

## **Ngugi wa Thiong'o's notion of Historical Change in *Petals of Blood***

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**Abstract:** *In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi's fourth novel, he deals with the issues plaguing post-colonial Kenya. He narrates how the fruits of Independence have been monopolized by the neo-colonial elites, in collusion with the capitalist interests. He critiques the colonial historical narrative and justifies the urgency of rewriting national history. For him no revolution is ultimate in guaranteeing an exploitation free society. It is only through a ceaseless struggle that the Post-colonial Kenyans can resist neo-colonial domination and true freedom. *Petals of Blood* bears a testimony to his notion of history in Post-colonial Kenya.*

**Keywords:** *struggle, Uhuru, neo-colonial, historical change, alienation*

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Ngugi's fiction begins with the story of Gikuyu land since the times of the colonial invasion, recording what Gerald Moore says its essential harmony and unity when seen from above, its apparent division and hostility, when viewed from below. His earliest novel *The River Between* (though second to be published) marks the arrival of Christian missionaries and their impact on the villages on the two ridges of different sides of the river Honia. Though Honia means cure or bring-back-to-life, the river in fact divides the Christian and traditional villages of the same Gikuyu community. The story foregrounds the conflict between Christianity and ethnic identity and its threat to the people's connection to the land. The story ends with a suggestion of the Mau Mau uprising as a natural and inevitable consequence. *Weep Not Child* marks the beginning of the struggle for repossession of lost land and independence through Mau Mau uprising. Its central concern is Emergency and the consequent repression. *A Grain of Wheat* probes into the psyche of the Kenyan people in the aftermath of the Emergency and the problems of independence. *Petals of Blood* is constructed in grand 'epic proportions' (Palmer, 1979: 153), it covers not only the colonial and independence period, but is also a comprehensive analysis of the post-colonial context; it talks about sacrifices of the Mau Mau activists, resistance against enslavement, the love of money breaking up families, lack of employment opportunities in the post-independence Kenya. It's also about the manipulation of religion, culture and state machinery for exploitation, and the degradation of the rural people into destitute and beggars. It sketches the transformation of a primitive Ilmorog village into a new Ilmorog Town, a change from agrarian economy to market economy. It's the story of the betrayal of a whole nation by a minority ruling class. *Petals* presents a gloomy situation, though it's not a story of pessimism; rather it puts aside pessimism and strikes at the necessity of adjustment, reorganisation and reformulation of the aesthetics of a new struggle in the post-colonial context. Through mistakes, suffering, alienation, revenge and violence emerges a vision; birth of a new child- the progeny of 'Kimathi in his moments of triumph and laughter and sorrow and terror- but without one limb' (338). *Petals* is a political novel, a novel about humanity, a novel that brings out almost all the postcolonial concerns viz. history, culture, identity, education, religion, gender, language etc.

One of the primary concerns of Ngugi in *Petals of Blood* is, though, redefining History as the story of man's actions on nature and on themselves. History is about human struggle first with nature for the production of wealth and secondly among themselves for control of that wealth. The changing social formations, institutions, values, outlook, which constitute history reflect the ever changing relationships between labour and nature and between social groups in a nation. Change, movement is thus the essential and eternal theme in history. It is because of this changeability of history that it is perceived as a threat by the ruling strata in all oppressive exploitative systems. It's the nature of power to consolidate its position, and sustain the status quo. Hence to arrest the march of history, the ruling class needs to rewrite history, the official history which shows it as the natural inheritors of power and also justifies its existence. The Arabs, Portuguese, and the British invaders in Kenya had always justified their colonialism to suit the capitalist interests; instead of reinterpreting the colonial history reinforced the colonial invasion through the cover up of the true history of Kenya. Ngugi finds this present history failing in answering the people's questions:

For there are many questions about our history which remain unanswered. Our present day historians, following on similar theories yarned out by defenders of imperialism, insist we only arrived here yesterday. Where went all the Kenyan people who used to trade with China, India, Arabia long long before Vasco da Gama came to the scene and on the strength of gunpowder ushered in an era of blood and terror and instability—an era

that climaxed in the reign of imperialism over Kenya? But even then these adventures of Portuguese mercantilism were forced to build Fort Jesus, showing that Kenyan people has always been ready to resist foreign control and exploitation. The story of this heroic resistance: who will sing it? Their struggles to defend their lands, their wealth, their lives: who will tell of it? (Petals: 67)

The neo-colonial state has attempted to bury the living soul of Kenyan history of struggle and resistance as it finds it a threat to its continuance. But 'the real living history of the masses' (Petals: 98) throws up its own historians.

First are the ordinary people who, in their songs, poems, stories, sayings anecdotes, remembrances, still talk of the Waiyakis; the Koitalels; the Me Katililis; the Hassans and the Kimathis of Kenyan history. And secondly, a few progressive intellectuals who have defied their class among the petty bourgeoisie, and joined hands with the people. These have put their learning, their intellect, at the service of the people. They are committed to unearthing the buried history of struggle and resistance. (Ngugi, 1993: 98)

Ngugi presents a view of history where the past, present and the future consist of a continuum. Whether in the life of the individual or the community, the past, the present and the future are dynamically interrelated, each blending into the other. The protagonist in the novel Karega says, "To understand the present...you must understand the past. To know where you are, you must know where you came from, don't you think?" (127-8). This understanding of the past is necessary to counter the lies of the neo-colonialist propaganda. We come to know that:

(E)ven Ilmorog...had not always been a small cluster of mud huts lived in only by old men and women and children with occasional visits from wandering herdsmen. It had had its days of glory: thriving villages with a huge population of sturdy peasants who had tamed nature's forests and, breaking the soils between their fingers, had brought forth every type of crop to nourish the sons and daughters of men. (Petals: 120)

The story of the founding patriarch Ndemi is stored in the legends and folklore of Ilmorog.

