

Yearning for Paradise: Postcolonial Ecocritical Perspective in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*

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Abstract

Using the conceptual framework of postcolonial ecocriticism, this paper attempts to find intersection between social and ecological issues in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel *Petals of Blood*. Using the concept of 'slow violence' propounded by Rob Nixon, it seeks to illustrate the long-term impact of reckless exploitation of nature. This impact is not confined to the environment alone; it impacts the way of life of the people proximal to it, often in unanticipated ways. The paper lauds Ngugi's call for the creation of a hybrid space that facilitates sustainable development.

Keywords: *Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Slow Violence, Social Justice and Ecological Justice.*

Human beings are sustained and nourished by nature and they owe their very existence to it. However, their attitudes and interaction with nature are largely shaped and conditioned by their culture. Indians, American Indians and Africans have had a reverential attitude towards nature. The advent of colonialism however, saw this reverence of nature supplanted by a dominant western worldview underpinned by a Judeo-Christian belief system that viewed the existence of nature as being solely for the use of mankind. Hence, during colonial rule, the environment of the colonized was ravaged and exploited to meet the colonizers' greed and nature was as much a victim as the colonized people were.

Postcolonialism as a school of thought focuses on the impact of colonialism on the colonized but its focus has primarily been on the social and cultural aspects. Critical studies of works falling in the ambit of postcolonialism from an environmental viewpoint have been far and few between. Fortunately, the development of ecocriticism has provided the desired focus and rigor needed to critically examine literary works from an ecological point of view. That said however, ecocriticism in its nascent stages has been parochial with its focus primarily on American writers, leaving the works of writers belonging to colonized countries boxed in postcolonial studies. As Professor Rob Nixon points out, while both postcolonialism and environmental studies possess an activist dimension "yet a broad silence has characterized environmentalists' stance toward postcolonial literature and theory while postcolonial critics

have typically been no less silent on the subject of environmental literature” (233). He attributes estrangement between them to four major differences in their dominant viewpoints. Firstly, while postcolonialism’s pivot is hybridity, ecocriticism’s point of concern is purity, wilderness. Secondly, postcolonialism focuses on displacement while ecocriticism prioritizes place. Thirdly, postcolonialism favors transnationalism in sharp contrast to ecocriticism which has developed within the narrow precincts of America. Fourthly, postcolonialism has devoted considerable efforts in excavating the marginalized past which ecocriticism has buried in its pursuit of timeless nature. It has done so through the erasure of history of the dispossessed colonized by viewing their landscapes as uninhabited lands. Both thought systems, however, have managed to bridge their differences through the framework of postcolonial ecocriticism.

Over 80% of the world mass had been colonized and the consequences of colonization are being felt to this day. The long history of colonialism has been interpreted primarily from an anthropocentric viewpoint. It must be noted however, that colonialism also impacted the environment and hence it has an ecological dimension associated with it. Postcolonial theorist Helen Tiffin trenchantly observes:

Destruction of wildlife and wildlife habitats frequently deprived invaded human communities of their primary means of subsistence, while their ‘resources’ were exploited for imperial profit. The importation of sheep and cattle, cash-cropping and other European agri-practices replaced local hunting and gathering or systems of crop rotation, thereby damaging established ecosystems, reducing soil fertility, and even, as in the case of African settlements south of the Sahara, causing famine through desertification. (xii)

Postcolonial ecocriticism draws upon the critical methodologies of both frameworks and focuses upon the ramifications of colonialism on both the colonized and their environment not only during the colonial rule, but also in the neo-colonial era. It focuses on the interrelation between social justice and ecological justice. The impact of human actions on the environment could be long term or immediate. Conversely, any impact on the environment can have profound short term and long term socioeconomic effects on the people in close proximity to it. Rob Nixon calls the long term impact ‘slow violence’ (2). He describes it as:

Violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not

viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. (2)

This paper attempts to examine Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel *Petals of Blood* from the point of view of postcolonial ecocriticism. It seeks to make the important point that human lives are inextricably linked to the environment around them and espouses the cause of sustainable development.

The novel revolves around the transformation of a remote Kenyan village Illmorog for the worse, when the villagers seek help from the government to tide over the drought that hits the village. It has Munira, a school teacher, Abdulla, a shopkeeper and an erstwhile Mau Mau fighter, Wanja, a barmaid and Karega who can be considered Ngugi's socialist voice, as its principal characters. David Cook and Okenimkpe describe the novel as

The first of Ngugi's novels which is fairly and squarely about independent Kenya. It is an expose of the nature of capitalism, of the insensitivity, callousness and insatiable ambition of those who control vested interests in order to gain power and wealth, impoverishing the underprivileged, imposing misery and suffering upon the majority. (90)

The novel is a good example of the intersection of postcolonialism and ecocriticism. It weaves the exploitation of African people together with that of the environment. Ngugi makes the perspicacious observation that ideology shapes attitude towards the environment. Ideology centred on individualism and greed invariably leads to the abuse and exploitation of the environment while ideology celebrating communality and contentment is more amenable to a harmonious relationship with the environment. This is exemplified in the novel through the myth of Ndemi, whom the Africans venerate as their progenitor. Ndemi is believed to have transformed them from being nomads to becoming an agrarian community by clearing forests for cultivation, breeding livestock and putting in place a set of beliefs and a value system for his descendants to follow. His skill at cultivating land, his survival instincts and his knowledge of the medicinal value of herbs and the bark of trees evoke their awe and respect to this day. One of the key values instilled in the African farmer was that he would never cling to land with a desire

to possess. Africans farmers would move on to a different tract of land if the one they were on lost its vitality, allowing it time to revitalize. This sentiment is echoed in the words of Karega, one of the protagonists in the novel.

