

NGUGI wa THIONG'O: A THEMATIC EXPLORATION OF HIS FICTIONAL WORKS.

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Abstract

This paper examines the fictional writings of Ngugi wa Thiong'o by identifying the recurring themes in his earlier and later fictional creations. Being one of the most prolific writers in Africa, his revolutionary impulse has made him a committed literary analyst and "a disturber of peace" in Kenya; but his ideological position has affected his artistic imagination in the later works. This work reveals the impact of ideology on the creative spirit and establishes Ngugi's relevance as a foremost African writer.

Introduction

The writings of Ngugi wa Thiong'o recreate the traumas of Africa's encounter with Western colonialism and the disillusionment which follows the betrayal of the liberation struggle by the agents of neo-colonialism. He mirrors the tangled situation of acute deprivation among the masses and the misappropriation of public wealth by the elites as well as the consequences of both on the Kenyan people. From his earliest to his later works, Ngugi assumes an ideological position because the intensity of corruption, crass materialism and the duplicity of the elites point to the fact that revolution is the panacea for the imbalance in the social system. His earlier writings include *The River Between*, *Weep Not Child*, *Secret Lives* and *The Black Hermit* while the later ones are *A Grain of Wheat*, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross* and *I Will Marry When I Want*.

As a writer, Ngugi aligns himself with the masses in the task of mobilizing the people for the fight against social injustice in Kenya. He has been incarcerated in many instances and some of his works prohibited before he was forced into exile. Nevertheless, he maintains his commitment to the masses by sustaining his sensitivity to the plight of Kenyan workers. It is this same commitment that propels him to write in Gikuyu language in order to educate the people on the essence of personal liberation. This paper, therefore, analyses the fundamental issues raised in Ngugi's fictional writings and also examines his development as a writer from his earlier to his later works.

Thematic Exploration of Ngugi's Fictional Works

Ngugi's writings are literary chronicles of social reality and represent the history of imperialism in its colonial and neo-colonial stages. Each of them is a creative but realistic reference to the history of Kenya as a settler colony. This is because the African writer is a literary historian and as Lewis Nkosi observes in *Tasks and Mask*, s/he is committed to the depiction of "a collective fate shared" by members of his community (31). *The River Between* and *Weep Not Child* illustrate the encroachment of Western civilization and its destruction of social cohesion and moral regulation in Gikuyuland. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and *A Grain of Wheat*, to a large extent, critically analyze the struggle for independence and the responses of Kenyans to it. But *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross* and *I will Mary When I Want* portrays the institution of neo-colonialism by the elites, the disillusionment of the masses with Kenyan politics, the betrayal of the collective struggle and the fight for complete emancipation.

The systematic exploitation of Africans in Ngugi's Works is borne out of the greed and individualism of Western capitalism, which led to the appropriation of land, by the whites in East Africa. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in an interview with Dennis Duerden in *African Writer Talking* divulges that land has a spiritual implication which surpasses material acquisition for the Gikuyu people. This is why Africans resist the idea of being "squatters" in their ancestral homestead. Ngotho in *Weep Not Child* is passionately attached to the land because it is "a tribute to the dead, the living and the unborn of his line" (31). Unfortunately, this same land is the personification of Mr. Howland's frustrated dreams and the only avenue of escaping the realities of his devastated existence. Therefore, land as the centre of conflict, is a predominant theme in all of Ngugi's works.

Myths are created to authenticate the fact that the land belongs to Mumbi and Gikuyu. In the beginning, Murungu declares in *The River Between* "This land I give to you O man and woman. It is yours to rule and till, you and your posterity" (12). Thus, the enslavement of Africans on their land draws a parody between them and the Israelites in Egypt; a situation which partly accounts for the

random use of Biblical allusions and their location within the tensions in Ngugi's writings. But this reliance on Biblical allusions is also a product of his early Christian background and his decision to repudiate and/or interrogate the validity of his Christian upbringing.

