



CLASS STRUCTURE, SOCIAL RELATIONS AND DIALECTICS OF THE CLASS STRUGGLE: A MARXIST READING OF NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S *PETALS OF BLOOD*

**Emmanuel Akaana Tarhamba (Ph.D)¹, Michael Otebo Osori¹ and
Emmanuel Agbu Envoh²**

¹Department of Arts, Nasarawa State Polytechnic Lafia

²Department of Languages, Nasarawa State Polytechnic Lafia

ABSTRACT: *The novel has become the predominant creative work for analyzing and commenting upon life of a people at a given time. It is a kind of portable mirror which conveys or reflects the socio-political and economic aspects of life of a given society. It also enlarges our understanding of life generally. This paper examined the role of literature in a dysfunctional and conflictual social system. It critiqued Ngugi's Petals of Blood in its Marxist ideological posture. Findings revealed that, in every social organization, conflict or class struggle is rooted in the prevailing mode of production and that economy is the ultimate determinant of all other aspects of life. The paper then concluded that, conflict or struggle will continue to manifest in capitalist societies so long there is income inequality due to unequal distribution of resources.*

KEYWORDS: Class Structure, Dialectics, Class struggle

INTRODUCTION

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is an African writer-novelist, playwright, literary, social and political critic whose voice of protest for social justice is heard throughout the world. Through his numerous plays, novels and essays, he has consistently positioned himself as an advocate for the ordinary peasants and workers in Kenya, Africa and the oppressed the world over.

His earliest novels, *Weep Not Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), written before Kenya's independence examine the colonial past in Kenya. In these works, Ngugi sees freedom from colonial hegemony as a prelude to the realization of the African of his potential. That is, he tries to encourage the African to liberate himself from colonialism and its continuing constraints on his mind maintaining that the worst colonialism is the colonization of the mind that undermines one's dignity and confidence. This position converges with that of Chinua Achebe who asserts that his concern as a writer is to teach and educate his society to regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement (279). Ignorance, prejudices, hate and exploitation are some of the obstacles that would have to be removed if the African is to be liberated. Expressing the same vies, Fanon puts it poignantly, 'I seriously hope to persuade my brother to tear off with all his strength the shameful livery put together by centuries of incomprehension' (25).

Petals of Blood has attracted wide ranging critical comments – sociological, formalistic, structural, archetypal, explication of the thematic strands, the analysis of its stylistic and



language features, among others. An analysis of the class structure, social relations and author's social vision in the novel, an area that we consider has not been given adequate consideration by critics is also necessary considering the peculiar problems of Africa with its crushing poverty, leadership problem, crass ignorance, corruption and underdevelopment. Critiquing works aimed at addressing these issues is most beneficial and holds a lot of promise to the exploited masses in the post-colonial African society. This is because the work would prompt the exploited peasants and workers into taking up arms to undertake a complete overhaul of the economic and political structures that oppress and dehumanize them.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts Marxist revolutionary theory (dialectical materialist theory) propounded by Marx and Engels as its theoretical base. This theory seeks to understand literature from the perspective of historical materialism. It pays attention to class struggle in society and draws attention to unfair and exploitative conditions seeking to reverse the system and entrust a greater portion of societies wealth in the hands of each officers. Marxist writers therefore encourage a revolutionary spirit, a call to the people to rise and take back what belongs to them as the only reasonable way to change history and achieve prosperity. Eagleton explains that "the aim of Marxist literary criticism is to explain the literary work more fully and this means a sensitive attention to its form, style and meaning and as a product of a particular history" (108).

The Marxist theory is preferred for this study for the fact that products of history can only be analyzed fully if the experience of the people, their political and economic relations and other social systems are all examined. Again, being a class approach to the study of social phenomena becomes vital, vital for a correct analysis and interpretation of the complicated and contradictory issues within African social system. Therefore, the adoption of this theory would help us to examine the revolutionary elements in *Petals of Blood* with emphasis on class and dialectics of class struggle to achieve the idealized and harmonious society of our dream from the view point of Marx and Engels. The discourse presupposes that there is a lot of affinity between ideology (Marxism in this case) and the African novel genre.

