

Empowering the Marginalized

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Abstract: Writers of Post-Colonial nations cannot afford to indulge in imaginative literature but are bound to be socially conscious. Therefore their focus is on contemporary social injustices such as marginalization, corruption and exploitation. Ngugi Wa Thiongo is a Kenyan writer who pioneered the concept of empowerment of the marginalized through his works. In novel after novel he tried to explain the Kenyans about post colonial exploitation and goaded them towards rebellion as he seems to suggest that it is the only option left for the exploited. His attention is on the three marginalized groups – women, workers and peasants. He ardently believed that social change is possible through an awakening of these three categories. The present paper attempts to focus on the portrayal of women characters in the novels of Ngugi and his hope and anticipation for their empowerment.

Keywords: Post-Colonialism, Exploitation, Marginalization, Empowerment.

Shakespeare has no heros, he has only heroines -John Ruskin

A brilliant and appropriate statement of Ruskin which may well be applied to the women characters of Ngugi Wa Thiongo, the Kenyan writer who pioneered and emphasized the necessity of women empowerment much before the women writers of African countries. In the five major novels of Ngugi, a progressive and positive dynamics in the status of women in the post-colonial Kenyan society is anticipated and presented. An observation of the state and status of women in the pre-colonial African society leads to a nostalgic longing for the golden past where women were empowered with specific rights, duties and responsibilities. They enjoyed freedom at domestic, economic and commercial fronts. Though the women were victims of patriarchal hegemony and polygamy the right to walk out of an unhappy marriage was a boon given to them. With the onset of colonialism new avenues were opened for the colonized in education, business and employment. Women too were given equal opportunities. At the same time it appears as if the traditional values and respect towards women are relegated to the background. The impact of western education and value system seems to have worsened the situation of women in the post-colonial African societies. The burden of re-establishing the lost status of women by combating the exploitation has become the inevitable task of the women writers of post-colonial Africa. Ngugi Wa Thiongo is the Kenyan male writer who ardently supported empowerment of the marginalized groups viz. Workers, peasants and women. He went a step ahead in his fictional work to show that revolution seems to be the only way to regain

the lost status and to establish an identity for themselves.

The present paper focuses on the women characters of Ngugi who are strong and act as catalysts in transforming and paving way to the male characters/protagonists. In his five novels women are presented in different roles such as daughters, lovers, mothers, wives and mistresses. Be it any role, the Ngugi woman is presented as an embodiment of patience, resilience, courage and determination. They are the potential force behind the men and appear to be trend-setters. From time immemorial it is accepted that women are endowed with special psychological strength to face the odds of life and to console and guide men in difficulties. Ngugi women are no exception. In Ngugi's first novel *The River Between* it is Muthoni, daughter of Joshua, a staunch convert and head of one village, who attempts to reconcile the Christians and the traditionalists. Being a baptized Christian she questions: 'Father and mother are circumcised. But why are they stopping me?' (TRB p.51) It is she who shows the path of reconciliation of both traditions to the hero Waiyaki but in the process gets circumcised and dies. Her death makes Waiyaki think "Is she paying for the disobedience?" (p.56) The traditionalists and the Christians assume that Muthoni deserves such punishment as she betrayed both the religions. Muthoni's death motivates Waiyaki to define his purpose – reconciliation between traditional and Christian beliefs. When the missionary school bars the students who adhere to the tradition he opens a school called 'Marioshini' and achieves fame as "The Teacher", "The Saviour", "Black Messiah". He loves Muthoni's sister Nyambura who also strives for reconciliation of both the religions. Waiyaki remains in a state of confusion and fails to choose a definite path. He firmly believes that education is the be all and end all for their problems whereas it seems to be one of the means. It appears that his tragedy is caused because of his own weakness – his indecisiveness, self-doubt, inability to propel his people, the hero image (saviour image). On the other hand Nyambura seems steadfast in all her beliefs. For her life and religion has no meaning without Waiyaki. "Waiyaki loves Nyambura, but his clumsiness exposes her to grave dangers. While Waiyaki fails and fumbles, Nyambura remains undefeated". (Cook and Okenimpke p.46) While Muthoni tries to practice dual conviction Nyambura works for reconciliation and motivates the hero to follow her path.

