



The Radicals Are Not Yet Born

By Katya Nyangi



*So here you are,
Too foreign for home,
Too foreign for here,
Never enough for both'*

~ Ijeoma Umebinyuo

When I acquiesced to the idea that the solution to our problems was to be conquered with the patience of waiting for the Baby Boomers to die off by virtue of fate, I forgot the likes of Moi, *the Silent Generation*, who carry with them genes of immortality. They grew up believing that '*children are to be seen not heard*' so most of their actions were just- actions- little said or justified. Then came the Boomers in the mid-50s to the early 70s, who consider themselves the fighters for our civil liberties- you cannot tell them anything to the contrary for they know best; they have seen it all. Then come the in-betweeners, the ones we Generation Y's look at in dismay - that's the Generation X, the new policymakers. They had the privilege of being the early adopters to the personal freedoms fought for by their predecessors, but have instead caught themselves in the shackles of a system they do not wish to alter; it becomes an internal scramble for Kenya.

Can I call it my country? Or will I just say, '*Hey, I'm a global citizen*' to disclaim the shame of it. I own no land and home is where I hang my hat- never staying too long in one place to make it; a

wanderer, a restless spirit, paradoxically, secretly searching for home. The wait for the 'die-off' is longer than anticipated. But maybe those traits are in my DNA. I walk about hosting them in oblivion. An identity I do not understand and that I do not own.

This brings me to thinking of my Baby Boomer father - a highly educated man for his era, PhD I mean. He was a happy young man who became an angry older man. By the time he died, I was still not sure what he was angry about. And by the time he lay on his deathbed the anger had metamorphosed into regret. His last words to me were apologies. What did it matter by then? Nothing could be done. He left me nothing but the consequences of his deeds.

Now I know why I love stories. I recall the stories he'd tell. Like how he had to run several kilometres to get to school. Upon arriving late, a thorough whipping was dispensed on the buttocks. Salt sprinkled over the wounds to further hurt and in the process appease as well. I found it strange that the new local authorities mistreated them in the same way they had been mistreated by the colonisers, the slave drivers. As an adult I see that nothing has changed. We gained independence, yet in some way they won, made us rats- eating ourselves up, giving up our resources for personal gain, only to die painfully and lonely- at best laid in an expensive coffin. This makes me tear when I listen to the National Anthem, placing my hand to my chest. Pathetically sad.

My father - feels strange to utter those words repeatedly for I rarely speak of him - he told me that you can lose everything, but no one can take your education away from you. I took his words with me. This is because, at age 12, at the time they spoke of him in past tense - the usual false sentimentalities of funerals - they still called him *Daktari*. "*Daktari was ...*" I would have quoted something further but honestly, I do not remember; I was not paying attention. It was the Generation X's talking again, the noisemakers; ready to fight for the little he had left. I was just a child - the Y, born in the 80s - the observer searching for the voice I had never been allowed to have. I wished I could stand up and tell them, "*You got it all wrong, this is what you should have said if you must, ...*" How did that education make it better for us? We were left trying to figure out who we were in that barbaric animal farm.

And that's what it feels like since. An inherited traumatic identity, story, voice that I do not own and I cannot rectify. I live through it attempting to redefine it in a whole other space.

Does it start with the names or end with the names?

It's close to election time, 2017. I park my little vehicle across from the main gate of the Department of Defence (DOD) so that I could easily walk to where I needed to go. As I exit the parking, he sermons me - Mr. Soldier. At that point, I am 100 percent certain it's the vulnerability of being a petite female of mixed race that lands me in this predicament. I yield, for after all, he is armed. I observe his colleagues. They look very proud of their armor and pistols- neatly tucked on their waist belt, in a white (of all colours) holster. White definitely means there was no intention to be subtle about it. Perhaps they adopted white because that is what white colonial masters did, and they didn't consider that a black (or chocolate) holster would work better on them. Or maybe, they know well the power an open carry weapon serves in intimidation, '*see and recognise the deadly powers I possess.*'

Frankly, I think death by gun is the most benevolent way to die - just saying.

As the soldier speaks to me, I listen and think it all through. I even smile pleasantly. He realizes intimidation wouldn't work well with me. Not because I do not get intimidated, but because I was not easily frazzled and I confess, I was admiring his toys! That white holster was arresting!

Of course I was excited, it was my first time to get past the barrier of the Department of Defence. I would not have minded venturing further in.

He asks for my ID. I show it to him. See, I was born in Nyeri. As much as I love the Mt. Kenya region, I have no heritage in that part of the country. I just happened to be born there while my father was on an assignment and my mother accompanied him. *"Oh, Nyangi, so you are my sister,"* he said. Suddenly we were related and his tone changes. I do not play dumb. I know what he means. I explain that I was not from Mt. Kenya region and I only had two siblings known to me. He laughs; the kind of annoying laugh one makes when they want to be boastful.

