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LANGUAGE, ORAL TRADITION AND SOCIAL VISION IN  
NGUGI'S DEVIL ON THE CROSS

by

Bayo Ogunjimi

*I was born in a large peasant family: father, four wives and about twenty-eight children. I also belonged as we all did, in those days, that is my generation, to a wider extended family and to community as a whole. We spoke Gikuyu as we worked in the fields. We spoke Gikuyu in and outside the home. I can vividly recall those evenings when we sat around the fireside and grown-ups and we, the children, would tell stories in turns. It was mostly the grown-ups telling the stories to us, the children, but everybody was interested and involved . . . The stories with mostly animals as - the main characters were told in Gikuyu. Hare being small, weak, but full of innovative wit and cunning was our hero. We identified with him as he struggled against the brutes of prey like Lion, Leopard and Hyena.<sup>1</sup>*

At the Second International Conference of African Literature in the English Language held at the University of Calabar in Nigeria in 1982, Ngugi restated the cultural background, linguistic and social vision that inform African oration in general. His last novel written in Gikuyu is an evolution of such literary tradition, a creative validation of the sources, didactic and aesthetic qualities of African oral literature. The opening chapter of Devil on the Cross, which functions as a prologue, proves that the contemporary artist evolves from the historico-cultural generation of the Gicaandi Player or the Wandindi Player (the African traditional bard, minstrel and story-teller of old). The dialectical affinity between the two is reflected in Ngugi's invocation of the Muse, Gicaandi, at the beginning of the novel. The transposition of the utilitarian essence of the ancient art into the present is summed up in the remarks of Bahati, the old man of Nakuru -- "All stories are old. All stories are new. All stories belong to tomorrow. And stories are not about ogres or animals or about men. All stories are about human beings".<sup>2</sup> The ritualistic invocation of the Muse, the communal essence of art in traditional societies, the creation of a new man of new sensibility in the age of imperialism and neo-colonialism, depict the epic potentialities of the novel form in modern society. This is an interesting point to note in that Devil on the Cross presents both the authentic and mock-heroic epic forms. The

antithetical play of the opposites produces a fruitful synthesis, which is the commitment we find in the artist.

Devil on the Cross is a practical culmination of an important debate in African literature and in this guise it is an experimental novel. African writers and critics for quite a long time have been debating the issue of linguistic colonization and the need to write in national languages. Initial efforts directed towards this end are noted in the transliterative style and localization of fictional elements we find in writers like Achebe, Okara and Okot P'Bitek. Writing in the languages of the colonial powers provokes the tough question "who is the African writer writing for?" Linguistic acculturation in art and indeed in all spheres puts Europe in the position of "playing the role of primary audience and linguistic arbiter for the third world writing." An African artist that endeavours to break this historical advantage enjoyed by Europe is accused of committing "literary tribalism." Ngugi motivated by his ideological position writes:

*If our audience is composed of peasants and workers, then it seems to me that we must write in the languages of the peasants and workers of Africa. We cannot write in foreign languages unspoken and unknown by peasants and workers in our communities and pretend that we are writing for, and somehow communicating with, those peasants and workers, or pretend that we are writing a national literature.*<sup>3</sup>

In South-East Asia and other third world nations, the issue of linguistic colonization is assuming its most critical phase. Responding to questions at a seminar on Indian writing in English, held at London's Commonwealth Institute, Nirad Chaudhuri, a popular Indian writer remarked, "So far as I write in English, I am not an Indian writer." The massive illiteracy in these affected regions poses a great problem for this experiment. However, its long time effect will not be less than the type of iconoclasm that accompanied the invention of printing during the Middle Ages and subsequent popularization of literature and radical consciousness. It is an historical reality that such development destroyed the monopoly of knowledge by the Papacy over Latin Christendom and produced the era of Lutheran Protestantism.