Why anyway, should soil, which after all was what was Kenya, be owned by an individual? Kenya, the soil, was the people's common *shamba*, and there was no way it could be right for a few, a section, or a single nationality, to inherit for their sole use what was communal any more than it would be right for a few sons and daughters to own and monopolize their father or mother. . . (359)

The advent of colonialism saw the British, with their capitalist ideology, take control of Kenya. British settlers snatched land away from the Kenyans and forced them to become squatters on their own lands working for their new masters for a pittance. In his non-fictional work, *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* Ngugi describes this thus: “land is taken away from its owner, and the owner is turned into a worker on the same land, thus losing control of his natural and human resources” (6). In the same book, he further unravels the deception behind the rationale offered for colonization thus:

When Europe contemplated Africa through the prism of its bourgeois desire to conquer and dominate; it saw nothing but uninhabited lands. A uniform rationale for European settlements in Kenya, Zimbabwe, and South Africa was that the land was empty of human beings. Where inhabited, it was by hordes of savages virtually indistinguishable from nature- an integral part of the gloom that Conrad depicted in *Heart of Darkness*, contact with which could cause a fairly enlightened Europeans to degenerate into primitivity. (22)

Upon taking control of Kenya, the British demarcated land into areas reserved for themselves and imposed taxes on the local population – a double whammy for the Kenyans. The land they reserved for themselves were the most fertile tracts. They progressively started acquiring more land for cultivation pushing the Kenyans deeper into poverty; an act illustrative of environmental racism. Race, in this case, was the determinant of what one could partake of nature’s offerings. The socioeconomic impact of colonialism also had a gender angle to it. In Kenyan society, every woman was allowed to cultivate land and she was responsible for her produce. After reserving enough food for herself and for her family, she could sell the rest for whatever amount she thought fit. With many men turning squatters on their own land, now owned by the British, they started demanding a say in how their wives sold their produce. This

caused discord in several families. In the novel, the protagonist Karega's mother separates from his father after a tiff with him on the disposal of her produce. This has a close parallel in Ngugi's own life as well. As Ngugi describes in his memoir *Dreams in the Time of War: A Childhood Memoir*, his father, upon losing his land and livestock to an unknown disease and consequently losing his wealth, laid claim to his mother's harvest which she outright rejected. Ngugi's mother's refusal to part with the proceeds of the cultivation of her own land led to a showdown between his parents and they separated never to be united again.

The demands of modernization took their toll on nature. Forests were felled to make way for railways and provide fuel to train engines. In *Petals of Blood*, Muri, an elderly Illmorogian sadly observes:

The land was also covered with forests. The trees called rain. They also cast a shadow on the land. But the forest was eaten by the railway. You remember they used to come for wood as far as here- to feed the iron thing. Aah, they only knew how to eat, how to take away everything. But these foreigners- white people. (99)

Capitalist greed also played its part with forests being felled to grow commercially viable crops like pyrethrum. In the novel, Munira's father Ezekiel, a collaborator of the British, who is shown to exploit Kenyans working on his farms for his personal gain, grows pyrethrum on his lands. Ngugi also makes mention of this in his memoir *Dreams in the Time of War: A Childhood Memoir*. He describes how the forest near his father's land was progressively depleted to make way for pyrethrum plantations:

I was aware of trees being cut down, leaving only stumps, soil being dug up, followed by pyrethrum planting. It was strange to see the forest retreating as the pyrethrum fields advanced. More remarkable, my sisters and brothers were working seasonally in the new pyrethrum fields that had eaten up our forest, where before they had worked only across the rails in the European-owned tea plantations. (11)

Ngugi goes on to show that the colonizers' materialistic approach towards land and its treatment as a conquest more than as a life supporting natural resource that needed to be nurtured, resulted in it losing its potency. Munira in *Petals of Blood* says, "Our erstwhile masters had left us a very unevenly cultivated land: the centre was swollen with fruit and water sucked from the rest, while

the outer parts were progressively weaker and scraggier as one moved away from the centre” (58).

