

Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the Frontiers of Feminism in African Literature

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Abstract

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, playwright, novelist, critic and political activist, is the most prolific and successful creative writer East Africa has up to date. However he is best known as a novelist, and in each of his six novels Kenyan women play a significant role. He has consistently explored their roles in the traditional African society and followed their exploits in the political and historical emergence of Kenya from an agricultural community to an independent capitalistic society where graft, exploitation and corruption have also led to disillusionment and bitterness on the part of the men and women whose sacrifice gave birth to Kenyan independence. His women characters are very politically aware. They are resilient, resourceful and adaptable and always conscious of their identity.

This paper explores and analyses the predicament of the heroine, Muthoni, in *The River Between*, Ngugi's second novel, where she makes a decision with far reaching social, emotional, religious and political implications and loses her life in the process. That such a sacrifice is centred on the complex issue of female circumcision is problematic for Western feminist activists like Tobe Levin who tend to ignore the supreme fact that to the "initiated" circumcision is a source of identity and cultural integrity. That critics must therefore respect that fact is part of the argument of this piece.

The paper therefore contextualises this critical question and in the process assesses Ngugi's position as a foremost upholder of feminist ideals in African literature.

One of the profoundest critical statements ever made about the phenomenon of feminism in African Literature appears in the last paragraph of a long article on Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (1965):

Perhaps the value of Ngugi's work for feminists lies here, in his dialectic vision of women in revolt. Often in the face of crushing odds, his heroines survive. They are active, intelligent, courageous, defiant. **Even** (emphasis mine) Muthoni, in *The River Between*, rebels, a rebellion misdirected but of great symbolic import. For her choice is both right and wrong. It is right to defy the father's law; it is wrong to choose clitoridectomy. Her act does not allow of simplistic interpretations. Yet the activist is tempted to oversimplify. Excision is a crime, mutilation an atrocity. Those "rites" should be stopped. Yes. But how? Not merely by demanding that they cease, but also by understanding why they happen. *The River Between* takes a step in this direction, for understanding precedes change¹.

I have underlined the qualifier "even" used in Muthoni's case by the author who goes even further to state that "the difficulty with Ngugi's handling of the theme may be traced to his lack of feminist insight at that time (1965) into the unconscious motivation of males who support initiations for women" (p.216). Not surprisingly Tobe Levin focuses on the much debated Kikuyu practice of female circumcision which is the central theme of the novel, and within which she adopts an uncompromising position. Levin accepts that Ngugi's novels demonstrate a dialectic vision of women in revolt, in which "even Muthoni...rebels." Obviously that praise is grudgingly given to the heroine and automatically defines the author's attitude towards the life and death choice she had to make. The typical Western activist would normally have preferred a total rejection of this traditional rite and complete severance of relationship with her father. Regardless of this posture the intricacies and complexities of the situation dictate that a far reaching choice of that sort, a singular break with an ancient cultural practice by a young girl, deserves more than the patronising word, "even." As a matter of fact it is conceivable that Muthoni's choice is the most revolutionary any Ngugi heroine ever had to make. For one thing she loses her life in the conflict: To Judith Cochrane's suggestion that:

... Muthoni's act of rebellion in forsaking the home of her Christianized father in order to participate fully in the rites and ceremonies of the tribe is a personal act of courage².

Levin responds in a typical way:

Certainly, this may be true, yet Muthoni's desire to escape the stultifying lovelessness of her father's faith serves better to expose Christian sexual hypocrisy than does it support initiation. After all she dies as a result of circumcision, her mission a failure ... Doubly alienated, her attempt to achieve wholeness through mutilation, to reconcile the tribe with Christianity, cannot bear fruit³.

To reduce the heroine's struggle to simply "an attempt to achieve wholeness through mutilation" is the type of simplistic statement which often demonstrates the repeated inability or unwillingness of some female activists to contextualise events and decisions within the tradition that produced them and to reduce all human motivation and action which impact on women's lives to a tool of feminist protest. Tradition, like any human phenomenon, can be abused, and has been in all societies. In spite of that activists must learn to enter the value system of the "circumcised." For Muthoni's action has deep physical, cultural, psychological and emotional implications. That is the angle from which Ngugi has explored the lives of women in all his novels. He is not usually out to isolate the problems of women, but within the same context he realistically and sensitively highlights their particular problems as major aspects of the problems of the whole society. His vision is therefore not dialectic in the sense of his women characters growing more rebellious with time, but rather developmental, in the sense of exploring their personalities and strengths as they respond to the changing societal and personal challenges they have to face, as their societies evolve.

