RESISTANCE AND BETRAYAL IN NGUGI'S PETALS OF BLOOD AND DEVIL ON THE CROSS IN THE CONTEXT OF NEO-COLONIALISM

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Abstract

The paper analyses the themes of resistance and betrayal in the last two novels by Ngugi by tracing the background of the resistance theory and examining the modes of resistance depicted in the texts. The onslaught of neo-colonialism is conceptualised in the light of betrayal by the African bourgeoisie to their community and country. Also its exploration is to be analysed not only in relation to repression but the reasons behind it. The issue of class is discussed in detail as the new means of oppression, while race was the initial mode of discrimination and hence colonisation, in context of Africa. The concept of neo-colonialism is also studied in comparison to the preceding colonial condition, in order to examine the changes and similarities in the ways of repression.

Keywords: African literature, betrayal, bourgeoisie, Gikuyu, Neo-colonialism, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Post colonialism, racial discrimination, resistance.

Petals of Blood is Ngugi’s fourth and last novel written in English while Devil on the Cross is the last and first novel written in Gikuyu, the native African language. In these two novels, Ngugi lays bare the neo-colonial exploitation by the African comprador class on the natives in terms of economic, political and educational means. Africa’s move towards self-government and independence is drawn ironically and realistically in these novels. The country had fought a long and bitter struggle against the colonial forces but now the challenge posed was to resist the devils acting as willing accomplices of the capitalist forces. As Ngugi says “first it has been external factor of foreign invasion, occupation and control but now the internal factor of collaboration with external threat…western slavery, slave trade under colonialism, now neo-colonialism…the storm repeats itself, in a more painful way under neo-colonialism” (Uwasomba, 96).

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Liberation is the outcome of resistance and Ngugi in his works stresses on the collective effort in resisting the oppression rather than individual one. This shows the influence of Fanon’s work *The Wretched of the Earth*, where he not only mentions about violent means of rebellion and resistance but also encourages for the collective struggle for freedom. Alan Kennedy in his essay “Marquez: Resistance, Rebellion and Reading” distinguishes between resistance and rebellion and states that resistance is the substitute for rebellion. In other words, resistance acts as a supplement for rebellion (Bhalla, 51). This may also be related to Hegel’s ‘master-slave’ dialectic, according to which the social element of human consciousness remains undiluted unless it gains approval from an external agency in order to survive. In other words, one’s consciousness is mediated through others and hence the power structures gain foothold among the masses. Likewise, rebellion through opposition ensures the existence of the oppressor and in the process the opposer becomes the opposable. In this sense the natives themselves become the oppressors who initially wanted to free their country from colonist forces now themselves have acquired the role of oppressor and hence become opposable.

In relation to the background of resistance theory which is about the resistance to an authority by an individual or a group, is also an aspect of political thought. In the early modern period of European history it was first practised by the protestant reformer, Martin Luther. He resisted against the traditional Roman Catholic Church which advocated the hierarchy of chain of being along with this, he rejected the clerical authority in context of religion. Hence, the dominant authority which is repressive in nature ought to be resisted as is the natural law, formulated by resistance against the colonial regime in the modern context. But Ngugi draws the attention towards the further colonisation in the form of neo-colonialists which is far more repressive and exploitative than the foreign colonisation. Resistance is one of Ngugi’s “progressive internationalisms” implicating Kenya’s long tradition of resistance through his works (*DtM.*, 52). He emphasises the international, even universal dimension of resistance as a collective means of redemption. Accordingly, Ngugi emphasises that when it is dealt with at the level of language and culture it subverts the conditioned colonial mind.

In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi analyses how Africa was colonised through dual means of controlled access to literature and writing. Firstly, the printing press authority allowed only religious and sociological works to be published debarring the works with any political theme. Secondly, the African mind was colonised through the education, as in the universities and institutions students read the foreign version of their culture and hence witnessed the fictional encounter with their own country. In *Homecoming*, he writes about the significance of teaching African languages, as a carrier of culture and identity.

*Petals of Blood* is written in the post-colonial times, when the neo-colonial regime had already been established. The four main protagonists- Munira, Abdulla, Wanja, and Karega who come to Illmorog to find an escape from ennui of their past lives and in turn they find themselves intertwined due to the Mau Mau rebellion. As Abdullah depicts the failure of the rebellion, Wanja suffers from the past horror associated with the same and Karega’s brother who is arrested due to betrayal by Kimeria experiences the onslaught of neo-colonial regime along with the modernisation of Illmorog. The title of the novel is significant as it witnesses the transformation of an innocent bean flower (Illmorog) to misused theng’eta
flower which is commodified (the now new modernised Illmorog) and results in fire and blood forming petals of blood. The four characters are like the petals of a flower conjoined by the common bud in the form of Illmorog, who later turn into fiery ones as all are interrogated for the murders of the capitalists in the novel.

