

The Politics of Resistance and Liberation in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*

by

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of a continuing socio-economic crises in Africa stoked and sustained by Western imperialism and its agents, this paper examines and discusses Ngugi wa Thiong'o's concern and perspectives on Africa's march towards selfhood and independence via his novels *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* which represent an effort towards the liberation of Africa from the claws and shackles of imperialism as they deal with neo-colonialism in all its virulent manifestations. As political novels, they are unambiguous in their support of the views of the proletariat and condemnation of bourgeois philosophy and practice, as manifested in international capitalism, and thus reject neo-colonialism as a viable way of life for African people.

INTRODUCTION

Africa remains comparatively the least developed of all continents in terms of the production and sustenance of critically significant social goods such as physical infrastructure, telecommunication facilities, food supply, electricity, medical and health services, education, shelter, employment and other vital materials for human personal and social being¹

The above quote captures in clear terms the pitiable and dismal condition of Africa. Africa has been subjected to various forms of naked slavery, exploitation, colonization and neo-colonization in the last four hundred years or so. The integration of the economies of Africa into the international capitalist orbit which began between 1450-1500 with its consequences has created problems of development and survival for the peoples of Africa.

To sustain and promote their interests to the disadvantage of Africa, the international hegemonic have ensured that their agents remain in power to do their biddings. These agents consider and pursue policies that satisfy their interests and those of their imperialist masters even at the brink of economic collapse occasioned by “fictitious debts” ostensibly owed to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) and other Western banks and financial institutions, like the London and Paris Clubs.

Day in and day out, the African continent is racked by afflictions, disasters, macro-economic crisis and dysfunctions, debt over-hang, corruption, high level illiteracy, squalor, disease, hunger and other negative and destabilizing conditions thrown up by imperialism in cahoots with a greedy and unpatriotic ruling class. And the continent appears to be in limbo and suspended animation as the received development paradigm from the West has failed abysmally in addressing the ravaging socio-political and economic problems that have engulfed it. As articulated by Kofi Anyidoho in an article:

“Africa is a homeland that history has often denied and contemporary reality is constantly transforming into a quicksand; a land reputed to be among the best endowed in both human and material resources and yet much better known worldwide for its proverbial conditions of poverty, Africa the birth place of humanity and of human civilization now strangely transformed into expanding graveyards and battlefields for the enactment of some of the contemporary world’s worst human tragedies”²

It is against the background of the foregoing that Ngugi wa Thiongo’s two novels, *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* become very important in understanding the sorry pass to which Africa has come and the need to mobilize patriotic and concerned people for a collective battle against the forces that have hijacked Africa’s development. This paper attempts to investigate Ngugi’s concern about and perspectives on Africa’s march towards selfhood and independence. The focus on Ngugi and particularly the two novels becomes increasingly important given the rampaging influence of imperialism on African soil, and the need for political struggle and consequent liberation of the people.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Three broad concepts are significant to this study: namely politics, resistance and liberation. In life, everybody desires to think and act as s/he likes; and at the same time, every one cannot have his/her way, because he/she lives in a society. There are always conflicts between one’s desires and those of others. And so, the relations of individual members of society need to be regulated by an organized body called government. It is in this context that A. Appadorai defines politics as “the science concerned with the state and of the conditions essential to its existence and development”³

Hans J. Morgenthau, on the other hand, sees politics as “the authoritative allocation of resources.”⁴ Here, politics is seen in terms of power which is also a means to an end and an end in itself. Power is, also the ability to influence those who could determine outcomes, and the ability to influence others in one’s interest. Power is therefore, a component of politics the ruling class uses effectively to maintain and sustain their hegemony.

From the foregoing, one can clearly observe that the way a society is organized; the operation of its machinery of power; how and by whom that power has been achieved, the class configuration and the maintenance of power; and the ends to which the power is put are all issues in the domain of politics. In other words, this means that there could be two forms of politics: a politics that holds back the advance of humanity and the one that enhances it for the benefit and improvement of humanity. The latter politics is that of resistance against all forms of pressures and forces which stifle and inhibit the full realization and development of the potentialities of human beings; thus, a politics that questions the status quo and the hegemony of the exploitative ruling class and frees the masses of the people in the process.