Ngugi said at an interview on Devil on the Cross (1982):

Because women are the most exploited and oppressed section of the entire working class, I would create a picture of a strong determined woman with a will to resist and struggle against conditions of her present being . Wariinga will be the fictional representation of this heroine of Kenyan history. Wariinga, heroine of toil....⁴

Wariinga is not the first but one of the later of such heroines in Ngugi's works. His works are dominated by a string of realistically portrayed women beginning with the youthful heroines of *Weep not Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965). Nor should this characteristic of portraying socially and politically aware female characters come as a surprise in the works of the best novelist East Africa has known; since the whole East African literary tradition is typified by its social focus, and by a consciousness of the function of literature in the African environment. In that order women's contributions in the past and

present remain a central preoccupation. This abiding awareness of the social function of literature which is the hallmark of East African literature has produced not only Ngugi's catalogue of brave and resourceful women but also Okot p'Bitek's *Lawino* (Song of Lawino, 1966) and Okello Oculi's *Rosa*. (Prostitute, 1968). To this list can be added Ngugi's Nwihaki, Muthoni, Nyambura, Mumbi, Wambuku, Wanja, Nyakinyua and Wariinga. These women are integral parts of Ngugi's dominant theme of the progressive reenactment of the historical passage of Kenya from colonial rule to independence and after, with colonialism serving as the catalyst in which personal decisions, cultural changes and family rifts are automatically foregrounded. That each of his novels takes cognizance of their personal and societal choices is a conscious political act which places him at the earliest frontiers of feminism in African literature. In their experiences, utterances, predicaments and choices; from the village of Makuyu and Kameno; from Ilmorog to Nairobi they struggle as daughters lovers, fiancées, wives, warriors, grandmothers, prostitutes, business women, rape victims, engineers and murderers; in war at home and at the work place; but never as insignificant members of the society or victims that celebrate their own weakness. Ngugi proves that the belief that men cannot successfully enter a women's world is more fallacy than fact. His sensitivity to gender-specific issues will be fully explored in this paper, for even within the context of struggles for national liberation he recognises the inequities under which women function. It was he who after all described women as:

... the most exploited and oppressed section of the entire working class, "exploited as workers and at home, and also by backward elements in the cultural remnants of feudalism."⁵

But Ngugi dwells equally on their strengths and weaknesses. He makes the courageous leap which presents them as fighters and crowns their efforts with dignity, understanding and compassion, which is ultimately the best way to challenge the traditional social and political enemies of women, be they human or institutional, a service which several women writers have proved incapable of rendering. The irony of the following passage clinches this point, when Carole Boyce Davies writes:

For women writers the "woman as victim" character performs a political function, directly simulating empathetic identification in the readers and in a sense challenging them to change. Nnu Ego in Emecheta's **The Joys of Motherhood** is the best example. it is such an excellent example of the undesirable "long-suffering" character presented by a woman writer to make a statement on the depths to which women's lives can descend. A positive image,

then, is one that is in tune with African historical realities and does not stereotype or limit women into postures of dependence or submergence. Instead it searches for more accurate portrayals and ones which suggest the possibility of transcendence. Writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ousmane Sembene have demonstrated this possibility in their creation of characters like Wariinga and N'Deye Touti⁶.

Ngugi's feminist consciousness spans the whole life cycle of women, running from their childhood, adolescence, maturity to old age often using historical and cultural paradigms as raw materials for his ultimate journey into the interior, their joys and pains, disappointments, dreams realised and unrealised, errors of judgement, successes and failures and often seeing each stage as an essential step towards the character's growth into maturity and wholeness.

