

# Ngugi's Devil on the Cross: The Novel as Hagiography of a Marxist

by F. Odun Balogun

## Introduction

Depending on a reader's ideological orientation, Devil on the Cross<sup>1</sup> can elicit one of two diametrically opposed responses. The anti-communist Christian is likely to hate it not only for its marxist ideology but even more for the stylistic strategy adopted as a vehicle for this ideology. For precisely the same reasons, the reader with a marxist outlook will be doubly happy with the novel. Devil on the Cross, however, is not just another proletarian novel as it might at first appear, but one most carefully crafted to achieve the author's ideological objectives, one of which is making the Christian religion undermine its believers while at the same time it serves the interest of non-believers.

The popular identification of Christianity with capitalism and atheism with marxism<sup>2</sup> usually ignores the fact that there are capitalists who are atheists and marxists who are Christians. While the former situation is less publicized, the latter has recently become the subject of debate because of the development of the phenomenon called "liberation theology" in South American countries. In the specific case of Africa, however, the identification of Christianity and Islam with imperialist exploitation has historical foundation in the roles these religions have wittingly or unwittingly played in African development from the time of slavery to the colonial period and to the present stage of neo-colonialism. Opinions on this matter, of course, differ among African intellectuals but the literary response on the part of African writers has largely been critical. Reactions have varied from the mild criticism evident in Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Ngugi's The River Between to the biting satire characterizing Beti's Poor Christ of Bomba and Ousmane's Xala and to the vicious attack in Armah's Two Thousand Seasons.

On his part, Ngugi has shown in successive novels a growing impatience with the socio-political role of Christianity in Kenyan history. As a bourgeois intellectual in the fifties and sixties, Ngugi's criticism of the role of Christianity was understandably

mild, even if unequivocal, in his novels published at that time - Weep Not Child, The River Between and A Grain of Wheat. However, by the time of writing Petals of Blood in the seventies, Ngugi was already a marxist and, predictably, organized religion was subjected to a "savage satire."<sup>3</sup> By the time of writing the present novel, Devil on the Cross, Ngugi still regarded religion as an instrument of bourgeois exploitation,<sup>4</sup> but he was not as interested in satire as in depicting Christianity in the ironic situation of undermining capitalism and of actively promoting marxism. In fact, the anti-capitalist pro-marxist message that emerges from the totality of the novel -- from its title, subject matter and setting to its plot, characterization, language and narrative device -- is encoded in a composite religious idiom derived from Christian religious beliefs, symbols, church liturgy, biblical parables, allusions and motifs.

### Christian symbolism

The paradoxically symbolic title of the novel immediately announces the author's mischievous intention of forcing the Christian religion into a non-traditional role: instead of Christ on the Cross, it is

Devil on the Cross. The comfort that the right-wing Christian mind might derive from the illusion that the devil has at last received the punishment he deserves is ultimately destroyed by the gradual revelation of the true identity of this particular devil on the cross. The first hint about the identity of the devil is given in the note tossed to the heroine, Wariinga, by one of the thugs hired by her landlord to evict her from a rented room:

We are the Devil's Angels: Private Businessman.  
Make the slightest move to take this matter to the authorities, and we shall issue you a single ticket to God's kingdom or Satan's - a one-way ticket to Heaven or Hell (p. 10)

More revelations concerning the devil's identity come as the narrator recalls the recurrent nightmare that plagues Wariinga:

And now Wariinga was revisited by a nightmare that

she used to have when, as a student at Nakuru Day Secondary, she attended the Church of the Holy Rosary.

She saw first the darkness, carved open at one side to reveal a Cross, which hung in the air. Then she saw a crowd of people dressed in rags walking in the light, propelling the devil towards the Cross. The Devil was clad in a silk suit, and he carried a walking stick shaped like a folded umbrella. [...] His belly sagged, as if it were about to give birth to all the evils of the world. His skin was red, like that of a pig. Near the Cross he began to tremble and turned his eyes towards the darkness, as if his eyes were being seared by the light. He moaned, beseeching the people not to crucify him, swearing that he and all his followers would never again build Hell for the people on Earth.

