

“Third World” Revolutionary Theory and Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s Fiction

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Abstract:

Ngugi Wa Thiongo novels in general are very practical and provide the reader with a thorough understanding of the field of post-colonialism and specifically in the phase of transformation. This study puts forward a “Third World” revolutionary reading of Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s novels *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *Petals of Blood* (1977). In Addition to the novels, “Third World” revolutionary ideas, such as the re-humanizing violence of the colonized, cultural resistance by means of constructing a unifying national culture and having control over the means of production, will be highlighted. Ngugi, unlike other Nigerian authors, chose to write in his native language. Ngugi’s rejection of colonial culture translates into his fierce rejection of the post-independence westernization of African societies as the novelist clearly presents in his novels. These theoretical and revolutionary ideas will be applied to selected works by this author.

Keywords: Third World, Independence, transformation, Social Consciousness, armed struggle.

The term “Third World” is used to describe several countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In this research, it is used to describe African countries in general, and Kenya in particular. The term is placed between inverted comas in order to avoid using discriminatory expressions that negatively typify some races and countries in a research that is intended to be anti-racist, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist. Due to the unremitting intervention of the “developed countries” in every detail related to the peoples’ lives in the countries of the “Third World,” these countries suffered severely in almost every field one cares to name. “Third World” countries are characterized by their low per capita incomes, limited industrial development, and high rates of illiteracy levels.

Probably the most well-known “Third world” revolutionary theorist is Frantz Fanon. In the beginning of his *The Wretched of the Earth*, and specifically in “On Violence,” Fanon emphasizes a detailed explanation of violence with regard to both colonization and the process of decolonization. He defines decolonization as a violent process without exception, clarifying that it is, “National liberation, national reawakening, restoration of the nation to the people or commonwealth, whatever the name used, whatever the latest expression, decolonization is always a violent event” (1968, 22).

The goal of this process is the final replacement of one group of people with another group and the process will only end when this transition or change is totally completed. This conception of decolonization is created by Fanon's construction of the colonial world. Fanon infers that all colonial societies are hierarchally-structured communities. Based on his conclusion, Fanon effectively shows that the settler class totally dehumanizes the native population in every way. According to the settlers' logic, natives do not possess morals and, therefore, are the embodiment of absolute evil as opposed to the Christian settlers who represent the forces of good (1968, 32). This point is considered crucial for Fanon because it explains the phenomena that happen in the colonial world. One of them concerns the idea that decolonization is the replacement of one group of people by another. Another is related to the realization on the part of the natives that they are not any less human than settlers and colonizers; they are not animals, and consequently they need to be re-humanized by developing a sense of agency, specifically by violently rebelling against the settler.

Fanon divides natives into three groups, which, as he believes, evolved because of colonization. The first is the native worker who is appreciated by the settler for his work. Group two is what he calls the "colonized intellectual" (1968, 47). According to western criteria, this group consists of the more educated set of natives who are in many ways engaged by the settler to be spokespeople and representatives for their (settler's) views.

The settlers, in the words of Fanon, "implanted in the minds of the colonized intellectual that the essential qualities remain eternal in spite of the blunders men may make: the essential qualities of the West, of course" (1968, 36). These intellectuals were "ready to defend the Graeco-Latin pedestal" against all adversaries, settler or native (1968, 36). In addition, group three labelled by Fanon as the "lumpenproletariat," is described in Marxism as the poorest class. Because these people have very little, they are outside the system. In contrast to Marxists who maintain that this group is often unable to help in the organizing of the workers, Fanon sees in them a promising power. As a matter of fact, he strongly believes that although the lumpenproletariat or the peasants are poverty-stricken, they will be the first to discover the value of violence in the face of the settler (1968, 47).