Weep Not Child was Ngugi's first attempt to enter a woman's world. Its theme can be summarised as the story of adolescent love dominated by a child hero, Njoroge. But Nwihika is a very crucial contributor to this mini social tragedy as well as a fellow sufferer in the complication hoisted on the society by Western civilization. The motif of treachery runs into the life of all the important characters in the form of allegiance to family, to one's emotions, to the tribe or to the new powerful administration to which Jacobo, Nwihika's father belongs, and for which he loses his life. Violence hovers like the sword of Damocles over the landscape and eventually pierces through the protected and affluent life of the heroine. That there is potential or real violence in all Ngugi's novels is a testament of his belief in what one might call constructive violence:

Violence in order to change an intolerable, unjust social order is not savagery; it purifies man. Violence to protect and preserve an unjust oppressive social order is criminal and diminishes man. (Ngambika 143).

Nwihika is not spared the devastating reality of that violence. Her father is murdered shattering her whole world; her boy friend Njoroge is arrested and brutally tortured although Ime Ikiddeh summarises the emotion of the novel as "sloppy sentiment" (ALT. 1969, p. 7). Nwihika's life is therefore explored within the harsh context of politics and adolescent love and she emerges slightly more grown up. Only towards the end does she realize that Njoroge was not responsible for her father's death.

The adult lesson that Nwihika learns is that the fate of children, their individuality notwithstanding is inextricably bound to the unfolding of events from the past, even to the fate of their elders. She and Njoroge fear the effect of

their parents' enmity on their friendship. She is sensitive enough to notice the drastic changes in her father's character as the erstwhile extrovert, her protector gradually withdraws into himself. Outside the home, she is overwhelmed by fear and loneliness; because of her father's activities people avoid her, even girls of her own age. At that youthful age she realises that to be human is to meet the demands of both private and public commitments." (Yvonne Ochillo, 1993). The darkness and terror of the situation persist till the end of the novel leaving the reader with a feeling of disillusionment, in spite of the vague hope of the lovers.

The River Between explores similar topics; politics, religion, love, tribal allegiance all climaxing on the gender-specific issue of female circumcision as a reaffirmation of Kikuyu tribal heritage, a vital source of cultural integrity. To be specific:

Ngugi's narrative takes a similarly complex approach, disconcerting at first to hard line opponents of genital mutilation. The only fictional work I have found which elevates females circumcision to a position of central thematic importance, *The River Between* has the issue serve as battleground in the clash between conservative tribal elements and the patriarchal Christian church, a plot based on events of the nineteen twenties and thirties marked by growing nationalist sentiment in Kenya⁷.

Such an approach in no way diminishes from the sensitive political, sexual or causal dimensions of the topic. Rather it focuses on its religious and socio-cultural implications which prove to be far-reaching in their tragic consequences. Nor can it offer the one-dimensional feminist reductionist reading of the conflict as an instance of savage mutilation for the sake of reconciling Christianity and tribal obligation. Ngugi's treatment is much more mature, more complex because it recognises Muthoni, first as a human being whose life is automatically interwoven with that of her father, her sister, her boyfriend, the Kikuyu race and its ancient traditions; and with Christianity. She chooses and loses her life, but symbolically she has vindicated herself, her identity as a woman. When Muthoni tells Nyambura: "I see Jesus, and I am a woman beautiful in the tribe," she is celebrating a personal beatific vision bound up with the spirit of the race. It is an ambiguous existential statement. *The River Between* is a central symbol of this reality:

It is the site of the rites of passage that ensure the transition of the individual from one state of being to another; the place of transformation, encounter and exchange, its movement providing an image of both continuity and change, of history as a dynamic process of becoming in which past, present and future

intervene and blend. Conflict, contradiction and the possibility of the dialectical synthesis their existence presupposes are inscribed with in the topography of Kameno and Makuyu. (Jane Wilkinson)⁸.

Her courage in the face of family and societal opposition confirms the validity of that experience for her life and death. Marielouise Janseen - Jurrct therefore missed the mark when she interpreted such a metaphysical and feminist statement as simply implying "getting a husband and children to play around the hearth." (*Ngambika*, p. 213).

At the 1991 Canadian Association of African Studies Conference held at York University Toronto, a female professor, a doctorate degree holder who taught at a Teachers' College in Kenya began her paper by proudly declaring in her contribution to a discussion on female circumcision, that she was a circumcised Kikuyu woman and would not have it any other way. This should convince critics, feminist and otherwise that for such intricate cultural practices, propped up by years of intimidation and indoctrination only the circumcised can fully understand and enter the meaning of Muthoni's dying words. She dies fighting, in the manner of many Ngugi heroines, loving and respecting tribal ways, but courageous enough to look change in the face; "for the cultural model of womanhood was not submissive, but powerful, as the old Kikuyu legend says."