Liberation is an arm or product of resistance, and according to Gustavo Gutierrez, it expresses the aspirations of the oppressed peoples and social classes emphasizing the conflict aspects of the economic, social, and political process which puts them at odds with wealthy nations and oppressive classes⁵. Liberation is attained when the people are said to be truly free; when they control all the tools, instruments the means of their physical, economic, political, cultural and psychological being. Put differently, when the people control the means and context of their integrated survival and development they are considered liberated.

But in the Africa of the 21st century, that free integrated self-development has not been allowed to materialize. Ngugi has provided an explanation for the existence of this condition:

*First it has been the external factor of foreign invasion, occupation, and control, and second, the internal factor of collaboration with the external threat. Whether under Western slavery and the slave trade, under colonialism and today under neo-colonialism, the two factors have interacted to the detriment of our being. The greedy Chief and other elements bred by the new colonial overlords, collaborated with the main external imperialist factor. The storm repeats itself, in a more painful way under neo-colonialism.*⁶

The interplay between the external threat and the internal collaborators is considered the greatest problem in Africa today, and the effort towards the liberation of Africa from the claws and shackles of imperialism and capitalism that provokes the revolutionary undertone in Ngugi's works as the only a radical break from the status quo demanding a profound transformation of the private property system, access to power of the exploited class, and a social revolution that would break dependence and thus allow for social change.⁷

LITERATURE AS HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The question may be asked: what has literature got to do with the whole lot of issues that have been raised so far. This question is important if we take into consideration the views of some writers and critics who insist that literature does not have any utilitarian value. The poet-soldier, Christopher Okigbo, who died fighting on the side of Biafra against Federal forces, in an interview he was of the opinion that *...the writer in Africa does not have any function. That is, personally, I have no function as a writer, I think I merely express myself, and the public use these things for anything they like.*⁸ And similarly, Ogunbesan stated that *...it is a betrayal of art for the writer to put his writing at the service of a cause, even if it is such a laudable and uncontroversial cause as the education of the people*⁹

These positions differ from our conception of literature. Literature is concerned with humankind and human life in its entirety. This includes everything that impinges on human life; it covers every aspect of experience and aspirations, politics inclusive. And interestingly enough, it does not deal with a closed sphere of human experience as mentioned by Amuzu "...it admits of all human activities and experiences dealing with the whole life"¹⁰. And according to Strauch's statement "...the literary work manifests man's understanding of the meanings of human experience..."¹¹

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the writer whose works are the subject of our discussion has demonstrated in his creative and critical works that the writer is a product of society, and has a responsibility towards it, wherein he unequivocally says in his prison memoir, *Detained* that literature is not *...something belonging to a surreal world, or a metaphysical ethereal plane, something that has nothing to do with man's more mundane, prosaic realm of attempting to clothe, shelter and feed himself*¹²

In contemporary Africa, we can construct some axioms that "... *writers and their works are implicated in the larger struggles which define political life in wider society*"¹³; hence the subjection of Africa to colonialist brigandage and imperialist capitalism in various guises has made it supremely important for the enlisting of literature and art in the task of liberation, from imperialism and of redressing social inequalities within individual national boundaries; literature and art have a primary commitment to freedom and can only thrive in a free state, and that "... *in a situation bedeviled with unfreedom, the primary responsibility of art is to enlist in the service of freedom*".¹⁴

Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*¹⁵ and Amilcar Cabral's *National Liberation and Struggle*¹⁶ reveal the political, economic and social circumstances that formed the sensibilities of most African writers. Thus, they illuminate the various types of approaches and mentalities or ideologies that inform African revolutionary writings. In addition, these works help the reader to determine if a writer's portrayal of African society fully reflects its social relations, political arrangements, and economic factors. These critical writings also help in the debate on the definition of African literature, because they bring forth the historical connections that make it possible for us to analyze African literature dealing with the pre-colonial, colonial and neo-colonial phases of African history.

