

REPRESENTATION OF WOMAN IN NGUGI WA THIONGO'S DEVIL ON THE CROSS

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Abstract

This paper explores the representation of women in the novel of NgugiwaThiong's Devil on the Cross. It is pointed out that how the concept of western feminism is not relented in Africa context. In Ngugi's novel women is represented as embodiment of courage and fearless who is capable of the paper is to point out how women represent the tragic paradox inherent in strongly particular African society. The main character becomes embodiment of a degraded Nation and The Novel is written on woman's body (Stratton) Ngugi attempts to reinstate focus of the woman as real subject through warina but his nationalist ideology subsumes the identity of warina as a female.

Key words: representation, resistance discourse, national allegory, white feminism, womanism

Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* (1982) has often been hailed by critics like Stratton as the female bildungsroman, another path-breaking milestone through which Ngugi has been able to break fresh grounds and provide literary impetus to the African Resistance discourse by his conscious concern for resituating the woman as a subject of history. In his *Prison Diary* he states about his commitment to the feminist agenda when he asserts "... Wariinga heroine of toil ... there she walks haughtily carrying her freedom in her hands...". Later he sheds more light on his feminist concerns by saying:

Because the women are most exploited and oppressed section of the entire working class, I would make a picture of a strong determined woman with a will to resist and to struggle against the conditions of her present being. Had I not seen glimpses of this type in real life among the women of Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre? Isn't Kenyan history replete with such type of women? Me Kitilili, MuraawaNgiti, Mary MentthoniNyanjiru? Mau-Mau women cadres? Wariinga will be the fictional reflection of this resistance heroine of Kenyan history ... (*Detained 10*)

Thus, Ngugi's authorial intention to displace the prescriptive model of female identity and create a new woman is quite straight and clear. Ngugi has always been in the forefront of resituating the marginalized in the face of the dominant; this time the focus is on the recovery of the Black woman's identity in neo-colonial Kenya.

Ngugi has placed Wariinga at the centre, has redrawn the circle of existence around her and has shifted the angles of vision at the periphery. Wariinga, the heroine of resistance, has to fight a battle against the twin-power structure constituted of neocolonial power nexus and a strong black patriarchy as Marie Pauline Eboh says: "The African Woman Bears a Double Yoke"(333) or as Stratton puts it: "(She) is doubly oppressed enmeshed in the structure of an indigenous patriarchy and a foreign masculinist colonialism" (173.)

It is not that Ngugi has emerged as a womanist overnight. His womanist discourse like his nationalist one has evolved over the years from *The River Between* to the present novel. But one thing is quite clear that at the outset is that Ngugi's feminist discourse and for that matter most of the Black feminist movement since 1960s, black Afro-American or African, has been entirely different from the Western bourgeois feminism.

The main difference between the bourgeois white feminists and the Black feminists is that the liberatory discourse of the black womanism does not achieve its target of sexual egalitarianism through any "man-hate" or through a mere reversal of male patriarchal structures of domination, which are generally professed by the white-bourgeois feminists. Pauline Eboh has very perceptively brought out the difference between the two:

A black feminist, a feminist of color [is] committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female, but who loves her nonetheless. African womanism tends to marry African perturbation with feminine problem. For the African womanist, the double allegiance to woman's emancipation and African liberation are inseparable. (335). Similarly, Kirsten Holst Petersen, in her much famous article "First Things First" 3, while putting nationalism before feminism shows how the black womanist agenda prioritizes its battle against colonialism and neo-colonialism even sometimes at the cost of its own identity. She says: whereas Western feminists discuss the relative importance of feminist versus class emancipation, the African discussion is between feminist emancipation versus the fight against neo colonialism, particularly in cultural aspect. (251-52)

Thus, the philosophy of African womanism can be summed up as:

Although the African woman is repressed by the normative patterns of her male-dominated culture, she is well-informed of other social and political forces in the society which may take precedence over sexual politics. She would rather identify more with African man in the struggle for social and political freedom than with the middle class white feminists who ignore the fact that racism and capitalism are, concomitants of sexism. Given a society where sexual prejudice consists in the circumvention of female potentials, it is

only logical that the African woman should rely on male support in her war against sexism, capitalism and neo-colonialism. She is alive to the fact that her individual freedom is, to an extent, interlocked with the freedom of her continent which is still under Western hegemony. (Eboh 335).

