



REVIEW ARTICLE

Vol.2.Issue 4.,2015 (Oct.-Dec.)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

NGUGI'S *PETALS OF BLOOD*: STRUGGLE AND SOCIALISM

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how Ngugi wa Thiong'o's postcolonial novel *Petals of Blood* addresses the Issues of struggle and socialism within the matrix of class. In the paper, an attempt has been made to show post colonial studies in The Third World Countries including Africa has great relevance to the understanding and interpretation of contemporary African society. *Petals of Blood* seeks to survey the unpleasant events of the postcolonial scenario of the country between 1963 and 1975. Ngugi's writing becomes a national and people oriented literature in which he demonstrates the power of masses as a force that can fight and bring an end to capitalism. The novel is used to illustrate this perspective. The novelist's quest for a world - a new idealized world - free from greed and competitive accumulation appears to be utopian at one level but also attainable at another. The wish to change an existing, unacceptable social order is the primary concern of the political novel. He uses novel as a tool for social change. His main characters however are politically and socially active. A significant progress in the time frame where the author attempts to point out the demoralization and dehumanization evident in the post colonial African society forms the backdrop of *Petals of Blood*. Religious symbolism is evoked in the novel as a complementary force to reinforce the motif of rebellion for the establishment of egalitarian values. The novelist is on the side of the peasants and workers. He also feels that bright future for Kenya will come only at the end of a long and arduous class struggle. It addresses the politics of revolution and socialist programme. The novel inaugurates and endorses the era of people's liberation struggles in Africa and recommends a socialist order as the only panacea for all the maladies in Africa.

Key Words: struggle, socialism, masses, capitalism, social change, liberation, egalitarian

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This article explores how Ngugi wa Thiong'o's postcolonial novel *Petals of Blood* addresses the Issues of struggle and socialism within the matrix of class. In the paper, an attempt has been made to show post colonial studies in The Third World Countries including Africa has great relevance to the understanding and interpretation of contemporary African society. *Petals of Blood* seeks to survey the unpleasant events of the postcolonial scenario of the country between 1963 and 1975. It addresses the politics of revolution and socialist programme. The novelist's quest for a world - a new idealized world - free from greed and competitive

accumulation appears to be utopian at one level but also attainable at another. It has provision for peoples' liberation struggles on the one hand and a sense of faith in fate on the other. It seeks to deal with the law of God, the law of the state and the socialistic goals. In one of the interviews, he says: *In a nutshell, I would say that I believe our national economy reflected in our culture should be able to develop freely but that Kenyan wealth should feed, clothe and shelter Kenyans.* (1979:30)

The title of the novel, ***Petals of Blood*** is from Derek Walcott's poem "***The Swamp***." (1963) in his ***Castaway Poems***, Derek Walcott uses the myth of Robinson Crusoe who robs the rich and helps the poor. The poet feels that a huge tree prevents little flowers from reaching out into the light. It is akin to the social system of capitalism and imperialism that stifles life. In the novel, Ngugi does not hesitate to exhibit varied kind of exploitation particularly in the realms of education, religion and agriculture. He has added an artistic representation of the betrayal of the independence movement and the need for the creation of a cultural liberation struggle fostered by the peasants and workers.

The novelist is on the side of the peasants and workers. The four parts of the novel take us back to 1896 when the exploitation of Kenyans by Europeans began and in some passages to the pre-historical period of Africa. These parts delineate how the African has been alienated from the land first, the wise imperialists who helped themselves to the land paying into the pockets a few whatever worth they conceived to it. Finally a class of African landlords was able to purchase the land. In the novelist's mind, the question of re-achieving the land for the Kenyan people through struggle remains. Ngugi's analysis is at the stage where class antagonism between the capitalist and the proletariat is polarized. He also feels that bright future for Kenya will come only at the end of a long and arduous class struggle. The approach of the novelist is synthetic and multi-dimensional. He seems to be of the view that at the ultimate level both struggle and socialism meet and mix. In a vital sense, the novel could be interpreted as a study in socialism and rebellion.

Petal of Blood, (1977) appropriately deals with the situation in politically independent Kenya. The village of Ilmorog is a microcosmic representation of the whole of Kenya. The novel opens with Munira, one of the protagonists. There are as many as four in this novel. It is taken to New Ilmorog police station for 'just routine questioning'. Soon Abdulla and Karega, two of the other three protagonists, are brought there on the same pretext. The fourth one, Wanja, is in hospital with severe burns when a police officer arrives 'to question her'. The reason for the summoning of these characters to the police station is soon revealed through the reproduction of a newspaper report. Munira refused to be drawn into the local people's concern about their land and its misappropriation by the Whiteman. Munira did not take part in such talk. He felt an outsider to their involvement with both the land and what they called 'things of blood'. Any talk about Colonization made him uneasy. He would suddenly become conscious of never having done or willed anything to happen, that he seemed doomed to roam this world a stranger.

