

National and Revolutionary Consciousness:  
Two Phases of Ngugi's Artistic Praxis<sup>1</sup>

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Introduction

This essay is a resumption of the investigation set in motion by Omafume Onoge a decade and a half ago in what he perceptively termed "the crisis of consciousness in modern African literature."<sup>2</sup> Now, as then, the situation still bears being described as one of crisis, although not an unmitigated one. Modern African literary culture (writing and criticism) clearly exhibits sometimes highly contrastive and sometimes complementary perspectives and features. In any case, however, concerning the writer, theorist or critic, the perspectives can easily be placed in specific spaces elaborated within the spectrum of African literary discourse. Whatever the developments that might have taken place within modern African literature to date, the classificatory paradigms elaborated by Onoge still stand as the most appropriate to place any perspective, or an inflection of one, in terms of the patterns of consciousness of the African writer and his responsibility to his African heritage.

Briefly, we may synthesize these patterns into four. They have been arrived at by analyzing the realism brought into the artistic process by the writer, taking into account the socio-historical conditioning of the writer's consciousness.

The first pattern is what Onoge calls the "affirmative consciousness," associated with the early beginning of modern African literature—"Negritude." Within this consciousness two tendencies are distinguished: the "revolutionary affirmation" of Aimé Césaire, which expresses anger at the culture which rejects his own humanity and whose literature is a resistance to the politics and culture of assimilation; and the "mystical affirmation" of Leopold Senghor, which, to a certain extent, is a literature of protest but is essentially an uncritical glorification of an undynamic primordiality and an unrealistic acceptance of equally unrealistic myths of the black personality.

The second pattern, to which only few African writers subscribe, is the "art for art's sake" tendency. This was in response to the prescriptions of foreign critics and theorists of the bourgeois sensibility who advocate a literature untainted by socio-political concerns. Writers such as Lewis Nkosi, John Nagenda and Pepper Clark were, at some point, of this persuasion.

Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ferdinand Oyono, Mongo Beti, and Ayi Kwei Armah are some of the writers whose works show signs of increased realism, in protest against cultural imperialism. Their revival of the African cultural heritage without an uncritical adulation of an inglorious past, advocacy of a committed literature and rejection of an unhistoric African essence are all indications of their awareness of the demands of the African heritage. This pattern Onoge classifies as "critical realism." But this consciousness has its limitations, which is the justification for the fourth pattern. Generally, critical realist writers' assessment of the African situation and the cultural imperative is apt, but their solutions are often either reformist, nihilistic or downright pessimistic. The writers exhibit a liberal reformist tendency. Borrowing Maxim Gorky's term "socialist realism," and Ernst Fischer's characterization of same, Onoge classifies the consciousness that remedies the former's shortcomings as of a higher realism. The crux of this consciousness is the recognition of the African dilemma as changeable, the identification of the modes of effecting change, and understanding that change to be revolutionary. Essentially, the perspective is politically socialist, philosophically materialist and subscribing to a popular participatory aesthetics. Above all it is optimistic. Sembene Ousmane and Ngugi wa Thiong'o are two artists identified with this pattern.

The forum for the expression of Onoge's classification and analysis leads him to certain generalizations and occasions certain lapses. Admitting the limitations, however, Onoge expressed some hope in the possibility of coherently accounting for the growth of our writers' consciousness in the future by critics of African literature.<sup>3</sup>

This essay is an attempt to account for the growth of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's consciousness, to determine what his consciousness consists of at different stages, and the implications of his changing awareness for his art. In other words, this essay is a specific instantiation of the categories elaborated by Onoge which have generally been accepted as valid in African literary discourse. Constrained by the context of a journal article the exhaustive discussion that will do real justice to this issue cannot be attempted here, but we will attempt to provide a summative profile, a distillation, in fact, of this writer's development.<sup>4</sup>

We intend to demonstrate Ngugi's meaning and development by exploring the thematic strand—alienation (causes, manifestations and suppression) which binds all his works together. This is appropriate because the theme of alienation as an existential predicament runs through all African literature inspired by the colonial and neocolonial experience.<sup>5</sup>

