

THE SUBALTERN SPEAKS: NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S *PETALS OF BLOOD* AS A REPRESENTATION OF MARGINALIZED VOICES

DR. V. Sakthivel*

Abstract

The article explores how Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel *Petals of Blood* gives voice to the marginalized and oppressed, amplifying their struggles and resistance against neocolonialism and patriarchal oppression in African countries, especially in Kenya. Through a critical analysis of the novel's characters, particularly Wanjia, Karega, Munira, and Abdulla, this article examines how Ngugi wa Thiong'o represents the experiences and perspectives of subaltern communities in postcolonial Kenya. By centring the voices and stories of marginalized individuals, *Petals of Blood* challenges dominant narratives and power structures, offering a powerful critique of neocolonialism and oppression. This article argues that Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel is a significant contribution to the broad area of postcolonial studies, highlighting the importance of amplifying marginalized voices and challenging dominant discourses. By challenging the bourgeoisie, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel offers a counter-narrative that amplifies the voices and stories of marginalized communities, challenging the power and privilege of the ruling class. Ngugi wa Thiong'o is a well-known East-African writer and post-colonial critic, known for his influential works such as *Weep Not, Child*, *The River Between*, and *Devil on the Cross*, which have contributed immensely towards the enrichment of Kenyan literature and postcolonial studies. His writing often explores themes of colonialism, resistance, and social justice, providing a powerful voice for marginalized communities.

Keywords: Marginalized, voices, resistance, colonialism, oppression, Kenya, and resistance.

*Assistant Professor of English, Government Arts College (Autonomous), Affiliated to Periyar University, Salem- 636007 E-mail: omsakthipower@gmail.com

Discussion

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is a renowned and celebrated East African writer, acclaimed for his thought-provoking and insightful novels, essays, and plays. He is known for his seminal and influential novels like *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Petals of Blood* (1977), and *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), as well as his provocative and incisive essays and plays, including *Decolonising the Mind*. He was imprisoned for boldly exposing the corruption of the postcolonial regime in his first Gikuyu play, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I Will Marry When I Want*). According to Ngugi, literature and politics are inextricably and intricately interlinked. In his works, Ngugi highlighted the historical events that affected the common people most, i.e., the struggle for freedom - Mau Mau.

His goal was to empower and convince the African people to fight against oppressive powers and recover their cultural heritage, and resist the forces of oppression. Ngugi's objective was to liberate people from oppressive forces, as aptly pointed out by critic Wamalwa in his article, "The Engaged Artist: The Social Vision of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o." According to Wamalwa, "Ngugi's task as a Kenyan is to apply the issues of liberation as outlined by Fanon to the particular situation of post-colonial Kenya" (12). This highlights Ngugi's commitment to applying Fanon's principles of liberation to the Kenyan context, addressing the specific challenges faced by the country in the post-colonial era, and promoting social justice and empowerment amongst the Kenyan people. He depicts the two competing forces of capitalism and imperialism on the one hand, and socialism and national liberation on the other. He advocates socialism as a political system of governance for effectively solving the problems of newly liberated African nations suffering under the covert attack of neo-colonialism. He has been a powerful and passionate mouthpiece of the subaltern, giving voice to the marginalized and oppressed. He suggests a solution to the postcolonial issues in Kenya, emphasizing the need for African nations to adopt socialist principles and resist the forces of imperialism and capitalism.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's seminal novel, *Petals of Blood* (1977), marks a pivotal moment in his literary career, as it was his last novel written in English during the Age of Neo-Colonialism. This powerful narrative is a scathing critique of the ruling elite who exploit and oppress peasants and workers, while also condemning politicians, landlords, banks, industries, and private companies. Through the novel, Ngugi underscores the imperative need of unified action in

empowering ordinary people to resist oppression, as exemplified by the Ilmorog delegation's journey to Nairobi and the strikes at the Theng'eta Brewing Industry. With unflinching realism, Ngugi portrays the complexities of the postcolonial experience in Kenya, amplifying the voices of the marginalized and oppressed. This novel is an exploration of the bitter experiences of subaltern characters as seen in Ilmorog, an imaginary village. Through the lens of Subaltern Theory, which draws on the works of writers like Antonio Gramsci and Spivak, the novel can be looked at as a critique of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

