



ETHICAL REVISIONISM IN NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S *PETALS OF BLOOD* AND *DEVIL ON THE CROSS*

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Abstract

The contemporary discourse on moral issues is unlikely to holistically adhere to normative ethical standards. The legalization of abortion, bhang, homosexuality, same sex marriages, and mercy killing by some Western countries in spite of criminalization of the same in most countries in the world, reflects a modern society striving to unshackle itself from confines of moral absolutism. The concept of jihad as practiced by extremists in some Muslim countries also points to a destabilization of rigid boundaries associated with normative ethical approaches to moral issues. This study sets out to examine Ngugi wa Thiong'o's treatment of key moral concerns in post-independence Kenya. The study is anchored in feminism, applied ethics and Metaethics. The current study concludes that Ngugi wa Thiong'o suggests that issues of morality should not only be explored from a moral absolutism stance, but also dissected from a meta-ethical position so as to craft an ethical code responsive to justice and existential humanity.

Key words: Existential Humanity, Feminism, Metaethics, Moral Absolutism, Normative Ethics

1.1 Introduction

Ngugi wa Thiong'o as one of the major writers of the world grapples with myriad moral concerns in his fiction. This paper examines Ngugi wa Thiong'o's treatment of controversial moral issues, particularly prostitution and murder. Though this study adopts a literary analysis to Ngugi's writings, it also draws material from major religions and legal stances to make sense of the writer's exposition of murder and prostitution in *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*. The selection of the two novels was informed by the revolutionary manner they address the moral concerns.

This paper is grounded on feminism, applied ethics and Metaethics in its delineation of the moral

issues in the two novels. Feminism advocates for equity and equal treatment of the female voice in the society while applied ethics consists of an analysis of specific moral issues such as matters of sexuality, murders, abortion and euthanasia, some of which are key concerns in this study. Metaethics, a study of origin and meaning of ethical concepts, buttresses this ethical analysis of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's two novels because it accords the current study latitude to examine issues of prostitution and murder in Ngugi's fiction beyond the narrow confines of what constitutes right and wrong in normative ethics.

1.2 Ethical Revisionism in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Fiction

1.2.1 Prostitution

Prostitution has been a controversial question since time immemorial. The simplest, most operationalized definition of prostitution is that prostitution is a lending (for money or other purposes) of one's body to another person so that they can satisfy their sexual needs (Lazarevic, 2000). Prostitution has been a part of society for many years, irrespective of where you go (Bullough, 1964; Scott, 2016). In virtually every country, authorities are confronted with this phenomenon (Wagenaar & Altink, 2012). This results in a variety of ways in which prostitution is regulated. The World Health Organization (1988) defines prostitution as a process that involves a transaction between a seller and a buyer of a sexual service. From the foregoing definitions, two points emerge. First, prostitution entails selling one's body which is a form of objectification of oneself, a factor which robs one dignity and humanity since one relegates oneself to the realm of objects. Second, prostitution can also be considered as a commercial activity between two parties. In this paper, it is opined that a comprehensive definition of prostitution should encompass labour offered by workers if compensation of such labour is a product of exploitation. In this regard, both sexual and economic exploitation are viewed as forms of prostitution.

In *Petals of Blood*, Wanja is forced into prostitution by exigencies of life. Having been forced to drop out of school by Kimeria's sexual predatory habits which make her pregnant, she flees home and aborts the pregnancy. She plunges into the world of prostitution. Her house is burnt by one of her clients and she finds herself at Ilmorog where she stays with her grandmother, works as a barmaid and later becomes a business partner at Abdulla's Old Ilmorog Bar. As Onkoba (2017) observes, faced with an anguished upbringing, obnoxious encounters with men such as Kimeria, the auctioning of her grandmother's land and the confiscation of the licence to brew Theng'eta at the Old Ilmorog Bar, Wanja decides to go into prostitution as the only

way of getting back at Chui, Mzigo and Kimeria who are symbols of economic exploitation in Kenya. From Onkoba's assessment of Wanja's existential conditions, it is evident that Wanja's brand of prostitution should be understood as a form of retribution. She avenges Kimerias' murder of her dreams when she drops out of school and also when he forces her to sleep with him to secure freedom for the elders and delegates during the journey to the city. She hits back at Chui and Mzigo for conniving with the authorities to revoke her Theng'eta brewing licence which renders her economically subservient to them. From a moral stance, Wanja could be accused of engaging in affairs with other people's husbands but in *Petals of Blood*, prostitution becomes a tool for economic emancipation. This is evident in Wanja's defiant confession:

If you are born with this hole, instead of it being a source of pride, you are doomed to either marrying someone or else being a whore. You eat or are eaten. How true I found it. I decided to act and I quickly built this house... Nothing would I ever let for free...I have many rooms, many entrances and four yards...I have hired young girls...It was not hard...I promised them security...and for that...they let me trade their bodies...what's the difference whether you are sweating it on a plantation, in a factory or lying on your back, anyway?...And me? Me too! I have not spared myself...It has been the only way to get my own back on Chui, Mzigo, and Kimeria. I go with all of them now...I play them against one another. (P.293)

It is significant to note that Wanja chooses not to be exploited. Once other business ventures fail due to virulent capitalistic forces, she chooses without any form of coercion to treat prostitution as an avenue through which she hopes to restore her dignity. Stratton (1994) argues that prostitution has been used to exploit the male-female relations of domination and subordination. Stratton's assertion insinuates that in a moralistic parlance, prostitution has to a larger extent been portrayed as a purveyor of societal evils and a destabilizing force for the family institution. The current study, however, holds

that Ngugi wa Thiong'o's portrayal of prostitution is not wholly condemnatory. Even though she is repatriated to the Ilmorog village for redemption according to Stratton's (1994) line of thinking, Wanja's brand of prostitution should be interpreted from a meta-ethical position. Wanja's involvement in prostitution can be blamed on her materialistic father who entertained Kimeria owing to his riches and hostile capitalist forces at play in the country. Her decision should be understood from an existential perspective. It is a decision she makes freely to avoid being exploited by the capitalistic society. Wanja's choice of prostitution is geared towards empowering her economically to enable her fight gender exploitation.

Unlike the politics of male domination and female subordination implied by prostitution in Stratton's discourse, Wanja in *Petals of Blood* is a woman who is in full control of her destiny. She uses prostitution as a tool for economic empowerment and control. She manipulates and controls the lives of Chui, Kimeria and Mzigo. But later, Wanja makes a choice to transcend her facticity (prostitution) and embrace other economic ventures. To this end, then, prostitution in Ngugi's novel can no longer be blamed for the evils of the society but as Muriungi (2003) contends in her study, prostitution finds victory over patriarchy, and shifts the centre of economic power from men, allowing women a share in this power. This subversion of the male-female power relationship that defines prostitution in patriarchal societies can be viewed as a revolution. Wanja is no longer an object of pleasure to Chui, Kimeria and Mzigo; her sexual clients become objects of her economic empowerment. But does this imply that Ngugi wa Thiong'o sanctions prostitution in the society? This study contends that though the novelist portrays prostitution from a meta-ethical standpoint by condemning the forces that thrust Wanja into it, he uses Karega to castigate it by arguing that 'prostitution was too ruthless, and it could lead to despair and self or mutual annihilation (P.303).

Karega's censure of Wanja's lifestyle, makes Wanja to contemplate leaving prostitution for other ventures but after avenging her earlier betrayals and shattered dreams:

She would invite Mzigo Chui and Kimeria: she would then introduce Abdulla, in his rags, as her rightful man. She would expose Kimeria. She worked out the plan. She would send all the girls away, and the watchman, for she really was determined to end the ever present lifestyle and means of earning a living. She would later work out ways of employing the girls in her other ventures. But for the night of her vengeance they had to be away: (P.328)

Wanja's planned denunciation of Kimeria, Chui and Mzigo can be interpreted as Ngugi's disapproval of prostitution as a means of earning a living. It is significant to note that Wanja thinks about her present barmaids whom she plans to employ in her other ventures, which presents her as a sensitive being, unlike the Kimerias of this world. This sensitivity of Wanja to the girls, who are women like her suggests that women must take care of each other or rather gang up to end subordination. The intended employment of her barmaids is critical because it will give them an opportunity to be self-reliant without having to engage in prostitution. In a way, Ngugi seems to be proposing that instead of vilifying female prostitutes, rich women in the society should pool resources and create employment opportunities for them as Wanja does. Wanja's change of heart which triggers her decision to leave whoredom is occasioned by her decision to join the side of the struggle after her conscience is pricked by Karega's exposition of the ills of a world in which only a few enjoy the wealth of the society. Wanja's decision will certainly bring positive changes in the lives of her barmaids and the whole society. The deaths of Kimeria, Mzigo and Chui in an inferno and the burning of her brothel by Munira completes this process of purification of the society. Like the proverbial Sphinx which rose from its ashes, there is a sense in which the fire that consumes Wanja's whore house is likely to usher in a new beginning for Wanja, the barmaids and the Ilmorog residents. Since Chui, Kimeria and Mzigo embody capitalism which engenders prostitution in Ngugi's view as it creates social and economic inequalities which marginalize the vulnerable in the society, it can be argued that their deaths in an inferno can also be

read as Ngugi's suggestive solution that to eradicate prostitution in the society, there is need to eliminate factors which cause it.

