



NGŪGĪ WA THIONG'O'S WRITING CAREER: THE RISE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A DYNAMIC AFRICAN LITERARY STAR

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ABSTRACT: *A myriad of Ngugi's readers may presuppose that the literary career of this celebrated African writer began at the University. Albeit it was at Makerere that he triumphantly wrote and subsequently published his first and second novels, Weep Not Child and The River Between for which reason he reveals in his own words that "I started writing in 1960. I was then a student at Makerere University College" (Homecoming: 47), and for Lindfords, Ngugi's literary career begun specifically "towards the end of 1960" (23), evidences corroborate that Ngugi has started his literary writing since at the secondary school: the Alliance High School. The motive behind this article is to unveil that Ngugi's literary writing career history is marvellous and distinctive. Although famous African writers the likes of late Achebe have written earlier than him, he is such a rare prolific writer, who has written at different places, at different periods, for different motives, with varying degrees of inspirations, all of which demonstrate an unprecedented, literary dynamism in his entire literary writing career.*

KEYWORDS: Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Literary writing career, Dynamism, Rise and development.



INTRODUCTION

A writer responds, with his total personality to a social environment which changes all the time. Being a kind of sensitive needle, he registers, with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions in his changing society

NgugiwaThiong'o, *Homecoming* (47).

The writer of fiction can be and must be the pathfinder

Ngugi wa Thiong' o, *Writers in Politics* (85).

Ngugi's standpoint above indubitably depicts a writer as an invisible "recorder" that records what daily transpires in his/her community, including the incessant transformation such a community undergoes day-in-day-out: be it social, cultural, political, religious, economical and possibly scientific via the white paper as his/her recording device. So, as the mouthpiece of the society in which he/she dwells, the writer responds through his/her writing(s) what he/she has been recording at times to express his/her anger, disillusionment or resignation, about what is harmful, diabolical or oppressive, bedevilling his/her people. At other times, he/she writes to enlighten or to educate his/her people, region, or the entire globe about something it ought to know, owing to its significance. He/she raises his/her community's awareness about something which consciously or unconsciously it ignores, or it is completely oblivious about its existence. Others write to persuade his/her people to do something tangible or to refrain from it. He/she warns his people or the entire world in connection about the perilous disposition of something that may threaten or jeopardise the progress or existence of his/her community or the globe at large. This is why in Achebe's viewpoint; the writer is but a teacher. For Ikiddeh, he is a historian among other roles. So, versatility is one of his/her rare peculiarities as Ngugi argues in *Moving the Centre*, "writers are supposed to have an opinion on everything from geography, history, physics and chemistry to the fate of humankind (154). This is the *raison d'état* he/she may also write to unveil the mounting crises and tensions in his/her increasingly dynamic society, arising from colonial or neo-colonial oppressions and subjugations as Ngugi himself has been doing over the years both in texts and contexts. In doing so, such a writer and of course Ngugi as a prototype performs but the role of a leader, who leads his/her society to a better tomorrow, a social prophet who delivers an instructive message to his/her people through the power of written words: a revolutionary, who sees art as a literary vehicle or a communicative medium aimed at bringing about a social change; hence, a "pathfinder". The writer is thus a politician and in *Writers in Politics* Ngugi writes that "the writer and the politician have been the same person" (73).

Be that as it may, Ngugi identifies two varying types of writers, writing in the European and African context. The first group of writers are those who presume that a society is stagnant and stable either because they live in an epoch when society is presumed to be stable or because "cocooned in their class or being prisoners of the propaganda of the dominant class become insensitive to basic structural conflicts" (74)

A striking example is George Eliot, one of the famous 19th-century writers who "assumed such a stability of the basic static structure". For Ngugi, her fictional world is broad and the issues she deals with are wide as well, but "the intellectual and moral conflicts do not arise out of an awareness of a changing world" (74) Eliot is then a prototypical of writers who often have an "ideal of conduct or human type to which the different characters approximate



with differing degrees of success and failure” (75 Yet, Ngugi commends her and her likes for producing literature of sharp social criticism. This artistic commitment is an attitude to society, “abstraction of human types” and “moral ideals” from their basis in the class structure and class struggle”. This gives rise to literature “distinguished for its shallow dive into society and only redeemed from oblivion by those of our critics who have no other critical tools apart from the worn and meaningless phrases like human compassion timeless and universal” (75-6).

However, there are other group of writers that differ from the first. This is either because of the “period in which they live, or because of their instinctive or unconscious dialectical approach to life and society do not assume a static stability” (76) he reason as Ngugi expounds further is that “the behaviour of their characters is deeply rooted in history and changing social conditions of the society” (76). It is thus owing to their awareness of a changing world, celebrated writers the likes of “Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Conrad, Sholokhov, Chinua Achebe place conflicts between peoples in differing classes with their differing and often antagonistic conceptions of world order: of who holds, who should hold power, the ends towards which the power is put, and of the possibilities of a new social order from womb of the world” (76).

