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Research Article

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and African History: The Second Writing Back in the Later Novels

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Abstract

If in the early novels Ngugi writes back to Europe to address the misrepresentation of Kenya's history, whose artistic voice bears a collective standpoint of Africa, speaking back to the west or Europe, it is pertinent to note that this nationalistic commitment in literature has also persevered in the later novels and this is what this paper is concerned about. Its aim is to explore the contrasting resonance between Ngugi's writing back in the early and the later novels. The later novels are *Petals of Blood* [1977], *Devil on the Cross* [1980] and *Matigari* [1987]. It demonstrates that while in the early novels Ngugi's target addressee are the European literary writers and their history counterparts, whom he has indicted for misrepresenting Africa's history, particularly through the medium of fiction, drama and history, in the later novels, the focus shifts and the target addressee have altered either. In these novels, he writes back to address the distortional fallacy of Africa's history by the post-independent European educationists, the post- independent elites and historians trained by the neo-colonialists, underpinned by the post-independent government of Kenya to write another version of the country's history. The paper has employed postcolonial theory as its critical paradigm.

Keywords

Ngugi wa Thiang'o, African History, Second Writing Back, Later Novels, Postcolonial Theory

1. Introduction

The loud laugh speaks the vacant mind

Oliver Goldsmith, in Mahesh Chopra, A Book of Proverbs and Quotations, [5].

The standpoint of one of the popular playwrights in European literary tradition quoted above vividly expresses the euphoria that embraces the mind no sooner it reveals something pertinent or disconcerting and be it verbally or in written. Doing so is tantamount to unburdening some troubles that have been perturbing it inwardly. So, through the literary medium, particularly the novel, Ngugi lets out his "loud laugh". In *Nation and Novel* [2006], Pattick Parrinder argues that the novels exert a powerful influence on our perceptions of society and of our individual selves precisely because they lack any official sanction [7]. It is based on this premise that Ngugi employs the medium of fiction to write back once more, as another response by the empire or "periphery" Ahluwalia [2] to address the second misrepresentation of its history through the later novels, namely; *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross* and

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Matigari by the "metropolitan center" [Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith, and Helen Tiffin, [3]. This overtly spells out that the Eurocentric misrepresentation of Africa's history has not ceased even in the post-colonial era, when independence has been attained and the Whiteman's presence in the continent isn't as physical as it was in the days of colonialism. So, when the music changes, so must the dance and Ngugi has taken the bulls by the horns to untie the knot once more.

2. The Later Novels and Writing Back

While in the early fictions Ngugi writes back in response to European literary writers and historians who in their masterpieces have misrepresented Kenya's/Africa's history, in the later novels, Ngugi writes back in response to European educationists and Africa's post-independent elites who misrepresent Kenya's history through the designed curriculum studied in schools, Kenya's historians trained by the neo-colonialists and supported by the government to re-write the other side of Kenya's history, and this is also true to some unpatriotic and corrupt University professors, whose greediness has turned them government's loyalists that defend its self-centered interest, all in misrepresenting the true history of Kenya. This is because as Addei et al argues, "Ngugi tries as faithfully as possible to present the Kenyan society to us as he has known it" [1]. To this end, Carol M. Sicherman writes "Ngugi intends to make his compatriots see the history of Kenya for the last hundred years as the story of resistance to colonialism- and to neocolonialism" [9] To link the present with the past, Ngugi laments in *Petals of Blood* that:

For there are many questions about our history which remain unanswered. Our present day historians, following on similar theories yarned on by defenders of imperialism insist we only arrived here yesterday. Where went all the Kenyan people who used to trade with China, India Arabia long before Vasco da Gama came to the scene and in strength of gunpowder ushered in an era of blood and terror and instability that climaxed in the reign of imperialism over Kenya [10].

Ngugi's wrath here quoted above is directed towards Kenya's historians and of course African historians at large, who have concurred with the Eurocentric perspective of African history originating from European racists and philosophers such as Hegel and whom have been paid, by the neo-colonial agents in their country to misrepresent Kenya's history which by extension denotes that Africa was a historical desert prior to the advent of the Europeans, forgetting that Africa had contacts with other races such as Indians, Chinese and the Arabs before it was invaded by the Europeans. Is this not enough to demonstrate that Africa and its people existed long before the White man landed in its soil?