It is not surprising that he equates the puritan restraint in orthodox Christian concepts to "a debased European middle class mode of living and behaviour" in *Homecoming* (32). Consequently, Waiyaki's failure as a hero in *The River Between* is associated with the pervasion of Christianity by racial prejudice, economic exploitation and a poorly conceived missionary education. Orthodox Christian principles is also one of the factors instrumental to Remi's actions and reactions to life in *The Black Hermit*. The pastor intensifies the tribal partisanship in Marua by the elusive vision of using Remi to restore sanity in the land. But the problem takes a sophisticated dimension in *Petals of Blood* and *I will Marry When I Want* where religion is the agent of capitalism. The persistent use of Christian symbols in his works, Ngugi comments in *Homecoming* are a testimony that the church as an institution has championed cultural alienation instead of cultural integration in African societies (35).

He portrays the forces contending for domination in Kenya through the antagonistic ridges divided by Honia River in *The River Between*; the infiltration of Western civilization and missionary education through the activities of ardent converts such as Joshua in "Village Priest" and the insistence on social norms by traditionalists such as Kamau and Kibanyi. These forces provide the bases for the juxtaposition of conflicting characters, situations, locations and images in the works. Thus, the narrative voices of his principal characters predominantly adopt the third person point of view, indicating that they are social types whose problems have collective implication for Africans in general and the Kenyan masses in particular.

This is most evidently shown in Ngugi's reaction to the issue of language in African literature. He frowns at the suppression and under-development of African languages as a deliberate distortion of reality because English language embodies a colonial mentality. This is shown in his decision to write in Gikuyu and the conscious attempt to transfuse certain stylistic features of oral narratives like proverbs, riddles, maxims and songs into his alien structures of imagination whether short stories, novels or dramas in the English translations of his works. *Devil on the Cross* and *I Will Marry When I Want* represent this position because these dramatic works were first published in Gikuyu language before Heinemann brought out the English translations.

Consequently, there is a gradual development in Ngugi's perception of reality, which is recaptured by the changes he adopts at certain points in his career. This development of creative vision has drawn a thin line of demarcation between his earlier and later works. David Cook acknowledges this in a unpublished paper entitled "Ngugi's Failed Protagonist: Compassion or Indictment?". The argument of David Cook, who happens to have been Ngugi's teacher, is that although this writer has grown from a humane and compassionate analyst of human inadequacy to a radical social reformer, he is not particularly concerned with indicting or exonerating his failed heroes. Rather, he engages the reader in a drama that induces him to contemplate on social issues with the intention of restraining them from "failure, defection and betrayal" (1).

In doing this, language is his greatest tool and the highest manifestation of his growth as a writer. This is the factor through which other changes are revealed. A major stylistic device in his earlier works is the use of simple sentences. In a discussion between Kamau and Njorege in *Weep Not, Child*, the narrator records: "I am, oh, so glad. But I wish you too would come" (3). In *The River Between*, Waiyaki's naïve attachment to education is reflected in the following sentences: "Education is life. Let it come" (112). Again, Njorege recounting his experience to his friend in "The Black Bird" says: "The Bird was starting... I felt nothing" (35). And also the narrator describing Njorege's hut in "The Martyr" remarks "it was a very small room" (*Secret lives* 44). These sentences lack structural depth though each of them has a subject and a predicate; and as such is complete and meaningful.

But language use in the later works shows a conscious utilization of sentences with structural complexity. A typical example is a sentence in *A Grain of Wheat* with fifty-eight words.

In turn, Thompson contemplated the blotting paper on the table, the pen and pencil rack, the ink bottle, the white-washed office walls and the ceiling as if seeking a pattern that held the things in the room together – but his mind only hopped from one thought to another (37).

Similarly, the first sentence in chapter two of *Petals of Blood* has forty words.

But all that was twelve years after Godfrey Munira, a thin dust cloud trailing behind him, first rode a metal horse through Ilmorag to the door of a moss-grown two-roomed house in what was once a school yard (5).

There is no doubt that Ngugi's better mastery of the English language in his later works has affected his creative ability in the last two instances.

The element that dictates the structure of these sentences is the intensity of reasoning which ultimately affects the nature of dialogue among characters. Although dialogue is employed in the earlier novels, the characters are restrained by the pressures around them. And so, Speech is an index of characterization and portrays the helplessness and fragmentation in the lives of the characters. The interactions between Njorege and Ngotho in *Weep Not, Child* and Waiyaki and Nuambura in *The River Between* are demonstrative of this fact. But in the later works, dialogue is used to confront or directly indict the characters either from mutual hatred or persuade them to identify with the struggle for liberation.

