

Decolonizing African Literature by Deconstructing Mono Genre-Centrism in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Petals Of Blood* (1977)

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Abstract

*Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o is an ardent advocate of decolonization as demonstrated in both his creative writing and critical texts. In the former he has achieved decolonization by various strategies. In *Petals of Blood* (1977) he achieves this through deconstruction of mono genre-centrism that defines western literatures. The text has received extensive critical analysis from various perspectives. In this paper I argue that the many interpretations are validated by the multiple genres in the four parts of the text. The book has aspects of various genres of modern Literature and Orature including poetry, narrative fiction and elements of drama. It contains tragedy, comedy, romance, satire, allegory, epic, myth and folklore in varying degrees. It fits into various thematic categories such as socialist realism, postcolonial discourse, gender perspectives in literature and so on. Add to that multilingualism--including vernacular sub-texts that are deliberately left untranslated, complex stylistic strategies of deviation and foregrounding, the numerous stylistic devices by which the strategies are achieved and you get a literary artifact that transcends any one genre. wa Thiong'o has even been accused of creating a propagandist text. That is yet another sub-genre. His deconstruction of mono genre-centrism is part of his strategy of "moving the centre" from Eurocentrism to Afrocentrism in multiple ways. This in turn defines post-colonial writing at its best by way of problematizing the rigid boundaries that are imposed on literary art in modern Literature.*

Petals of Blood (1977) is the Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's fourth and last literary text written primarily in English. Thereafter the author turned to writing first in his vernacular Gikuyu before the works are translated into English and other foreign languages. *Petals of Blood* has received extensive critical interpretations from various perspectives. All the critics and even the author himself refer to the text generally as a novel without specifying the type of novel it is. But a close reading of the text reveals multiple genres in its four parts titled; PART ONE: WALKING ... PART TWO: TOWARD BETHLEHEM, PART THREE: TO BE BEORN AND PART FOUR: AGAIN LA LUTA CONTINUA! The book has many aspects of modern literature and orature including narrative fiction, poetry and drama. It contains elements of tragedy, comedy, romance, satire, parody, allegory, epic, myths, legends and mini parallel biographies. It fits into various literary categories including romanticism, realism, socialist realism, crime fiction, post-colonial discourse, historical novel, gender based literature and so on. Add to the above biblical excerpts, multilingualism (including vernacular texts that are deliberately left untranslated) and the complex stylistic and devices, and the resultant text becomes a literary artifact that transcends any one genre. wa Thiong'o has been accused of creating a propagandist text. That is yet another sub-genre. It is this multifaceted aspect of the text that validates the many interpretations by the many critics who have engaged it. Deconstruction of genre-centrism is the author's strategy for "moving the centre" and "decolonizing" African Literature in multiple ways. It is this very act which defines post-colonial writing at its best by problematizing, disrupting, and diffusing the rigid eurocentric boundaries imposed on literary art in modern Literature. Reference to this writer is usually made by his first name Ngugi. This is unconventional. In this paper I use his surname wa Thiong'o and the possessive wa Thiong'o's. This text lends itself to several synopses depending on the orientation of a given interpretation. The following summarizes the text's deconstruction of mono genre-centrism. At surface level *Petals of Blood* is about the experience of the people of an imaginary Ilmorog village in central Kenya in the post-independence period. The villagers are victims of the malpractices of a corrupt post-independent regime which misuses the people during elections in order to appear democratic and thereafter abandons them until the next elections.

The regime is no different from the colonial one which exploited the villagers but was indifferent to the villagers' plight. After much suffering which is exacerbated by a long drought, Ilmorog villagers resolve to trek to the city of Nairobi to seek help from their Member of Parliament Nderia wa Riera. A few of the villagers like Wanja, Karega, Munira and Abdulla are familiar with the city and beyond, whereas the others are complete strangers to city life. The trek has many effects and ramifications for the village. The book story time takes twelve days in which arson occurs on a brothel in the village killing three dignitaries, Kimeria, Chui and Mzigo and wounding Wanja the brothel owner. Investigations reveal that the arsonist is Godfrey Munira a respected teacher in the village. At a deeper level the story covers centuries beginning with Ilmorog's experience in the dim past of the hunting and gathering stage to its agrarian settlement by its founder Nderi to the present post-independence period. Much of the story is told in flashbacks. According to the author the text combines:

Techniques of flashbacks, multiples narrative voices, movement in time and space and parallel biographies and stories. The techniques allowed me to move freely in time and space through the centuries and through all important landmarks of Kenya's history from the early times and back to the twelve days duration of the present of the novel (1986:77).

