



DECOLONIALITY IN THE FICTION OF NGUGI WA THIONG'O



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INTRODUCTION

This article uses the fiction of Ngugi wa Thiong'o to demonstrate decoloniality in his thought and work. In doing that, this article relies on decolonial critical theory as its lens to decipher and demonstrate decolonial insights, concepts and philosophy in the work of Wa Thiong'o. In his own self-examination and expression, Wa Thiong'o took a philosophical interest in human relations in society in the context of politics, culture and economics. Enrique Dussel (1985) and Paulo Freire (1972), as decolonial philosophers of human liberation from oppression and exploitation, human beings and their relations in the world are at the centre of humanist philosophy. Further, Wa Thiong'o's philosophical interests in the spirituality of life and liberation draws his thought closer to decolonial liberation theologians and philosophers that challenged conquest, slavery and colonialism in the world since 1492 (Dussel, 1996). Wa Thiong'o, in his fictional works, delineates the exploitation of the Africans by the Whites and the consequential effect of such exploitation on the lives of the Africans. He vividly identifies three facets of the encounter of the Africans with the European imperialists – slavery, colonialism and neocolonialism. His first three novels – *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) – deal with the period of slavery and colonialism. They explore the detrimental effects of colonialism and imperialism. On the other hand, *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Devil on the Cross* (1982) and *Matigari* (1986) are about Wa Thiong'o's bitter criticism of neo-colonialism. In fact, there is also an attack on slavery and colonialism. Wa Thiong'o's latest novel, *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), is his conscious effort to sum up Africa of the 20th century.

ENCOUNTERING COLONIAL CONQUEST

By way of background, Wa Thiong'o, when he came to recreate the history of his people through fiction, selected for his first two novels – *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965) – the events relating to the introduction of western education as well as Christianity. *The River Between* is wa Thiong'o's first attempt at novel writing, but it was published after *Weep Not, Child*. In fact, it contains the period of Kenyan history prior to that of *Weep Not, Child*. To use the genre of fiction and the novel to engage with colonial and imperial

history is a philosopher's choice of expression. Okolo (2007) insists that Wa Thiong'o and Achebe are philosophers who elected to express their philosophy of liberation through fiction and essays.

In *The River Between* (1965), Wa Thiong'o uses a distinction in setting between two mountain ridges as an organising conceit that dramatises the antagonism between two competing native constituencies and their seemingly irreconcilable belief structures. Because the setting (presumably the late 1940s or early 1950s) precedes the emergence of substantive attempts at decolonisation, Wa Thiong'o's novel portrays not so much the conflict between "coloniser" and "colonised", but the internal conflicts and plural ambitions of native people themselves. The novel's opening situates the narrative's broader conflicts within a Kenyan landscape that has yet to experience the effects of British colonialism:

The two ridges lay side by side. One was Kamenno, the other was Makuyu. Between them was a valley. It was called the valley of life. Behind Kamenno and Makuyu were many more valleys and ridges, lying without any discernible plan. They were like many sleeping lions which never woke. They just slept, the big deep sleep of their Creator. A river flowed through the valley of life ... The river was called Honia, which meant cure, or bring back- life. Honia river never dried: it seemed to possess a strong will to live, scorning droughts and weather changes (wa Thiong'o, 1965:1)

The image of the two mountains captures, symbolically, the political binary that separates the coloniser and the colonised. Albert Memmi (1974) philosophised on the separation of the worlds of the coloniser and the colonised. Enrique Dussel (1985), Samir Amin (1997), Walter Rodney (1972) all described the separate centre and periphery relations between the colonisers of the world and the colonised, Wa Thiong'o is not solitary in deciphering political relations thus, but he is together with other decolonial thinkers. Wa Thiong'o (1965:1) stretches the image thus: "When you stood in the valley, the two ridges ceased to be sleeping lions united by their common source of life. They became antagonists. You could tell this, not by anything tangible but by the way they faced each other, like two rivals ready to come to blows in a life and death struggle for the leadership of this isolated region."



Wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* is mainly concerned with the exploitation of the Africans by the Whites and adverse impact of colonisation on the culture of Kenya. In the very beginning the novelist emerges as a true advocate of the cultural glory of Africa. He describes at length in the novel the impenetrable Kenya in all its beauty. He explains that the Kenyans had been without any fear of intrusion by "ukabi" (outsider). They used to lead a happy, peaceful and united life with their traditions and customs which bound them to their land. The African people believed that their land is their God, Murunga's gift to their first parents-Gikuya and Mumbi. Anibal Quijano (2000:533) describes the clash of civilisations and invasion of the cultural universe of the conquered and the colonised that Empire and the world system does, a description that Wa Thiong'o captivantly captures in the foregoing. In the novel Wa Thiong'o captures the history of conquest and its progression in the manner Enrique Dussel (1985) describes the conquest and subjugation of the Americas in 1492, where the conqueror used God and religion as an excuse to racialise and oppress the natives, robbing them of their God given resources.

The breaking down of the old world of the native in Wa Thiong'o's fiction, which Achebe (1958) dramatises in his *Things Fall Apart* is described also by Ramon Grosfoguel (2013) and Enrique Dussel (1985) as the violence of conquest that integrates the native world into the modern colonial world system of capitalism, Christianity and monotheism. The preaching of new ways and values of life through a new religion had a drastically adverse effect on the old beliefs. The collision between the two antagonistic ways of life was, indeed, most catastrophic and tragic. Wa Thiong'o remarkably portrays in *The River Between* the tragic predicament of the Kenyans torn by a lacerating conflict between the loss of cultural heritage and identity in the exploitative colonial context at both the individual and societal levels. Thus "the disinheritance of the Gikuyu religion and tribal culture by White colonialism figures in this novel" (Ravenscroft, 2000:695).

The novelist clearly draws our attention to the exploitation of the Africans in the field of education imparted by the colonisers. In fact, the education imparted to the students at the Siriana missionary school was directed mainly to advance interests of the British Empire. They wanted to convert the Africans to believe in their faith and help them

spread Christianity. They also wanted the students to help them in the administration of the natives. Livingstone recognised Waiyaki to be "a possible Christian leader of the church". Such education began to condemn the native rituals, customs and traditions. Wa Thiong'o critiques this education system and the coloniality of knowledge.

The colonised Black people of Africa were paganised (Dussel 1985) and their gods called the Devil, their religions reduced to Satanism, "those who refuse him are the children of darkness; these, sons and daughters of evil one, will go to Hell. They will burn and burn forever more, world unending" (wa Thiong'o, 1965:29). True to what Edward Said (1983) described as cultural imperialism, which Anibal Quijano (2000) describes as coloniality of knowledge, and Wa Thiong'o himself calls the colonisation of the mind, Joshua, as a converted Christian, began to hate his African culture. He repented all his life for having married circumcised Miriamu. He also did not want his children to have any inclination for their African culture. Joshua began preaching to the people to believe in the Bible and give up their traditions. Thus, by condemning the native tradition in favour of the new faith and by becoming a preacher himself, he was at once the exploited as well as the exploiter. Coloniality can use the colonised to advance its imperial projects. Chege was hurt to see many Africans converted. He was also disappointed as he was unable to do anything to save his culture. He feared that even his son, Waiyaki, might begin to dislike the ways of the ridge and its rituals. We find clearly the impact of missionary education on him. The day before circumcision Waiyaki hesitated to join other boys. At first, he stood as an outsider. He grew uneasy to listen to the songs of circumcision sung by the young Kenyan boys and girls of his age. When he was pushed into the circle dancing around fire, his body moved mechanically. The voice of Whiteman's education made him guilty so he could not put his heart in it. Wa Thiong'o comments thus on the disruptive influence of Christianity on the African life: "Christianity as an organised religion is corrupt and hypocritical, besides acting as an agent of Imperialism. It exercised a highly disruptive influence on African life and was the chief villain in alienating the African from his own culture" (Wa Thiong'o, 1986:31).

The instrumentalisation of religion in conquest and coloniality was, according to Enrique Dussel (1985), the collapse of Christianity to Christendom, a corrupt kingdom of this world. Wa Thiong'o makes circumcision the central point around which he rotates his novel and describes, in a telling manner, the cultural exploitation of the Africans by Whites. Robson comments: "In his narration of the ceremony of circumcision, he draws a number of elements closely together" (Robson, 2003:8). In chapters three and four of *The River Between*, Wa Thiong'o describes at length the importance of circumcision to the people who lived there. He makes it explicitly clear that the act of circumcision is the most central in the Gikuyu way of life:

Circumcision was an important ritual to the tribe. It kept the people together, bound the tribe. It was the core of the social structure and something that gave meaning to man's life, end the custom and spiritual bias of the tribe's cohesion and integration would be no more (Wa Thiong'o, 1965:79).