The literature of East Africa has in fact been noted by a sensitive African critic to be more relevant and realistic in addressing issues concerning alienation than, for instance, its West African counterpart.<sup>6</sup> Ngugi's whole literary enterprise stands as the most unique exemplar of these observations. The relevance and adroitness of Ngugi's literary enterprise may be found in the socio-historical determination of his art. Precisely, this refers to the extensiveness of the colonial and neocolonial physical and psychological trauma experienced in East Africa, particularly Kenya. We propose here that alienation should be understood within the whole complex of relations engendered by deprivation, which include the social, the cultural, the political and even the aesthetic.<sup>7</sup>

### The Two Phases of Consciousness

Going by the above premise, therefore, two distinct phases of consciousness are distinguishable in Ngugi's literary praxis: the National and the Revolutionary. These correspond to Onoge's "critical realism" and "socialist realism" respectively. What are the constitutive characteristics and what are the distinguishing features of these phases in Ngugi's art?

#### National Consciousness

The first stage, that is, of national consciousness, is common to most, if not all, modern African artists. This can be historically accounted for by the colonial onslaught on the African political, cultural and social ethos. This national consciousness, which is also referred to as "cultural nativism," "cultural revivalism," and "cultural affirmation" by Obiechina, Onoge, Irele and others who have written on African creative writing of the 1950s and 60s,<sup>8</sup> arose as a reaction to the European myth of African cultural inferiority, primitivism and barbarism. These creative writings therefore sought to set the record straight and give Africans confidence in their history, culture and personality. As Ngugi remarks in an interview, this imperialist onslaught necessitated a response. To wit:

Our history up to now has been distorted by the cultural need of Imperialism, that is, it was in the interest of the imperialists to distort Kenyan history with the view of showing that Kenyan people have not struggled with nature and with other men to change their natural environment and create a positive environment. It was also in the interest of the imperialists to

show that the Kenyan people have not resisted foreign domination.<sup>9</sup>

Another formative factor in Ngugi's consciousness, apart from the cultural imperative, is the limitation placed on his experience by age. His prefatory remarks in *Secret Lives* briefly sketch his initiation into, and practice of, the literary profession. He started writing in 1960 at the age of twenty-two, in his second preliminary year in Makerere University College. That was the era of the short stories "The Fig Tree" (Mugamo) and "The Return," the novels *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child*, and the play *The Black Hermit*. The experiences which inform the works and the sensibilities celebrated in them he states as follows:

The stories in this collection form my creative autobiography over the last twelve years and touch on ideas and moods affecting me over the same period. My writing is really an attempt to understanding myself and my situation in society and in history. As I write, I remember the nights of fighting in my father's house; my mother's struggle with the soil so that we might eat, have decent clothes and get some schooling; my elder brother Wallace Nwangi, running to the security of the forest under a hail of bullets from colonial policemen. . . .<sup>10</sup>

He restates these sensibilities more succinctly in *Homecoming* as being concerned with the people and their inner lives, ". . . their fears and hopes, their loves and hates, and how the very tension in their hearts affects their daily contact with other men. . . ."<sup>11</sup> We certainly gain more insight by looking at some of the artistic productions of this phase, viz: *Secret Lives*, *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child*. Both the ideological stand and the aesthetic modes yield useful insights as to the characteristic features of the phase.

The stories in Part I of *Secret Lives* treat, with sensitivity, the typical hopes and aspirations of the people before the coming of the white man—the pre-colonial era. The stories show the people's battles with nature and their interaction with each other. Their anxieties about nature are usually about its inclemency and unpredictability. With other men, the problem is with some unexplained but accepted social norms and clash of interest. Interestingly and significantly, whatever contradiction arises between society and the individual during interaction is often resolved and balance maintained through processes already laid down and imbibed by all. The alienated individual is often reintegrated into the social ethos. Nevertheless, tragic moments and events exist; tragic characters also abound, like Nyokabi in "And the Rain Came

Down," who is struck by barrenness. In such cases, the individual is not left without understanding and support. And even when the individual is bewildered by his lot, again, like the old woman in "Gone with the Drought," who lost her only son during the famine of the 1940s, man is eventually reconciled with nature and society.

