



CRITIQUING NEO-LIBERALISM IN THE NOVELS OF NGUGI WA THIONG'O

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Abstract

The writings of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, particularly his later fictional works, are marked by his representation and criticism of the neo-colonial and neo-liberal situation in the context of newly-independent Kenya. As a vocal critic of colonial and neo-colonial machinery, Ngugi has raised his concern over the rise of international capitalism and the neo-liberalism as disguised forms of imperialism. In his view, the rise of neo-liberalism is a mark of the failure of the objectives of freedom struggle and a threat to the common person's aspirations from an independent nation. As a novelist, his mastery lies in transcending the geographical limitations of Kenya in terms of the social, economic and political problems that neo-liberalism may brew and thus his fictional representations attains a much wider appeal in terms of their applicability. As a matter of fact, there is also the possibility of interpreting some of his later works as dystopias in terms of their representation.

The present paper intends an analysis of the later novels of the author to throw light on the various economic, social and political problems and the power-structures ushered in by the neo-colonial and neo-liberal forces with the application of several apparatuses. The paper will also discuss what recourse the author offers as the possible solution or the way forward (if any) to such a predicament.

Keywords: Neo-colonialism, neo-liberalism, representations, power-structures.

Several countries that gained independence from the European powers around the middle of the last century could not reap the desired fruits for some of these countries. The wave of neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism evolved as international capitalism that made in-roads into the economies of these newly-independent countries. The exploitation of the country's economy and natural wealth continued under a different guise by the same powers that had earlier ruled over them.

According to Nicola Smith, neo-liberalism "is most commonly associated with laissez

faireconomics. In particular, neoliberalism is often characterized in terms of its belief in the sustained economic growth as the means to achieve human progress, its confidence in free markets as the most-efficient allocation of resources, its emphasis on minimal state intervention in economic and social affairs, and its commitment to the freedom of trade and capital." (Britannica)

On the other hand, neo-colonialism has been defined by Elleke Boehmer as:

A term from economic theory, current since the 1960s, 'neo-colonialism' signifies the continuing economic control by the West of

the once-colonized world under the guise of political independence, and the betrayal therefore of the ideals of postcolonial liberation. (Boehmer 9)

Boehmer also draws the link between neo-colonialism and postcolonial intent:

Despite anti-imperial developments, despite the apparently subversive energies of postcolonial writing, in a world order powered by multinational companies, colonialism is not a thing of the past. (Boehmer 10)

Hence, the ill-effects of colonial exploitation continued to plague nations in a more tightened way from the 1960s. The collapse of the USSR finally resulted into the world turning into an almost capital-centric economy with two broad divisions – the rich and the poor nations, with the latter nations being technically termed as the third-world nations.

Such evolution of the global scenario became a cause of worry for some authors who raised their concern regarding it in their writings. The Kenyan author, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, has emerged as a vocal critic of neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism in his novels. In his view, the rise of neo-liberalism is a mark of the failure of the objectives of freedom struggle and a threat to the common person's aspirations from newly-independent nations like Kenya. His appeals as a critic of neo-liberalism lies in the fact that he makes the socio-economic problems associated with Kenya attain larger applicability. Some of his later works are possible of being interpreted as representations of emerging dystopias. This paper intends to analyze his later novels, beginning from *Petals of Blood* (1977) to *The Wizard of the Crow* (2007), as critiques of neo-liberalism in the Kenyan context. His three other novels, *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) which were written before *Petals of Blood*, will not fall under the purview of this paper since while the first two are set in the backdrop of colonial Kenya, *A Grain of Wheat*, which is Ngugi's third novel, is set against the last four days of colonial rule leading to the celebration of *Uhuru*

(independence), yet this novel can be taken as an ominous prophecy for the failure of the ideals of the freedom struggle and the future onslaught of neo-liberalism in Kenya. *A Grain of Wheat* raises apprehensions regarding how far the common people, who were the actual strugglers for freedom would be able to enjoy its fruits. There is an instance in the novel when a group of small farmers visits the local MP and request him of helping them to get a larger plot of land which can be jointly cultivated for better benefit. The MP assures them of their help and praises their spirit of *harambee*, but later it is revealed that he is the one who secretly transfers the rights of the lands to himself and the people are left empty-handed. This instance is an example of how power corrupts but it is equally important in presenting the helplessness of the small farmers and the poor people before the rich and the mighty.