The insistence on indigenous cultures and practices is what Walter Mignolo (2008) called epistemic disobedience, a decolonial practice and concept of resistance to the Empire and its colonial projects. Indeed, Wa Thiong'o, as a devoted Kenyan wants to emphasise that colonial rule in Kenya destroyed the entire culture and social peace. It not only divided the society but also the inner beings of Africans. As a sensitive artist, *The River Between* is Wa Thiong'o's cry for the loss of African culture and the glory of the rich heritage. We are reminded of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which sums up the African religion thus:

How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers. He came quietly and peacefully with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer be like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart (Achebe, 1958:158).

The people of the ridges, the natives, ceased to talk to each other. The real charm of life has completely disappeared under the impact of White man's religious attitude towards the natives. The natives suffered the coloniality of being (Maldonado-Torres 2007) and became what Frantz Fanon (1967)

called the wretched of the earth, by-products of Empire and the debris of conquest in the world system and its orders.

AGAINST COLONIALITY AFTER POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE

The most, perhaps, vivid description of coloniality after African independence is found in Kwame Nkrumah (1965) in his neocolonialism as the last stage of imperialism. In her essay "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism,'" Anne McClintock problematises the term "post-colonial", arguing that it reinscribes the colonialist discourse of linear time and progress and ignores the continuities of imperial power in the post-independence period: "the historical rupture suggested by the preposition 'post' belies both the continuities and discontinuities of power that have shaped the legacies of the formal European and British colonial empires" (McClintock 2000:178). She also argues that one of the problems of the term "post-colonial" is that it signals "the privilege of seeing the world in terms of a singular and a historical abstraction" and suggests that post-colonialism encourages "a panoptic tendency to view the globe within generic abstractions voided of political nuance" (McClintock, 2000:177). What she is warning against, in other words, is the generalisation of the term "post-colonial", which is considered to be applicable to all previously colonised nations despite their different cultural, social and historical specificities. Wa Thiong'o's fourth novel, *Petals of Blood* (1977), demonstrates the validity of McClintock's argument that imperialist practices continue in the post-colonial era and manifest in a variety of forms, particularly in the guise of transnational capitalism in post-independence Kenya. Keeping McClintock's framework in mind, an analysis of "the post-colonial" conditions in Kenya requires an understanding of Kenyan historical contexts which shaped the country's neocolonialism in specific forms and thus required specific solutions.

Here the focus is on Wa Thiong'o's critique of the processes and effects of neocolonialism on the colonised subjects of the Kenyan nation state. The neocolonial nation state that is controlled by an indigenous bourgeoisie not only exploits the oppressed economically but also deprives them of their history.



As Peter Nazareth notes, “colonisers steal not only labour and resources, they also steal history. If a people believe they had no history before the coming of the colonisers, they can be exploited more easily” (Nazareth, 1986:122). Despite the demise of colonialism, Wa Thiong’o illustrates that the neocolonial nation state, far from embodying the new hope of the masses, is a replica of the colonialist master’s political system negating the history of its own peoples and perpetuating colonial authority and legacies. *Petals of Blood* tells the story of the transformation of a rural community named Ilmorog and of the four major characters who come from outside and yet play vital roles in changing it: Munira, a school headmaster; Abdulla, a former Mau Mau fighter, then barkeeper, and now a seller of oranges and sheepskins on the street; Karega, a former teacher and now a trade unionist; and Wanja, a prostitute and a barmaid at Abdulla’s old bar. All of them have unresolved pasts with which they have to come to terms in the new era. Aligning with the genre of the detective novel, *Petals of Blood* revolves around the mysterious murder of Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria, the most well-known businessmen in the community. Like *A Grain of Wheat*, the novel is narrated through different points of view by the four main characters and employs the flashback as one of its main techniques to give an overview of Kenyan histories from the pre-colonial to colonial and to “post-colonial” eras. The temporal focus of the novel is post-independence Kenya in the 1970s, and, through his characters, Wa Thiong’o explores how the fruits of Uhuru (freedom) have been unequally eaten, how the ideals of the national liberation are betrayed by the new ruling classes who align themselves with the exploitative ideologies of a transnational neocolonial bourgeoisie, and how those who actually fight for Uhuru are unrecognised in Kenyan history. *Petals of Blood* can be said to be Wa Thiong’o’s attempt to expose the exploitative features of neocolonial capitalism and to speak as a representative voice of the marginalised. In the novel, the villagers of Ilmorog form a delegation and set out on a journey to see Kimeria, their MP in the capital Nairobi to ask for a solution for their drought-stricken community. The drought has a significant meaning in that while it suggests the geographical fragility of the area, it also evidently symbolises the hardships of the peasants in neocolonial Kenya who suffer from the lack of practical connection between the politicians and the people. The departure of the British colonisers does not mean the end of colonial power. On the contrary, the educated