The four important subaltern characters of the novel, Munira, Abdulla, Karega, and Wanja, converge on the village of Ilmorog, seeking refuge from the suffocating grip of neocolonialism. Each has adopted a distinct strategy to confront the oppressive conditions prevailing in independent Kenya. Contrary to people's expectations, Third World countries, including Kenya, failed to witness significant improvements in lifestyle and infrastructure after gaining independence. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", the subaltern is often silenced or marginalised in dominant discourses. Ngugi gives voice to the subaltern characters like Munira, Abdulla, Karega, and Wanja, highlighting their struggles and resistance against colonial and the neocolonial bourgeoisie.

Ngugi vividly illustrates this stark reality by describing a school in Ilmorog village, highlighting its deplorable condition and inadequate infrastructure. The politicians have failed to realize the importance of education in the postcolonial era, neglecting the infrastructural development of schools and not giving due importance to educating young children. This remarkable portrayal underscores the harsh truth that, despite the regime change, the lives of ordinary Kenyans remained largely unchanged in post-independent Kenya.

The characters' experiences and struggles serve as a microcosm for the broader societal issues plaguing Kenya. Munira, Abdulla, Karega, and Wanja each embody different responses to the oppressive system, reflecting the complexity of resistance and survival in a postcolonial context. Through their stories, Ngugi sheds light on the persistent inequalities and injustices that have become entrenched in Kenyan society.

The novel highlights the disconnect between the expectations of independence and the harsh realities faced by ordinary Kenyans. The failure of politicians to prioritize education and infrastructure development has perpetuated the cycle of poverty and inequality. By exploring these themes, Ngugi's work offers a powerful critique

of neocolonialism and its ongoing impact on Kenyan society. It is evident when Ngugi describes the abysmal infrastructure of the school established in Ilmorog. The school that was run-down, and additionally, had spider webs, dead fly wings, and heads of flies. The teachers fled at the first sight of the school. The majority of the students were shepherd boys, who frequently skipped classes to accompany their dads looking around for new pastures and water for their cattle.

After independence, people could not live peacefully in one place. They had to migrate from the peaceful, tiny village to the city and they were not welcomed into the city with a red carpet. There were no males staying in the village; they could not live as a family in the city as it did not provide space for the whole family to live in. A woman of Ilmorog describes the pathetic condition of her people to the village school master, Godfrey Munira, in the following manner:

The young people leave their homes, lured by the city's allure. The young women return occasionally, leaving their newborns with their aging mothers, who toil to make ends meet. They're told that in the city, children are not welcome. The young men also depart, some never to return, while others visit their wives, leaving them pregnant. (*POB* 20)

Before colonialism, people in the village had the desire to possess goats and cows. We get much information regarding crops and goats from the conversation going on among the farmers and herdsmen who have gathered in Abdulla's shop. The herdsmen indicate how the white master has exploited the labour and the resources of the black people during the colonial period. The people of Ilmorog are craving for the pre-colonial golden past, " The white man first took the land, then the goats and cows, saying these were hut taxes or fines after every armed clash, and only later did he capture the youth to work on the land ." (*POB* 22)

At one point in time, Ilmorog suffered from drought. Water and food were scarce. The whole village had decided to sacrifice Abdulla's donkey. Being completely helpless, the villagers decided to do something about the drought and thought of approaching their MP, the elected representative. Some of them were unable to recollect the name of their MP. Some said he had visited during the election campaign. He had made a number of promises in the election manifesto and even though he had collected two shillings each for the Harambee water project, he had never returned. The monsoon had failed; the farmers could not produce much but they would be intimidated into paying their taxes by the Chief and the tax collector

at the start of the year. The money the farmers were yearning for would only go towards paying the land tax. Ngugi emphasises that the people must know about their elected MPs and check whether the poll promises have been fulfilled. To redress their grievances, they must meet their MPs and get solutions from them for their daily problems, such as water scarcity, basic amenities, infrastructure development, quality education, laying roads to facilitate trade, and providing infrastructure for schools.