Peter Nazareth relates the biographical relevance of Ngugi’s life to his thematic works. He explains that Ngugi as a student at Alliance high school and Makerere college was under the influence of colonialism and Christianity but when he was enrolled in the University of Leeds in 1960 he came under the influence of Fanon and Marx and found the means “to hit back at the white man” (121, Ibid.). As a result of which he not only favoured proletariats against growing economic exploitation of masses by post and neo-colonial state but also advocated the violent means of resistance. The Grain of Wheat (1967) ends at the beginning of neo-colonialism and the next novel Petals of Blood starts from the same. Hence from the former text onwards, Ngugi shows the working of Fanonist Marxist ideology. Likewise, Lisa Curtis observes that A Grain of Wheat stands apart from Ngugi’s “later novels in the way in which it universalises the human struggle for order and meaning in a changing world” (198, Ibid.). The past events of the African history of that of betrayal of the nation by the neo-colonists like Karanja in the novel determine the further struggle, in Walter Benjamin’s words “the fight for the oppressed past”. In his Concept of History, he stated that “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule”, and in the Kenyan context- the exceptional state of emergency, the Mau Mau war becomes the daily state of emergency of repressive neo-colonial regime (Benjamin,198).

Later, Ngugi subsequently renounced English and wrote his first Gikuyu novel Devil on the Cross, while detained in the Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. In an interview, Ngugi said that he was arrested when he wrote in gikuyu because it had larger impact and depicted the debilitating picture of current scenario of neo-colonialism to the natives, and was widely accessible. In Petals of Blood, the characters undertake journey from Illmorog to Nairobi (city) and in Devil on the Cross the characters travel from Nairobi to Illmorog only to discover the advanced stage of bourgeoisie colonisation. Both the novels can be juxtaposed with each other in relation to its common theme of neo-colonialism as they were first enslaved through racism by Europeans and later by class through native compradors.

In the early novels Ngugi wrote about how the Europeans colonised the Africans through education, economy and politics and in these specific two novels, he depicts the ingrained conditioning of colonialism in the form of neo-colonialism by the African middle class. Carol Sicherman in his essay quotes Murray Carlin who observes that the mental subversion on Ngugi and other fellows implanted by higher education system in late colonial East Africans was later subverted by him but some became its victims by internalising this and thus became “neo-colonialists” (12, Ibid.). In Petals of Blood, Chui, Nderi, Kimeria and Mzigo are the agents of imperialism. Chui, who was a rebel at Srijana School is lured by material and political power and heads the education sphere. While Mzigo uses the position of school inspector to enhance fortunes and Nderi misuses his position at the Parliament by smuggling stones and young women for foreign brothels. He is just interested in gaining votes by the people and not in providing measures. The religious sphere is governed by Rev. Jerrod Brown who heads the church but is a sham in belief and practice. Kimeria and Mzigo become
the directors of Theng’eta Breweries and Enterprises, which was earlier, run by Wanja and Abdullah on a small scale. One can place the appropriateness of the Marxist argument where capitalism turns value into exchange value. In other words, thenget’t’a, a community drink which was made with care was now commercialised being sold for profit. Palmer aptly says that “…of all African novels …Petals of Blood probably presents the most comprehensive analysis to date of the evils perpetrated in independent African society by Black imperialists and capitalists” (qtd. in Uwasomba, 98).

