



WRITING REVOLUTION: FIGHTING THE COLONIAL DEVIL IN NGUGI WA THIONGO'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

NgugiwaThiong'o is a writer who has witnessed the age of anti-colonial struggle, the age of independence and the age of neo-colonialism of Kenya. His works, especially *Matigari*, point towards the ever tightening grip of imperialist ideology on the social, political, cultural and economic life of Kenyan people-with independence only the masters have changed, the ideology continues to be the same. Poverty and police brutality has not come to an end. His writing records the voices of the people who are denied a voice in the colonial and independent Kenya-the peasants and the workers and the women.(women in *Matigari* and *Devil on the Cross*).he reminds people that things have not really changed in Kenya. Writer is a cultural and intellectual worker. In his role as a writer waThiong'o is trying to reach to the root of the problems faced by common people of Kenya. The issues are economic, superficially, but beyond that they have got a cultural dimension. In analysing the cultural dimension he goes back to the colonial and pre-colonial past of Kenya. He revisits the myths and legends and the colonial regime that exploded the 'cultural bomb' to annihilate their belief in their history, names and environment- the regime that taught them 'theft is holy'. The significance of land in the life of the people is an important concern in the novels of waThiong'o. People are spiritually attached to the land. The British misinterpreted the land ownership pattern of Kenyan people to appropriate their lands. WaThiong'o is writing history from the margins. His attempt is to instil in them faith in their history, culture, tradition and to throw away the 'spiritual eyeglasses' of the West which makes them see their past as 'one wasteland of non-achievement.' The novels thus revolt against the intellectual, moral economic and cultural supremacy of West. His message is significant in this era of globalisation when the democratically elected governments are appropriating people's land to hand them over to transnational firms with the help of police and military. It is a clarion call to the oppressed masses to unite and revolt against the ideology of modern imperialism.

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By manipulating and mobilizing the systems of language, religion and education the imperial masters ensured the control over people's subjectivity which in turn helped in the perpetuation of colonialism even after the colonies gained

political freedom. NgugiWaThiong'o writing is aimed at winning back for the people their right for cultural, political and economic self determination.He re- invents a resistance culture, a revolutionary culture of courage and patriotism to

de-(neo)colonise the Third World in general NgugiwaThiong'o is a writer who has witnessed the age of anti-colonial struggle, the age of independence and the age of neo-colonialism of Kenya. Colonialism created a world in which 'the tailor wears rags, the tiller eats wild berries, the builder begs for shelter.' It has economic, political, cultural and psychological consequences for the people of the world. With independence the colonised were longing for freedom from exploitation, the right to live with dignity and self-respect and, above all, for the right to live in their land not as aliens but as owners. The same longing is symbolised in Matigari's quest for 'home'.

The 'home' to which Matigari returns after defeating settler Williams is not the 'home' of his dreams. His 'home' is a place of love and sharing in which "we shared even the single bean/ That fell upon the ground." The dreams are shattered once he reaches 'home'. He finds settler Williams being replaced by John Boy Jr., son of John Boy who joined hands with settler Williams to oppress his own people. The masters have changed but the ideology continues to be the same. Poverty still persists. He sees children fighting in the garbage yard for rotten tomatoes. They have to pay money to enter the garbage yard. A share of the money collected from the children goes to the truck-driver and two police men. "...a handful people still profited from the suffering of the majority, the sorrow of many being the joy of the few?" (Matigari 12). With great pain he realises that nothing has changed.

Women have to sell their body and the common people are oppressed by the police. He himself experiences the depth of police brutality. The voices of resistance are hushed with the help of police and army. Students and workers are beaten up by police, detained without trial, sometimes killed. Post-colonial regimes imitate the colonial masters and oppress their own people. "The economic and political dependence of this African neo-colonial bourgeoisie is reflected in its culture of apemanship and parrotry enforced on a restive population through police boots, barbed wires, a gowned clergy and judiciary" (94.2).

The struggle between the 'imperialist tradition' and the 'resistance tradition' continues in post-colonial Africa. Imperialist tradition is continued by 'the flag-waving ruling classes' which was the creation of colonial powers and are represented by people like John Boy and Ole Excellence. They also resort to the methods of colonisers to perpetuate their repressive regime. Coloniser to perpetuate their ideology transformed the system of education, language, literature and media to serve their purpose. The culture of natives was fossilized during colonial regime. For survival they had to sing the approved tune of the regime. Those who were loyal to the coloniser alone reached the higher echelons of power after independence.