At any rate, this chapter, which is part of my unpublished book entitled *Who Is Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Life, Education, Writing and Influences* traces the beginning of Ngugi’s literary writing career from the Alliance High School in Kenya to Makerere, where he was enrolled by the Ugandan-based University to study English, and as a journalist: a job which he began shortly after he left Makerere, and subsequently at the University of Leeds, in the United Kingdom, where he pursued his postgraduate studies and equally important another base, where his writing career blossomed, as well as in the University of Nairobi where he served as a lecturer at the beginning and later rose to the rank of a Professor. His writings at exile and after exile would also be extensively explored.

Writing at Alliance High School

In his seminal essay “Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s Early Journalism” Lindfords argues that “Ngugi wanted to write when he was in secondary school but had never actually got down to it until he got to the university” (23). Untrue is this assertion, for according to Lovesey (2015), Ngugi, inspired by Tolstoy’s childhood and youth whose novels he read as one of his favourite European literary writers at Alliance, wrote a story in 1957 entitled “My Childhood”. However, the editors changed the title in the editorial process to “I Try Witchcraft”. They inserted in it, a declaration of Christianity’s triumph over superstition (52).

So, *In the House of the Interpreter*, Ngugi comments on the head start of this new development in his early writing career that it is :-

A condemnation and pre-Christian life and beliefs of a whole community and simultaneously, an ingratiating acknowledgment of the beneficial effects of enlightenment. I was turned into a prosecution witness for the imperial literary tradition from which I had been trying to escape. Although well-intentioned, this editorial intrusion smothered the creative fire within me (166-7).



Very much so! For the smothered creative fire at Alliance kept on burning at an inestimable proportion in Makerere, where Ngugi's literary writing star began to sparkle.

Writings at Makerere University College Uganda

If Alliance High School is Ngugi's literary creative root, then Makerere is his writing blossoming home. Enrolled by the Ugandan-based University in 1959 to study B.A. English, Ngugi's writing career incessantly flourished when in 1960 he wrote a short story entitled the "Fig Tree" which was subsequently published by *Penpoint*, the university English department's literary magazine. Three months later, he published his next story titled "The Wind" in both *Penpoint* and *Kenya Weekly News*, a European settler's magazine based in Nairobi. In 1961 Ngugi scribbled three more stories as well as the first draft of a novel "he called *The Black Messiah* which he entered in a novel-writing competition sponsored by the East African Literature Bureau. His manuscript won the top prize in English-language section of the competition" (Lindfords 23).

Ngugi abruptly began to write edifying socio-political, economical, as well as cultural articles, placing much premium on the state of the nation for some of the Kenya's popular tabloids as a regular columnist from 1960-3. This was the period Lindfords and Lovesey called Ngugi's early journalism. But there is a motive behind this development, as he recounts in his school memoir *In the House of the Interpreter*, Ngugi wanted to become a journalist since he was a student at Alliance High School. This dream was unsuccessful when his application was turned down by the East African Standard, the then only major English newspaper in Kenya. Secondly, he also admits that his early work in journalism was financially- motivated; to bring in some ready cash, just as the writing of his first novel *The River Between* for a competition. In 1961, Ngugi, considering the overcrowding nature and the state of destitution in the newly created villages during the State of Emergency which resulted to moral decadence as widespread prostitution and illegitimate birth became rampant, wrote an article for the Sunday Post on 20th August titled "Social problems of the New Villages: A Challenge to African Leaders". He also wrote another article published by the Sunday Nation on agriculture, admonishing against the paucity of agricultural education and the effects of agricultural ignorance in Kenya. Moreso, Ngugi wrote another article published by Sunday Nation in 1962 titled "Let Us Be Careful about What We Take from the Past" to emphasise against the cultural practice of paying bride price and the still more culturally sensitive practice of female circumcision or genital mutilation which he describes as a tradition which is "wholly uncivilised and repugnant to our sense of decency and progress" (Lovesey 54).

Furthermore, one of the Kenya's biggest national problems prior to independence, and even after political independence was won is tribalism. It is against this background that two years before independence was declared, Ngugi wrote an article in Sunday Nation titled "Let's See More School Integration" in July 8, 1962 to demonstrate that the immediate obstacle to the creation of a Kenyan nation is not so much racialism, but tribalism. In a parallel article published by Sunday Nation on 8 July, 1962, titled "How Much Rope Should Opponents Be Given?" Ngugi emphasises the threat of tribalism to the newly independent African states. For, him tribalism and splinter groups can really frustrate the efforts of the new government. In a bid to portray the necessary severing of loyalty to tribe at the expense of the nation, Ngugi again wrote "It Is Time We Broke This Tribal Outlook", published in Sunday Nation of October 20, 1963 (57).