After the idea of revolution is accepted by the natives, Fanon designates the process by which the idea is discussed, adjusted, and finally implemented. Fanon believes that the spark that ignites the beginning of the revolution is the idea of total systematic change. However, through the actual application to real world situations, this revolutionary idea is watered down until it becomes a small shift of power within the existing system: "[The] pacifists and legalists...put bluntly enough demand... 'Give us more power'" but the "native intellectual has clothed his aggressiveness in his veiled desire to assimilate himself to the colonial world" (1968, 46, 47). The colonizer introduces non-violence and compromise as further ways out of the violence of decolonization. But, these ways are tools to direct and degrade the liberation movement.

When the newly independent Republic of Gabon gained independence from France in 1960, for instance, the new president, Léon M'ba said “Gabon is independent, but between Gabon and France nothing has changed; everything goes on as before” (1968, 52). Fanon describes many aspects of the violence and response to violence necessary for total decolonization. He also draws attention to several different methods of anti-colonial violence.

Fanon’s focus on anti-colonial violence is closely linked to his emphasis on the importance of a national culture, which he outlines in his chapter from *The Wretched of the Earth* entitled, “On National Culture.” Fanon sets out to define how a national culture can emerge among the Africans when, at the time of the publication of his book in 1961, many nations of Africa were still colonized. Rather than depending on a fetishized understanding of pre-colonial history, Fanon discusses a national culture, which should be constructed upon the material resistance of a people against colonial domination. Fanon narrates the essay with reference to what he calls the “native intellectual.”

Fanon explains that colonizers try to write the pre-colonial history of a colonized people as one of “barbarism, degradation, and bestiality” in order to justify and legislate the supremacy of Western civilization (Fanon, 149). In order to upset the supremacy of colonial society, writes Fanon, the native intellectual feels the need to rewrite history and construct a national culture. Fanon also suggests that some of the colonized intellectuals fall into the trap of the colonizer when they try to prove that there exists an essential African or 'Negro' culture. This is a dead end for them, as stated by Fanon, because it was originally the colonizers who essentialized all peoples in Africa as 'Negro', without considering distinct national cultures and histories. This leads to what Fanon considers as one of the confines of the Négritude movement. In articulating a continental identity, based on the colonial category of the 'Negro', Fanon argues, "the men who set out to embody it realized that every culture is first and foremost national" (1968, 155).

Thus to speak about cultural resistance and armed struggle in Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s fiction, we need to consider the “Third World” revolutionary theories of Fanon as discussed above and Amilcar Cabral who are among the most important thinkers from Africa on the politics of liberation and emancipation. Firozi Manji, an activist and public intellectual from Kenya states:

While the applicability of Fanon’s thinking has re-emerged, with popular engagements and movements such as Abahlali base Mjondolo in South Africa proclaiming his ideas as the inspiration for their mobilizations, as well as works by Sekyi-Otu, Alice Cherki, Nigel Gibson, Lewis Gordon and others, Cabral’s ideas have not received as much attention. (“Culture, Power, and Resistance”, 1)

Cabral assumed that the expansion and control of capitalism depends disapprovingly on dehumanizing the colonial subject. Moreover, central to the process of dehumanization has been the need to destroy, modify or recast the culture of the colonized, for it is principally through culture that the colonized have sought to resist domination and assert their humanity. For Cabral,

and for Fanon, culture is not some aesthetic artefact, but an expression of history, the foundation of liberation, and a means to resist domination. At heart, culture is subversive. Cabral insists that culture is intimately linked to the struggle for freedom. While culture comprises many aspects, it "... grows deeper through the people's struggle, and not through songs, poems or folklore. ... One cannot expect African culture to progress unless one contributes realistically to the creation of the conditions necessary for this culture, i.e. the liberation of the continent" (Manji, 2). In other words, culture is not static and unchangeable, but it advances only through engagement in the struggle for freedom.

Edward Said is also of key importance to modern cultural theory, specifically anti-colonial theory. The matters which stand out in Said's writings and which differentiates his critical identity from the colonial discourse theorists are his ideas on secular criticism. By secular criticism, he means a criticism unrestrained by the restrictions of intellectual specialization. Said supports amateurism in intellectual life. He argues passionately for the need for intellectual work to recover its connections with the political realities of the society in which it occurs. The association with political realities enables the intellectual to "speak truth to power" (*Said, Representations* 63). For Said, the problem with contemporary criticism is its extreme functionalism, which pays too much attention to the text's formal operations but far too little to its materiality. Cultural resistance becomes an essential aspect of the armed struggle and is maintained by the text itself. The result is that texts become " a self-consuming artefact [. . .] idealized, essentialized, instead of remaining as the special kind of cultural object it is, with a causation, persistence, durability and social presence quite its own" (*The World*, 148).