But the people cried in unison: 'Now we know the secrets of all the robes that disguise your cunning. You commit murder, then you don your robes of pity and you go to wipe the tears from the faces of orphans and widows.' [...]

And there and then the people crucified the Devil on the Cross, and they went away singing songs of victory.

After three days, there came others dressed in suits and ties, who, keeping close to the wall of darkness, lifted the Devil down from the Cross. And they knelt before him, and they prayed to him in loud voices, beseeching him to give them a portion of his robes of cunning. And their bellies began to swell, and they stood up, and they walked towards Wariinga, laughing at her, stroking their large bellies, which had now inherited all the evils of this world.... (pp. 13-14).

The details to be noted are that (1) Wariinga's nightmare used to take place when she attended church, (2) the devil has an enormous sagging belly, (3) the devil's skin is red like a pig's, (4) the devil is crucified by a crowd of people in rags, and (5) after the crucifixion the devil, in fact, becomes multiplied as his disciples take on his personality including the bulging stomach.

Soon after these details of the dream are provided, the reader meets the first of two variants of an invitation card to a feast in

Ilmorog. The first card bearing the heading "The Devil's Feast!" (pp. 28, 68) is fake and is printed by those who oppose the feast, while the genuine card is headed "A Big Feast!" (p.76). The objective of the feast as explained by Mwireri wa Mukiraai, a sympathizer, is this:

'First things first. This feast is not a Devil's feast, and it has not been organized by Satan. This feast has been arranged by the Organization for Modern Theft and Robbery in Ilmorog to commemorate a visit by foreign guests from an organization for the thieves and robbers of the Western world, particularly from America, England, Germany, France, Italy, Sweden and Japan, called the International Organization of Thieves and Robbers.

'Secondly, our university students have become very conceited. They have now devised ways of discrediting theft and robbery even before they know what modern theft and robbery really is. These students are spreading the kind of talk I have just heard from Wangari and Muturi, namely, that theft and robbery should end.

'So I would like to say this: I am very sure that people can never be equal like teeth. Human nature has rejected equality. Even universal nature herself has rejected any absurd nonsense about equality. Just look at God's Heaven. God sits on the throne. On his right stands his only Son. On his left side stands the Holy Spirit. At his feet the angels sit. At the feet of the angels sit the saints. At the feet of the saints sit all the Disciples, and so on, one rank standing below another, until we come to the class of believers here on Earth. Hell is structured in the same way. The king of Hell is not the one who makes the fire, fetches the firewood and turns over the burning bodies. No, he leaves those chores to his angels, overseers, disciples and servants.' (p. 78).

If the conflicting names of the feast are meant to reflect a divergence in moral assessment, ironically the sympathizer's explanation confirms its immorality even more strongly than the opponent's falsified title. The conscience of Mr. Mukiraai is so totally dead that he not only fails to see the immorality of theft and

## UFAHAMU

robbery but actually defends them with such righteousness that the reader cannot but identify him with the world of the devils in Wariinga's nightmare. It is significant that, among other reasons, Mr. Mukiraai should justify theft and robbery as the means to maintaining social inequality in terms of the biblical hierarchical representation of heaven.

Events of the feast as it takes place inside a cave in Ilmorog reveal that Mr. Mukiraai is in fact a benevolent devil compared to the generality of the delegates attending the feast. All the details of Wariinga's nightmare are represented in the setting, characters and episodes of the feast. Firstly, the feast takes place on Sunday. It commences in a solemn atmosphere reminiscent of church services as the Master of Ceremonies, like a priest, recounts his own version of the biblical parable of the talents: "...For the Kingdom of Earthly Wiles can be likened unto a ruler who ..." (pp. 82-86).

