

NGUGI'S PETALS OF BLOOD: A NOVEL OF PRAXIS

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Petals of Blood is a trenchant critique of the national ruling elite, who under Jomo Kenyatta and his KANU cohorts, pushed Kenya literally into a neo-colonial state. Written in 1977, Ngugi wa Thiong 'O points out how colonialism in its recycled form as neo-colonialism affected even more dangerously the life of Kenya and Africa. The black national bourgeoisie pursued and perpetuated a totalitarian system under the garb of democracy. And, it is their relentless pursuit of capitalism that has further widened the schism between the few "haves" and the majority of "have nots" reducing Kenya into a country of "ten millionaires on the shoulder of ten million beggars" (Ngugi, Writers 109). The novel has a close affinity with Fanon's classic article "Pitfalls of National Consciousness", where he had prophetically forewarned the national bourgeoisie of their neo-colonialist role in the emergent post-colonial nation states. The lawyer, one of the characters in *Petals of Blood*, highlights the systemic fault line, which the national bourgeoisie embraced at the time of Uhuru:

We could have done anything, then, because our people were behind us. But we, the leaders, chose to flirt with the molten god, a blind, deaf monster who has plagued us for hundreds of years. We reasoned: what is wrong is the skin-colour of the people who ministered to this god: under our own care and tutelage we shall tame the monster and make it do our will. We forgot that it has always been deaf and blind to human woes. So we go on building the monster and it grows and waits for more, and now we are all slaves to it. (163)

As a committed Marxist, Ngugi makes a scathing attack on capitalism that generates the absurd inhuman conditions of existence. He lays bare its operations of power and shows how when levers of power go into the hands of the neo-colonial elite (comprador bourgeoisie), they prove themselves no more than intermediaries - at best self-serving middlemen, at worst puppets whose strings are pushed by the immeasurably powerful and soulless system of capitalism, operating within its global mode of imperialism. This is the reason, Ngugi concludes: "Whether under slavery and slave trade under colonialism, and today with neo-colonialism, the factors -foreign invasion and internal collaboration, have interacted to the detriment of our being"(Moving 78).

Petals of Blood is situated in the revolutionary nationalism voicing proletariat class perspective. It is very straight in its ideological persuasions, as Ngugi has left behind all social ambivalences and equivocations by this time. Mau-Mau here becomes a full-fledged national liberation movement, and is free from all those ambivalences that we find in the earlier trilogy. Craig V. Smith highlights the difference:

In *A Grain of Wheat* Ngugi inserted Mau-Mau into a centuries long tradition of African resistance to colonialism. Here he extends that tradition up to his post-colonial present by claiming for Mau-Mau and thus for tradition of which it is part—an unfinished opposition to social stratification, class exploitation and national fragmentation. (96)

Petals of Blood becomes a pioneer novel of resistance, which does not merely aim at portraying revulsion against neo-colonial structures of power and domination but also in showing a way forward out of this neo-colonial morass through a collective mode of resistance or social revolution of the proletariat. While suggesting a way forward to the third world writer out of his historical past and the neo-colonial chaotic present, Ngugi in his article "The Writer and His Past" says:

The African novelist has already done something in restoring the African character to his history, to his past. But in a capitalist society the past has a romantic glamour, gazing at it ... is often a means of escaping the present. It is only in a socialist context that a look at yesterday can be (Homecoming 46)

Thus Ngugi advocates that an artist, if he is to be meaningful for his people or if he is to map out and anticipate a healthy future, has to be "rooted in the critical awareness of the past"(Petals 199). And, the critical sensibility of the past can be meaningful if interpellated with the socialist perspective. *Petals of Blood* inscribes this critical awareness of the past and a progressive social vision. Emmanuel Ngara calls it "socialist art par excellence" (Art and Ideology 84). The novel aims at curing the whole-sale alienation and social amnesia of the people by infusing a national consciousness in them. It attempts to inject such a consciousness of resistance in them so that they go all out for a collective social revolution to fight out the socio-economic inequality. People overall have to come forward, challenge and overthrow the syndrome of capitalism, built in the name of so-called progress. "Only then", as Marx says, "will the human progress cease to resemble that hideous pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain" (Marx, "The Future Result of the British Rule"325).