It becomes clear that the concept of the worldliness of the critic is the question of the writers' own position in the world. All texts are constructed out of many available discourses; these are discourses within which writers themselves may be seen as speaking subjects. The author in the text is considered to be a textual construction; and it cannot be supposed that nobody speaks to us in the text. Sooner or later, worldliness is concerned with the materiality of the text's origin and culture. These ideas of the worldliness of the critic and the text are ideas principally associated with Edward Said. According to Said, we should reject the supposition that literature is a passive structure. He goes on further to say that to treat literature as a passive structure is to miss the important fact that it is an act located in the world. The text is a cultural production, a cultural act, involving the relations of power within which it is produced.

The actual encounter for Said is to negotiate between two approaches to the text, which in different ways misrepresent how texts have existence in the world. The classical point of view of this position sees the text as simply referring to the world "out there". Such a view seems to fail to take into account the ways in which language mediates and determines what is seen in the world by framing the way it is represented. On the other hand, the structuralist point of view is different; it sees the world as having no absolute existence at all but as being completely constructed by the text itself.

Said discusses these two extremes in this way:

I put this as carefully as I can worldliness, circumstantiality, the text's status as an event having sensuous particularity as well as historical contingency, are incorporated in the text, are an infrangible part of its capacity for producing and conveying meaning. This means that a text has a specific situation, a situation that places restraints upon the interpreter and his interpretation not because the situation is hidden within the text as a mystery, but rather because the situation exists at the same level of more or less surface particularity as the textual object itself. There are many ways for conveying such a situation, and I shall be considering some examples presently. But what I will be drawing attention to is an ambition on the part of a writer to deliver his text as an object whose interpretation-by virtue of the exactness of its situation in the world-has already commenced and is therefore already constrained, and constraining, its interpretation. (*The Text, the World, the Critic*, 8)

This means that the text is worldly in that the world does indeed exist and that worldliness is constructed within the text. Said's different approaches to the text are very comprehensive when they are applied to works such as those of Ngugi Wa Thiongo.

Many critics see *Petals of Blood* (1977), as the most ambitious and important of his works. According to Eustace Palmer "... of all African novels...*Petals of Blood* probably presents the most comprehensive analysis to date of the evils perpetrated in independent African society by Black imperialists and capitalists."(*The Growth of the African Novel*, 18) The novel begins in the present with four main characters – Wanja, Abdulla, Munira and Karega – in jail on suspicion of being implicated in the murder of three African directors of the Theng'eta Brewery – Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria. This exposure comes to the front through Munira in the cell while writing records to satisfy the demands of the probing police inspector. Thus, from the present the story moves twelve years back to when Munira came to Ilmorog as a teacher in the village. The story periodically returns to the present and shows Munira in the cell, and on one or two occasions the narrative goes further into the experiences of Munira in Siriana where she was a student in the 1940s and during the Mau Mau (a group of activists fighting for Kenyan independence) uprising of the 1950s.

The setting of most of the events of the novel is the city of Ilmorog, which grew from a traditional African village into a modern industrial compound. Through the historical presentation given to us by Ngugi, we are able to have sights of the glory of Ilmorog's past as a truly peasant community undamaged by Western values that moved gradually from "a nomadic one to an agrarian civilization."(*The Growth of the African Novel*, 23)

Before the penetration of imperialism, there was prosperity, contentment and a sense of belonging in Ilmorog. However, with its distorting influence, and the intrusion of imperialist values, Ilmorog was brought into its decline, hence the author informs the reader that:

... Ilmorog... had not always been a small cluster of mud huts lived in only by old men and women and children with occasional visits from wandering herds men. It had its days of glory: thriving villages with a huge population of sturdy peasants who had tamed nature's forests and, breaking the soil between their fingers, had brought forth every type of crop to nourish the sons and daughters of men.... In those days there were no vultures in the sky waiting for the carcasses of dead workers and no insect-flies feeding on the fat and blood of un-suspecting toilers (*Petals of Blood*, 120).