In class societies like Africa, culture, art and literature take on class character where literature is fully implicated as evince of a consciousness that seems to conserve society on behalf of privileged interests or in contrast, exude a revolutionary consciousness congruent with the objective interests of the oppressed class engaged in class struggle to change the *status quo*. It is in the context of the latter interpretation that we place Ngugi's works as not only discourses on cultural and political decolonization, but also as works that are in quest of a new socio-economic and political order. On this quest, James Ogude observes that "...*Ngugi has been most poignant in his engagement with other disciplines and the discursive practice ...to imagine. Africa's history, which he believes, had been repressed by colonialism. Ngugi has insisted, correctly, that his writing is very much part of Kenya's and by implication Africa's historiography and the theorizing of its political economy...*"¹⁷

PETALS OF BLOOD

Petals of Blood, Ngugi's fourth novel is seen by many critics as the most ambitious and important of his works. According to Palmer "... of all African novels...*Petals of Blood* probably presents the most comprehensive analysis to date of the evils perpetrated in independent African society by Black imperialists and capitalists."¹⁸

Also, Ngara¹⁹ and Anyidoho²⁰ among others see *Petals of Blood* as not only breaking new grounds for the African novel in literary creation, but also as representing the height of Ngugi's achievement. This is because *Petals* is seen as having subsumed the themes and concerns of all of Ngugi's other works, including those written after it, into one volume. During the launching of the book, Ngugi hinted that ... *imperialism...can never develop a country or a people. This was what I was trying to show in Petals of Blood; that imperialism can never develop us, Kenyans. In doing so, I was only trying to be faithful to what Kenyan workers and peasants have always realized as shown by their historical struggles since 1895.*²¹

In both theme and ideological perspective, *Petals* begins where *A Grain of Wheat* stops. It deals in the main with neo-colonialism in all its manifestations: oppression, exploitation, social abuse and injustice, and thus "... *it probes the history of the heroic struggles of the people of Kenya, from pre-colonial times to the present day, within a comprehensive cultural perspective which embraces the political, religious, economic and social life of Kenya*".²² In *A Grain of Wheat*, the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the peasants is still in its embryonic stages and therefore is not expressed in explicit ideological terms, whereas *Petals*, takes us to a later period in the history of Kenya and the development of Ngugi's socialist vision.

The novel begins in the present with four main characters – Wanja, Abdulla, Munira and Karega – in jail on suspicion of being implicated in the murder of three African directors of the Theng'eta Brewery – Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria. This revelation comes to the fore through Munira in the cell while writing notes to satisfy the demands of the probing police inspector. Thus, from the present the story moves twelve years back to when Munira came to Ilmorog as a teacher in the village, and periodically it returns to the present and shows Munira in the cell, and on one or two occasions goes further into the experiences of Munira in Siriana where he was a student in the 1940s and during the Mau Mau uprising of the 1950s.

The scene of most of the events of the novel is the community of Ilmorog which grew from a traditional African village into a modern industrial complex. Through the historical presentation given to us by Ngugi, we are able to have glimpses of the glory of Ilmorog's past as a truly peasant community untouched by Western values that moved gradually from "a nomadic one to an agrarian civilization."²³

There was prosperity, contentment and a sense of belonging before the penetration of imperialism with its distorting influence, and the intrusion of imperialist values which brought Ilmorog into its decline, hence the author informs the reader that “... *Ilmorog... had not always been a small cluster of mud huts lived in only by old men and women and children with occasional visits from wandering herds men. It had its days of glory: thriving villages with a huge population of sturdy peasants who had tamed nature’s forests and, breaking the soil between their fingers, had brought forth every type of crop to nourish the sons and daughters of men.... In those days there were no vultures in the sky waiting for the carcasses of dead workers and no insect-flies feeding on the fat and blood of un-suspecting toilers* (Petals of Blood,120).

