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## THE DELINEATION OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN NGUGI WA THIONGO'S FICTION

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### ABSTRACT

'Life is a challenge meet it.' More so, for a women life is always a challenge and since ages she has been subjected to face many challenges thrown by society, men, customs and tradition. In every society, from time immemorial the subjugation of women has given a sanction. The figure of women and her position in the society have changed drastically throughout the human history. The ever changing reality of African women's life inevitably reflects itself in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's writing. This paper is an attempt to critically analyze the delineation of women characters in the fiction of Ngugi. The main aim is to argue that the representation of women in Ngugi's fiction changes with time as the status of women all over the world has been undergoing a rapid change. We see women portrays as victims of colonialism, patriarchy, oppressed figures, mothers, and also freedom fighters. The women have pitted against the unjust social, economical and political order and play their positive roles for the establishment of a new order.

**Keywords:** Ngugi wa Thiongo, Postcolonialism, African Literature, Feminism, African Women

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Ngugi wa Thiango, an acknowledged Kenyan writer and human activist, was baptized as James Ngugi, which was the direct effect of colonialism on black people. But later on realizing that his Gikuyu culture and values were underestimated, he rejected Christianity which he regarded as a sign of colonialism and changed his name as Ngugi wa Thiong'o to honor his African Heritage. Ngugi is associated with the campaign run for the welfare of African women and other marginalized groups in the African society. The African women, one of the most prominent groups among the classes of oppressed people in Africa has been the subject of discussion in his fiction.

In his early novels he shows women as an object and victims of patriarchy and colonialism.

African women were one of the most exploited women of the world. They were being suppressed on the basis of gender, class and race. Woman has assigned a lower and subordinate position in the social set-up of African Society. However important the duties of a woman are, she is always neglected by the society. Women have accepted this role without any complaint and protest, despite the fact that they have a kingdom of their own with both its recognition and obligations. Women accepted the frame work of the family with a blind faith and rarely showed a spirit of rebellion. She continued to be self sacrificing, loving, patience and capable of suffering. But in his later novels, readers can see the radical shift in the portrayal of women characters. His later works break new grounds for women

characters as women acquire more experience and become empowered through female consciousness. Eko rightly claims that Ngugi is "a ground breaking example of the modern African male author's shift from portraying women as objects to that of subjects" (212).

The women in African colonized societies are not only exploited by colonizers but also by indigenous people. African women were double exploited by the patriarchy and colonial powers; Young mentions this situation with these lines:

For women, the problem centered on the fact that the conditions against which they were campaigning were the product of two kinds of oppression which put the antagonists of the nationalist struggle in the same camp: patriarchal systems of exploitation were common to both colonial regimes and indigenous societies.

Women therefore had to fight the double colonization of patriarchal domination in its local as well as its imperial forms (Young, 379).

Ngugi in his novels shows that women in African society are the victim of patriarchy and are also exploited by colonial powers. He clearly describes the picture of African society that is essentially patriarchal. It is a man made world where woman is bound within the narrow confines prescribed by man. Male members of the family are considered to be more superior to the female counterparts. In *A Grain of Wheat* the effect of patriarchy in Mumbi marriage can be clearly seen. As she was not happy with her married life and wants to return back to her parents home but she was not able to do it because of patriarchal ideologies. Her parents also takes her husband's side and it is clearly distinguish in her mother Wanjiku's statement

"The women of today surprise me. They cannot take a slap, soft as a feather, or the slightest breath, from a man. In our time, a woman could take blow and blow from her husband without a thought of running back to her parents." (Grain, 176)

One of the traditional sufferings of women in African society is polygamy. Women were judged only in term of physical appearance and men see them as

their property. Since Wangari's husband in *A Grain of Wheat* is not pleased with her sexual conditions, he falls out of love with her. Following lines clearly describes his thought about her wife:

He got new brides and complained that the thighs of the first wife did not yield warmth any more. He beat her, hoping that this would drive her away. Wangari struck on. Eventually, Waruhiu ordered her to leave his home and cursed mother and son to life of ever wandering on God's earth (Grain, 71-72).

Karanja's father has four wives, when he is bored of them and find more beautiful girl, he sends them away. That is, women are the victims of Karanja's father. Following lines support these statements: "She was the third of the four wives that Karanja's father had acquired by paying so much bride price in goats and cattle. He acquired them, yes and then left them to their own resources" (Grain, 220).