Mumbi in *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) is Ngugi's only heroine to be situated in a marital setting. In many ways she remains thematically and technically the best realised of his heroines. Situated in the centre of a psychologically and politically complex novel which attempts to trace the defects of political morality back to their ultimate sources within the individual, she is portrayed as the pivot of the web of ironic betrayals through which the topic is explored. She is the wife of Gikonyo, sister of Kihika, the murdered hero, and former idol of Karanja, former homeguard now turned Chief of Thabai. The setting is that of war, and abandoned in an environment of terrorism, insecurity and deprivation. Mumbi's basic problem of survival within a besieged village renders her vulnerable to her former suitor, now drunk with power and mesmerized by his contact with the white man's magic. In spite of being Gikonyo's wife she plays a central role in the social and political life of Kenya like other women, young and old. The harsh environment forces out her courage, heroism and resourcefulness, but also exposes her to abuse, insult and sexual exploitation from Karanja the all powerful chief and injured lover. In an engaging confession, full of frankness and candour she narrates her fall to Mugo. Intoxicated by the news of her husband's imminent release and return from detention she falls into Karanjas' trap:

My heart was full of fear and hope I would have done anything to know the truth. He came to where I was standing and showed me a long sheet of paper with government stamps. There was a list of names of those on their way back to the villages. Gikonyo's name was there. What else is there to tell you. That I remember being full of submissive gratitude. That I laughed even welcomed Karanja's cold lips on my face. I was in a strange world and it was like I was made. And need I tell you more. I let Karanja make love to me⁹.

She falls but not low enough to be despised. Having partaken of this painful reenactment of Mumbi's fall, Mugo the solitary frightened hero opens his own heart and confesses his betrayal of Kihika. At the end the thought of Mumbi's reaction prevents him from letting Karanja die for his own crime. Peter Nazareth is not alone in seeing her as "the archetypal woman... woman as romantic faithful lover and mother." Govind Narain Sharma (1979) writes of Mumbi:

Perhaps it would be more correct to describe her as the spirit of Kenya, its beautiful and bountiful earth, ancient yet very young, deep and mysterious patient and long suffering, which in spite of being ill-used by unscrupulous adventures has retained its goodness, fecundity and warmth. She exercises a wholesome influence on the other characters, arousing them to a better knowledge of themselves¹⁰.

Despite the obvious historical and allegorical dimensions of her portrait, she functions consistently on the human level, as a young and spirited Kikuyu young wife with a strong sense of self and nation, loving and devoted to her doting husband, but strong enough to leave his home when he rejects her and her illegitimate son. At the lowest point in her life she still shows pride and maturity. To her mother-in-law she says:

No, mother, if you don't want me in this hut, tell me at once, and I with my child will go to Nairobi or anywhere else; yes I'll not go back to that house. I may be a woman, but even a cowardly bitch fights back when cornered against a wall¹¹.

She is not a superwoman or a helpless victim, just a recognisable and representative female character portrayed with sensitivity and endowed with dignity.

Petals of Blood (1977) grows directly from *A Grain of Wheat* exploring the gains and losses of the war of Independence through its casualties, the ordinary men and women who sacrificed their lives or limbs and found themselves abandoned by the same country. In their visions, sense of

commitment and suffering Ngugi does not distinguish between the male and female characters - Wanja, Munira, Karega and Abdullah are simply Kenyans, now confronted with the task of rebuilding their lives in the new Kenya. But Ngugi particularly singles out Wanja and her specific predicament as a woman no longer in the cohesive village environment, but now battling it out in the economic, political and sexual jungle of the city. Now Africans are in control of their country's affairs and Wanja suffers all aspects of the new faces of oppression by virtue of being a woman. In Palmer's words:

Her story represents the most thorough demonstration in African literature of the cases of prostitution in modern African societies. As drop-out from school, Wanja is forced to play the tough city game in order to survive in the jungle and even after her rejection in Ilmorog, when she had discovered a new sense of purpose in helping to engineer that society's revival, she is thrown back into high class prostitution by the schemes of the new black imperialists¹².