With *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi's apprehension of the scramble over the resources of newly-independent Kenya and the struggle of the common people become the core of his writing. In *Petals of Blood* and later in *Devil on the Cross* (1987) he uses the Kenyan setting, while in *Matigari* (1990) and *The Wizard of the Crow* the setting is fictionalized. *Petals of Blood* is a strong novel which begins with a reference to a murder of three important personages in its opening page. The three persons, Chui, Mzigo and Kimeria were burnt to their death in a fire and the police suspect that it could have been a planned murder and not just an accident. These three persons held key positions in the town of New Ilmorog in terms of administration and economics. With the progress in narration, their stories and that of the experiences of the other characters are revealed which reveal several issues consequent upon the misappropriation of the economic resources in the hands of the undeserving few, including many had earlier collaborated with the former colonial regime to control and exploit their own people. *Petals of Blood* presents the sad picture of how the actual freedom fighters like Abdullah have to scamper for a living while those who had never turned a brick during the days of the struggle keep on growing from rich to richer. The lack of employment

opportunities is reflected in the increased numbers of beggars and prostitutes in the country and the development of an educational system which neither allows the poor to come out of their poverty nor rise to higher positions of power. The inequality in the distribution of national wealth and its concentration in the hands of the undeserving few become the root cause for the large-scale suffering of the poor and the underprivileged. In the novel, Ngugi has shown how the hopes of *Uhuru* are dashed and the spirit of *Harambee* has turned into a myth in independent Kenya. Interestingly, the ones who are responsible for this dashing of hopes are the ones who patent the small production rights of the community through legalized means and rob the people of even their small means of livelihood; as instanced in the patenting of the liquor *Theng'eta*. This patenting drives several small brewers out of business and the mass-produced *Theng'eta* in modernized distilleries lacks the heady aroma and effect of the traditionally brewed drink. Also, the rituals associated with the brewing and drinking of this drink is also lost. As such, the tactic to mass-market this ritualistic drink affects the social and economic fabric of the society. Similarly, the rise in prostitution in New Ilmorog is reflected in the fact that the female protagonist runs a brothel and she herself had been a prostitute earlier.

The ill-effects of neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism that Ngugi presents in *Petals of Blood* continue through his later novels. In his next novel, *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi presents two sides of independent Kenya. On one hand, he shows the unemployment, the exploitation and the desperation of the common people, and on the other hand, he shows the lavish lifestyle of the affluent. In this novel, he uses the art of caricaturing as a tool to attack the evils born out of free economy under the guise of international capitalism. He heightens the effect of the ridiculous in naming the contestants in the competition to become the master of thieves and robbers. This competition, which includes contestants from almost all technically and economically advanced countries of the world, serves as a reflection of how the developed nations prey upon their weaker

counterparts and rob them of their wealth and resources. The height of the ridiculous is attained when one of the contestants proposes to sell land in small containers and packets so that all the people can claim to own land of their own. Another contestant proposes to sell even air in packets so that people would be forced to buy air to stay alive. These proposals are turned down because of fear that they may lead to a revolution by the masses. The point to be noted here is the extent to which the multinational companies and the international trading houses, in collaboration with some of the native people, can go to exploit national resources.

However, Ngugi does not leave the picture all bleak and hopeless. The competition is disrupted and the contestants are arrested with the help of the workers and the people who surround the place with the police. This intervention of the workers and the common people to bring down the criminals is a reflection of the hope that Ngugi had held for long in the restoration of social and economic equilibrium through a revolt by the workers and the peasants. It may be noted here that in many aspects Ngugi exhibits Marxist inclinations and hence his writings are marked by a direct confrontation between capitalism and Marxism. His Marxist inclination and his firm insistence on a revolt as the only solution to the evils spawning from neo-liberal economic policies is more pronounced in his two later novels – *Matigari* and *Wizard of the Crow*.

