

## NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S PETALS OF BLOOD

By

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*It was the great Dimitrov who pointed out that as regards culture there are no small countries.*

Roberto Fernandez Retamar

*For it is not a question of showing the written works in relation to their time but of presenting the time which knows them - that is our time - in the time when they originated. Thus literature becomes an organon of history and the task of literary history is to make it this - and not to make it the material of history.*

Walter Benjamin

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel, *Petals of Blood*, has opened a new horizon in African literary history, for it has posed to this tradition the fundamental question of literary production today: what is the nature of the historical poetics of realism? Indeed, the very cardinal construct of Marxist poetics is the nature of the dialectic between history and literature.

Walter Benjamin, more than any other figure within the tradition of Marxist literary criticism, has cogently and resolutely examined the relationship of this dialectic in his profoundly original and, need it be said, unsettling theses on literature. What was fundamental in Benjamin's literary practice was the constant charting of the process of the historicity (or better still, the historization) of poetic forms *within* a work of art.

This was an original and lucidly pursued literary enterprise which was to lead Lukács to observe, in his intriguing commentary on Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, that it was a project informed by:

*a vivid portrayal of the actual theoretical problem, without forcing or distorting the historical facts in the manner so often seen in contemporary general histories.*<sup>1</sup>

It was this correct posing of a theoretical problem, and a respect for historical facts, which ushered in a new concept of literary history in the twentieth century: a new understanding of historiography which transforms the isolated fact of positivistic history into a moment in a historical continuum;<sup>2</sup> a *materialistic* literary history which, in its totalizing movement, examines the very experience of the reading as well as the subject-matter of literary works;<sup>3</sup> a concept of literary history which takes into consideration the fact that a history of a literary work is centrally determined, though not wholly, by the history of its functions within different and contradictory ideological systems it inhabits, sequentially or simultaneously.<sup>4</sup> Within this totalizing historico-literary context, literature transparently reveals the *political determinants* of its production and the concrete *social relations* of its reception (literary consumption).

Perhaps the text that best exemplifies Benjamin's new concept of literary history, i.e., the contextual dynamic of/between history, ideology and literature, is that great essay, "The Author as Producer",<sup>5</sup> which was delivered at the International Conference of Progressive Writers against Fascism held in Paris in 1934. In this text, Benjamin articulates all the fundamental concepts essential to a Marxist writing of literary history (or its conception of historical poetics): *the historical conditions of the relationship between the correct political tendency and progressive literary technique*. Benjamin theorizes this dialectical relationship in the following manner:

*I should like to show that the tendency of a literary work can only be politically correct if it is also literarily correct. That is to say, the politically correct tendency includes a literary tendency. And, I would add straight-away, this literary tendency, which is implicitly or explicitly contained in every correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality because it includes its literary tendency.*<sup>6</sup>

To Benjamin, this process of *functional interdependency* between a correct political tendency and a progressive literary technique can only be posed and articulated on a new terrain of literary history: a new terrain of history in which a work of art is situated *within* the literary relations of production of its time, rather than merely, as has been a tradition in Marxist literary criticism (a tradition represented by Gyorgy Lukács and Plekhanov), to chart a *correspondence* between a literary work and its context. Whereas the former examines the *structural position and relations* of a literary object within its literary relations of production, which in

turn are situated within the social relations of economic production, the latter, because of its theological and positivistic perspective, merely examines the "attitudinal relations" of a literary object in relation to its contextual space. For Benjamin, this situating of a literary object leads necessarily to the examination of its literary technique, rather than an undialectical charting of its so-called "*external content of realism or symbolism*", as is the case with Lukács and Plekhanov.<sup>7</sup> Hence for Benjamin, it is *only* through examination of literary technique that literary products can be made amenable to a materialist and social analysis. The articulation of this concept of literary technique "provides the dialectical starting point from which the unfruitful antithesis of form and content can be surpassed. And furthermore, this concept of technique contains an indication of the correct determination of the relation between tendency and quality, the question raised at the onset."<sup>8</sup>

It is within this context of a new concept of literary history, that for Benjamin as was also true for Marx:

*Works of literature are products, authors are producers, and literature cannot remain unaffected by the modes of production and consumption prevalent in the society within which and for which it is produced.*<sup>9</sup>