It is no wonder that he had to diffuse traditional genre divisions and subdivisions to capture the conglomeration of stories within a long story.

The first boundary that wa Thiong'o diffuses is the traditional division between narrative prose, conventional novel fiction, poetry and drama. He uses all of them literally combining them to achieve meaning in the four parts of the text. He uses poems and biblical texts as epigraphs. At the beginning of the novel he quotes from Derek Walcott's *The Swamp* and at the beginning of "PART ONE: WALKING" he quotes from chapter six of the book of Revelation in the Bible which epitomizes destruction and death. He emphasizes a theme with a poem by the American poet-cum-journalist Walt Whitman (1819-1892) which foregrounds a common feature of oppressive regimes. This is particularly apt as a summary of the connection between oppressive colonial regime and presumed post-independence African democratic government:

The people scorned the ferocity of Kings...
But the sweetness mercy brewed destruction,
and frightened monarchs came back;
Each comes in stage, with his train-hangman,
priest, tax-gatherer,

Soldiers, lawyers, lord, jailer, and sycophant. Walt Whitman (Qtd.in wa Thiong'o ibid.)

"PART TWO: TOWARD BETHLEHEM" is about the journey, exodus, trek that Ilmorog villagers undertake to the city of Nairobi in search of their Member of Parliament Nderi wa Riera who has deserted them since he conned them into electing him. wa Thiong'o borrows two poems from the English poet-cum-painter William Blake (1787-1827) to foreground city life that condemns young women to immoral lives and the pitiable existence of the oppressed of the society which is man-made: "But most thro' midnight street I hear How youthful Harlot's curse Blasts the new Infant's tear And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse." William Blake goes on to say "Pity would be no more if we did not make somebody poor". William Blake (Qtd. in wa Thiong'o ibid.119)

Within the chapter simply titled: "THE JOURNEY", wa Thiong'o quotes at length from William Shakespeare to satirize the betrayal of a local headmaster Chui who takes over the leadership of Siriana Mission School and revives all the oppressive colonialist regulations and practices he rebelled against when he was a student there. Below is a section of the quotation which emphasises conformity in orderly institutions:

The heavens themselves, the planets and the centre observe degree, priority and place,
Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,
Office, and custom, in all line of order:

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Take but degree away, untunes that string,
And, hark, what discord follows! (Qtd. in ibid.172)

This quotation in essence summarizes advocacy for colonial and neo-colonial status quo. And the character aptly borrows from a metropolitan author.

The PART THREE: TO BE BORN epitomises the rebirth of Ilmorog after the journey to the city. The village receives extensive media coverage and is thereafter gradually transformed from rural to urban slum status complete with the features of the latter including land and people's alienation. During the journey, the villagers encourage themselves with songs and folktales making the two forms integral to the chapter (121-135,136,142,149-10,165,181).

“PART FOUR AGAIN...LA LUTA CONTINUA!” begins with quotations from Walt Whitman and the political leader of Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde Amilcar Cabral (1924-1973). Both the poem and quotation emphasize the need for continuation of the struggle against oppressive neo-colonial African regimes exposed in the three chapters of this section of the text. The epigraphs to the four parts are foregrounded graphologically and semantically. They enable the writer to capture meaning that would otherwise have required lengthy prose passages to express. There are also poems constructed by the characters in the text. Karega constructs a poem to celebrate the departure of a whiteman Cambridge Fraudsham from Siriana Mission School:

I can't believe it .I can't believe that
Our united strength, untried before,
Could move mountains where the prayers of
yesterday had failed. Still, he was not there:
he was not there any more at the blowing
of horn and raising of the flag—
our flag .It is of three colours,
rightly the poet: Green is our
land; Black is black people ; and
Red is our blood. (Ibid.52-3)

The author comments that these “words carried poetry and beauty and sadness and momentary triumph” (ibid.52).The poetic form captures the meaning that would have required a long prose piece.

The second boundary that wa Thiong'o diffuses is the one between written Literature and Orature. Reference to the text by the author and critics as a novel presumes a written text. However, for wa Thiong'o the two have never been separate (2012, 1993, 1981). “Even setting aside the extension of writing to cover certain signifying systems in orality, there has always been continuous literarisation of the oral and oralisation of the literary “(2012,71). He demonstrates this in *Petals of Blood* where text orature is used in several dimensions including transliteration of speeches by non –literate, non –english speakers among the characters such as Nyakinyua, Njuguna, Muturi and Ruoro. The author translates some of the oral proverbs, songs and folktales into English (196,202,207-9,253-4,263-5,277-8,287,296) to cite a few. Myths and legends are borrowed from the oral history of Ilmorog villagers who are a section of the Gikuyu community in Kenya. The author also borrows the conversational tone from orature which he represents through the use of ellipses that are replete in the text for example:

The movement away had started after the second Big War ...No...before that....No, it was that railway
... all right, all right... even this had always been since European colonists came into their midst, these
ghosts from another world. But they of Ilmorog... they now would have found a way of avoiding those
taxes... Politics! Couldn't one escape from these things, Munira thought impatiently? (ibid.19).