In the second novel of Ngugi, *Weep Not Child*, it is the mother who comforts, convinces and consoles the young hero Njoroge. Though the novel has the Mau Mau Movement of the 1950s as the backdrop it focuses on the relevance of education to the young Africans to fight against the colonizer. Njoroge grows from boyhood to adolescence in such a tensed atmosphere. Njoroge's half brothers Boro and Kori participated in the Second World War and another half brother Mwangi died in the war. Boro, who appears to be a rebel, also supports Njoroge's education. The entire family thinks that Njoroge's education is the only remedy for their problems. Declaration of emergency to suppress the Mau Mau Movement and the consequent violence disturb Njoroge's education. In such a serious situation Njoroge tries to escape from reality into an utopian world in the guise of education. Just like Waiyaki Njoroge

imagines himself as the saviour and redeemer of his people. But the western education leads Njoroge to self centredness and selfishness. It is Mwhaki, friend of Njoroge, who points out the immaturity of Njoroge. Though Njoroge's attitude seems to be optimistic regarding the future of their country Mwhaki thinks that it is his escape from reality. Later when his brother kills a white settler and a local convert leader Njoroge's father takes the crime on him and faces punishment. His father's death leads Njoroge to get expelled from school to become a worker in an Indian shop – both humiliating experiences. He plans to flee to Uganda to escape from responsibilities and proposes to Mwhaki to come with him. Mwhaki tells him: "... we have a duty. Our duty to other people is our biggest responsibility as grown men and women." (WNC p.151) There is a maturity in her attitude which Njoroge lacks. He attempts to commit suicide by hanging himself but his courage fails him as his mother comes to save him. The novel begins with Njoroge's mother asking him and encouraging him to go to school and ends with Njoroge's mother saving him from the disappointment and disillusionment as a result of his incomplete western education. Njoroge's mother is the woman who saves his life and this makes him realize his guilt and think of himself as a coward. This 'possible rehabilitation' (Cook & Okenimpke p.67) of Njoroge can be attributed to his mothers. His act of opening the door of their house for his mothers indicates opening into a better future.

In the third novel *A Grain of Wheat*, it is Mumbi, wife of the hero, who is portrayed as the embodiment of womanhood. The name Mumbi itself is the name of the Kenyan first mother, African counterpart of Eve. In this novel Ngugi effectively portrays the influence of emergency in Kenya on individual psyche. The novel is about Kenyan war of Independence with particular reference to four characters – their personal and social relationships. The epigraph of the book is from Corinthians (I.15:36) which states that if Kenyans want independence they had to sow seeds which should die in order to bear grain. The novel is almost a sequel to *Weep Not Child*, with more mature characters, more mature narrative technique such as flashbacks, reflectors, point of view and cross chronology. Ngugi tries to present the mental condition of the four characters – Mugo, Gikonyo, Mumbi and Karanja, their experiences with Kihika, a leader who was betrayed by one of the villagers. Kihika's fellowmen come to the village to punish the betrayer. Of the four major characters Mugo appears to be an introvert who believes in hard work and wants to be away from violence, conflict and Mau Mau movement. Ironically a day comes when Kihika makes him leader of the underground movement for independence in their village. He is in a conflict - if he follows Kihika the government will kill him, if he doesn't serve, Kihika will kill him. Thus Mugo takes the extreme step of betraying Kihika. Karanja is the most pathetically delineated character as he always tries to place himself above his fellow Africans. The means he chooses to achieve this is working for the whiteman as a betrayer and then as a homeguard. In the end he realises his guilt and repents, gains the reader's sympathy for not gaining Mumbi in the race. It is the women characters who show the way forward. Mumbi is the embodiment of womanhood with forgiveness, compassion, generosity and humanity.

She recognizes the heroism in man and also his frailty and fallibility. She forgives Mugo, murderer of her brother Kihika. Her love for Gikonyo gets consummated in marriage. Soon Gikonyo gets imprisoned, experiences psychological terror in the detention camps and bears the trauma with the hope of meeting Mumbi. He thinks of making a beautifully carved wedding stool for Mumbi when his mother refers to such stool. His confession to the authorities is because of his weakness but due to his strong love for Mumbi. He craves for release 'to see his Mumbi' and 'take up the thread of life where he had left it' (GOW p.130). But he is shocked to see Mumbi with Karanja's child on his return. Unable to digest the fact he gives up carpentry, moves away from Mumbi and becomes a petty trader. Both Gikonyo and Mumbi confess to Mugo. Mumbi's confession is pathetic and moving. When the men got imprisoned it is the women of the village who faced severe hardship, suffered from starvation. Reluctantly she accepts Karanja's help knowing his intention to seduce her. But when she listens to the news of Gikonyo's release after years of detention in the moment of extreme joy she succumbs to Karanja. This is the only guilt from which she suffers and which makes her human. Otherwise she is an angelic figure, as Peter Nazareth describes 'the archetypal woman.....Woman as romantic, faithful lover and mother.....perhaps it would be more correct to describe her as the spirit of Kenya; its beautiful and beautiful earth, ancient yet ever young; dark deep and mysterious; patient and long suffering, which inspite of being ill-used by unscrupulous adventures, has retained its goodness, fecundity and warmth. She exercises a wholesome influence on the other characters arousing them to a better knowledge of themselves.' (p.173) Gikonyo realizes Mumbi's troubles and accepts to establish their life together. Then Mumbi says "What has passed between us is too much to be passed over in a sentence. We need to talk, to open our hearts to one another...". (Gow p. 280) and departs. Gikonyo again thinks of carving a stool for Mumbi. The novel ends on an optimistic note as Wambui and Mumbi express the idea that the duty of Kenyans is to face the enemy with affumation. With stoic determination Mumbi says "We have got to live" | "Yes we have the village to build" | "And children to look after", finished Mumbi (p.275) Gikonyo's mother tells him, "But you like a foolish child, have never wanted to know what happened.... You are a man now. Read your own heart, and know yourself." (pp.200-201) It is again a woman – a mother who shows her son what manhood is. All the characters undergo suffering and attain self-knowledge towards the end.

