

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Critique of Christianity in *Petals of Blood*

Dr. Somdev Banik

Dept. of English, Tripura University

Abstract: *Ngugi wa thiong'o's Petals of Blood is an interesting study of Kenyan post-colonial context from a socialist perspective. He not only dissects the opportunistic neo-colonial ruling clique, but also exposes the complicity of Church and Empire in the enterprise of Colonialism. Though the novel is seeped with Biblical allusions and a spiritual journey motif, Ngugi questions the white man's religion and proclaims the necessity for redefining Christianity from a Blackman's perspective. He rejects both religion and politics as liberating forces, as both are in collusion with capitalism. He rather roots for revolutionary politics as the means of ushering in meaningful change in the socio-politico-economic and cultural conditions of the masses of the Kenyan people, who comprises of peasants, workers and labourers.*

Keywords : *revolution, decolonization, exploitation, liberation, spirituality*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is a post-colonial Kenyan intellectual who belongs to the group of committed writers who had steadfastly worked for the emancipation and upliftment of the peasant and working communities of his country. His unflinching attempt to make them aware of their social status and the importance of their blood and sweat, to expose the complicity of the national government with the western capitalist interests and also religion to perpetuate exploitation and enslavement of the native psyche is nowhere better documented than in his *Petals of Blood*. His fourth novel *Petals of Blood* looks at colonialism in all its complexities, while exploring the complicity of the allied forces; since one can't comprehend and formulate the resistance movements without looking at colonialism from all dimensions. Ngugi points out the hidden collusion between imperialism, religion and the civilising missions succinctly when he writes:

“The missionary had traversed the seas, the forests, armed with the desire for profit that was his faith and light and the gun that was his protection. He carried the Bible; the soldier carried the gun; the administrator and the settler carried the coin. Christianity, commerce, civilisation: the Bible, the Coin, the Gun: Holy Trinity.” (*Petals of Blood*: 88)

In a similar note, one revolutionary character Karega within the novel briefly puts across the process of colonial conquest through a metaphor in his vision after Thenge'ta drinking.

“Today, children, I am going to tell you about the history of Mr. Blackman in three sentences. In the beginning he had the land and the mind and the soul together, on the second day, they took the body away to barter it for silver coins. On the third day, seeing that he was still fighting back, they brought priests and educators to bind his mind and soul so that these foreigners could more easily take his land and its produce.” (*Petals of Blood*: 236)

The colonisation of Kenya could not have been possible without the active support of religion and the concurrent education policies. It's these which enslave the mind, the psyche, and is harder to overcome. In post-colonial Kenya, according to Ngugi, patriotic or nationalistic forces should expose the complicity of the 'Holy Trinity' to achieve effective decolonisation. Ngugi's 'Church, Culture and Politics' (1972) offers a critique of the role played by the Church in the African context. He locates a contradiction between colonialism and its religious ally, the Christian Church. The basic doctrine of Christianity is love and equality between men, while colonialism of which it was an integral part, was built on the inequality and hatred between men and subjugation and exploitation of the black race by the white race. Secondly, the measure of one's being Christian lay in ritualistically imitating European ways of life, and outright rejection of all African customs. The Church had denounced the primitive rights of the Kenyan people, condemned beautiful African dances, images of African Gods, thus robbing the people of their soul. It justified poverty through its doctrine that the poor were blessed and would get their reward in heaven. Christianity, according to Ngugi is:

“...part and parcel of cultural imperialism. Christianity, in the past, has been used to rationalise imperialist domination and exploitation of peasants and workers. It has been used to blind people to the reality of their exploitation because Christianity as a whole wants to tell people that their lot is God-given, as opposed to man-conditioned. So, you see, if you are poor because God has willed it, you are more than likely to continue to pray to God to right your condition. But if you know that your poverty is not God-conditioned, but is socially conditioned, then you are likely to do something about those social conditions that are assuring that you be poor. (1978: 10)

The missionary also preached the need to obey the powers that be, through the saying “render unto Caesar things that are Caesar’s”, however morally corrupt the Caesar may be. Ngugi notes that the Christian Church has aligned itself with the ruling class and given the lie to its own protestations of support for a humanistic vision of life. The Church by aligning always with the ruling class guaranteed its own safety and security. The African Christian was told to obey the white man and not to interfere with politics and political agitation, as that was inconsistent with Christian faith. The Church thus gradually became the greatest opponent of the African struggle for freedom, it opposed Mau Mau struggle declaring it as savage and anti-Christian. Even in the post-colonial Kenya, the Church refuses to talk against oppressive regimes and measures, against the newborn African middle class grabbing and amassing land and business concerns at the expense of the peasants and the working masses.