Indeed, and Cambridge Fraudsham is one of these neo-colonial educationists and racists who, as the headmaster of one of the most prestigious school in Kenya, the Siriana Secondary School in *Petals of Blood* has among his educational dreams and agenda the distortion of Kenya's history: as European literature and history are among the designed curricula for the school. Consequently, in literature and history, Europe is the model, for only European texts are studied not Africa's instead, what Fraudsham calls "the perfect system" [10]. In these classes as Karega testifies "Chaucer Shakespeare, Napoleon, Livingston, Western conquerors, Western inventors and discoverers were drummed into our heads" [10]. The implications lie in that these students study European literature in that, they not only lack literature and history worthy of study, but also they have no history as well. Therefore it is through the European literature and history that they would know much about themselves, which by extension denotes their history, (beginning) and culture (civilization, identity). In other words, the European literature and history are their reflections, they define what they should be, not what they in truth are. In the words of Ngugi in *Moving the Centre*, this is an attempt to "bury the living soul of Kenya's history of struggle and resistance, and the attempt to normalize the tradition of loyalism to imperialism has continued into neo-colonialism" [13]. All these are attempts by the post-independent European educationist that headed several high schools in Africa as Siriana to deter the Kenyans to decipher that part of the history of Kenya is that of resistance and struggle against colonialism and now neo-colonialism. This is what they dislike these growing students to comprehend.

Moreover, when Fraudsham resigns, following students' riot and protest demanding to be taught African history and literature, which paves the way for one of the famous ex-model student of the school Chui, a black man, to be made the new headmaster, as students demand, they have a justification as Munira one of the ex-student of the school testifies:

We wanted to be taught African Literature, African history, for we wanted to know ourselves better. Why ourselves be reflected in white snows, spring flowers fluttering in icy lakes? Then somebody shouted: we wanted an African headmaster and African teachers. We denounced the perfect system, the knightly order of masters of menials that did it. And imagine the newspapers took up this aspect of the crisis and denounced us. Since when did students, a mob, tell their teachers what they ought to teach? If the students were so clever and already knew what they ought to be taught and who was fit to teach them, why had they bothered to enroll in the school? And a school with such a record! A headmaster whom even the very best school in England, like Eton would have been proud to have in their midst [10].

The above emotive piece unveils the students' resistance against being taught European literature and history through which they would have known their root and culture, designed to misrepresent them. However, they are optimistic that the ex-student of the school Chui who is now a post-independent educationist would redesign the curriculum, and incorporate African literature and history into it so that they would know the true side of their history and culture much better.

Not Chui, for their hopes are shortly shattered, when the

new black headmaster rules that Siriana's time-honored, educational policy will not be altered to meet the protesting students' demands. For him, the notion of African literature and African teachers as desired by the students is a wishful thinking; hence, it is meaningless and nonsensical. "What mattered were good teachers and sound content: history was history: literature was literature and had nothing to do with the colour of one's skin" [10]. This is a fallacy, yet we are not amazed given Chui's past studentship in Siriana, which marked him out as a distinctive student in learning and dress, and who aspired to be a European-like more than any other student else. For him, Europe and the white man is the model. "He was neat with a style all his own from quoting bits from Shakespeare, to wearing clothes. Even the drab school uniform of grey trousers, a white-starched style, a blue jacket and a tie as if it was specially tailored to fit him. It was Chui who first introduced the tie-pin to school; it became a fashion. He was the first to wear sports-shorts with the bottoms turned up: it became the fashion" [10]. This is why Fraudsham's predecessor Rev. Ironmonger, who liked Chui so much owing to his profound predilection to European ways called the young student Shakespeare. Ngugi writes, "thus the teaching of only European literature and mostly British imperialist literature in our schools, means that our students are daily being confronted with the European reflection of itself, the European image, in history. Our children are made to look, analyze and evaluate the world as made and seen by Europeans. Worse still, these children are confronted with a distorted image of themselves and of their history as reflected and interrupted in European imperialist's literature" [10]. In another lamentable response in *Writers in Politics* Ngugi stresses that:

It is time that we realized that the European imperialist bourgeois experience of history as reflected in their art and literature is NOT the universal experience of history. Moreover, their history has largely been one of exploitation, oppression and elimination of history as reflected in our songs and our literature is one of continuous heroic struggle against western European slavery and their imperialist pillage and plunder of our wealth, be expected to memorize and recite the story our imperialist oppressors and thus identify with their literary glorification of imperialist plunder and murder [14].

The history of the colonized other for Ngugi as quoated above in the Eurocentric perspective should be universal in which the "other" would have to accept and believe what he/she is interpreted by the Europeans in that he/she has been made by them. The bottom-line for Ngugi is that the European history of Africa is dehistoricizing the continent owing to its misrepresentation tendencies. It is thus a form of exploitation and oppression itself to prevent us from understanding the genuine side of history of Africa's struggle against slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism, during which the continent had/has experienced a mass exploitation of its material wealth and resources, as part of that history.

Furthermore, there is more to this historical distortion as Ngugi depicts how the imperialists collaborate with the self-centered and unpatriotic African leaders to misrepresent Africa's history. In *Petals of Blood*, Karega is disenchanted at the history books sent to him by the lawyer written by the University professors, which do not answer the questions he requires about Kenya's history. This is because history in the standpoint of the young revolutionary "should provide the key to the present, that a study of history should help us to answer certain questions. Where are we? How did we come and be where we are?" [10]. For him, "history after all should be about those whose actions, whose labour, had changed nature over the years" (10). Consequently, "there is no pride" as he phrases it in the history written by the professors. The reason lies in that "the professors delighted in abusing and denigrating the efforts of the people and their struggles in the past" [10], which the European educationists and their trained black models do not want to appear in the true African history.

In *Matigari*, Ole Excellency Ole is an archetypical of such modern African leaders in question, who uses the University professors to distort Kenya's history. At any rate, we are deeply disillusioned by the words of the Minister of Truth and Justice sent by Ole Excellency to settle the dispute between the employers of the Anglo-American Leather and Plastic Works and the employees over wage increase, in connection with Kenya's history.

Wasn't it only the other day that all the University Professors and specialists in Parrotology had a history conference? What do they teach us? That according to their research, those who joined hands with the colonialists in protecting the law-loyalists- are really the ones who made the colonialists gave us independence on a platter. I have ordered all holders of Ph.Ds in Parrotologyto be promoted and given permanent professorship. For these professors are different from those who are always raising a hue and cry about revolutionary politics, revolutionary socialism and other foreign ideologies [12].

The minster's words above are fallacy-ridden, hence they depict a misrepresentation of Keny's history. The truth is it were the African nationalists and liberation movements that fought and won Kenya's independence but not the colonialists' loyalists that sided with the oppressors as opposed to their own people as the minister shamelessly claims. What is more, the Minister further concludes that Kenya's history has been written by unqualified historians. Consequently, now as the Minster says "we have qualified professors who will write Kenya's history for us". [12]. These would be found in nowhere other than the post-independent universities. Thus, Ngugi, seems to lampoon Africa's University's professors, who ought to be the societal moral eye and intellectual grand masters and at the same time whose knowledge and theories should be geared towards national progression and invariably point the government the right way and at the same time eschew being used by it to bring about national retrogression or bamboozle the citizens, now wear a new mask; as they let the government to abuse their knowledge which belongs to the whole nation for their self-gains. Consequently, they are but for Ngugi a national cancer in that "this history has often been

distorted in our bourgeoisie school, in our bourgeoisie Universities, in our libraries often filled with the filthy results of bourgeois, scholarship. But if the peasants and workers were to write in ink history they have already written in blood and sweat, their standpoint would be closer to that of the worker looking at history" [12]. In post-colonial Africa for Ngugi, part of African history is the struggle by the workers and peasants to fight neo-colonialism in the continent whatever it costs.