It is on this point of reconciliation, resolution and eventual reintegration that the stories in Part II, "Fighters and Martyrs," differ from those in part I. Correspondingly, they also differ in the causes and manifestations of the conflicts and contradictions in the lives of individuals in their relation with nature and society. In the first part the conflicts, even though sometimes bewildering, are often times understandable. This inherent understanding and acceptance makes reconciliation and reintegration possible. Conflicts in the second part remain incomprehensible and unacceptable, and, thus, resolution and reconciliation are impossible. This is the colonial period with an alien cultural norm and completely new modes of socio-political relations, and like every mode of imposition, there is no clear perception. Stoic acceptance with brewing dissent is what indigenes resort to. This situation leads to various kinds of psychopathic disorders, including overzealousness bordering on lunacy or, at times, martyrdom. Such examples are Joshua in "The Village Priest," Mangara's grandfather in "The Black Bird" and Noroge in "The Martyr," or even Kamau in "The Return" and John in "A Meeting in the Dark." The comparison made of the pre-colonial and colonial forms of alienation are obvious in these stories, and Ngugi's preference for the pre-colonial order is unmistakable.

As admitted by Ngugi, the period, the experiences and the sentiments covered by the short stories are the same as those in *The River Between*, *Weep Not, Child* and *The Black Hermit*. Thus, whatever conclusions we draw from any of the works will be generally applicable.

In *The River Between*, for instance, what Ngugi attempts, first and foremost, is to repudiate accepted colonial history of Kenya and her people by intellectual apologists of the system. But he also moves beyond history to fiction and raises fundamental question of self-apprehension and self-cognition under such alienating social relations as imposed by colonialism.

However, in the instance of this novel, it is the process of self-cognition of the young and growing consciousness of Waiyaki. Waiyaki's role as the mouthpiece of the artist is obvious. Ngugi's vision of a solution to alienation at this stage of his creative career is still a questioning one and one that also believes in an elicitation of certain transposable elements of pre-colonial tradition into a new potential. His perspective is integrative. His vehicle for testing these ideas is the pathetic character of Waiyaki, caught in the polarized conflict of

personal passion, private love and yearning, and social responsibility. The naivety of the young consciousness proves too fragile to cope with the weight of the issues encountered. This becomes obvious in the apparent vagueness with which the issues are approached and in the solutions he proffers. Waiyaki's prevarications in pursuing his idea of unity, the lack of co-ordination in his perception of the roles of education and the "Kiama" paint him as a starry-eyed visionary. Whatever his motivation, whatever pietistic hopes he nurses in his own messianic vision, his actions demonstrate little, if any, relational political astuteness. Thus, Ngugi does not show clearly and unequivocally his vision of how to transcend the alienating situation he paints. His vision appears blurred and shifting, an oscillation between a morality of love and unity, and a political action leading to freedom from oppression and exploitation.

A similar pattern of perception of alienation (causes, manifestation and suppression) is discernible in *Weep Not, Child*. The novel is written more or less on the same fictive/moral basis as the former. But the focus on alienation shifts perceptibly from the simple cultural perspective to incorporate the social and economic implications, carrying along with the political. But even here the cultural perspective is what becomes more intensely explored.

The human milieu that forms the background within which the issue of alienation is explored is the familial triad of Ngotho, Jacobo and Howlands, representing the three contending forces in the socioeconomic relations of colonial Kenya. The three families stand at specific locations on the socioeconomic battle field as they work out their relationship that forms the plot of the novel. More specifically, the issues Ngugi treats here are those of cultural alienation through Christianity and education; the issue of economic alienation through land appropriation in a colonial settler dispensation; the issue of political oppression and repression through the various laws of appropriation, taxation, restrictions and the emergency; and the issue of the liberation struggle.

In *The River Between* as in *Weep Not, Child* the exploration of the theme of alienation ends unresolved. But three main ideas are tested in this latter work. First, the education conviction vigorously begun in the former novel is even more rigorously pursued in the latter. The one motivating passion and the only solution to the constricting impasse in the land as far as Njoroge is concerned is education; this is characteristic of him as of Waiyaki. But it fails to bring the "better tomorrow."

The social milieu painted and Njoroge's attitude provide an opportunity for Ngugi to test the multi-racial co-existence option as a solution. This is the continuation of the unity and love morality of the earlier novel. But within the discriminatory exploitative socioeconomic

relations, with all the contradictions and conflicts, how viable is the option? The relationships Njoroge thought he could build on this with Stephen and Nwihaki break down.

