

Imperialism, Corruption and Protest in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* and *Wizard of the Crow*

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Abstract

Most African countries today are at the verge of collapse as a result of corruption and failed leadership, occasioned by imperial conquest of Africa by the West. This led to the steady but gradual erosion of African cultural values and bred self-centred elites who saw nothing good in their African roots. This paper takes a literary journey into Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* and *Wizard of the Crow* to examine how he has continued to criticise African landers and the elites and how he has educated and aroused the consciousness of the peasants and workers of Kenya and Africa in general to rise up and protest neo-colonial leaders. Adopting the library-based research and content analysis of the two primary texts, this paper employs literary Marxism as interpretative ideology to examine Ngugi's stance on neo-colonialism, corruption and protest in his literary oeuvre as the only way to check both individual and community excesses of the African elites in modern times. The findings of this paper show that Ngugi is not just re-telling history, neither is he an unbeliever but he uses his literature as a tool for raising national consciousness of the masses that their present socio-political and economic conditions lie with their corrupt leaders. He advocates for mass action of the workers and peasants of Kenya and Africa to hold their leaders accountable.

Keywords: Imperialism, Corruption, Protest, Marxism, Africa

Introduction

Historically, dominant nations have consistently overpowered weaker ones by taking control of their political structures, seizing territories, exploiting economic resources and sometimes installing military outposts to assert dominance. In Africa, the French employed assimilation as their method of colonial rule, while the British used indirect rule. Regardless of the strategy, the dynamic between the coloniser and the colonised was fundamentally unequal—a legacy that continues to influence Africa-Europe relations today (Shija 2014: 214).

Generally speaking, one can see African novels as a reaction to the consequences of imperialist conquest, occupation and exploitation of Africa. This is explored by different African writers in numerous texts under different perspectives. It is a historical process that can be classified into three different phases. First, there was the period of imperial conquest of Africa which led to the gradual but effective erosion of African cultural values. Then we have the period of armed struggle in different parts of Africa in which people fought and thirdly, there was the period of independence, nation building and re-adjustment to re-discover the continent's lost cultural values which were eroded during colonialism. All these issues have been discussed by different African novelists in different dimensions.

Kenya and Africa in general have a history of colonialism, a historical experience in which people were killed, subjugated, humiliated and alienated from their ancestral lands and values. Infact, Cook & Okenimkpe (1997:49) attest to this social reality about the estrangement of landed property in Kenya that by 1948, about an estimated Quarter of Gikuyu population were forced to leave their family homes because of imposed restrictions on farming activities in the "Native Reserves" by the colonial government. This created resentment against the colonial administration. The level of discrimination was quite humiliating.

The Church Missionary Society, which was fingered as an active agent working in collusion with the colonial administration, established schools with restrictions for only children of African converts. Those children whose parents remained traditionalists, were exempted from early education. It was in protest against this ugly trend that Gikuyu Independent Schools under two umbrella bodies – Gikuyu Independent Schools Association and the Gikuyu Karinga (Pure) Educational Association were formed (Ogude 1999). These associations focused their attention specifically on mission education and to remedy the quantitative and qualitative shortcomings of church schools.

Indeed, the above social context explains why Ngugi often attempted to give a picture of an organic and united ethnic community threatened by a foreign social agency. The threats were multiple and varied, but central to those threats was land confiscation. Those who benefited from this land alienation exercise were the white settlers and few black notable lackeys who had joined the church to "eat the crumbs that fell from the masters' table." This generated discord and ultimately resulted in the popular Mau-Mau resistance in Kenya.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the East African writer has written many books including novels and other polemical works which focused attention on the exploitative relationship between Africa and her colonisers. He was one of the surviving members of his peers against European imperialism and neo-colonialism in Africa through his numerous literary oeuvre until his recent departure to join his ancestors. This paper therefore focuses on his treatment of the issues of imperialism, corruption and protest in the two novels.