Class Structure, Social Relations and Dialectics of the Class Struggle: A Marxist Reading of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*

Classes arise when societies are socially divided based on status, wealth or control of social production and distribution while other sociologists and writers assign classes on the basis of criteria such as occupation, income, education and place of residence. Marx sees class in economic terms as a social group whose members share the same relationship to the forces of production. Classes have their own political ideology and morality which promotes their interest. It is this contrasting nature of class interests that is the source of class struggle in a capitalist society. Marx emphasizes that class struggle leads to social change.

The class structure in the world of *Petals of Blood* consists of two broad social classes typified by certain characters. These classes are capitalists – the Europeans, Asians and African elites on the one hand and the African proletariat on the other. The African workers, peasants and women are the proletariats. The presence of the Europeans and Asians in Kenya has made the history of Kenya one of racial tension and quarrel, one of African people



feeling they have been rejected and subjugated to a certain class and position when they are the actual producers of wealth that feeds, clothes and houses everyone in Kenya in addition to the one that goes out of the country for export. The relationship between these classes is therefore antagonistic and conflictual. The struggle for improved welfare and to recover their land and of the members of the delegation for the release of Karega among others as recorded in the text attest to this binary opposition between the classes.

Ngugi interprets the class struggle in the novel along the Marxist line. The struggle is as a result of the conduct of the power elite in their relationship with the lower classes. He regards the Kenyan power elite; - the businessmen, intellectuals, and the traditional rulers, among others as accomplices that have failed the Kenyan masses because they are obsessed with wealth and property and forget the plight of the ordinary people, thereby abandoning them to providence and charity.

Therefore, as a work that attempts to redress societal imbalance, the socio-economic and political structures on which the novel rests are very clearly spelt out. First, the mutilation of land by both colonial and post-colonial oppressors is done through the aid of religion, cultural and educational institutions which instill and perpetuate mental slavery of the oppressed and buttress the interest of the oppressors. The choice lands were shared only among the bourgeois at the expense of the poor masses. The farmers were forced to mark out their land and mortgage them with loans linked to the success of their harvests. As the quality of the harvest wavers and unable to march their loan repayment, many were forced to sell their land. In addition, the arable lands were appropriated by the giant multi-national corporations for the purposes of establishing their plantations and factories at the expense of the poor masses. Consequently, the peasants are further impoverished and their ecology and environment further degraded. As a response to this deplorable state of affairs, Ngugi is providing a salient critique of the post-colonial economy-that workers do resist the post-colonial leadership's naked robbery. The conflict of the poor and the rich in Kenya has been transposed to the conflict between the developed and the underdeveloped countries.

Abdulla in the novel symbolizes the betrayal of the people who had fought for Kenya's independence with the hope that things would be better after gaining the independence. Maimed, imprisoned and later released on independence, he expresses tremendous hope in the new Kenya where jobs and land will be freely available. According to him, "No longer would I see the face of the Whiteman laughing at our effort... And the Indian trader with his obscenities... kumanyo komwivi... he too would go. Factories, tea and coffee estates would belong to us, Kenya people" (253). However, all these hopes are eventually dashed as he laments: "I waited for land reforms and redistribution, I waited for a job" (254). Capitalism took over when colonization bowed out of the scene. It was only a change of drivers and not a change of direction. Unfortunately, this ugly scene still permeates most contemporary African nations where the comprador bourgeoisies in collaboration with international organizations, business organizations, retired army generals and police chiefs own large expanses of land, thus depriving the peasants of their own legacy and means of livelihood. This phenomenon of corruption has become a motif in most contemporary African novels.

Ngugi posits further that English language was another vehicle through which colonial masters in Kenya held Kenyan prisoner. He condemns the imposition of English language on Kenyans and by extension, Africa maintaining that this system of reduction will produce Kenyans who would be disconnected from the values of their nature culture who would be



neither complete Kenyan nor Europeans or a creator who is neither a complete African nor European. He concludes that, this colonial system produced the kind of education which nurtured subservience, self-hatred and mutual suspicion.