For the first time in the novel, we discover that drought has started ravaging Ilmorog with consequential damage to the otherwise thriving community. The criminal neglect by the political authorities, in particular, Nderi the member representing Ilmorog in the Parliament, worsens matters. Nderi, like other political officials, is only interested in acquiring wealth at the expense of his constituency. Eventually, Karega, the bright, idealistic young teacher in the community puts forward the proposal that the people should march to the capital where their MP stays to confront him with their problems. Like the revolutionary-minded masses in Ousmane’s *Gods Bits of Wood*, they march to the city in search of their representative. This march and its accompanying achievement mark a turning point in the lives of the exploited segment of Kenyan society in general.

Arising from the visit to the city and the plane crash in Ilmorog, the attention of the government is attracted to Ilmorog, as the people’s doubts are fully justified. The capitalists and their agents-Chui, Mzigo and Nderi-move in their development projects: roads, banks, factories, distilleries and housing estates. These developments quickly destroy the fabric of traditional Ilmorog. The destruction of the mysterious spirit Mwathi by a giant bulldozer is the concrete symbol of the annihilation of a once proud society by the ravaging forces of modernization, and notwithstanding, the deceived peasants lose their lands and all their possessions to the local profiteers and their international principals.

Ilmorog is transformed into a proto-capitalist society with all the attendant problems of prostitution, social inequalities, misery, uncertainty, and inadequate housing. The new Ilmorog is now divided along class lines. There is the residential area “of the farm managers, country council officials, the managers of Barclays, and African Economic Banks, and other servants of state and money power” (p.280). This area is called Cape Town , while New Jerusalem is reserved for the downtrodden in the society.

At this stage in the development of Ilmorog, Karega who had left Ilmorog following his dismissal from the teaching service five-years before reappears. To his chagrin, Wanja whom he was in love with has become one of the “powerful” people in the society. He informs Wanja, Munira and Abdulla of his activities during the last five years, doing one menial job or the other. Karega’s return to Ilmorog helps in arousing the consciousness of the people (especially, workers in the Theng’eta Brewery where he does his last job). The novel ends with a strong hope of a proletarian revolution, as there is the realization on the part of the Kenyan workers and peasants of the possibilities of overthrowing international capitalism and its neo-colonial agents.

In this novel, there is a clear demonstration that imperialism can never develop Kenya in particular and Africa in general. According to Ngugi: “In writing this book I was only trying to be faithful to what Kenyan workers and peasants have always realized as shown by their historical struggles since 1895.”²⁴

The spokespersons for Ngugi’s socialist solution are Karega, the lawyer, Abdulla and Munira. Ngugi through Karega shows concretely that socialism was a natural way of life in traditional African society and calls on the African society to go back to its former way of life. Ngugi is deeply conscious that imperialist capital is the real enemy in Africa today. To change the *status quo*, Karega becomes a trade union agitator who mobilizes the workers and the peasants to rid the society of exploitation. Karega’s union activities have politicized the workers and they are ready to haul defiance at their greedy employers as can be seen in the last part of the novel, “the last duty” indicating that the struggle continues – *La Luta Continua*. Ngugi hopes that out of *Petals of Blood*, Kenyans (Africans) might gather “petals of revolutionary love.”²⁵

In *Petals*, Ngugi uses his art to challenge the *status quo*. The Chuis, the Kimerias and the Nzigos who are agents of imperialism control the important spheres of life in Ilmorog. This can be seen in their directorship of Theng’eta Breweries and Enterprises Ltd. It is important to remember that this enterprise belonged to Wanja and Abdulla but the government through its agents handed it over to a multinational corporation. The economic deprivation and ruthless dispossession of the peasants finds its most effective symbol in the degradation of Wanja, the barmaid, who rises from prostitution to economic independence and womanhood but is forced back to the humiliating status of a prostitute who sells her body because nothing is obtained free, and the slogan becomes “eat or be eaten”.

Ngugi's combative spirit against neo-colonial agents and their masters continues in *Devil on the Cross*, a novel he wrote in detention in Kimathi Maximum Security prison in Kenya. Like *Petals of Blood*, the story takes place mainly in Ilmorog and partly in Nairobi. It is no wonder, then, that the major trope in *Devil on the Cross* could be neo-colonial dependency, with the *Devil on the Cross* as the structuring symbol. This is best illustrated in Wariinga's nightmare in which the white colonialist Devil is crucified by the masses (apparently, a reference to political independence) only to be resuscitated by the local comprador.