After the parable and the opening speech by the leader of the foreign delegation, the "Hell's Angels band" in attendance "struck up a tune" which "was more like a psalm or a hymn." After a few minutes, everyone turned towards the band, and they all started to sing, as if they were in church:

Good news has come  
To our country!  
Good news has come  
About our Saviour!" (p. 90)

Throughout the ceremony of the feast (church service), the delegates' speeches which are described in religious language as "testimonies," but which might equally be termed "sermons" are frequently punctuated with phrases from the Catholic Mass liturgy such as "Kyrie, kyrie eleison" (p. 126), "Per omnia saecula saeculorum. Amen" (p. 171), "Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi; Miserere nobis ... Ecce Agnus Dei; Ecce qui tollis peccata mundi . . . Take, eat, this is my body; Do this until I return. Corpus Christi. Amen . . . Dominus vobiscum" (p. 190). Significantly, as always happened inside the church in her past, Wariinga once again experiences a nightmare during the feast (pp. 184-194). With all these details no reader can possibly fail to see the link between the setting of Wariinga's nightmare and that of the feast since the church and the cave have in essence been merged.

## BALOGUN

Secondly, the delegates at the feast exhibit the physical traits characteristic of the devil in Wariinga's nightmare. The black men invariably have the protruding stomach: "Here, in this cave, we are interested only in people who steal because their bellies are full,' the master of ceremonies said, patting his stomach" (p. 95). Thereafter, those who mount the platform to explain why they should be crowned the king of thieves are almost uniformly alike. One has "a belly that protruded so far that it would have touched the ground had it not been supported by the braces that held up his trousers" (p. 99) while another carries a belly that "was so huge that it almost bulged over his knees" (p. 122). The White men, on the other hand, have the red skin: "Wariinga noted that their skins were indeed red, like that of pigs or like the skin of a black person who has been scalded with boiling water or who has burned himself with acid creams", (p. 91). Thus, the aggregate of the delegates at the cave's feast is the devil in Wariinga's church nightmare.

Thirdly, in the novel's action, just as the devil in Wariinga's nightmare is chased and crucified by the crowd of people in rags, so are the delegates at the feast chased out of the cave by a procession of people, many of whom "had rags for clothes. Many more had no shoes" (p. 202). The routing of the delegates in a battle for the cave actually equates with the crucifixion of the devil in Wariinga's dream. In fact, in their song, the ragged crowd identifies the delegates as the Devil and his disciples: "Come one and all,/ And behold the wonderful sight/ Of us chasing away the Devil/ And all of his disciples! / Come one and all!" (p. 207). Similarly, the initially victorious ragged crowd is ultimately defeated by the devil in both instances. In the nightmare, the devil after his crucifixion by the crowd is multiplied and transformed into his disciples; at the cave, the routing (crucifixion) of the delegates (the Devil) is avenged by the soldiers (Devil's disciples) who kill five and wound many more of the righteous crowd.

The clue to the symbolic meaning of the cave feast is contained in the following parable which features as a consistent religious motif throughout the novel:

... For the Kingdom of the Earthly Wiles can be likened unto a ruler who foresaw that the day would come when he would be thrown out of a certain country by the masses and their guerrilla freedom fighters. He was much troubled in his heart, trying to determine ways of protecting all the

## UFAHAMU

property he had accumulated in that country and also ways of maintaining his rule over the natives by other means. He asked himself: What shall I do [...]

And it came to pass that as the ruler was about to return to his home abroad, he again called together all his servants and gave them the key to the land, telling them: "The patriotic guerrillas and the masses of this country will now be deceived because you are all black, as they are, and they will chant: "See, now our own black people have the key to our country; see, now our own black people hold the steering wheel. What were we fighting for if not this? Let us now put down our arms and sing hymns of praise to our black lords."

Then he gave them his property and goods to look after and even to increase and multiply. To one he gave capital amounting to 500,000 shillings, to another 200,000 shillings, and to another 100,000 shillings, to every servant according to how loyally he had served his master, followed his faith, and shared his outlook. And so the lord went away, leaving by the front door. [...]

And it came to pass that before many days had elapsed, the lord came back to that country through the back door, to check on the property he had left behind. He called his servants to account for the property and the money that he had given to each. [...] (pp. 82-86)

Thus, the feast at the cave is the reunion of the former colonial masters represented by people of the multinational companies and the Kenyan ruling elites represented by their businessmen. The "testimonies" are the rendering of account by the latter to the former in respect of the talents which were to be looked after.