Theoretical Framework

The literary theory applied in this paper is Marxism. Marxism as a literary, political and social theory seeks to explain the course of human history and the structure of past, present and future societies. For this reason, there is a vital link between literature and history. When this theory is brought to bear on the literary works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, it helps in understanding the artistic process of re-inventing social realities from historical antecedents.

Many adherents of this theory concern themselves with the power of literary culture to intervene and transform existing economic and political arrangements and activities in their various societies. Prominent proponents of this theory and Marxist ideology are Karl Marx and his fellow thinker, Friedrich Engels. Others include Terry Eagleton, Edward Said, Franz Fanon and others. Ngugi wa Thiong'o has deployed this theory in his literary endeavours by presenting colonial and post-colonial insights into Africa's problems from this ideological standpoint.

Imperialism in Africa

The term "imperialism" means different things to different people. Many scholars and critics consider "imperialism" as a complex term due to its multifaceted dimensions. These arguments about the motives and techniques of imperialism rest dominantly on economic gains, national pride, the "so-called" Whiteman's burden to civilise, educate and evangelise Africa and for the purpose of national defence, all have loopholes. However, one thing still remains that whatever these apologists may claim, one cannot rule out economic motives from imperial conquest of Africa. Infact, Hobson (1902) argues that as one nation after another entered the machine economy in Europe and America and adopted advanced industrial methods it became more difficult for consumption to equal production, there the need for steady sources of supply of raw materials for the "hungry" industries. This condition of affairs formed the taproot of imperialism.

Whereas Marxists use the term, "imperialism" to apply to "a phase in expansion of capitalism" the Leninist theory of imperialism rests upon the assumption that all political actions spring from economic motives. Lenin therefore concludes that "imperialism is the monopoly stage of capitalism". In all these claims and arguments, Assibong (1999) definition fits the focus of this study. He describes imperialism as a ruthless and greedy pursuit by powerful nations to dominate weaker ones politically, economically, socially and culturally, benefiting the stronger nations while harming the weaker states. This unequal contact between Europe and Africa resulted in unequal exchange and exploitation of Africa, which according to Walter Rodney, shows "how Europe underdeveloped Africa"

The colonisation of Africa through imperial conquest in the last three decades of the 19th century was majorly for economic factors. This surge of colonising imperialism was fueled by heightened consciousness of economic advantages of the newly acquired colonies. Being colonised had a devastating effect on the people's cultural tradition where foreigners overran territories and installed their own governments. The inhabitants (Africans) were forced to speak the language of the colonisers and even adopt their cultural traditions. Many of the challenges faced by African nations today stem from the unequal encounter with Europe during the era of imperial conquest and exploitation. Fisher (2025) explained that the persistent political instability and socio-economic struggles across much of Africa can be traced back to the class structures imposed by colonialism. Even today, Africa's economic and other vital resources continue to be unequally distributed between the local petty bourgeoisie and their European and American partners.

The African elite and those in positions of political power today are largely products of colonial influence that persists into the neo-colonial era. This view aligns with Wa Thiongo (2006) observation that the African bourgeois class, which assumed leadership after colonial powers withdrew, was shaped by the imperialist cultural system. As a result, their worldview and mindset mirrored that of their European counterparts. Even after gaining political independence, their perceptions of society, history, language and national identity remained foreign, shaped by the ideological lens inherited from colonial mentors.

To writers like Ngugi, Africa's present conditions can only be traced back to European imperial conquest and subsequent colonisation of Africa which bred exploitation, corruption, self-seeking individuals, rivalry and suspicion, thereby eroding the hitherto communal spirit that existed among Africans before colonialism. African leaders today are enslaved by the temptation of money and the luxuries that money can buy, so they go to any length to acquire wealth, not minding the pathetic suffering of the majority. It is on the basis of the aforementioned that Ngugi always agitates for the collective spirit of the struggle against both internal and external forces shaping the future of Africa as in the days of old.

