicates the colonizer's identity will never be realized.

Wanjiru is incapable of embracing her identity, and she demeans her self-image when she contrasts her inglorious self with the glamour of the other bar girls. The question "What do they have that I don't have?" haunts her mind perpetually with no hope of finding an answer. Nyaguthii is "the thorn that […] pricked her wounded flesh" the most because she is "the girl she would have liked to be" (Wa Thiong'o, *Secret* 83). Wanjiru aspires to be like Nyaguthii, a replica of the colonizer. Nyaguthii is a "free woman" who sails around cities and towns to discover "new territories for her conquest." Nyaguthii is also a leader guiding the girls out of "Starlight" to places where they will "be free and where they [will] be treated as not just barmaids" (Wa Thiong'o, *Secret* 85). The remarkable act that Nyaguthii performs, and which Wanjiru longs the most, is subverting the hierarchy of power and

becoming the center of attention. Nyaguthii is superior to all the men seeking her affection. Although she is "indifferent" to their advances and treats them in a contemptuous manner, they "cling to her as if they enjoyed being whipped with biting words" (Wa Thiong'o, *Secret* 83). She is their goddess. They bring her "propitiating gifts" which she would "accept as a right." These men worship her and will do anything to please her.

Furthermore, Wanjiru's desire to mirror the colonizer is to obtain the "privileges and benefits that accompany the status of being white" (Harris 1773). Nyaguthii's social and economic position is higher than that of Wanjiru. Nyaguthii works behind the counter instead of being an "invisible" sweeper and bed-maker, and she earns more shillings than the rest of the bar girls. Men favor her and the bar owners endow her with special care. For instance, she "had a room to herself" and "woke up whenever she liked to," while the rest of the girls "had to wake up at five" and "clean the bar and wash dishes" (Wa Thiong'o, *Secret* 85). Wanjiru envies Nyaguthii for her colonizer characteristics and the bliss that accompanies them. Wanjiru believes that the only way to turn her fantasy into a reality is to "run away from [her] own individuality, to annihilate [her] own presence" (Fanon 43). To put it differently, Wanjiru attempts to demolish her colonized self in order to reconstruct an imitation of the self of the colonizer.

The initial step of her transformation is changing her name. Names are strong chains fastening one to one's heritage and culture. Colonial power targets this link with a "cultural bomb." The goal of this lethal weapon is to "annihilate a people's belief in their names […] and ultimately in themselves" (Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing* 3). The ideology the colonial enterprise ingrains in the minds of the colonized is one of self-hatred. It brainwashes its colonial subjects into despising their identity for no logical reason. The result is the abandonment of all that ties them to their identity, including their names. Wanjiru renounces her African name and embraces her "Christian one, Beatrice." She is allured to her Christian name because "it sounded more pure and more beautiful" (Wa Thiong'o, *Secret* 82). The reason underlying this action is that she wants a name that would enable her to mimic the colonizer who, in her eyes, is virtuous and handsome. Furthermore, the choice of words embodies Wanjiru's identity crisis; Ngugi wa Thiong'o introduces Wanjiru's African name in the first line of the narrative, and it is the only time he does so. In the rest of the short story, he

refers to her as Beatrice to further emphasize Wanjiru's desire to eradicate any African chains that impede her from adopting a new identity.

Another drastic measure Wanjiru carries out to incarnate a new identity is bleaching her body. Blackness harbors undesirable connotations: "Satan", "shadows" and "physical dirtiness or […] moral dirtiness;" such "expressions […] make the black man the equivalent to sin" (Fanon 146). Wanjiru strongly believes that black skin is a stigma; it frames its bearer in a derogatory image. She tries to resolve her dilemma by using Ambi, a bleaching cream. Ambi is the savior that will redeem her from this "ugly sin" and transform her into a "white star". However, she is never capable of completing her metamorphosis into an "Ambi-self." She cannot afford to buy this cream on a regular basis, so she only applies it to her face and arms while the rest of her body remains black. Ironically, she is a manifestation of the title of Frantz Fanon's book *Black Skin, White Masks*. Whiteness is only a veil wrapping her true reality. No matter how much she strives to alter her appearance, it will not change the fact that she is of African ancestry. African blood runs through her veins. Overall, these failed attempts to fabricate a self based on the image of the colonizer further shatter her identity.

In addition to objectification and mimicry, alienation fractures Wanjiru's fragile identity. The feeling of loss and of not belonging is a dreadful outcome of imprisonment in the liminal space. This space is an "interstitial passage between fixed identifications" that permits "temporal movement, but … prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities" (Bhabha, *The Location* 4). A borderline character is incessantly fluctuating from one sphere to another. He/she is never in harmony with his/her environment. Wanjiru is a liminal figure divorced from her surroundings; no one and no place make her feel secure. The estrangement she experiences suffocates her; she exists as a dead body eager "to be filled by the spirit." The agony of alienation urges her to tread different places and occupy various positions in hope of quietening the turmoil roaring inside her.

