

DEVIL ON THE CROSS -AN INDICTMENT OF POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN POST-COLONIAL KENYA

DR. VINITA S VIRGANDHAM

Asst Prof, Dept. of English
BhiwapurMahavidyalaya,
Bhiwapur

ABSTRACT

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's entire oeuvre is the outcome of his participation in the larger social-political processes of the Kenyan nation state. "My writing is really an attempt," he admits in the preface to Secret Lives, "to understand myself and my situation in society and history. Indeed, the underlying focus of all of Ngugi's work has been the critical examination of the throbbing psychological significances of colonial and cultural depreciation; continued neo-imperial economic exploitation; and the cancerous growth of African scrounging elitism.

Keywords: Disillusionment, Politics, Cultural, Economics, Nationalism

David Cook and Michael Okenimpke, trace the evolution of Ngũgĩ's thought in three phases which run parallel to important stage-posts in his literary career—"the early period until his undergraduate studies at Makerere, Uganda; the intermediate phase at Leeds University in England; and the third phase of post-colonial disillusionment. His two early works of fiction—*The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child*—are marked by a strong sense of cultural nationalism as Ngũgĩ, like other writers in the 1960s" (*Africa is Born* 49). According to Herta Meyer, "he was grappling with issues of ethnicity, individualism and nationalism, uneasy bedfellows at best time" (Meyer 23). His third novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, explores in retrospect, the themes of betrayal, cowardice and individual/collective guilt as a new Kenyan nation awaited its birth in December 1963. There are signs of growing disenchantment with the post-independence conditions, and the questioning of Uhuru or this "new dawn" underscores the general mood of the novel.

The plot revolves around an anticipated praise-ceremony for Mugo, who is admired as a hero by the villagers, but has been actually a traitor to the Mau struggle for Kenya's independence. Although Mugo ultimately confesses to betraying Kihika, a Mau Mau leader, the novel ominously foreshadows that in independent Kenya it will be the "betrayers" of the movement who will assume the mantle of power. In his earlier novels Ngugi had strongly identified his two messianic protagonists with Jomo Kenyatta, leader of the Kenyan Nationalist Union (KANU). Wayaki (*The River Between*) and Njoroge (*Weep Not, Child*) conceive of their roles as analogical with that of "the spear of the nation" and "Jomo the Black Moses"—the symbol of true leadership. By the time Ngugi wrote *A Grain of Wheat*, the fantasizing of Mugo, of his role as a leader turns into an anti-

Special Issue

255

October 2021

Website: www.langlit.org

Contact No.: +91-9890290602

International Conference on 'Emerging Trends in Literature and Language' organised by English Departments of Hislop College, Nagpur, J.M. Patel Arts, Commerce and Science College, Bhandara & Smt. Binzani Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Nagpur

Indexed: ICI, Google Scholar, Research Gate, Academia.edu, IBI, IIFC, DRJI



messianic dream. Mugo, an anti-hero, represents the betrayal of the implicit faith of the people in "the Party".

Disillusioned with the failure of the post-independence government of Jomo Kenyatta, and repulsed by the growing corruption neo-colonial middle class, Ngũgĩ's next novel *Petals of Blood* is a deep caustic critique of post-colonial Kenya. Clearly discernible is the shift from hope-filled descriptions of the future in *The River Between* and *Weep Not Child*, to painful disappointment in *Petals of Blood*. The narrative is underscored by a stringent political criticism that is militant in its indignation and leftist in diction and content.

Set in the village of Ilmorog, *Petals of Blood* is structured as a political detective novel wherein four prominent Nairobi businessmen are all victims of an act of murder. The novel presents these men - Chui, Mzigo, Kimeria and Hawkins—as accomplices of the "real" larger crime, which is the ruthless economic exploitation of neo-colonial Kenya. As Eustace Palmar puts it, the narrative "explores not only the history behind the crime but the history behind the history of the crime" (Palmer 37). There is a constant and intense questioning throughout the novel on the patterns of social and political decay, the modes of behavior and shifting of values. Significantly, *Petals of Blood* works towards a radical representation of Kenyan history from the perspective of the marginalized—women, peasants and working classes. The village of Ilmorog becomes a microscopic representation of the Kenyan nation state.

According to Cantalupo, what emerges in Ngũgĩ's work post *A Grain of Wheat* is "a broad binary opposition between the forces of oppression on the one hand and the forces of resistance on the other". This becomes evident in his first novel *Devil on the Cross*, written on toilet paper in prison during his detention in 1977-78. The novel is intensely political and profiles "the nation-state as an illegitimate heir to, and hence suppressor of a genuine nationalist culture and history" (Cantalupo 50). Ngũgĩ constructs his women characters; protagonists- Wangari and Wariinga, as important resistance figures against manifold levels of exploitation—racial, class-based and patriarchy.

In many ways, Ngũgĩ's goal is reminiscent of Marxist ideology, as the novel is ultimately meant to educate the Kenyans on the corruption in their society and the power of non-compliance with such a representative writing. The central event in the novel is the *Devil's Feast*, a sort of literature in which Kenya's elite boasts of their cutthroat achievements. In allegorical form, the *Devil's Feast* attests to the exploitation of peasants and workers by foreign business interests and a greedy indigenous bourgeoisie.