Ngugi shares true womanist concerns as he opens up a new conceptual space for women in his novels and plays since beginning., Ngugi's research in the rural theatre about the role played by peasants and workers, especially that of women, re-animated his resistance discourse and gave a new flip to his imagination. His plays '*Ngaahika-Ndeenda*' (*I Will Marry When I Want*) (1977) and *Mother, Sing For Me* (1982) in Gikuyu language connect him to his cultural roots much more than his earlier ventures in English. But even his earlier play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, which is a scathing attack on the neo-colonial political corruption and the regime of repression, perpetrated by "the Spear of the nation" Jomo Kenyatta, we find a discernible shift in Ngugi from male characters to strong black women characters especially highlighting their roles as figures of resistance in the anti-imperial Mau-Mau resistance movement. Micere Mugo, Ngugi's co-author in the play *the Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, when asked about this strange shift⁵ from male to female characters, remarks that:

We didn't mean it to be a shift but *a kind of fusion*, to show that what Kimathi was fighting for was the same thing that a lot of our women were fighting for. Our concern was that whereas the part that the men played in the struggle has been recorded by historians and biographers, *the women on the whole have simply been forgotten* (99: italics mine) Ngugi has been alive to the need of giving space to women in his novels inscribing nationalist agenda. But one of the greatest problems with this kind of womanist agenda, especially where men writers are engaged in correcting the historical distortion in the female identity, is that its anti-colonial nationalist discourse has often been found to subsume the feminist concerns.

With Wariinga in *Devil On the Cross*, Ngugi makes a decisive departure from his earlier woman representations and really makes "a room for women". She is a bold advance over both Mumbi and Wanja as she emerges out to be a full-fledged central figure of resistance against the forces of neo-colonialism and patriarchy. The central locus of the novel is warring's evolution from victimhood to a combatant character. Moreover, this is Ngugi's first novel where all the male characters around a woman remain on the periphery as compared to her charismatic growth. In order to create sexually a more egalitarian society, Ngugi valorizes Wariinga and makes her a vehicle of his resistance strategy.

Wariinga is the bearer of Ngugi's vision of resistance against the reactionary tendencies of his society. Of course, *Devil On the Cross* marks continuities and discontinuities with his earlier novels so far as the identity of women is concerned. Wariinga's life up to a point runs parallel to Wanja's. Both of them hail from Ilmorog. Both of them are seduced in their school age by a wealthy businessman who denies responsibility for pregnancy. Both are outstanding in studies but suffer heavily when the school-age pregnancy thwarts their dreams of academic success. Both suffer at the hands of big bosses in Nairobi. Thus frustrated, both are tempted to resort to prostitution. But the similarities end here. For while Wanja succumbs to the temptation and joins the comfortable bag-wagon of the "Eaters", Wariinga refuses to submit point blank. She, unlike Wanja, neither throws her child nor slides into the life of a barmaid or prostitution.

In order to correct the historical erasure, Ngugi has constructed a strong black woman's identity in the form of Wariinga. When the novel opens, we find Wariinga's life totally fallen apart. She has been shunted out of her job as a secretary for refusing to submit herself to her boss Kihara's sexual advances, she has been thrown out of rented accommodation by the "Devil's Angels" for refusing to pay the enhanced rent and deserted by her university mercenary parasitic boyfriend, John Kimwana, on the false pretext of her being a "sugar girl" (22) of boss Kihara. As Nairobi has proved "large, soulless and corrupt" (15), a place "where woman's thighs are tables on which contracts are signed" (19), she decides to leave Nairobi.

Davinder Mohan is right in pointing out that the novel that opens with Wariinga's fearful dream speaks of "female powerlessness": Recovering from the dream, while she was about to lose "consciousness and balance" (12), she is saved by a young man. In order to unburden herself of her blighted past and broken present, she narrates her own tragic story, through the mask of an imagined character of Kareendi: how she suffered a teenage seduction at the hands of the Rich Old man; is abandoned and dumped and became jobless for her refusal to be a girl with "easy thighs"(25). The young man, after listening to her, gives her an invitation card for attending a Devil's Feast: a competition to choose seven cleverest men in the art of "theft and robbery" in Ilmorog.