The Theme of Corruption in the Two Novels

Ngugi's novels present colonial insights into Africa because of the strong political message they present, based on strong historical and political dimensions. *Petals of Blood* and *Wizard of the Crow* deal with the Kenyan people's heroic struggle against both internal and external forces that stood between the people and development. Karpagam (2019) argues that *Petals of Blood* and *Wizard of the Crow* explain how Europeans had used the native leaders as tools to make the people surrender for economic and security expenses. The local power-mongers who cared only for their own profit exported the primary raw materials to the Western countries, thereby plundering the wealth and resources of the natives. He asserts that "*Wizard of the Crow* represents the plundering of the wealth and power of the people by the colonizers" (2019:716) in cohort with the rulers.

Ngugi focuses on the themes of corruption and protest in the two novels as themes that are interrelated and he treats them together because of their inextricable links and consequences. To Ngugi, history is a major tool in the fight against the socio-political disorder of the African continent caused by the ruling elites who took over power after independence but could not chart any meaningful ideology. Rather, they continue to act as stooges to Western capitalism. Ngugi argues that Africa's present socio-political problems are a direct consequence of colonialism. His argument has always been that Africans lived a communal life, devoid of selfishness. Land, which was and still is, the source of livelihood had the status of collective ownership and was shared and used by the community for the common good of all. He views pre-colonial Africa as a serene society devoid of parasites and predators. Wa Thiongo (1977:120) notes that, in the past, there were no vultures circling overhead to scavenge the bodies of dead laborers, nor were there flies feeding on the sweat and lifeblood of unsuspecting workers.

Suddenly, those predators came in to disrupt the hitherto existing serene society in the name of colonialism with their capitalist manipulations, thereby changing Ilmorog from a dusty village into a modern city with all its moral and social implications. Munira, the village headmaster, becomes a 'Born Again' Christian, Karega becomes a trade unionist. Abdulla, the former Mau-Mau fighter becomes a seller of oranges, a drunk and beggar while Wanja graduates into a madam of a brothel, with young girls working under her. Wanja's brothel becomes the centre of activity where politicians

and the elites like Chui, Kimeria, Mzigo and others go to spend weekends, enjoying young girls, while spending tax payers' money.

Wa Thiong'o (1977) illustrates how those who remained detached during the struggle for independence later emerged as powerful figures when Ilmorog transformed from a rural village into an urban center. Characters like Wanja, representing the common people, are compelled to adapt to this new economic reality. Through Wanja's reflections, Ngugi highlights the irony and injustice of post-independence Kenya. Individuals like Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria—particularly Kimeria, who had enriched himself by collaborating with colonial forces and had previously exploited Wanja—are now reaping the benefits of modernisation. This bitter reversal contributes to Wanja's descent into morally compromising choices. She openly admits using her sexuality as a tool of resistance and revenge against the same men who once oppressed her. Manipulating their desires and turning their rivalry into personal gain, Wanja seeks to reclaim agency in a system that continuously marginalizes her (Wa Thiongo, 2006).

Those in position of leadership are not left out in Ngugi's scrutiny. In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi presents a thorough depiction of the widespread corruption and injustice he perceives in Kenya—and Africa more broadly—under black leadership. The character of member of parliament (MP) Nderi wa Riera embodies this decay through his blatant incompetence, corruption and disregard for the struggles of his constituents. Rather than using funds collected for a vital community project, he diverts the money for personal gain—securing loans, purchasing company shares and investing in land and water-related ventures—while abandoning the very peasants he claims to advocate for. He has become one of the country's most influential and wealthy capitalists. This is a fitting illustration of politics in Africa today. The party in power is also indicted because of its corruption, thuggery, sectionalism and indifference to the problems of the country which are poverty, unemployment, starvation, poor healthcare and education, just to mention a few.

Many people see politics as a stepping stone to material aggrandisement instead of service to the people. The ideology that informed the Mau-Mau struggle for independence in Kenya and other places was defeated as the people wake up to the realisation of what they fought for—disillusionment. Ngugi expresses deep frustration with post-independence disillusionment through Abdulla's repeated cries of waiting for land reforms, employment and recognition of national heroes—symbolizing unfulfilled promises and systemic neglect. This same theme of capitalist exploitation, manipulation and societal frustration is echoed in *Wizard of the Crow*, where Ngugi calls for resistance against oppressive structures.