The third option is a political one, involving violence. But the blood-letting, family desertions, deaths and terror that already envelop the land assail the tender sensibility of Njoroge, and makes this the least appealing option and, therefore, not fully explored. Ngugi thus concludes this novel also on only a hopeful note. He gives no direct or explicit indication as to what might be his projection for the future, the end to the alienating condition, his vision. In the two novels and the short stories discussed above, we get a glimpse of the impressions of a critical consciousness. Critical, because it questions and concerns itself with the problems of the immediate present reality, but offers no clear and viable vision of supersession. A cultural transposition may solve a cultural problem but not necessarily the politico-economic. Yet a major factor in characterizing Ngugi as a critical realist and his consciousness as of cultural nationalism at this stage is this attitude to culture. Colonial invasion is mainly regarded in terms of cultural nihilism and deprivation. The economic connection of the whole colonial enterprise has not been fully grasped and is, therefore, not tangibly stressed in these works. By the time Ngugi wrote *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), his consciousness had undergone a definite growth, achieved apparently by the artist looking inwards into the set-up inherited from the white man and its operation by the black bourgeoisie. This introspection is directly conditioned by the state of socio-political development on the continent during decolonization.

But the decolonization process is definitely not the only thing that influenced Ngugi's shift of consciousness. Critics, among them Killam, have been quick to notice influences in Ngugi's life that could have created a definite impact. Killam cites two predominant influences on his third and fourth novels. These are Karl Marx and Frantz Fanon. In Killam's words, "It is Marx who articulates a political and economic philosophy which will suit Ngugi's conviction about post-independent Kenyan development. It is Fanon who places the thinking of Marx in the African context."<sup>12</sup> Robson gives further evidence to corroborate this Marxist influence during Ngugi's sojourn at Leeds University.<sup>13</sup> The Fanonian influence came through Kamenju, a Kenyan professor of literature, as recorded by Peter Nazareth.<sup>14</sup> All these demonstrate the ideational and socio-political influences on the artist's consciousness. Critics have also traced Ngugi's debts to Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* and *Lord Jim*.<sup>15</sup> Ngugi himself, in an interview with Dennis Duerden, acknowledges this influence and that of D. H. Lawrence on his writings.<sup>16</sup> This is of course apart from influences imbibed

consciously and unconsciously from oral narratives in his traditional lore.

Considering *A Grain of Wheat*, in which these influences can first be traced, one is probably more confused than enlightened by this plethora of influences in their combination and the result thus obtained. In terms of radical political views the influence of Marxism and Fanonism is not too obvious here. What is apparent is that Ngugi's humanism coincides with and coheres in the same region with Marx's and Fanon's. The vagueness of his redemptive categories would classify the consciousness informing the novel as of liberal nationalism. On the other hand, the artistic modes influencing him are well adapted and produce a qualitative artistic piece, a *tour de force*.

*A Grain of Wheat* is a re-enactment and orchestration of the trauma of the Mau Mau war of liberation begun in *Weep Not, Child*. It is a demonstration of the popular feelings of disillusionment as captured on the eve of independence. The novel can also be considered a dramatization of the tenuous pull between the individual and the collective. As such, the problematic is posed in the collective aspiration for freedom in a struggle that enlists the services of unwilling "heroes" like Mugo and Gikonyo, martyries real heroes like Kihika, destroys imperialist conservative liberals like Thompson, and raises self-centered and opportunist MPs. The novel is not interested in the morality of action or inaction alone, but also in the social situation that gives form to individual failings, fears and aspirations giving rise to collective betrayal. The causes and manifestations of alienation are as contained in the many speeches which he translates into actions as a freedom fighter and the ideals for which his own life is sacrificed.

"Who betrayed Kihika?" becomes the central question and the search becomes the central action of the novel. Around this central question, the four central characters—Mugo, Gikonyo, Mumbi and Karanja—relive their past and their contributions during the emergency, and reveal their present, their individual senses of guilt, fears, passions and aspirations. However, by the mood painted at the end of the novel, by the increasing corruption of the MP, and by the evidence of the neocolonial system, the society in general has not transcended, and is unlikely to transcend, human alienation—politically, economically or spiritually. Herein lies the shortfall in Ngugi's vision. The picture painted is apocalyptic. Ngugi's hopes and aspirations are based, if not on a providential intervention, on a moralistic piety, a hope that a change of heart will be wrought, maybe, through a general regeneration. This is the cause of Ngugi's unrealistic ending following a realistic depiction. This pattern of resolution of the conflict of alienation is in consonance with what we have seen in the preceding two novels.