The year 1962 is momentous in Ngugi's literary writing career in that one of his early plays *The Black Hermit* was written in celebration of Uganda's independence, performed by Makerere Students Drama Society at the Ugandan National Theatre (*Decolonizing the Mind* 42). In his Masterpiece *Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, Simon Gikandi reveals the reason for writing, staging the play, and what this development resulted afterwards:

The new leadership in Kampala wanted a cultural text that would signify "a break from the past" and Ngugi was keen to produce a play to meet the desire for newness, for historical rupture. But by calling attention to the pathologies of colonialism, of the dangers facing a stillborn African independence, and a decisive rhetoric that constantly militated against the ideal of black unity, Ngugi's play caused so much discomfort to the new rulers that its run at the Ugandan National Theatre was short-lived (162).

Secondly, one significant literary event which has shaped his career as a writer is the African Writers Conference held at Makerere University in June 1962 which I have talked about earlier in Ngugi's education and studentship in chapter three. It is in this historic, literary gathering that the burgeoning African writer met the Nigerian Chinua Achebe, seeking for his intellectual and editorial advice on the manuscript of his novel *Weep Not, Child*. Equally pertinent, he also wrote *The Black Messiah* earlier; a title, which was subsequently changed to *The River Between*. It was the first written Ngugi's novel but second in order of publication.

Writings After Makerere

When Ngugi triumphantly graduated from Makerere University in 1964, he worked momentarily as a columnist for Daily Nation, Sunday Nation and the Nairobi Daily Nation. On 16th August 1964 for example, he wrote an article for Sunday Nation titled "Now the Emphasis must Be On Co-opts". In this article, Ngugi laments at the consequences of short-term agricultural solutions such as distributing tiny parcels of land instead of creating large cooperative farm. What is more, he also wrote a commentary for Daily Nation 18 August 1964 on lack of teachers which created a continuing dependence on expatriate teachers who could not help injecting the prejudices of an alien ideology into student's minds. Ngugi also adds that the education of women and girls deserves more attention in order to foster gender equality and in particular to redress the widespread and growing imbalance between the rich and poor, the educated and uneducated (Lovesey 54).

Writings and Literary Experiences at Leeds University London

As Alliance and Makerere, the significance of Leeds to the growth of Ngugi's literary writing career cannot be over-emphasised. Albeit he went to Leeds University for his postgraduate studies, in 1964, there are however, at least, two prime motives that invited him there. First is to fill in the literary vacuum created by the Makerere department of English, which for him and at the time he was an undergraduate student was "probably typical of all English departments in Europe or Africa (*Moving the Centre* 6), for studying English literary texts from Chaucer, Spencer and Shakespeare up to twentieth century of T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Wilfred Owen in preference to the Third World literature produced in other parts of the world. Secondly, Ngugi's deep interest to study at Leeds grew, owing to the earlier presence of some of the famous African writers, the likes of Wole Soyinka and some other Makerere students such as Peter Nazareth, Grant Kamenju, and Pio Zirimu, all of whom had their



postgraduate studies there. Then there was the Commonwealth Literature Conference held earlier in the year, before Ngugi's arrival. For him, "there had to be something at the university of Leeds and I felt that I had to go there to get my share" (*Moving the Centre: the Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* 7).

At Leeds, Ngugi, in a bid to fill in the Makerere literary vacuum, chose to undertake his thesis research on Caribbean Literature and he was supervised by Douglas Grant. He focused on the theme of exile and identity in Caribbean literature with particular reference to the work of Gorge Lemming. Ngugi quickly discovered at Leeds that there was as he puts it "something worthwhile beyond the traditional location of the European imagination"(8), lacking at Makerere. What elated him most was the establishment of an area of study called Commonwealth Literature, the creation of the first chair in Commonwealth studies and its first occupant was Professor Walsh and the launching of the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. In 1965 *The River Between*, his second novel was published by Heinemann.

Another exquisite literary experience that Ngugi had at Leeds was his introduction into the writings of the West-Indian Algerian born writer Franz Fanon by Grant Kamanju, particularly to his influential text *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), which resulted in Ngugi's radicalization. Similarly, he was also exposed to the writings of Karl Marx and Engels. Consequently, he became an undisguised detractor of colonialism and Christianity. In their celebrated book *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: An Exploration of His Writings*, Cook and Odenimpe describes this phase in Ngugi's writing as a period of maturing vision, a focus on the Mau Mau, capitalism, socialism and nationalism (13), as reflected in his third novel *A Grain of Wheat* written at Leeds, published in 1967, the year he returned to Kenya. Prior to that, he had published his second play in English, *This Time Tomorrow*, which as he writes in *Decolonizing the Mind*, "*This Time Tomorrow*, written in 1966, was about the eviction of workers from near the centre of Nairobi to keep the city clean for tourists" (43). For Gikandi, *The Black Hermit* and *This Time Tomorrow*, which he depicts as Ngugi's early plays are concerned about "the conflict between the modern subject emerging from colonial institutions such as the university and the church striving to connect with old traditions, only to discover that more often than not, the ideas of nationhood are at odds with "tribal" affiliations and practices" (166). It is a play in sum, which portrays the growing alliance between the black African leaders and their white mentors in Europe in the era of neo-colonialism. It was broadcast live in 1967 by the British Broadcasting Co-operation, the BBC. This is why Gikandi argues it was written for the BBC (174).