Those who participated in the freedom struggle against British rule have not been recognized in Kenya. Despite their sacrifices, their lifestyle has not improved. This is illustrated through the character of Abdulla, a Mau Mau veteran who lost his limbs in the struggle against the British imperial forces. He is now forced to run a small shop in Ilmorog. Though the Mau Mau rebellion was the main force behind African independence, the real heroes of the Kenyan freedom struggle have not received the praise they deserve. The spirit of the Mau Mau rebellion has been betrayed by the post-independent politicians and the government. Ngugi underlines the importance of government recognition and reward for the Mau Mau warriors, thus improving their socio-economic status after independence. Ngugi envisions a socialist society where workers and farmers are free from exploitation by both indigenous and foreign capitalists.

Munira, a school teacher, is driven by a desire to uplift the downtrodden through education. His experiences in the colonial school in Siriana have left a lasting impact, where he witnessed firsthand the discriminatory practices that favoured “Black Europeans” over true African students who refused to abandon their native traditions and ancestral ways.

The daily prayers in the school were a stark reminder of the colonial indoctrination, where students were forced to sing hymns that praised the White masters. As Munira recalls, “Wash me Redeemer and I shall be whiter than snow” (*POB* 35). This quote highlights the insidious attempt to erase African identity and culture, replacing it with a warped aspiration to whiteness. The prayers also invoked the continuation of the Empire, with students praying “for the continuation of an Empire that had defeated the satanic evil which had erupted in Europe to try the children of God” (*POB* 35).

This environment has shaped Munira’s perspective, fuelling his determination to use education as a tool for empowerment and cultural revival. He seeks to challenge the legacy of colonialism and promote a more inclusive and authentic form of education that values African heritage and traditions. Through his character, Ngugi

highlights the complexities of education in a postcolonial context, where the struggle for self-definition and cultural preservation continues.

Karega, as a subaltern, embodies the voice of the marginalized and oppressed. His character is revealed through his poignant observations and suggestions for change. He critiques the politicians for enjoying privileges while the ordinary people struggle, saying:

“As I sold sheepskins to watalii I asked myself, how could a whole community be taken in by a few stomachs-greedy because they had eaten more than their fair share of that which was bought by the blood of the people? And they took a symbol from its original beautiful purpose..... and they think can make it serve narrow selfish ends! Make poverty and stolen wealth shake hands in eternal peace and Friendship!. And what do we do with people who are hungry and jobless, who can’t pay school fees; shall we make them drink a tinful of oath and cry unity?” (*POB* 135).

Karega suggests meeting their MP to seek help, stating: “This place has an MP. We, or rather they, were elected to Parliament to represent all the corners of their constituency, however remote. Let us send a strong delegation of men, women, and children to the big city. To the capital. We shall see the MP for this area. The government is bound to send us help. Or we can bring help to the others. Otherwise, the drought might swallow us all” (*POB* 136). He also emphasizes the importance of respecting every individual, saying: “Whenever any of us is degraded and humiliated, even the smallest child, we are all humiliated and degraded because it has got to do with human beings” (*POB* 193).

As a subaltern, Karega’s experiences and perspectives highlight the struggles and injustices faced by marginalized communities. Through his words, he effectively criticises the structures that uphold injustice and inequality. Through his character, Ngugi sheds light on the complexities of subalternity and the need for collective action to challenge dominant power structures.

Wanja embodies the struggles of a subaltern, having faced exploitation and oppression throughout her life. As a victim of circumstance, she was forced into prostitution and objectified by men. Her experiences as a barmaid shed light on the harsh realities faced by women in postcolonial Kenya, where she notes,

“We barmaids never settle in one place. Sometimes you are dismissed because you refused to sleep with your boss. Or your face may become too well-known in one place. You want a new territory. Do you know, it is so funny that when you go to a new place, the men treat you as if you

were a virgin. They will outdo one another to buy you beers. Each wants to be the first. So you will find us, barmaids, wherever there is a bar in Kenya. Even in Ilmorog" (*POB* 155).