This Marxist concept of literary history, which is comprehensive and totalizing in its movement, is in contradistinction to the new theory of literary history which is presently being theorised by the so-called University of Constance School, whose classic position has been articulated in the essay, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory", by Hans Robert Jauss.<sup>10</sup> In this text, the historicity of literature, i.e., its literary history is defined by or conceptualized through, the communicative character of literature in relation to the audience; a communicative process which takes the form of a dialogue and is understood as a relationship between message and receiver, question and answer, problem and solution.<sup>11</sup> This process of communication is understood as a *circular system of production*, in which the methodology of literary criticism moves in the past, though it takes into account the resonance of the aesthetics of reception and impact. Hence, it is the sequence of literary works as a continuity which defines literary history.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the historical significance of a literary work is evaluated through the nature of its "receptions" from generation to generation; hence, the literary historian, to judge literature, must examine the history of reception of literary works.<sup>13</sup>

The hypostatization of literature is made absolute in this empiricist definition of literary history, for nowhere

in this conception is the historical nature of literature (i.e. the historical conditions of literary production) examined, or the social relations and historical conditions of aesthetic reception and impact articulated, let alone, the unravelling of class relations or ideological perspectives of the different segments of the audience. In contradistinction to this charivari of the Constance School, Marxist literary history is defined by the unity (process) of synthesis (dialectical) of the historical (chronological) and critical (logical) approaches to works of art, precisely because the historical cannot but be critical, and the critical cannot but be historical. It is in this sense that Marxist poetics is the science, and the *only* science of literary criticism.

It is the unity of the *past significance* and *present meaning* of literary works which is the object of Marxist literary history (as defined by Benjamin). It is a unity, whose nature has been captured in these memorable lines by Weimann, the literary historian from the German Democratic Republic:

*From this angle (Marxist), history would then be seen as a comprehensive process which includes the present as well as the past; a process which is a continuum and as such as indivisible as the aesthetic experience, which appeals to the whole nature of man as a historical being. In this process and in this nature both the extrinsic and the intrinsic interact: change and value constitute a relationship which corresponds to a similar tension in the work of art, between what is past and what is present. Literary history has to embrace this necessary tension, and conceive of its object in terms of both the unity and the contradiction of mimesis and morality, of past significance and present meaning.<sup>14</sup>*

It is a necessary tension because it is a product of dialectical literary criticism; a dialectical methodology which, vis-a-vis a literary work of art, does not pre-establish categories of analysis, but rather, takes cognizance of its inner logic and the historical development of its content.<sup>15</sup>

This short detour into the terrain of literary history as specified by Benjamin's theoretico-literary practice, was necessary in order to draw, in a schematic form, a rich system of *theoretical determinations* with which to theorize, specify, dislocate and disengage the complex whole which forms the unity of *Petals of Blood*. A dislocation and disengagement of the ideological and literary elements (unities) of the novel is required in order to re-assemble them within a newly recon-

stituted context.

This foray into literary history has been made all the more necessary by Ngugi wa Thiong'o's profound understanding of the complex relation between history and literature. Expressing this understanding, wa Thiong'o has formulated this relationship in the following manner:

*Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society. The relationship between creative literature and these other forces cannot be ignored, especially in Africa, where modern literature has grown against the gory background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations: slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism.*<sup>16</sup>

*The novelist is haunted by a sense of the past. His work is often an attempt to come to terms with "the thing that has been", a struggle, as it were, to sensitively register his encounter with history, his people's history.*<sup>17</sup>

It is this relationship, the decentered complex between literature and history, that has been and continues to be the central force behind Ngugi wa Thiong'o's creativity. To be sure, this is hardly surprising, since the history of the novel, according to Frank Kermode<sup>18</sup>, is the history of literary forms rejected or modified by parody because of the constant tension or dissonance between paradigmatic form and contingent (historical) reality. Or, in the words of Arnold Kettle,<sup>19</sup> the history of the novel, is the history of the novelists' research for an adequate philosophy of life. Consequently, it is incorrect to formulate this relationship in the following phantasmagoric manner, as George Steiner has done:

*The novel arose not only as the art of the housed and private man in the European cities. It was, from the time of Cervantes onward, the mirror which the imagination in its vein of reason, held up to the empirical reality.*<sup>20</sup>

No! The novel arose at a particular conjuncture in history because a new emerging bourgeois class needed a new literary form through which, and by which, to capture and attempt to resolve the social, cultural and philosophical tensions which had emerged due to class conflicts and ideological contestations. In short, the emergence of the novel was an attempt, which proved successful, by the bourgeois class to rewrite

history against the aristocratic class. For sure, this rewriting of history corresponded to the hegemony of bourgeois class (economic and cultural) power.