The very mention of the forest fighters once again made Munira feel guilty but Wanja rescued him by changing the topic by inviting him for a walk on the ridge. Once on the ridge, Wanja suddenly saw the moon rise and she invited Munira to her hut, to spend the night with her and 'break the moon over me'. This had been suggested by Mwathi wa Mugo for her to get a child. Munira of course accepted her invitation.

Munira then recalls that ironically this long march and the publicity it got that led to the opening of a police post at Ilmorog and the church too had decided to open its branch there. Naderi wa Riera opened a private company, Ilmorog (KCO) Investment and Holdings Ltd, to 'develop' the area. This set the stage for the exploitation of Ilmorog in independent Kenya by the combined forces of private and political vested interests backed by religion and the so- called law-enforcing agencies.

Ngugi once again intervenes to continue with his story of the subjugation of Africa, the resistance by the people and its failure primarily due to the division of Africans on regional, linguistic and ethnic basis. He recalls similar cries of the patriots and diviners: Africa must unite. His omniscient voice of 'we' then goes on to trace the legendary growth of Ilmorog from a sleepy little village to a modern, sprawling town, primarily due to the brewing of Theng'eta by Wanja which attracted to Abdulla's place not only people from neighbourhood but also tourists from far.

The construction of the trans-African Highway, also catapulted Ilmorog into modern times. Nderi wa Riera promised to set up shopping centres, ranches and wheat fields while Mzigo promised expansion of the school. The people were given generous bank loans for setting up Farmers' Cooperatives. The people had 'waited for flowers to bloom' after voting for Nderi wa Riera once again. The story of Karega's struggle inspired Wanja to tell her story, how she longed to have a child of her own since the time when she threw her newly born into a latrine, how she looked for love and a useful life and how things had been progressing in the right direction when she had to suddenly sell her business to redeem her grandmother's mortgaged land. She told them how her license to brew Theng'eta had then been taken away from her by Nderi wa Riera who set up Theng'eta Breweries. It was then she discovered the most important law in new Kenya, "eat or you are eaten". So she had decided to exploit once again her sexual power and opened a brothel to be even with the world: *It has been the only way I can get my own back on Chui, Mzigo and Kimeria ... I go with all of them now ... I play them against one another ... It is because I only receive them by appointment... each wants to make me his sole woman ... As for me, it's game ... of money ... you eat or you are eaten* (1977:326)

Ngugi presents the story of the Kenyan people immediately after independence. Since the Kenyan people, like any other people elsewhere, are not a uniform mass with similar aspirations and similar expectations from their own government, Ngugi abandons the traditional approach of having a single protagonist or principal character around which the entire action is woven. As is evident from the discussion above, there are four principal characters - Munira, Karega, Wanja and Abdulla - and not Munira alone, as has been claimed by Clifford Robson. (1979:93)

However, when they failed to repay the loans regularly and on time - as was feared by some, and hoped by others, they were ruthlessly evicted and their lands auctioned: *Ilmorog peasants had been displaced from the land: some had joined the army of workers, others were semi-workers with one foot in a plot of land and one foot in a factory, while others became petty traders in hovels and shanties they did not even own.* (1977:302)

The people have to fight back, although it is more difficult now because there is no visible enemy to fight against. Nyakinyua leads their fight by pointing out to them the nexus between the local exploiters and their foreign collaborators. However, not many have either the interest or the courage to resist and she is forced to "fight back.... alone'. She is however defeated and the huts and the Shambas of old Ilmorog are bulldozed into a new Ilmorog with shopping plazas, breweries and massage parlours. Ngugi, however, does not end the novel on a completely pessimistic note like this. The end shows a little girl, named Akinyi bringing food to Karega in jail and also the news from the other workers that : *They are with you ... and they are ... we are planning another strike and a march through Ilmorog*'. (1977:343)

Ngugi depicts the fruition of such a nexus by illuminating the economic structure, class formations, conflicts and contradictions and political and cultural struggles in contemporary Kenya. The unholy alliance of Mzigo, Chui, Kimeria and Nderi wa Riera backed by the international forces of neo-colonialism are pitted against the poor, simple peasants of Ilmorog - symbolizing the whole of Kenya, of course - backed by former freedom fighters like Abdulla, radical leaders like Karega, enlightened professionals like Mr. Hawkins and women like Nyakinua and Wanja . Ngugi shows how within no time of attaining independence, Kenyan society had decayed and became rotten at the core, represented in the novel by a worm-eaten bean flower, although on the face of it. It appeared to be healthy and thriving, represented by the red petals of the same bean flower which when viewed from a particular angle appear to be overflowing with life-giving blood. Kenyan society had decayed and became rotten at the core, represented in the novel by a worm-eaten bean flower, although on the face of it. It appeared to be healthy and thriving, represented by the red petals of the same bean flower which when viewed from a particular angle appear to be overflowing with life-giving blood.

