



REPRESENTING THE TRAITS OF CAPITALISM IN THIONG'O'S *DEVIL ON THE CROSS*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper deals with Ngugi WA Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* where the novelist beautifully presents the predicament of postcolonial Africans. The complex web of social relationships is studied where individuals' freedom is suppressed under the corrupt practices of capitalists. Caught between the treachery of privileged people on one hand and individuality, independence on the other, the protagonists feel lost and confused, and explore ways to fulfill themselves as human beings.

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INTRODUCTION

Ngugi WA Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* is a remarkable novel of the Post colonial period. It was originally written in his native tongue Gikuyu with the title *Caitani Hultharaba Ini*. It was first appeared in 1980 and was translated by the author himself into English in 1982. This was written in prison, which expressed his emotions regarding the neocolonial exploitation of ordinary Kenyan people. Regarding this novel Ngugi says:

Free thoughts on toilet papers! I had deliberately given myself to difficult task ... the Kenyan people's struggles against the

neo-colonial form and stage of imperialism (Ngugi 1981: 8).

Being a sensitive writer, Ngugi is worried about the corruption and exploitation that is prevalent in the Postcolonial Kenyan society. *Devil on the Cross* is his literary representation of his response to neo-colonialism. Ngugi's criticism of neo-colonial Kenya is not based on hatred, but on a reasoned critique of a county exploited and betrayed by a corrupt and parasitical national bourgeoisie. He is convinced that capitalism is a systematic robbery of peasants and workers. It is a robbery protected and sanctified by the government on one hand and religion on the other. Ngugi juxtaposes two different



classes: the peasants, students and workers and the exploiters and their close collaborators. The exploiters, though they represent a small part of the society, are the wealthy people upon whom the destiny of the whole society depends. In short they are the elite people. These elite members are the elect of the white imperialists, as one can see in the gathering in the cave for the competing selection of the best native robbers who would represent the colonizers. Ngugi describes these African political elite as the "local watch dogs" of the white man.

The story of *Devil on the Cross* focuses on a group of people who travel in a taxi to Illmorog, where a grotesque gathering is being organized and where thieves and robbers are gathered to contest for the title of the greatest criminal. Thus the tone is set – it is satirical, exaggerated, outrageous and melodramatic. The occupants of the taxi represent a cross-section of contemporary Kenyan society. They are ordinary local people, who participated in different movements and face different experiences. During the journey the driver and the five passengers discuss social issues which are the most central to the novel. They pass their time telling stories which highlight the social and economic conditions of the society in which they live, especially the exploitation of Kenyans through the collusion of corrupt Kenyans with the entrepreneurial comprador bourgeoisie. On the other hand there are "the leaders of foreign delegation from the International Organization of Thieves and Robbers (IOTR) whose head quarters are in New York". These people have applied to become full members of IOTR. These representatives are neo-colonial powers indulging in the most heinous corrupt practices and exploitation. Each one wears shirts made of paper money of their respective countries. They proclaim openly their criminality and greed vis-à-vis the communal goods each one reveals his grabbing of the Kenyan economy. They take away the natural resources of Kenyans and also indulging exploitation of the workers and the peasants. They have a complete hold on the law keepers such as the police and the judiciary. So they don't need to conceal their methods and motives of exploitation. The arrogance, conceit, and hypocrisy of capitalist

power are only matched with its repressive and exploitative power.

Gitutu is a big-bellied person who fattens on land. He proudly relates his story of success of how he has taken over vast estates from the white settlers, sub-divided into plots and sold them at high prices to his fellow Kenyans. He has no scruples to accept the deed openly:

The land wasn't mine and the money with which I had paid for wasn't mine and I hadn't added anything to the land where did I get the 2,20,000 shilling? From the pockets of the people. Yes, because the land really belonged to people and the money with which I bought it came from the people (106)

This shows the ugly picture of the grabbing of the lands of the poor peasants by the black imperialist.