elites and middle-class people who take over the political and economic controls from the colonisers reconstitute the colonial regime and exercise power over their own people. Merely seeking to create connections with multinational businesses for their own benefits, they do not, in fact, practically establish economic and political plans that would transform the country after independence. As Fanon puts it:

The national bourgeoisie of underdeveloped countries is not engaged in production, nor in invention, nor building, nor labor; is it completely canalised into activities of the intermediary type. Its innermost vocation seems to be to keep in the running and to be part of the racket. The psychology of the national bourgeoisie is that of the businessman, not that of a captain of industry (Fanon, 1963:149-150).

In imitating the role of the Western bourgeoisie, the national bourgeoisie in the post-colonial countries functions as “the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the mask of neocolonialism” (Fanon, 1963: 152). Instead of being the voice of the nation, as they once were during the decolonisation period, the elite betray the ideals of the nationalist liberation struggle and the hope of the people by fully embracing imperialist capitalism. The MP in the novel, for example, aligns himself with transnational companies in the tourism business. Given capital from foreign investors, he buys the land from the peasants, transforming Ilmorog into a tourist centre where tourists from outside the country outside come for young prostitutes. He has no mind to modernise agriculture but concerns himself with only the development of business.

As Fanon says, “the landed bourgeoisie refuses to take the slightest risk and remains opposed to any venture and to any hazard. It has no intention of building upon the sand; it demands solid investment and quick returns” (Fanon, 1963:155). *Petals of Blood* is a demonstration and, at the same time, a critique of the processes and impact of neocolonialism on the marginalised peasants and the workers who, for Wa Thiong’o, are the principal actors in the anti-colonial struggle. These two lower classes are on the verge of disappearing in contemporary Kenyan history.

The interventions of imperialist powers manifest themselves in the forms of transnational corporations and international development organisations, which are, of course, sanctioned by the national elite and the bourgeoisie. These organisations give loans to the peasants and encourage them to do various kinds of big-scale farming with machines, imported fertilisers and paid labour as well as persuading the workers to sell their plots and invest in commercial businesses instead. Unable to produce agricultural products at the expected level, the peasants accumulate debt, and their land is thus confiscated by the bank. This is the second robbery of the land after it was once stolen from them by the colonialists during the colonial rule. The peasants are disillusioned with independence which does not secure their land against foreign intruders. The advent of imperialist economic planning inevitably leads to the restructuring of the mode of production, and fundamentally transforms human and social relations in post-colonial societies. An epitome of a new Kenya affected by capitalism, Ilmorog has gone through just such a transformation.

This is perhaps best captured in the consumption of Theng'eta in different historical periods. The changes, symbolised by Theng'eta production, show that Ilmorog, once a drought-stricken community, now fully embraces the ideology of capitalism and transforms itself into national economy controlled by international owners. The once-communal drink made for ritualistic purposes is turned into a commodity produced to make profits in an international market. Mysticism becomes mass marketing. This is a good illustration of Marx's criticism of exploitative capitalism that "turns use value (Theng'eta made with care by people for their own use in important community ceremonies) into exchange value (Theng'eta commercially produced simply as a commodity to be sold for the greatest possible profit)" (Wa Thiong'o, 1999:83). The profits from the drink never return to local people like Abdulla, but go to black businessmen who share them with foreign investors. Looking at it from a Fanonist perspective, Mzigo, Chui and Kamera – the representatives of businessmen – do not produce anything but borrow capital from foreigners and buy the Theng'eta business, a move initiated by Abdulla. In this sense, they act merely as the intermediaries who seek to construct Ilmorog (Kenya) in the image of the metropolitan mother country. Post-colonial modernity materialised in the construction of the Theng'eta factory, the New Ilmorog shopping

centre, and the New Ilmorog tourist village – at the expense of the land of poor peasants and the working-class people – engenders a new social organisation, altering human relations and consciousness.