'Modern imperialism' is often fought economically and politically while its cultural aspects are often ignored. WaThiong'o addresses the cultural aspects of colonialism through his writings. By controlling the cultural and psychological domain, the coloniser controls 'the individual and collective self-image of the dominated nation and classes as well as their image of the dominating nations and classes.' (93.49). This ensured that the slave accepted his situation as natural.

Belief in itself, its history, its destiny and its capacity to change the scheme of things is important for any oppressed nation in its struggle for economic and political survival. As a 'cultural and intellectual worker' WaThiong'o is trying to instil in people, a faith in themselves, their history and culture which was distorted by the colonial discourse.

According to waThiong'o culture is to society what flower is to a plant. It is the carrier of seeds for new plants, the bearer of future for that species of plants. Along with economic and political liberation the liberation of our cultures our feelings, values, outlook are necessary. Otherwise economic and political freedom will not be complete. (93.54)

The biggest weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the 'cultural bomb'. It annihilates 'a people's belief in their names, in their language, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves' (94.2). It forces them to see their past as one 'wasteland of non achievement' forcing them to distance themselves from it. It forces them to identify

themselves with that which is 'furthest and removed' from themselves-the language and customs of the coloniser. John Boy Jr. embraces the culture of the coloniser. He is vociferous in denouncing his culture. He betrays and exploits his own people. He asserts, "Our country has remained in darkness because of the ignorance of our people. They don't know the importance of the word "individual", as opposed to the word "masses". White people are advanced because they respect that word, and therefore honour the *freedom of the individual*, which means the freedom of everyone to follow his own whims without worrying about the others" (Matigari 48). He praises the coloniser's motto-Survival of the fittest and condemns his own people, " But you black people? You walk about fettered to your families, clans, nationalities, people, masses...Mzee, let me tell you that what belongs to the masses is carried in a bottomless pail"(Ibid).

John Boy Jr. very comfortably forgets that he became what he is because of the masses-people who treated him not as John Boy's son but their. The people's lament over the lost son echoes their fellow feeling and bonding as a community, "Are you the boy we sent abroad? The boy the cost of whose education we all contributed to, singing with pride: Here is one of our own and not a foreigner's child over whom I was once insulted?" (Ibid). They had great expectations about him, "The boy for whom we sang: He shall come back and clean up our cities, our country, and deliver us from slavery? The boy we sent off to study, saying that a child belongs to all that a nation's beauty was borne in a child, a future patriot?"(Ibid)

Joshua is another victim of coloniser's misinterpretation of the customs of Kenyan people. He got converted to new faith attracted by the power and magic of the white man. He renounced his tribe's magic, power and ritual, "He realised the ignorance of his people. He felt the depth of the darkness in which they lived. He saw the muddy water through which they waded unaware of the dirt and mud. His people worshipped Murungu, Mwenenyaga, Ngai.The unerringwhite man had called Gikuyu god the prince of darkness.(*The River Between*29)

The white man was perfect and unerring and his culture was the only true culture. The colonial masters interpreted the culture of African people for them. Since they wielded immense power they could pass on their version reality as the reality. The coloniser thus controlled the mind of the colonised. Culture is 'an image forming agent' and by presenting a distorted version of the colonised people's culture the imperial masters were degrading them to control them and their resources.

Culture is a product of history and history in turn reflects it.(waThiong'o94,15). In a colonial situation the history of the colonised will be written in colonial fashion. Thus for a colonial and post-colonial writer writing becomes 'an extended historiography that actively collapses the past into present in order to accelerate political awakening'. This is necessary for the emancipation of colonised. As Achebe says, "There is a desire to re-establish the vital link with the past, to seize the creative initiative, and to help their society regain a faith in itself and to put away the complexes of the years of self-denigration"(Killan 234).

Through his works waThiong'o is trying to create and establish historical legends for a nation less than half a decade old. He develops a national literature for Kenya in the immediate wake of that country's independence from British rule.

Land is an important symbol for the nationalist writer- 'the material symbol that holds family and tribe together and encapsulates the national spirit.' It the vital link between man and nature, the principal modes of production whose loss signifies the disruptive and savage nature of imperial conquest. "In an agricultural community the whole social organisation must derive from land and without understanding the system on which it is held and worked it will be impossible to see the meaning of other aspects of life..."(Killan235).

People are spiritually linked to the land given by God to their ancestors Gikuyu and Mumbi.

