

Cultural Revival and National Consciousness as Alternatives to
Corruption in the 21st century: A Study of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's
Petals of Blood and *Wizard of the Crow*

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Abstract

Literature is not necessarily history but it can be as it has the ability to forecast an unacceptable future by providing a model in fiction to construct that future. Literature, therefore, relates to history by being a product upon which it depends for its various constituents. Literature can take from the historical process of the past and the present to shape the future. This paper, therefore, examines the need for arousing cultural awareness through cultural a revival in an attempt to overcome the challenges of nationhood in the 21st century: a period that is bedeviled with corruption, insecurity, oppression, unemployment and neo-colonialism. The paper focuses on Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Petals of Blood* and *Wizard of the Crow* in which the author advocates for the resumption of the colonial struggle to tackle the present challenges in neo-colonial Africa. The paper examines the role of the artist as a historian and a nationalist in the midst of socio-cultural problems and explores Ngugi's treatment of the dominant themes of corruption, dictatorship and protest in the two novels as some of the prevailing problems of Africa in the 21st century that need to be tackled by all while exploring the need for cultural revival. It also makes recommendations.

Introduction

Literature is an imaginative commentary on human society which involves writing and reading books that try to mirror as well as analyse society and human experiences. To this end, a literary text is judged by the artistic organization and beautiful expressions employed by the artist to communicate meaning. It also involves the organization of the internal elements or structure of a text. A creative artist thus combines reality and imagination to address certain social issues in his

work. Literature as a discipline, therefore, reflects society by giving an insight into the world at large and by so doing, appreciates good traditional values and discourages bad ones.

Culture is the bedrock of development in any given society. It covers a wide range of activities and it is entrenched in the customs and traditional beliefs of the people. A healthy culture is therefore, devoid of corruption and exploitation and it combines with a sharp sense of relationships within the society to balance its weaknesses and strengths in the midst of a historic struggle to create a healthier future. Talking about a healthy culture, Ngugi (qtd in Cantalupo 6) asserts that “Cultures that change to reflect the ever-changing dynamics of internal relations and which maintain a balanced give and take with external relations are the ones that are healthy”.

Viewed from the above, cultures and societies do not and cannot grow alone. There is always a give and take but the “giving and taking” must ensure the retention of fundamental aspects in the culture and the rejection of retrogressive elements or values derived from foreign cultures.

One of the major hindrances to nationhood in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular today is insecurity occasioned by lack of unity, corruption, greed, ethnicity, etc. For any nation or country to achieve any meaningful development, there must be mutual understanding and unity. These are two elements that are missing in Nigeria, Africa, and most third world nations today. The achievement of mutual unity has become difficult especially in multi-cultural, multi-faceted and multi-ethnic societies like Nigeria. The Holy Bible illustrates this thus:

The lord said, They are one people with one language. This is only the beginning of what they will do! Now nothing they plan to do will be too difficult for them. Let us go down there and mix their language so that they won't understand each other (*Gen. 11:6-7*).

The above quotation there enforces the fact that our present diversity was occasioned by man's corrupt thoughts. It is also important to note that there is power and strength in diversity when such diversity is explored positively. This means that Nigeria and Africa can still integrate with positive thinking by extolling those aesthetic values that held society in check in the pre-colonial days.

In Africa today, however, many people think and act along ethnic and religious affiliations. It is difficult to find people thinking along national lines. This is the problem of nationhood in the 21st century.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this paper is Marxism. As a social and political theory, Marxism seeks to explain the course of human history and the structure of past, present and future societies. It provides a unifying and an integrating set of values for the prescription of the future. For this reason, there is a vital link between literature and history.

The artist as a historian, teacher and nationalist

The unfolding socio-political realities in Africa today have continued to form the central message in most contemporary African literary works. As social crusaders, the strength and power of their writings depend on how skillfully they deploy their style to depict the society in which they find themselves. Literature helps in the promotion of national art and culture and as a cultural experience; it plays an important role in character development of individuals and groups especially in a multi-cultural setting like Nigeria. Literature can take from the historical process of the past and present to construct the future. The artist could start from a dissatisfied present, peep into the past to see what it was like and make a selection from both the past and present to shape the future. This is geared towards the future betterment of society.