In *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, for instance, Ngugi and Mugo enact their shared hatred for colonialism and neo-colonialism as the panacea for eliminating human oppression. They achieve this by recreating the heroic exploits of Dedan Kimathi, and leaders of the Mau Mau War in order to awaken in the masses the need to fight for their rights. The content of the work dictates the style and imposes on the language a level of urgency and exactness as this encounter reveals:

Judge: Kimathi S/O Wachiuri, you
have been found guilty of possessing a fire arm... Have you anything to say
before the sentence?

Kimathi: In the court of Imperialism!
There has never and will never Be Justice for the people Under imperialism
Justice is created Through a revolutionary struggle Against all the forces of
imperialism (82).

There is no doubt that Ngugi and Mugo are writing with bitterness; and so, we hold suspect Michael Etherton's suggestion that Ngugi has "clearly transcended this rather rhetorical level of political commitment" (178).

The attack on the political elite is more intense in *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross* and *I Will Marry When I Want*. There is no attempt to mask his commitment to social justice which is why he makes this declaration in *Homecoming*: "I believe the African intellectuals must align themselves with the struggle of the African masses for meaningful national ideal" (50). He does this by dramatising the war between the "have and the have-nots", through the use of parallels and contrasts, both in motifs and characterization. At the centre of this conflict is the land "stolen" from the peasants by neo-colonialists like Nzigo, Chui and Kimeria; a picture he presents most clearly in *I Will Marry when I Want* when Kiguuda's only property in life "a title deed" for one and half acres of land is dubiously taken by Ikuua wa Nditika, a prominent capitalist. Disillusioned, Kiguuda's broken spirit seeks illusory gratification in drinking before Gicaamba offers him a flicker of hope through collective struggle. Yet Kiguuda has lost everything, including his daughter, Gathoni who is impregnated and abandoned by Ikuua's son.

The truth is that independence has not emancipated the masses; rather, it has ironically given some opportunists the privilege of continuing the heritage of the colonial masters. This readily explains the dilemmas of Ngugi's protagonists – Waiyaki; Njorege, Mugo, Remi – who though presented as deliverers cannot adequately confront the realities in their societies. They are alienated, unattached and unaccommodated individuals whom colonialism has neither freed nor allowed the "civilized" mentality to develop. Waiyaki and Njorege want to liberate their people through formal education, even when they themselves are inarticulate. Remi intends to uproot tribalism and religious bigotry from Marua yet he is physically and spiritually dislocated from his cultural root. If Ngugi's perspective at this stage in his creative vision is that of a humanist, then his characters discovered too late that every realistic vision must resonate the aspirations of the time.

However, Ngugi's vision as a revolutionary writer is inextricably linked with the revolutionary atmosphere of Leeds University where he did his Graduate Studies. This is the reason *Petals of Blood* serves as a dramatic departure from the conciliatory tone of his earlier works. The elites collaborate with foreign capitalists to afflict the peasants with adverse deprivations. The "secret

lives" of the oppressed and their oppressors are unraveled through extensive flashbacks and flashforwards in which we have access to Wanja's crisis and Abdulla's disappointment with independence after his heroic participation in the Mau Mau struggle; among many others.

The great human tragedy which nature presents to the inhabitants of Ilmorag is reflected in the journey to Nairobi. This is one of the highest manifestations of Ngugi's craft as a chronicler of collective affliction and a protest writer with revolutionary impulse. The entrance to Rev. Jerrod Brown's estate is a sharp contrast to the arid landscape called Ilmorag. The duplicity in orthodox Christianity is shown as the preacher of love refuses to help a dying child but in order to justify his spiritual blindness, he offers the child "the bread of life".

This journey, unfortunately, transforms Ilmorag from a neglected village to the centre of capitalist enterprise. With the construction of a Police Post, Church, Prison, Reserves and Trans-African Highway, the Breweries and the ravaging of African womanhood by foreigners, the proletarianization of the masses is complete. Yet Ngugi intimates through Karega that the problem lies with the system or the structure of the society. This explains why the struggle is transferred to Joseph, the unborn foetus in Wanja's womb and other members of the younger generation.