Corruption has a long-standing history of origin since the creation of humans and now assumes different dimensions, especially with African leaders. Infact, it has become an issue of great concern because of its atrocious impact on modern society. It is one of the greatest impediments to development in Africa and other so called "Third World" countries. Here, Ngugi portrays this in the Ruler of the Free Republic of Aburiria who has prolonged himself in power with nothing to show for it. The country is overflowing with filth and garbage. There is massive unemployment and the only thing the Ruler could think of is to embark on useless projects that have no direct bearing on the lives of the people. He is building an edifice on foreign loans acquired from Global Bank to finance "Marching to Heaven" while the people suffer hunger and starvation. Ngugi satirically portrays the ruler in *Wizard of the Crow* as a delusional dictator who justifies the absurd "marching to heaven" project by claiming it will surpass the biblical Tower of Babel, allowing him daily conversations

with God and divine guidance for national progress. This exaggerated ambition highlights the Ruler's megalomania and detachment from reality. At the same time, Ngugi reveals the dictator's cunning use of divide-and-rule strategies, pitting ministers, regions and communities against each other to secure his grip on power (Wa Thiong'o, 2007: 16).

The ordinary people bear the brunt of suffering while government officials focus solely on pleasing the Ruler and indulging in the privileges of power, thereby ignoring the needs of the masses. This reflects the argument by Oshionebo & Mbachaga (2010:2) that, since the post-colonial era, African nations have continued to endure hardship under the rule of elites who impose meager wages on the public, while a privileged few enjoy extravagant lifestyles funded by heavy taxation and deductions from the people's earnings.

According to Wa Thiongo (2007: 687), because the ruler is surrounded by greedy and corrupt politicians, the masses are pushed to the background in all things. This is the sad issue with African leadership today. The ruler's grip on power is the dictatorial combination of Idi Amin and Mobutu Sese Seko in Africa. This makes ministers fall over one another to impress and be in the good books of the Ruler for power. The Ruler has to import mirrors from abroad to cure his mysterious sickness while the people go hungry. This is confirmed by the wizard that, "I have been asked to use mirrors imported from abroad to smoke out enemies of the state" (Wa Thiongo 2007: 687).

Ugwuanyi (2014:77), in his work criticises the nature of leadership in postcolonial Africa, observing that many governments neglect people-centered initiatives in favor of superficial or wasteful projects that offer little to no meaningful benefit to the population. This is evident in the novel because the Ruler is surrounded by the likes of Mr. Tajirika, Kaniuru (Big Ben Mabo) Sekiokuu, Machokali and others who are just there for their personal gains and not for the people.

Ngugi's concern in these two novels and anywhere else is Africa's march towards genuine statehood arising from the negative effects of imperialism, corruption and dictatorship in the continent. He depicts this in his numerous literary works by focusing attention on the various political, economic and social intricacies that impedes development in Africa. It is based on these atrocities that Ngugi agitates for a collective fight of both the peasants and workers of Africa through protest which is one of the dominant themes in the two novels and clearly Marxist oriented. He has constantly urged the masses of Kenya and Africa in general to revolt and resist African capitalist governments through his novels. Ngugi clearly understands the efficacy of songs in African culture so even when the protest is presented in songs, the message is always clear.

Protest in the Two Novels

The unfolding socio-political realities in Africa have continued to form the central message in most contemporary African literary works. As corruption in Africa continue to manifest itself in different dimensions, Ngugi also continues to chart new ways or styles to combat such in his attempt to arouse national consciousness of the teaming masses of Africa to reject such leadership. Ngugi consistently celebrates the courageous resistance of Kenyans both during and after colonial rule, emphasizing the need for the oppressed masses of Africa to confront ongoing colonial and neo-colonial domination. He argues that as long as these forms of exploitation persist, peasants and workers—who are the true creators of national wealth—must be prepared to rise in defiance, even through violent means if necessary, especially when that is the only language their leaders understand. Ngugi defends this stance by asserting that

violence used to overthrow an unjust and intolerable social system is not barbaric but rather a form of purification, whereas violence used to maintain such a system is criminal and dehumanising. From a Marxist perspective, this viewpoint holds significant weight, as it calls for a critical re-examination of history to challenge the entrenched corruption, exploitation and oppression perpetuated by Africa's political elite.