Devil on the Cross shows the class struggle between the poor and the rich, the exploited and the exploiters. The novel begins with the story of Wariinga, a lady who had suffered a series of misfortunes, maltreatment and deprivation at the hands of some irresponsible men in the society. She was used, abused and abandoned by the rich old man of Ngorika whose child she was carrying. She had attempted suicide on the railway track but was saved by the timely intervention of Munti. After having her baby, she was able to complete her secretarial studies and found herself a job in Champion Construction Company. She later lost this job because she did not welcome boss Kihara's attentions. Her undergraduate friend, John Kinwana, jilted her after accusing her of being Kihara's mistress; and she was thrown out of her one-room apartment for her inability to pay the rent which the landlord had increased, and the landlord secured the services of three thugs who threw her things out.

On the matatu bus, we see Muturi, Wariinga and Wa Mukirai with the invitation cards for the feast to choose the seven cleverest thieves and robbers in Ilmorog. Mukirai is in favour of the competition, and he is of the opinion that the feast is not organized by Satan but by the organization of modern theft and robbery in Ilmorog to commemorate a visit by foreign guests from an association of the thieves and robbers of the Western world, particularly from America, England, Germany, France, Italy, Sweden and Japan. The creation of a Devil's feast where national robbers and thieves with their foreign allies gather in order to reveal their tactics, strategies and motives provides Ngugi with the space for enacting or deconstructing, through the grotesque and the obscene, the banality of power, in a neo-colonial African society.

During the feast we are confronted with the boastful thieves and robbers in the cave as the co-operation of the Kenyan bourgeoisie is seen as fruitful by the international representatives; the leader of the foreign delegation from the international organization of thieves and robbers headquartered in New York thanks the local thieves and robbers for the good work they have done performing, yet thieves who steal out of hunger are not allowed to compete.

An example is Ndaaya Wa Kahuria in order to stop these noisy competitors who are watchdogs of imperialism that Wangari decides to invite the police, while Muturi who believes in the ability of the workers to arrest the thieves goes ahead to mobilize them. But the police who ought to arrest the thieves turn round to arrest Wangari, who should have been treated as an informant.

The ability of the workers, students and other members of the exploited class to mobilize themselves is very encouraging. The clarion call and song of the masses in their revolutionary movement to overthrow capitalism and the rule of its agents are resonating:

*Come one and all,
And behold the wonderful sight
of us chasing away Devil
And all his disciples:
Come one and all (Devil on the Cross, 201).*

The resistance put up by the people, their massive struggle against the forces of law, shows that the masses can determine their fate.

The realization of Wariinga's life ambition to train as an automobile engineer goes a long way to show how the underprivileged in the society have worked hard to improve their condition, in spite of the brutal attempts by the powers that be to reduce them to nothingness. After Wariinga had worked strenuously to become an engineer, the forces of "economic strangulation" strike. Boss Kihara, in partnership with a group of foreigners from the USA, Germany and Japan, buys the garage and the surrounding piece of land for the construction of a tourist hotel. The shooting and killing of the devil's accomplices, including the rich old man of Ngorika (whose son, Gaturia, Wariinga has fallen in love with) show the determination of the masses to liberate themselves.

Devil on the Cross exposes the plight of the masses and the workers in the present-day political set-up in Africa in consonance with the belief of Ngugi that African writers should address themselves "to the crisis or conflict between the emergent African bourgeoisie and the African masses."²⁶ According to Edward Shills, ideologies arise in conditions of crisis and in sectors of society where the prevailing situation has become unacceptable, he states "... an ideology arises because there are strongly felt needs which are not satisfied by the prevailing outlook, for an explanation of important experience, for the firm guidance of conduct and for a fundamental legitimating of the value and dignity of the persons who feel these needs."²⁷

Ngugi's ideological commitment to the masses of Kenya (Africa) must therefore be seen as a result of loss of confidence in the ability of the elite to build a successful society along the lines of capitalist ideology.