Nevertheless, Ngugi's treatment of alienation is in no other work more trenchant and gripping than in *A Grain of Wheat*,

through the exploration of the effects of the external reality on the internal man and how this affects human relationships. His tilt towards individual determinism in the individual/collective dialectic is not in doubt and this fact contributes to the endearment of this work in particular to bourgeois critics with individualistic sensibility. The writer's penchant for a heavily introspective mood is an asset in this regard. But *A Grain of Wheat* may not qualify as a product of revolutionary consciousness. More appropriately, it bestrides the former and this latter consciousness.

### Revolutionary Consciousness

The movement through the phase of national consciousness to the revolutionary is a qualitative one. The main distinguishing factors in Ngugi's development in this phase are the definitiveness of his ideological stance as against the vagueness and ambiguity of the earlier one, and the combativeness of his approach in response to the demands of that stance, again in contradistinction to the earlier groping, passive, contemplative and moralistic one. In explicit terms, Ngugi posits that there is need for positive and qualitative change, beyond reformism; that the change is possible and inevitable; that the bearers of change are the masses of the people; that the means of bringing change is revolution through struggle. Artistically, Ngugi becomes receptive to all positive human and cultural creations but intransigent to all forms of cultural mystification whatever their source. His approach consists of showing the real contradictions in people's lives by counterposing the conflicting forces on both sides of the battle for existence. The issues leading to and arising from the alienation of the masses in colonial and neocolonial Kenya are polarized along definite racial/class lines. The settings are also clearly delineated along these lines. The net effect of this is manifested in the reality, and not just the possibility, of aesthetic complexity and the overall suggestiveness of the dialectical relation of content and form, characteristic of *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*.

The significant shift in Ngugi's consciousness can be accounted for by the pressure of socio-historical conditions in Kenya and Ngugi's contact with Marxism and Fanonism as discussed above. His consciousness of socioeconomic situations in other third world nations is also constitutive. Particularly, Ngugi's understanding of the historical role of the Mau Mau rebellion as a war of liberation is of tremendous influence on his theory of supersession of capitalist alienation. These conditions demand some elaboration.

We take the occasion of the publication of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) as a reference point for the emergence of this consciousness. But prior to this occasion Ngugi had lectured at and

resigned from the University College, Nairobi, in protest against government interference with university academic freedom and government closure of that college. The socio-political milieu in Kenya had become worse than in colonial times, considering that erstwhile African nationalists are now at the helm of state affairs. The colonial economic *status quo* is maintained; people are still as landless as before the war of independence; the majority of the populace have become more and more marginalized with more than seven million living below the official poverty line. Against this background is the small coterie of the ruling elite that perpetrates a system of kick-backs, graft, looting, corruption, capital and profit exportation. In short, the whole colonial system of socioeconomic exploitation, oppression and repression remains intact, only this time kept so by people in whom faith and hope had been reposed. This culminates in a culture of assassination of political opponents, detention without trial and imprisonment of teachers and students who dissent.

Ngugi has been a participant in this whole drama of existence. This whole scenario he paints in the works *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, *Petals of Blood*, *I Will Marry When I Want and Devil on the Cross*. Through his literary praxis his combative spirit is at work arousing, sensitizing and mobilizing, as it were, the consciousness of compatriots, and Africans at large, to a revolt against oppression. All the thematic concerns of Ngugi in the earlier phase are recreated in the works of this phase with larger dimensions.

*Petals of Blood* stands as the true novel of the proletariat, and definitely not *A Grain of Wheat* as critics have averred. In terms of material, this novel attains a comprehensiveness of depiction of the totality of the Kenyan life going far before the time of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. It incorporates and embraces all the basic human issues central to the ideological understanding and exposition of colonial and neocolonial exploitation of Kenyan people and resources. It is mounted on a four-tier time construct that corresponds to its four parts. Although the story is revealed in bits, in the recollections of Munira, the parts still bear definite ideological imprints.

In part one, we see the various manifestations of the alienation process brought about by neocolonialism in the four central characters of the novel who are running away from the city—the seat of imperialist interests. These manifestations are revealed in the characters' attitude to themselves, including sexual relations, their attitude to culture, and certain fixations that indicate psychosomatic disorders. By the time we come to the end of this first part all manifestations of alienation in the intensity of their cumulation make struggle for change not only desirable but a necessity.