Ngugi believes that the Church could return to (or learn lessons from) the primitive communism of the early Christian Church of Peter and also the communism of the traditional African society. With this and working in alliance with socialist aspirations of the African masses, they might build a new society to create a new man freed from greed and competitive hatred, and ready to realise his full potential in humble co-operation with other men in a just socialist society. He writes:

“If the Church in the past has been the greatest cause of the mis-shaping of the African souls in cultural alienation, it must, today, work for cultural integration. It must go back to the roots of the broken African civilisation. It must examine the traditional African forms of marriage, traditional African forms of sacrifice. Why were these things meaningful and wholesome to the traditional African community?” (1972: 34)

Ngugi’s vision of Christianity provides for a just society free from subordination and exploitation. Thus religion and rebellion both should pave the way for change, a change towards reviving the indigenous culture.

Ngugi has been also called a ‘religious writer’ for whom the Christian faith or any religious faith in general is concerned with the inner lives of the people. He writes—“...about people: I am interested in their hidden lives; their fears and hopes, their loves and hates, and how the very tension in their hearts affects their daily contact with other men: how, in other words, the emotional stream of the man within interacts with the social reality” (1972: 31). From that perspective and on the more personal level *Petals* is a religious novel, where we find Munira’s quest is for purification, Wanja’s for love and cure from her barrenness, Abdulla’s for a new world purged of the elements of betrayal and collective shame at the failure of the freedom movement, Karega’s to regain a holistic existence for every Kenyan in a free and just society. But capitalism has robbed the religious faith of its spirituality and put it in the hands of self-seekers and self-righteous leaders who use their hold over the people to exercise power. The novel is rich with biblical allusions and set with a spiritual quest motif through appropriate use of captions and quotes from Book of Revelations, Whitman, William Blake, and Songs of Solomon, A. Cabral etc. The four parts with titles like ‘Walking’, ‘Toward Bethlehem’, ‘To Be Born’, ‘Again... La Luta Continua! (The struggle continues)’ are indicative of the journey motif of the novel.

Ngugi explores three categories of Christian representatives in the novel. They are Ezekieli, Rev. Jerrod and Lillian, from three generations to highlight the corruption and alienation of the religious leaders. Munira’s father, Ezekieli, an old man of seventy five and one of the earliest to recognise the advantages of conversion is portrayed succinctly through a photograph which made Munira always feel uncomfortable at home; his father standing by a gramophone with a dog sitting on its hind legs, barking out: HIS MASTER’S VOICE. Ezekieli is a worldly man who regained all the lands lost by his forefathers to the colonisers and accumulated immense wealth and estates out of the advantages of being a Christian. He is a capitalist now and needs KCO (Kenyan Cultural Organisation), “a cultural organisation to bring unity and harmony between all of us, the rich and the poor, and to end envy and greed” among the other minor tribes, so that he can protect his wealth. He doesn’t understand what ails Munira and considers his son a loss. Rev. Jerrod is the second generation neo-colonial Christian leader, who refuses to help a group of hungry, tired, thirsty villagers from Ilmorog on their way to Nairobi. For he believes the Bible is against a life of wandering and begging; and the peasants and villagers are lazy and idle people, people suffering from “spiritual lameness”. Instead of providing them with food and water in his posh Blue Hills residence he offers a diet of prayers to each and every one of them to cure their spiritual debility. The lawyer in Nairobi points out that both the political and religious leaders are in service of the monster god, worshipping capital. He uses a religious metaphor while speaking to the people of Ilmorog, whom he provides shelter and food in the capital city:

“Now see the outcome...dwellers in Blue Hills, those who have taken on themselves the priesthood of the ministry to the blind god...a thousand acres of land...a million acres in the two hands of a priest, while the congregation moans for an acre! and they are told:it is only a collection from your sweat...let us be honest slaves to the monster-god, let us give him our souls...and the ten percent that goes with it...for his priests must eat too...and we shall take it to his vassal the bank...meanwhile let’s all pray and the god may notice our honesty and fervour and we shall get a few crumbs. Meanwhile the god grows big and fat and shines even brighter and whets the appetites of his priests,

for the monster has, through the priesthood, decreed only one ethical code: Greed and accumulation. I ask myself: is it fair, is it fair for our children?" (Petals:163)