Petals of Blood opens with the arrest of the four protagonists, Munira, the village headmaster turned a 'Born again' Christian, Karega, a trade unionist, Abdulla, a former Mau-Mau warrior, now a seller of oranges and Wanja, a former prostitute, now a madam of a brothel in Ilmorog. Ngugi (1977) vividly portrays the theme of protest through the murder investigation involving the deaths of Chui, Kimeria and Mzigo, the directors of Theng'eta brewery. The workers, angered by the arrest of Karega, quickly mobilise and confront the police, interpreting the situation not just as a legal matter but as an attack on the workers' movement and their collective struggle. Their chants and defiance reveal deep resentment against foreign exploitation and local collaborators, highlighting a class struggle driven by frustration and a desire for systemic change. The escalating tension and revolutionary tone reflect Ngugi's call for active resistance against oppression.

Protest and resistance are presented more humorously in the activities of Nyawira and her women of the 'people's court' as they call themselves. "a new order of justice created by today's modern woman. You are now appearing before a people's court" (Wa Thiong'o 2007: 435). In this scene, Ngugi captures the essence of collective resistance through the strategic actions of Nyawira and her group of women, who cleverly disrupt the Ruler's self-glorifying ceremony. By inciting chaos with cries of a snake in the crowd—despite the snake being largely unseen—they generate panic and confusion, exposing the fear and insecurity beneath the regime's facade of control. The ministers' hesitation and subtle glances reveal the fragility of their authority. This orchestrated disruption serves as a symbolic protest against the misuse of public resources for personal aggrandisement. Through this episode, Ngugi critiques the nature of African dictatorship, portraying the Ruler and his ministers as embodiments of corruption and self-interest. At the same time, he emphasizes that meaningful change can only occur through the unified resistance of the people—men, women and youth alike—against tyranny and exploitation.

Ngugi constantly advocates a revisitation of history to shape the future so that the younger generation does not go down in error. In *Wa Thiong'o* (1977), uses the character of Abdulla, a Mau-Mau veteran, to reinforce the enduring spirit of resistance and the legitimacy of revolutionary violence as a path to justice and national dignity. Through Abdulla's storytelling and songs, which he shares with children and fellow travelers, Ngugi revives the memory of the Mau-Mau struggle and highlights the betrayal of that cause by post-independence elites. The lyrics of the songs emphasize that Kenya belongs to its indigenous people and warn that traitors to the nation will eventually face judgment when true patriots rise again. This narrative thread suggests that figures like Kimeria, Chui and Mzigo—who symbolise betrayal and exploitation—meet a fate that aligns with the justice demanded in Abdulla's revolutionary songs. Ngugi thus implies that their deaths, caused by Munira's fire, represent a symbolic cleansing of corrupt elements and a fulfillment of the people's desire for retribution and restoration. They are traitors and betrayers to their people.

According to Ngugi, the inevitable outcome of the deep-rooted conflict between the wealthy elite and the impoverished masses is open rebellion by the oppressed. He vividly portrays this in *Wa Thiong'o* (1977:183), where public outrage against corrupt leadership erupts into physical resistance. As a crowd confronts Nderi, a symbol of the ruling class's betrayal, someone cries out, "These are people who are misusing our freedom," triggering a wave of collective disapproval. This quickly escalates into violence, with stones, sticks and other objects hurled at Nderi. Despite his initial attempt to maintain composure, a lump of mud strikes his mouth, shattering any illusion of control or authority. Forced into a humiliating retreat, he flees through Jeevanjee Gardens towards the police station, chased by angry citizens shouting "Mshike! Mshike! Huyuu!"—a scene that encapsulates Ngugi's belief that when injustice becomes unbearable, the people will ultimately rise up against their oppressors.