Part two realizes that struggle for change. The people's consciousness has been awakened and they now struggle within the

limits of that consciousness to shake off the shackles of oppression manifest in their neglect and marginalization by government. But what they attempt is not a revolution, it is a protest march into the city that bears revolutionary potentials. However, the march opens their eyes to new vistas of imperialist activities and the cause of their own alienation.

Part three details the sense of temporary euphoria that attends the success of the people's march. The promises made by agents of imperialism turn out to be false, and the people's sense of success soon turns out to be mere appearance rather than essence of true change. The promised aid turns out to be but an extension of imperialist tentacles, extending the villagers' alienation into new dimensions. Part four demonstrates the logical denouement: preparation for an inevitable struggle that would free the people through an overthrow of the system. The elements are already present in the formation of the workers' party, the increasing awareness of Joseph, Abdullah's "brother" and the embryonic Abdullah in Wanja's pregnancy.

*Petals of Blood* is concerned with how "the emotional stream of the man within interacts with the social reality."<sup>17</sup> That reality Ngugi elaborates as being sometimes "too painfully real for the peasants who fought the British yet who now see all they fought for being put on the side."<sup>18</sup> That reality of marginalization is what the four central characters, Munira, Abdullah, Wanja and Karega live out in the rural backwater of Ilmorog. The triangular love relationship involving Munira, Karega and Abdullah with Wanja at the center, and the drought that hits Ilmorog, provide the foreground of the action. By the time Munira commits the arson and the murder of the representatives of their oppression, Karega, the outstanding protagonist of the story, is already leading a workers' union which in Ngugi's view will herald a new day through an overthrow of the system.

Apart from a realistic, unambiguous depiction of what Ngugi considers the causes and manifestation of alienation in the four characters and the villagers, the distinctive feature of this revolutionary consciousness is in the proposition of the method of supersession. The proposed supersession is seen in a new "Tomorrow" which is embodied in the spirit of Karega, whose vision is seen in the feeling of solidarity of peasants and workers with "the workers and peasants leading. . . seizing power. . . and bringing to an end the reign of the few over the many and the era of drinking blood and feasting on human flesh."<sup>19</sup> This summarizes the views and vision of Ngugi in its Marxist revolutionary exorcism. The core of this vision as solution to the social malaise of alienation is the solidarity of workers and peasants as the revolutionary potential of the exploited neocolonial nation.

As it were, *Devil on the Cross* takes up from where *Petals of Blood* left off—organization of the progressive classes to struggle

for a supersession of their alienating conditions with emboldened dimensions. *Devil on the Cross* has a directness of vision and singularity of purpose that has now generated much debate by critics as to its literariness. The novel's realism consists essentially in its being problematic and revolutionary. It projects life as a problematic. It captures the complexity of man's relationships with himself, with society and with nature. It does not attempt any facile or simplistic integration of man with his alienated nature or within a normless society as in the critical realist novels. Its revolutionary vision lies in its aesthetic and the resolution it proposes for a transcendence of alienated man's fragmented existence.

The only dialectical proposition that arises from posing the complexity of the problematic is the subversion of the present socioeconomic order and the subversion also of existing literary modes, starting with the rejection of colonial language as his *primary* language of literary communication. The aesthetic of this novel calls for an understanding and the involvement of the reader, because Ngugi here writes with a specific purpose—to shock and stun; he writes with a class consciousness and for a specific class—the peasant/proletariat; and he writes using idioms and a language understood by that class. All this constitutes the novelty of this novel, which makes it problematic for the erstwhile admirers of Ngugi's art. But what Ngugi has done, simply, is to appropriate the novel form, rewrite it and, in a re-enactment of its origin, turn it into the form of what he considers the most progressive class of this epoch.

The novel emerged as a new aesthetic form of a revolutionary class of its time: a mercantile industrializing class struggling against the political and aesthetic base of aristocracy. At the noon of the bourgeois class development, the "classical" novel becomes the art of a moneyed, leisured and individualized sensibility. Comparatively, the twentieth-century peasant/worker class in Africa is at the dawn of its existence as the new revolutionary class struggling against bourgeois imperialism, hence the necessity of a proletarian form. In the artistic hands of Ngugi it undergoes a revolutionary adaptation without losing its essential nature. Thus, we have a collectivized rather than individualized sensibility; the descriptions are sharp, short and brutal; presentations are undetailed and unelongated; characters are typified rather than symbolized; and all these are in response to the aesthetic requirements of a deprived, exploited and oppressed class. Therefore, a "sociology of perception"<sup>20</sup> is necessary for a proper evaluation of this work. Ngugi furnishes us with information on how this work was received in the Kikuyu form by workers and peasants.<sup>21</sup>

