

Drama of Post colonialism in select works of Ngugi wa Thiongo

Dr. Mamta Roy¹, Mr. Deepak Kumar²

^{1,2}Guru Kashi University, Talwandi Sabo

The reader who wants to examine Ngugi's literary and critical works in their historical and cultural context has several options: they can read them as specific commentaries on the African experience as it emerges from colonial dominance and moves into the theatre of independence and postcoloniality, for example. These works might be viewed from the author's ideological standpoint, as expressed in his essays and social critiques. Alternatively, one may see Ngugi's main works as a sequence of narrative experiments, experiments motivated by the author's search for an acceptable style for depicting a more complicated social structure. Indeed, his books and plays might be understood as attempts to come to terms with a Gikuyu culture seeking to remake itself in the face of British colonialism's challenges and potential as it establishes hegemony over the people of Central Kenya.

Key words: Gikuyu, colonialism, decolonization

One of Ngugi's early observations on the delicate relationship between African authors and their past is a good place to start: "A feeling of the past haunts the author. His work is frequently an attempt to make sense of 'what has been,' a quest to delicately capture his interaction with history, his people's past." (p.47 in *Homecoming*) African authors, according to Ngugi, are tormented by their history merely because the historical narratives they assumed would make their experiences more understandable have instead presented them with the opacity of the past. The notion that fiction may be a conduit for knowledge and a method of addressing the past, on the other hand, puts into question the accuracy and impartiality of the history that fiction is tasked with conveying.

Ngugi's initial attempt to address this issue is to situate himself at the intersection of history (context) and his works (text). Examining three autobiographical instances in which Ngugi shows the writing self as the mediator of situations and texts will help us better understand

this juncture. One of Ngugi's early attempts to tie his autobiography to history and the contradictory claims it puts on the writing self may be found here. The conflict between the peasant and the settler appeals to Ngugi's imagination because it serves as a compelling metaphor for the colonizer's and colonized's historical struggle. In fact, this battle becomes the key to comprehending Kenya's colonial and postwar history.

Ngugi identifies with the dispossessed on their way to exile precisely because their situation mirrors that of his own family; indeed, the scene of deprivation is vividly remembered nearly two decades later because of its powerful emotion of loss, an emotion that readers will recognise as essential to the form and meaning of Ngugi's early novels. Second, because of its deep roots in Gikuyu nationalist songs and Christian hymns (*nyimbo*), songs whose sorrowful melodies simultaneously evoke the loss of the original country and the prophetic time of return and restoration, the discourse of emotions is crucial to Ngugi's storytelling technique. Finally, the incident Ngugi observed as a youngster was a big historical event: the peasants he saw in a column of lorries were Gikuyu squatters evicted from the Olenguruone community on their way to forced exile in the semi-desert terrain of Yatta in Eastern Kenya.

If Ngugi is writing about a defining moment in his political culture that is a key driver of his attachment to it, the most obvious interpretation is that Ngugi is more interested in the images formed by history than in the event itself. However, this explanation fails to explain for Ngugi's omission of the specific historical event, since, as the remainder of the article reveals, Ngugi's quest is for the sorts of histories that the colonial library suppresses: "Back then, the music I heard as a youngster talked of the past and the future." I was completely ignorant that I was in a colonial context." (*Homecoming*, p.45) As in many of his early works, Ngugi is caught between two opposing texts: a Gikuyu song advocating national restoration and a colonial history aiming to repress such themes. While Ngugi's sympathies were always with the nationalists, he fought for years to find the correct approach for showing colonialism's history through the eyes of its victims. Of course, one would ask why Ngugi tries to explain what appears to be self-evident events, especially when he wrote the preface to *Secret Lives* in 1975. Despite the fact that Marxism provided Ngugi with a tool for understanding postcolonial culture, it was unable to account for, or even give meaning to, historical events that the author had personally witnessed,

experiences that, as he noted in the passage cited above, resurfaced in his mind whenever he attempted to write about the past. Indeed, Kenya's independence had strained the writer's relationship with the past for an unexpected reason: the ruling class was busily rewriting "Mau Mau" and the state of emergency to explain its position.