David Rubadiri argues in the same vein by describing the colonial education as a 'pot plant able to grow in its own confined boundary, but failing to take root and nourishment from mother earth itself' (20). That is, colonial education was only for the sake of carrying out duties designated by colonial masters and not to enable Africans to come to terms with the realities of their own immediate environment. Ngugi also believes that, colonial indoctrination would penetrate the entire sense and psyche of the African and that in the years following independence, the African would consequently exhibit negative traits of behavior in many situations true to it. It is the African elite who absolved the culture of capitalism that has continued to loot and plunder the wealth of their countries. This has today become part of Africa's heritage and major challenge to social development.

Furthermore, in his search for a turn-around, Ngugi, like the Zimbabwean writer, Charles Mungoshi, turned for his native language, Gikuyu in the creative redirection of his people's predicaments. He feels that writing in Gikuyu is the articulation of politics that seeks to include those who have no access to power and whose voices are simply ignored or worse, erased since they are not speakers of English. His farewell to English is not an abrupt break with his past but rather a conclusion arrived at many years of serious political engagement. It was his increasingly radical turning away from alien scale of values and to vindicate his deepening commitment to indigenous African culture that in 1970, Ngugi permanently gave up his Christian name, James, in preference to his traditional African name. This action is viewed as a gesture of solidarity with his people at large and a break-away from European culture and literary tradition which have swamped much of Africa's heritage.

Ngugi also comments clearly and vividly on the international dimension of capitalism. Though the novel is set in Kenya, Ngugi, through the benevolent lawyer tells us of life in America. Addressing the delegation of Ilmorog indigenes in Nairobi, the lawyer explains to them his experiences in America: That he saw in the cities of America white people also begging and white women selling their bodies for few dollars. That he saw a lot of unemployment in Chicago and other cities... (165-6). This speech establishes the global nature of capitalist exploitation and reveals too that capitalism is an intercontinental monster that is not only restricted to colonized Africa, Asia and other Third World nations but the rest of the world. In this regard, attempts to crush it must assume collaborative international dimensions. This explains why Marx calls on all workers of the world to unite against it. This is where one wonders if Ngugi can develop the vernacular necessary to build the unity to transcend his national origin and assume a place in the global stage.

In another dimension, even though the journey of the Ilmorog citizens to the city to meet their representative is presented as very arduous, it has brought forth some revelations. Firstly, apart from portraying the organic nature of African society, the action privileges collective experience over individual subjectivity and shows that the people under intense pressure can unite and organize themselves and seek the betterment of their conditions. Secondly, it has opened up Ilmorog to vicious effects of capitalist machination which in turn has led to the foundation for the reorganization of society along socialist line by the formation of trade union activities. This is a necessary stage toward the attainment of socialism because socialism cannot emerge directly from capitalism. For it to emerge, there must be an intense



period of capitalist exploitation and oppression marked by an equally intense maximization of profits, misery and gross impoverishment. Thirdly, the journey reveals the betrayal of government functionaries of the people they purport to represent as portrayed by Nderi Wa Riera and Waweru. Through them, Ngugi criticizes the baseness, the moral and social ineptitude, the depravity and the consciousnessless nature of leaders in a capitalist society. Lastly, except for Nyakinyua, it is the only time that we meet the other peasants like Muriuki, Njuguna, Ruoro, Njogu and Muturi. Similar experiences that depict the direct involvement of the people are hard to come by in the text.