Religion like politics is no more there to serve humanity and the society, but has become a profession, an institution to acquire wealth and power. The third generation religious leader, Lillian, a prostitute turned reformer, leads a charismatic religious movement for preparation of a new kingdom of God. This movement speaks of no difference between the rich and the poor, the employer and the employed and prescribes avoidance of strife and struggle in this world because the next world is close at hand and it is through love and acceptance of Christ that one can reach the other world. One should not worry about the exploitations and sufferings in this world, because the next world is egalitarian and just. Karega, the protagonist, could realise that this religion "was also a weapon against the workers" (Petals:305) and sustains an exploitative world order with the beguiling hopes of a close by Heaven. It urges the people not to strive to improve their present lot and instead resign to the God's will and hope for the next world. This movement also, as Karega comes to know later on is financed by the American churches, which serves to protect the present economic order. It's Lillian who influences Munira to become a religious fanatic, obsessed with an urge to save Karega from Wanja, a sexually exploited woman turned prostitute, because he thinks it is his moral duty to save him from the "fatal embrace that has been the ruin of many great men across the centuries" (Petals:245). Being from an orthodox Christian family Munira's interpretation of the world is moralistic. He sees Wanja as Jezebel, who destroyed his cloistered moral existence in Ilmorog and is now ruining Karega's life. He decides for an active obedience to the universal law of God rather than just passive obedience to the law, he decides "to burn the whore-house of Wanja which mocked God's work on earth" (Petals:333). His choice of fire as an agent of cleansing has a parallel with an earlier incident in his life. As an adolescent boy he had once visited a prostitute, which remained as guilt in his conscience. This act, he believed, would give him an opportunity to attenuate his guilt and purge himself of the sin.

"He stole a matchbox, collected a bit of grass and dry cow dung and built an imitation of Amina's house at Kamiritho, where he had sinned against the Lord, and burnt it. He watched the flames and he felt truly purified by fire. He went to bed at ease with himself and peaceful in his knowledge of being accepted by the Lord." (Petals:14)

Karega is able to understand the deep rooted prejudice within Munira, his necessity to purge himself through the blaming and annihilation of others. Munira's calling Wanja a prostitute brings out an emotional outburst from him:

"...we are all prostitutes, for in a world of grab and take, in a world built on a structure of inequality and injustice, in a world where some can eat while others can only toil, some can send their children to schools and others cannot, in a world where a prince, a monarch, a businessman can sit on billions while people stare or hit their heads against church works for divine deliverance from hunger, yes, in a world where a man who has never set foot on this land can sit in a New York or London office and determine what I shall eat, read, think, do, only because he sits in a heap of billions taken from the world's poor, in such world, we are all prostituted...why then need a victim hurl insults at another victim?" (Petals:240)

Munira's privileged background prevents him from understanding the world as Karega does; he is concerned only with the moral nature of the world. Hence, unfortunately his concept of purgation is unilateral, arising from his conscience of guilt heedless of others' views and beliefs. But his belief in fire as a cleansing agent is significant and we find such a faith in fire even in Wanja. Wanja thinks of "the water and fire of the beginning and the water and the fire of the second coming to cleanse and bring purity to our earth of human cruelty and loneliness" (Petals:65). Wanja wants a clean new life with the images from the past 'burnt right out of her life and memory'. Her narrow escape from the arson at her whorehouse gives her 'yet another chance to try out new paths, new possibilities'. And the narrator informs us that "Already she felt the stirrings of a new person (doubly signifying both herself and the baby to be born)...she had after all been baptised by fire" (Petals:337).

Ngugi, a true revolutionary socialist writer that he is, rejects religion as well as democracy as means of achieving liberation from socio-economic and cultural bondage in the post-colonial Kenyan context. In spite of all the deceptions, dejections and deaths, *Petals of Blood* ends with a revolutionary vision, where Karega though confined in a lock-up finds himself no more alone. He is visited by a girl who informs that all the workers in Ilmorog and the unemployed have planned for another strike and a march through Ilmorog. The Society of One World Liberation under the leadership of Stanley Mathenge is returning from Ethiopia to complete the war he and Kimathi had started. There are also rumours about a return to the forests and the mountains. Thus we are back to the beginning, with the hint of a new revolution in the offing. The system which "bred hordes of round-bellied jiggers and bed-bugs" has to be

“...fought consciously, consistently and resolutely by all the working people! From Koitalel through Kang'ethe to Kimathi it had been the peasants, aided by the workers, small traders and small landowners, who had mapped out the path. Tomorrow it would be the workers and the peasants leading the struggle and seizing power to overturn the system and all its prying bloodthirsty gods and the gnostic angels, bringing to an end the reign of the few over the many and the era of drinking blood and feasting on human flesh. Then, only then, would the kingdom of man, and woman really begin, they joying and loving in creative labour.” (Petals:344)

References

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