Dispossession and displacement are the first weapons of Empire and coloniality on a world scale. The invasion of capitalism into Ilmorog has also affected the main characters. After his shop is bought off by Mzigo, Abdulla finds himself selling sheepskin and oranges on the street for tourists, whereas Wanja now runs a brothel targeting high-class businessmen. Neocolonialism not only manifests itself in terms of economic oppression, but it also has psychological effects on the colonised subjects. The competitive and exploitative nature of capitalism invites them to think like business people, who are only concerned about themselves. The invasion of capitalism into Ilmorog has also affected the main characters.

Coloniality of power that is in capitalism (Quijano, 2000) morphs up and produces coloniality of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) and renders the world of the conquered desperate and beastly. Wanja's worldview – that "you either preyed or you remained a victim" (wa Thiong'o, 1977: 294) – is a manifestation of how the subjectivity of the colonised is deformed by the exploitative ideology of capitalism. As a product/subject of the capitalist epoch, Wanja defines things along the axis of exchange value where human beings are commodified and deprived of their essence and so she turns women into sex objects for profits.

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By creating a brothel, Wanja falls into the trap of the vicious circle of capitalism which turns her into an exploiter herself. In this sense, she is both a capitalist victim and a predator. Wa Thiong'o points out that capitalist ideology is sustained and perpetuated by a variety of social organisations. In his famous essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Louis Althusser notes that under capitalism, the state creates two kinds of apparatuses to maintain its domination, Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). While the first one is maintained by overtly coercive institutions such as the army and the police, the latter is enforced by religious, educational, political and cultural institutions such as the church, the school, the political party, the press and by cultural products such as literature and history (Althusser, 1971:143). Educational and political institutions in the novel illustrate how dominant practices and values of capitalism are reproduced. Kareja is the character who has doubts about formal education as a tool to bring about a people's liberation. In the words of the human rights lawyer in the novel, formal education does nothing more than "obscure racism and other forms of oppression. It was meant to make us accept our inferiority so as to accept their superiority and their rule over us" (Wa Thiong'o, 1977:165). Under the rule of headmaster Cambridge Fraudsham, the colonial discourse of progress and order is reinforced in the classroom where the students do not study their own history but rather the history of the Celts, for example. His teaching is colonialist in perspective in that it reinscribes the colonial rhetoric of the master-and-slave relationship: "In any civilised society, there were those who were to formulate orders and others to obey: there had to be leaders and the led" (Wa Thiong'o, 1977:170).

In *Petals of Blood*, Wa Thiong'o not only focuses on Ideological State Apparatuses as seen in the educational institutions, but also on Repressive State Apparatuses in form of the police. Suspected of being involved with the murder of the three businessmen, Munira, Abdulla, Wanja and Kareja are put into jail. In this carceral environment, we see the perpetuation of the capitalist ideology by Inspector Godfrey, who helps maintain social stability and order to protect all kinds of industries and foreign investment. In *Petals of Blood*, Wa Thiong'o not only illustrates for us the plight of the peasants and working-class people in its material aspects, but he also demonstrates how these people are marginalised in Kenyan historiography.

Since history is a discourse where language can be a tool of domination and a means of constructing identity, the question of who writes it, who the subject of history is, and how it is written becomes an important issue. Wa Thiong'o's concern is that the sacrifices made by the masses in the war of liberation have been erased from national memory. The groups of people who are given special attention in the novel are peasants and working-class people who, for Wa Thiong'o, are national heroes of Kenya. Despite being agents of historical change, they are not given a place in national history which, like the national economy, is controlled by a neocolonial state. What national development has caused for the masses is a sense of isolation and alienation. Their lives have been neglected by the government since they have no control or power. A cry for historical existence is uttered, for example, by Munira. Wa Thiong'o's confrontation with the neocolonial world is at once an engagement with coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge and coloniality of being, even as Nkrumah himself and Wa Thiong'o do not use the terminology of decoloniality.

CONFRONTING COLONIALITY AS THE DEVIL

Wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* (1982) is more remarkable in his life as it was written in Gikuyu. Its original title was in Gikuyu as *Caitaani Hultharaba Ini*. It first appeared in 1980 and later in English in 1982. When he was in prison, he wanted to express his emotions regarding the neo-colonial exploitation of ordinary Kenyan people. Wa Thiong'o, as a sensitive writer, is worried about corruption that prevails in the Kenyan society. He believes that capitalism is a systematic robbery of peasants and workers. It is a robbery protected and sanctified by large courts, parliament, religion, armed forces, police and educational institutions. The novel opens at a crush in a realistic society. There is a journey in a taxi from Nairobi to Ilmorog; during the journey, the driver and five passengers discuss social issues, which are the most central to the novel.