Terry Eagleton, in pages of great literary verve, has indicated the *concreteness* and *realness* of this relationship between the novel (text) and history (class struggle):

*History, then, certainly 'enters' the text, not least the 'historical' text; but it enters it precisely as ideology, as a presence determined and distorted by its measurable absences. This is not to say that real history is present in the text but in disguised form, so that the task of the critic is then to wrench the mask from its fact....Within the text itself, then, ideology becomes a dominant structure, determining the character and disposition of certain 'pseudo-real' constituents...History, one might say, is the ultimate signifier of literature, as it is the ultimate signified.*<sup>21</sup>

*The literary text does not take history as its object, even when (as with 'historical' fiction) it believes itself to do so; but it does, nevertheless, have history as its object in the last instance, in ways apparent not to the text itself but to criticism. It is this distantiation of history, this absence of any particular historical 'real' which confers on literature its air of freedom...*<sup>22</sup>

Eagleton has formulated the following scientific literary categories through which the *contradictory relation* between history and literature can be apprehended and specified.<sup>23</sup>

- (i) General Mode of Production - "Characterised as a unity of certain forces and social relation of material production."
- (ii) Literary Mode of Production - "A unity of certain forces and social relation of literary production in a particular social formation."
- (iii) General Ideology - "...denotes not some abstraction or 'ideal type' or 'ideology in general', but that particular dominated ensemble of ideologies, to be formed in any social formation."
- (iv) Authorial Ideology - "...the effect of the author's specific mode of biographical insertion into the General Ideology, a mode of insertion over-determined by a series of

distinct factors: social class, sex, nationality, religion, geographical region and so on."

- (v) Aesthetic Ideology - "... (a) specific region of General Ideology, articulated with other such regions - the ethical, religious, etc. - in relations of dominance and subordination determined in the last instance by the general mode of production."
- (vi) Text - "... is the product of a specific overdetermined conjuncture of the elements or formations set out schematically above."

It is the complex articulation of these categories, their *systematicity* and *totalizing process*, their ability to make "bare"<sup>24</sup> the *ideological secrets* of literary texts (through the unravelling of the constitutional elements of literary modes), which makes Marxist literary criticism much more superior to other literary schools of criticism, e.g. Formalism, New Criticism, Structuralism, "Leavisism", etc.

The depiction of the literary effects of *real history* on, and realized within, the novel is constructed through the literary technique or mode of *realism*. Hence, the fundamental importance of the concept of realism for Marxist literary criticism is the central construct of Marxist poetics,<sup>25</sup> notwithstanding statements to the contrary by Hans Mayer:

*A consequence of abandoning the original questions of Marxism is the more and more sterile discussion about the problems of realism... Literature as a reflection of reality realism as a criterion of literary evaluation - with these ambitions, the Marxist literary scholarship seems to be condemned to fruitfulness.*<sup>26</sup>

This is all the more paradoxical, for Auerbach in his great book, *Mimesis*, has convincingly shown that the *whole* tradition of Western literary culture, from Homer and the Bible through Tacitus and Petronius to Proust has been characterized and determined by the *literary method of realism* (which has developed in complexity from antiquity to the present, in relation to the *real history* it sought to articulate and capture):

*Now if Petronius marks the ultimate to which realism attained in antiquity, his work will accordingly serve to show what that realism could not or would not do... In modern literature the technique of imitation can evolve a serious, problematic, and tragic conception of any occurrence regardless of whether it be legendary, broadly*

political, or narrowly domestic; and in most cases it actually does so. Precisely that is completely impossible in antiquity....In the realistic literature of antiquity, the existence of society poses no historical problem; it may at best pose a problem in ethics, but even then the ethical question is more concerned with the individual members of society than with the social whole....consequently, social criticism never leads to a definition of the motive forces within society.<sup>27</sup>

Realism is a complex method and technique (for the constitutive elements of realism vary and change from period to period, reflecting the concrete historical and social conditions of different eras)<sup>28</sup> which has determined and continues to determine the structure of different genres - their narrative systems, stylistics, characters, etc.