J.S Robson in his Dissertation titled Ngugi’s fight against colonialism and neo-colonialism: theme of betrayal maintains that in Petals of Blood, there is a conflict between resistance and betrayal and that the neo-colonial betrayal in the novel comes through gradual transformation of old Illmorog to a new one. The construction of banks, factories, commercial plants and other developments destroy the utopian traditional Illmorog. The destruction of mysterious spirit Mwathi by a giant bulldozer is the concrete symbol of annihilation of Illmorog by ravaging forces of modernisation. New Illmoroggets reconstructed according to the class, New Jerusalem for the downtrodden and Cape Town for the officials causing further division amongst the people (43, Ibid.). Moreover the alienation of Illmorog is also characterised by Trans African highway which is similar to Macondo’s change in Hundred Years of Solitude due to coming of technology and modernisation which paves way for international capitalism. Thereby, the idea of progression is favourable only when the intention behind it is noble and not that of exploitation which is similar to the idea of ‘white man’s burden’. Hunt Hawkins in his essay alludes to Karl Marx’ justification for imperialism and says that Marx was a proponent of Victorian ideas of progress and productivity, and supported imperialism, as it helped in the progress of static agrarian societies towards industrialism. (289, Ibid.). However, he was against the capitalist forces as it created urban proletariats. In context of the novel, it can be observed through Wanja’s move to prostitution, while Abdullah becomes a drunkard and Munira a fundamentalist Christian while Karega joins the trade union. The socio economic betrayal of old Illmorog by Kenyan government can be substantiated through the figure of Njeri who betrays his duties towards the people and instead blames the foreign exiles like Munira, Abdullah and Karega for the difficulties in Illmorog, promising instead to head delegation himself. Munira recalls “we went on a journey to the city to save Illmorog from drought .We brought back spiritual drought from the city” (PoB, 195). Part four of the novel completes the struggle of Illmorog. In Robson’s words, “the intervention of national bourgeoisie through figures of Kimeria, Chui, Mzigo and Nderi had accelerated the level of political struggle by integrating Illmorog into the infrastructure of neo-colonial state” (143).

In his essay “Multiculturalism or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism”, Slovej Zizek comments on the way in which self-censorship helps power to operate more efficiently. He states that,

the power of edifice itself is split from within, that is, to reproduce itself and contain the Other, it has to rely on an inherent excess which grounds it. To put it in the Hegelian terms of speculative identity, Power is always-already its own transgression, if it is to function, it has to rely on a kind of obscene supplement—the gesture ofself-censorship is co-substantial with the exercise of power (34).
This can be analysed by the power structure depicted in Devil on the Cross, where the worst form of neo-colonialism is sketched satirically. The thieves in the cave at Illmorog boast about their achievements in robbing their own people and becoming rich. The living effect of capitalism is personified through the figure of Devil in the novel. Furthermore, in a meeting which is organised to meet the international robbers includes the competition among the thieves (neo-colonists) to contend for highest treachery and amassing of wealth. The judges in turn select the most eligible thief to carry on the process of colonisation in terms of repressive capitalism. The testimony related by Gitutuwa Gataanguru accounts of robbing the public money through land. While the next thief Kihaaahuwa Gatheeca takes pride in having made his children “speak English through the nose, exactly like people born and brought up in England” (DoC, 109). This shows the mental colonisation of the colonised who are ruled by consent through means of language and economy. Earlier, the colonisers had to subvert through coercion but now in the neo-colonial era, the colonial ideology worked through means of consent. Feroza Jussawala in the essay “the language of struggle” correlates the strategy of Macaulay who stated that Indians would be Indian in skin but British by choice through language, hence is the after effect of colonisation. Therefore, the continuing use of English language as a medium of expression in the third world countries affirms prevailing effects of linguistic imperialism. The third testimony is given by Mwiriwa wa Mukiraa who being an elite intellectual native agrees to rob from one’s own people but by ousting the ownership governed by the foreigners, so that the economy stays within the country. But he faces criticisms from others for having put forward such an idea and is later killed for insulting the international capitalists. So, the extreme form of coercive consent is shown through the novel where the foreigners are still ruling the country without direct involvement. However, the climax of exploitation is presented by Kimeendeeri's scheme which was revealed to Wariinga in a dream of Satan who postulates about exporting blood, sweat, energy and even the physical body of the workers to be used as a fertilizer for enhancing the productivity of the rich also proposing to make the good air a commodity. Metaphorically it relates to the Marxist terminology called ‘reification’, where the labourer is commodified and hence alienated. In other words, it shows the extreme oppression of capitalism on the working class, where the rich feeds on the blood of poor. In an essay Georg M. Gugelborger observes that Blake was a revolutionary poet who rebelled against the social injustice through his works and was the first to have progressive attitude towards the third world. He said that class not race is the basic problem of oppression (470, Ibid.). This partly justifies the exploration of exploitation as a theme in the two last novels by Ngugi.

The symbolic representation of neo-capitalism is shown through the recurrent nightmare of Wariinga, where she sees the Devil the colonialist being crucified by the masses in context of freedom fighting movements. And ironically the devil is retrieved by the bourgeois indicating the rise of neo-colonialism. In relation to Gramsci’s concept of organic and traditional intellectual, the colonial education produced traditional intellectuals who were under the hegemonic power and not from dominant class. And Ngugi supports the Africanisation of education in order to produce a radically different type of intellectual, of that of an organic one. To substantiate this, for instance in Petals of Blood, Munira and Gatuiriia the educated intellectuals fail to lead the people and instead fall prey to their personal anguish. Ngugi asserted that unless there is a collective effort against the oppression nothing can ameliorate the nation. The role of education in subverting the mind of the colonised can be seen through the character Gatuiriia, who feels difficult to speak in the native language properly stating the reason that “the kind of education bequeathed to us by the
whites has clipped the wings of our abilities, leaving us limping like wounded birds” (*PoB*, 63)