Language itself is a form of communicative aesthetics, such aesthetics is transformed into ideological essence in a materialist context. Ngugi identifies two working functions of language. To him "the verbal means of mutual apprehension" transposes into what Marx calls "the language of real life"<sup>4</sup> as daily manifested in the productive machinery in a communal or capitalist system. The manifestation is more pronounced in



the latter because of the massive scale of specialization. Language thus becomes a dialectical realization of socio-culture -- "The duality of language is in fact a dialectic unity."<sup>5</sup> An artistic synthesis of proverbs, folktales, folklores, myths and legends expressed in the wealthy Agikuyu language is a more objective programme towards an ideological conscientization. These materials are made relevant to provoke dynamic reality in the present situation. Of course, this paper examines how the artist has synthesized the sense of commitment with that of creativity -- a synthesis that produces the type of Saint-Simonian spirit of avant-gardism in the novelist. The central thesis of the paper is that "art as a means of communication and an aspect of ideology . . . can help motivate men's minds in bringing about social change."<sup>6</sup>

#### AN ELEGY FOR THE HOMESTEAD

The theme of the destruction of the cultural homestead is recurrent and treated with deep concern in the novels, plays and critical works of Ngugi. Matters affecting national languages, arts, folktales, and lores and other essentials of the people's tradition, have always been considered with maximum interest. The traditional bards, minstrels and storytellers that educate, enliven and inculcate discipline into the system are almost totally swept away by the tide of colonialism. Ngugi the artist is the offspring of the Gicaandi Player and his creativity is to fill the cultural vacuum created by colonialism. Gatuiria, the intellectual-artist embodies this concern of the novelist.

Ngugi is very critical about the permeation of every aspect of the contemporary social matrix by acculturation. He expresses this in the language understood by the people, the language of proverbs, fables and parables. Wariinga, a victim of acculturation is warned that "Aping others cost the frog its buttocks." When we first meet Wariinga, she suffers from culture complex, behaving like Clementina, the new wife of Ocol in The Song of Lawino. In the P'Bitekian comic satirical mood, Ngugi flays the blacks who undergo the biological process of ecdysis. We are informed that Wariinga's "body was covered with light and dark spots like the guinea fowl. Her hair was splitting, and it had browned to the colour of moleskin because it had been straightened by red-hot iron combs." In short, Wariinga runs after a shadow and she is "in covetous pursuit of the beauty of other selves." This "masquerade motif" is a common strand in the novel as reflected by the "apemanship" of the intellectual class and the clientelism of the comprador class. The fable of the beautiful black girl and the man-eating foreign ogre is a further elucidation of this theme of culture complex. All these depict the anecdotal qualities of African proverbs. Proverbs are essential expres-

sions of the inherent wisdom and resourcefulness of African culture. As Professor Obiechina rightly admits, they belong to the gnomic tradition of the people and express the profound functioning of their intellect. Blending proverbs with modern thematic, especially in a novel originally written in the vernacular language, affords the artist an ample chance of socializing his reader. The imagistic composition of the proverbs creates a strong rhythmical flow in the narrative rendition.

What Lindfors acclaims as the "diachronic" element in Ngugi's fiction extends to the dialectical usage of culture. A close link can be established between Ngugi's renaissance move of the homestead and his stance against the ethics of capitalist ideology. Culture in a kind of structuralist-functional framework is defined as a synthesis of the economic, the political, which produces the ideological. Ngugi's theory of organicism is however neither Althusserian nor Simonsonian, in that he recognizes the supremacy of economic determinism. Further still, the philosophy behind his revival of the homestead transcends the Senghorian school of "Authenegrificanitus"<sup>7</sup> or Achebian concept of "nativism".<sup>8</sup> The absence of ideological dynamics in Achebe's cultural avant-gardism may justify Simonse's criticism of what he sees as cultural and thematic particularisms in Achebe's novels.<sup>9</sup> This to Simonse may constitute a problem for a more objective appraisal of African novel from the Marxist perspective of the modes of production approach. But even then, Simonse seems to underplay the role of cultural detraction in African Literature. What formulates the material culture on which Marxist literary criticism is based is the generic culture or the aggregation of life values that inform the essence and existence of any society in course of its growth. Such generic culture has duality of relationship both to the base and the superstructure; therefore it cannot be relegated to a tiny spectacle in course of the growth of the society. Such "cultural concepts" are basic to material culture whether in pre-capitalist or capitalist societies and the interruption of such "cultural concepts" brings the perpetual internal contradictions of the materialist culture of capitalist production. There is the fear of an historical omission if the discussion of the African novel is based on a materialist ideology that suppresses the culture contact between Africa and Europe. Ngugi's works make a cautious balance out of this complex dynamic.