Gitutu Kihaaku is another exploiter who made a lot of money through the concept of no national languages, songs and names. The advertisement in the newspaper was given as follows:

Modern-day Nursery School.
Experienced European Principal.
Formerly for Europeans Only.
Now Open to a Few Kenyans.
Foreign Standard as Before
National Languages, National Songs,
National Names Banned.
Foreign Languages, Foreign Songs,
Foreign Toys etc., etc.
English Medium of Instruction
Limited Places.
Telephone or Call in Your Car
Colour is no Bar: Money is the Bar
Fees High (113).

Kinaa Ku is another evil who indulged in corrupt practices in the local elections. He indulged in such activities like bribing and rigging and thus became the chairman of local Housing Committee. He gets percentages by foreign speculators in exchange for building contracts. Ngugi depicts the ugly face of the ghastly exploiters. The pot-bellied and fat persons indulge in unscrupulous commercialism. There is discussion on the topic that



the elite should exploit only the poor. The novel exposes false educators and corrupt business tycoons. One of the exploiters brags in the following way:

I hadn't shed a drop of sweat. All my money came... I never stopped plucking it. I picked one fruit after another. The sweet juice would spill out the corners of my mouth before I learned to eat more decrepity (116).

Nditika boasts of another area of exploitation. It is the practice of smuggling of goods and hiking up the prices of essential commodities through black market. The whole narration runs like a treatise on exploitation of the Africans by the African imperialists.

Mwireri is another character who reveals how the multinational companies force the local enterprise out of the market by under-selling cooking oil and contraceptives. He demands that exploitation must be indigenous, free from foreigners. The story reaches its climax when each speaker claims the crown of social crime and gives a new scheme of exploitation. For example, Kihaaku thinks of deploying plastic puppets of white children in enticing local parents. Gitutu imagines about the class where plots of land will be sold instead of tiny toys and citizens queue up to buy them. He also thinks of selling the air to the workers in the airtight bottles. Nditika confers the market in the human organs for transplants so that the elite will purchase the physical immortality and leave death to the poor. In that way selling the very air to workers in their country and siphon of their blood and sweat to sell them abroad for a profit is the zenith of capitalistic tendency.

According to Ngugi, the trademark bulging, the arrogance of power, the uncurbed ambition and cynicism charactering African imperialist stooges in their pursuit of wealth are the sad factors of life in today's African society. Ngugi conveys the fact that these capitalist would go to any extent to promote their interest and have no moral scruples to make money. They, in fact, soled their motherland to the colonizers for their materialistic ends. It is for the

same reason that they continue to serve it into neo-colonialism.

In *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi conveys that the Devil is worshipped by the capitalist power. Satan exposes the precise methods of power of the elite and their cynical exploitation of the religion. Satan made a true picture of what was going on in the neo-colonial Kenya. The novelist argues that the cook is deprived of eating his tasty food, as he is not allowed to eat the pudding. In the same way, the peasants and the workers toil and produce resources which they cannot enjoy.

CONCLUSION

In his essay on Literature and culture *Homecoming* Ngugi states his ideology that there is no area of our life that has not been affected "by the social, political and expansionist needs of European capitalism" (1972: xv). *Devil on the Cross* can be seen as representing Ngugi's Marxist ideology in favour of the Kenyan proletariat and against capitalist and corrupt African elites. Therefore, his Marxist beliefs and their clear representations in his work make Marxist readings most obvious. Undoubtedly and indisputably, *Devil on the Cross* represents capitalism as a social, political and economical phenomenon. Regardless of the seeming independence of Kenya, politically, socially and economically colonialists and imperialists are still influential. That is why in the novel the presence of the colonial power is strongly felt. Accordingly, to approach *Devil on the Cross* without discussing Marxism and colonialism is impossible: it is the effect of capitalism and the neo colonial stage of imperialism that is the source of all conflicts in the text.

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