The titanic battle in *Petals of Blood* is not only for the homecoming of the wretched of Kenya alone or of Africa but of the whole world. Though nativism in the shape of Gikuyu patriotic songs and Swahili expressions is quite audible in *Petals of Blood*, the novel takes on a pan-nationalist and universalist perspective. In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi has been able to achieve that liberating stage which, according to Edward Said is the final stage-post for the third world novelist: "A progression from nativist through nationalist to liberation theory"(Parry 180). Ngugi's nationalist commitment does not restrict or limit his artistic perspective. As a truly socialist artist, he accepts all that is progressive and valuable, from great artists of other countries. It has been said that "a progressive artist while remaining a son of his own people, does not scorn the achievements of other people and that progressive outlook serves simultaneously the interest of its own people and of mankind, its own time and the future"(Ngara 82). While comparing Achebe's *Arrow of God* with Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, E. Ngara says:

Achebe is, from a Marxist point of view, narrowly nationalist for in *Arrow of God*, he enriches his narrative with literary and cultural elements from Igbo society only, whereas Ngugi accepts whatever is of literary value from other cultures, while uplifting his own cultural heritage. (82)

Petals of Blood is a novel of praxis (Neil Lazrus 193) where the prioritizing of the socio-political realities of contemporary Africa over the character has been done with a sound conviction "that "structure" or history or the "mechanism of society" provides man with referents which can enable him to know himself and the world"(Zeraffa 20). *Petals of Blood* is a novel that belongs to the genre of the proletariat. *A Grain of Wheat* adumbrates the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the peasantry; here in *Petals of Blood*, the working class asserts itself. The basic conflict that energizes the novel arises out of the socialist vision called Ujamaa, which according to Julius Nyerere is inbuilt in the fabric of African society. Ngugi seeks the answer in *Petals of Blood*:

Why anyway, should soil, any soil, which after all was what was Kenya, be owned by an individual? Kenya, the soil, was the people's common shamba, and there was no way it could be right for a few, or a section, or a single nationality, to inherit for their sole use what was communal. (302)

The novel displays Ngugi's fierce commitment to the cause of peasants and workers or 'the wretched of the earth' who through their resistance efforts, get transformed from the objects of pity into the subjects of history. Ngugi in order to become the voice of the powerless and the proletariat consciously chose to "unclass" himself and lingered to achieve a "de-intellectualized" stance. But his class-located interest and his fierce political commitment makes his novel more pronounced, theatrical and partisan in nature. That is why he has earned the wrath of numerous normative critics. John Updike holds that *Petals of Blood* is "aesthetically deficient" (91-94). C.B. Robson finds "a lack of psychological and emotional depth in the characters and their reduction to allegorical figures" (13). Gikandi considers the main drawback in the novel as that of "excessive authorial intrusiveness" (Gikandi,

Reading 146). Crehan says the novel is "monological" (81). Thus, these critics looking for restraint, neutrality, universality, artistic balance or "sensitivity to the human motives on both sides"(Gikandi 146), or middle-class habit of complex and complicated psychological probing, resolve that *Petals of Blood* is an artistic failure. But for a political novelist the biggest challenge is to create a fictional world which would carry out his outspoken militant vision as a logical development of the emotive and intellectual interaction of his characters and situation. Ngugi to a large extent, has been able to achieve the artistic unification of thought and feeling, or character and situation, or ideology and art, rhetoric and aesthetics through a fusion of what Gikandi says "the mimetic function of the novel with its symbolic one"(Reading 134). Ngugi, as a conscious craftsman of the African novel of the proletariat, has been able to achieve to a large extent this "fusion" of the mimetic with the symbolic through the artistic technique of a popular genre called crime detective.

Petals of Blood is a successful catalysis of the genre of the crime thriller and the art of novelization of 'high' literature. This fusion makes Ngugi a populist modernist on the one hand and the anti-canonical novelist on the other. The interrogative at each step associated with crime detective solving murder mystery gives *Petals of Blood* its mass appeal as a novel. Despite being written in English "20,000 copies were sold overnight in Kenya alone."