This passage makes readers aware of the change in Ilmorog. The climate has started destroying the city with consequential damage to the otherwise thriving community. The criminal abandonment by the political authorities, in particular, Nderi the member representing Ilmorog in the Parliament, deteriorates matters. Nderi, who is considered a traditional politician, is only concerned in obtaining wealth at the outlay of his constituency like other political officials. Eventually, Karega, the cheerful, stubborn young teacher in the community puts forward the proposal that the people should walk to the capital where their MP stays to confront him with their problems. They march to the city in search of their representative. This march and its accompanying achievement mark a turning point in the lives of the exploited segment of Kenyan society in general.

Stemming from the visit to the city and the plane crash in Ilmorog, the government's main concern is attracted to Ilmorog, as the people's doubts are fully justified. The capitalists and their agents Chui, Mzigo and Nderi move forward with their development projects: roads, banks, factories, distilleries and housing estates. These developments quickly destroy the fiber of traditional Ilmorog. The destruction of the mysterious spirit Mwathi by a giant bulldozer is the concrete symbol of the obliteration and abolition of a once proud society by the devastating forces of modernization. The naïve peasants lose their lands and all their possessions to the local profiteers and their international masters. We should keep in mind that later, peasants who lost their lands and their possessions would be the first to discover the value of violence in the face of the settler; this is true according to Fanon.

Fanon divides natives into three groups, which, as he believes, evolved because of colonization. Ilmorog is transformed into a proto-capitalist society with all the related problems of prostitution, social inequalities, misery, uncertainty, and inadequate housing. The new Ilmorog is now divided along class lines. There is the residential area "of the farm managers, country council officials, the managers of Barclays, and African Economic Banks, and other servants of state and money

power” (280). This area is called Cape Town, while New Jerusalem is reserved for the downtrodden in the society.

At this stage in the development of Ilmorog, Karega who had abandoned Ilmorog following his discharge from the teaching service five-years before reappears. To his grief, Wanja with whom he was in love has become one of the “powerful” people in the society. He informs Wanja, Munira and Abdulla of his activities during the last five years, doing one tedious job or the other. Karega’s return to Ilmorog helps in arousing the consciousness of the people (especially, workers in the Theng’eta Brewery where he does his last job). The novel ends with a strong anticipation of a proletarian revolution, as there is the realization on the part of the Kenyan workers and peasants of the potential of defeating international capitalism and its neo-colonial agents. Throughout *Petals of Blood*, there is a clear demonstration that imperialism can never develop Kenya in particular and Africa in general. According to Ngugi: “In writing this book I was only trying to be faithful to what Kenyan workers and peasants have always realized as shown by their historical struggles since 1895.” (24)

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon explained that according to western criteria, one group of the native’s community comprises the more educated set of natives who are in many ways involved by the colonizer to be spokespeople and agents for their (settler’s) views. The settlers, in the words of Fanon, “implanted in the minds of the colonized intellectual that the essential qualities remain eternal in spite of the blunders men may make: the essential qualities of the West, of course” (1968, 36).

Based on that, Karega, the lawyer, Abdulla and Munira are considered the spokespersons for Ngugi’s socialist solution. Ngugi through Karega displays concretely that socialism was a natural way of life in traditional African society and demands that the African society go back to its former way of life. Ngugi is deeply aware that imperialist capital is the real evil in Africa today.