Wanjiru does not belong to any town or city. Colonial powers have severed her bond with her country, Kenya. They have maliciously uprooted her generation from their nation. They dismantle the chain that unites the colonial subjects to their land in order to facilitate the process of conquering both the colony and the colonized. Wanjiru is "part of a generation which will never again be one with the soil, the crops, the wind and the moon" (Wa Thiong'o, *Secret* 86). The colonizer has doomed her to a life of a vagabond. Ngugi wa Thiong'o portrays her as a "wounded bird in flight" restlessly

"wobbling from place to place" (Wa Thiong'o, *Secret* 82). She deserts her tedious life in the village, and heads to different towns and cities. The promises these places seem to offer enchant her. She is dissatisfied with working at different bars in Limuru, so she runs to Ilmorog. Ilmorog shines with the blazing light of hope. She soon discovers that this is merely an illusion. All these places are similar to each other, and she will never find the warmth and comfort of a stable home. In such a wretched state, she dreams of her village, endowing it "with romantic illusions of immeasurable peace and harmony" (Wa Thiong'o, *Secret* 86). Nostalgia for the village she has abandoned burns in her heart, but it is now a "distant landscape in the memory," a past she will never be able to revive.

Occupying a number of jobs is another manifestation of Wanjiru's inner loss. At the bar, she is not only a barmaid but also a prostitute. Men do not pay her as much attention as she desires nor do they compete against each other to win a night with her. She envies the other bar girls for the treatment they receive from their admirers. The hostile atmosphere prevalent in the bar further isolates her. She does not belong to the "world of bar violence and sex" because she is incapable of adopting the norms of the "bar culture." Therefore, she decides to work as a sweeper and bed maker. She thinks changing beds that have "witnessed" many parched desires quenched is a decent job. Unfortunately, her "rivals" from the bar follow her to Treetop Bar, Lodging and Restaurant. They stand in the spotlight, while she fades further into the background. One way of resolving her problem is to create a third space where she is both a prostitute and a maid. She cleans and sweeps the rooms of Treetop, and at the same time, she sells her body to one of the regular visitors. The decision to develop a third space proves to be a failure when that visitor ignores her just as previous men have done. In other words, whatever she does only backfires on her, plunging her into further loss.

Furthermore, Wanjiru is a lonely creature among the "crowd of strangers" floating around her. She needs affection and security to pull her out of her dejected state. Wherever she goes, she encounters hate and contempt. It is as if she were never destined to feel the tender touch of love. Her emotional depravity is the main reason behind her oscillation from one man to another. She yearns for love, security and stability, which she believes can only be found in the arms of a man. Her greatest achievement would be to have a man in her life, a warm home, and a child of her own. Despite the fact that she knows that men caress her body out of lust and not love, she still craves

these men's "sweet pretense." She is desperate to experience love even if it is a lie. That is why she takes her relationship with her clients seriously. She regards her clients as potential lovers and endeavors to build a sincere bond with them. On the other hand, what men want from her is to surrender her body to their desires. For example, the regular visitor, who attracts Wanjiru's attention at Treetop, is only interested in her for two reasons. First, She is the only person willing to listen to him complain about his life struggles. Secondly, he uses her as an object of sexual gratification. Wanjiru views him from a different perspective. He is both a lover and a fellow victim with whom she identifies. Nonetheless, reality crushes her dream of finding someone who will make her feel loved. He sleeps while she opens her heart to him because he does not care about her troubles. Her potential lover mercilessly abandons her. In short, Wanjiru's entrapment in the middle of nowhere begets a shattered identity.

Finally, the climax of Wanjiru's identity crisis occurs when she experiences her infamous "minutes of glory." Towards the end of the short story, one recognizes a radical change happening to Wanjiru. She wants to resolve her identity crisis, but every possible solution is a disappointment; whatever she does helps to accentuate rather than lessen the intensity of her problem. After these successive failures, she is determined to change her image drastically. The image she wants to embody is that of a powerful woman. The first step of her transformation is adjusting her appearance. She avenges for all the times she has suffered from humiliation by stealing money from the regular visitor of Treetop. Then, she heads towards Nairobi to purchase a new garment that befits her novel self. She buys a number of "ladderless and holeless stockings," so that she will "never again […] mend torn things" (Wa Thiong'o, *Secret* 88). The significance of these stockings is that they symbolize her identity. She is exhausted from filling the void in her identity; she wants to wear a self that is free of rupture. She also buys high heels, and, instead of wobbling, she walks confidently down the street showing off her "newborn" identity, and waiting for the "whole earth [to] sing hallelujah to the one Beatrice" (Wa Thiong'o, *Secret* 88). After that, she goes "to a mirror and look[s] at her new self" (Wa Thiong'o, *Secret* 94). She admires "her looking-glass self," a term coined by the American sociologist Charles Cooley. He introduces the idea that "each to each a looking glass – Reflects the other that doth pass" (152). In other words, Wanjiru's image in the mirror is the same one she sees reflected in the eyes of society. She derives

her sense of self from society's opinion. Thus, she admires her reflection because it resembles the socially accepted stereotype of a beautiful woman.