At a young age Wanja was compelled to murder her unwanted baby because she feared condemnation and rejection by an unimaginative and hypocritical society. She admits to having murdered her own life by that crucial life-dying act. That act transforms her life into a cycle of periodic illusory happiness and more mistakes, a career of oppression, shame and degradation. She soon learns resourcefulness, independence and determination and in spite of the odds against her she retains a core of humanity. Commenting on her dead child she says:

I was young then, I am not saying that I was right. It was only that this seemed the only thing to do, for how, I asked myself, was I going to look after it. Where would I get food and clothes for the child. Later I felt the guilt sit on me. Every night...sometimes even today I hear the delicate cry of that baby¹³.

When Wanja reaches out for love and thinks she has found it in Munira he later goes away. She laments:

God knows I am speaking the truth..I wanted to live honestly, an honest trade, and honest profit if possible¹⁴.

Such soul searching turmoil and turbulence characterise her life in this story of oppression, deprivation and untold injustice from politicians, hypocrisy from churchmen and callousness from fellow Kenyans. In spite of all her personal problems she commits herself to the transformation of Ilmorog; participates in the march and demonstrates extraordinary courage and inventiveness, combining femininity, strength and resoluteness. Strangely

Palmer regards these as masculine qualities. Wanja is not masculine; she is a strong woman and Ngugi portrays her as such.

Finally she is toughened and resigned, but realistic. It is only appropriate that she should be responsible for the death of Engineer Kimeria who ruined her life. She now peddles her philosophy of prostitution and survival boldly but never denying her loneliness and disillusionment:

You may blame me... I ask neither pity nor forgiveness nor any understanding excuse. The 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. Like you I have wondered, I don't know in search of what, but I looked for two things in vain. I have desperately looked for a child... a child of my own. Do you know how it feels for a woman not to have a child?¹⁵

With Abdullah, Karega and Munira Wanja travels the harsh landscape of the new Kenya. She is a murderer, a prostitute and woman, and to capture this clashing identity Ngugi surrounds her with fire symbolism which destroys in order to cleanse and regenerate.

It is however Wariinga that Ngugi deliberately casts in a strong world, as he admitted in an interview. The statement was more gratuitous than factual because all Ngugi's women are strong, in varying degrees and according to the nature of the problem they are confronted with. Overtly Wariinga is Ngugi's strongest female personality but the plot of *Devil on the Cross* is patterned on similar lines as *Petals of Blood*: a poor young girl falls for the sexual advances of a lecherous older man, becomes pregnant and is abandoned. Subsequently she is exploited by other men, moves from job to job, each disaster contributing to the building of a stronger personality. She is created with the vehemence and bitterness which characterised the author's life at the time of her creation. Wariinga is dissuaded from destroying her own baby who in the time honoured tradition of African family solidarity is adopted by her parents who in return give the heroine further support and an education on the value of children:

Wariinga was always to remember her mother's words to her. "Our forefathers said that only a fool sucks at the breasts of his dead mother. Wariinga, do you know how many women yearn for a child of their own without ever having one? A baby is a special gift to a man and woman-even unmarried woman¹⁶.

The trials of the heroine however gain in depth and intensity by their allegorical realism. She is set in opposition to the masters of the underworld in the Kenyan economic system. Her visit to the Robbers' den is literally a descent into hell, a baptism by fire, a true journey into experience as she comes face to

face with systemic corruption of the society. Ngugi's disenchantment with the system is obvious and he uses the exploitation of women as a signification of the poor Kenyan society. That she works alone, that is if the reader discounts her love affair with the confused son of the Rich Old Man, Ngorika, who raped her, is symbolic. It renders her struggle more bleak. Single-handedly she commits herself to the eradication of oppressor and exploitation. Her whole life is a struggle for justice and dignity. Like Munbi her influence on Gatuirira is a wholesome one. Like Achebe's Clara she is the strongest partner. She brings love, self-control and clear-sightedness to their relationship. He is idealistic preferring to sing the praises of ancient Kenya rather than confront its present horrors. Gradually she leads him out of his vocational confusion to a better understanding of his talent and role in society. At the end she not only triumphs against sexual abuses and inequities ranged against her but undertakes a predominantly male dominated job at the garage where as a mechanic she also excels.