According to Roos' article, "Re-Historicizing the Conflicted Figure of Woman in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*," Wanja represents a powerful symbol of unity. Roos notes, "When asked who the father of her child is, Wanja declines a name, and instead finds in her artistry the ability to link past, present, and future, sorrows and triumphs, and man and woman, all into the image of Abdulla. This unity is the father of Abdulla" (159-160). Wanja's perspective on her profession is complex, revealing both empowerment and vulnerability. She says, "For a woman, anyway, it is a good feeling when a thousand eyes turn toward you and you feel that it is your body that is giving orders to all those hearts. Sometimes you see what is wrong. You want to get out: You also want to remain" (*POB* 155). Despite these hardships, Wanja remains a symbol of resilience and determination, seeking to improve her circumstances and challenge the societal structures that perpetuate inequality and oppression. Through her story, Ngugi amplifies the voice of the subaltern, bringing attention to the struggles and injustices faced by marginalized communities, particularly women. According to Palmer, in his article entitled "Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*", Wanja embodies remarkable qualities, described as "brave, resilient, resourceful and determined" (278-279). These traits highlight her strength and unwavering spirit in the face of challenges.

Munira's character embodies the concerns and empathy of a subaltern, as he worries about the peasants in Ilmorog. He is deeply troubled by their struggles, noting, "The peasants here were without decent water? That the herdsmen had swollen eyes and the cattle died of drought?" (*POB* 59). Munira's introspection reveals his sense of responsibility and guilt for not being able to make a difference, as he questions, "What did it matter to me that the able-bodied had fled Ilmorog in search of the golden fleece in cities of metallic promises and no hope?" (*POB* 59). Through Munira's character, Ngugi highlights the complexities of being part of a community that is struggling to survive, and the moral dilemmas that come with it. As a subaltern, the injustices and challenges endured by the peasants are illuminated by Munira's stories and viewpoints, which highlight the necessity of collective action and transformation. Abdulla, a former freedom fighter, recounts his experiences during the struggle for independence. He shares stories of his time in the shoe factory, where workers were exploited and lived in poverty, and his

involvement with the Mau Mau movement, led by Dedan Kimathi. Abdulla's narrative highlights the brutality of colonial rule and the resilience of those who fought against it.

As Abdulla reflects on his past, he notes, "To redeem the land: to fight so that the industries like the shoe factory which had swallowed his sweat could belong to the people: so that his children could one day have enough to eat and to wear under adequate shelter from rain: so that they would say in pride, my father died that I might live: this had transformed him from a slave before a boss into a man." (POB 164). This transformation is a testament to his growth and dedication to the fight for freedom.

The concept of subalternity is evident in Abdulla's story, as he represents the marginalized and oppressed groups who fought against colonial rule, and which highlights the struggles and resistance of the Kenyan people. Abdulla views the Mau Mau movement as part of a larger struggle, stating, "Mau Mau was only a link in the chain in the long struggle of Struggle people through different times at different places..." (POB 166)

Abdulla's story also underscores the theme of subaltern resistance, as he recounts the bravery and sacrifice of those who fought against colonial rule. He notes, "Dedan had been caught, delivered to our enemies by our own brothers, lovers of their own stomachs, Wakamatimo. May their names, like that of Judas, ever be cursed, an example to our children of what never to be!" (POB 171). This highlights the tension between those who collaborated with the colonizers and those who resisted.

The delegation's journey to meet the MP is marked by challenges, including hunger, thirst, and cruelty. When they seek help from Rev. Jerrod Brown, he offers a differing perspective, stating, "The Bible is then clearly against a life of idleness and begging. This is what's wrong with this country. Most of us seem to prefer a life of wandering and begging to a life of hard work and sweat." (POB 178). This highlights the contrast between Abdulla's narrative of collective action and the Reverend's emphasis on individual responsibility, reflecting the complex power dynamics between the subaltern and dominant groups.