The story opens like a detective novel with its three main characters- Munira, Abdullah and Karega-in jail, as suspects, being interrogated in the murder of three African directors-Chui, Kimeria and Mzigo, of the Theng'eta Brewery Ltd. The fourth suspect-Wanja is convalescing in a hospital from burn injuries. Munira is the recording consciousness of the novel. Therefore, the structure of the novel is Munira's recollections as he sits in his cell, writing copious notes in order to clarify, to explain, to ascertain and to come to terms with himself as well as to satisfy the queries of the probing Chief Inspector Godfrey who shares half identity with Munira (as inspector's half identity is common with Godfrey Munira). This way inspector Godfrey's interrogation of Munira becomes Munira's self-introspection and the whole novel becomes a direct interior monologue where Munira's self is inextricably woven with the external socio-political reality of Kenya. *Petals of Blood* emerges from Munira's prison diary almost narrating sequentially twelve years of history, from old Ilmorog to New Ilmorog since Uhuru. Though most of Munira's reminiscences are in sequential order, yet they overflow into the various historical periods, for example the time of 1895, when colonialism made its sly entry into Kenya etc. The novel is interwoven through two time frameworks-one in the present in which Munira writes his notes on what happened where, when and why, during his twelve day interrogation in the jail and the other is the historic time which is that of twelve years since Uhuru, which has brought Munira and others and Kenya and Africa to such a pass. The imprisonment of the central characters throughout the narrative symbolically suggests the manacled spirits and liminality of the people in Africa.

Ngugi's strategy of social egalitarianism develops however a fault-line towards the ending of the novel. A kind of reductionism and romantic simplification in the end shows Ngugi's haste to achieve a "socialist novel"(Nkosi, "A Voice from Detention" 335). *Petals of Blood* lacks that artistic subtlety which Ngugi had shown in *A Grain of Wheat*, where through the art leit motif, Ngugi had shown the necessary stages that an artist has to pass through to achieve his finished product, that is, he has to absorb the socio-political circumstances surrounding him and sublimate them into the work of art. The artistic process, which Ngugi elaborated in *A Grain of Wheat*, makes it a metatext. But in the ending of *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi seems to have failed to transform "socialist thought into novelistic structures" (Nkosi 334). Many a time Ngugi resorts to bare and banal political rhetoric, which almost brings the text close to pamphleteering. John Updike's comment: "the fine calm style of *A Grain of Wheat* has here come unhinged"(76) seems definitely to be applicable to the formulaic quality of the final pages of the novel.

Ngugi's showing in the end of the novel that revolution is already taking place in the minds and hearts of the people rather seems imposed on the text due to Ngugi's over-riding faith in his vision of resistance. The thin hope that Ngugi offers in the end of the novel through Akeneyi's meeting Karega in jail and assuring him "You're not alone", sounds rather too optimistic, contrived and simplistic. Ngugi looks to be a victim of the triumphalist vision of resistance that becomes so heavy in the end of the text. Paul

Dorn opines "Petals of Blood concludes with rather vague and tenuous reasons for optimism—Wanja's pregnancy, Joseph's school rebellion, Karega's faith in renewed strikes and protests in Ilmorog".

Neil Lazarus pinpoints another triumphalist chant in the ending of the novel, where Ngugi speaks of "Wakambozi" (One World Liberation Movements). Lazarus says, "And even here, in the formulaic quality of the final pages, in which the specter of the proletarian internationalism is rather unconvincing [seems] to be arising in the collective political imagination of Kenyan workers and peasants, there is a suggestion of residual intellectualism"(22).

Thus, the failure of the novel is due to the "doctrinaire Marxism" (Wanjala, 12) or what Larson calls "author's somewhat dated Marxism: revolt of the masses; elimination of the black bourgeois; capitalism to be replaced by African socialism" (African Dissenters 22). Ngugi's over-enthusiastic faith in the peoples' resistance- at the international/national level seems to pull the aesthetic frame of the novel somewhat out of proportion. But at the same time, it is this very faith, which rescues the African novel from its political defeatism and literary impasse.

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