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Examining the Politics of Female Identity and Ethnicity in Ngugi Wa Thiong'O

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this paper is to attempt an ethno-gendered study of women as portrayed in two neo-colonial novels of Ngugi wa ThiongÓ. Both *Petals of Blood* (1977) and *Devil on the Cross* (1980) are socially located in post-independent Kenya; a society grappling with problems of its new-found freedom such as consumerism, and the conflicts of oppositional binaries like indigeneity vs. modernity. Caught in the maelstrom of such a mechanically male-oriented structure is the African woman who strives to carve a niche for herself in an urbanized society, while being entangled in the perpetual dilemma of retaining her past heritage. Ngugi has always been vocal about natives losing their self-esteem as a result of Western conditioning. And here he envisions a nation which shall strive to reconstruct itself by juxtaposing the fragments of its ancestral glory instead of replacing the norms of imperialism with that of hegemonic neo-colonialism. Adding a feminist dimension to this nationalist discourse, by foregrounding two women in central roles, further problematizes the newly liberated nation's endeavour to hold on to its indigenous roots and still coping with the drawbacks of cosmopolitanism devouring its unique ethnicity.

The paper will be developed with Third-world and postcolonial feminist approaches, triggered by the aim to examine how does the neo-colonial woman assert her individual agency in a world where the perpetrators are her own black native companions and not the white colonial masters anymore.

Keywords

African women, identity, ethnicity, feminist agency, woman question

Introduction

“The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms to the colonies, where it goes naked...”

– Karl Marx, *Future Results of British Rule in India* (1853)

The above indictment of Marx of the colonial situation, though written in a different context, is nevertheless prescient of the barbaric proportions that the imperial system would assume in the near future. What history witnessed thereafter is an atrocious array of oppression, trauma and colonization; a history which not only trampled the native culture, but also robbed it off its indigenous identity. And this process of domination continued till these colonies gained independence and even after that. This is especially true for the African nations which were granted freedom as late as 1990s. Another universal constant is that like other nationalist movements, during Kenya’s struggle for liberation, the women of the nation played a crucial role in them and were represented using the traditional ‘Nation-As-Mother’ trope whose integrity had to be rescued by her sons, only to be sent back to domesticity when the national emergency was over. In postcolonial discourses, the nation generally symbolizes the binaries of female power and female helplessness. It is Ania Loomba’s reformulation of Benedict Anderson’s argument- “If the nation is an imagined community, that imagining is profoundly gendered” (2012, 215) – which leads to Rosemary Marangoly’s contention that “Postcolonial feminist scholars have argued that while women may make minimal gains when mobilized as symbols of the new nation, they are easily returned to the domestic or depoliticized private sphere when independence is achieved” (2006, 222). It also should be remembered that in the history of freedom, the concerns of women have always been secondary to that of nationalism.

Noted Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong’O, in one of his two memoirs entitled ‘*In the House of the Interpreter*’, recounts his incarceration, during his detention from 1977, being done by a Kenyan local policeman- an incident he narrates in order to emphasize on the traces of ‘mental miscegenation’¹ that the imperial system had left behind them before their departure from Africa. By granting apparent ‘independence’ to the natives, in fact the colonizers had opened the floodgates of indirect domination in the form of Neo-colonialism; which is, to borrow Nkrumah’s definition, is the last stage of imperialism and also the most

¹ Term coined by Benedict Anderson for those colonial educational policies which aimed to create Europeanized natives.

perilous. Hobsbawm has stated three chief ways in which the world has changed from the beginning to the end of the twentieth century: non-Eurocentrism, the reduction of the world into a 'single operational unit' both economically as well as culturally and drastic disintegration of human relationships and ruptures in past and present (Habib 191). The conglomeration of the above three factors inform how Capitalism has grown to be a permanent force in the postmodern world. Ngugi unveils a bleak and tenebrous African society shrouded by the illicit forces of capitalism; a pattern on its way to assume a massive proportion in the potential annihilation of indigenous native culture. Ngugi labels this annihilation as the greatest defeat of the African culture which he witnesses as allowing itself to be stripped of all its heritage and history. Ngugi has always been vocal about natives losing their self-esteem as a result of Western conditioning. And here he envisions a nation which shall strive to reconstruct itself by juxtaposing the fragments of its ancestral glory instead of replacing the norms of imperialism with that of hegemonic neo-colonialism. Addition of a feminist dimension to this nationalist discourse, by foregrounding two women in central roles, further problematizes the newly liberated nation's endeavour to hold on to its indigenous roots while still coping with the drawbacks of cosmopolitanism devouring its unique ethnicity.