Within Marxist literary culture the concept of realism has been an object of complex and intense debates.<sup>29</sup> Probably Bertolt Brecht has given the most succinct and lucid definition of the concept of realism:

*Realist means: revealing causal connections in society, unmasking dominant points of view as the points of view of the dominators, writing from the point of view of the class which is ready with the widest solutions to the most pressing difficulties in which human society is enmeshed; underlining the moment of development, concreteness and the possibility of abstraction.*<sup>30</sup>

*When it comes to literary forms, one must question reality, not aesthetics, not even the aesthetics of realism. There are many ways in which it can be told.*<sup>31</sup>

The method of realism is one of historical *synthesis* and epistemological *analysis* of literary phenomenon. It is a method which has specific and complex components: poetic truth, verisimilitude, complexity of ideas, typicality of characters, etc.<sup>32</sup> The method of realism<sup>33</sup> structures the different systems and components of the novel: the narrative process, the development of the plot, the ideological unities within and its stylistics, etc. The literary structure of the novel is forged by the unity of *composition* and *ratio* of these components (i.e. the regularity or irregularity of their succession) in forming a complex *semantic* whole of the novel.<sup>34</sup>

With the possible exception of Raymond Williams,<sup>35</sup> European and North American literary critics and scholars have never given Ngugi wa Thiong'o his due. They have refused to recognize the profundity of his literary creations, and the immense importance he occupies within African literary history.

For instance, W.J. Howard has written very critically of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's supposed lack of historical awareness and deficient literary skills:

...the novels, have a good deal of merit in their own right, even though each in its own way gives evidence of the author's uncertainty in his use of the novel form.<sup>36</sup>

...his work does evidence the presence of a confusion between fiction and history.<sup>37</sup>

But A Grain of Wheat indicates that Ngugi is shaping his talent towards the thought, the imagery and the needs of a new Kenya; on occasion this imagery becomes universalized as he moves deeper into the human problems of all men rather than the immediate historical problems of some.<sup>38</sup>

Ngugi has succumbed to the inherent weakness of nineteenth and early twentieth century historical fiction, which needed to do more than successfully dramatize history.<sup>39</sup>

We shall confute these charges by schematically showing the complex unity and processes of the literary structure (composition) of Petals of Blood. Its serious grasp of real Kenyan history determines its narrative structures. Ngugi wa Thiong'o clearly stated his intention and purpose in writing Petals of Blood:

We, as writers, as historians, as Kenyan intellectuals must be able to tell...stories, or histories, or history of heroic resistance to foreign domination of Kenyan people. Doing so, we shall not be looking at ourselves as people who were weak in the face of foreign domination, threats, aggression, but as a people whose history shines with the grandeur, if you like, of heroic resistance and achievement of the Kenyan people. That's why I think history dominates Petals of Blood so much. I feel that Kenyan history, either pre-colonial or colonial has not yet been written.<sup>40</sup>

In a brilliant text, Kipkorir Aly Azad Rana,<sup>41</sup> has postulated and articulated the fundamental historical and structural coordinates of this society.

It is in a living sediment of historical humus<sup>42</sup> that a work of art coheres and forges the unity of its constituent elements. *Historical self-knowledge* is probably the guiding and central theme of *Petals of Blood*. The theme is interwoven between and through the dialectical contrast and contradictory unity of the structural coordinates of class and ethnicity, town and country, religiosity and atheism, bourgeois class and proletarian class, industry and agriculture, man and woman, etc. For sure, these structural contrasts and contradictions are hierarchically determined by the portrayal of history *within* the novel itself. It is this theme which *structures* the narrative system and unifies the complex whole (its ideological and literary unities and disunities) of the novel.

It is in the knowable community<sup>43</sup> of Ilmorog that the dramatic plot of the novel unfolds. It is a destitute, drought-stricken, wasteland, depopulated of peasant community which once had a great history:

*It had 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. How they toiled together, clearing the wilderness, cultivating, planting: how they all fervently prayed for rain and deliverance in times of drought and pestilence! And at harvest-time they would gather in groups, according to ages, and dance from village to village, spilling into Ilmorog plains, hymning praises to their founders. In those days, there were no vultures in the sky waiting for the carcasses of dead workers, and no insectflies feeding on the fat and blood of unsuspecting toilers.*<sup>44</sup>

*From Agu and Agu, Tene wa tene, from long long before the Wanjiri generation, the highway (the Rift Valley in which Ilmorog is located) had seen more than its fair share of adventures from the north and north-west. Solomon's suitors for myrrh and frankincense; Zen's children in a royal hunt for the seat of the sun-god of the Nile; scouts and emissaries of Genghis Khan; Arab geographers and also hunters for slaves and ivory; soul and gold merchants from Gaul and from Bismarck's Germany; land pirates and human game-hunters from Victorian and Edwardian England: they had all passed here bound for a King-*

*dom of plenty, driven sometimes by holy zeal, sometimes by a genuine thirst for knowledge and the quest for the spot where the first man's umbilical cord was buried, but more often by mercenary commercial greed and love of the wanton destruction of those with a slightly different complexion from theirs.*<sup>45</sup>

The collapse of the Ilmorog community from grandeur to destitution is the by-product of two historical processes: the *legacy* of the Holy Trinity of Colonialism: Christianity, Commerce, Civilization: the Bible, the Coin, and the Gun; and the *heritage* of the Holy Trinity of Neo-Colonialism: Corruption, Greed, Disunity: Money, Prostitution, and Tribalism.