Ngugi Wa Thiongo stands out clearly as one African writer who always explores new ways of conscientising Africans through his numerous novels about the path they took to independence. He always teaches them to know that their present predicament lies with their leaders who have not charted any meaningful ideology for development long after independence. His major concern have been the peasants and workers in Africa who are the sole producers of the nation's wealth. In an interview with Dorn, Ngugi proudly claims that:

I am not as a Kenyan ashamed of speaking and writing about the peasants and workers who have built Kenya and who, through their blood and

sweat have written a history of grandeur and dignity and cultural domination, a history of which we should be proud (www.sfsu.edu/).

The creative artist therefore, concerns himself with how his target audience receives his message. Consequently, he uses his imaginative art to palliate his intention on the surface value and thus conveniently criticizes, instructs, educates and also entertains. He is a historian and an artist who chronicles his people's past as he projects into the future. Such a projection does not fail to embody experiences that are already lived or ongoing in his society. The essence of literature is to effect a functional change in society. To this end, Ngugi tries at all times to re-enact the history of the Kenyan people's struggle by extolling their heroic achievements and those of Africa in general in the wake of colonialism and the neo-colonial era. Dorn affirms this commitment thus:

One African writer with an explicit desire to "end the whole thing" is Kenyan (Gikuyu) writer, Ngugi Wa Thiongo. Through his numerous plays, essays and novels, Ngugi has constantly positioned himself as an advocate for the ordinary peasants and workers of Kenya, and more generally, Africa (www.rumuki.com).

The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle-the oppressed and the oppressor who are in constant opposition to one another, a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the classes. Such struggle is what one finds in almost all of Ngugi's literary works. He gives an account of this in history, showing how each of these contending classes emerged at the decisive moment when the Kenyan people reacted to foreign invasion. Thus, the Mau-Mau is seen as the culmination of the previous struggle waged by other resistance heroes in Kenya. Consequently, one role African literature has continued to play is that of mapping out unique political and cultural consciousness as part of a larger project of liberating Africa from the harsh conditions and realities created by imperialism and neo-colonialism.

African novelists respond with a certain urgency to the needs not only to decolonize the minds of the citizenry but also to expose and condemn the subtle and indigenized forms which oppressive power has taken in the post-colonial era in Africa. This conforms to Simatei's assertion that:

The novelist's relevance to the society is attained through a conscious intervention in the unfolding of history; an intervention which, as a kind of artistic mission, is already over-determined by the inhuman politics of both colonial and post-colonial epoch. (10)

From the above statement therefore, literature is an important tool for cultural revival in the formulation of national consciousness geared towards a virile nation by Africans and other developing countries in the 21st century. It is also important to note that the specific historical realities and conditions that dictate the writer's responses may differ from place to place. For this reason, Ngugi's tone is certainly dictated by the collapse of the dreams of independence in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa, an experience which is considered as a betrayal of the masses who sacrificed a lot to see an Africa ruled by Africans. His reactions and criticisms are thus directed at the immediate forces shaping these events – the ruling (political) class. Rushdie affirms this that, "Writers and politicians are constant rivals. Both groups try to make the world in their images: they fight for the same territory. And the novel is one way of denying the official politician's version of truth". ((140)

In this regard, *Petals of Blood* and *Wizard of the Crow* are two novels through which Ngugi attempts to rival the politicians' version of truth and create national consciousness for virile nations in Africa in the 21st century.

Corruption and Protest in the Two Novels

Ngugi, like many other African novelists, has responded to the painful realities that have continued to undermine Africa's growth and attainment of national harmony in recent times. These writers are determined to expose and concerned with opening up the corruption, greed and incompetence of African leaders and the elite political class. These confrontations are necessary in moulding the attitudes of the masses for a constant struggle for self-assertion.