By shooting the Rich Old Man of Ngorika she enters what Patrick Me Gee (1992) calls a third world of the revolutionary totally different from the worlds of the oppressor and the oppressed:

Wariinga enters this world at the novel's end when she takes up for herself the "duty of violence." Like Soyinka's Ogun, she must progress through the abyss of transition, or history to struggle against the agencies of both economic and cultural hegemony¹⁷.

She is deliberately exposed to all facets of political thought; all shades of social and political ideology. Throughout Ngugi casts her in heroic proportions, so that although we can expect the ultimate punishment for her after the murder, she does regain her pride and dignity and does reassert her identity.

Ngugi's works therefore consistently present female characters whose lives are the embodiment of whatever is noble and positive in the African woman. In the tribal environment they participate in home and nation building; and fight traditional practices which oppress and exploit women. In the city environment they suffer, grow from submissiveness to self-confidence and self-assertion. But they are never condescendingly shielded from the pain and prejudices which, like their mates all over the world, they are subjected to. They are never total victims; rather they refuse to accept the fact of victimisation as a permanent one, and face them as hurdles to be crossed on their journey towards recognition and strength in a world dominated by men.

The Gicandi Player's tale of Jacinta Wariinga is a story "too disgraceful, too shameful, that it should be concealed in the depths of everlasting darkness... a matter for tears and sorrow" (p. 7). He also told a story of her victory and heroism. To achieve this transformation she allies herself with other

women and men of like minds as partners in the struggle against neo-colonialists, corrupt politicians, abusive men and all that is inimical to human dignity, for men and women.

Ngugi's feminist consciousness has always been alive, yet growing and maturing in its formulations and expressions as the social and political dynamics of Kenya dictated and as Ngugi's ideology hardened and deepened. His is a feminism built on a personal experience of the lives of African women, lives informed and shaped by age long values, traditions and their self-image as Africans. His works define in sharp outlines the frontiers of feminism in African literature. In that task he never ceased to be the historian, over and over again mediating the experience of the past through the lives of individuals marching towards self-knowledge and ultimately regeneration.

Silence, solitude, the refusal to confront the past are linked to a condition of sterility, both physical and spiritual. Speaking, communicating opening out to the knowledge of one's self and of others is the first step one of the richest and most complex female figures in African literature symbolising the violation of continent in her tormented existence, guilt of infanticide and forced to prostitution - both of herself and others - apparently doomed to sterility, is yet able to preserve her vitality and strength and to rise again like a phoenix after her baptism by fire, bearing within her the new life that must be born (Jane Wilkinson)¹⁸.

In spite of such glowing tributes to the resilience of Ngugi's women, as acknowledged by many critics, the landscape of that criticism has not always been smooth especially when tested against specific feminist critical criteria. Elleke Boehmer (1991) stands out for her indictment of Ngugi's creative performance on the grounds that even these strong women are forced to operate under a male dominated system. Commenting on African Literature in general and Ngugi's works in particular she writes:

Relative to the liberation of nations or of "people", the emancipation of women has been rated as of secondary importance. For this reason, Ngugi's exertions to include women in a vision of a Kenya liberated from neocolonial domination, merits recognition. Yet at the same time, precisely because of the prominence of his achievement, the enduring patriarchal cast of his ideas cannot be ignored¹⁹.

The whole argument hinges on the fact that Ngugi had fixed women under the evaluative epithets, "vibrant" and "beautiful" in the following statement in *Detained: A writer's Prison Diary* (1981), as if those are undesirable qualities:

A writer needs people around him... for me, in writing a novel, I love to hear the voices of the people... I need the vibrant voices of beautiful women: their touch, their sighs, their tears, their laughter²⁰.