Writings at University of Nairobi and North-western University

On returning home from Leeds, Ngugi became a lecturer in English at the University Collage, Nairobi in 1967. Soon enough, his Leeds escapades inspired him to be deeply involved in a project over the abolition of English Department at the University of Nairobi and replaced it instead, with the Department of African Literature and Languages. He, Henry Owuor-Anyumba and Taban Lo Liyong his teachers, wrote a paper titled "On the Abolition of English Department", presented at the 42nd meeting of the Arts Faculty Board on 20th September, 1968, questioning the role and status of English Department in an African situation and environment. This is because as they argue "the primary duty of any literature is to illuminate the spirit animating a people, to show how it meets new challenges, and to investigate possible areas of development and involvement" (*Homecoming* 146). What is more, they suggested a new name for the department and as they argue further the change "is



not a change of name only, their goal was to establish the centrality of Africa in the department” (150). The new curriculum they proposed includes “a study of Kenyan and East African literature, African literature, third world literature and literature for the rest of the world” (*Decolonizing the Mind* 94). There is Orature or oral literature too, which for Ngugi “has its roots in the lives of the peasantry. It is primarily their compositions, their songs, and their art, which forms the basis of the national and resistance culture during the colonial and neo-colonial times”. “We three lecturers were therefore calling for the centrality of peasant and worker heritage in the study of literature and culture”(95) in the university. On the whole, the project’s aims are encapsulated in the following standpoint of the three:

We reject the primacy of English literature and cultures. The aim, in short, should be to orientate ourselves towards placing Kenya, East Africa and then Africa in the centre. All things are to be considered in the relevance of our situation and their contribution towards understanding ourselves..... In suggesting we are not rejecting other streams, especially the western stream, we are only clearly mapping out the direction and perspectives the study of culture and literature will inevitably take in an African university (94).

Consequently, the proposal had a serious setback as it created a division between the academic community and the students, as a result of Government’s interference with academic freedom in the university. Ngugi resigned in 1969 (Killam V). From 1970-71, Ngugi became a visiting Associate Professor at Northwestern University, in the United State of America. He continued writing his fourth novel *Petals of Blood* which he had begun at Evanston Illinois.

Writings Again at the University College Nairobi

Ngugi returned to the University College, Nairobi in 1971. In 1972, he published *Homecoming*, his first critical book essays on African and Caribbean literature which underscores the historical events of pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial Kenya in his three early novels: *Weep Not, Child*, *The River Between* and *A Grain of Wheat*; the role of historical past to the African writers and a critique of Caribbean literature, with so much emphasis on Gorge Lamming’s works. A year later, in 1973, Ngugi was promoted to a Senior Lecturer and Head of the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi. In 1975, he published *Secret Lives*: a collection of short stories. In the Preface to the collection, Ngugi writes that the stories constitute his creative biography, which touch on ideas and moods that affected him when he was writing his early novels and in addition, writing generally is an attempt to understand himself and his situation in society and history. "The themes one finds in the stories and the order he imposes on them" as Killam writes, “reflect Ngugi’s development as a novelist” (74). Secondly, “the stories deal with the nature of and moral worth of various aspects of original Gikuyu culture, the effect of Christian teaching both in schools and the churches on the quality of African life; of the development of capitalism, class-consciousness and human alienation as new Kenya develops out of independence struggle”. Consequently, “political Africa in the widest sense is the background to the stories and what happens to the characters in the stories can be taken for what is happening in the land” (74). In 1976, he published *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi*, a play, which he co-authored with Micere Mugo. Simon Gikandi discloses the rationale behind writing the play. For him, it was written as Ngugi’s response “against what David Cohen, has called the economy debate on the meaning of the Kenyan past” (162). In *The Combing History*, Cohen encapsulates this historical debate:



Since the midst of the Mau Mau experiences of the 1950s, what Mau Mau was, what it means, how it was individually and collectively experienced, whether its ideals and objectives were abandoned or carried on, and by whom for what ends have been the most captivating questions in Kenyan political, theatre, and literature. In the early 1980s, the debates had reached the point where lawsuits were being filed among combative Kenyan historians. By the 1990s, it had become clear that the question of “whether or not Mau Mau was betrayed has since the 1950s been the core motor of production of Kenyan historiography joining questions of social justice with debates arising from the inspection of fresh layers of material from archives and memoirs (60).

This might be the reason why in *An Introduction to the Writings of Ngugi* (1980) published earlier, Killam argues that it is a play which attempts “to restore the character of Kimathi to his legitimate place in history of Kenya” (86). Nine years later, Chidi Amuta comments that “based on the actual trial of Dedan Kimathi in 1956 by the British colonialist authorities, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* explodes its specific historical prediction to become a gigantic metaphor of the history of struggle among the African peoples in the past and present, as well as a way of envisioning a future of triumph for patriotic and progressive forces” (158). This Ngugi corroborates in *Decolonizing the Mind* that in 1976 I had collaborated with Micere Mugo in writing *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. In the preface to the published script we had written, what amounted to a literary manifesto calling for a radical change in the attitude of African writers to fight with the people against imperialism and class enemies of the people. We called for a revolutionary theatre facing the consequent challenge: how to truly depict the masses in the only historically correct perspective: positively and historically and as the true makers of history” (43).