In his sixth novel, *Matigari*, Ngugi fictionalizes a character with the same name that is in search of Truth and Justice. Matigari has returned from the jungle after having heard that his country is now free. He has buried his weapons and come back to reclaim his house. But to his dismay he finds that truth and justice do not prevail in the land and that his house is now taken by Boy Junior, the son of his former master. Matigari is perceived as a threat and the repressive state apparatus is unleashed after him. He goes into a run with a prostitute whom he had rescued from the police and who had, in turn, rescued him from prison. However, both of them are wounded during police-firing and are swept away by the river. The reader is not sure whether Matigari is dead or alive but his

struggle is taken over by a young boy, Muriuki, who digs out the weapons buried by Matigari and wears them. The novel ends with the message that the struggle of the people has not ended and the dreams of independence have taken a backseat in a nation where authority rests in the hands of persons like Boy Junior. *Matigari* presents the confrontation between the real producers of wealth and the ones who misappropriate them. Because of the concentration of power in limited hands, the country has now become a place where

The builder sleeps in the open,
The worker is left empty-handed,
The tailor goes naked,
And the tiller goes to sleep on an empty stomach (Ngugi, *Matigari* 98).

The opposition or the conflict between the state-machinery and the protagonist can be interpreted as a direct conflict between neo-colonial power and the power of the people symbolized by the forest fighters during the days of anti-colonial struggle in Kenya and later by persons like Matigari who are the seekers of truth and justice in the context of independent Kenya. The fact that Matigari is an ex-forest fighter also points towards such interpretation. However, given the context of independent Kenya, the struggle between these two forces is the symbolic need to continue the struggle against all forms of oppression and exploitation. The crux of the novel lies in the following lines:

I will not produce food
For him-who-reaps-where-he-never-sowed
to feed on it.
While I go to sleep on an empty belly.
I will not build a house
For-him-who-reaps-where-he-never-sowed
to sleep in it
While I sleep in the open.
...
I have refused to be like the cooking
pot Whose sole purpose is to cook and never
to eat! (Ngugi, *Matigari* 97-98)

There is also a dystopian touch about the manner in which *Matigari* presents a society where values have crumbled and where unemployment, poverty and prostitution have become the order of the day, thereby providing a critical contrast to the affluence of the few like Boy Junior.

Ngugi's seventh novel, *Wizard of the Crow*, carries forward the struggle of the people against a dystopian regime. The novel is narrated against the fictional setting of Aburiria where a supreme ruler, called the Ruler, controls everything with the help of his henchmen who are placed in the charge of all the important offices of control and intelligentsia. He maintains his power through fear and harbours the wish to accomplish something that will find him a place in history. So an unrealistic project of Marching to Heaven is undertaken and the Global Bank (which can be understood as a disguised name for the World Bank) is approached for a loan. The approach of the Bank diplomats towards money is interesting in terms of capitalist approach towards wealth and money:

They were Bank diplomats who had been trained to understand that money knew no religion, race, skin color, or gender; that money was the root of all money, the only constant law of the new global /order (Ngugi, *Wizard of the Crow* 497-8).

But the question remains whether such projects sanctioned under a unified global economic order would benefit the people of nations like Aburiria in any way? The remark may also be interpreted as a remark by the author that any political or economic order that places money above everything else will never be able to take care of the citizens like a welfare state. As a means of protest, there is a show of resistance by the people during the visit of the officials from the Global Bank and the loan is stayed. This unleashes a long series of dramatic events which finally culminate in the Ruler being replaced by one of his own men (the shrewd businessman Tajirika).

Wizard of the Crow also carries forward the problems associated with the neo-liberal economic order that the novelist had projected in his earlier novels. The exploitation of the unemployed and the

needy continues and so does the vulnerability of women in the hand of rich male predators. The interview between Tajirika and Kamiti in the former's office during the initial part of the novel is an instance of how the unemployment scenario had led to the loss of bargaining power of labour. This novel too, through its projection of the underground Movement of the People led by Nyawira, develops on the author's firm belief in the power of the people to set things right in an exploitative and dystopian regime. However, Ngugi does not show the final success of the people's movement but ends the novel with a sign of hope and peace in the love of Kamiti and Nyawira for each other. The struggle of the people is a continuous process and there is no definite point in history when the desired objectives would be achieved and it will come to an end.

At the conclusion, it can be said that the three later novels of Ngugi wa Thiong'o written after *A Grain of Wheat* establish his critique of neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism. In order to achieve his goal, Ngugi uses the art of caricature and humour. He also sees the joint effort of the people, particularly of the workers and the peasants, as the only means out of the problems caused by the capitalist world economic order yet does not provide any guarantee that it will end all problems. Hence, these novels are statements of the need of the people to continue with their struggle against oppression and exploitation.

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