It is onto this destitute, and poverty stricken peasant community of Ilmorog that four characters descend, each fleeing from his or her particular past history. Yet it will be here that they, *collectively*, will recover the true knowledge of their *living history*:

*To understand the present...you must understand the past. To know where you came from, don't you think?; But why should I become a prisoner of a past defeat? Why should it always be held against me?; We cannot after all escape from our separate though linked pasts.*<sup>46</sup>

Munira - a teacher and man of God, Karega - a teacher and trade unionist, Wanja - a prostitute and yet still a child of innocence, and Abdulla - a petty trader, seek to *overcome* the "long night of unreality", that was their past, by transcending the "difference" between the "call of life and the involvement in living history... (and)...between the desire for active creation and a passive acceptance of one's ordained fate."<sup>47</sup> It is through the portrayal of these characters, including Nyakinua - Wanja's grandmother, and Njunguna - a leading member of the community, as *types*, that Ngugi wa Thiong'o forges the social relationships and organic links of the Ilmorog community into a socio-historical whole:

*The writer, then, has to be aware of the nature of society, and indeed has to grasp society as a totality. But he must not present society and its laws in an abstract way...and characters and situations...Instead, the writer must create characters and situations which Lukacs (following Engels) calls 'types'...A type is not something that is devoid of individual traits; neither, on the other hand, is it something purely individual, with no relation to what is universal. The type*

*binds together general and particular, in the sense that through the character and the events in which the character is involved the author presents the universal laws that govern society.*<sup>48</sup>

Lukács links this phenomena of typification to the actual process of composition:

*The classic realists, however, choose the extremely accentuated person and situation merely as the most suitable means of poetic expression for portraying the typical in its highest form. This differentiation leads us back to the problem of composition. The creation of types cannot be separated from composition itself. The portrayal of extreme situations and characters becomes typical only by virtue of the fact that the total context makes it clear that the extreme behaviour of a person in an extremely accentuated situation gives expression to the deepest contradictions of a definite complex of social problems.*<sup>49</sup>

The typification of characters renders possible a portrayal of the unity of the totality of relationships and objects within their social context.

The narrative of the *Petals of Blood* traces the parallel and corresponding development of an awakened *historical consciousness* of Abdulla, Wanja, Karega, Munira, and the whole Ilmorog community, and the transformation of Old Ilmorog into New Ilmorog, in four historical phases: Phase I, Pre-Colonial era; Phase II, Mau-Mau rebellion period 1950's; Phase III, the euphoric period of Independence, 1960's; and, Phase IV, the neo-colonial period, 1970's. Though the narrative covers only the twelve years between Phase III and Phase IV, it retrospectively and periodically shifts the perspective of focus to former periods in order to facilitate the cumulative knowledge of the two latter periods.

Soon after the arrival of Wanja, Abdulla, Karega and Munira in the community, seeking redemption and atonement for their past "sins", Ilmorog is stricken by a severe drought. A journey is organised by them to Parliament in Nairobi to seek the assistance of Hon. Nderi wa Riera who supposedly represents the constituency of Ilmorog; "supposedly", because instead of looking after the interests of his community, Nderi wa Riera is busy acquiring wealth through corruption.

The journey from Ilmorog to Nairobi, "the exodus toward the kingdom of knowledge" maps a historical awareness of the Ilmorog community to the evils of Capitalism and Neo-Cap-

*italism*. It is a journey that forges a *community of spirit* and also reveals the following historical problems: the social differentiation of classes and the exploitation of workers; the corruption of young African girls through prostitution; the mystification of tribal ideology to deflect class struggle; the religious hypocrisy of Reverend Kamau, alias Terrod Brown; the bourgeois corruption and cynicism of Raymond Chui and Kimeria, populism and Black authenticity a la Sese Mobutu.

Needless to say, the journey to Nairobi proves to be materially unproductive. Yet, the acquisition of historical consciousness proves to be solid and ever-lasting. Hence, the development of *historical self-recognition* as an oppressed and exploited class. This self-recognition of the Ilmorog peasant community will lead them to attempt to reclaim their *historical rights* and material interests.