Indeed, for Ngaruro, the workers' leader tells Matigari two camps exist in Kenya: the camp of the imperialists and that of the working people. The former is accompanied by its "messengers, overseers, police and military. The ruling party were the messengers, and they had control over the government, the laws and the gunmen in boots" [12]. On the hand in the latter, the workers are accompanied by their "values, their culture, and their history" [12]. This is because, "the ruling party of the messengers was trying to imprison the real history of the working people behind bars and in detention camps" [12]. It is part of this historical apprehension for Matigari, that in neo-colonial Kenya, the "the robber calls the robbed robber. The murdered calls the murdered murderer and the wicked calls the righteous evil. The one uprooting evil is accused of planting evil". [12] For Rodney, "the oppressor always seeks to maintain class hegemony by implanting numerous historical myths in the minds of the oppressed" [8] to believe that they did not exist in the past, for they were found by the White man, and that even today they should see themselves through the eyes, mind, and language of the imperialists if they are to understand their history.

So, through our patriotic and revolutionary character Gaturia in *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi artistically addresses again, the Eurocentric misrepresentation of Kenyas/Africa's history. Using Kenya's local musical instruments. Gaturia wants compose a music that tells the genuine history of Kenya. It is a work of two-hundred pages long that takes the young man two-years to complete. The most scintillating thing even before he composes the music is that he visualizes the moment after the performance, audience surging out of the concert hall "angry at those who sold the soul of the nation to foreigners and babbling with joy at the deeds of those who rescued the soul of the nation from foreign slavery. Gaturia hopes all that his music will inspire people with patriotic love for Kenya [11]. Moreover, it is a music that would be played by an orchestra of hundreds of instruments and sung by hundreds of human voices composed in five moments that encapsulates the unadulterated history of Kenya/Africa:

3. First Movement

Voices from the past, before the coming of British imperialism
The gicandi calabash
The one-stringed violin
Drum, flutes
Rattles, horn
Stringed instruments
Percussion instruments
Dancing Our women Clearing forests
Asking riddles Our men Clearing the bush
Telling stories Our Children Digging
Praying Young men Breaking up clods
Settling disputes Young women of clay
Taking part in Boys Planting
ritual ceremonies Girls Cultivating
Birth The crowd Protecting millet
Second birth The masses from the birds
Initiation Harvesting
Marriages Grazing
Burials Building houses
Working with iron
Making potter And the sound of the feet
of young men
At the cattle kraal,
Defending the wealth of the land
From foreign foes,
To prevent them from eating
That which has been produced by others.
The sounds of spears and shields.
The voices of patriots.

4. Second Movement

Foreign voices
Voices of imperialism
Drums
Trumpets
After our land foreigners Their aims:
After our labour and Our wealth
After slaves their armies Our herds
Shadows of the Our harvests
Land Our industries
Our creations
The struggle against the foreign forces.
The voices of patriots.
Horn trumpets
Drums
Flutes
The sound of the foreign forces retreating.
Patriotic songs of victory.
Songs of Waiyaki, Koitalel, Me Kitilili,
Gankuuju...

5. Third Movement

Foreign voices, oily smooth with hypocrisy
Drums
Flutes
Piano, organ
Christian choirs

They secure loyalty Foreigners Their aims:
from: Priets wealth
Educators The means:
Bishops Administrators Divide and rule
Feudalists Armed soldiers Capture their soul
Sellers of the soul
of the nation
The imperialist flag
The struggle of cultures.
People taken captives.
The nation divided
Revolutionary activities banned.
Some young men have hung up their arms;
Now they have no weapons.
Voices of the soldiers of imperialism.
The sound of chains on our people,
Chains on hand,
Chains on legs.

6. Fourth Movement

The voices of slavery
Piano
Guitar
Saxophones
Drums and trumpets
The voices of people picking tea.
The voices people picking coffee.
The voices of people harvesting wheat.
The voices of workers in a factory.