To change the status quo, Karega becomes a trade union campaigner who arouses the workers and the peasants to rid the society of exploitation. Karega’s union activities have politicized the workers and they are ready to defy their greedy employers as can be seen in the last part of the novel, “the last duty” indicating that the struggle continues – La Luta Continua. Ngugi hopes that out of *Petals of Blood*, Kenyans (Africans) might gather “petals of revolutionary love.” (*Writers in Politics*, 25)

In the novel, Ngugi practices his art to challenge the status quo. The Chuis, the Kimerias and the Nzigos, who are agents of imperialism, govern the important spheres of life in Ilmorog. This can be seen in their directorship of Theng’eta Breweries and Enterprises Ltd. It is vital to remember that this project belonged to Wanja and Abdulla, but the government through its agents handed it over to a multinational corporation. The economic destitution and ruthless dispossession of the peasants finds its most effective symbol in the degradation of Wanja, the barmaid, who

originated from prostitution to economic independence and womanhood but is forced back to the humiliating status of a prostitute who is exploited and sold.

Petals of Blood, is one of Ngugi's novels that most clearly support the armed struggle. The following passage indicates the need for resistance in order to move forward:

They drink Theng'eta the whole day. That is why they will not work on the railway line. That's why they will not work on our tea and coffee and sisal farms. That's why they will not be slaves. That... was after the battle of Ilmorog, and they said that those warriors must have been drunk: for how dared they put out their tongues and flex their muscles at the colonialists...(132)

This passage brings to the reader's attention, the role of theng'eta as a sign for the cultivation of a revolution. Although the drink described above had been made illegal by the colonialists, its preparation and the subsequent drinking that follows marks the beginning of a rebellion against colonial rule. This drink gives the people enough courage that they are able to exhibit their strengths in front of their oppressors.

Written on a raging span of Kenyan history that examined the disorder of British colonial rule, *Weep Not, Child* observes the consequences of cultural division. More precisely, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o illustrates how systematically British settlers were able to sow disagreement in Kenya as recently as the 1950s, essentially setting Kenyans against one another in order to better conquer and rule the country.

The pervasiveness of this practice is made evident in *Weep Not, Child* by the white Mr. Howlands's satisfaction when he sees that the Kenyans he wants to repress are in fact "destroy[ing] themselves." (108), and the author uses the words that the blacks are destroying the blacks, if they continue to destroy themselves to the end, they will terminate each other.

Pleased that his enemies are warring, Mr. Howlands prospers on the land he stole from black Kenyans like Ngotho. Though people like Ngotho can recognize that fighting with other Kenyans only keeps them from uniting against their collective enemy (the colonizers), the struggles they have with one another are too pressing.

Certainly, when Ngotho's eldest son joins the Mau Mau, his family hesitates between this militant group and other groups who have vowed allegiance to white colonizers. This is important, considering that Ngotho's family has until this point always been closely linked. As such, Ngugi illustrates how easy it is to become weak by the kind of separation that takes place under oppressive colonial rule, ultimately suggesting that even the most unified groups of people can fall victim to disruptive strategies.

At the beginning of an earlier novel *Weep Not, Child* (1964), Ngugi makes a point of inducting and welcoming the close connection that runs throughout Ngotho's family. He gives a specific

inducting with elaborative depictions of the relationship between characters. For instance, like other men of the Kikuyu people, Nguni has two wives- Njeri and Nyokabi, with whom he has many sons.

Notwithstanding what Western readers might assume about the potential competitive nature of this preparation, though, Nguni goes out of his way to highlight that Nguni's family members are closely attached. "The feeling of oneness was a thing that most distinguished Nguni's household from many other polyamorous families," (44) Nguni notes, signifying that this sense of accord is "attributed to Nguni" (44) himself, who keeps the family together because he acts as a "stable center."(44)

The perception of the feeling of "oneness," is significant here. Nguni goes on to display the opposing and disruptive effects of colonization on Nguni's family. After WWI, when Kenyans were enlisted to serve on behalf of the British, people like Nguni returned to their homes to find that white people had taken control over their land. Grievously, there was very little to do about this, since the Kenyan government itself was ruled by English colonists. As such, Nguni and his fellow veterans were forced to take jobs working on farms that used to belong to them. Then, after years of toiling for low wages, they organized a workers' strike and demanded better pay.