Ngugi presents his social vision through the persona of various characters. As stated earlier, the situation in contemporary Kenya, or in any developing country, for that matter, is too complicated to be presented through a single protagonist or principal character. Just as the analysis is presented through his own omniscient interventions in the form of 'we', his principal spokespersons are Abdulla, representing the bitter

and angry former freedom fighters that have been marginalized in independent Kenya and Karega who represents that section of the society which has the most developed consciousness.

Petals of Blood ends on a note of optimism which is rekindled and reinforced by Karega's renewal of faith in a new kind of Kenya to be born out of struggles to be launched by the peasants and workers all over the country. In all probability, Joseph is likely to lead these struggles in his absence. Both of them are committed to a humane and socialist order of a promising "tomorrow."

Petals of Blood depicts the flowering (petals) of a new egalitarian and just order brought about by struggle and sacrifice (blood). Two major motifs stand out in ushering the new world; religion and rebellion. The titles of the three parts: "Walking," "Towards Bethelhern" and "To Be Born" have religious symbolism. The pilgrimage brings about an awakening and change in the protagonists to fight the effete and corrupt order for the establishment of a new civilization which needs to be preserved and sustained through continuous vigilance and struggle by the community. This is well defined by the caption of the fourth part-*La Luta Continua* (The struggle continues).

The renewal of a promising and prosperous "tomorrow" as conveyed to him in his prison cell by a girl, Karega's hopes are rekindled. He imagines the dawn of a new world: *the kingdom of man and woman ... enjoying and loving in creative labour.* (1977:344) This 'creative labour' is the prerequisite for the dawn of a new order. It has provision for peoples' liberation struggles on the one hand and a sense of faith in fate on the other. It seeks to deal with the law of God, the law of the state and the socialistic goals. He emphasizes that the true saviours or liberators are the people themselves in their collective wisdom and might. Ngugi's protagonists represent three generations of colonial, neo-colonial and the era of liberation struggles.

It offers a ray of hope and optimism in the tradition of socialist realism. This is integral to Ngugi's commitment in the novel in terms of religion and rebellion with reference to the vital areas of human experiences and social relationships. It carefully scrutinizes the postcolonial present pointing out the basics that fighting social oppression and class exploitation is at the core of contemporary African realities. Religious symbolism is evoked in the novel as a complementary force to reinforce the motif of rebellion for the establishment of egalitarian values. Karega, the trade union protagonist in the novel, shows the path of people's liberation struggles and Joseph, the orphan, who turns into "a tall-youth" is also committed to the struggle motif. It is hailed as a socialist and the first Proletarian African novel.

Of all his main characters, it is Karega that Ngugi invests with more power, more space and time to fight against capitalism and campaign for its replacement with socialism.

Ngugi is clearly suggesting a revolution and the type he puts in Joseph's mouth. Gatuiria's speeches are not replete with socialist slogans, but he is more practical than Joseph. Joseph is already organizing strikes, but Gatuiria's scheme is on a large scale and with far reaching effects. His intellectualism is complemented and blended with the students' activism on the more practical level. He rejects wealth from his father because it is extorted from the masses.

Ngugi interweaves the overlapping layers of the legacy. Ngugi believes in class war and in seizure of political power by workers and peasants through violent struggle. He is an uncompromising champion of African identity and culture and pleads for the decolonization of mind from all traces of subservience and enslavement that smack of the white man's hegemony in areas of culture, language, Eurocentric values, and capitalistic, imperialistic, economic, and political domination.

The copious uses of socialist phrases are such as. "The oppressed" "The dispossessed", "masses", "peasants", "The struggle" as "imperialism", "Capitalism", "Landlords", "Earthworms", etc. should not surprise anyone. Karega, a trade unionist, says so much in the novel as a part of Ngugi's design to influence the leader, who must be constantly reminded that Ngugi is waging a war against capitalism. At the end Karega is able to organize the peasants and workers to the point of a revolution.

The novel concludes with a note of hope which is fired and concreated by Karega's renewal faith in a new Kenya to be born out of struggle. Joseph leads the struggles. Both are dedicated to civilized and socialist order of tomorrow. This is how a writer can motivate and guide people in order to involve them in a continual struggle so as to make their political freedom more meaningful, functional and relevant. The writings of Ngugi

make sincere endeavour in this direction. The postcolonial discourse finds its place with a lot of assertions in his fictions. The novel inaugurates and endorses the era of people's liberation struggles in Africa and recommends a socialist order as the only panacea for all the maladies in Africa. This article explores how Ngugi wa Thiong'o's postcolonial novel *Petals of Blood* addresses the issues of struggle and socialism within the matrix of class.

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