

# LITERATURE AND CULTURAL NATIONALISM IN SELECTED NOVELS OF NGUGI WA THIONG'O

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## ABSTRACT

Literature embodies a wide range of human experiences, dealing with man in his immediate environment. Africa encompasses a diverse range of traditional beliefs and cultural traditions that are occasionally shared by numerous societies. These ideas and rituals are developed from the people's revered culture and they provide a connection between people's historical heritage and the current day. This paper adopts Library-based research or content analysis using Ngugi wa Thiongo's novels *Weep Not, Child*, *The River Between*, *Petals of Blood* and *Wizard of the Crow* as primary sources of data and other critical literary materials about Ngugi's literary ouevres as secondary sources of data. Employing Marxism, Ngugi's Globalectics theory and the politics of knowing and mythology as interpretative ideologies, the paper examine Ngugi wa Thiongo's approach in trying to wrestle Africa's cultural heritage from the Neo-colonial whims of the West in collusion with African elites in the era of globalizatioin. This paper therefore analyses Ngugi's cultural nationalism project and the effectiveness of his advocacy for resistance and rejection of bad leadership in Africa by the teaming masses of Africa.

**Keywords:** Literature, Myth, History, Cultural Nationalism, Marxism, Globalectics.

## INTRODUCTION

Literature is a discipline that deals with man in his social environment. Literature is not necessarily history but it can be history as it has the ability to pre-empt an unacceptable future. In this case, literature relates to history by being a product of history upon which it depends for its

various constituents. To this end, the literary artist is thus a historian as well as a nationalist. Literature can take from the historical process of the past and the present to construct the future. The artist could start from a dissatisfied present, peeps into the past to see how it was like and makes a selection from both to predict the future. For the

creative writer, re-visiting history is always oriented towards future betterment of society.

African literature is therefore influenced by the authors' personal experiences and historical facts. This is because of Africa's unique historical experience of colonialism in which people were humiliated and exploited. For this reason, the African artists takes keen interest in the political developments of his time as he watch his society disintegrate under the yoke of colonialism. R.L. Okonkwo attest to this that "With the advent of colonialism... the traditional society was disrupted by Christianity, Western education and other forces, European influences seemed to have swept the African culture before it. Missionaries saw little of value in the African way of life..." (researchgate.net). Terhembba, Shija in *Modern Literary Theory and The African Fiction*, asserts that "most of African fiction was written for the purpose of waging war against imperialism, colonialism corruption, dehumanization and ignorance... (16)

Viewed from the above, one could be right to conclude that most pioneer African Literature and even now has been a literature of reclamation and record setting. This is where Ngugi, Achebe and a host of others are prominent names in African Literature in their bid to wrestle African Culture out of the clutches of colonial and neo-colonial whims of the West.

Ngugi wa Thiongo is one African novelist who has always placed himself as the advocate of the down-trodden masses of Africa because of his overt socialist literary ideology. He tries at all times to re-enact and extol the heroic struggle of Kenyan and African masses since the era of colonialism. He is equally concerned with the themes of corruption, colonialism, neo-colonialism, religion, culture, protest and hope among others. He does this effectively by relying on the history of Kenya and Africa in general.

History has the ability to change society either positively or negatively. For the creative writer, re-visiting history is with a view to checking individual or community excesses. It may also be for the purpose of re-inventing and re-

scripting those affirmative values of society so that the new generation does not go into error. The process of an imaginative re-visiting of the past helps in making a sober and rational assessment of the present to creatively blaze a new and glorious trail for the emergence of future society. These are issues the reader finds on the pages of Ngugi's numerous novels. His desire is to arouse national consciousness of African masses.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The literary theories applied in this work are Marxism, Globalectics Theory and the politics of knowing by Ngugi wa Thiongo and mythology as interpretative ideologies. Marxism as a literary, political and social theory seeks to explain the course of human history and the structure of past, present and future societies. For this reason, there is a vital link between literature and history. When this theory is brought to bear on the literary works of Ngugi, it helps in understanding the artistic process of re-inventing social realities from historical antecedents.

Globalectics deals with the continued need to decolonize theory from its traditional "Western" heritage and open it up for globalectical discourse. This theory allows readers globally to see the connection between works from different times, periods and places as original, meaningful and relevant to those places. Globalectics demonstrates the need to understand the similarities and differences in stories we tell each other. It is a cross-pollination of literary dialectics and an attempt to rescue world literature from the dichotomy of its imperial past and transform such literature into a mode of sharing. This theory embraces wholeness, interconnectedness, equality of potentiality of parts, tensions and motions. It is a way of thinking and relating to the world, particularly in the era of globalization. Globalectics is meant to accord dignity to the poor as they fight poverty.