Even though corruption, dictatorship, and protest are three different themes, they will be treated together because of their interrelatedness. This is especially important because literature is a viable instrument for curbing corruption and creating or reviving those cultural values that held society together before the advent of colonization.

The word “corruption” has come to mean different things to different people. To some, it means manipulating the potential of one’s social standing to gain personal or collective advantage at the expense of others. To others, corruption means the violation of some existing order or social norms of a community. Other people relate the term to taking a bribe, stealing public resources or simply, dishonest behaviour. Hornby defines corruption as “dishonest or illegal behaviour, especially of people in authority” (261). Corruption has become an issue of great concern because of its atrocious effects on modern society. It has engulfed the political, social, economic, religious, cultural and moral spheres in the lives of people. In Africa, it has been with leaders since the colonial period. Ngugi emphatically stresses this because to him, pre-colonial Africa was a sincere, peaceful and harmonious society where everyone was his brother’s keeper, evenings were characterized by story-telling around the fireplace where the elders told stories to the younger ones who later retold such to their peers.

Ngugi examines and laments the distortions caused by colonialism and goes down memory-lane before colonialism:

And at harvest-time they would gather in groups according to ages, and dance from village to village, spilling into Ilmorog plains hymning praises to their founders. 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 the blood of unsuspecting toilers (*Petals* 120).

Suddenly, the vultures come in the name of colonialism with the police and the church to disrupt the hitherto peaceful co-existing society.

A critical study of Ngugi’s novels reveals five major influences. They are literary Marxism, biblical typology which is closely aligned with the Gikuyu cosmology, social reality and experiences of the Kenyan people, gender complementarity and cultural nationalism. Viewed from this angle, one can better understand Ngugi’s stance as well as appreciate his use of typical symbols which sometimes conflict when considered on the surface.

Petals of Blood opens with the arrest and detention of the four protagonists, Munira, the village headmaster, Karega, the trade unionist, Wanja, the prostitute and matron of a brothel and Abdullah, the Mau-Mau fighter, now a seller of oranges and sheep skin. They are suspects in the murder of the three directors of Theng’eta brewery. As it is common with neo-colonial Africa, the press is also

bought over and “The „Daily Mouthpiece” News Paper carries the caption, “MZIGO, CHUI, KIMERIA MURDERED” (4). The paper goes on to shower accolades on the three Directors:

... It is believed that they were lured into a house where they were set on by thugs. The three will be an irreplaceable loss to Ilmorog. They built Ilmorog from a tiny nineteenth century village reminiscent of the day of Krapf and Rebman into a modern industrial town that even generations born after Gagarin and Armstrong will be proud to visit ...etc ... etc .. Kimeria and Chui were prominent founding fathers of KCO ... etc ... etc ... (5)

The paper fails to highlight the fact that those three people, held as models for new Kenya, are actually betrayers and exploiters who align with the colonialists and betray their people during the struggle. It is those of them who stay aloof that have come to enjoy the fruits of the struggle. Kimeria impregnated Wanja in her primary school days and drove her into prostitution and also raped her during the mass trek to the city to meet their member of parliament (M.P) ,Nderi Wa Reira. He also betrayed Karega’s brother, (Ndinguri), to the police as a Mau-Mau. Chui, who once led a strike in Siriana Mission School against European leadership also expelled Munira and Karega for leading strikes when he became the Principal. It is Mzigo who acquires the sole right to Theng’eta and the building belonging to Wanja and Abdullah, thereby pushing them out of business. It is here that the reader is led gradually into Ngugi’s controlling voice that those who are being questioned are not the real criminals in the society. The police should rather go deeper into the lives of the common people to find out what is going on or risk inverted justice which is enacted through the investigation. This is portrayed in the confrontation between the police and the workers at the arrest of Karega (*Petals* 4).

