BOOK REVIEW | Asunta Wagura overcame stigmatisation from family and society to gain international fame and respect

Aids activist lives her life to the fullest

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There are not many

Kenyans suffering from

a disease who have lived

such a ‘public life’ like Asunta

Wagura. Asunta has written a

column for many years in the

*Daily Nation* newspaper in

which she literally ‘updates’

her readers about her life

with HIV.

To constantly refer to

oneself in relation to HIV

and Aids is not an easy task

in a country where, despite

sustained campaigns against

stereotyping and alienation of

those ailing with HIV and Aids,

Kenyans still get anxious and

suspicious when this subject

is introduced.

It doesn’t matter that such

reference may not be about a

person but just the condition of

being HIV negative or positive

or of just the fight against

Aids. But Asunta has gone

beyond ‘reporting’ about her

experiences in the newspaper

and written an autobiography,

*From Heartbreak to Daybreak*

(Sasa Sema, 2012).

Asunta, though, is one of

the few people in Kenya who

believe and argue that talking

about HIV and Aids is among

the first significant steps in

dealing with the condition of

either being HIV positive or

living with Aids.

She talks about the ‘disease’

in her column, in seminars and

it preoccupies her in her work

at Kenya Network of Women

with AIDS (Kenwa).

*From Heartbreak to Daybreak*

tells of Asunta from when she

was born at the Nyeri General

Hospital.

The family, like many others,

depended on their father for

a livelihood and therefore the

mother and children went

where the man of the house

went.

Thus we see the father as an

itinerant, looking for jobs in

Kapenguria, Lodwar, Songok,

Nandi Hills and settling in

Nairobi.

Asunta was ‘daddy’s girl’

despite the father being a

drunk and a womaniser. The

mother, like many women in

such situations ‘stayed in the

marriage to see the children

grow up.’

**Working hard**

Asunta, therefore, saw

schooling as a way out of the

poverty that afflicted the family.

She worked hard at school,

got very good marks CPE, 33

points out of maximum of 36,

and scored a Division Two in

KCE. Her performance in high

school, though, was affected

by abseentism due to lack of

school fees. She only managed

four points out of a possible 11

and missed out on university

education.

The moment that changed

Asunta’s life forever, if you

allow the cliché, was when she

was told she had six months

to live because she was HIV

positive whilst training

to become a nurse at the

McDonald School of Nursing,

Nairobi Hospital.

Undoubtedly Asunta’s life

before this is interesting. But it

becomes even more remarkable

after this diagnosis.

How does a young woman

survive betrayal by a man she

thought she loved, alienation

from friends, stereotyping and

stigma by the community,

including the Church, rejection

by the family, suicidal emotions,

joblessness, etc?

How does one live with the

knowledge that even if you

survived the six months that

doctors have ‘given’ you, you

would still be unacceptable in

the immediate community?

Well, that is what Asunta

overcomes, living on to become

a happy and fulfilled wife and

mother to three HIV negative

children, a women’s rights’

activist and the executive

director of an organisation

with an annual budget of about

Sh60 million.

The moral of this story is

that family and friends are

just as good as medication

if one has to heal from a life

threatening condition like

infection with HIV.

Indeed in *From Heartbreak*

*to Daybreak,* Asunta’s brother

Ruga is her guardian angel

when the rest of the family and

the community reject her.

This is a story that has

to be told and retold for its

inspiration, education and

historical value; it really doesn’t

matter how many times.

But Asunta’s story appears to

have been published in haste.

There are just too many

inconsistencies, repetitions,

too many interruptions in

the flow of the narrative,

language mistakes litter the

text, and in some cases just

too little is offered when we

expect more.

For instance, the husband,

Martin, is mentioned in just

about three pages of the book;

and beyond a few mentions

of her friends who died from

Aids, she doesn’t talk about

the impact of the disease in

her family, community or the

country in general.

This leaves the reader

wondering why such a

seemingly epic story couldn’t

have been told better.

The writer teaches literature

at the University of Nairobi.