There are odds against the people in this novel as the devil appears deeply entrenched. Even during Wariinga's nightmare, we observe that the devil is not allowed to suffer and die on the cross. He is soon released by the rich men in dark suits. Opposition is stifled, and the dissenting voice is silenced. It is this state of affairs that has forced suffering people like Wariinga to seek redress and take sides with the masses. By the time Wariinga joins the workers at the cave, she is mentally prepared to identify with the workers, and it is at this stage that she gets a gun from Muturi which she later uses to kill the rich old man of Ngorika.

Ngugi has through this novel shown that the sophisticated structures that have sprung up in the cities of Kenya – Ilmorog, Mombasa , Nairobi , Nakuru, Kisumu – do not have their corresponding enhancement in the standard of living of the general population. Rather, what we observe is the emergence of a new class structure *the nouveau riche*, an infinitesimal corrupt minority, having allied itself with the ex-colonialists to form a formidable barrier to the people's share of the national resources. The battle is therefore between these "grabbers," who strive to consolidate their hold and the deprived, who also strives to thwart them.

The novel shows the class to which each character belongs; Muturi, Wariinga, Wangari, and Gaturiria represent the peasants and workers, while Gitutu Wa Gataaguru, Kihaahu and Muirevi represent the bourgeoisie. Hence, there is an intense struggle between the victims of exploitation and the exploiter class.

Ngugi uses the symbols of the *Matatu* and the *cave* to represent two things. The *Matatu* represents the world of the underprivileged where freedom of speech is not guaranteed. Thus, the *Matatu* represents the lower class striving after freedom as seen in the characters of Wangari, Maturi, Gaturiria and Wariinga. The cave, on the other hand, represents the devil's domain dominated exclusively by men of profit and women of leisure. Ngugi's vision in this novel, as in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) which he wrote with Micere Mugo, *Petals of Blood* (1971), *I will Marry when I Want* (1982) which he wrote with Ngugi Wamiri, *Matigari* (1986) and all his critical works, rests on a "completely socialized economy collectively owned and controlled by the people."²⁸ But the realization of this dream is dependant on unity, a factor Ngugi explains as "... until democratic-minded Kenyans, workers, peasants, students, progressive intellectuals and others unite... things will get worse, no matter who sits on the throne of power"²⁹

Finally, some readers may consider Wariinga's action of shooting Ghitahy and his colleagues as mere savagery. Ngugi, however, does not seem to see it as such. He perceives the action of Wariinga as a means to securing freedom. Violence is unacceptable only if it is used in protecting oppression and exploitation. As he puts it: "Violence in order to change an intolerable, unjust social order is not savagery. It purifies man. Violence to protect and present an unjust, oppressive social order is criminal and diminishes man."³⁰ The action therefore must be seen in its ideological relevance as a means of overthrowing an unjust social order.

Although Wangari's action in inviting the police to arrest the rich robbers fails, it nevertheless helps the people in the course of their struggle for a new society, and teaches peasants and workers that the law is not the source of their salvation from capitalist exploitation, and as a result, it exist to sustain the *status quo*.

CONCLUSION

In these two novels there is a possibility of progress and liberation in the cultural and economic spheres as articulated by Maslela Ntongela,³¹ Chesaina³² and Jeyifo.³³ Ngugi comes down heavily on the African ruling elite in *Petals of Blood* and celebrates the renewed struggles of the people against oppression and repression implemented by local colonialists. This theme is carried further in *Devil on the Cross* as *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* expose the ills of the society, hence ideological works that emphasize the collective survival of the exploited in Africa who attack the neo-colonial class structure which has thrown up poverty, privation, want, and the sense of insecurity that often define present life in many neo-colonial modern states in Africa.

As political novels, the two works are unambiguous in their support of the views of the proletariat and in their condemnation of bourgeois philosophy and practice, as manifested in international capitalism, and therefore reject neo-colonialism as a viable way of life for Africans. The novels affirm that the coming together of the peasants and the workers in a united and collective manner against their exploiters will liberate them from the present state of bondage and life of misery and poverty.

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