They are going to attend the gathering in Ilmorog. The scene in the minibus simply melts into the voice of the meetings of the masters of ceremonies:

And now, before I sit down, I shall call upon the leaders of foreign delegation from the international organisation thieves and robbers whose headquarters are in New York, U.S.A. to talk to you. I think you all know that we have already applied to become full members of IOTR. Their visit to this delegation thus, the gifts and the crown they have brought marks the beginning of even more fruitful period of co-operation (Wa Thiong'o, 1988:87).

The seven representatives are the neocolonial powers indulging in the most heinous corrupt practices and exploitation. Each one wears shirts made of paper money of their respective homelands and reveals his grabbing of the Kenyan economy. They take away the natural resources of Kenyans and also indulge in the exploitation of the workers and peasants. Gitutu is a big-bellied person who fattens on land. He proudly relates how he has taken over vast estates from the White settlers, subdivided into plots and sold them at high prices to the citizens. He accepts without any hesitation for "the land wasn't mine and the money with which I had paid for wasn't mine, and I hadn't added anything to the land where did I get the 2, 20,000 shilling? From the pockets of the people. Yes, because the land really belonged to people and the money with which I bought it came from the people" (Wa Thiong'o, 1988:106). Gitutu celebrates coloniality and its capitalist modernity that punishes the poor. *Devil on the Cross* is a dramatisation of coloniality, and it impacts in the Global South. As a result, workers and peasants gather and seek to overthrow the system:

We, who are gathered here now, belong to one clan: the clan of workers – I think all of us saw the incredible spectacle of those who have bellies that never bear children come to scorn us. Those bellies are not swollen by disease. They have been fattened by the fruit of our sweat and blood. Those bellies are barren and their owners are barren. What about us the workers? ... Today here, we refuse to go on being the pot that cooks but never tastes the food (Wa Thiong'o, 1988:208).

Here, the novelist argues that the cook, in spite of his tasty food, is deprived of eating it as he is not allowed to eat the pudding by the master of the house. Similarly, the peasants and the workers in Kenyan society toil and produce resources they never enjoy. Neocolonial Africans exploit the poor and the indigent.

Most readings of *Devil on the Cross* have adopted a Marxist posture of the novel where workers and the peasants seek to dethrone the exploitative ruling class to establish utopian communism and have accused Wa Thiong'o of yearning for the idyllic pre-colonial era where even "if a bean fell from the sky" the people would "split it" among themselves and "share" it in the true spirit of African village democracy. While other readings have placed *The Devil on the Cross* in the realm of post-colonial literature and thought. The exploitation of women and the poor by the rich "robbers and thieves" does in imagery and grammar compare to that of post-colonial theorists such as Achille Mbembe, the gist of *Devil on the Cross* refuses the confines of post-colonial thinking in that it insists in the presence of the "Devil" of coloniality in post-independence African contexts. The emphatic presence of the resurrected "Devil" and his works forbid imagination of the "post" that post-colonial theory envisages. The decolonial reading of *Devil on the Cross* critiques it as an act of epistemic disobedience couched from the locus of enunciation of "colonial difference" by a writer whose work is enmeshed in the political struggles of the peasants and the workers in the "zone of none-being" that is represented in post-independence African locale.

Long after juridical colonialism has been de-stooled, political and social conditions of coloniality continue in Ngugi's fictive universe as they do in the lived experiences of Africa to squeeze life out of the poor and to squeeze the poor out of life.

Okolo (2013:18), while observing that "Marx has no defined theory on literature" states that according to the Marxist literature of Wa Thiong'o:

Literature then should function as a reflection of the economic arrangements in society and the nature of relationships they foster. Its purpose is to analyse society in its own terms, to present a fictional world that is a lifelike representation of the real world. Writers should approach their task as a social act that entails evaluating the mode of production in society, the nature of the relationship between the various classes, and how to bring about a revolutionary end to the oppression of one class by another (Okolo, 2013:18).



From what Okolo says and what Marx and Engels (1968:51) say that “the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of the ruling class” the Marxist way of reading literature sees the trouble in the world as the trouble of one class of rich capitalists exploiting poor workers (and peasants.) There is no doubting throughout *Devil on the Cross* that Ngugi himself espouses Marxism and envisions a form of communist future for his struggling workers and peasants whose catechism of struggle says:

I believe that we workers are one clan

I believe that in the organisation of workers lies our strength

I believe that imperialism and its local representatives are the enemies of the progress of the workers and the peasants

And of the whole nation...
(*Devil on the Cross*, 1982:210)

This “workers anthem” rhymes in sound and in meaning with the international Marxist slogan of “workers of the world unite”.