Ngugi views Christian religion as an integral part of colonialism considering its role of cultural subjugation and agent of exploitation, stagnation, deceit and fraud. Though, no direct remark of criticism is expressed against Christianity or even against Rev. Jerrod Brown or Ezekiel Waweru – the two representative Christian characters in the text, their roles make them the most hated. Waweru, Munira's father is portrayed as a man who propagates Christianity because it is rewarding to him and his family (he had acquired wealth and influence exploiting religion). He is said to have taken refuge in religion at the time of Kenya's struggle for independence, denouncing all anti-colonial activities such as Mau Mau oath-taking rituals as the devil's work. Jerrod Brown, a white-washed black man (who had even dropped his native name for the anglicized Jerrod Brown characteristic of early Christian converts in the novels that deal with cultural conflict with the west) who only paid lip service to the tenets of Christianity (offering only spiritual bread of Jesus to the needy as against the very clearly needed bread of the body) and who became one of the first to jump on the "grave train" to Ilmorog not to save souls but to set up a collection center for the American church that sponsors his creative crusade. He reads a sermon to the hungry and sick delegation that makes them look like thoroughly dehumanized persons. His hackneyed and senseless clichés and numerous needless quotations from the Bible anger the delegation the more. For such a man to build a church in Ilmorog is viewed as another commercial enterprise that contributes to the destruction of the village. Here Ngugi is at his best in his employment of Jerrod Brown as an instrument of lashing out oddities and ineffectiveness of the Christian religion. That the same Rev. Jerrod Brown is involved in erecting churches at new Ilmorog which has become a symbol of human graft, slavery and exploitation completes the role of religion as a cog in the wheel of progress.

In line with revolutionary aesthetics, Ngugi has employed a substantial number of women in *Petals of Blood* and imbued them with revolutionary roles. The role of women in this and similar revolutionary struggles is important in that it dissolves the myth of masculine superiority and also wrests them from docility to activism and allows them to complement the role of men in the revolutionary struggle. Ngugi seems to suggest that women, together with the male working class, should fight for freedom of all by working together towards the dismantling of the oppressed capitalist structures.

The revolutionary role of women in this text can be seen firstly from Wanja, one of the major characters. She is presented as a liberated, urbanized, oppressed and exploited woman. Her role in the entire novel is that of a facilitator. Her life as a prostitute allows her greater mobility in and out of the major events in the novel. She symbolizes ruthless exploitation experienced by women of post-colonial Kenya: unemployed, sexually harassed, uneducated, landless, and cut off from the family. The dominant image of Wanja that emerges in the text is that of a victim of economic deprivation and male bourgeois domination and capitalist exploitation by the rich engendered by colonialism. We have seen that her exploitation by a



wealthy Mr Kimeria drives her to prostitution in the first instance. She tells Munira of how she had no choice but to become a bar-attendant- a job description which is synonymous with prostitution in Kenya. She is forced to sell her house to Mzigo and she cannot continue with her mother's business because the licence had been cancelled and subsequently awarded to the multinationals. Through his depiction of Wanjas's trial, Ngugi attempts to make us appreciate the forces that send Wanja to prostitution and how the acquisitive spirit of capitalism twists the relationship between man and woman into relationship of ownership and domination. Although, prostitution is portrayed as a degrading occupation, "a career of always been upon, a career of endless shame and degeneration" (329), it is the main source of capital accumulation available in post-colonial Kenya. Prostitution is thus presented at another level as an indicator of the state of the nation in Kenya. Kenya's position of dependence in the world economy is therefore, likened to prostitution as a social institution. It is a mirror to the economic prostitution of post-colonial Kenya.

Furthermore, Ngugi portrays Nyakinyua, a courageous, wise, strong and exploited woman whose husband was killed in the period of Emergency; her children are landless and therefore disappear from the scene leaving her alone to eke out a living from their impoverished and denuded land. In advanced economies, the aged are usually granted social security scheme, but in Kenya where this is not done, Nyakinyua rather has her land confiscated from her. This shows the lack of concern of the leaders to the people's plight. Her stories of the past, especially of her husband, who resisted colonialism actually provide an authentic history of modern Kenya and encourage the Kenyan people to emulate the people who earlier resisted all forms of oppression. Her courageous attempt to reclaim her land proves that protest and struggle against oppression and dispossession are not exclusive to the young, educated nor the male. Her failure to get back her land through her struggles and protests further illustrates the futility of a lone or an individual struggle and therefore confirms the potency of collective action which she had been denied by the inaction of the other peasants. Her clear understanding of the unified role of the bank, KCO, government and Nderi as agents of exploitation with a common goal puts her above other equally dispossessed peasants.