Thus, it is not astounding when Gikandi concludes that *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is an attempt by Ngugi to intervene in the debate on the Kenya’s historiography (162).

The year 1977 is a turning point in Ngugi’s literary writing career owing to not only the publication of *Petals of Blood* in English as a novel, and the performance of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* or *I Will Marry When I Want* a play, which eventually led to his imprisonment, but also it marked the memorable moment, when he began to write in his native language, Gikuyu. Ngugi’s fourth novel, *Petals of Blood* was ultimately completed at Yalta, in Soviet Union, where Ngugi was invited as a guest, by the Soviet Writers Union. He expresses his escapades of writing the novel:

Petals of Blood was written over a period of six years, 1970 to 1975, with a spill over into 1976. It was a hard day’s journey: in the course of writing it, I would sometimes see myself riding on clouds of sheer excitement. But most were times when I felt totally fed up with drudgery, the boredom and the frustration of writing it: How did I ever come to be involved in this madness of putting words together to form stories? How did I ever get caught in this indulgence of fiction (*Writers in Politics* 95).

Written in English and littered with Gikuyu and Swahili words, it is a novel, whose publication as some critics argue marked a paradigm shift in Ngugi’s ideology and vision. Here, it was a writer who abandoned Christianity and hugged Marxism. The novel’s major preoccupation is the diabolical effects of imperialism in its neo-colonial stage, as Kenya and by extension Africa as a whole is now ruled by the blacks, who are but mere agents of the former colonisers, that indirectly control Kenya and by extension, Africa at large through



their overseers. This as Ngugi portrays becomes successful through economic bodies such as the IMF and World Bank whose conspiratorial policies constantly impoverish the African nations. What degenerates the situation is capitalism, owing to the presence of Europe's innumerable multilateral co-operations that cart away its resources which it much needs to compete with Europe.

The script of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* was written by Ngugi in collaboration with Mugo wa Miiri. This is why in *Barrel of A Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-colonial Kenya*, Ngugi reveals that "although the script was drafted by Ngugi wa Mirii and I, the peasants and workers added to it, making the end product a far cry from the original draft. Everything was collective, open and public, and it was fascinating to see a unity gradually emerged virtually rubbing out distinctions of age, education, sex and nationality" (42). Simon Gikandi comments on the production and performance of the play:

Indeed if the performance of Ngugi's first Gikuyu play, *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, is now heralded as a radical development in his writing career, it is not because the writing of the drama marked the first time he had produced work in his native tongue; rather, this play was to mark a turning point in the author's aesthetic ideology because it enabled him to overcome the boundary separating him from his audience and his text from its context. For Ngugi, the collective generation of this play pointed a way out of the prison house of European languages and culture, and thus of his own education, experience, and vocation (161).

The play was performed at Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre which Ngugi subsequently joined, following repeated pleas by the people in his community through a woman messenger who came to his house for four consecutive Sundays:

Early one morning in 1976, a woman from Kamirithu village came to my house and she went straight to the point: we hear you have a lot of education and that you write books. Why don't you and others of your kind give some of that education to the village? We don't want the whole amount; just a little of it, and a little of your time. There was a youth centre in the village, she went on, and it was falling apart. It needed a group effort to bring it back to life. Would I be willing to help? I said I would think about it. In those days, I was the chairman of the Literature Department at the University of Nairobi but I lived near Kamiriithu Limuru, about thirty or so kilometres from the capital city. I used to drive to Nairobi and back daily except on Sundays. So, Sunday was the best time to catch me at home. She came the second, the third and the fourth consecutive Sundays with the same request in virtually the same words. That was how I joined others in what was later to be called Kamirithu Community Education and Cultural Centre (*Decolonizing the Mind* 34).

The research on the script of the play as Ngugi reveals, the writing of its outline, the reading and discussions of the outline, the auditions and rehearsals, as well as the constructions of the open-air theatre took in all about nine months. "The results of all this effort to evolve an authentic language of African theatre were obvious when the play opened to a paying audience on 2 October, 1977. The performances once again were timed for Sunday afternoons. The play was an immediate success, with people coming from afar, even in hired buses and taxis to see the show" (57), at times in rain. Suddenly, on 16 November 1977, the Kenyatta government banned further public performances of the play by withdrawing the public gathering license at the centre. Ngugi was arrested on 31 December 1977 and was imprisoned at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison, the largest prison in Kenya, for what the



government interpreted as an attempt to inspire the down-trodden masses, to rebel against it and its policies. Ngugi describes in *Detained: A Writers Prison Diary*, his apprehension process on that memorable day:

On the morning of 31 December 1977, at about 10 o'clock, a man who identified himself as Mr. Muhindi Munene, and who I much later came to learn was the senior assistant commissioner of police, Nairobi area, and also the detainee's security officer, served me with a detention order signed by Mr. Daniel Arab Moi as the then minister for Home Affairs. A few minutes later I was treated to a most incredible if slightly ludicrous show of psychological terror. I was truculently handcuffed by a gruff unsmiling policeman, shoved into a vehicle between two armed men with a rifle and a machine-gun and seemingly at the ready for a combat, and was then whisked off across Nairobi to the gates of my detention center. The same gruff, murderous policeman grabbed me by the collar of my shirt and pulled me out of the car. I was handed over to the prison authorities. No words, no questions, no explanation, nothing. I was in cell 16 in an isolation block wedged (184-5).