Thus, the ‘slow violence’ perpetrated against nature and against the Kenyan people during colonialism left a lasting impact on the country. The British left behind unevenly cultivated lands, lands deprived of their vitality and depleted forests in their wake. Depleted forests, in turn, caused deficient rain, leading frequent crop failure, a counter-hegemonic reaction by nature to reckless exploitation. The society was left deeply stratified as well, with classes that had aligned themselves with the British becoming significantly wealthier and more influential than the rest. The socioeconomic ramifications of these deep cleavages were felt long after the demise of colonialism. The ruling bourgeoisie believed in charting the course of their erstwhile masters, according greater importance to industrialization than to agriculture, which led to unplanned urbanization and a large-scale exodus of the young population out of the countryside. The eco-centric African worldview was replaced with the anthropocentric colonial viewpoint. In the novel, the son of Njuguna, one of the village elders, laments thus:

I have worked on this land for a year. My nails are broken. But lookat the yield. It mocks the strength in these arms. Tell me father, when the tax gatherer comes round, what shall I give him? When I go to Ruwa-ini and I see nice clothes, where shall I get the coins to give the shopkeeper? I must go to the big city and try my future there: like my other brothers. (99)

Through the character of Njuguna, Ngugi also makes a pertinent point with regard to the breakdown of the social unit that was the family. During colonial times, when industrialization had created urban centers providing opportunities for work, people would travel to the cities and work hard not only for their subsistence, but also to pay the taxes imposed upon them. They would, however, always return home at the end of the day to their families, as part of their families would also be toiling hard on lands back home. In neo-colonial times, however, with land losing its vitality, frequent crop failures due to droughts and an apathetic government, the cities weaned off young men from rural areas permanently. Consequently, their ties with their families weakened which, in the long run, weakened the close knit society that Kenya was in pre-colonial times. Njuguna wonders wistfully:

I don't understand young men these days. In our time we were compelled to work for these oppressing Foreigners. And even then, after earning enough to pay taxes or fines, we would run back to our *shambas*. Now take my sons... I don't even know where they are. One went to work in Nairobi, another in Kisumu, another in Mombasa, and they hardly ever come back Only one, occasionally comes back to see his wife Wambui, and even he hardly stays for a day. (98)

Ngugi provides an example of the perpetuation of the colonial mindset and the tight coupling between the environment and socioeconomic effects of human actions in neo-colonial times through the central plot of the novel itself. When Illmorog is hit by a drought, thanks to the effect of 'slow- violence', the villagers meet their elected representative Nderi wa Riera in the city to seek his help. He uses this as an opportunity to usher in development that does more harm than good and exacerbates the poor plight of the villagers. In the name of development, there is mismanagement of resources leading to exploitation and environmental degradation. The villagers are coaxed into giving up their lands and into borrowing loans that pushes them deeper into the precipice they already were in. The landscape of Illmorog is restructured for economic profitability. Agricultural lands are converted to plots, transforming the village into a concrete jungle. This, in turn, deepens poverty as many small time peasants lose their source of livelihood and the herdsmen are deprived of their grazing rights, forcing them to work as laborers. "The demarcation and the fencing off land had deprived a lot of tillers and herdsmen of their hitherto unquestioned rights of use and cultivation. Now they were hiring themselves out to any who needed their labour for a wage" (324). In an ostensible bid to generate livelihood through tourism, a tourist cultural village is set up by government authorities spawning an elite culture of leisure. It is, in actuality, used as a cover for the smuggling of precious stones, ivory tusks and animal skins; another form of plunder of natural resources. Another interesting illustration of capitalist greed, akin to that of pyrethrum cultivation that Ngugi provides is the mass production of the traditional African drink called '*theng'eta*.'(321). A potent intoxicant, this drink is brewed from a plant and consumed during special ceremonies such as circumcision, marriage, *itwika*, and after a harvest. The colonizers, fearing the loss of inhibition after consumption that this drink induced, banned the cultivation of this plant. Consequently, the knowledge of its preparation got restricted to the older generation. In the novel, Wanja, one of the protagonists, learns the method

of preparing the drink from her grandmother and runs a business making the drink for villagers. She sells the land on which she runs the business to an Anglo-American company. This company, named ‘*Theng’eta Breweries*,’ (333) mass produces the drink and prevents her from making it claiming that she forfeited her right to make the drink when she sold her land and the building on it to them. This is what Canadian activist Pat Mooney calls ‘biopiracy’ (qtd in. Mgbeoji 12) – the unethical and unauthorized usage of indigenous, local knowledge and their resources without adequate compensation paid for them.

In summary, Ngugi laments the present day detrimental effects of the slow violence perpetrated during colonial times by the British. He points to the ideological shift in Kenyan society that took place in the wake of the end of colonialism, especially among the neo-colonial ruling elite with commoditization and the pursuit of wealth being celebrated and accorded greater importance than communality, harmony and contentment. ‘Slow violence’, therefore, was merely passed on to the local elite and not reversed. While Ngugi acknowledges the need for Africa to modernize in order to benefit from mankind’s achievements, he wants modernization to not take a toll on humanity and the environment. He, thus, calls for the creation of a hybrid space that facilitates sustainable development. For this, in his opinion, Africa would need to walk the path of modernization guided by the values enshrined in its history and reflected in its culture. That way, it would become possible to “end all droughts from our earth” (137).

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