This is typical of what one finds in neo-colonial states of Africa where corruption, alienation, greed, sychophancy and exploitation are the order of the day. Ngugi holds that the sad issues of corruption and individualism in Africa today have their roots in colonialism because in the past, Africa had a way of instilling fear and discipline in her people. Anybody vested with community responsibility had a role to play to preserve his name, that of his family, his community, and that of his age grade at all times. This is because Africa lived a communal life where everyone

was his brother's keeper. This instilled discipline and morality in every one. He states this thus: "In the past, before colonialism, we had a system of age-grade, of extended families, of sub-clans and clans. In those day, we had many people's organizations. We had Ujamaa Wa Mwafrika, for example in English, African Socialism". (*Devil* 67)

The above statement reveals that pre-colonial Africa had a well organized system of administration for checking and punishing offenders. This is one thing that is missing today that makes political office holders behave as if they are demi-gods.

It is against such behaviours that Ngugi advocates protest even if it is a violent one. He (qtd in Nwankwo 8) supports this claim: "Violence in order to change an intolerable, unjust social order is not savagery, it purifies man. Violence to protect and preserve an unjust oppressive social order is criminal and diminishes man." This violent confrontation is echoed in *Petals of Blood*, between the police and the workers (4).

Wizard of the Crow which is Ngugi's most recent novel treats the same issue of corruption, (plus) dictatorship and protest. Here, the Ruler of the Free Republic of Aburiria wastes public funds on useless projects that have no direct bearing on the people, while majority of the nation's citizens wallow in poverty, are unemployed and lack basic social amenities. He makes himself a semi-god by building a project called "Marching to Heaven" in order to make himself equal to God. It is here too that Ngugi encourages the poor masses to revive those cultural and historical heroic legacies of the struggle against colonialism in order to impact on the present situation.

Under the leadership of Kamiti (The Wizard) and Nyawira, the two stage a co-ordinated resistance to destabilize the leader who is sick with an unusual kind of ailment but does not want to leave power. This is a common trend in neocolonial Africa. These are the kind of people that prevent Africa from attaining meaningful development in the 21st century.

Ngugi's satirical presentation here corresponds to that kind of protest staged in *Petals of Blood*. The people are able to revive those cultural values that bound society together in the pre-colonial era against the colonialists. Ngugi's desire is

for the Kenyans and Africans to apply those struggles waged against the invaders against present day black African ruling class.

The ruler of Aburiria has been in power for so long that he has forgotten when his reign started:

His rule had no beginning and no end: and judging from the facts, one may well believe the claim. Children have been born and given birth to others and those others to others and so on, and his rule had survived all the generations. So that when some people heard that before him there had been a first ruler ... they would simply shake their heads in disbelief saying, no, no those are just tales of a day dreamer: Aburiria had never had another and would never have another ruler, because had not this man's reign began before the world begun and would end after the world had ended? (5-6)

Kamiti and Nyawira find themselves allied together in opposition to the ruler's despotic quest for personal glorification at the expense of the wellbeing of the nation's citizens. This quest is represented by the ruler's attempt to secure a loan from Global Bank to build the world's tallest building, a monument of the ruler called "Marching to Heaven" in the midst of hunger, poverty and unemployment. This is played out in this comic scene during one of the ruler's public appearances.

A woman stood up: I am Nyawira, she said. Hardly had the eyes of the people turned to her than a man stood up and said, I am Nyawira: he was followed by every other woman and man until the entire assembly proclaimed itself Nyawira ... One woman started shouting: How many tribes are there? Others replied two, producers and parasites. (688)

This portrays Ngugi's constant reminder of his readers about the kind of struggle and resistance the Kenyans of Africa exhibited in the wake of insensitive leadership policies by African elites. Such policies up till today create a dividing line between the rich (political class) and the poor (peasants).