Cultural nationalism to Ngugi means the enfranchisement of the people from a materialist culture which threatens their survival. The process of cultural reconstruction is the process of critical consciousness. Culture, history and materialist concept fuse to produce the reality we see in the Kamirithu Educational, Cultural and Community Centre in Limuru. The organizers of the Centre perceived integrated rural development



as that of people's culture, economy and literacy. The artistic fruition of the Centre is the play Ngaahika Ndenda (I will marry when I want). The events associated with this play, logically are those that produced Devil on the Cross and Ngugi Detained. The cumulative radical values of a comprehensive art-piece produced from a synthesis of a familiar language, history and culture is stated by Chinweizu when he perceives such literature as

*. . . an important medium for helping to shape national consciousness, for contributing to the historic projects of nation-building and development, and for moulding the world outlook and intellectual framework for national action. They are actually aware of literature's capacity to prepare people for life, and even on occasion to move them to action.*<sup>10</sup>

Literature at this point ceases to be less particularistic, but tends to nurture "a revolutionary culture which is not narrowly confined by the limitations of tribal traditions or national boundaries, but is outward looking to Pan-Africa and the Third World and the needs of man." For Ngugi, the ultimate goal of such a universal force in art is to "be transformed into a socialist programme, or be doomed to sterility and death."<sup>11</sup>

#### A MOCK-EPIC OF CAPITALISM

Ousmane's protagonist in The Money-Order elucidates on what Marx identified as the effect of man's irreverent worship of money. In a letter to his cousin in Paris, Ibrahim Dieng advises:

*I beg you not to regard money as the essence of life. If you do, it will only lead you into a false path, where sooner or later you will be alone. Money gives no security. On the contrary it destroys all that is human in us.*<sup>12</sup>

It is this absurd morality of bourgeois ideology that Ngugi castigates in his last novel. The virulent Swiftian satire and Brechtian comic-satirical dramatic elements fuse with the allegorical style of Bunyan, to produce the mock-heroic technique of Pope and Dryden. This tapestry of style strengthens the parabolic element for strong thematic effect.

The dramatic core of the novel is the Devil's Feast and basically it is about those whom Armah refers to as predators, askaris and zombies in Two Thousand Seasons. Very early in the novel, the passengers in the Matatu sensationally prepare us for this allegorical gathering. But more than the dramatic

rendition of the allegory itself, the central character, the Devil figure is an archetype, the variants of which we find in D.O. Fagunwa and Amos Tutuota's folktales. The giant figure of the Devil is that of a monster and tormentor. Ngugi conjures such pictures as being synonymous with the destructive and parasitic role of those he calls "bourgeois compradors." Apart from the philosophical interpretation of the Feast as a conflicting drama between the forces of Good and Evil, the novelist metaphorically describes it as "dance of the hunter and the hunted" -- "the joke between the leopard and goat."<sup>13</sup> The implied message is obvious, the oppressed can perceive the enormity of the crime of the ruling elites and prepare themselves for redress.

The setting in the Cave has the classic conventions of the epic tradition such as the invocation of the Muse, the introduction of the heroes, the descriptive list of subsidiary heroes, the competitive games and speeches, which are all imitation of a serious action. But all these present an empty façade and the novelist's mockery of neo-colonialism and capitalism in Africa. It is relevant to make reference to the setting in the Matatu, which is equally important stylistically and thematically. Though the two settings are somehow antithetical, they are complimentary in that they are calculated towards the same exposition. When the scene finally moves to the Cave, we are entertained and at the same time instructed with the aid of caricatures and burlesque figures. Ngugi uses his experiences as a dramatist to shape the fictional presentation of his characters and actions. This he effectively integrates with his ability to grapple with the various concepts and theories that strengthen capitalism as an oppressive ideology.