Then he cockily unfastens his bullet-proof jacket to escort me to my car. He shares his telephone number and says, *"If anyone disturbs you, call me."* How ironic. If only I could call him to deal with himself. He then proceeds to say, *"Flash me so I can have your contacts."* I tell him, I will, but he insists that I do it there and then. I oblige so as to avoid further trouble - perhaps that is cowardly, but I just want to leave!

Each one of these incidents have become a theatre of experience for me. It can get weary though.

The soldier, he makes sure to contact me to find out if I voted. He is making the assumption that my loyalty to my place of birth would incline us to vote similarly; he is my brother - after all? I do not respond, because I can't afford to tell this armed Generation X that I was not voting. I had already received a mouthful from my older friends about this. They could not understand - I do not identify and I do not want to choose between death by slow-acting poison or by hanging - the final result is the same. Let them, who know each other choose among themselves.

My Tribe - Youth Culture

I had other commitments that day. I was going to be hanging out with others like me. We would exercise, then gather at a cafe and talk about our ideas- the things that made sense to us: the spoken poetry coming up, the new love affair, the book I have not started writing, healing and spirituality. Then we would go and watch a young live band, sing love songs on heartbreak and longing. Everyone would be there: black, white, Asian, mixed-race. In that space it did not matter who you were. It just mattered that we were sharing something unspoken: that longing for something, for somewhere, for someone.

This is what it has come to, parallel universes in the same country. While the Baby Boomers polish their wills and the Generation X refuse to shut up, I and those I represent, are crafting new stories. I do not watch news and I seldom read newspapers. Those outlets don't tell my tale and I can't afford to get them told, so I write blogs and I endorse forums such as ONE TOUCH on Instagram. Here we celebrate the beauty and abundance we still believe our country holds in its wildlife and counterculture escapades off the beaten track. I attend Free Mind Sessions to discuss our emancipation from the patriarchal chains of being, and listen to the Villagers at J's while having a cocktail and chatting on why we need to heal and learn to love again. I balance the social media with the face-to-face time with these events, because I realise that authentic human connection is what we are desperate for. And even if my social media feed is slightly righteous, portraying my life from a breakthrough angle, I am well aware I have skeletons to deal with - I just don't rush to overtly rant about my neighbours dirty laundry that spoils my scenic view all over the internet. I listen to the stories I relate to, told by my mates on YouTube, so that when TV stations get shutdown, I do not even notice until I see the headline running through my other stream.

That is what makes us the Y's. Meanwhile the X's seem to be in a state of perpetual outrage, only to realise late in the day, that they had no friends when they are unable to respond to the favours

demanded by their peers. All those long hours spent in the bars chatting politics and entitlement away was a faux! It is not until this moment that the X's recall the Hip Hop music of protest they listened to as youth. Their path seemed straightforward; they hit 40 content with life and successfully paying off mortgages, a divorce here and there - no big deal. They were born at the time when personal freedom was becoming the buzzword, but ended up feeling entitled, living their lives individualistically, forgetting the next generation coming through and we require some breathing space too. So while the Y's are competing on who had a better breakfast on IG selfies, the X's are shooting at each other from the hip on FB, blinded to the real issues we want to fix: our children's rights to a good education, our right to basic needs, unemployment, low wages, healthcare. Therefore, I gather among the *counterculturists*, where we try to understand how we are going to navigate our difficult realities and imagine a future.

The truth is ...

I love Kenya, so dearly, I feel attached to Africa- deeply. And the only way to continue loving it, is to continue crafting this new world while waiting for the other to become obsolete. With my other Y's we drive our conversations in our social spaces believing that eventually we will have our maturing identities validated. We will not be talking of names, we will be talking of equity. Or so we dare to imagine.

Anyway, that specific evening, after my version of voting day, I met my Generation X lover, just to ensure the day - a holiday to me - is complete in all ways possible. He kept all gadgets on, following the news closely and contributing to the arrogant social media mob justice streaming on Facebook and WhatsApp groups. He commented about a friend who is no longer a friend - a heated exchange of political insults led to an expulsion from the group. I keenly listened but felt detached and irritated that my evening was not going as planned. We finally made love (the one apolitical moment I could have with him). The next morning I was awoken by the cacophony of him tuning into the latest 'Fifth Estate' episode. And there it goes again, that noise.

To my Father ...

Have I forgiven you? Yes. But I cannot forget. I cannot forget the day I tried to have a voice - I spoke - and you said you would tie me to the tree at the backyard at night and the dogs would eat me up. I was only 10. I am still trying to understand who I am and it has started with learning to have a voice. That's why I write, in a state of angst.

Arundhati Roy — 'There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.'

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