Ngugi's thematic preoccupations in *Devil on the Cross* and *I Will Marry When I Want* are a continuation of the issues raised in his later works though the temperament is stronger. At this stage, he knows that the peasants have assumed the role of second-class citizens and are treated as step-children in their ancestral heritage. He is writing with intense bitterness, and so, he resorts to speak directly to the masses and the establishment. The medium is Gikuyu language and the form is oral narrative. *Devil on the Cross* shows Ngugi as the conscience of his society; and as the repository of knowledge and social ethos, he interacts directly with his audience.

Devil on the Cross is a testament on Ngugi's cultivation of the folk culture. The songs are not just elements of cultural revival. Unlike in the earlier works, they are meant for comic relief and dramatize the highest moments of the narrative by creating rapport between the artist and his audience. Waringa comes out of her dark past in a characteristic folktale pattern. She transcends her limitation and becomes an automobile engineer, an exclusively male dominated profession. When the old rich man crosses her track the second time, he is eliminated despite the prospect of being married to his son. His destruction marks the dismantling of the structure of male domination and suggests that everybody should rise against tyranny, including women who have always been regarded as weaker vessels.

Again, Ngugi depends heavily on Biblical allusions to unfold the story, a device which is predominantly utilized in *A Grain of Wheat*. Christ's sacrifice parallels the sacrifices of the leaders of the independent struggle, especially Kihika. The epigraph recalls images of Christian suffering and forbearance, which are necessary for social justice. But the plot structure of the story impinges on irony for its effects. Mugo, a traitor compromises social justice by betraying Kihika. But Kihika's blood instigates the masses to resolutely demand for their rights. Leslie Monkman confirms this in an article titled "Kenya and the New Jerusalem in *A Grain of Wheat*" where he remarks that "rebirth and growth lies... in an objective recognition of [the] inter-dependence of their common potential for future achievement" (133).

In *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi re-interpretes the crucifixion of Christ in a biting satire against the establishment. The "devil on the cross" is a detestable reference to the materialists who will in future be vanquished by the masses. Even the parable of the talents is inverted by the thieves to illustrate the sensual gratification surrounding the values of the oppressor. But in *I Will Marry When I Want*, "The Village Priest" and "A Meeting in the Dark" – two stories in *Secret Lives*, the writer openly confronts the false pretensions in orthodox Christianity through the failure of its practitioners to uphold human dignity for the Africans. His position is that it preaches a hope for transcendental deliverance while actually instructing Africans to submit to Western capitalism.

This explains why Gicaamba in *I will Marry When I Want* speaks vehemently against Christian principles. The fact is that Ngugi is not against God because he is a Roman Catholic. But just like Lloyd Williams, he believes that, religion should grow from the experience of the people and not necessarily imposed on them by the whites (54). Ngugi affirms this remark in *Homecoming* when he counsels that the church should return to "the primitive communism of the early Christian Church of Peter and also the communism of the traditional African Society" (36). This marriage is debatable if not "a probable impossibility" but the respect for human life and the equitable distribution of wealth

cultivated by both are values which this writer has persistently advocated in his novels, plays and short stories.

Conclusion

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is a better workman with the novel. His plays have many structural weaknesses because the characters lack the complexity and depth given to Mugo and Wanjia in his novels. Indeed, his dramatic works present social types who are created to justify Ngugi's anger on the rape of his ancestry, and so, his tone becomes more sentimental. The result is that artistry is sacrificed in order to project the message so his later works fail as art but succeed as propaganda. This thesis can be tested by reading a novel, drama or short story by any other writer after studying Ngugi's fictional works. The result is therapeutic because there is a relief from anger, hatred and revolution.

Therefore, Ngugi's career as a foremost writer in Africa reveals a committed response to the pressures of life in his society. And also, his fictional works are deployed to raise social consciousness among the peasants in order to dismantle the structure of social exploitation that has come to characterize the relationship between the elite and the masses in Africa. He operates from the standpoint of ideology which may have helped his perception of reality but has affected his creative ability negatively, especially in the later works.

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