The feast is declared open by the Master of Ceremonies with the Biblical parody of the gospel parable:

*. . . For the Kingdom of Earthly wiles can be likened into a ruler who foresaw that the day would come when he would be thrown out of a certain country by the masses and their guerilla freedom fighters. He was much troubled in his heart, trying to determine ways of protecting all property he had accumulated in that country and also ways of maintaining his rule over the natives by other means . . .*<sup>14</sup>

The capitalist/client relationship at the heart of the parable defines what neo-colonialism is. Like the Master of Ceremonies, the foreign leader from the International Organization of Thieves and Robbers (IOTR), explains further the ideology of capitalism. Allegorical and satirical use of names is also effectively employed to match the mock-heroic setting. The



foreign leader dabbles into an illogical tirade by saying "No! You black people are incapable of planning and working out ways of cutting the ropes that tie you to your masters. You must have been misled by the Communists." The rationalization by capitalism which aims at the maximization of profits thereby widening the gap between the poor and the rich is reflected in his own Biblical allusion -- "For unto the man of property more will be given, from the poor man will be taken . . ." An attack on the politics of the Cartels and International monopoly capital is presented in the satirical war against their various institutions such as "World's Exploitation Banks; Money-Swallowing Insurance Schemes; Industrial Gobblers of Raw Materials: Cheap Manufacturers for Export Abroad, trades in Human Skins, Arms for Murder . . ." The whole Lenin's theory of imperialism and capitalism is rendered convincingly in a fictional mode to expose the inhumanity of an ideology that "wraps poison in leaves sugar." Other than using Biblical allusions for denouncing Christianity as a Colonial apparatus and "the opiate of the masses," Ngugi employs these Biblical elements for stylistic effects of parody and satire.

Ngugi's satire becomes more vitriolic when portraying the local allies of European Fetishism. The local competitors are all given satirical appellations and their popularity, an euphemism for notoriety is determined by their philistinism. It is of interest to note that the first speaker is a lumpen proletariat. Comically and pathetically, his own skill in theft does not qualify him for this ensemble of International Robbers. Of course, Ndaaya wa Kahuria, the Napier-Grass-Son-of-Trembling is thrown out of the cave. This is a biting irony when we realize that the real "Caterpillars of Commonwealth" are exalted and exonerated. We are later introduced to Gitutu Gatuaguru, otherwise hailed as Rottenborough Ground-flesh. An historical tragedy, his ancestors were traitors during the struggle against colonialism. His own Cathecism and code of conduct is "Reap where you never planted, eat for which you never shed a drop of blood." Kihaahu Gatheeca, whose foreign name is Lord Gabriel Bloodwell Stuart-Jones is another eminent competitor. The deceit and exploitation involved in his Modern-Day-Nursery, shows how socio-economic programmes are used for profit motives by egocentric individuals.

Mukiraai, a very strategic character in the novel is encountered both in the Matatu and Cave. Such positioning is symbolic as an authentication of the dilemma of a petty-bourgeois, who aspires to the bourgeois class. Mukiraai is a University graduate with a chain of degrees in Economics, Business Administration and Commerce. An academic robot, he reduces all the radical and socializing themes of the debate in the Matatu to a campaign against Communism. A student of Social Darwinism, he believes that "people can never be equal



like teeth. Human nature has rejected equality. Even universal nature herself has rejected any absurd nonsense about equality." As a competitor in the Devil's Feast, he defends the capitalist doctrine of Malthusianism. Of course, he is a member of the International Parenthood Association and as he tells us: ". . . children are our biggest enemy. Any increase in the population is contrary to our interest." But like the lumpen proletariat he is disqualified because "Education is not property." Mukirai becomes a stylistic device in the hand of the novelist. He later changes his ideological position and wages a war of calumny on the ideology of capitalism. We have no hope for a sane society through Mukirai's type of intellectualism and more than Gatuiria, he illuminates the novelist's pessimism about the role of the petty-bourgeoisie as a revolutionary class.<sup>15</sup>