Devil on the Cross is the story of Jacinta Wariinga, apparently narrated by the Gicaandi Player or "Prophet of Justice" at the request of Jacinta's mother, "so that each may pass judgement only when he knows the whole truth" (DOTC 17). In many respects the pattern of Wariinga's life resembles that of Wanja in *Petals of Blood*. Both approximate to the exemplary tale of Kareendi, told by Wariinga as the story of "a girl like me ... or ... any other girl in Nairobi" (21). Sexual exploitation and discrimination are dominant factors in Kareendi's life. She is given few opportunities to develop her potential and is consistently at the mercy of men for her livelihood. She is very often reduced to the cursed "cunt".

Ngũgĩ portrays sexual confrontation between men and women as part of the destructive rivalry on which Kenyan capitalism thrives, and through which injustices and inequalities

Special Issue

256

October 2021

Website: www.langlit.org

Contact No. : +91-9890290602

International Conference on 'Emerging Trends in Literature and Language' organised by English Departments of Hislop College, Nagpur, J.M. Patel Arts, Commerce and Science College, Bhandara & Smt. Binzani Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Nagpur

Indexed: ICI, Google Scholar, Research Gate, Academia.edu, IBI, IIFC, DRJI

are perpetrated. Wariinga faces a spiritual crisis at the Devil's Feast, a competition among modern thieves and robbers to choose the best means of exploiting the masses. Challenged by the devil in a dream to account for her passivity in the face of her former lover, the Rich Old Man's treatment of her, she depends her reaction by appealing to the conventional notions of her gender: "I'm a woman. I'm weak. There's nothing I could do" (54). As a result of her enlightenment at the Feast, she undergoes a transformation: *Today's Wariinga has decided that she'll never again allow herself to be a mere flower, whose purpose is to decorate the doors and windows and tables of other people's lives, waiting to be thrown on to a rubbish heap the moment the splendour of her body withers. The Wariinga of today has decided to be self-reliant all the time, to plunge into the arena of life's struggles in order to discover her real strength and to realise her true humanity.* (57)

However, Ngũgĩ's portrayal of Wariinga, in both her original and transformed character, can be seen to operate in the context of patriarchal relations, the very relations that confirm Wariinga's status as a sexual subject, "a mere flower" in the lives of men. The paradox emerges from Ngũgĩ's commitment to a class analysis of history and theory of revolution, a commitment that leads him to conflate patriarchy and neo-colonialism and to impose a single narrative on his heroine's struggle against oppression; that of class conflict. Ignoring the heterogeneity of subject constitution, Ngũgĩ subordinates gender (as well as other social distinctions) to class. For him, "post-colonial" Kenya's history operates along a single dialectic. The content of *Devil on the Cross*, he asserts in *Detained*, will be "the Kenyan people's struggles against the neo-colonial form and stage of imperialism". A marginalized category in his novel, gender is reconstituted to meet the requirements of the master narrative.

Gender functions as a sign for class in the first section of *Devil on the Cross*. Sexually abused and exploited by the men of the new ruling class, Wariinga provides a useful symbol for the degraded state of neo-colonial Kenya. In order to secure employment, she must first satisfy the demands of the boss whose target is her thighs" (38). The conclusion she comes to on the basis of her experience of looking for secretarial work is identical to the one Wanja reaches about women: "The day on which they are born is the very day on which every part of their body is buried except one—they are left with a single organ" (42).

Social values, too, have been reduced and debased, as the leader of the radical students' movement explains to Wariinga: "*(Neo-colonial) countries have been taught the principle and system of self-interest and have been told to forget the ancient songs that glorify the notion of collective good. They have been taught new songs, new hymns that celebrate the acquisition of money.*" (43)

The analogy becomes explicit when one of the contestants at the *Devil's Feast*, a man with nationalist loyalties (Mwireri wa Mukirai), exhorts foreign investors "to go back home and rape your own mothers, and leave me to toy with my mother's thighs". (40)

The way out of the stalemate lies in what Wariinga calls the "Holy Trinity"—the worker (Muturi), the peasant (Wangari) and the patriot (the student leader who saves her from a certain death in the streets of Nairobi and who hands her over an invitation card to the Devil's Feast). In this trinity, the outcome of Marxist ideology, lies the hope for the Kenyan people; in their struggle against capitalism lays the salvation for post-

Special Issue

257

October 2021

Website: www.langlit.org

Contact No. : +91-9890290602

International Conference on 'Emerging Trends in Literature and Language' organised by English Departments of Hislop College, Nagpur, J.M. Patel Arts, Commerce and Science College, Bhandara & Smt. Binzani Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Nagpur

Indexed: ICI, Google Scholar, Research Gate, Academia.edu, IBI, IIFC, DRJI



independence Kenya.