The way the Master of Ceremonies has recast the biblical parable shows that he is speaking about the nature of the political independence granted to African countries and the relationship existing between the former colonial masters and the African governing elites. The Master of Ceremonies says: "The flag of

## BALOGUN

Independence can be likened unto a man traveling unto a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods ...." (p. 174)

The testimonials reveal a gallery of the types of businessmen in Kenya today. They vary from the intellectuals like Mwireri wa Mukiraaai to stark illiterates like Ndutika wa Nguunji. Mr. Mukiraaai is in fact the first person in the novel to use the parable of the talents (p. 81) and he identifies the system the businessmen operate as one "based on the theft of the sweat and blood of workers and peasants - what in English we call capitalism" (p. 166) Mr. Mukiraaai also stands for the servant in the parable who buries his talents, his reason being that he prefers national capitalism and therefore resists the control of multinationals (pp. 170-171). Mr. Nguunji, who like many of the delegates had been a saboteur of the fight for independence, dislikes Mr. Mukiraaai's "nationalist" position and advocates international capitalism under the umbrella of multinationals. He tells his colleagues: "Let's all forget the past. All that business of fighting for freedom was just a bad dream, a meaningless nightmare. Let's join hands to do three things: to grab, to extort money and to confiscate. The Holy Trinity of theft: Grabbing, Extortion, and Confiscation. If you find anything belonging to the masses, don't leave it behind, for if you don't look after yourself, who'll look after you?" (p.177). Mr Mukiraaai is also an exception in that he is sexually controlled while the majority are as promiscuous as Mr. Gatheeca who prefers other peoples' wives as mistresses.

The delegates also vary from the recklessly avaricious ones like Mr. Gataanguru, who wants to package and sell air to peasants and workers (p. 107), to the more cautious others like Mr. Gatheeca who warns his colleagues, saying: "Better meanness that is covert: better a system of theft that is disguised by lies, or why do you think that our imperialist friends brought us the Bible? Why do you think I go to all the church fund-raising Haraambe meetings?" (p. 123) While delegates like Gatheeca have no qualms about exploiting people of their own class, others like Gataanguru believe in the exploitation of only peasants and workers.

Not surprisingly, an old peasant woman, Wangari, is thoroughly incensed by the disclosures during the testimonies. She invites the police and denounces the delegates, saying:

There are the men who have always oppressed us  
peasants, denying us clothes and food and sleep.

## UFAHAMU

These are the men who stole the heritage bequeathed to us by Waiyaki wa Hiinga and Kimaathi wa Waciuri, and by all the brave patriots who have shed their blood to liberate Kenya. These are the imperialist watchdogs, the children of the Devil. Chain their hands, chain their legs and throw them into the Eternal Jail, where there is an endless gnashing of teeth! For that's the fate of all those who sell foreigners the heritage of our founding patriarches and patriots! (pp.197-197).

Ironically, instead of arresting the delegates, the police end up bundling Wangari into prison! This is consistent with the novel's depiction of the police and the army as "disciples" of the business tycoons -- the devils, to use the metaphor of the novel.

Thus, the central action of Devil on the Cross is a parabolic rendering of how the revolt against Kenyan bourgeois elites by "an army of workers, peasants, petty traders and students" (p. 203) is bloodily put down by government troops. However, while the conclusion at the level of action makes the capitalists the victors, the artistic rendering of the story stresses the moral victory of the revolting proletariat. The symbolic system of narration not only equates the bourgeois class with the devil but also makes the bourgeois themselves admit and boast of their devilish ways. Therefore, being a band of religious hypocrites, thieves and robbers by their own admission, Kenyan capitalists are depicted as nothing but criminals at large, still awaiting arrest, judgement and punishment. But even more damning is the fact that these capitalists have no inkling whatsoever of the irreparable moral damage they have done to themselves as a class by the way they behave and speak. Being totally morally dead, they are depicted as caricatures.<sup>5</sup>

### Hagiographic Narrative Device

The use of the Christian idioms to satirize capitalism in Devil on the Cross goes beyond symbolic exploitation of theme to include also the manipulation of narrative device, language, characterization and plot structure. The novel begins with the fervent, intimate testimony in the first person by a narrator who calls himself the "Prophet of Justice." This narrator further claims that the story he is