The more competitors want to display their expertise in the game to theft and robbery, the more incisive the novelist's satire becomes. The characterization of Nditika wa Ngunji and Kanyanju are particularly interesting in this regard. Nditika wa Ngunji's concept of Trinity is based on "Grabbing, Extortion and Confiscation." He displays all the vices of capitalist economy such as the exploitation of labour, smuggling, profiteering and hoarding. To him, "mass famine is jewellery of the wealthy." Ngunji manifests the illusory intellectualism that Swift satirizes in the Academy of Lagado. For the cupidity and egoism of the privileged class, he contemplates a pseudoscientificism "for manufacturing human parts." Therefore, "Every man could have two mouths, two bellies, two cocks, two hearts and hence two lives. Our money would buy us immortality! We would leave death to the poor."<sup>16</sup> Kanyuanji contemplates a similar programme. Voice informs us that Kanyuanji wants to set up an experimental farm for milking the bodies of the workers. The company that will handle such a bogus project is "Kenyo-Saxon Exporters: Human Blood and Flesh." Ngugi carries the satirical aspects of Swift to a more serious level of reprobation and disgust. Ngugi's social philosophy and criticism of capitalism produces a kind of existentialism in him. His message is summed up in the poems "The Leveller" or "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard."<sup>17</sup>

The use of Dream Vision allegory in the novel is a variant of the stream of consciousness technique common in his earlier novels. Voice carries the motif of Satanism but ironically, he is even holier than the "Devils" we find in the cave. Almost at every level of his utterances we seem to be hearing the voice of the novelist himself. Wariinga's dialogue with Voice can be perceived as a stylistic device of acquiring the psychological stamina Ngugi wants to see in the contemporary African woman.

## ARTS FOR HEART'S SAKE

Ngugi writes for the oppressed, but he does not idealize their potentiality. Therefore when he warns them in the prologue/chapter of "the blindness of the heart" and "the deafness of the mind," he is only being realistic. This is an educative method of averting what Paulo Freire perceives as the chronic problem of the oppressed. More than any other of Ngugi's novels, Devil on the Cross works through diverse aesthetic patterns to effect the theory of mobilization.

The setting in the Matatu like that of the Cave is a forum for the education and socialization of the masses. The non-static claustrophobic setting is a panoramic condensation of the vast society, its social, economic and moral problems. We are provided with an image of a collapsing social system, symbolised by the ailing structure of the Matatu: "The engine moaned and screamed like several hundred dented axes being ground simultaneously. The car's body shook like a reed in the wind. The whole vehicle waddled along the road like a duck up a mountain . . . The engine would growl, then cough as if a piece of metal were stuck in its throat, then it rasped as if it had asthma."<sup>18</sup> The implied metaphor is the correspondence between "the patient" and "the healer." For survival, the Kenyan body-politic deserves an urgent health service. "Healing is an implicit symbolism pervading the novel and it bears the revolutionary optimism of the novelist. The pattern of character-creation articulates this unhealthy contradiction and the need for panacea. The diviner and the tormented peasant the unhealthy car that Wariinga the healthy mechanic puts back on road are pointers to this symbolism. The whole syndrome is summed in a committed artist, the healer versus the uncommitted society, the patient.

Despite the perverse symbolism that Mwaura, the driver and his Matatu conveys, Ngugi's device is not meant to preach the pessimism of Armah in his first novel. The passengers in the Matatu are not somnabulists like Armah's characters in the rustic bus. Neither do they venture alone like "the man", for they realize that to venture alone is to perish alone without any concrete social change. Most of the passengers in the Matatu are conscious and critical of their societal crises, and they are willing to resign themselves to fate.

The programme of conscientization is discernable in the various fables told by Bahati, the Old Man of Nakuru. A custodian of oral tradition, he makes the relevant past flow into the conscious present. The fable of the peasant and the ogre and the Faustus-Mephistopheles story of Ndinguri have one thing in common, and that is, the concept of violence. The diviner/artist warns the peasant "Nothing good was ever born out of



perfect conditions." Of course, he can only get rid of the ogre through violence. In *Ngugi Detained*, Ngugi indicates his interests in Blake and Hegel's theories of dialectics. Such theories perceive that revolution defies the law of inertia; it operates through the logic of antitheses at war with thesis to forge a synthesis. Logically, any literature organized to negate "the culture of silence" is a literature that advocates revolutionary violence. This Freirian-Fanonian circle is represented by Muturi, who re-affirms the belief of his creator in the use of violence when he says "Even today guns like this should really be in the hands of workers so that they defend the unity and wealth and freedom of their country."<sup>19</sup> The conflict in the Cave confirms this novelist's attitude to social revolution.