*Devil on the Cross* is a story surrounding a heroine, Wariinga (a rare practice among male African writers). It focuses on

five main characters on their way to Ilmorog for different purposes, echoing the movement of the four in *Petals of Blood*. Mwaura's "matatu" becomes the vehicle for the individuals to pour out their troubles and review their experiences in the city, from which they seem to be running, again in the pattern of *Petals of Blood*. Four of the characters—Wangari, Wariinga, Muturi and Gatuiria—share a common class interest as opposed to Mwireri who belongs to the "class of thieves and robbers." Nwaura, the driver, is a hireling of that class.

Gatuiria, the student, is an example of a person born into the dominant oppressor class protesting against the culture of that class, yet uncertain of his own views, and casting his lot with the oppressed. Wangari and Muturi have been exploited and humiliated by the system while Wariinga's experience within the short span of her life has been more horrific and redoubtable. She has been misused, exploited and humiliated. She has attempted suicide three times. These are some of the revelations made in the taxi. But three main issues are discussed from the two disparate ideological stand points: harambee; independence and its aftermath; and morality. The discussions, naturally, evince highly polarized views and the reader, predictably, empathizes with the oppressed class. Here, Muturi becomes the window through which we see the position of the class for whom Ngugi shows concern.

The more stunning and horrendous revelations are, however, yet to come. The robbers' den brings us the whole story. The IOTR (International Organization of Thieves and Robbers) reveals its true characteristics: parasitic, bloodsucking, beastly, destructive and outrightly against the well-being of the workers who produce the wealth it appropriates. These outpourings of the representatives of the oppressed are invited to witness in order to sharpen their anger and dissent. Ngugi goes further to depict antagonisms and contradictions within a class and between classes. He carries these conflicts to some conclusion without ignoring deceptive appearances. He shows the development of individual awareness through the effects of their vicarious participation in the robbers' feasts. While Wangari and Gatuiria are baffled, Muturi, like Karega, joins forces with the workers, students, and the unemployed in protest against the oppressive class's culture. Also, it takes an additional two years before the awareness of Wariinga can take a decisive step. And then, even though her killing Gatiria's father is vengeful, her ability to right a wrong in the manner she does, her resolve to take her destiny in her own hands through hard work and dedication is symptomatic of the fullness of her revolutionary consciousness.

Even though the story is woven round Wariinga, she is definitely not the only heroic figure in the story. Like in *Petals of Blood*, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and *I Will Marry When I Want*, the image of the messiah looming large is no longer visible; that

dream is dead. Struggle that requires unity and solidarity among the deprived is now the order. But the consciousness of the protagonists does not necessarily develop and mature at the same rate. As a result, highly conscious characters emerge whose awareness predisposes them to lofty but realistic visions—Dedan Kimathi, Karega, Muturi, and Wariinga. Yet, this fact does not make them individual heroes, but heroes and heroine among others. Struggles and situations throw up the people's heroes.

In this novel the only proposition for transcendence of alienation endorsed by the writer is Muturi's option, and which is revolutionary, which believes in the overthrow of the system and its replacement by a more humane, collective and egalitarian one. The Devil in form of the system is hanged on the cross, and as Muturi is re-arrested and Wariinga walks away from her victims, the eventual decisive battle is on the horizon. For Ngugi the only acceptable culture is that which works for the all-around goodness of humanity, and in contemporary Africa the only creator and vehicle of that culture is the working class people of peasants and proletariat, since culture is forged in struggle with nature and with man. This is the crux of Ngugi's revolutionary consciousness which comes out in the subversive artistic creations *Devil on the Cross* and *I Will Marry When I Want*.