In the first half of *Weep Not, Child*, and when Nguni was working for Mr. Howlands on land that used to belong to his own family, he finds himself wavering between going on strike and keeping his job. "[Mr. Howlands] cautioned [his workers] that if any man went on strike he would instantly lose his job," (58).

This choice was very tough for Nguni. Unfortunately, the tense hesitation that arises because of this dilemma eventually works its way into Nguni's family, as he discusses with Nyokabi about the pros and cons of uniting with the rest of the workers. "We shall starve," (59) Nyokabi points out, to which Nguni, replies, "This strike is important for the black people."(59) In response, Nyokabi says, "What's black people to us when we starve?"(59) This question gets at the heart of the dilemma Nguni's family faces; it demonstrates the inner conflict that was caused by settlers, as it highlights the ways in which the white settlers and their monopoly of power have forced Kenyans to either turn against their community members or sacrifice their own wellbeing.

Later, and When Nyokabi asks and insist on Nguni not to go on strike, Boro criticizes Nguni for failing to defend his fellow Kenyans. In keeping with this, Boro's friend Kiarie approaches to Nguni's village for a meeting and insist on everyone to join the strike, he says, "Today, we, with one voice, must rise and shout: 'The time has come. Let my People go.'"(64) However, not everyone agrees with this attitude, which is why Jacobo stands and argues that his people should "go back to work and not listen to people like Kiarie. Unexpectedly emotional and angry, Nguni realizes that the stance of Jacobo as a traitor and decides to attacks him, eventually inciting a conflict between his and Jacobo's family that culminates own death, and with Jacobo's and Boro's at the end of the novel. In addition, as these two families antagonize one another,

readers come to understand that this kind of discord only keeps Kenyans from confronting their true oppressors: the white colonists. At this point, the conflict between Kenyan natives and white settlers surges, inner disputes become more marked. Boro decided to join the Mau Mau in order to protect his people through the practice of guerilla warfare, (a form of warfare in which armed civilians organize to resist traditional military forces), he eventually ends up terrorizing his community by violently coercing people to join him, at least he attempt to change and not to take a bystander point of view.

Predictably, this is much to the pleasure of people like Mr. Howlands, who takes pleasure in the discord he observes taking place amongst the Kenyans, he wants to disempower. “The machine he had set in motion was working,” (108) Ngugi writes. “The blacks were destroying blacks. They would destroy themselves to the end. What did it matter to him if the blacks in the forest destroyed a whole village? [...] Let them destroy themselves. Let them fight against each other. The few who stayed would be satisfied with the reservation the white man had set aside for them.”(108) The “reservation” Ngugi—and, in turn, Mr. Howlands—refers to in this moment is the unattractive occasion to work for low salaries on Howlands’s farm, an existence that might seem bearable related to the violent contacts of the Mau Mau. As such, it becomes clear that the white settlers are all too enthusiastic to inspire division amongst the people they are trying to exploit, which Mr. Howlands does by encouraging Jacobo to exact revenge on Ngotho, thereby adding fuel to the fire of their already unrestrained relationship. In this way, Ngugi displays how damaging division can be to a community, especially when malevolent people use it to repress and rule an otherwise unified, combined culture.

Although in the earlier novel, *Weep Not Child*, Ngugi seemed ambivalent about the Mau Mau and the use of violence, he later changed his opinion, especially when he realized how cruel, violent and malevolent the colonizer really is as reflected even in *Weep Not Child*. Ngugi’s more developed and mature “Third World” revolutionary ideas are exhibited in full display in his later novel, *Petals of Blood*, where he gives full throated support to not only cultural resistance, but also the armed struggle. In a review that Ngugi wrote for Fred Majdalany’s *A State of Emergency: The Full Story of the Mau Mau* in 1963, he states: “Violence in order to change an intolerable, unjust social order is not savagery: it purifies man. Violence to protect and preserve an unjust, oppressive, social order is criminal and diminishes man” (Qtd. in Maughan-Brown, 1981: 1).

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