But there's another reason why Ngugi frames his writing career as a never-ending struggle to understand himself in a colonial and postcolonial world defined by tainted histories: the astute reader can't help but notice the gap between him and the past, even as the novelist draws on his own subjective experiences to imbue his version of the past with moral authority. Ngugi writes as someone who vividly remembers the recent African past, yet he does not appear to be connected to it other than via memory and, ultimately, literary depiction. If Ngugi's art appears to be driven by a deep need for the historical, it is because history, even history of events observed directly, appears to be obliterated by the tales intended to convey it. This is due to two factors: first, until his works were published, the events that Ngugi considers fundamental to his understanding of Kenyan history (land alienation, colonial terror, and nationalist resistance, or "Mau Mau") were considered absences, voids, or silences. Second, because he was a student at a privileged colonial school and university institution at the time, Ngugi was never there when the incidents he describes. Due of his family and social standing, he was a part of history's drama, but he was cut off from it because of his colonial education.

As in the other autobiographical experiences examined above, the drama of colonial tensions cuts numerous ways here: The colonial narrative (Biggies' Adventures) aims to instil in African students an unthinking connection with Englishness; nevertheless, this identification can only be attained by ignoring one's social and historical background, and even betraying family at odds with British colonisation. Despite the fact that nationalists have taken up arms against colonial administration and rule, and by extension, Englishness culture, they find time to welcome the author's arrival in Kenya's colonial bastion.

The goal is to show how Ngugi perceives his own relationship to Kenya's defining periods of colonialism and postcolonialism as related to bigger ideological concerns, rather of portraying his personal engagement in his texts and situations as entirely subjective or perpetually self-reflective. In his endeavour to understand himself, Ngugi tells stories in which

In this consideration with the land and the values it endorses, we can see another crucial drama of contradictions in Ngugi's conception of literary production: on the one hand, he characterises literature as a collective enterprise that is affected by a community's wrestling with its environment, and he sees the writer as a person defined by his or her engagement with this community's interests; on the other hand, he seems to want art to maintain a certain freedom.

While much has been written about these political and societal challenges and how they emerge in Ngugi's stories, less has been written about the aesthetic aspect of these themes. As Terry Eagleton has argued in a different context, the justification for this separation of aesthetic and political forms arises from the indefinite nature of aesthetic forms and their traditional relationship with historical notions such as universality and autonomy. Nonetheless, the aesthetic is one of the most important points of entry into the issues that, according to Eagleton, "are at the heart of the middle classes' struggle for political hegemony" and are inextricably linked "to the construction of the dominant ideological forms of modern class-society, and indeed to a whole new form of human subjectivity appropriate to that social order." One of Ngugi's greatest achievements as a writer is his clear understanding of the complex link between aesthetics and politics in modern society.

However, because the aesthetic is so important to the establishment of the type of bourgeois hegemony Ngugi condemns, it must be included as a counter-agent. To quote Eagleton once more, the aesthetic "provides an immensely strong challenge and alternative to these dominant ideological forms, and is in this way an intrinsically contradictory phenomenon." The very contradictoriness of the aesthetic or imaginative may be seen in Ngugi's persistent search for forms that might bridge three sets of gaps that occur every time he seeks to utilise his novels or plays to make sense of the recent history of colonial and postcolonial Kenya.

Work cited

Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature and Politics*, Westport, CT: Lawrence and Hill, 1972, p. 45 & 47.

Kanogo, Tabitha. *Squatters and the Roots of Mau Mau*, London: James Currey, 1987.

Furedi, Frank. *The Mau Mau War in Perspective*, London: James Currey, 1989.

Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *Secret Lives*, London: Heinemann, 1975.

Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, London: James Currey, 1993.

Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971.

Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *Writers in Politics*. London: Heinemann, 1981.

Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.