In a daring act of elimination the critic excludes the word "people," repeated in the speech and concentrates on "women," rather than see women as part of a people that are bound together by their shared history and cultural traditions. She criticises Ngugi for investing "his leading women characters with dignity of ages or with an almost bionic power," calling them "heroines of immense, if not impossible, stature: either great Mothers of a future Kenya or aggressive gun-totting revolutionaries." To her they are "icons-allegorical figures representing all that is resilient and strong in the Kenya people" (p.189). She continues:

Yet by maintaining relations of dominance in his portrayal of revolutionay forces, he is forced to enlist his women characters into the ranks of a male ordered struggle, or to elevate women to the status of mascot at the head of the (male) peasant and workers' march. Ngugi's neglect of both the engendered and structural nature of power, whether that power is held by rational or by proletarian forces, ultimately works to inhabit his rousing call for a new dispensation in Kenya²¹.

For Boehmer Wariinga's and Wanga's reputation is predicated on the fact of their being women, or biological females. The whole article operates on such well worn expressions as "phallic power," "male values" and female shapes," "dismantling of structures of power" and patriarchal affiliations." In conclusion she writes:

That remarkable magnetic power of Ngugi's women to which Cook and Okeninkpe refer in such glowing terms is simply another manifestation of the potent nameless forces with which women as "nature" or as "wild" have traditionally been associated²².

From this issue she attacks Ngugi for placing class above gender, and for mentioning the workers of Kenya without defining what he means by a worker. Ultimately she condemns Ngugi for disregarding the work of women. "For if mothers are assumed to be non-workers, and prostitutes, like Wanjia of *Petals*

of *Blood* (1977) part of a lumpen-proletariat, and if most of Ngugi's women can be slotted into either category, then both groups are automatically and conveniently marginalised" (p.191).

This article furnishes an example of feminist tirade and polemics at their most dangerous, the type that prescribes for a creative writer what to write and what group to satisfy, judging all works of art by sexist, gender or Marxist dictates and willing to convert every artistic piece into a political tract.

In an aesthetic project which celebrates the victories and failures of all Kenyans from colonialism to the present the critic searches for the establishment of a structure of sectional achievements based on gender. In a work that speaks about one nation she strives to enthrone two; and in a work that builds its intergrity on integration she seeks to dismantle and sow disintegration. African feminism promotes a system in which men and women work together for the eradication of all forms of oppression and inequality. In his novels Ngugi had successfully demonstrated this, and the worst disservice that activists can do to his works or any other creative work is to reduce the sum total of their artistic intergrity to a list of feminist platitudes. Ngugi's feminism is not a war between men and women, but a war fought by committed men and women for a better society for all.

Footnotes

1. Tobe Levin, "Women as Scapegoats of Culture and Cult: An Activist's View of Female Circumcision in Ngugi's *The River Between*", in **Ngambika**, Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press Inc., 1986, p.216.
2. Ibid., p.214.
3. Ibid., p.214.
4. Charles A. Nama, "Daughters of Moombi: Ngugi's Heroines and Traditional Gikuyu Aesthetics", **Ngambika**, p.143.
5. Carole Boyce Davies. "Introduction to Feminist Consciousness and African Literacy Criticism", **Ngambika**, p.11
6. Ibid., p.15.
7. Tobe Levin. op. cit., p.209.
8. Jane Wilkinson, "From Shore to Stream: The Development of a Kenyan Novelist" **Africa**, 1989, p. 553.
9. Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. **A Grain of Wheat**, London, Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1967, p.171.
10. Govinda Naraim Sharma "Ngugi's Cristian Vision: Theme and Pattern in *A Grain of Wheat*", **African Literature Today**, No. 10, London: Heinemann, 1979, p.173.
11. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, **Petals of Blood**, p.206.

12. Eustace Palmer, Ngugi's **Petals of Blood**, **African Literature Today** No. 10 London: Heinemann, 1979, p.161.
13. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, **Petals of Blood**, London, Nairobi, Ibadan: Heinemann, 1977, p.292.
14. Ibid., p.292.
15. Ibid., p.291.
16. Ngugi wa Thiong'o **Devil on the Cross**, London, Heinemann, 1982, p.182.
17. Patrick McGee **Telling the Other**, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992, p.165.
18. Jane Wilkinson, op. cit., p.574.
19. Elleke Boehmer "The Master's Dance to the Master's Voice: Revolutionary Nationalism and the Representation of Women in the Writing of Ngugi wa Thiong'o," **Journal of Commonwealth Literature**, August 1991, p.188.
20. Ibid., p.192.
21. Ibid., p.189.
22. Ibid., p.192.

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