Revolutionary writers also recognize the central role that violence plays in reshaping capitalist societies. They look at violence as a defence mechanism used by the oppressed. In other words, violence is a structural necessity. As a revolutionary writer, Ngugi has effectively employed violence in *Petals of Blood*. For one, Wanja's edifice, an embodiment of moral decadence, prostitution and exploitation is destroyed to its foundation. Secondly, Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria, who throughout the novel stand as pillars of capitalist exploitation and complicity with foreign capital, are destroyed in one fell swoop. Their destruction is a set-back to capitalist exploitation as the foreigners will find nobody to co-operate with and the remaining Wa Riera will think again before embarking on a systematic re-exploitation of the peasants and workers. In addition, the novel records the presence of a violent group of persons referred to as the Wakombozi or the society of one world Liberation who gunned down a very important person who had profited on the misery of the poor. Violence then has been effectively used in the novel in accordance with revolutionary aesthetics of Marxism.

Fanon in particular must have transformed Ngugi's views on violence for liberation to the nature of neo-colonialism as Fanon's criticism of the national bourgeoisie and his prediction of their neo-colonial mentality find echoes in the post-colonial novels of Ngugi embracing violence as a cardinal imperative in the decolonization process. Ngugi was also influenced by



the failure of the neo-African government that could not deliver the fundamental promise they had made at the height of nationalism.

Historical authenticity which puts the relationship of Literature and History into more realistic perspective is one of the bench-marks of Revolutionary art. In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi traces the various known historical epochs of Kenya: the earliest or pre-colonial period-the period nomads and crop raisers tended their animals and plants and had a few feudal lords who interfered minimally in the people's daily lives; the period of legitimate trade in which Lord Freeze Kilby and his wife established a farm out post in Ilmorog and experimented with few crops. With his house and belongings destroyed, the lonely Lord fled. This marked the period of conquest and resistance in Kenya. This period also witnessed the presence of Indians represented by Ramlagoon Dharamash who opened a trading store in Ilmorog a few years later. Dharamash was sent packing by threats of Ole Masai, the anti-colonial warlord. The mission of Ole Masai was to turn back the forces of imperialism and emancipate the African people. The post-colonial period witnessed the emergence of African elite. The major characters of this period were the famous Dedan Kimathi, Ndingiuri, Abdullah and several other freedom fighters. This era differs from the colonial one only in so far as the major actors were no longer whites but blacks. The period is represented by Wa Reira, Chui, Mzigo, Kimeria and Revered Jerrod Brown, the religious accomplice. Ngugi's careful drawing of these phases of history demonstrates the fact that the beginning of colonial incursion into Africa marked the beginning of capitalist expansion in the continent.

From the above discourse, it could be observed that Ngugi's discussion of revolution is broadly within the Marxist-Leninist tradition but his main point of divergence lies in his discussion of social classes in the revolutionary process. He reinforces the possibilities of revolt in his creation of characters that are positively disposed to revolutionary transformation within the society. But his position in relation to the revolutionary force in Kenya remains blurred. He is not consistent as he seems to shift his opinion in all the three novels (*Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross* and *Matigari*) from the peasant political consciousness to the proletariat as the custodians of the political future. At times, Ngugi seems to be espousing Fanon's theory on the role of the peasants as a decisive force exemplified by the match of the Ilmorog peasants to the city in *Petals of Blood*. And yet, he shifts to the alternatives of the trade union as a vehicle for change. Karega, the brewery worker and trade union worker embodied Ngugi's shift. After organizing with the peasants and workers the march to Nairobi. Karega moves to build a union of the workers and organize strikes for improvement in their working conditions. By this, Ngugi anticipates a socialist revolution through organized labour. The description of the desperate workers shows that Ngugi moves away from Fanon's theory on the urban proletariat as a pampered lot. He does not however, create a distinction between the urban working class and the poor peasants. Ngugi's message seems to suggest the formation of a revolutionary movement consisting of committed intellectuals and the people whether they are peasants or workers in factories. It is this same vision that we find in *Devil on the Cross*, where Muturi rallies the Ilmorog workers to invade the Devil's Feast. Muturi also tries to create political awareness among the workers by organizing them to demand higher pay in Boss Kihara's company.