These are many episodes and sections of the text that are expressed in this tone which is achieved mainly through fragments as distinct from complete sentences that convey complete meaning (41,43,45,87,137,191,299). The third sets of boundaries that wa Thiong'o collapses are those between the traditional literary genre divisions of narrative fiction: novel and short story and their subdivisions -- folktale, the epic, the romance, allegory, satire. According to Richard Taylor's *Understanding the Elements of Literature: Its_Forms Techniques and Cultural Conventions*_(1981), the latter are the traditional sub-divisions of narrative fiction. A close reading of *Petals of Blood* shows that it comprises aspects of them all. The chapter on “THE JOURNEY” begins with the oral history of Ilmorog community including myths and legends from the dim past. It explains how the founder Nderi and his wives Nyagendo and Nyagithi begot a prosperous group of people whose knowledge and advancement in metal work and pottery attracted Arabs and Portuguese and latter Mzungu (European)trader, missionary and ruler. The rich historical background is narrated by old Nyakinyua. She explains how Nderi's work was destroyed in sixty years. Abdulla tells the children many folktales as they trek to the city.

The nature and function of the folktale becomes an integral part of the journey through which the author is able to capture a lot of information that would have covered lots of pages and long story time. The journey itself is both an allegory and epic. As an allegory it explores biblical texts to represent Ilmorog community's literal movement as well as metaphorical transformation from one level of socio-economic development to another. As an epic it celebrates the culture of the people of Ilmorog and the villagers' struggle for survival. The only difference is that *Petals of Blood* does not foreground an individual hero, instead it celebrates the struggles and successes of the whole community.

The romance is the one traditional subdivision that would seem to be least relevant to a serious work such as *Petals of Blood*, yet it is. The concept is used here in a thematic sense to include any or some of the following; powerful love emotions manifested by individuals towards a target who is unlikely to reciprocate, rivalry involving several individuals, and illicit love which disrupts virtuous character. All these experiences apply to sexual and conjugal relationships in *Petals of Blood* involving the major characters: Wanja, Munira, Karega, Abdulla, Mzigo, Kimeria and Nderi wa Riera. Wanja uses romance to revenge the wrongs done to her in the past by some of these men and secondly to earn wealth in a society that has adapted a "man eat man" survival strategy. The final arsonist catastrophe that occurs in the text is motivated by love where Godfrey Munira – Wanja's former lover claims that he burns the latter's brothel to save Karega from Wanja whom he views as the signification of evil. Eventually, Wanja conceives by Abdulla the least expected among all the men she has affairs with. The unborn baby symbolizes genuine love and hope for survival of the original Ilmorog community that is almost extinct physically and metaphorically at that point in the story.

As for the modern novel and short story, wa Thiong'o again blurs the distinction between the two. For example, he does not adhere to all of E.M. Forster's aspects of the novel. Neither does he stick to any other fixtures such as the one emphasized by Taylor (1981) to the effect that "the one requirement of construction in a novel is that it should combine a number of episodes or events and provide a reasonable developed view of its subject or subjects" (46). On the contrary, the one subdivision that mostly defines *Petals of Blood* is the short story. The text is a conglomeration of short stories narrated by multiple voices from multiple points of view. Some of the short stories are autobiographies, biographies and treatises like the lawyer's and Karega's narratives in addition some episodes attributed to omniscient narrator.

Petals of Blood may be a realistic novel but it is also replete with satire because such is the reality in the post independence Kenya that wa Thiong'o portrays where the leaders have turned into satirical caricatures. In his own words, the author is compelled to be extra creative in order to capture the seemingly fictional reality into his creative imagination:

How does a writer, a novelist, shock his readers by telling them that these are neo-slaves when they themselves, the neo-slaves are openly announcing the fact on the rooftop?... How do you shock your readers by pointing out that these are mass murderers, looters, robbers, thieves, when they the perpetrators of these anti-people crimes are not even attempting to hide the fact?... How do you satirise their utterances and claims when their own words beat all fictional exaggerations? (wa Thiong'o; 1981, 80).