In a bid to get rid of the emotional trauma, arising from the solitary prison life and mounting boredom, Ngugi resolved "to find way of keeping with his sanity" (98). Consequently, "writing a novel was one way" (98) and he had planned to finish the Gikuyu version of his fourth novel *Caitani Mutharabaini* or *Devil on the Cross* in English which he wrote in the toilet paper at Kamiti. Ngugi spent one year in detention and he was released in 1978 unconditionally. He was denied jobs, and was banned from the premises of schools and colleges (*Moving the Centre* 102). In 1980, he published *Ngaahika Ndeenda* and *Caitani Mutharabaini*. In 1981 his prison memoir, *Detained: A Writers Prison Diary* was published. The book is a nostalgia of his prison life escapade and the raison d'être for his arrest by Jomo Kenyatta's government which is comprehensively explored. However, Gikandi holds the view that "*Detained*" is a utopian memoir because it seeks to resurrect the heroes of Kenyan nationalism who are out of place in the postcolonial order of things. Its material and psychic condition of production, however, calls into question the efficacy of such efforts. Ngugi's desire for a romance of national resistance is overwhelmed by the feeling that something beautiful, something like the promise of a new dawn had been betrayed and their presence and situation at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison was a logical outcome of that historical betrayal" (207). He also published in this year, another collection of essays *Writers in Politics*. In the preface to the book, Ngugi states the goals of the essays:

These essays were written between 1970 and 1980 and they reflect some of the issues that dominated my mind in the seventieth, but which can be summed up in the question: what is the relevance of literature to life? The search for relevance immersed me in my ideological debates ranging from questions of culture and education to those of language, literature and politics. The search also saw me move from an intense involvement in the Department of Literature and its many lively debates and activities at the University of Nairobi, to an equally intense involvement in the cultural life of peasants and workers in Limuru. For me, it was a decade of tremendous change: towards the end, I had ceased being a teacher and had become a student at the feet of the Kenyan peasant and worker. The result was my departure from Afro-Saxon literature in order to reconnect myself with the patriotic traditions of a national literature and culture rooted among the people. This change was reflected in my writing of the decade; at the beginning of the seventieth I had started *Petals of Blood*, in English, but towards the end of the seventieth I had completed *Caitaini Mutharabaini*, in Gikuyu



language. In the field of theatre, the period saw my collaboration with Micere Mugo in the writing of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* in English, to my collaboration with Ngugi wa Mirii in the scripting of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* in Gikuyu. The period also saw my being hauled from professional heights at the University of Nairobi to a dungeon in Kamiti Maximum Security Prison (i).

Ngugi yet suffered another artistic frustration, when in 1982 he was denied permission by the Kenyan authorities to perform another Gikuyu Play, *Maitu Njugirao* at the Kenyan National Theatre, to celebrate the same kind of history in the *Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. The police shut the theatre and later President Daniel Arab Moi sent truckloads of armed policemen to raise to the ground the Kamirithu open theatre (*Moving the Centre* 175). However, two significant developments in connection with Ngugi's literary career was the publication in the year the English version of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* or *I Will Marry When I Want*. In his influential masterpiece *Theory of African Literature: Implication for Practical Criticism* Chidi Amuta argues that *I Will Marry When I Want* is an "attempt to dramatize, in plain terms the reality of the exploitation of the workers by an evil alliance of foreign capital and indigenous middlemen under the guise of economic development. The manipulation of people's consciousness is designed by Christian religious propaganda. The overriding message of the play then, is the nature of capitalist exploitation and its implication in everyday facet of life among members of different classes in society (162-3). It is a play which as Ngugi puts it "reflected the contemporary social conditions of the people, as well as their history of resistance became popular" (*Moving the Centre* 92). What is more, for Gikandi, "with the writing and performance of *I Will Marry When I Want*, Ngugi was finally able to achieve his aesthetic ambition to overcome the gap that separated his art. More than any other of Ngugi's works, this play was going to function as something other than the depository of knowledge about the postcolonial situation, a knowledge that would be presented to a passive by an elite writer, on the contrary, the author and his collaborators were now seeking a form in which knowledge could be produced through enactment. This shift from observation to action was implicit in Ngugi's critique of his previous works, including *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, which is considered to be one of his most radical plays" (185).