In *Devil on the Cross*, the novelist does not make any attempt to validate prostitution as means of earning livelihood as he does in *Petals of Blood*. Through Wariinga, the protagonist of the novel, he condemns the vice in totality:

Ah Kareendi, jobs are very hard to come by these days. But a girl like you...it shouldn't be difficult to find something for you to do. But, Kareendi, a matter like this can't be finalized in the office. Let's go across to the Modern Love Bar and Lodging to discuss the question more fully" ...Kareendi declines all invitations to meetings at hotels designed for love, old fashioned or modern. (P.18)

Wariinga's refusal to offer sex in exchange for employment is laudatory. She refuses to be commodified and opts to continue searching for a job without compromising her dignity. It can be averred that the repudiation of prostitution in *Devil on the Cross* shows that Ngugi considers it morally unjustified. This moral shift is important in deciphering the novelist's stance on prostitution.

1.2.2 Murder

Murder is a capital offence whose penalty in most countries is death by hanging, poison or firing squad. Even in Christianity, God commands people not to kill. Most African communities punished murder by death or banishment from the community since the perpetrators were considered social misfits. So from an ethical perspective, murder is considered wrong by both religion and most ethnic cultures. Exceptions include when one commits murder in self-defense.

In Ngugi's novels, the concept of suicide and killing of people considered exploitative is explored. In *Petals of Blood*, Munira who is a son of a prominent farmer and businessman murders Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria in an inferno when he decides to set ablaze Wanja's brothel, ostensibly to save Karega from Wanja whom he considers to be evil. Munira is arrested and is eventually found culpable of the killings by Inspector Godfrey. In Munira's case, it can

be argued that Munira loses his freedom and is likely to be hanged for his heinous action. Theory of retributive justice states that punishment must be accorded to the accused in proportion to his crime or offence (Shree, 2016). The writer, therefore, seems to propose retributive justice in the case of Munira. There is a sense, however, that Ngugi proposes that the murder of people who exploit others in the society can be permissible. In *Petals of Blood*, Karega informs Karega about the death of a very important person in authority in Nairobi:

'He was gunned down as he waited in his car in Eastleigh, outside Mathare valley. He was waiting for his chauffeur to bring him the rent...

'He profited on the misery of the poor. It was probably robbers who did it, but all the same...

'Not robbers. According to Ruma Monga it is more than that. They left a note. They called themselves Wakombozi-or the society of one world liberation...and they say it's Stanley Mathenge returned from Ethiopia to complete the war he and Kimathi Started... (P.344)

The important man killed epitomizes capitalists exploiting the poor in post-independence Kenya. The allusion to Mathenge and Kimathi who participated actively in the country's freedom struggle is Ngugi's way of stating the sad fact that even after Kenya attained independence, the poor were still enslaved economically so that there is need for the downtrodden to rise against the capitalists in order to reclaim their freedom. One way this can be achieved is through killings of those who make them live in abject poverty. The fact that those who kill the prominent person in authority go scot-free hints at Ngugi's suggestive proposal that murder can sometimes be justified if it is meant to free a society of social and economic inequalities.

In *Devil on the Cross*, Wariinga kills her fiancé's father so as to save her life and rid the society of The Rich Old Man from Ngorika. To understand the motive of her action, it is important the matter is put in perspective. Pincus (2002) links

murder with sexually damaging childhoods. The Rich Old Man from Ngorika makes Wariinga to drop out of school just like Kimeria does to Wanja in *Petals of Blood* when he impregnates her. After making Wariinga pregnant in Form 2, The Rich Old Man attempts to tell her to abort the baby but:

Kareendi refuses to take drugs. It is appalling that babies should emerge from mothers' wombs as corpses...Kareendi has the baby. And she doesn't throw it into a pit latrine, nor does she abandon it at the roadside or in a bus. Nor does she leave it in a forest or on a rubbish pit. Kareendi places on the shoulders of her mother or her grandmother the burden of bringing up this baby, who has come into this world in spite of the fact that her parents have neither welcomed nor prepared for her arrival. (P.12)