Petals of Blood, the fourth novel of Ngugi was hailed by Nairobi Newspapers as a 'literary bombshell' where Ngugi portrays woman as a mistress turned bombshell due to the exploitation of the post-independent Kenyan leaders and politicians. The novel exposes "the nature of capitalism – insensitivity, callousness and insatiable ambition" (Cook and Okenimpke p.90) of the Kenyan bourgeoisie whose aim is to gain wealth and power. Ngugi depicts the transition of a traditional village, Ilmorog, into a modern town in post-independent Kenya. Along with it the lives of the masses including the four major characters get irrevocably metamorphosed. Munira, a teacher of Ilmorog primary

school, Abdulla, an active participant in the Mau Mau movement, Wanja, a young girl turned prostitute due to victimization and Karega, a representative of the oppressed poor are placed by Ngugi as the archetypes of exploitation belonging to both the old and the new Ilmorog. All four are suspected of the murder of three businessmen of new Ilmorog. Kimeria, Chui and Mzigo who in the words of newspaper actually built "Ilmorog from a tiny nineteenth-century village.....into a modern industrial town...". (PoB p.5) All the four characters realize that people like them have been betrayed and betrayers during freedom movement have become successful entrepreneurs. It is Wanja who preaches the philosophy of life in modern Kenya "You eat somebody or you are eaten; you sit on somebody or somebody sits on you." (PoB p.291) The positive and negative aspects of city life are presented simultaneously. It is the centre of opulence with tall buildings, huge houses, bright lights, smooth and wide roads. It also has centres to satisfy sensual needs where barmaids and prostitutes live without barest facilities. Wanja belongs to this category of whom Ngugi spoke in an interview "She is not a prostitute, not a straight girl, her salary not regulated but paid according to the whim of the employer. She is a member of the most ruthlessly exploited category of woman in Kenya." (Shrev Anita p.35) She belongs to the breed of Ngugi women – "brave and resilient, resourceful and determined." (Palmer p.160)

Wanja is deceived by Hawkins Kimeria, one of the betrayers for whom money is 'alpha and omega'. (Cook and Okenimpke p.92) Taking advantage of his friendship with Wanja's father he seduces Wanja when she was in school which throws her into prostitution. Within a span of five years she becomes the owner of a brothel house 'Sunshine Lodge' which is as famous as the Church in Ilmorog. She takes revenge on Kimeria by killing him. Towards the end it is indicated that Wanja conceives a child through Abdulla, who is regarded as the real hero. It is she who sums up the meaning of human life. "May be life was a series of false starts, which once discovered, called for more renewed efforts, at yet another beginning." (PoB pp.337-338) Wanja's grandmother Nyakinyua is another woman character who resists and fights against exploitation. The seed of rebellion among the workers and peasants against the black oppressors was sown by Nyakinyua, which was taken over by Karega. The onset of revolution is conveyed to the imprisoned Karega by a school girl. "The other workers ... are with you ..." | All the workers in Ilmorog and the unemployed will join us", (PoB p.343). In a bold voice she tells Karega "You will come back." (PoB p.344)