On their return back to Ilmorog they are soon to discover that a Trans-Africa Highway connecting Cape to Tripoli, Dakar to Dar-es-Salaam, is to be built through Ilmorog. With the construction of the project, Old Ilmorog is transformed into New Ilmorog: "How Ilmorog rose from a deserted village into a sprawling town of stone, iron, concrete and glass and one or two neo-lights is already a legend in our times."<sup>50</sup> Whereas, to the Ilmorog peasant community, the construction of the Trans-Africa road is a moment within a process of unifying Africa.

*They had seen that the weakness of the resistance lay not in the lack of will or determination or weapons but in the African people's toleration of being divided into regions and tongues and dialects according to the wishes of former masters, and they cried: Africa must unite.*<sup>51</sup>

To the comprador bourgeoisie (Raymond Chui and Kimeria) of Nairobi, the project is to facilitate their enrichment.

*And so, abstracted from the vision of oneness, of a collective struggle of the African peoples, the road brought only the unity of earth's surface: every corner of the continent was now within easy reach of international capitalist robbery and exploitation...LONRHO, SHELL, ESSO, TOTAL, AGIP...*<sup>52</sup>

With the construction of the project, the Ilmorog peasant class is transformed into a landless labouring class and some are exploited as a working class in the newly constructed factories and industries, like the *Theng'eta Brewery* owned

by foreign international capital:

*The breweries were owned by an Anglo-American international combine but of course with African directors and even shareholders. Three of the four leading local personalities were Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria.*<sup>53</sup>

After being absent for some time, Karega returns to Ilmorog to organize the working class for higher wages and better working conditions. By this action Karega frees himself from the "tyranny of the past". On the eve of the strike, Raymond Chui, Kimeria, and Mugo, who are members of the African comprador bourgeoisie, are burned to death in Wanja's brothel, *Sun Shine Lodge*. The prime suspect is Karega, the union organizer, who has a passionate hatred for this decadent and contemptible class. Because of his *proletarian class consciousness*, Karega knows that only the *unity and organisation* of the working class will overthrow the *comprador bourgeois class*:

*There are a million Karegas for every ten Kimerias. They can kill the lawyer or ten such lawyers. But the poor, the dispossessed, the working millions and the poor peasants are their own lawyers. With guns and swords and organisation, they can and will change the conditions of their oppression. They'll seize the wealth which rightly belongs to them. Why - its happening all around us - Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe...Never! The workers and the peasant farmers of Kenya are awake.*<sup>54</sup>

Munira, driven by his religious fanaticism (a form of *false consciousness*), murders Kimeria, Raymond Chui and Mzigo, in order to "save" Karega:

*It was enjoined on him to burn down the whorehouse - which mocked God's work on earth. He poured petrol on all doors and lit it up. He walked away toward Ilmorog Hill. He stood on the hill and watched the whorehouse burn, the tongues of flame from the four corners forming petals of blood making a twilight of the dark sky. He, Munira, had milled and acted, and he felt, as he knelt down to pray, that he was no longer an outsider, for he had finally affirmed his oneness with the Law.*<sup>55</sup>

The narrative thread of the novel forms a *complex system* through the interconnection of *past histories* of the characters: Mukima, Munira's sister was Karega's lover; Nding'uri, Karega's brother, and Abdulla were Kimathi's soldier

in the Mau-Mau rebellion; Kimeria, who seduced Wanja as a young girl, betrayed Abdulla and Nding'uri to the British colonial police; Raymond Chui, was Munira's student friend at Siriana High School, where both were expelled, and where later Chui was to become Karega's headmaster, etc.

It is the unravelling of these interlocked *historical relationships* that governs the progressive and regressive movement of the narration between the past and the present. Without doubt, Ngugi wa Thiong'o is an outstanding master of the narrative process, who can hold his ground among the contemporary masters of the novel, i.e., the Latin American giants like Mario Vargas Llosa and Juan Rulfo.

The literary technique (tendency) employed by Ngugi wa Thiong'o to facilitate the totalizing progression of the narration within discontinuous time sequences, and to portray the typicality of characters, cannot but be of *progressive realism*. Only realism can capture the dense texture of real history the historical myths on which the novel feeds. *Humanism* is, necessarily, the political tendency of *Petals of Blood*. The real importance of this novel within African literary history lies in its absolute affirmation that only through the literary technique of realism can the African novel develop and capture the immediacy of history. *Petals of Blood*, which is otherwise an admirable and significant novel, is somewhat marred by Ngugi wa Thiong'o's tendency of forcing into the narrative texture of real contemporary historical events, situations and happenings which are not imaginatively and organically integrated or incorporated into the narrative structure of the novel. Nonetheless, Ngugi wa Thiong'o is a master magician of the novel.