While women serve as an index of the state of the nation, men make up the nation's citizenry. Not only the ruling elite but also "the people", the workers whose plight Wariinga represents, are defined as male. This identification is implied by the inflections for gender in the discourse on the struggle to dominate nature delivered by Muturi, the one male character in the novel to acquire heroic structure—by the generic pronouns and nouns he uses, as well as by the conventionally male-defined types of "human" accomplishment he celebrates, and it betrays the patriarchal basis of Ngũgĩ's class perspective. "Look at the fruits of the combined labour of many hands: roads and rails, and cars, and trains, and many other types of wheel that permit man to run faster than the hare or the swiftest animal in the forest; aeroplanes that give man wings more powerful and swifter than those of any bird in the sky; missiles faster than sound and lightning; ... telephones, radios, televisions, devices that are able to capture the voice and substance of a human being, so that his face and his voice remain alive even after his body is dead and buried and has decayed."

It is, therefore, not surprising that when, in the latter part of the novel Wariinga "discovers her real strength" and "realises her true humanity", she almost literally develops male characteristics.

Wariinga, "heroine of toil", "has said goodbye to being a secretary" and has qualified as an engineer and motor mechanic. Not even contemplating the organisation of a stenographers' trade union, she enthusiastically takes up a male-defined profession and becomes active in promoting the cause of its (male) workers. In Ngugi's view, secretaries are not "workers", a concept which he defines from an exclusively male perspective, hence excluding what are traditionally considered to be women's occupations (clerical work as well as mothering and prostitution) from his definition. His heroine is also required to undergo a transformation in character—to convert stereotypical feminine qualities into equally stereotypical masculine ones. Whereas the younger Wariinga is passive in response to her oppressors, the mature Wariinga is aggressive—even violent. A master of the martial arts, she assaults her opponents "with so many judo kicks and karate chops". An expert marksman too, she sometimes shoots to kill and sometimes merely shatters kneecaps.

Ngũgĩ leaves the readers in no doubt as to the significance of the weapon with which he equips his heroine. For the conventional figurative association of the gun with phallic power is made explicit. As Wariinga reminds the Rich Old Man from Ngorika just before she shoots him, she has taken over the role he used to perform when they played the game of "the hunter and the hunted". In the version they played when they were lovers, the game reached its climax when the Rich Old Man fired his pistol into the sky to announce his sexual conquest. According to the dictates of Ngũgĩ's narrative, Wariinga must become an honorary male before she can acquire heroic stature. With a gun in her possession, she is suitably equipped to participate in the struggle for a more equitable system for men.

The ending of *Devil on the Cross* is optimistic insofar as it offers possibilities of new social orders in the future, but it is not conclusively "happy". Both Wariinga and Gaturia go through enlightenment and liberation in the process of finding themselves and each other but, like the ill-fated lovers of Ngũgĩ's earlier novels, they are to find that the larger

Special Issue

258

October 2021

Website: www.langlit.org

Contact No. : +91-9890290602

International Conference on 'Emerging Trends in Literature and Language' organised by English Departments of Hislop College, Nagpur, J.M. Patel Arts, Commerce and Science College, Bhandara & Smt. Binzani Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Nagpur

Indexed: ICI, Google Scholar, Research Gate, Academia.edu, IBI, IIFC, DRJI



social forces impinge on their personal relationship. The fact that there is no simple "happy" ending reinforces the point, made in *Petals of Blood*, that "La Luta Continua!"

As Ngugi has said: "The problem of men and women cannot be satisfactorily solved under the present system. Sexual relations are the reflection of an unequal economic system." Wariinga refuses to settle down to marriage with Gatuiria because she discovers that her prospective father-in-law is her seducer, "the Rich Old Man from Ngorika". When Wangari delivers her condemnation of the thieves at the *Devil's Feast*, "her voice carried the power and authority of a people's judge". Wariinga also speaks with the voice of "a people's judge" when she condemns the Rich Old Man to die. Wariinga's execution of the oppressor, like Wanja's execution of Kimeria in *Petals of Blood*, is more than a personal revenge. It carries the force of communal retribution and justice.

REFERENCES

1. Thiong'o' wa Ngũgĩ . *Devil on the Cross*, Blue Rose Publishers, Nairobi, 1980
2. Cantalupo, Charles. *The World of Ngugi wa Thiong'O*, Pencraft Books, Delhi, 2015
3. Cook, David and Michael Okenimkpe. *Ngugi wa Thiong'O: An Exploration of his Writings*, Oxford University Press, Chennai, 2009
4. Merta, Herta. *Justice for the Oppressed: The Political Dimension in the Language Use of Ngugi wa Thiong'O*, The Herald Publication, London, 2013
5. Palmer, Eustace. *An Introduction to the African Novel*, Outskirts Press, Washington, 2006

Special Issue

259

October 2021

Website: www.langlit.org

Contact No. : +91-9890290602

International Conference on 'Emerging Trends in Literature and Language' organised by English Departments of Hislop College, Nagpur, J.M. Patel Arts, Commerce and Science College, Bhandara & Smt. Binzani Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Nagpur

Indexed: ICI, Google Scholar, Research Gate, Academia.edu, IBI, IIFC, DRJI