He goes on to say: "As I contemplated the neo-colonial reality in Kenya I was confronted with the question of the fictional form of its depiction." (ibid.) This may even yet another emerging genre that can be defined as fiction within fiction which is distinct from story within a story. But the text is realistic in so far as it addresses some historical events and experiences in Kenya in the dim past as well as the text's contemporary story time under the first President Jomo Kenyatta.

Petals of Blood can also fit into the socialist realist category. It entails historicism, dialectical materialism, collectivism and ideological education, all of which are characteristics of the socialist realist novel. Historicism can serve a double function and place it as a historical novel because it actually deals with some landmarks in Kenya's history such as Colonial invasion, Missionary factor and education, the Mau Mau liberation movement, celebration of independence and subsequent political system (ibid.77). Of course the book epitomizes post-colonial discourse which in the words of Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (1995): "reject[s] the claims of universalism made on behalf of canonical Western literature... develop a perspective... where by states of marginality, plurality and perceived 'Otherness' are seen as sources of energy and potential change" (192).

In the post-colonial experience as depicted in *Petals of Blood*, the concept of canonical genres and texts becomes irrelevant because all genres and sub-genres are functional and so cohesively linked to one another in the text. With regard to gender perspective, wa Thiong'o remains faithful to his declaration in his critical text. For him, decent ring African Literature from Euro centrism entails dislocation and relocation in terms race, class and gender:

”Within nearly all nations today the centre is located in the dominant social stratum , a male bourgeois minority...Hence the need to move the centre from all minority class establishments within nations to the real centres among working people in conditions of gender, racial and religious equality”(xvii).

In *Petals of Blood* he succeeds in moving the centre in conditions of gender by demonstrating a high level of gender sensitivity in terms of allowing his female characters to tell their stories from their own points of view. He allows them to participate actively in all community activities and foregrounds their contribution to society from its beginnings. His portrayal of Wanja and her grandmother Nyakinyua affirm his authorial statement. Nyakinyua is a non-literate but wise old woman. Like the old men of Ilmorog, she is a connoisseur of the community's history and culture. Wanja is a prostitute who is forced into the vice by the current MP and consequently drops out of school. Unlike other male writers who stop at creating stereotypical prostitutes, wa Thiong'o redeems Wanja the oppressed the oppressed girl-child and latter woman without celebrating prostitution. Wanja latter joins the “ man eat man” survival strategy. At that point the writer destroys her brothel business because it is her own conscious choice as distinct from oppression by patriarchal culture.

To achieve all the meanings above, the author stretches stylistic techniques and devices to the limit. He foregrounds meaning mainly through deviation from rules and conventions. He uses various levels of language including graphology, syntax, lexical, sociolinguistics, schemes and tropes of all types. CHAPTER ELEVEN is the apex of it all. Its main subject is the transformation of the old Ilmorog village into two contrasting spaces inappropriately named New Ilmorog and New Jerusalem courtesy of “civilization”. The transformation results from the construction of “the Trans-Africa road linking Nairobi and Ilmorog to many cities of the continent” and consequently “every corner of the continent was now within reach of international capitalist robbery and exploitation” (262). With this come many international companies: LONRO, SHELL, ESSO, TOTAL, AGIP and banks each of them with its own ramifications. Many songs are constructed to reveal the paradox of this development which takes place soon after a plane crashes into “old” Ilmorog village. Thereafter the Village is literally invaded by Kenyan petty capitalists in alliance with international exploiters who disrupt the traditional land tenure dispossessing the villagers and turning them into casual laborers. Within the main story of transformation and destruction of old Ilmorog there are mini stories of the main characters Munira's and Nyakinyua's told by omniscient narrator and Wanja, Abdulla, Karega's autobiographical excerpts narrated from their own points of view. This representation in addition to other forms of deviation in the text defies the major plot structures that are associated with narrative fiction: chronological, logical sequence of events (cause and effect), the well-made plot, allegorical structures, and mythical patterns. The story may falls under mixed methods of construction. All the above aspects place the text in a category of its own far above the conventional definition of the novel in written literature. This text exemplifies the author's view of inter-linkages of art forms in his own words :

Verbal forms, in other words, were not always distinct from dance and music. Within music, we argued, there was close correspondence between verbal and melodic tones; within metrical lyrics, the poetic text was inseparable from the tunes; and the folktale often bore an operatic form with sung refrain as an integral part. The distinction between prose and poetry was absent or very fluid (wa Thiong'o: 2012,61).

These authorial statements from wa Thiong'o's critical text, *Globalectics: THEORY OF POLITICS OF KNOWING* (2012) summarize the central argument of this paper. If life itself which literary art represents is not compartmentalized in the manner of Eurocentric genres, neither can art itself be constricted by such strictures.

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