Writings in Exile

Ngugi was forced to an impromptu exile in 1982 by the government of Daniel Arab Moi, when he came to Britain to "promote" as he puts it, the English translation version of his Gikuyu novel *Caatani Mutharaabaini* or *Devil on the Cross*, originally written in Gikuyu at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison in 1978. Ngugi's earlier resolution was to return to Kenya as soon as he completed the job. However on returning to his hotel room one day he was startled to find an urgent coded message from Kenya that a red carpet awaited him at Jomo Kenyatta airport on his return. This he subsequently confirmed that he would be arrested and detained again without trail which might be worse than the previous arrest he had experienced. So, he was forced into an exile, first in Britain from 1982 to 1989 and later in the USA from 1989 to 2002. Hence, the famous African writer became what he describes as a 'wanderer'. He lived and worked in several places, including Yale University, as a Visiting Professor in USA. For Ngugi, although he was far away from home, "But there is Kenya he always carried with him, a Kenya that nobody, not even dictator Moi could take from him" (*Moving the Centre* 174).



Ngugi was inspired to write *Devil on the Cross* by the Southern Korean poet Kim Chi Ha I's *Five Bandits and Groundless Rumours*, where he exploits the oral form and images to confront the South Korean neo-colonial realities. So, he concluded that satire was one of the most effective weapons of oral traditions. This fact he does not conceal in *Penpoints Gunpoints and Dreams* that "in my Gikuyu novels I once again drew largely on orature" (124). Consequently, an idea struck him that he should tell a story of men "who had sold their souls and that of the nation to the foreign devil of imperialism". In other words he should tell a story of robbers who take pride in robbing the masses" (*Decolonizing the Mind* 81), His fifth novel *Devil on the Cross* "written at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison in cell No.16", as Ngugi reveals "is an attempt to reconnect myself to the community from which I had been brutally cut by the neo-colonial regime of Kenya (*Moving the Centre* 103).

In 1983, he published another collection of essays *Barrel of Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-colonial Kenya*, which responds to the atmosphere of repression and domination in Kenya. In the collection, Ngugi argues that the defence of national culture and national identity is central in the overall struggle against regimes of repression and imperialist domination. Three years later, he published his sixth novel *Matigari*, on October 1986, which also drew its material heavily from oral literature as Ngugi emphasises that "the clearest and most deliberate drawing on features of oral narrative is in my novel *Matigari*" (*enpoint Gunpoint and Dreams* 124), for which reason Gikandi reminds us its first salient feature is its "indebtedness to Gikuyu folktale" (277). "It is a story of a wanderer in search of social justice in a postcolonial society"(124). What is more, *Matigari* is a novel that thought to reconceptualise the relation between art and reality; its major success as a novel would come to depend on its capacity not merely to represent reality but to create it and it differs from Ngugi's "prior novels by its complete evacuation of the authoritative narrative voice." (Gikandi 226). The aftermath of the publication of this novel was the reports that reached President Moi that peasant were talking about a man called *Matigari* who was going round Kenya demanding for truth and justice. He ordered for the immediate apprehension of this man. When it was afterwards discovered that *Matigari* was only a character in a book, there came another order, this time for the arrest not the character, but of the book and its removal from the bookshops in Nairobi, as well as the publisher's warehouse. Ngugi's celebrated collection of essays *Decolonizing the Mind the Politics of Language in African Literature* was also published in this year. In the Statement section, Ngugi declares that the book is a farewell to English as a vehicle of his writings and "from now on it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way" (xiii). Furthermore, it a summary of the some of the issues in which he has been passionately involved for the last twenty years of his practice in fiction, theatre, criticism and in teaching literature. Hence, the book is a part of a continuing debate about the destiny of Africa (1).

Ngugi published more collection of essays in 1993, *Moving the Centre: A Struggle for Cultural Freedom* and in 1998, *Penpoints Gunpoints and Dreams: Towards A Critical Theory of the Arts and State in Africa*. One of *Moving the Centre*'s primary concerns is freeing the world cultures from the restrictive walls of neo-colonialism, class race and gender. Moreso, it also examines issues such as the importance of language to national identity, the effects of globalisation and Ngugi's hope for united Africa. *Penpoints Gunpoints and Dreams* discusses the role of the writer in contemporary African society and the complex relationship between art and the state.



Writings after Exile

Ngugi's exile formally came to an end in 2002, for which reason he delivered in July 2004, two memorial lectures at the University of Nairobi, the University of Dar-es-Salam at Tanzania, as well as the University of Kampala Uganda, his *alma mater* subsequently in August 2004, to mark his return home following twenty-two years in exile. However, the night after the Makerere lecture was a memorable catastrophe to the famous African writer. "Hired gun-men broke into his apartment" at midnight and attacked him. Worst, they raped his wife and stole the computer that contained the lecture. For Ngugi, he and his better-half "narrowly escaped death" (*Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*). Consequently, Ngugi and his beloved wife fled to the United States the next day, where they have been living up to today. This questions the formal end of Ngugi's exile, as some critics argue that the celebrated African writer's exile life is far from over, hence, controversial.