### Conclusion

What we have attempted here is a summation of Ngugi's consciousness in his artistic journey so far. The two phases of his artistic praxis identified have been accounted for, albeit not with details and particulars, as in their implications for the artistic works. What is paramount, however, is that the development of this artist's consciousness from national to revolutionary has not been obtained either gratuitously or by fiat. Besides the change that we have witnessed is a qualitative one. From a groping, ambivalent, moralist reformer, Ngugi's perspective shifts to that of a radical, determined, partisan revolutionary. But as an artist it is the shift in Ngugi's artistic consciousness that carries the weight of his new ideological posture. This is clearly revealed in his new ways of perceiving reality and his new relation with his *primary* audience. Thus Ngugi rejects the bourgeois modes of individualist psychology and heroism; he rejects colonial language as primary medium; he relies more on modes of orality in which his audience is rooted; and he promotes with fervor collaborative and participatory aesthetics. Even his choice of genre from time to time reveals the pressure of an inner need to convey ideology through form. What further extensions of consciousness Ngugi will attempt in the fecundity of artistic modes and how these will be received by the literary world is, for now, a matter of speculation.

<sup>1</sup>The core of this paper comes from a Ph.D. thesis presented to the Department of Literature in English, University of Ife, 1987. I acknowledge the contributions of Prof. Biodun Jeyifo, now of Cornell University, and Prof. B. M. Ibitokun, presently of Purdue University.

<sup>2</sup> Omafume Onoge, in *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1974.

<sup>3</sup> Onoge's classification of Ngugi as a socialist realist at this point is not very apt. Ngugi had only demonstrated a tendency. His later works starting with *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1979) place him within this pattern.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see P. A. Aborisade, *Aesthetics and Ideology: A Study of Ngugi's Works*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Dept. of Literature in English, University of Ife), 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Prof. Abiola Irele's inaugural address "In Praise of Alienation" asserts this. (University of Ibadan; in press.)

<sup>6</sup> Biodun Jeyifo makes this point pungently in "Patterns and Trends in Committed African Drama," in his *The Truthful Lie* (London: New Beacon Books, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> Alienation is often understood in terms of the withdrawal of people's rights from their land holdings during colonial era in Kenya. Killam used the term more in this light in his *An Introduction to the Writings of Ngugi*. (London: Heinemann, 1980). This is a highly restricted use.

<sup>8</sup> See Emanuel Obiechina's "Cultural Nationalism in Modern African Creative Literature," in *African Literature Today*, Omnibus ed. I, pp 24ff; Onoge's "The Crisis of Consciousness in African Literature"; and Irele's *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (London: Heinemann, 1981).

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in G. D. Killam's *An Introduction to the Writing of Ngugi*, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Ngugi's preface to *Secret Lives* (London: HEB., 1975).

<sup>11</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Homecoming* (London: HEB., 1972), p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> G. D. Killam, *Op. Cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> C. B. Robson, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (London: Macmillan Press, 1979), p. 133.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Nazareth's "A Grain of Wheat: A Socialist Novel?" in *Literature and Society in Modern Africa* (Nairobi: EALB, 1972).

<sup>15</sup> Ben Obumsele's "A Grain of Wheat: Ngugi's Debt to Conrad," in *Benin Review*, 1974; and Peter Nazareth's *An African View of Literature* (Evanston, 1974), are some of the works on Ngugi's artistic indebtedness.

<sup>16</sup> Cosmo Pieters and Dennis Duerden (eds.), *African Writers Talking* (London: HEB., 1972).

<sup>17</sup> Ngugi, *Homecoming*, p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> Ngugi's note to *A Grain of Wheat* (London: HEB., 1967).

<sup>19</sup> Ngugi, *Petals of Blood* (London: HEB., 1977), p. 344.

<sup>20</sup> Wole Soyinka's term for what he called a neglected area of criticism in his inaugural lecture "The Critic and Society: Barthes, Leftocracy and Other Mythologies," University of Ife, 30 October, 1988.

21 Ngugi, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1989), pp. 83-84.

*A BABOON THAT CALLS ITSELF A BABOON IS NOT A BABOON*

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*NO SKUNK SMELLS AT BIRTH*

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*HUMANS AND COWS BOTH MOURN THEIR DEAD*

*supplied by Mazisi Kunene*

*THEY LEAVE THEIR DOORS OPEN,  
AND THEY CALL PEOPLE THIEVES,  
SAID THE DOG*

\*\*\*\*\*

*HE WHO SPITS LYING DOWN  
MAKES HIS SPIT ALL HIS OWN*

\*\*\*\*\*

*WHAT DOES A LION EAT?  
HE BORROWS.  
HOW DOES HE PAY BACK?  
BUT WHO DARES TO ASK!*

*Amharic sayings supplied by Yonas Admassu*