Ngugi reinforces his theme of resistance in *Wizard of the Crow* through the symbolic actions of beggars in the Free Republic of Aburiria, who represent the marginalized majority suffering under an exploitative regime. While the Ruler seeks massive loans from the Global Bank to fund extravagant and meaningless projects, a significant act of defiance unfolds during his birthday celebration. Kamiti and Nyawira, disguised as beggars, unite with the destitute masses to challenge the Ruler's authority, delivering a powerful message. As *Wa Thiong'o* (2007:72) illustrates, the beggars chant slogans like, "Marching to Heaven is marching to hell. Your strings of loans are chains of slavery. Your loans are the cause of begging. We beggars beg the end of begging," openly condemning the Ruler's policies and exposing the deceit behind his promises of prosperity. This radical expression of dissent reflects Ngugi's deep alignment with progressive and revolutionary ideologies. Cook and Okenimkpe (1997:266) emphasize that Ngugi consistently uses his literature and activism to advocate for transformative change, fully committing himself to the causes he believes in. In doing so, he validates Simatei's (2001:10) claim that a novelist's true relevance lies in actively shaping history through a deliberate artistic engagement with the oppressive realities of both colonial and postcolonial Africa.

Ngugi's works consistently portray the reality that resistance against oppression often comes at a steep cost. From his early writings to his later novels, he depicts the sacrifices made by individuals who fight for justice, particularly during and after the Mau-Mau rebellion. In *Petals of Blood*, characters like Ndinguri and Abdulla serve as representations of these sacrifices—Abdulla, for instance, loses a limb in the struggle for Kenyan self-rule. Equally symbolic is the assassination of the Lawyer, a pivotal figure who nurtures Karega's awakening to class struggle and political activism through mentorship, letters and shared ideological resources. The lawyer's murder not only highlights the threat posed by enlightened resistance but also symbolizes the clash between truth and tyranny, as well as the brutal silencing of dissent, a pattern deeply rooted in both colonial and postcolonial African governance. *Wa Thiong'o* (1998:119) strongly emphasizes the persistent and irreconcilable struggle between the oppressed and their exploiters, asserting that no degree of repression—be it imprisonment, detention, or even death—can extinguish the determination of the working class to fight against those who thrive on their labor. He firmly states, "Whether they imprison, detain or kill us, they will never stop we who toil from struggling against those who only feed on our toil. Between producers and parasites, there will never be peace, or unity or love," underscoring the fundamental and permanent rift between the laboring masses and the parasitic elite. This powerful declaration reflects his unwavering belief in the resilience and inevitability of the

people's resistance, highlighting the impossibility of harmony or reconciliation as long as systemic injustice and exploitation persist.

This resolve and understanding is also echoed in *Wizard of the Crow* in the confrontation between the protesters and the ruler with his sycophantic politicians, "One woman started shouting: How many tribes are there? Others replied two, producers and parasites" (Wa Thiong'o, 2007: 688). Ngugi's stance on the issue of imperialism, colonialism, corruption and neo-colonialism in his numerous novels and polemical works shows how different writers and characters responds differently to the political and national problems in their areas.

Conclusion

A critical study of Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* and *Wizard of the Crow* indicate that his pre-occupation has been to expose and reject neo-colonialism which is characterized by corruption and the hunger for power by African ruling elites. To him, the only way out of this is the mass protest, resistance and rejection of such by the peasants and workers of Africa. He insists that this gesture of protest should follow the old pattern of resistance even if it involves revolutionary violence. The task of redefining Africa's past and the present is a valuable project in envisioning a better future for the continent. The two novels for example portray the writer's postulation about Africa's developmental predicaments and how to tackle them in order to end colonial and postcolonial subjugation. He does this in his novels in order to build a better society for future generation of Kenyans and Africa in general.

Conflict interest(s)

The authors declare that they have no personal, professional or financial interest that may have inappropriately influenced the outcome of this research.

Ethical considerations

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