The primary purpose of this paper is to attempt an ethno-gendered study of women as portrayed in the two neo-colonial novels of the author. Both *Petals of Blood* (1977) and *Devil on the Cross* (1980) are socially located in a post-independent Kenya grappling with problems of its new-found freedom, such as consumerism, and the conflicts of indigeneity vs. modernity. The paper is triggered by the aim to examine how does the neo-colonial woman assert her individual agency in a world where the perpetrators are her own black native companions and not the white colonial masters anymore, not explicitly at least. Ngugi seeks to create in his fiction, "a picture of a strong, determined woman with a will to resist..." as an example for his audience (ThiongÓ, *Detained* 8-9).

Ngugi in his recent seminal anthology of critical essays, *Secure the Base* (2016), demonstrates the futility of addressing a self-proclaimed 'modern' world in terms of its expanding horizons, because the social structure of hierarchy and power relations continue to remain unchanged for women in the 21st century. Ngugi cites the norms of the 18th century when the American Declaration of Independence bestowed certain 'inalienable' rights to all the citizens who were equal in the eyes of governance but smoothly erased out black people and women from its rubric (ThiongÓ, *STB* 5), thereby dehumanizing these two significant categories. The position of women in the neo-colonial world continues to be peripheral to that

of men, who are in power of the Centre. Rather, it has touched the nadir of sexual subjugation in the present time and this is what concerns Ngugi the most, who has always considered women to be an integral factor in the process of nation-building. Ngugi's concern for deterioration of the African identity is graver in the present when the African society has been bonded in the dialectics of master-slave relationship and even more apprehending for the African woman who undergoes tripartite colonization due to her gender, race and class.

He uses his power of language to highlight this grave crisis in his literary representations, for he believes that literature does not happen outside history but within it and that it possesses the capability to bring about a social change in society, echoing Sartre's views. Marxist influence tends to state the possibility of literature being a reflection of the dominant ideology of a particular age. However, the other side of the coin suggests that literature consents to the dominant ideology with the aim of countering or transcending its limits and hence begins the process of social change. Ngugi being a staunch supporter of Marxist ideology uses this paradoxical position as a writer to stipulate a set of neo-colonialist notions only to negate them with his scathing indictment of a society which promulgates its practice. He launches a vitriolic attack in his writings by posing a stark reality hidden beneath the illusion of 'Uhuru'² : that the promises of independence have not been fulfilled. With their widespread world-view, his novels chart out how the Kenyans have undermined their own legacy by their associations with the neo-colonists and how Kenya continues to be exploited under the new regime. Caught in the maelstrom of such a mechanically male-oriented structure the African woman strives to regain her lost individual self while being entangled in the perpetual dilemma of retaining her past heritage. The construction of the 'Third World woman' by First world feminists informs the explicit subversion of Black women in the post-colonial society. The subsequent marginalization of the third world woman in feminist scholarship is explained as a 'discourse of convenience' (Bahri, 199). The 'Third world woman' concept exists only in order to bestow privilege and superiority to the first world. Ngugi deliberately foregrounds his women characters as the epitome of African heritage, who can write their own Third World heterogeneous histories, while offering significant resistances in the face of capitalistic oppressions.

² Swahili for Freedom or independence.

Representation of Women in Ngugi's Texts

“I am not fully known to myself, because part of what I am is the enigmatic traces of others”

– Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (2004)

Petals of Blood (POB) occupies a very significant place in Ngugi's oeuvre not only because it is the last novel that he wrote in English, but also because we witness a drastic shift in his treatment of narrative and characterization from his previous novels. Unlike there he weaves a string of major characters here, especially the proletariat represented by the men and their struggles against the exploitative government, but led and strengthened by strong-headed, powerful women like Nyakinyua and Wanja. Similarly, *Devil on the Cross (DOTC)* the first novel written after Ngugi's decision to write in Gikuyu, while still in prison, makes 'allegorical figures' out of its characters who make extraordinary mouthpieces conveying Ngugi's socialistic polemics, most blatantly voiced by two of his heroines, Wariinga and Wangari. With the passage of time and changing demographics of the new world, patriarchy too has tended to mould itself by transitioning from Private to Public patriarchy³, wherein the former is the space where women are excluded from the social life apart from that of the domain of the household while the second occupies the space where women are no longer excluded from the public sphere but rather dominated and subordinated within it openly (also called neo-patriarchy).