During this time, Ngugi's third Gikuyu novel *Murogi wa Kagogo* and the seventh of his novels was published in 2004 and its English version *Wizard of the Crow*, the bulkiest of all his novels, was published in 2006. By the time Ngugi wrote *Wizard of the Crow*, Nichollas argues, the legendary African writer has "developed a reflexive but non-mimetic theory of artistic creativity that is grounded in social freedoms" (185). In this novel, "social repression potentially inhabits creative expression, if the artist chooses not to oppose it" (185). The whole novel is thus what Nichollas calls the "maturation of Ngugi's vision of the corrupt state". (186). For Dalleo M, the novel is not "as obviously about education as some Ngugi's earlier novels, it centres instead on a different metaphor for the intellectual as postcolonial" "witch doctor" (147). However, according to Professor Njogu Waita of Chuka University Kenya, *Wizard of the Crow*, "compared to *Matigari* represents a more advanced oral narrative. While it opens with the traditional oral narrative formula *Ugai i tha*, the narrator requests the audience to clean up their ears, so that they can hear this (new) narrative in the spirit of those who are gone, those who are alive, and future generation" (87).

Two more collection of essays were published by Ngugi in 2009. These are *Re-memembering Africa* and *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*. Re-memembering Africa is the title of the Nairobi Ford Foundation lecture that he gave at the University of Nairobi at Kenya and the University of Darussalam at Tanzania, in July 2004 to mark his return to Kenya following twenty-two years in exile. In the essays, Ngugi unveils the importance of memory in explaining and renewing contemporary Africa. Similarly, the first three chapters of *Something Torn and New* as Ngugi reveals, originated as the Macmillan-Stewart Lectures, which he delivered at the Dubois Institute of African and African-American studies in March 2006 and at the University of Nairobi in January 2007 as part of East African Educational publishers launch of the Kenyan edition of his novel *Wizard of the Crow*. "Ngugi argues that there is no region, no culture, no nation that has not been affected by colonialism and its aftermath. Indeed, modernity can be considered a product of colonialism", hence, "this book speaks to the decolonization of modernity" (xi).

In 2010 and 2012, Ngugi published two more memoirs that have become globally popular. The first is *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir*. The book explores the childhood life and escapades of Ngugi, his family status before and after he was born, how he and his entire family struggled and suffered during colonialism. The second is *In the House of Interpreter: A Memoir*. Although the book focuses on Ngugi's educational life, bitter experiences, hard struggle, and challenges, this school memoir captures the power of



education, the rootedness of kin and the need to transform the colonialist narrative. Ngugi also published in 2012 *Globalectics: Theory and Politics of Knowing*. In her review of the book published at the *International Dialogue: A multidisciplinary Journal of World Affairs*, Annika Hughes argues that the “book is multidisciplinary in scope, as it deals squarely with continued need to decolonize theory from its traditional heritage and open it up for globalectical discourse” (142). In the words of Ngugi, “globalectics embraces wholeness, interconnectedness, equality of potentiality of parts, tension and motion. In other words, globalectics is a way of thinking and relating to the world, particularly, in the era of globalism and globalization” (8). Finally, his latest book *Birth of a Dream Weaver: A Memoir of Writer’s Awakening* was published in November 2016. The memoir explores the beginning of Ngugi’s creative output which covers the four years he spent at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, during which he found his voice as a journalist, short story writer, playwright, and novelist.

To conclude, Douglas and Rowe encapsulate Ngugi’s development as a writer, which as they argue has evolved through stages. The first stage extends from 1960-1964, the year he graduated from Makerere, and marked by the formative influence of Gikuyu social and cultural tradition, Christianity and western liberal thought. The second stage from his arrival at Leeds in 1964 to his involvement to the Kamiriithu festival at Limuru in 1976 was influenced decisively by his introduction to Marxim Franz Fanon Pan-Africanism and the cause of black solidarity through his study of West Indian writing and awareness of the black power movement in the US. This period was characterised by his increasing disillusionment with bourgeoisie nationalism. In the third period, which extends from 1976 onward, the disillusionment is complete and Ngugi lost all hope of improving things in Kenya and in Africa except through total revolution brought about by the peasant masses. The turning point in his intellectual and emotional life was joining the Kamiriithu Cultural Centre in 1977. His theoretical leftism now assumes a concrete shape and the change is nothing less than a spiritual conversion. Ngugi’s realisation that he has nothing to teach and everything to learn from the Kenyan peasants marks the end of the alienating influence of colonial education. One result of this change is his resolution to write in the language of his people. Another is an increasing reliance on the theatre rather than the novel for creating revolutionary awareness (176).

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it is crystal-clear that Ngugi, who has joined the African literary writing queue after Achebe, Soyinka and others have dramatically emerged as a dynamic popular African writer within 85 years much more than any other writer. With four plays, seven novels and innumerable book essays that outstrip the number of plays and novels he has written put together, demystifying his social vision, artistic mission and dynamism, it marks him out not only encyclopaedic, but also an extraordinary African literary writer in the African literary map.



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