Mythology in its modern sense refers to a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin once believed to be true by a particular group of people. Myths serve to explain why things happen as they do, and why the world is as it is. They provide a

rationale for social customs and rules by which people conduct themselves. Myths also relates to rituals. These myths are printed in the people's minds and hearts, oral history or customs, shrines and in their religious functions which have become integral to the people's way of life, and which may not be encoded in the written form. Prominent names in this area of mythological study includes Claud-Levi-Strauss, Hans Blumenberg, William Blake and others. Today, myth has become a prominent term in literary analysis. It is on the basis of the relevance and context of Ngugi's works that Marxism, Globalectics and mythological criticisms are adopted as critical tools for analyzing his novels. This is necessary since both viewpoints relate to history, culture and society.

### **The Place of Myth and History in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Novels**

Africa has a wide variety of traditional beliefs and social practices which are sometimes shared by many societies. Such beliefs and social practices are derived from the people's cherished cultural heritage that connects the past with the present. Africa has a vast reserve of folklores, myths and legends, upon which the African writer depends as source of raw materials for his creative works. Art therefore, is generally affected by society and its politics. Indeed, Sanka, Eyison and Darteh have argued that:

Elements of the oral tradition, apart from giving an African touch to Ngugi's writings, also contribute in sharpening the style of the novelist, in developing the themes of the writer, as well as demonstrating his commitment towards a particular course (6).

Ngugi's novels are full of myths, legends, folktales, songs, rituals and other traditional art forms which are beneficial to modern society. For example, myths are stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular group of people. They are created to explain the mysteries of life, death, the beginning of the world, natural phenomena and powers. Even though they are imaginary and mostly with

anonymous authorship, they are strongly believed to account for the origin of man and the universe. Myths also give rise to the different religions in various parts of the world.

Africa has a great reservoir of tales that employ animal characters in substitution for human characters. The animals represent specific human actions and generalized patterns of human behaviour. The ultimate goal is to subvert the corrupt and divisive moral conventions and the established social order that originally enforced those values. Iortyer Manasseh and Jacob Gaadi in "Literature and History for Cultural Revival..." have argued that Africa has a past that is not recorded in most history books and a culture that was fragmented during colonialism. According to them, African writers have continued to remind the African masses of the road they travelled to independence; thus reiterating the necessity for African cultural and economic independence and unity of all oppressed masses in third world countries (106). This is a call for Africans to return to their cherished aesthetic and cultural values that once held society together in the pre-colonial days.

Before the advent of colonialism, Africa had different social values with established systems which were embedded in the cultures of the people. These values were passed on from generation to generation through oral narratives. Some of these values are still being practised in some rural communities today because they are closely tied to the culture and beliefs of the people. The traditional welfare systems adequately took care of the needs of the people in diverse ways like respect for elders, virtue, communal living system, extended family system, traditional medicine, religion and traditional education. These were meant to meet the people's needs so they could live functional lives. These traditional mechanisms of community education were carried out through the observance of such cultural norms which facilitated the entrenchment of the acceptable behaviour of all. These mechanisms were also conveyed through myths and legends of the people in order to inculcate moral values in the younger generation. Thus, these acceptable social

systems were based on kinship or village council of elders which served as units of community organization that promoted mutual, peaceful co-existence. According to scholars like Folaranmi and Tope, the Christian and Islamic religions in Africa only but built on this existing system they found in Africa. They argue further that:

The norms and practices were by the second half of the nineteenth century crystallized to formal services on the one hand by Christian missionaries with their Judaic heritage of being “their brothers’ keepers” and being “kind to one another” and on the other hand by the Muslim practice of Zhakat religious alms which enjoin the rich to give to the less fortunate (327).

The above statement indicates that African traditional beliefs and welfare culture pre-date the advent of Christianity. It also reveals that communal living and social welfare were inherent in traditional African society and formed an integral part of the socio-economic and religious well-being of the people. Therefore Christianity and Islam which came to build on this system, only turned society and individuals into religious hypocrites as portrayed by Ngugi and other writers in Africa.

Tanure Ojaide has opined that culture has a history and geography feeding it in a continuum of self-renewal. According to him, the process involves abandoning some aspects that are not relevant, and appropriating some new things even from outside. This means a culture has a past and a present but the present reality is also bound to change with time (*Emerging Perspectives* 11). It means that culture, literature and history co-relate. Therefore, it is necessary for Ngugi to revisit his people’s history in order to re-create society along pre-colonial lines in order to learn lessons from the past and to combat the present problems facing Africa today. He does this in both his fictional and non-fictional writings. Angela Miri agrees with this position that “Ngugi has consistently canvassed in his non-fictional writings for the right of the people to be exposed to the truth (in its stark

reality) about their national situations and realities, and how these affect their individual conditions” (30).