Ngotho in *Weep Not Child* has got two wives and he looks at women only as an instrument of attaining pleasure. . For him, a good wife is a "fleshy, black body with sweat[...] a fat woman" not a woman that looks like his Memsahib's wife who is "so thin that [he] at times wondered if the woman had flesh at all" (*Weep* 12). Love does not have any place in his relationship with his wives. As he himself accept that he has married one of his wives because he has "pitied her" and because "Nobody could have taken her" (*Weep* 26). It is a humiliating justification that does not seem to be true. This is a symbol of Ngotho's selfish attitude towards women, which rationalizes his insistence on keeping more than one wife. Ngotho's wives seem to have no voice. On the one hand Njeri and Nyokabi, Ngotho's wives have to learn to live in harmony within an obviously hostile polygamous structure, on other hand they suffered under the economical exploitation under the white settler. Although they are aware of the fact that their sufferings and reduced economic status is due to male counterparts and colonial forces even than they could not do anything in opposition of them.

In *Weep not Child* during his wife's absent the white settler picked up African women and exploited then sexually but in *A Grain of Wheat*, African women are sexually exploited by their own

race. Mumbi, the main female character of the novel is seduced by Karanja, the leader of home guards. He takes her advantage in her husband's absence, who was detained without trial for a long time. She sacrificed herself for her husband, Gikonyo as Karanja promised her to release her husband. However, when Gikonyo returned back, he saw Karanja's child with Mumbi, and treats her in a bad manner. The sufferings of Mumbi never stopped even after the return of her husband. Gikonyo even thought that of "killing her and the child, and ending all misery" (Grain, 112). After a while Gikonyo thought about Mumbi that "she had betrayed the bound, the secret between them" (Grain, 114). On the other hand, Mumbi has an extensive love for her husband and never betrays him. Mumbi tells her love for Gikonyo "I hung on to Gikonyo with all my heart. I would wait for him, my husband, even if I was fated to rejoin him in the grave" (Grain, 145).

Mumbi clearly depicts the figure of postcolonial women in the novel. From the statements of her, it is understood that women have a low position in the colonized society. Mumbi says "I had forgotten that I am a nobody" (Grain, 29). Even her husband behaves her in a bad way without knowing Mumbi's sacrificing for him. Gikonyo says to Mumbi "I will make you shut this mouth of a whore" (Grain, 163). He does not show respect to her. During the colonial period, women's suffering reached at a high point. Through Mumbi, Ngugi shows the miserable condition of African women and their sufferings. She is also disdained, humiliated and obsessed by the colonizers. Mumbi grief of poverty and the hard conditions of the colonial period is clearly visible in her words:

We are prisoners in the village, and the soldiers had built their camps all around to prevent any escape. We went without food. The cry of children was terrible to hear. The new DO did not mind the cries. He even permitted soldiers to pick women and carry them to their tents. God! I did not know how I escaped from that ignominy. Every night I prayed that such a thing should never happen to me (Grain, 139).

Women were also forced to sleep with the colonizers just only for a piece of bread. Mumbi tells that "a number of women secretly and voluntarily

offered themselves to the soldiers for a little food, and I felt no different" (Grain, 142).

That shows the bitter reality of the lives of colonized women in a wretched society. Ngugi says in the novel "Mothers warned their daughters to take care not to be raped in the dark" in the festival of celebration (Grain, 199). Although Mumbi suffered so much, she is a strong woman. She does the duties actually men do. "Mumbi tied a belt around her waist and took on a man's work" (Grain, 136). We also understand that she is a brave woman as she says "I may be a woman, but even a cowardly bitch fights back when cornered against a wall" (Grain, 176). She is also a proud woman. When Gikonyo kicks her out of the home, she never returns. She says "I will not go back to his home, not if he kneels before me" (Grain, 228).

As a critic rightly observes:

The life of Gikonyo and Mumbi is one of the most significant points of attention in *A Grain of Wheat* because it enlarges the traditional conflict between man and woman in the society and prescribes solution, which is still relevant to the entire situation in the novel. The most important prescription is recognition of equality and mutual cooperation. (Emmanuel, 38)