Wanjiru's modification of her appearance is not sufficient; she must also change her behavior in order to become the epitome of female dominance. She exerts control over her male subjects by using her body, once a tool of subjugation becomes now a weapon of power. By manipulating her body, she is following the footsteps of her female ancestors. She is a "descendant of Wangu Makeri who made men tremble with desire at her naked body bathed in moonlight, daughter of Nyang'endo, […] of whom they often sang that she had worked several lovers into impotence" (Wa Thiong'o, *Secret* 89). Wanjiru acts like these superior women who are capable of castrating men and usurping their power. For instance, while having a meal at a restaurant in Nairobi, a man "in a dark suit and" whose "eyes spoke of lust" approaches her. He caresses her knee and her thigh. She yields her body to his desires, but she abruptly leaves the restaurant interrupting his indulgence in sensual pleasure. She proves that she is in control; she is the one who decides how much and for how long men can touch her body. Silence is another weapon she utilizes to resist patriarchal control. In male dominant societies, men voice their ideas, while women are silent. Silence, nonetheless, can be perceived as a paradox: "silence may be a product of oppression or it may be a means of resistance against oppression" (Roberts 344). Wanjiru exploits silence to reduce the power of men. She responds to the advances of the man at the restaurant with silence eventually abandoning him in a dumfounded state. This incident confuses him because usually men use a woman's silence to dominate her not vice versa; she uses silence to govern his actions.

Furthermore, she experiences the apex of her newfound power at Treetop Bar. She enters the bar as a different Wanjiru; she is the "ruler" of this "bar-kingdom." Men of high ranks cluster around her waiting for her approval of spending the night with them. She does not reciprocate their gestures, but "accept[s] their drinks as of right." The highlight of her time at the bar is when she dances to the music of the jukebox. Her body sways freely with the rhythm; the burdens that hung depressively on her shoulders vanish. She dances in the limelight enjoying her sweet "minutes of glory." However, these minutes do not last for long. The police along with the visitor of Treetop arrest Wanjiru. Her crime is stealing money, but the true crime she commits is identity theft. The police and the visitor of Treetop are

representatives of the institutions of power whose job is to suppress revolutionary tendencies. This arrest is prevalent "in post-colonial societies, [where] the participants are frozen into a hierarchal relationship in which the oppressed is locked into possession by the assumed moral superiority of the dominant group, a superiority which is reinforced when necessary by the use of physical force" (Ashcroft et al., *The Empire* 170). Wanjiru has trespassed forbidden lands by claiming to be a free, powerful woman. Both the colonial and patriarchal powers view her as a source of threat to the status quo and in turn to their authority. They literally and metaphorically arrest her; the police handcuff her and at the same time fix her to the identity of a weak, colonized woman. They condemn her to an eternal identity crisis. Even the men at the bar are accomplices of the structure of power; they encourage her imprisonment and laugh at her humiliation. In brief, her stolen "minutes of glory" are not as magnificent as they sound to be. During those notorious minutes, the limelight deceives her into believing that she has finally found the remedy to her wounded identity[5].

In conclusion, "Minutes of glory" is a concise literally work that envelops one of the most destructive influences of colonial and patriarchal victimization of African women. Their subjugation of female colonial subjects results in the fragmentation of these women's psyche. Ngugi wa Thiong'o brilliantly portrays the distinct but overlapping aspects of the African female identity crisis: the sexual objectification of women, the imitation of the colonizer, the alienation of the liminal character and the entrapment in a fixed image. He also depicts the many futile ways Wanjiru, the symbol of the suppressed African woman, resorts to in order to triumph over her predicament. In my opinion, as long as Wanjiru stitches her wounds with illusory threads, she will never find the inner peace she seeks. The solution to her problem is to embrace her African identity completely and to be proud of her black skin, the stamp that distinguishes her unique culture from that of the colonizer.

[5] Very little research has been carried out on "Minutes of Glory." However, the conclusion of this paper contradicts the results of Mordaunt's study of the same story. He views Wanjiru as triumphant, and he claims that her infamous minutes of glory are a sign of hope for African women.

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