Through Abdulla's narrative, the passage conveys the importance of understanding the past to move forward into the future. By sharing his experiences, Abdulla aims to rejuvenate the mission of seeking help from their MP and to inspire others to continue the fight for justice and equality, giving voice to the subaltern perspective.

Abdulla narrates the story of the antelope and hare to the

delegation from Ilmorog village (to meet the MP) to illustrate the story of the dominant and the dominated. A hare and an antelope fell into a hole, symbolizing the power dynamics between dominant and subjugated groups. The hare, representing the powerful and exploitative class, climbed on the antelope's back, representing the marginalized and oppressed, to escape, and then abandoned it. Instead of showing empathy or gratitude, the hare blamed the antelope for their situation, exemplifying the way those in power often shift responsibility onto the oppressed, further perpetuating their subjugation. Abdulla's narrative expresses his vision for a future where the subaltern, comprising workers and peasants, would lead the struggle to overthrow the existing system. He envisions a society where the many, rather than the few, would hold power, bringing an end to the era of exploitation and oppression. Abdulla's vision emphasizes the need for collective action and empowerment of the working class and peasantry, critiquing the existing system as being ruled by "preying bloodthirsty gods and gnomish angels."

In his vision, Abdulla sees a future where people can thrive without exploitation, enjoying and loving in creative labour. This future would mark the beginning of a new era, where the kingdom of man and woman would truly begin. For a moment, Abdulla becomes so immersed in this vision that he forgets about the woman beside him, highlighting the intensity of his passion for a better future. Abdulla's narrative highlights the ongoing struggle of the subaltern and the need for collective action to bring about change. His vision for the future emphasizes the importance of creating a more just and equitable society, where the many, rather than the few, hold power.

The narrator has exactly described how the postcolonial government has failed to deliver goods and how they are exploiting the people. A loan is given to the farmers which they can ill afford to repay. Their land is taken away. The peasant farmers and herders of Ilmorog, who had been compelled to take loans and to mortgage their land while purchasing fertilizers from foreign imperial nations that they could barely afford to repay, were similarly impacted. Lacking sufficient labor, machinery, a departure from traditional practices and perspectives, and guidance, they struggled to cultivate the land enough to satisfy their food requirements and repay the loans. Some had utilized the funds to pay for their children's school fees. Now, the unyielding force of monetary power was pushing them off their land: "Some had used the money to pay school fees. Now the inexorable law of the metal power was driving them from the land".(*POB* 317)

The shopping and business centre is dominated by a tourist cultural village owned by Nderi wa Riera and a West German firm called Ilmorog African Diamond Cultural and Educational Tours. Mizigo owns and operates the Thengeta Breweries factory currently employing six hundred people, with numerous research facilities, chemical engineers, and scientists. They have produced a wide range of beverages using Theng'eta. They have produced a variety of Theng'eta drinks: from pure gin, which is meant for export, and cheap but potent drink for labourers and the unemployed youth. The breweries are owned by American transnational companies with African directors and, indeed, shareholders. The leading original mates are Mzigo, Chui, and Kimeria. The novel also illustrates the complexities of resistance and struggle, highlighting the difficulties faced by the subaltern in challenging the dominant power structures.

In the novel, Ngũgĩ offers a scathing critique of the post-colonial Kenyan state and the rise of a new bourgeoisie class. Through the characters and their experiences, the novel illustrates the complex power dynamics at play in society, highlighting how dominant ideologies are maintained and challenged. This analysis explores the characters and themes of the novel through the lens of Antonio Gramsci's theories, shedding light on how power and resistance shape the course of history.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony is more relevant to the novel, as it highlights how the ruling elite maintains power not just through coercion, but also through the creation of consent and the shaping of popular opinion. As Gramsci notes, "The State is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules" (244). The character of Chui, a corrupt industrialist who has betrayed his earlier revolutionary beliefs, is a prime example of this. Chui's actions and influence serve to further entrench the dominant ideology, making it more difficult for those who would challenge it.