The general philosophical debates in *Devil on the Cross* are based on the concept of Evil and Good. But Ngugi's philosophy is a characterization of the conflicts of the capitalist mode of production and ethics. Antithetical juxtapositions such as Heaven and Hell, God and Satan, Life and Death, Body and Heart are thematic syndromes for explaining such a materialist culture. Ngugi's strong logic about the natural and physical law governing the Body and the Heart is a way of depicting the social contradictions of our real world. Against the theological law in the Book of Ecclesiastes : 12, Ngugi defines human existence in terms of the atomic materialism of Lucretius<sup>20</sup> and Marxist theory of organicism. The body, the soul, the heart and the mind are functional parts of an organic structure. The death of one is the end of others and "the soul does not return to God who had created it." This is a form of atheistic existentialism in the novelist. One of his characters makes a comical reflection on this: "This Earth is my home. I am not passing through." Ngugi makes a parody of Jimmy Reeves's dream of a paradisaal bloom in "This world is not my home I am just passing through," a re-affirmation of Jimmy Cliff's philosophy of "I want it right here on earth."

The concept of Evil and Good extends to the level of characterization. The novel makes a dramatic tabloid where characters act their virtues and vices. The guests and competitors at the Devil's Feast represent a level of sensibility which the novelist abhors. However, Wangari, Muturi, Wariinga, even the petty bourgeois Gatuiria articulate a genuine sensibility pointing to a new spirit of change. Wangari is an archetypal representation of Mumbi in the Agikuyu mythology. Her replicas in the previous novels of Ngugi are Mumbi, Nyan-kinyua and Wanja. Wangari epitomizes the historical contradiction of all generations and the novelist imbues her with a great sense of historical continuity. Her experiences in the Matusu make her to lament the perverted spirit of heroism in Harambe. Ngugi illustrates this sense of failure in the songs



of Wangari entitled "the Harambee of Money." An essential element of oral tradition profusely used by Ngugi is songs. In traditional societies songs have topical values and represent the contemporary social mood. Unemployment, the confiscation of her land by the "Kenya Economic Progress Bank" and her eventual arrest in Nairobi exacerbate her disillusionment. When we meet her in the Cave, she is involved in the revolutionary struggle against "the robbers" of her country. But ironically she is clamped down upon by the agents of reactionary violence. The fear Ngugi consistently expresses is the historical negation that relegates and replaces Kenyan Saints, martyrs and conquistadors with despots, who epitomize an historical fraud.

As for Wariinga, she embodies the contradictions of her own age. The purpose for which she is created is categorically stated by Ngugi himself in Ngugi Detained.<sup>21</sup> She becomes a complex character in terms of theme and style. Like Njoroge, her education suffers because of her class background, and she must have to strive for survival. Wariinga is sacked as an office typist for refusing the advances of her boss -- the Manager of the Champion Construction Company. Deserted by her boyfriend and ejected out of her house by the hired thugs of the landlord, she attempts committing suicide but is rescued by Muturi. In a dramatic game and parable "of the hunter and the hunted" between her and the Rich Old Man of Ngorika, she becomes pregnant, and birthing a daughter called Wambui.

But for Wariinga, this is not the end of the road. Her remorseful mood and reflections and immediate sense of guilt signal a victory for her generation. The hidden symbolism of the patient and the healer re-surfaces. By the time we meet her in the Matatu, her moments of sombre reflections are over and she becomes more assertive and critical of the system. Her revolutionary optimism is strengthened by her rescuer, Muturi, who after listening to her story of woes asserts confidently: "But I don't agree with you that our children will never know laughter. We must never despair. Despair is one sin that cannot be forgiven."<sup>22</sup> Muturi performs the historical role of Dedan Kimathi, Karega and other heroes of Agikuyu history and mythology. His role during the revolutionary onslaught in the Cave delineates further his revolutionary stance.