Ngugi also portrays the women who struggled for their freedom and supported Mau-Mau Movement. Several women fought against the colonial power, and they were excruciated, suffered, and even died during this rebellion movement. Ngugi pays attribute to the heroic women and celebrates their never ending sacrifices and contributions to the struggle for freedom and the liberation of the homeland in his writings. In *A Grain of Wheat*, women are described as the invisible backbone to the movement. Ngugi made use of traditional African values of womanhood to fight the enemies. Thus, women were able to lead Mau Mau's movement unnoticed. Through the portrayal of the ideal patriotic women, Ngugi pays great attribute to the African women especially in those dark days. He believes that though men are fighting openly, the invisible war led by women in fighting for freedom is as much important as men's. He wants to demonstrate that if African women had not been

such an inner- force, Kenya would have never got independence. Ngugi's heroines work as custodians and defenders of transitional Gikuyu culture and occupy a prominent place in African history. Though the novel reflects the Kenyan culture and its underlying patriarchal conduct very effectively, still Ngugi portrays strong women with highly sensitive minds and exceptional intellectual abilities that often result in sound judgment.

*Petals of Blood* marks Ngugi wa Thiong'o's growing interest in strong women characters like Wanja. Ngugi with the help of Wanja's character shows the most exploitative section of the African Women in African society under neo-colonial and imperialistic conditions. She goes through identical experience. The sexual exploitation portrayed in *Grain of Wheat* takes a different turn in the next novel *Petals of Blood*. Wanja became the victim of sexploitation in her young age. She had been seduced by a thoughtless, much older man and because of this fifth boy friend she became pregnant in her adolescence. She was obliged to drop out of school because of this unexpected pregnancy and had been kicked out of the family fold. She says "...I was pregnant. I ran back to my lover. I will marry you all right, he assured me, if you don't mind being a second wife, and my first is so harsh she will make you her slave" (*Grain*,40).

We also become aware of the polygamy problem in colonized communities. Wanja's lover offers her to be his second wife, which shocks Wanja deeply. She inevitably drift into the city and in spite of her original high ideas, she works as a barmaid, a gendered menial job rife with exploitation and abuse. As a means of survival she goes into prostitution. Ngugi points out the factors which force Wanja to the prostitution. Through her image, Ngugi stresses the condition of all exploited women in Africa, especially in Kenya. Though prostitution is seen as a humiliating job, it is the final destination of many women in postcolonial regions. Ngugi himself says: "When I take a prostitute, I want to show that she is a product of all forces impinging on that society" (*Martin*, 156)

Wanja firmly believes in the philosophy that you eat somebody or you are eaten. Wanja thinks that there is no difference between a worker

and prostitute. She says "What is the difference whether you are sweating it out on plantation, in a factory or lying on your back, anyway?" (*Petals*, 293). She herself admits:

As for me, it's a game . . . of money . . . you eat or you are eaten . . . they are proud to be seen with me . . . even for one night...and they pay for it . . . I have had to be hard . . . It is the only way. . . the only way . . ." (*Petals*, 293-94)

Later on Wanja works for Illmorong people and finds some meaning in her life, she realized her mistake of blaming others for what has happen to her. At the end she changes her philosophy for good.

Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* deals with the story of Wariinga a betrayed young woman. She represents the Kenyan working class and the struggles she faces are illustrative of a post-colonial state, captivated by the neo-colonizers. Through Wariinga, Ngugi brings to light the psychological damage cause to the blacks because of the color complex induced by the Europeans. This is worse in the case of women. Unable to understand the things, Wariinga thinks that her appearance is the root cause for all her problems.

Exploitation chased her from very school days. The Rich Old Man, friend of her uncle who frequently visits her home to exploit Wariinga sexually. Later on she has been fired from her job and evicted from her apartment. Wariinga believes that in order to find or keep their jobs, women must allow licentious behavior in their employers. Wariinga states that these office women are their bosses' real wives, but not their legal ones; the contrast she draws is between a "goat for slaughter and one for grazing" (*Devil* 206). She is also dumped by her sweetheart at the University because he mistakenly and unfairly believed she was sleeping with her boss. Even after being sexually exploited in her school days she takes a positive route early in her life, realizing the things to become a fully developed self respected individual. Unlike Wanja who threw her child in latrine pit, Wariinga did not abandon the child.