The next stage-post in Wariinga's growth of consciousness is her encounter with the passengers on the Matatu (local car) – Gaturi, Wangari, Muturi, Mwatiri and the driver of the Matatu Robin Mwaura. Four of them except Wariinga are typical stock-characters representing different aspects of neo-colonial reality. Wangari, a typical Mau-Mau freedom fighter, a strong Gikuyu peasant woman, wholoses her land to the bank for non-payment of her loan. She goes to Nairobi in search of a job but is charged under "vagrancy law" for roaming in the town without proper papers on her. She is released by the court only when she promises to co-operate in nabbing thieves and robbers in the country. Her tragic neglect by the post-colonial society touches the lowest when in Nairobi she is offered a job of "spreading [her] legs" (42) in the market of love through a shameless suggestion that "women with mature bodies were experts at that job" (42). And, the irony is that she tells: "these legs have carried many bullets and many guns to our fighters in the forest ... and I was never afraid, even when I slipped through the lines of the enemy and their home-guards allies" (40).

The next stage of Wariinga's development is the Devil's Feast in the Ilmorogcave. This underworld of smugglers, robbers, hoarders, extortioners and power brokers, false educators and criminal politicians no longer needs any secrecy about its plans and manipulations. The grand spectacle of modern theft and robbery powerfully presented as a "festival of misrule" becomes instrumental in transforming Wariinga's life and character. As a result of her *enlightenment* at the "Feast", Wariinga becomes a new woman. She joins the polytechnic for a course in mechanical engineering, her long cherished desire. She learns judo–karate to defend her person and to support her education joins a motor garage run on co-operative bases by the workers. Just in two years time, she regains her lost self-confidence. She is no longer interested in bleaching creams to lighten her skin, or straighten her hair. By rejecting what Fanon calls "lactification" a sign of racial inferiority-complex and the traditional woman's freeze frame: "To cook, to make beds and to spread

their legs in the market of love" (218), she declares her ownership of both her body and mind: "Her thighs are her's her brain is her's, her hands are her's and her body is her's" (218).

She has finally matured into a figure of resistance. Ngugi sheds light on Wariinga's revolutionary ideology: Today's Wariinga has decided that she'll never again allow herself to be a mere flower, whose purpose is to decorate the doors and windows and tables of other people's lives, waiting to be thrown on to a rubbish heap the moment the splendour of her body withers. The Wariinga of today has decided to be self-reliant all the time, to pluge into the middle of the arena of life's struggles in order to discover her real strength and to realize her true humanity. (216)

She is now fully competent to meet the challenges of the male-dominated world. If now someone tries to abuse her sexually, she with a lightening speed assaults him with so many "judo kicks and karate chops" that the man falls prostate and groveling before her.

Ngugi resorts to a reversal of the initial terms of sexual allegory, i.e., he resorts to headlong inversion of masculine assertiveness and feminine passivity. This is the same strategy, which contemporary women writers deployed in their fiction. Analyzing the fiction of Grace Ogot, Flora Nawapa, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba, Stratton says:

Such an inversion – female and male, good and evil, subject and object—does not resolve the problems of gender, but it is, nonetheless, a subversive maneuver. For it exposes the sexist bias of the male literary tradition and creates space for the female subject. ... inversion is a strategy that other women writers have also employed in their attempt to combat patriarchal Manichaeism. (162)

In order to valorize Wariinga, Ngugi has not only situated the central action of resistance in her but also marginalized all the male characters around her especially Gaturia, the central male character, if any, in the novel. As a typical bourgeois intellectual, he is progressive philosophically and ideologically, yet when it comes to the crucial moment of choosing to act, he, unable to decide, remains frozen in inertia and inaction. When Wariinga kills Gaturia's father and injures two other business tycoons, and walks out with the pistol daring the body-guards of the rich elite.

Wariinga in the first part of the novel serves as a metaphor for class and nation. Despite Ngugi's all out efforts at valorizing Wariinga, the snags between his womanist agenda and its actual inscription in the novel are quite visible. The reason for this is that Ngugi's nationalist agenda and his proletarian class perspective is so heavy on the text that it does not allow Wariinga to emerge as a full-fledged female subjectivity. Moreover, due to Ngugi's anti-bourgeois stance, the Western feminist theories emerging from Francophone feminist concept of "écriture féminine" ¹⁶ do not interest Ngugi. He is not interested like European feminists in middle-class individual feminine linguistic or sexual oppression. His main interest lies in female social oppression emphasizing "woman as an historical and social class rather than as an immutable female essence" (Monique Wittig qtd. in Andrea Cady 142).

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