In contrast, characters like Munira and Karega symbolize the likelihood of organic intellectuals challenging dominant ideologies and bringing about change. Munira, with his moral and spiritual dimensions, and Karega, with his anger and determination, embody the spirit of resistance and challenge to the neocolonial power structure. As Gramsci notes, "All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say, but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals" (9). Munira and Karega's experiences and actions serve to highlight the complexities of power and resistance, illustrating

how individuals can work to challenge and change the dominant ideology.

The novel also highlights the concept of passive revolution, where a transformation of the social and economic structures of a society occurs without a fundamental change in the relations of production. The independence movement in Kenya, which promised much but delivered little, is a prime example of this. As Gramsci notes, "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (276). The rise of a new bourgeoisie class, represented by characters like Chui, Kimeria, and Ezekiel, serves to perpetuate the existing power structures, making it more difficult for true change to occur.

Through its exploration of power and resistance, *Petals of Blood* offers a powerful critique of the neo-colonial state and the ongoing legacies of colonialism. The novel highlights the need for true change and the importance of challenging dominant ideologies, shedding light on the complexities and challenges of this process. As such, it remains a powerful and relevant work of literature, offering insights into how power and resistance shape the course of history.

Abdulla's character exemplifies the struggles of a subaltern, highlighting the disconnect between development and the benefits for ordinary people. Despite the changes, Abdulla is forced to adapt to menial work, such as selling oranges by the roadside. His experiences during the Mau Mau struggle have left a lasting impact, as he recounts how Abdulla's family members had been killed by the British. Dedan Kimathi was also killed, and he had lost his brothers. As a result, "his mother had gone crazy, and that he himself was later killed and all this for the sake of struggle....But still...the woundit was hard, and only the knowledge that all that which we had fought for would soon be done....land of honey and wine" (*POB* 339).

As a subaltern, Abdulla's story sheds light on the sacrifices made by ordinary people during the struggle for independence and the disappointment that followed when the benefits of freedom did not trickle down to them. His narrative highlights the complexities of postcolonial Kenya, where the rich and powerful continue to exploit the marginalized, and the legacy of the struggle is remembered differently by those who fought for it. Abdulla's character serves as a scathing attack on the neo-colonial state that promotes inequality and oppression, emphasizing the need for true change and recognition of the subaltern's struggles.

Conclusion

The characters of Karega, Wanja, Munira, and Abdulla in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's narrative offer a poignant portrayal of the subaltern experience in postcolonial Kenya. Through their stories, Ngugi highlights the struggles, resilience, and determination of ordinary people in the face of systemic injustices, exploitation, and marginalization. The narrative underscores the disconnect between the benefits of development and the experiences of ordinary people, emphasizing the need for true change and recognition of the subaltern's struggles. The characters' voices and perspectives serve as a scathing attack on the systems that promote inequality and oppression, highlighting the ongoing quest for justice and equality in postcolonial Kenya.

Ultimately, analyzing these characters provides valuable insights into the complexities of the subaltern experience, emphasizing the importance of amplifying their voices and perspectives. By shedding light on the struggles and resilience of ordinary people, Ngugi's narrative offers a nuanced understanding of the postcolonial condition, encouraging readers to reflect on the ongoing challenges and injustices marginalized communities face.

In the context of *Petals of Blood*, characters like Wanja, Abdulla, Munira, and Karega can be understood through the lens of subalternity. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says, "I define the subaltern as the person removed from all lines of social mobility. That is, the subaltern is barred from access to all public resources that would allow for upward movement, out of dire poverty and into political invisibility" (67). This definition resonates with the struggles of these characters, particularly those marginalized by societal structures. Through exploring class struggle and resistance, *Petals of Blood* challenges dominant narratives of colonialism and neocolonialism. The novel pinpoints how the subalterns are exploited and marginalized, how they resist and challenge dominant power structures. Finally, *Petals of Blood* is a remarkable work in postcolonial literature, which provides a powerful critique of colonialism and neocolonialism. Through the lens of Subaltern theory, the novel affords a subtle understanding of the experiences of marginalized groups and the intricacies of resistance and struggle.

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