Both Wanja and Wariinga represent these phases of domination in the neo-colonial African society. Nyakinyua and Wangari act as reminders of the heritage of Africa's lost glory that they try to resurrect through the next generation of women, Wanja and Wariinga. Together they create a collective identity of African women, subjected to histories of humiliation but rising every time with an inherent strength of soul and spirit. Postcolonial feminist scholar, Chandra Mohanty draws attention as to how the first world strives to build a singularized and homogenized image of the Third world woman which “effectively subsumes the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world” (2003, 17). The main purpose for which Ngugi deploys the women in his novels is their romantic eclecticism. While Nyakinyua and Wangari embody the old-school patriotism which the

³Wallby, B.S., *Theorising Patriarchy*, Oxford: Blackwell. 1990.

African rebels nurtured in them during the Mau Mau rebellion, the contemporary ‘New Woman’⁴ represented by Wanja and Wariinga are quite open about their sexuality.

Both Wanja and Wariinga are much alike in that they become the sites for enacting cultural repressive practices which not only stigmatizes their physical conditions but also shroud their spiritual self into the shadows of darkness. Wariinga, from the beginning of *Devil on the Cross* is shown to be possessed by the Devil; the Devil of her consciousness constantly misleading her standards of beauty by portraying the inferiority of African women owing to the colour of their skins: “Wariinga was convinced that her appearance was the root cause of all her problems...what she hated most was her blackness” (Thiong’O, *DOTC* 11). Ngugi’s portrayal of the evils of self-consciousness almost in terms of Marlovian abstracted figures (in this case, the Devil) should not be missed here. We find Wariinga first in the novel, as a woman ashamed of her ancestral genes, fired from her job because she refused to the sexual advances of her employer, contemplating suicide. Seduced at a young age by Rich Old Man, which destroyed her bright career, Wariinga’s narrative is submerged under the master narratives of neo-colonial exploitation. Ngugi paints an extremely tenebrous picture of what he calls the repercussions of ‘collective auto-destruction’⁵, which ultimately makes Wariinga return to Illmorog in search of some mental peace. The journey that she undertakes becomes life altering for her, since she meets a group of people nurturing eclectic ideologies about the state crisis, notably Wangari.

Wangari epitomizes the woman-warrior who once fought heroically for the ‘love of our country, love of Kenya’ (Thiong’O, *DOTC* 40) during the Mau Mau rebellion. She is now neglected like trash in the new social system which has no place for revolutionary radicalism. She is the embodiment of combativeness when she describes the real African woman to be the one who adorns her body not with extravagant ornament but with bullets and guns to oppose the adversary. She emerges almost as an alter-ego of Wariinga, a sort of lost mirror which reflects an image of Wariinga with an indomitable spirit. Ngugi sketches Wariinga in an almost Christ-like figure where she has a biblical encounter with the ‘voice of the Devil’ that lures her into abandoning her individuality. She resists its temptations and emerges a soul cleansed of all its impurities. In a radical metamorphosis, towards the end we witness Wariinga renouncing her desire to be somebody ‘else’ which makes her look even more beautiful than before: “...she appeared to be the Child of Beauty, the mother of all beauties”

⁴“The period 1890 to 1930 saw the rise of the “New Woman”- educated, emancipated, independent, outspoken, feminist...” *Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, p. 136.

⁵ Term coined by Frantz Fanon in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* to explain the dark consequences of neocolonialism when the native foreman is directed against his own fellow victims by the imperial forces.

(ThiongÓ, *DOTC* 242) when she “dresses in the Gikuyu way”. Embracing her African identity, she exemplifies the greatest mode of resistance. In her later life she is shown to regain her lost confidence, pursuing her dream of becoming an engineer and a worker who has sworn to proceed with the national struggles initiated by the likes of leaders like Kimathi and Wangari. However, her first step towards her personal Uhuru comes in the gesture of Muturi, the workers’ leader, who hands over a gun to her instead of Gatuiria who’s standing just beside, before proceeding for the mass revolution. Her final act of brandishing the gun and using it to avenge the man who once tore her life to pieces (who is ironically her fiancé’s father! The father of her own dead child) and the emissaries of modern theft acknowledge her freedom from mental slavery and the penultimate crucifixion of her own devils: “Wariinga blazing a trail of defiance through the final pages of Devil on the Cross must leave her vacillating lover Gatuiria behind her”. (Boehmer 46) Simon Gikandi points out:

Wariinga’s project is to break out of the prison house of self-hate and victimization and to assert her identity outside the culture and economy of arrested decolonization. (Roos220)

In his memoir, *Detained: A writer’s Prison Diary*, Ngugi eulogizes Wariinga as the ‘heroine of labor’, the embodiment of indigenous values, something to be worthy of emulation in the African culture. He initiates Wariinga in a ravaged state of mind and body only to negate the traits that her name attributes to her i.e. “a woman in chains”. The burden of “deconstructing and displacing the Eurocentric premise” (Parry 86) rests on her shoulders in order to engender the lost discourses of historical chronology, for as Benita Parry quotes Edouard Glissant: “... history is not only absent for us. It is vertigo. The time that was never ours we must now possess” (Parry 86).

Presenting an absolute analogy to Wariinga is Wanja, the female protagonist of *Petals of Blood* whose story is taken up from where Wariinga’s tale ends. Wanja is an eternally ravaged soul whose life course throughout resembles the dilapidated and barren condition of Kenya. We must recall how Fredric Jameson urges us to read the “story of individual characters in third world literatures as national allegories of the embattled situation formerly colonized people find themselves in” (Mwangi 68). Ngugi deploys Wanja to do that job on his behalf where she becomes the ideological critique of the same system of colonialism of which she is herself a victim. She thus describes the darkness of the neo-colonial situation: “...you eat somebody or you are eaten. You sit on somebody or somebody sits on you” (291). Indeed, Wanja is one of the first rounded feminist characters in the history of African literature, unveiling diverse sides of her personality throughout the entire novel. Chidi Amuta

remarks: “Wanja is a typical Ngugi woman, élan vital combining great adaptive skills with dynamism, enterprise and forbearance” (Reddy 96). Similar to Wariinga, Wanja too had been prey to the oppressions of the capitalist Kimeria who thwarted her brilliant career and led her to the path of downfall where she had to murder her own child when abandoned by him. She ventures into the city only to witness the bleak world of corruption, treachery and exploitation and has to compulsively take up the job of a barmaid, and later a prostitute. Then she returns to her hometown.

It is interesting to note that the three chief male protagonists, Abdulla, Karega and Munira enter Illmorog with a broken soul, as exiles in search of their salvation to find solace from the sinning world out there. Wanja is the only one who returns to find a new direction for herself and rejuvenates the villagers to seek an optimistic perspective, whereas it is she who is shown to be the greatest sufferer among all of them. Her entrepreneurial skills are appreciable when she proposes to re-open Abdulla’s bar and formulates strategies to increase the sale of the local drink, Thengéta, which is gradually petering out from the native tradition because of its replacement by beer. The competitive marketing strategies regarding the sale of beer, which symbolizes foreign invasion of the native beverage, Thengeta is a remarkable indicator of what the consumerist business does to indigenous productions. All this and many more efforts on her part don’t yield a positive result only due to the heteronormative convention of deducing a woman’s character by her physical chastity.

Wanja voices Ngugi’s radical ideals and that this voice of the author should be through the character of a prostitute is a well-carved strategy. Even in western literary theory the figure of the prostitute acts as an appealing figure capable of challenging the notions of traditional thinking, while staying outside the civil society. As LaPin informs:

Wives and mothers in literature were not the first women to realize the feminine potential unlocked by social change. For this part, male authors seized upon “free women” ...Prostitutes and courtesans openly challenged the established norms of sexual politics and roles. A degree of personal independence offset their marginal social position
(Roos115)

Thus when Munira demeans her by calling her a VIP (very important prostitute), Karega opposes it with his huge outburst: “we are all prostitutes, for in a world of grab and take, in a world built on the structures of inequality and injustice...we are all prostituted...why then a victim hurl insults at another victim?” (ThiongÓ, *POB* 240). Wanja whose name literally means ‘on the periphery’ uses her sexuality to turn her avengers against one another, thereby

formulating a consciousness of vengeance. She realizes the power of money in this degraded society, earns lot of it and uses them sometimes for developing the upcoming progeny like Joseph into honest citizens rooted in their own culture and other times to resist the devouring schemes of the government like that of saving her grandmother Nyakinyua's land from the clutches of the local MP. Ngugi equates Wanja's actions as propagating his own ideologies and he portrays her deliberately in the light of a true artist, a critic of the social condition and as a "metonym of the state of the disintegrating nation" (Mwangi70). Jennifer Evans (1983) very poignantly comments, locating Wanja in the broader framework of literary characterization that "it would be a mistake to see Wanja simply as an innocent victim. Her potential is wasted and she is exploited, but she also exploits others most obviously in running her own brothel" (Roos167). Wanja's final act of violence where she locks up her avengers into separate rooms and doesn't release them even when the brothel catches fire is in favour of her personal liberation, a ritual of almost ethnic cleansing on the lines of Fanonist violence. Towards the end, she becomes aware of the stirrings of life inside her body. That she should carry Abdulla's child, the representative of nationalist struggle during the Mau Mau, is only fair implying the future progeny to be a symbol of the pride and glory of the past and Wanja, a woman, its Creator or Life-giver.