Wariinga is finally awakened to the harsh realities of the neocolonial state as she discovers that the capitalist "devils" expound on their personal

exploits of the poor and rape of their motherland. Little by little, Wariinga begins to acquire more courage and to look ahead. As Simon Gikandi states, "Wariinga's project is to break out of the prison house of self-hate and victimization and to assert her identity outside the culture and economy of arrested decolonization" (220). Through a journey and adventure to her hometown of Ilmorog, Wariinga gradually changes and becomes impassioned with a nationalist spirit. Wariinga get a degree from the polytechnic university to be a mechanical engineer and she becomes a representative of the working-class women in their tireless search for recognition. Wariinga begins to feel the misery of her community under the colonial and neo-colonial rule and starts to question the position of women and the working class in her society. Wariinga has broken the common misunderstanding about women that their jobs are limited to housework. Her experiences change the way she views herself and how she operates in her society; she becomes a feminist. The battlefield for her is not only the reclamation of her sexuality, but also the rejection of what she has assumed to be true about her identity in terms of Christianity, the work force, and the war for national Uhuru (independence). Her role in Uhuru is equally as important as her feminization, the process of adopting feminist values. Wariinga has become a figure of female activism against postcolonial patriarchy. She "belongs to that remarkable breed of Ngugi's women—all of them brave, resilient, resourceful and determined" (Palmer, 1979, p. 6). She vows never to sell her soul to the Devil for money and never again to be owned by another man. She has saved herself and her people from the ghost of colonialism. She is no longer "a woman in chains."

In the *Wizard of the Crow* Ngugi describes about post-colonial women who are trapped in many ways. On the one hand they are still trapped in the patriarchal ideologies and in colonial past on the other hand they are trying to find their own identities after the departure of colonial forces. In the treatment of Rachael by her husband the ruthless of patriarchal oppression is epitomized. She question about sexual exploitation of school girls by

her husband and as a result of her "crime," she is "banished to a mansion built on seven acres of land where the ruler attempts to freeze her life in time and space" (*Wizard* 10) Virginia the wife of Tagirika represents an African woman trapped in the post-colonial structure of political elite. Even in this modern era her husband does not view her as an equal partner. She is consider as a lesser being, but when her husband beats her she takes a stand against the violence and demands for equal rights. She overcome her fear and asks for humanely behavior. She reports the incident and her husband gets a punishment by a women's court.

Through the character of Nyawira in *Wizard of the Crow* Ngugi provides insights to an emerging feminine consciousness that rejects traditional gender roles and patriarchal ideologies. The novelist moves beyond the traditional male/female dichotomy in gender analysis and promotes a strong image of modern African women. Nyawira is indeed a revision of the Ngugi's earlier female characters all the way from Nyambura (*River Between*) Mwhiki (*Weep Not Child*), Mumbi (*A Grain of Wheat*), Wanja (*Petals of Blood*), Wariinga (*Devil on the Cross*) and Guthera in *Matigari*. In *Nyawira*, Ngugi creates a character who is at the centre striving to create a new identity for women. He portrays a mature feminine vision of a woman ready to confront the cultural, social and political challenges of postcolonial Africa in the 21st Century. Nyawira, born into the middle class family but because of her self-consciousness she, rejects empty materialism and desire of her father to control her life. In spite of being aware that her father is against her marriage to the poor artist, Kanjuru she takes the firm decision and gets married to him. But when she come to know that Kaniuru married her for her father's property not for hr love, she divorces him and strikes out on her own. In the novel the author presents her as an astute organizer not only of women but for the larger Movement for the Voice of the People. She represents a new female consciousness that provide meaningful political leadership in a collective effort to heal the land. Nyawira questions the position of African woman as she is trebly oppressed:

She is oppressed on account of her colour like all black people in the world; she is oppressed on account of her gender like all women in the world; and she is exploited and oppressed on account of her class like all workers and peasants in the world ( Wizard, 428).

That is why she can be regarded as a socialist feminist who believes in consciousness rising as a strategy of sharing experiences and hidden fears resulting from the suppression of women in the neo-colonial African society.

Thus after a profound study of Ngugi's women characters it is clear that he has drawn them on the basis of race, class and gender. Though in his early novels his women characters remain silent as wives, mother and daughters and were trapped in polygamy and patriarchy. But Ngugi's later novels witness the rebirth of women characters and clearly reveal the facts that they begin to acquire new identities. Through Wariinga and Nyawira Ngugi clearly shows that after the self-discovery, the African women realize their direction and purpose of life.

Ngugi tends in his recent work especially to set to his women characters as icons allegorical figures representing all that is resistant and strong in the Kenya people. He thus seeks to identify with the liberation of African women as a part of his resistance to all forms of oppression. (Elleke, 189)

So the women began to move from self ignorance to awareness, assurance, and self –reliance. Ngugi's female protagonists become increasingly resourceful as the novels progress from pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial era.

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