There is more to Wa Thiong’o’s revolutionary fiction than there is to Marxism and its limits when decolonial reading of Wa Thiong’o is used. There is doubt that the worker that Karl Marx talks of is the same worker that Ngugi writes about, let alone the peasant. In short, a European worker and peasant and African colonial and post-independence peasant and worker might share the same name but are not the same subjects to the same power that allegedly oppresses them. The Orwellian aphorism of “some workers” being “more equal than others” might be applicable here.

Ramon Grosfoguel debunks Marxism as located inside Empire and as not fundamentally antagonistic to imperialism and coloniality. Although Marxism sings the anthem of the proletariat that must dethrone the oppressive class of capitalists, it is not removed or insulated from the pulls and pushes of epistemic racism and the ego-politics of conquest:

Marx situates his geopolitics of knowledge in relation to social classes. Marx thinks from the historic-social situation of the European proletariat, and it is on the basis of

this perspective that he proposes a global/universal design as the solution to the problems of all humanity: communism. What Marx maintains in common with the Western Bourgeois philosophical tradition is that his universalism, despite having emerged from a particular location – in this case the proletariat – does not problematise the fact that his subject is European, masculine, heterosexual, white, Judeo-Christian etc. Marx’s proletariat is a conflictive subject internal to Europe, which does not allow him to think outside the Eurocentric limits of Western thought (Grosfoguel, 2012:91).

The Marxist reading of Wa Thiong’o is limited by its locus of enunciation, which is North and its failure to read what Walter Mignolo (1999) calls “colonial difference”, which locates the African subject in the periphery and ‘imperial difference’ that positions the Western subject at the centre. The experience of colonialism, coloniality and racism that Wa Thiong’o’s workers and peasants are confronting is not exactly uniform with that of Marx’s workers, who were not exactly at the receiving end of the stick of Empire in the context of coloniality and its racist expression. By this failure to read and be alive to the “colonial difference” of African workers and peasants, in this blindness, which emanates from its “imperial difference”, Marxism, from a decolonial vantage point, collapses to another imperial technology of dominating the global South and enveloping it as an appendage of the titanic ego-politics of Empire.

INDIGNATION AT THE BETRAYED STRUGGLE

One of the major themes in Wa Thiong’o’s *Matigari* (1986) is the deceptiveness of any notion of an epistemological rupture between colonial and post-colonial society. The confrontational tone of *Devil on the Cross* is retained, and *Matigari* posits a vision of utopia, which must be obtained through armed struggle. While Wa Thiong’o, also in *Matigari*, is reversing the colonial binarism in order to combat the hegemonic interpellations of the neo-colonial regime, there is a paradigmatic shift in *Matigari* as the novel transcends the thought of *The River Between* in its Marxist, materialist discourse of *Devil on the Cross* (1982).

By including magic and supernatural elements, Matigari propagates an utopia which is based on what one could call an “ethical universal”, in Wa Thiong’o’s case premised on the ethical principles of Gikuyuism Christianity and Marxism. This non-materialist discourse with its magical aspects involves, as Brink states in another context, an acknowledgement of a more holistic way of approaching the world, an awareness of more things in heaven and earth than have been dreamt of in our philosophy, a free interaction between the living and the dead (Brink, 1998:25). Wa Thiong’o’s extension of his ideological base is premised on a profound disillusionment with the concrete socio-economic, cultural and political realities in the 1970s and the 1980s from which Matigari is generated. It is my contention that Matigari addresses the urgency of the polarised situation of post-colonial Kenya, not only by transgressing his former, materialist discourse but by having only one story to tell and thereby distancing his narrative from the multiple stories of post-modern fiction. Wa Thiong’o discusses the relationship between Matigari’s role as a prophet and the decentred, fragmentary voice of post-modern literature. In *Penpoints* Wa Thiong’o claims that art has more questions than it has answers. Art starts with a position of not knowing and seeks to know, hence its exploratory nature (Wa Thiong’o, 1998:15).