Ngugi, in *Petals of Blood*, plays out this resistance and protest in the encounter between the people of Ilmorog and their M.P, Nderi Wa Reira during the encounter in the city:

Somebody in the crowd shouted: these are the people who are misusing our freedom ... suddenly, a stone flew and hit Nderi on the nose. This was followed by a hailstorm of orange peels, stones, sticks anything. For a few seconds, Nderi tried to maintain his dignity and ignore the

miscellaneous missiles which flew about him. Then a bit of mud hit him on the mouth. It was too late to make a dignified exit. He suddenly took to his heels ... with a few pursuing him and shouting Mshike! Mshike! Huyuu. (182)

He recreates this spirit of resistance in *Wizard of the Crow* in the calculated attempts by Nyawira's movement for the voice of the people in making sure that they disrupt any gathering organized by the ruler to glorify himself. It is illustrative of the people's fighting spirit in the wake of provocation:

He stopped, for suddenly near the centre of the multitude issued a bloodcurdling scream. A snake! A snake! Came the cry taken up by others. Soon there was pandemonium. People shouted and shouted in every direction to escape the unseen snake by many ... The head of the secret police woke up from a stupor and whispered to the ruler. This might be the beginning of a coup d'état and within seconds, the ruler was on his way to State House ... (22)

Ngugi has created stereotypes in Africa's brand of dictatorship in the novel from which other dictators could be viewed and from which he advocates a collective solution by people of all ages. He always tries to re-create the heroic struggle of the Kenyan people. Ngugi feels that as the tentacles of colonial oppression still exist, the down-trodden must rise to the challenges of the time. Cook and Okenimpke attest to this fact:

Ngugi is a man who identifies himself unequivocally with a progressive and radical thought concerning all the pressing issues of his time and who eagerly deploys every means at his disposal to further the views and policies that he advocates (266)

Viewed from the Marxist point of view, it is important that a revisitation of history has to be made in order to raise national consciousness especially in Africa where corruption and oppression by leaders are common phenomena.

The Need for Cultural Revival

The reason why Nigeria, for example, is where she is today is because most of her political leaders are full of mischief, betrayal, corruption and deceit, among other vices. Most of the politicians shaping the future of Nigeria today are those

who were found wanting or indicted at one point in time in the history of this nation. Until Nigerians tell themselves the truth and correct the distorted image of Africa and the African psyche in western culture, meaningful development will continue to elude her. Nigerians and Africans in general need to remember that they had a culture before the advent of colonialism which was only eroded and distorted by the whiteman. Africa needs to go back to her roots and examine how they generated and managed their wealth instead of the hunger for western values. This has to be inculcated into the mind of everyone for a harmonious relationship among the various tribes and nationalities.

The younger generations especially need to be educated to aspire for unity and rise up against the shackles of imperialism. It is only when human security is guaranteed that there will be progress. Africa's culture took care of all these issues in the past. It is this culture that needs to be revived. Ile argues that we must re-engineer our values to evolve a culture that aspires for the ideal in the 21st century. He puts it this way:

In the 21st century, the definition of culture should go beyond mere beliefs, customs, traditions etc. However, if societies are driven by all these, why do our values, beliefs, ideas and customs not stop us from hate, evil, prejudices, discrimination based on ethnicity, corrupt practices, religious and racial discrimination? (193)

For any meaningful development towards a harmonious nationhood in the 21st century, a relationship with history has to be made through literature to revive those internal dynamics that held society together in the old days. According to Ogude, "This struggle crystallised itself in the Mau-Mau anti-colonial war, a struggle which should continue to improve new resolves for freedom and unity in Kenya's post-independence period" (9). This includes the entire African continent in general.

Conclusion

Literature is a rich treasure house of healthy cultural and moral values that Africa and her citizenry will tap from in order to understand one another and live in peace to chart a collective struggle against corruption, neo-colonialism and hunger for western values and then create a moral and just society in the 21st century. A

society where personalities will be recognized not because of their ability to wield oppressive powers but for what achievement one has attained that bears a direct benefit to society and humanity.

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