Conclusion

The concept of the 'woman question' in the title, tracing its roots back to the Victorian era which mobilized discussions on the status and role of women in an industrialized technologically advancing society, has been deployed here to analyze how the African woman is represented by a contemporary male African writer, first and in the feminist epistemologies of postcolonial discourse, second. For this, ironically the author takes up two 'fallen women'⁶ as his protagonists and channelizes the issues of tradition, ethnic and racial purity, through them. At the same time these same women are degraded, oppressed and exploited in the contemporary society while being revered with hyperbolic adjectives like that of the 'mother of men', 'virgin Mary', 'epitome of past African glory' and so on. Ngugi fails to reconcile this stark polarization in a single human being and that is his greatest victory, for it leads him to emphasize the complexity of how the identity of a woman is never complete, "always in the process and constituted within representation", (Hall 111) as Stuart Hall (1990) articulates it.

⁶A 19th century Victorian trait of representing women on the basis of her chastity and sexual purity.

In fact Ngugi, through his representations of women, emphasizes the constant 'rewriting' of feminism, redefining the categories that define women as women. As Spivak's summation suggests, "the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman is inevitably consigned to being either misunderstood or misrepresented through the self-interest of those with the power to represent" (Bahri199). Both Wanja in *Petals* and Wariinga in *Devil* are ravaged by the blows of patriarchy since young age, only to rise back as the source that rejuvenates the morbidity of a society plagued by the repercussions of a neo-colonial structure. Elaborating Spivak's contention about how can the subaltern be represented, or should he/she really needs representation, we can conclude that though Wanja and Wariinga have their 'counter-sentence' and also the voice-consciousness to speak about themselves, their voices get doubly marginalized solely on the basis of their being 'gendered subalterns'.

Ngugi has been influenced immensely by Marxist philosophies and studies of historical specificity. His perspectives on the woman question too are informed by a tripartite complex network of class, gender and race. Unlike his past novels such as *A Grain of Wheat*, *Weep not Child* etc., women are not defined in terms of their relationships to men; but rather it is through women that he represents the deplorable state of capitalism in Kenya and its commoditisation of sexuality bestows them with the power to take charge of the sexual equations themselves. Male writers have been persistently attacked for stereotyping women in clichéd images of the innocent virgin or the devilish whore, all reflected through male desire. Frantz fanon recalls how French colonialists would intrude into their private domain, mostly occupied by women to gain control over the nation-state (Loomba 161) and he speaks about them as long as they are necessary to the national allegory. Feminist scholars like Elleke Boehmer (1991) finds issues with Ngugi investing Wariinga with "...an almost bionic power...an erected heroine (s) of immense if not impossible stature" (189). Nevertheless, Ngugi tries to break these accusations by transcending his heroines as more than just the 'archetypal mother', providing them with a human dimension rejecting the divine. He shapes his works in the form of parables and radical polemics in order to expose the hideous oppression of not only two specific women but the millions of indigenous African women who fall prey to the game of the 'hunter and the hunted' and are plunged into the discursive apparatus of the European gaze both outside and inside their cultures. A question might disturb us as to why does Ngugi, a male author puts women on the forefront relegating men into the background and begins recognizing the masculine authority to be subordinate to feminine agency in his later phases of authorship? The answer lies in the complex motives and passions that drive these women which the male characters significantly lack, that invite

Ngugi's attention. The women in his earlier novels come off as embodiments of African custom and traditions and culminate into the heroines of the two novels in context who refuse to be typecast into one specific category of Mother, Virgin or Whore and evolve as women who live on their own terms, not as symbolic entities, but rather as active human agents capable of invoking a revolution. Despite the stark gender discrepancies Ngugi continues to converge incompatible qualities into one single woman, thus creating ambiguous, paradoxical heroines that remain a path-breaking move in Anglophone African fiction.

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