



Restoration and Resistance in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel *Petals of Blood*

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Abstract

The study investigates Ngugi wa Thiong'o's use of resistance as a method of literary representation in his rendition of postcoloniality. The study investigates the various elements of tragedy used in his selected novels; the use of tragedy in the representation of thematic concerns in this novel and the use of the tragic form as an expression of Thiong'o's postcolonial vision in the selected novel. With close analysis of key novelistic features such as narrative plot and structure, representation, characterisation, motifs, and point of narration, the study interrogates how wa Thiong'o uses tragedy not only as a means of evaluating the different causes of tragic conflicts but also as a means of proposing avenues for entrenching both ideological and a literary discourse in response to these tragic conflicts.

Keywords: resistance, rendition, exploitation, capitalism.

The rendition of the postcolonial social and historical imbalances through the prism of tragic heroines in *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* is a significant literary and ideological choice. The narrative focuses on commoditisation of human values, and encourages the destruction of those structures that breed social and economic inequalities in postcolonial society. The novel highlights the evils of an aggressively exploitative patriarchal socio-economic ordering and interrogate the ideological avenues that may be used to remedy the inequalities. The use of tragic irony in the narratives concretises the portrayal of the discourse of gendered inequalities, and demonstrates the viciousness of the exploitative capitalism. Furthermore, by utilising the tragic form, the narratives demonstrate the ideological underpinnings that must inform the quest for social, historical and economic justice in the postcolonial context.

In *Petals of Blood*, the interrogation of the social order is hinged on Wanja, the pivotal point of the narrative. She allegorises the conscience of the community in the changing phases of conquest, exploitation and rediscovery. Wanja symbolises nature or the natural order of things that capitalistic instincts seek to possess, conquer and subjugate. She is the embodiment of social and historical conflicts and contradictions that structure the expressive discourse at the heart of the narrative. The novel builds on the imagery of gendered variances to expound on the discourse of exploitation, and to contrast male and female perspectives on the existent inequalities in the postcolonial nation-state.

Quite early in the narrative, we are confronted with the metaphor of exploitation when Munira, having taken his students out in the field, encounters a worm eaten flower. In his explanation to the curious children, he states that such a flower "cannot bear fruit" and consequently urges the students to "always kill worms" (22). The expressive discourse intimated



through this encounter between Munira and what he fearfully explains as “a law of nature” (22) concatenate many of the relationships that function as social units in the exposition of the thematic concerns in the novel. These relationships revolve around the exploitative elite, and the peasants, who, like “the worm-eaten flower” (22), are socially and materially deprived.

Consequently, *Petals of Blood* is the narration of a community’s effort aimed at creating a philosophy that may avail to it a means of repudiating neocolonialism. Ilmorog, a microcosm of the neocolonial society, is a community struggling to cascade individual experiences to form a collective social history and a sense of identity. The fact that all the key characters, as they come to Ilmorog, arrive from a point of displacement or dispossession, is significant in reading the novel’s perception of history and its influence on the conscience of the neocolonial society. For instance, all the key characters do not have functional family units or even fruitful relationships, and the only meaningful social entity they can identify with is the Ilmorog community. Wanja brings to Ilmorog the burden of neocolonial dispossession of the peasant by the heirs of oppressive colonial structures; Abdulla is crippled in the struggle for independence; Munira has his dreams of academic excellence truncated at Siriana; while Karega is dismissed from school and has his hopes similarly thwarted by an intolerant colonial educational system.

At Ilmorog, the villagers seek a new order and a revival of their inner hopes, and in a way a redefinition of their social history with the wisdom of their personal and collective experiences. In this way, *Petals of Blood* adheres to the tenets of postcolonial literature in what Mullaney refers to as the interrogation of “the relationship between history, memory and place” (41). The experiences that have brought the inhabitants of Ilmorog to the village are formative units in the novel’s attempt to relay important social and historical experiences relevant to the interpretation of the discourse of power relations and postcolonial dispossession. Although the narrative articulates its evaluation of social philosophy through the intricate relationship between the characters, it is Wanja who functions as the pillar of the discourse due to the novel’s depiction of her as the bearer of the motifs of dispossession, resistance and restoration.

Wanja’s contribution in the articulation of the collective desires of the Ilmorog community is hinged on the community’s sojourn to the city in pursuit of a remedy for their collective problems. Historically, her participation in the trek to the city is founded on the conquests of Ndemi, the “best magician in words,” and the founder of Ilmorog, who was “tired of merely adapting to nature and its changing fortune” (120). This linkage to the past historical exploits of the community serves as an ideological invitation to the villagers to perceive their tribulations as “a community crisis needing a communal response” (123). The journey, as a narrative metaphor, integrates the personal experiences of the characters and their collective understanding of their history. It is through the events that characterise the villagers’ journey that the intrusive narrator



relates the confrontation between the past and the present, and most importantly, the community's encounter with the inhumane neocolonial social order.

The journey functions as an ideological turning point that alters Wanja's perspective on social and economic relationships when she returns to Ilmorog. The despair and the loss of trust in institutions breed transformative thinking in Wanja's approach to the tribulations of the community, and she urges them "not to kneel down to sorrow and to despair" (257). Through her determination, she identifies an ideological and social response to the struggles of her community, by turning to capitalistic tendencies that seem to resolve the despair of the community. She establishes herself as a "famed proprietor [. . .] aloof, distant, condescending, willing, and commanding things to happen" (270). This transformation is indicative of the possible reactions that an inhumane and exploitative social order may precipitate, and within the context of her role as the normative hero for social resistance against neocolonial social and historical injustice, an indication of the tragic consequences of neocolonial dispossession.