The connection to land was made physical in the shedding of blood in the rituals of circumcision and clitoridectomy- "All his life Waiyaki had waited for this day, for this very opportunity to reveal his courage like a man. This had been the secret ambition of his youth...The

knife produced a thin sharp pain as it cut through the flesh. The surgeon had done his work. Blood trickled freely on to the ground, sinking into the soil. Henceforth a religious bond linked Waiyaki to the earth, as if his blood was an offering.”(*The River Between* 45).

British land grabbing turned people to ‘ahoi’- landless tenants. They became part of money economy rather than living off their own produce or what they exchanged that produce for. According to Jomo Kenyatta the British misinterpreted the land tenure system of Gikuyu people to serve their own needs. Land ownership in Gikuyu community did not mean the exclusive use of land by the owner or extorting of rents from those who wanted cultivation or building rights. A man who owned land felt proud to own a property and his enjoyment to allow collective use of property. The British misinterpreted this communal use of property and used it to drive people from their land. “people had to face with comprehensive communal disaster of dispossession and forcible relocation.”(Williams 3)

WaThiong’o’s narratives are unforgettable for their romantic invocation of landscape which is associated with the individual and collective loss and desire. “...the natural landscape dominates the East African literary imagination. This awareness of land as the central actor in our lives distinguishes the East African literature from others in the continent and certainly looms large in my own writing from *The River Between* to *Matigari*.(qtd in Gikandi 288)

“Literature is concerned primarily with what any political and economic arrangement does to the spirit and values governing human relationships (72 xvi)”. The political, economic and cultural arrangement that has disrupted the relationship between African people is capitalism. He fights this system through his writings. It is a system in which those who reap and those who sow are not the same.

Writing is an essential component of de-colonisation. WaThiong’o subverts the coloniser’s ‘truth’ through his novels. He is ‘re-authorizing’ the buried stories of struggle. The coloniser called the freedom fighters ‘terrorists’. As he says in *Marigari*, there are two truths, one of the oppressor and the other of the oppressed. His novels gives the

oppressed a space to record their truth. If colonial enterprise relied on writing as a strategy of fixing reality, anti-colonial struggle at the cultural and political level uses writing as one of the means of countering suppression and misinterpretation inherent colonial discourse.

In *The River Between*, he is celebrating the heroic tradition of people. By recording it he is ‘re-authorizing’ their past to legitimise their present. It shows people resistance against the coloniser’s intrusion of their culture. He is validating a tradition which was otherwise marginalised by the coloniser. *Matigari* ‘re-cycles’ a resistance ethic for the present. Anti-colonialism modifies into anti-neo-colonial resistance. It creates class-consciousness among people.

Matigari is a symbol of resistance. He is not bound by time and place. None knows who he is and how he looks. But his voice instils in the mind of the people a belief in themselves. It gives them the power to resist oppression. An important element of the narrative is rumour. *Matigari* lives through rumours. People does not know if he is tall or short, old or young and man or woman. The authorities cannot do anything against him because he lives through rumours. It has got more power than the ‘Voice of Truth’ which churns out every now and then facts about *Matigari* and other rebels who has defied the ‘Voice of Truth’.

The History of writing is coincident with the inauguration and development of exploitation (Spivak 21). What *Matigari* counters is the authority of ‘well-documented story’ of those in power. In one party rule where only one voice is heard rumour becomes an important means of communication for the oppressed people. It spreads faster than the Voice of Truth and along with it the rebellion too. People fills it with their ‘consciousness’ and it evokes comradeship because it does not belong to one person but to a community. Everyone is part of it.

...who really was *Matigari* ma Njiruungi?

A patriot? Angel Gabriel?

Jesus Christ? Was he a human being or a spirit?

A true or false prophet? A saviour or sin simply a lunatic? Was *Matigari* a man or was he a woman? A child or an adult? Or

wOr was he only an idea, an image in people's minds? *Who Was He?* (Matigari158)

People give legitimacy to rumours. The mad man Matigari ignites the fire of resistance which spreads faster than the forest fire engulfing everything that belongs to the puppet regime of Ole Excellence that dances according to the tune of the colonial masters.

Everything that belongs to these slaves must be burn!

Yes, everything that belongs to these slaves must be burn!

Yes, Their coffee must burn!

Their tea must be burn!

Yes, their tea must be burn! (Matigari167).

The army and police, in the end, did not even get the body of Matigari. In life as in death he is a mystery. But the spark that he ignited will continue to burn through Muriuki.

He recalled the night of the workers' strike. And suddenly he seemed to hear the workers' voices, the voices of the peasants, the voices of the students and of other patriots of all different nationalities of the land, singing in harmony:

Victory shall be ours!

Victory shall be ours!

Victory shall be ours!

Victory shall be ours! (Matigari175) .

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