It can be noted however, that the confrontation between trade unions and ruling regimes is concerned not with altering productive relations and modes of productions of the neo-colonial system but with how much benefit each class is to derive from. In other words, trade union consciousness proceeds from an ideological perspective which does not seek more than



partial and incremental reforms. It does not look beyond them to a sustained effort to pose a radical change to, and therefore to bring about fundamental changes in the status-quo. The problem with trade union consciousness is that, it is not linked with the need to organize the peasantry and the proletariat for revolutionary action. This is where his position diverges from Marx's who believes that the peasants can carry out political action under an urban-based militant. In his later novel *Matigari* Ngugi sees the need for armed struggle to supplement trade union resistance in an attempt to build a socialist state. This ambivalent position of Ngugi seems to have arisen probably from the fact that Kenya society does not afford him a working-class struggle or a literary tradition directed primarily at bringing about socialist transformation. His constant return to the past-to the Mau Mau-war could therefore be linked to his attempt to reconstitute the ideal agents of change and also to debunk the claim by imperialist historian that there was no resistance to colonialism in Africa. His mobilizational structures or change agents are therefore inconsistent with his political thought.

Furthermore, another point raised about the novel is that it is pruned to so much political overtures that it gives the impression that Ngugi is merely using the literary form to "talk politics". Such phrases as "*Aluta Continua, Victoriua Acerta*", "long live the workers struggle", "out with foreign rule policed by colonized black skin,... out with exploitation of our sweet... disband the tyranny of foreign companies and their local messengers", among others are usually cited by critics who maintain this position. These are no doubt revolutionary clichés but they are used at specific instances and by a particular class of characters at the Theng'eta factory where the Ilomorg villagers are agitating for the release of their leader. They are primarily a mob who cannot `but shout slogans in such a way. To make them speak otherwise would have been unrealistic on the part of the novelist.

CONCLUSION

This paper is a critique of Ngugi's revolutionary novel *Petals of Blood* in the light of its portraiture of the issues of class and class struggle. Ngugi blames the state of underdevelopment in the post-independence Kenya to its emergent elite. The nexus between the native (comprador), bourgeoisie and the international bourgeoisie underpinned by the power of capitalism is shown as the cause of the economic impoverishment of the non-elite in post-colonial Kenya. Ngugi therefore provides a constructive alternative of moving the society forward in the right direction through a radical reformation or revolution by the oppressed class.

REFERENCES

- Achebe, Chinua: "The Novelist as Teacher" in *Commonwealth Literature*. (ed). John Press. London: Heinemann, 1965
- Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. Los Angeles: Univeristy of California Press, 1984
- Lemin, V.I. *State and Revolution*. New York: International Publishers, 1932



-
- Rubadiri, David. "The University Role in the Development of West Africa Culture" in *Perspectives on African Literature Selection from the Proceedings of the Conference on African Literature* (ed). Christopher Heywood. Ibadan: University of Ife Press, 1968
- Rubadiri, David. *A Grain of Wheat*. London: Heinemann, 1967.
- Rubadiri, David. *Devil on the Cross*. London: Heinemann, 1981.
- Rubadiri, David. *Matigari*. Trans. Wangui Wagoro. London: Heinemann, 1987
- Rubadiri, David. *The River Between*. London: Heinemann, 1965.
- Rubadiri, David. *Weep Not Child*. London: Heinemann, 1964.
- Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. *Petals of Blood*. London: Heinemann, 1977.