Another lacuna in *PoB* is stated through the figure of handicapped Abdulla, representative of the failure of Mau Mau rebellion and in contrast the character Wangari in *DoC*, comes across as another freedom fighter that helps in the cause for freedom. But their struggles and heroic roles do not account for any significant change and they had to fight yet another internal struggle against the neo-colonialists for survival. In the latter novel, the freedom fighters are mocked at and made fun of by the bourgeoisie class for making them suffer too in terms of economy and losing the trust of the foreigners and incurring loss. Thereby, the rebels live in poverty having gained nothing out of the rebellion.

The possible solution is hinted through women and the workers revolution in both the novels. In the *PoB*, Wanja murders the neo capitalists while Waringa shoots the neo thieves and kills the Rich Old Man (a character). Wanja who was exploited by Kimeria in her childhood later kills the unwanted child and joins hand with the neo-capitalist oppressors by opening a brothel also her prostitution is also symbolic of the neo-colonial state as Karega argues whole nation is prostituted. In other words, the African comprador class have bargained not only their bodies but souls (exemplified in *DoC*) for their subjective means. Wanja adopts the maxim “you eat or be eaten” in the new phase of capitalism and in contrast, Waringa (in *DoC*) does not betray her own self-respect and her people. Though like Wanja she too was exploited by the Rich Old Man and by her boss Kihira, she rears the child and starts working at a mechanics garage. Both the heroines use their bodies differently but in the end murder the exploiters. Though the struggle is still ongoing for them and even harder, nonetheless, they chose the violent way to strike back.

In *DoC*, the thieves in the cave were driven by the workers though later they get arrested too but it is to be observed that Waringa avenges not only her own exploitation but of whole nation by firing the Rich Old Man and the thieves with the same pistol which was given by Muturi, a worker and activist. On the other hand in *PoB*, Karega joins the trade union and supports the rights of the proletariats as a possible source of redemption having “already start[ing] to doubt the value of formal education as a tool of people’s total liberation” (part 4, Ibid.). Walter Rodney in his book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* views that Africa was deliberately exploited and underdeveloped by the colonial forces as their intention was to exploit the natives economically through power politics. Thereby, it led to the underdevelopment of Africa in terms of culture, economy and other factors. He states that the tools of repression were culture and language and hence it became a contention of resistance in the developing countries (211-220). In the preface of his book, Rodney praises the state of Tanzania, which had adopted the Marxist political ideology and hence the possible solution is offered through socialism as opposed to the capitalist forces.

Another metaphorical portrayal of further struggle is depicted through unwanted children born out of betrayal and exploitation in the three subsequent novels. In *GoW*, Mumbi bears the child of Karanja which is symbolic of the beginning of further neo-colonialism as it is Karanja who had betrayed the community. In *PoB*, Wanja kills the child born through
Kimeria and willingly gets impregnated through Abdullah and their child is representative of future Kenya which hopefully would be liberated from the tyranny of neo-colonial state. As Abdullah is representative of the failure of Mau Mau rebellion so the rebellion now has to come through new means and with newer implications of having to survive through the already corrupt neo-colonised state in the form of the child. Furthermore in the last novel DoC, Wariinga who bears and rears the child that had been born through the Rich Old Man, showcases yet another kind of exploitation and further struggle for the ‘Other’ in terms of repressed women and the working class.

Conclusively, this paper has charted out the theme of resistance and betrayal in the last two novels by Ngugi. The failures and the struggles on account of the Africans have been analysed textually and theoretically. The after-effect of colonisation have had more debilitating results in context of Africa. In other words, initially, the blame was on the ‘outsiders’ and now the ‘insiders’ betrayed the natives for their own interests. The possible solutions mentioned in the paper, are what comes across through reading the novels by Ngugi. The author placed trust on the women of Africa as the harbingers of peace and freedom. However, Ngugi not only does condemn neo-colonialism, but also states the reason for the same through one of the character named Mweri, in DoC who says that power can only be handled by those who are capable and not by the poor, Ngugi tries to see the other side of the coin. The only contention which the author contends for is that the worker is not to be dehumanised and exploited for capitalist gains thereby he supports socialism as a possible remedy for the same.

**Abbreviations used:**

*POB* - *Petals of Blood*  
*DOC* - *Devil on the Cross*

**Works Cited:**