In an ironic tragi-comic plot device, Wariinga falls in love with Gatuiria, the son of the Rich Old Man of Ngorika, father of Wambui, her daughter. Such an affair gives another perspective of her virility of purpose. Gatuiria symbolises the contradictions of the petty bourgeois intellectual. In every episode we meet him, Ngugi convincingly presents him being caught between the anvil and hammer of ideology and class. This notwithstanding, he demonstrates the prospect of an intel-

lectual who in the words of Amílcar Cabral is capable of committing suicide, to be restored to life in the condition of a revolutionary worker."<sup>23</sup> In the melodramatic wedding episode, Wariinga becomes a stylistic device, a kind of "deus ex machina." Symbolically the destruction of the Old Man of Nghorika is a victory for womanhood and an assault on the bourgeois morality.

Most of Ngugi's female characters are usually dynamic with a strong sense of historical destiny and heroism. Wanja, Wangari and Wariinga are not comparable to the phoney female characters like Simi and Monica Faseyi in The Interpreters and Mrs. Koomson in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born. Even Soyinka's female character in Season of Anomy still lacks the potentiality of radical activism. Where Ngugi's female characters are embroiled in the decadent urban society, their immorality is the immorality of their general social order. But of course, they are not total victims of the complex formalized societies, they retrace their movements to the rural Ilmorog for assisting in social development. Stylistically, they become the artist's weapon. The holocaust in Wanja's house in Petals of Blood sees the extermination of the capitalist chiefs in the novel. Wariinga performs the same role, and her technical skill proves she is a force to be reckoned with in the society. But for Ngugi to make his central figure in Devil on the Cross a resourceful, productive and dynamic woman is to break the myth that the feminist anthropologist Joke Schrijvers condemns as "this discriminating tradition," which divides "people into two unequal sexes -- strong and the weak, the dominant and the subordinated, the superior and the inferior, the active and passive, the powerful and the powerless (the male and female)."<sup>24</sup> Ngugi, however, does this within the confine of a culture and an economy rapidly undergoing modernization.

Ngugi's idea of social radicalism in art seems to be more comprehensive and realistic in terms of class involvement. Such idea is conveyed through an Agikuyu proverb: "a single finger cannot kill a louse, a single log cannot make a fire last through the night, a single man, however strong, cannot build a bridge across the river: and many hands can lift a weight however heavy." Ngugi advocates for the theory of class collectivity that embraces the workers, peasants, students, progressive intellectuals and others. What makes the novel more remarkable is the practical involvement of a class with a revolutionary potentiality, which has hitherto not assumed a distinct role in the African fiction, the students. The ideological positioning of this budding fragment of the petty-bourgeoisie has always been reduced to a travesty of the Quixotic world order in many African novels. The inability of the petty-bourgeois intellectuals to operate as a coherent revolutionary force is partly accounted for by the elitist



education devoid of rational ideological contents. A more comprehensive radical children's literature is a valuable asset to the course of the committed African artist in a socio-culture that still survives on conservative socialization process.

Students' participation in the revolutionary political process in Africa is proved by the cases of Ethiopia, Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa as depicted in Devil on the Cross. The coup in Kenya and the massive arrest and incarceration of students from the University of Nairobi attests to this. President Arap Moi during the Kenyatta Day on October 19th, 1983, reproached the University as "an institution which was brought into sorrowful disrepute by a student body which proved itself pathetically vulnerable to the crudest stupidities of dialectical subversion."<sup>25</sup> This type of outrageous outburst is expected from the boss of a neo-colonial capitalist state anywhere in Africa. In the novel, the solidarity movement of the students of Ilmorog with the workers will be regarded as subversive. The appearance of the "goatee beard" students' leader which recalls that of revolutionary Marxists like Castro and Guevara is enough to disorganize the state. Of course like Wangari and Muturi, the students' leader is arrested and detained.