Ilmorog later became a great centre of trade; its market days were known from Gulu to Ukambani... People came from all over with their different wares and took other's in exchange... Their knowledge of metal became legendary, reaching the ears of Arabs and Portuguese marauders from the coast. Here the first European Foreigner pitched his tent and sought supplies for his journey across the plains. (Petals: 121)

Later on, the Europeans lured the people with their metal God, metal goods and the Bible, which resulted in the decline and depopulation of the region.

But, Karega is aware of the abstractness of this past, hence he asks for a critical study of the past, not as a museum piece but in order to secure 'a living lesson to the present' (Petals: 323). Wanja, an exploited student turned prostitute, is not concerned with this past, because she thinks, "Drought and thirst and hunger are hanging over Ilmorog! What use is Ndemi's story? I am drowning: what use would be my looking back to the shore from which I fell?" (Petals: 128). To her the past is personal and more immediate and she doesn't find any greatness in her past. "Sometimes one would like to hide the past even from oneself" (Petals: 128). In fact, all the central characters are haunted by their immediate past; a past of shame, ridden with guilt and despair. Like Wanja, Munira, Abdulla, Karega, all come to Ilmorog to escape from their past. Munira looked down as a failure by his family, escapes Limuru, his native place, because he does not belong to it, the success of his father instills in him a sense of guilt. Abdulla returned crippled from the detention camp after Uhuru to find his family vanished, and told on the face that without money or connections he wouldn't be offered a job. He finds on the other hand, Kimiera, the traitor, a sell-out to the colonial rulers 'eating the fruits of Uhuru'. Abdulla could not bear the shock; he 'wanted to go deep into the country where I would have no reminder of so bitter a betrayal' (Petals: 255). Karega's expulsion from Siriana was because they (the students) wanted to study black literature, black culture and black history in a black country. Mukami, whom he loved, committed suicide when her father refused her marriage with him. Bewildered, hurt, dejected, he comes to Ilmorog. So is the case with Wanja; her life had been a series of setbacks; childhood pregnancy and then barrenness, running away from home, abduction attempt, fire, etc. She too comes to Ilmorog in search of an escape from her past.

*Petals of Blood* presents a myriad tangle of human relationships; probably Ngugi's intention is to establish that, to know the history of a people, to comprehensively understand the changeable, dramatic and often chaotic qualities of life or history as it unfolds, one needs to study the web of relationships between human beings. Exploring the whirlpool effects of people's actions, social interactions and personal dreams and schemes emerges a clear pattern as described by Wanja in the image of the Siamese twins of love and hate (Ayo Mamudu, 1988: 16).

Love and hate- Siamese twins- back to back in a human heart. Because you loved you also hated: and because you hated you also loved. What you loved decided what you would have to wait, in relation to what you loved. What you hated decided the possibilities of what you could love in relation to that which you hated. And how did one know what one loved and hated? (Petals: 335)

In order to understand the present happenings in the lives of the people of Ilmorog, we need to look at the past happenings in the past lives of the characters. To understand why Munira turns into a murderer, why Abdulla

intends to kill Kimiera, why the peasants and the workers of Ilmorog rise against the capitalist forces, we need to understand what happened to them in the past. So the present is only a consequence of the past, and what one does in the present is going to decide what future one is going to have? Thus, in a sense, the novel focuses less on the present and more on the past. The story of the novel is served 'in broken cups of memory' (*Petals*: 53), through a revelatory technique, thus 'moving from a position of seeing darkly to one of seeing clearly' (Ayo Mamadu, 1988: 17).

As Ayo Mamudu points out, this interplay of past and present can be an attempt to look at history from another point of view. In a post-colonial world, history repeats itself again and again, the present tends to replicate the past. The trajectory of one life not only shows parallels and repetitions of motions in another, their crossing each other creates a fear, an apprehension of the return of the past. This haunting apprehension alienates a personality and often leads to misinterpretation of the present. Munira escapes Limuru to flee the label of a failure, to forget his past at Siriana. 'He had lost touch and interest in active life at Limuru...every thing about his past since Siriana was so vague, unreal, a mist.... It was as if there was a big break in the continuity of his life and of his memories. So that taking a definite decision to go to Ilmorog was like his first conscious act of breaking with this sense of non-being' (*Petals*: 15). But Munira aspires to a sense of being through withdrawal, thus his escaping to Ilmorog does not help him, and even here he remains an outsider. His failure to act remains rather as a touchy, vulnerable guilt in his conscience, which makes him uncomfortable every time someone mentions about suffering and sacrifice. Karega's visit to Ilmorog threatens his existence, just like Wanja's did before.

Abdulla, on the other hand, has fought the war of independence and he is proud of that past. But he is ashamed of his post-Uhuru past, the past, which relegated him to the status of a beggar. To forget that past he escapes to Ilmorog. But this sense of a betrayed past has filled him with bitterness, has changed him to a man who only drinks and curses, thus changing his present into a living hell. Ngugi tries to emphasise that there is no escape from past through withdrawal from action. One has to act, struggle, and resist the past from consuming up one's present. Through a ceaseless process of resistance in the present, one can lay the foundation for a better future. *Petals of Blood* apparently is a very pessimistic novel, with all the deceptions, dejections and deaths. But it ends with a vision, a promise of action, a revolution like the past which brought in the Uhuru. It emphasizes on a cyclical pattern of historical change, where only change is eternal and life sustaining.

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