7. Fifth Movement

Sounds and voices of a new struggle.
To rescue the soul of the nation.
Horns
Drums
Flutes
Voices of rebirth.
Voices of our heroes.
Voices of Mau Mau
Voices of revolution.
Voices of revolutionary unity of workers and peasants. [11].

For Gaturia, the First Movement provides the image of the socio-cultural, religious and the economic life of the pre-colonial Kenya. The local and rudimentary Kenya's musical instruments, pottery, iron and clods of clay depict how Africa was vastly rich in indigenous technology prior to the inversion of foreign forces in the continent. What is more, the ritual ceremonies, marriages, burial, birth, dancing, riddles and stories symbolize Kenya's time-honored culture then and now. The Second Movement pictures the advent of the white man accompanied by his soldiers conquering the land, and began to exploit Kenya's natural resources. This led to the rise of the Mau Mau liberation movement to fight for the regain of the confiscated land and bring the exploitation to an end. In the Third Movement the white man uses religion, colonial education and administrators, as well as armed forces to create a deep division among the Kenyans, deterring them to achieve a collective national unity so as to profoundly exploit their natural resources. These resulted into clash of cultures, accompanied by Kenyan's resistance and opposition. Consequently, the Kenyan's were apprehended and detained and all revolutionary efforts were banned. Gaturia projects the image of Kenya's peasants forced to work at the Europeans' unlawful coffee, tea and wheat farms and plantations and subsequently in industries in the neo-colonial Kenya. Consequently, Gaturia portrays in the Fifth Movement, the beginning of a fresh resistance against neo-colonialism and the workers and peasants who have collectively united are the architects, inspired by the heroism of the past Mau Mau heroes and revolutionaries to challenge and end all sorts of neo-colonial exploitations in Kenya.

To this end, Ngugi opines that, there are two types of Kenya's history: "the real living history of the masses; and the approved living history. Those who run neo-colonialism are mortally afraid of any symbols or remainders of the Kenya peoples' struggle and resistance, and the Kenyan Land and Freedom Army, popularly known as the Mau Mau and Dedan Kimathi as the highest symbols of tradition has received total neglect or distortion" [13]. It against this background that James Ogude, in *Ngugi's Novels and African History Narrating the Nation* argues that:

For Ngugi, Kenyan history should be about the struggles of the subaltern, their resistance to colonial and neo-colonial domination in the postcolonial state. This struggle crystallized itself in the Mau Mau anti-colonial war, a struggle which should continue to inspire new resolves for freedom and dignity in Kenya's post-independent period. It is the narrative of the marginalized. Ngugi avers, which Kenya's pioneer historians like Ogot, Were, Muriuki and Ochin'g have suppressed [6].

For Ogude, part of Ngugi's artistic commitment is to address Kenyas or Africa's history through the literary medium, demonstrating that the real history of Africa must incorporate the brave struggles of the masses against colonialism and now neo-colonialism which the Europeans vehemently detest. For, him the Mau Mau heroes in Kenya for example, which spearheaded the anti-colonial struggle to triumph would even in death do equally the same for the neo-colonial revolutionaries to challenge neo-colonialism. Therefore, it should be deciphered that it is this historical part in African history that Kenya's post-independent historians, the imperialists' loyalists have been paid to suppress for evermore. In his critical comment on *Petals of Blood* the first of Ngugi's later novels, Nicholis BL stresses that the novel offers at least two models of anti-imperialist history. The first is model of black world struggle and the second is a model of Kenyan national struggle [4].

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this has opened yet, another page in the Eurocentric drama of the misrepresentation of the colonized "other", particularly in the later novels, which Ngugi has vehemently challenged in both fiction and in drama: *The Trail of Deden Kimathi* is another case in point. The aim is to disclose the European conspiracy against the African history in the years after independence and to unveil through the novel the power of literature in re-creating the veracity of the history of the African people, the marginalized voices of the empire or the periphery.

Abbreviations

Mau Mau	Kenya's Anti-colonial Movement
KFLN	Kenyan Land and Freedom Army (or the Mau Mau)

Author Contributions

Nasir Umar Abdullahi: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis

Fatima Abdullahi: Investigation, Methodology

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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