Kareendi in the above excerpt is Wariinga. She refuses to abort her baby like Wanja but gives birth to it and places it under the custody of her mother. This portrays Ngugi as a writer who embraces a pro-life stance on the position of unborn foetus. Afterwards, Wariinga goes back to school and gets her East Africa Certificate of Education (EACE), a certificate that enables her to do a Secretarial Course at Nairobi Secretarial College. It should be understood that she had set her mind to pursue Engineering at the university, a dream that is temporarily shattered when The Rich Old Man from Ngorika impregnates her in Form 2. This makes her to drop out of school and fail in her EACE when she returns to school to complete her high school studies. But due to her tenacity and resilience, Wariinga eventually does Mechanical Engineering at a Polytechnic and she fulfils her childhood dream. Wariinga justifies her murder of Gatuiria's father by telling her victim:

You snatcher of people's lives! Do you remember the game you and I used to play, the game of the hunter and the hunted? Did you imagine that a day might come when the hunted become the hunter? What's done cannot be undone. I am not going to save you. But I shall save many other people,

whose lives will not be ruined by your words of honey and perfume. (P.260)

The Rich Old Man from Ngorika (Gitahi) can be likened to the important man killed outside Mathare Valley in *Petals of Blood*. Gitahi is a rich capitalist who defiles school going children. Ngugi seems to be sanctioning the murder of such sex predators as a way of freeing the society of such social misfits. It should also be noted that Wariinga is forced to kill Gitahi after he threatens to have her killed like Mwireri wa Mukirai. So her act can also be interpreted as murder committed in self-defense.

Wariinga is not arrested like Munira who is incarcerated for murdering Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria in *Petals of Blood*. Instead:

People gave way before her. Outside the door she met Kihaahu wa Gatheeca and Gitutu wa Gataangura. And suddenly remembering Muturi and the student leader-the people who had roused her from mental slavery-she felt anger she had not felt as she killed Gitahi.

'You too, and you! And she shot both Kihaahu and Gitutu, splintering their kneecaps. (P.261)

The crippling of Kihaahu and Gitutu though not premeditated, is Ngugi's way of saying that agents of capitalism who exploit the poor in the society should be disabled to stop them from causing more harm. It can be averred that the failure to arrest Wariinga after committing the murder, implies that the murder of social misfits in the society may be permissible if it rids the society of such people.

Another key happening which underscore the view that murder can be sanitized in some circumstances in *Devil on the Cross* is the murder of Nding'uri Nding'uri by his village mates for impoverishing them. When his fellow elders go to him to persuade him to stop strangling the village economically, he tells them:

'There is nothing you can do to me, Nding'uri son of Kahahami, because I have no soul!'

When they heard that, the elders of the village were greatly alarmed, and they looked

askance at one another: "So we have been harbouring a witch in our village? We have been sheltering a louse in our bodies. This one will drink up all the blood of all people until there is no more blood left in the land". And then and there they seized him, and wrapped him up with dry banana leaves, and burned him and his house. From that day the village was rid of evil, and the shadows of the people grew healthy again. (P.63)

Nding'uri is murdered for robbing his village its economic opportunities. His capitalistic greed drives him to buy almost all the village land, which makes villagers to entirely depend on him for their survival. The absence of a soul implies that he did not care for the welfare of his village mates. His murder ushers in economic prosperity for the community. This insinuates that there may be circumstances in which it is morally justifiable intentionally to kill a person who is morally innocent, threatens no one, rationally wishes not to die, and does not consent to be killed. Although the killing would wrong the victim, it might be justified by the necessity of averting a disaster that would otherwise occur (McMahan, 2005). Nding'uri is killed to avert an impending economic downfall of his community. Ngugi, therefore, advances a moral justification of murder of those who threaten human dignity and livelihood of a whole society.

1.3 Conclusion

It has been demonstrated in this paper that Ngugi wa Thiong'o's approach to the moral issues interrogated in his novels can be viewed as a revolution on moral absolutism. Though he takes cognizance of the moral code envisaged in religion and African culture, he advances the argument that sometimes moral dictates have to be revised so as to build an ethical and just society which is sensitive to all vulnerable groups. While normative ethics seek to prescribe what is right and wrong in human actions, Ngugi wa Thiong'o proposes an ethical code that flows from logic.

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