That is why Ngugi keeps going back to the history and experiences of his people in his quest to liberate the Kenyan and African masses who continue to suffer under the yoke of their insensitive leaders. This concern and message of liberation keeps evolving in almost all of Ngugi’s literary works. His desire is to liberate Kenyans and African culture from the neo-colonial tentacles of the west in the era of globalization.

Ngugi weaves this message around the Gikuyu myth, especially the creation story that one finds in *Weep Not, Child* and the history of his people. This is a clear Marxist tenet of a historical revisiting of the past to shape the future. He sees colonialism not just as stealing the people’s history but also as annihilating the people’s culture and identity by killing their pride in their names, language and anything African. Perhaps, this may partly account for the reason why he dropped the name “James” in the first place to show his resistance to colonialism in its varying forms. This also explains why Ngugi tries at all times to recreate the history and social realities of the Kenyans’ heroic struggle against both internal and external forces that stand between Africa and her quest for true national liberation. Ngugi’s concern like that of most of his African counterparts is not just the collapse of independence, which is considered as a personal loss but also the immediate historical forces that are shaping these events. One must therefore take into account Ngugi’s ideological dimension of his literary project when reading his works. He uses his literary works to reflect on, expose and decry the socio-political and economic realities in Kenya and Africa in general, from the colonization to post-colonial era. His main concern in this project is to liberate the people of Kenya socially, politically, religiously, economically and teach Africans in general. For this reason, he draws his lessons from historical, cultural, religious, social and political issues obtainable in Kenya in order to drive home his message.

### Ngugi's Cultural Nationalism and Decolonization Project

Culture that stays in total isolation from others can shrivel, dry up or wither away. Cultures under total domination from others can be crippled, deformed, or else die. Cultures that change to reflect the ever-changing dynamics of internal relations and which maintain a balanced give and take with external relations are the ones that are healthy (*Moving the Centre*, 16).

The above quotation lends credence to the fact that Ngugi is very much aware of what happens when cultures come in contact with one another. There is always a possibility of give and take. He is much aware that no culture or society is an island if such a society must grow. The problem Ngugi attempts to solve is a situation where one culture (Western Culture) feels superior to the other (African culture) and tries to annihilate an already existing culture, calling it barbaric or uncivilized. Indeed, Ngugi has argued that to take away a people's culture is to take away their identity. That is why the author resolves to extol and promote his people's culture in order to make them take pride in who they are through his cultural nationalism project.

Ngugi exhibits this cultural nationalism any time he reflects on the Kenyan and African pre-colonial set up as he extols the communal spirit of Africans, bringing out their strengths and weaknesses as a group. He values and glorifies the affirmative virtues of the pre-colonial African set-up whereby the evenings were characterized by fire side storytelling, by adults to the young ones who later told those stories to their peers in school. That was a time when everybody was his brother's keeper and things were shared equally. Even when conflicts arose, they were settled amicably. Ngugi states this succinctly in *Petals of Blood* that, "In those days there were no vultures in the sky waiting for the dead carcasses of dead workers, and no insect-flies feeding on fat and blood of unsuspecting toilers (120). But gradually, the

people became subjugated by both local and alien tyrants.

The antagonism which later arose and upset this hitherto peaceful co-existence has its roots in the history of the tribe in the wake of European invasion and western Christian teaching which found its way into the community. A good example of this is found in Ngugi's *The River Between* where Kameno and Makuyu are in constant conflict with each other. Kameno is considered the home of traditional cultural values for its association with the original parents of the tribe, Gikuyu and Mumbi; while Makuyu ridge is the seat of clansmen who have adopted Christianity with their leader, Joshua. It is in the given scenario that Ngugi questions the validity of the imposition of the European cultural norms on the African peasantry. Infact, Ngugi emphasizes the disintegration of indigenous societies as a result of the encroachment of the Whiteman on the local culture with his civilization mission that fails to mediate with local values.

Those who are mostly criticized in Ngugi's cultural project are the elites who are exposed to cultural alienation and fascinated with western ways to the detriment of their own traditional African customs. They shy away from their customs, social ceremonies, language, names, and so on. In *Petals of Blood*, Rev. Kamau changes his name to Rev. Jerrod Brown, in *Wizard of the Crow* Emperor Tajirika changes his name to Titus Flavius Vespasianus Whitehead. What an irony and neo-colonial madness. They no longer see anything beautiful in their own African traditional ways. It is therefore no wonder that Ngugi later abandons his Christian name – James and also writes for his target audience in his mother tongue before translating the works into English. In this way he gives expression to his own concept of cultural nationalism. One other important feature in Ngugi's writings and ideology is his fight against both internal and external forces that seek to destroy African cultural norms that bind society together. Infact, in *Wizard of the Crow*, Ngugi illustrates this senseless neo-colonial hunger of the elites in western values in the activities of the



Ruler of Aburiria with his ministers. To this, Ngugi calls for a collective fight by the workers and peasants of Africa as exemplified by “movement for the voice of the people”. He agitate for a call to accountability of African leaders by the people through their heroic struggle.