Furthermore, the community's awareness of the "rainbow memories of gain and loss, triumph and failure [. . .] suffering and knowledge" (123) necessitates a new mode of resistance. The parodying of neocolonial hegemony and the subversion of genuine precolonial sense of communalism serves as a demonstration of Wanja's acute awareness of the limitation of choice, and offers her "an instrument of retribution" (Cook and Okenimkpe 92). The changing social and historical landscape is best demonstrated through Wanja's transformation from an individual searching for self regeneration and "a new flowering of self" (107), which is to be achieved through purposive redirection of her energies to honest and productive labour at Ilmorog. However, the arrival of the Trans-Africa highway portends changes in the social thinking of the Ilmorog community, and disrupts social and individual hopes and desires. The town's transformation "from a deserted village into a sprawling town of stone, iron, concrete and glass" (263), depicts the disintegration of the cohesive social values that have hitherto informed social and economic interactions in the community, where "nothing was for free" (280). Wanja attributes the changes to the fact that "this world . . . this Kenya . . . this Africa knows only one law. You eat somebody or you are eaten. You sit on somebody or somebody sits on you" (291).

The novel uses social transformation as a means of interrogating the tragic effects of modern capitalism. This approach agrees with Newton's attribution of the tragic with "the Dionysian or the darkness that has to be embraced even if the result may be destructive at both the individual and cultural level" (124). The tragic in this way decries the destruction of individuality and awareness as a means of condemning the social forces that bring about this destruction. These are the forces that impede Wanja's dreams of self regeneration and instead of



her expected “new flowering of self” (107), she is, like Munira’s flower, she turns into “a worm-eaten flower . . . [which] cannot bear fruit” (22).

Tragic discourse, as employed in *Petals of Blood*, deconstructs the emergent capitalistic aggressiveness, and illustrates the fact that the best of human intentions have failed to reconcile social and economic conflicts. This has resulted in the tragic disintegration of desirable social structures and values precipitating what can be best referred to as a tragic moral impasse. This is partly demonstrated in the way Wanja rationalises her “irrevocable and final entry into whoredom” (311), which to her is merely a response to the demands of changing social and historical circumstances.

Stuart Hall attributes transformations in postcolonial identities to the fact that these identities “have histories [. . . and] like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation [. . .] subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power” (98). The impossibility of holding on to the essentialised past of Ilmorog where there were solid social bonds and interconnected perception of destiny is the basis for the tragic endings that most of the cultural and historical values of this community have to endure. This is best expressed in Munira’s pain as he contemplates “the growth of Ilmorog from its beginnings in rain and drought to the present flowering in petals of blood” (45), which translate to a condemnation of the external neocolonial forces and a purgation of the community’s spirit. Modernisation of Ilmorog results in “murder of the spirit” (45) and demonstrates the tragic “irony of progress” (Gikandi 137), which dispossesses the community its valued social structures and a common understanding of their history, identity and destiny.

The artistic castigation of materialistic modernisation and the insatiable desire for capitalistic conquest concretises the novel’s ideological thrust. In this way, the novel functions to demonstrate what Evan Mwangi views as the use of art “as not only a means by which we understand our circumstances and narrate ourselves into existence but [also as] a reflection of the concrete conditions around us” (67). Literary discourse, as in Mwangi’s observation on the social value of artistic expression, offers readers an opportunity to evaluate the actions and desires of characters in concrete social and historical circumstances.

In *Petals of Blood*, the narration of the misfortunes of the community as it collides with the unsolicited interruption of their social structure by imperialistic desires, elicits our “humanistic solidarity with either the individual/aggregate elements in a society, or the entire society, that suffer the tragic misfortune” (Korang 13). The novel further demonstrates, according to Patrick Williams, that “human relations are there to be fought for and [to be] constructed” (81). It is only through such an effort that the neocolonial society may be able to



confront colonial legacies in the name of capitalism, neocolonialism, individualism and inhumane industrialisation.

Furthermore, *Petals of Blood* makes explicit attempts to entice the reader to accept the historical perspective offered by the narrative. This is on the one hand makes readers empathise with misfortunes of the tragic characters, their community or even their social class, and on the other hand to provide a solid background for accurate reading of the narrative's thematic concerns. The enunciation of historical imperatives underlying the narrative is mainly achieved by the naming of characters, both fictional and historical figures. According to Carol Sicherman, such utilisation is intended "to make Kenyan readers reflect on their own place in the continuum of history" (303). Additionally, such reflection as Sicherman refers to is significant in enhancing the acceptance of the novel's discourse on social and historical truths.

The importance of history, past and present, is accentuated by Wanja's sketch that blurs the historical distance between Abdulla and Kimathi, and the difference between the emotions of suffering and happiness. In this way, the narrative celebrates hope as enshrined in the community's awareness of its historical context, and underscores the need for sacrifice in the struggle for freedom and social justice. Furthermore, Wanja's conception of Abdulla's child signifies a continuation of hope and struggle for a more just society. In this way, the novel uses the tragic rendition of the community's encounter with imperialism as a means of asserting the need and desire for social and historical justice in the postcolonial context.

However, as the narrative demonstrates, such justice can only be achieved if the masses become conscientised on the fact of social and economic class inequalities, and become therefore aware of the factors that have abetted this form of stratification. It is for this reason that the novel engages in a revisionist collocation of colonial and postcolonial history. By using characters such as Nyakinyua and Abdulla, the narrative uses the Mau Mau freedom struggle as a point for historical and ideological reference. This fact is punctuated by Wanja's sketch that artistically emphasizes that the past and the present must merge as a single force while confronting neocolonial capitalism.

References

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