Decoloniality is the philosophy of those thinkers who have been outgrowing colonial ideologies and dominating Eurocentric doctrines. In fact, art has hardly any answers. Wa Thiong’o even goes on to illustrate his point by using *Matigari* as an example, who was going about asking questions related to the truth and justice of what was going on in the country. Actually, *Matigari* was only asking one question: where could a person wearing the belt of peace find truth and justice in a post-colonial society? Wa Thiong’o’s emphasis on art’s and literature’s function may in some way seem to contradict wa Thiong’o’s own development from *A Grain of Wheat to Devil on the Cross* (1982) and *Matigari*. In the first part of *Matigari*, there is a sense that this Socratic, exploratory mood is being introduced where *Matigari*’s quest is governed by two questions “where is truth and justice to be found” and “Had anything really changed between then and now?” (Wa Thiong’o, 1998:9). These questions are being tested as *Matigari* explores the ideological cartography of the country after independence. *Matigari* confirms the impression from *Devil on the Cross*

(1982) that the expected discontinuity between the colonial and post-colonial times is illusory. In fact, any idea about a new land as a result of the liberation struggle is being queried and eventually pulverised as a result of *Matigari*’s numerous, depressing experiences after his return from the forest. Whereas Wa Thiong’o’s earlier fiction has been focusing on objectifying the reality of grim post-colonialism with an underlying aspiration for revolution, he seems in *Matigari* – even though the idea of revolution is by no means forgotten – to realise the historical limitations of Marxism and its resultant lack of elasticity. *Matigari*’s response to the repression and exploitation of the present regime represents, in one way, a paradigmatic shift in Wa Thiong’o’s development as an author. As a prophet, *Matigari* not only passes judgment on the present state of affairs but also projects a vision of a New Jerusalem. By straying away from a strict materialist discourse, Wa Thiong’o lifts the novel beyond a mere reiteration of Marxist jargon by widening the scope of combat strategies, thus challenging in multiple ways the present order and the inevitability of the post-colonial situation. By transcending in this way the fixity of the post-colonial situation, the response to post-colonial imposition is more complex than Brenda Cooper’s somewhat condescending remarks about “the biblical tone of tilling and reaping and the exaction of godly vengeance” attest to (Cooper, 1992:177).

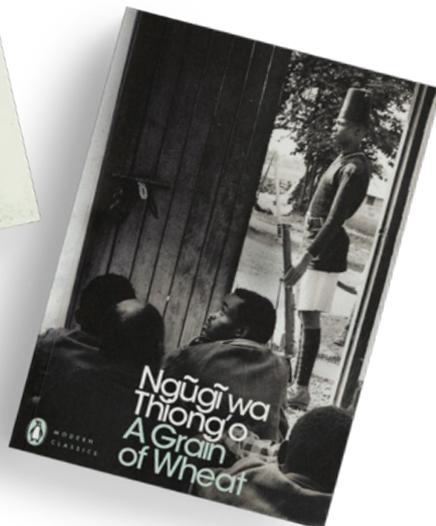
The dual and enigmatic nature of *Matigari* (moving beyond time and space and still having a material reality) does not, however, detract from the overall focus on the ethical and political realities of the novel. In a sense, *Matigari* functions as the beautiful one who comes back from the bush and queries the healthiness of the post-colonial situation, captured in the heading of the second part of the novel: “Seeker of Truth and Justice.” As a prophet who tries to reinvigorate the spirit from the days of Mau Mau, Matigari represents these ideals of resistance against oppression. Embodying the double-edged role of the prophet Old Testament style, Matigari both projects the truth to the people and passes judgement on the present state of affairs. But Matigari seeks beyond the limits of a traditional prophetic role by claiming a Christ-like stature. This can be attributed to the various specific New Testament allusions coupled directly to Matigari. Religion and spirituality, typically of the philosophy of liberation and liberation theology, permeates Matigari and represent liberation as a human and spiritual mission par excellence.



"I have also drawn from the Bible in the sense that the Bible was for a long time the only literature available to Kenyan people that has been available to them in their national languages" (Wa Thiong'o 1978:10). In true epistemic disobedience, (Mignolo, 2008) Wa Thiong'o usurps and appropriates the colonial canon and archive for liberation.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored the selected fiction of Wa Thiong'o and has used the same to decipher the radical decolonial philosophy that he exudes. Fiction is to Wa Thiong'o just a genre and a channel to express his decolonial philosophy. As the article has shown, Wa Thiong'o's philosophy has been growing and expanding from communalist, Marxist, nationalist and post-colonialist categories to decoloniality as a philosophy of liberation.



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