Indeed, Ngugi consciously recreates the historic struggle of his people against such foreign intrusion in order to educate and sensitize his readers on the negative effects of colonial encroachment under the guise of Christianity and the power of the gun. Ngugi wants those traditional African ideals to be liberated from the clutches of foreign domination through neo-colonialism. This has become a recurring decimal in Ngugi’s literary and cultural aesthetics. He supports this kind of struggle, which he expresses in an interview with Charles Cantalupo in *The World of Ngugi* in these words:

‘Struggle’ is part of nature and part of our history and cultures. As a central concept in my aesthetic or cultural vision, “struggle” has been developing. I think, starting from my essays on writers and politics. One can see this theme become more and more dominant in my cultural theory and aesthetic theory. “Struggle” is central to nature, to human art and to my history. (222).

The above excerpt shows Ngugi’s intellectual response to his world. One of the most important aspects of this task is raising the awareness of his people towards revolutionary change. His novels chart a new consciousness that serves as a counterweight against existing neo-colonial, social, political, religious, cultural and economic realities in Kenya and Africa in general.

Sharifa Akter has opined that in *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi portrays the threats that hybridity poses to cultural purity and integrity through the transformation of a traditional village (Ilmorog) to, “The capitalist social system with its associated class struggles fundamentally influences the social, cultural, philosophical, economic and political ideals of society” (180). This confirms Ngugi’s assertion that imperialism can never

develop a country or a people. He sees Africa’s present problem as a result of the Blackman’s contact with Europe which has not only robbed Africans of their resources but also their identity. He argues that language is culture and Africans cannot continue to promote African cultural values through a borrowed or imposed western language to the detriment of their traditional languages. His argument is that if African writers continue to write in the language of their oppressors (colonizers), they are giving up their cultural independence and abandoning the language of their people which is the only conservator of their culture.

Ngugi’s desire is for these languages and cultures to be preserved and passed on to the next generation. Indeed, Russell Al Farabi applauds Ngugi’s cultural nationalism when he asserts that “Ngugi’s philosophy of culture and decolonization is not only a powerful symbolic form of cultural empowerment, but is also an articulate socio-political counter-discourse to hegemonic notion of culture” (69). The author’s continued concern is for the upliftment of the down-trodden masses of Kenya and Africa in general. One basic achievement of Ngugi, like many other writers, is that he does not only point out problems but he also proffers solutions to such problems. His constant argument is that the African political elites have not evolved any meaningful ideology that can alleviate their people’s sufferings long after independence except the ‘texts’ proscribed by westerners to suit their whims. His goal as a cultural nationalist is to build a nation state in Africa in accordance with the wishes and expectations of the down-trodden masses of Africa.

## CONCLUSION

Ngugi’s reliance on the myth and history of his people to chart a verile future course for the people through resistance is worth applauding. Indeed, the historical experiences of Kenyans from the colonization through the mau-mau rebellion to independence and the subsequent bad governance of the postcolonial era are all central in Ngugi’s novel. For example, *Petals of Blood*

critiques the post-colonial Kenyan State and the betrayal of the revolutionary ideals of the mau-mau movement. Ngugi is keenly aware of how myths and legends of Kenya are important sources of inspiration for action in the history of resistance and social transformation of the nation.

In all these efforts, Ngugi's main preoccupation is for Africa to return to all those cherished aesthetic cultural values that united the people in pre-colonial days. He does this effectively by weaving his stories around the myths and history of Kenyans and indeed, Africa. His vision is that Africa must go back to her origin and learn lessons from the way in which the people produced and managed their wealth before colonialism. This is one of the tenets of Marxism. Ngugi believes that a study of the past can reveal systems which were fair and equitable and its principles and wisdom can be used to combat the present socio-political problems bedeviling Africa today.

There is a lot to learn from culture in literature for Africa to assert her cultural identity in the face of modernization and globalization. That is why Literature and African Literature in particular attempts to project the African culture as it were for readers (Africans) to learn lessons from the past. This is urgent as globalization is fast eroding aesthetic cultural practices that once held the entire continent in check. Ngugi, like many other writers in Africa have continued to preserve the records in their literary works for the upcoming generations of Africa to learn lessons from.

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