Ngugi's sole aim is to put art to the service of the oppressed class. The various conflicts in the novel constitute "a struggle to replace capitalist society by socialist society, capitalist man by socialist man" to use the words of Professor Norman Rudich. More specifically his art moves in the direction of what Roger Garaudy defines as the ultimate vision of an avant-garde art:

*The work of art is thus not only a model of the relationship between man and the world in which he lives: it is also a design or a projection of a world which does not yet exist, a world in the process of being born. The true artist then has this 'prophetic' function: he is pre-eminently the one who helps his contemporaries invent the future.*<sup>26</sup>

Ngugi realizes the enormity of the ideological crisis in the African society. He does not idealize the situation, hence he only articulates his ideological position with series of symbols indicating a revolutionary optimism. The holocaust and the disorganization of the Devil's Feast, the melodramatic assassination of the Old Man of Nghorika cannot terminate a system deep-rooted in the society. But the novelist believes that with these symbolic gestures the masses can be oriented and organized towards a revolutionary consciousness that can change their lot. The Kenyan coup seemed to authenticate this



view. Paradoxically, the state always underestimates the utilitarian values of art. But why censorship, why imprisonment and why the alienation of the committed artist?

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong'o "Language and Literature": A paper presented at the 2nd International Conference of African Literature and the English Language. University of Calabar, Nigeria, June 15-19, 1982. pp 1-2.

<sup>2</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong'o Devil on the Cross. Heinemann Educational books Ltd., London, 1982. pp. 61-62.

<sup>3</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong'o "The Making of a Rebel." Index on Censorship June 1980 Vol. 9 No. 3, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup>See the article "Language and Literature," p. 5.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>See D.D. Egbert Social Radicalism and the Arts. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1970. p. 88.

<sup>7</sup>This is the new term that Sembene Ousmane gives to Negritude in his last novel, The Last of the Empire.

<sup>8</sup>Professor E.N. Obiechina in an article "Cultural nationalism in Modern African Creative Literature" employs this sociological concept to define Achebe's usage of culture. See African Literature Today, No. 1, 1968, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup>See Simon Simons "African Literature Between Nostalgia and Utopia: African Novels Since 1953 in the Light of the Modes of Production Approach" in Research in African Literature, Winter 1982. 13/4.

<sup>10</sup>South: The Third World Magazine. January, 1983, p. 21.

<sup>11</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong'o "Towards a National Culture," East African Journal, VII, 1971, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup>Sembene Ousmane. The Money Order, translated by Clive Wake. Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1972, p. 130.

<sup>13</sup>In an article "The Robber and the Robbed: Two Antagonistic Images in Afro-American Literature and Thought," Ngugi gives the ideological interpretations of these metaphors. See Ngugi wa Thiong'o Writers in Politics, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1981, pp. 123-138.

<sup>14</sup>Devil on the Cross, p. 82.

<sup>15</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong'o Writers in Politics, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1981, p. 78.

<sup>16</sup>Devil on the Cross.

<sup>17</sup>These poems have existentialist perception about life. The poets' philosophy is about the inconsequentialness of life since "the paths of glory lead but the grave."

<sup>18</sup>Devil on the Cross, p. 31.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>In his book De Rerum Natura or On the Nature of Things, the Roman philosopher Lucretius Carus, based his natural law on the atomic materialism of Democritus and Epicurus. His attempt was to liberate mankind from religious fears by depicting that the soul is material and is born and dies with the body. This renders his philosophy to a kind of atheism.

<sup>21</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong'o Ngugi Detained. Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1981, pp. 10-11.

<sup>22</sup>Devil on the Cross, p. 27.

<sup>23</sup>Amilcar Cabral: Unity and Struggle. Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., London, 1980, p. 136.

<sup>24</sup>"Viricentrism and Anthropology" by Joke Schrijvers in The Politics of Anthropology: From Colonialism and Sexism Toward a View From Below, ed. Gerrit Huizer and Bruce Mannheim. Maiton Publishers. The Hague, Paris, 1979.

<sup>25</sup>Quoted from The Weekly Review, Nairobi, Kenya, October 22, 1982, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup>Quoted from Praxis and Ideology, Part 2, p. 49.



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