In *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi's fifth novel, a woman is the protagonist and dynamic centre with her courage, vitality and self-reliance. Set in Ilmorog and Nairobi, the novel exposes the state of affairs in post-independent Kenya as a realistic and fantastic blend and was a blockbuster success which was, Ngugi himself said, in *Decolonizing the Mind*, "read in families in buses.....in taxis.....in public bars" (p.83). By adopting various narrative techniques Ngugi portrays the plight of Wariinga in modern Kenya. He assumes the role of a prophet and critic to judge the life of Wariinga, who is introduced as a typist and secretary in an office in Nairobi. Wariinga was left in the care of her aunt

at the age of two when her parents were detained. When she was in class eight, her uncle sells her to a rich old man, representative of the capitalist sector. When Wariinga becomes pregnant he abandons her by saying "How could you possibly have conceived so soon if I were the only man who went with you?" (DOC p.146). Consoled and supported by her mother Wariinga continues her studies after giving birth to a baby. Though her dream of becoming an engineer is shattered she becomes a secretary-cum-typist in the champion construction company. Being an unmarried girl she is harassed by her boss to be his mistress. Her refusal throws her out of the job. Her boy friend abandons her by being her boss' mistress, her landlord forcibly drives her out of the house. A disillusioned and disappointed Wariinga decides to go back to her parents. On her way she loses consciousness and is saved by a young man, leader of Ilmorog student's Association. Wariinga, while narrating her life questions him "When will the kareendis (the exploited women) of modern Kenya wipe the tears from their faces? When will they ever discover laughter?" (DOC p.26) On her way home in the bus she meets a group of exploited class who express their hatred and disgust towards the imperialists/capitalists. Ngugi introduces a fantastic world to the readers in the form of a Devil's Feast where all the exploiters explain how they have been robbing their fellowmen. Wariinga gives up the idea of working as a typist and enters a polytechnic to do a mechanical engineering course of which, she used to dream about in her school days. For the first year she struggles and goes through a hard period while earning her living. She slowly undertakes typing of research papers and dissertations. During the third year of her course she manages to be a self employed mechanic at a garage. To defend herself physically she also attends karate and judo classes. Very soon she becomes one with the workers and devotes herself with self-confidence to achieve the goal chosen by her. It is through her character that Ngugi seems to suggest that achieving personal goals, in the long run, contributes to the development of nation. Wariinga retaliates forcefully to any comment or abuse about her sex:

"One day a man brought in his car for a check....but noticing Wariinga's beauty he started teasing her light-heartedly, and then touched her breasts...Wariinga turned like lightning, and in a twinkling of an eye, she has assaulted him with so many judo kicks and karate chops that for a time he saw stars." (DOC p.221)

Through these actions of Wariinga, Ngugi conveys that Wariinga represents the emergent classes in a new Kenya: She is a 'worker' and not an object of economic or sexual exploitation. However, as Trevor James points out 'Wariinga never develops as a character: She is a type that Ngugi hopes to create.....She represents an assertive and ruthless class struggle.' (p.58) Coming to her personal life Wariinga loves Gatuiria and they proposed to get married. As the plan to visit his parents, Wariinga is taken aback to know that his home town is Ngorika which figures in her mind as a nightmare. Troubled in mind, Wariinga leaves for Ngorika. As Wariinga and Gatuiria reached the house, things have been organised so that Gatuiria's father would be the first to receive his son's bride. As Wariinga enters the room, to her surprise she sees the rich old man from Ngorika, who is sitting on the high seat ready to receive her. Gatuiria's

father? Wambui's (her child) father. Realising that the man who had seduced her is the father of her fiancé Wariinga is shocked. But she refuses all the inducements of the old man to become his mistress. She refuses to abandon Gatuiria. She confidently declares: ...I shall save many other people, whose lives will not be ruined by words of honey and perfume' (DOC p.253) and shoots him down with the gun handed over to her by Muturi on that at the Devils Feast. In reply to Gatuiria's question she says: 'There kneels a jigger, a louse, a weevil, a flea, a bedbug. He is mistletoe, a parasite that lives on the trees of other people's lives.' (DOC p.254) On her way out of the house she shoots two other businessmen whom she saw in the cave, and Wariinga walked on, without once looking back. But she knew with all her heart that the hardest struggles of her life's journey lay ahead..... (DOC p.254) Thus Wariinga stands as the representative of the exploited and as an idealized figure of revolutionary womanhood but her individual triumph should not be assumed to be the victory of society. There are many more kareendis (exploited woman) who are still in the grip of people like the rich old man. A complete social change occurs only when women are recognized and respected. Through Wariinga Ngugi takes the opportunity to warn "the underestimation of women is indigenous." (Cook and Okenimpke p.130)

Ngugi feels that women are the agents of change in any society and it is also women who keep up the traditions of any country or society. They represent the mother figure as long as they are respected but once they are illtreated or exploited there is every chance of women becoming revolutionaries. In other words Ngugi seems to convey the idea that revolution must start from women, through the character of Wariinga. He simultaneously refers to the other marginalized groups, workers and peasants and goads them to rebel against their exploiters through the message 'know thyself.' Through his novels he suggests his aim that literature should serve the purpose of social awakening.

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