#### Footnotes

1. Lukács, Gyorgy, "On Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, *New Left Review*, No. 110, July-August, 1978, p. 84.
2. Jameson, Frederic, "Benjamin as Historian, or How to Write a Marxist Literary History: A Review Essay", *Minnesota Review*, Spring-Fall, 1974, p. 118. A recent vintage of interesting reflections on Walter Benjamin: Bernard White, "Benjamin & Lukacs, Historical Notes on the Relationship Between Their Political and Aesthetic Theories", *New German Critique*, Number 5, Spring, 1975; a special issue of *International Journal of Sociology*, Spring, 1977; John Fekete, "Benjamin's Ambivalence", *Telos*, Number 35, Spring, 1978; and, Sandor Radnoti, "Benjamin's Politics", *Telos*, Number 37, Fall, 1978.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

4. Eagleton, Terry, "Literature and Politics Now", in *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 20, No. 3, winter, 1978, p. 66.
5. Benjamin, Walter, "The Author as Producer", in *Reflections Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Peter Demetz, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Tovanovich, 1978, pp. 220-239.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
7. Lukács, Gyorgy, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, London: Merlin Press, 1962. Georgy Valentinovich Plekhanov, *Art and Social Life*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1953. To temper these astringent criticisms of Lukács and Plekhanov, it must be said that in other contexts they have written texts which have been equaled by a few, respective *History and Class Consciousness* and *The Fundamental Problem of Marxism* (fundamental texts whatever their demerits). It is fashionable today to treat Lukács like "a dead dog" in relation to Brecht; Lukács was much more superior than Brecht in many ways. Though, of course, Brecht has the upper hand on the question of realism - see Bertolt Brecht "Against Lukacs", *New Left Review*, 84, March-April, 1974.
8. Benjamin, "The Author as Producer", p. 222-223.
9. Praver, S.S., *Karl Marx and World Literature*, London: University Press, 1976, p. 405.
10. Jauss, Hans Robert, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory", in *New Directions in Literary History*, edited by Ralph Cohen, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974. The Constance School, which is now in vogue, especially in the United States, hails from West Germany; its other leading member is Wolfgang Iser, who has recently published its other "classic" text, *The Ideal Reader*.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
14. Weinmann, Robert, "Past Significance and Present Meaning in Literary History", in *New Directions in Literary History*, p. 44.
15. Jameson, Frederic, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 333.

16. wa Thiong'o, Ngugi, *Home Coming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics*, London: Heinemann, 1972, p. XV.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
18. Kermode, Frank, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 133.
19. Kettle, Arnold, *An Introduction to the English Novel: To George Eliot*, Volume I, London: Hutchinson University Library, 1967, Second Edition, p. 24.
20. Steiner, George, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in Old Criticism*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971, p. 19.
21. Eagleton, Terry, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*, London: New Left Books, 1976, p. 72.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
23. *Ibid.*, see Chapter II, pp. 44-63, "Categories for a Materialist Criticism", for a more detailed exposition on these categories or literary constructs.
24. A concept made popular by the Russian formalists, especially Viktor Shklovsky.
25. Gyorgy Lukács has written some remarkable pages in his great book, *Studies in European Realism*; these pages have left indelible marks on the edifice of Marxist literary culture. In two other books, though less inspired, Lukács examines the concept of realism - *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* and *Writer and Critic: And Other Essays*.
26. Mayer, Hans, "Karl Marx und die Literatur", cited in George Bizsatray, *Marxist Models of Literary Realism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1978, p. 1
27. Auerbach, Erich, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973, Third Printing, pp.31-32; my italics. To contemporary realism, the existence of society is a historical problem governed by material forces.
28. As much as Engels has shown in *Ludwig Feuerback and the End of German Classical Philosophy* that the history of philosophy is the history of the struggle between materialism and idealism.

29. A tradition which stretches from Marx and Engels through Lenin and Plekhanov to Lukács and Galvano Della Volpe. It would require another essay to evaluate the nuances of the concept. It was the concept of realism which was at the center of the aesthetic duels of the 1930's within German Marxism - *Aesthetics and Politics: Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno*, London: New Left Books, 1977.
30. Brecht, Bertolt, *Sinn Und Form*, cited in Galvano Della Volpe, *Critique of Taste*, London: New Left Books, 1978, p. 239, fn.
31. Brecht, Bertolt, *Versuche*, cited in Galvano Della Volpe, *Ibid.*, p. 239, fn.
32. Volpe, Galvano Della, *Ibid.*, p. 199.
33. For an interesting recent discussion on the relationship between realism, critical realism and socialist realism, see, "A Discussion on Socialist Realism", by Ivan Spassor and Boris Tsenkov in *Obzor: A Bulgarian Quarterly Review of Literature and Arts*, No. 40, Autumn, 1977, p. 26: "Socialist realism has incorporated everything valuable from the different artistic trends and especially from critical realism and progressive realism. It is an open artistic system in the sense that it borrows from everything that is progressive. But it is also a closed system in the sense that it rejects the formalistic artistic methods and trends. Its innovating spirit identifies itself with the continuity and the realist tradition in world art and literature." See also the position paper, "Of Socialist Realism by the Cultural Theory Panel Attached to the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party", in *Radical Perspectives in the Arts*, edited by Lee Baxandall, London: Penguin Books, 1973.
34. Mukarovsky, Jan, "A Note on the Czech Translation of Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose*", in *The Word and Verbal Art: Selected Essays*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977, p. 138.
35. Williams, Raymond, *The Country and the City*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1973. Commenting on the writings of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in relation to other writings from the Third World (the novels of Elechi Amadi, Wilson Harris, R.K. Narayan), which examine the colonial experience and the changing historical dynamic between country and city, Williams had this to say (p.285): "Many of these stories include characteristic internal themes: struggles with landlords; failures of crops and debts; the penetration of

capital into peasant communities...But their most pressing interest, for us, is when they touch the imperialist and colonial experience...What is important in this modern literature of the colonial peoples is that we can see history happening, see it being made..."

36. Howard, W.J., "Themes and Development in the Novels of Ngugi", in *The Critical Evaluation of African Literature*, edited by Edgar Wright, London, Nairobi: Heinemann, 1973, p. 118. These remarks were made in relation to *A Grain of Wheat*, *Weep Not Child*, *The River Between*, i.e. pre-*Petals of Blood* publication. Charles R. Larson, the doyen of these scholars, made similar remarks concerning *Petals of Blood*, on the occasion of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's detention by the Kenya Government on December 31st, 1977; the article appeared in the February or March issue of the *New York Times Review of Books*, 1978. Kwei Armah, the Ghanaian novelist, has severely criticized Larson for his imperialist attitudes towards African literature and culture (see an American journal, *New Black World Journal*, a late 1977 or early 1978 issue). Ngugi wa Thiong'o was detained for one year, released on the coming of the Second Republic, following the death of President Jomo Kenyatta in August 1978. Ngugi was recently arrested on some flimsy charges; the Magistrate dismissed the case and was critical of the Kenya Government and its repressive State Apparatus, the police force (see *Daily Nation*, Saturday, May 5, 1979 - a Kenyan daily newspaper).
37. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
38. *Ibid.*, (my italics).
39. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
40. "An interview with Ngugi wa Thiong'o", *The Weekly Review* (Nairobi, Kenya) January 9, 1978, p. 10.
41. Rana, Kipkorir Aly Azad, "Class Formation and Social Conflict: A Case Study of Kenya", *Ufahamu*, Volume VII, No. 3, 1977, pp. 17-73.
42. Volpe, Galvano Della, *Critique of Taste*, p. 25.
43. Williams, Raymond, *The English Novel: From Dickens to Lawrence*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1973, p. 14. Williams has this to say on the concept of the knowable community: "Most novels are in some sense *knowable communities*. It is part of the traditional method - an underlying stance and approach - that the novelist offers to show people and their relationships in essentially know-

able and communicable ways...that the knowable and therefore known relationships compose and are part of a wholly known social structure, and that in and through the relationships the persons themselves can be wholly known."

44. wa Thiong'o, Ngugi, *Petals of Blood*, Nairobi and London: Heinemann, 1977. Some of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's brilliant prose passages have a dense capacity to sustain a plurality of meanings.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 127-128; 229; 239.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
48. Parkinson, G.H.R., *George Lukacs*, London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977, p. 88.
49. Lukacs, Georg, "The Intellectual Physiognomy of Literary Characters", in Lee Baxandall, *Radical Perspectives in the Arts*, p. 101.
50. wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood*, pp. 263-64.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 262.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 262-63.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 327.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 333.

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