## BALOGUN

about to relate is no ordinary story but a divine revelation granted to him after seven days of fasting, suffering and penance. The language of his narration shows close affinity to the language of the biblical prophets:

And after seven days had passed, the Earth trembled and lightning scored the sky with its brightness, and I was lifted up, and I was borne up to the rooftop of the house, and I was shown many things, and I heard a voice, like a great clap of thunder, admonishing me; Who has told you that prophecy is yours alone, to keep to yourself? Why are you furnishing yourself with empty excuses? If you do that, you will never be free of tears and pleading cries.

The moment the voice fell silent, I was siezed, raised up and then cast down into the ashes of the fireplace. And I took the ashes, and smeared my face and legs with them, and I cried out:

I accept!  
I accept!  
Silence the cries of the heart.  
Wipe away the tears of the heart....

This story is an account of what I, Prophet of Justice, saw with these eyes and heard with these ears when I was borne to the rooftop of the house....(p. 8).

The heroine of the revealed story, Jacinta Wariinga, is also a highly religious person. She is so devout in her belief that she prays constantly, and her prayers are often miraculously answered. She, in fact, seems to be a special elect of God. She is several times miraculously saved from death and, like Saint Joan in Shaw's play by the same title, she hears heavenly voices, and future events are revealed to her in prophetic dreams. Indeed, the whole of the introductory part of the novel which consists of the identification of the narrator, appearance of Wariinga and her journey to Ilmorog reads like the introduction to a hagiography. It seems we are being prepared to witness the wonders in the life of a saint - Saint Wariinga!

What the story ultimately reveals, however, is the process of Wariinga's gradual growth from a devout Christian to a devout marxist revolutionary. Even though her final act of vindictive murder might lead her to the executioner's noose as a criminal, there is still a sense in which Wariinga becomes a revolutionary heroine (a saint). Her murderous act of revenge is at the same time a heroic act of revolt against the oppressors of her class. Thus, what the hagiographic narrative style has done is to lend religious authenticity to a marxist heroine revolting against the capitalist systems carried out in Kenya by the likes of the character Hispaniora Greenway Ghitahy - the Rich Old Man from Ngorika.

One of the first steps in the Christian process of beatification is investigation of the life of the candidate for canonization. Ngugi's strategy in Devil on the Cross seems, therefore, to have created a paradoxical situation whereby the reader seems to be witnessing the unfolding of the Christian process of beatification for a marxist revolutionary. And the whole procedure seems to have God's blessing, hence Wariinga's story is revealed to a "Prophet of Justice." In fact, the narrative canonization extends beyond Wariinga to also include Muturi, Wangari, and the student leader, all of whom are called "The Holy Trinity of the worker, the peasant, the patriot" (p. 230).

This idealization of the positive proletarian hero in contrast to the caricaturing of bourgeois characters, the optimism of the total depiction and the practical demonstration of the dialectical law of historical materialism are some of the obvious characteristics of Devil on the Cross as a proletarian novel. Characters like Muturi, Wariinga and Wangari are at different stages of marxist consciousness. While Muturi is fully formed, Wariinga and Wangari are rapidly growing in social consciousness as a result of deepening oppression and exploitation at the hands of Kenyan bourgeoisie. The direct result of the awakening consciousness is the forging of the unity of "the holy trinity" of workers, peasants and students, a unity that has started challenging and, as the novel intimates, will ultimately defeat the bourgeois class. This is the source of the optimism of the narrative whose tone is of a person already savouring future victory in spite of present difficulties.

#### Hagiographic Fabulosity as Gateway to Realism

The distinguishing characteristic of the novel as a literary

genre is its realism, its emphasis on verisimilitude in matters of theme, characterization, language, temporal and geographical setting. Devil on the Cross, however, stretches the norms of verisimilitude with the license of a hagiography. In almost all of its aspects, the novel is by and large fabulous, based as it is on prophetic revelations, mysterious voices, dreams, miraculous escapes from death, coincidences, parables and the fairy-tale concept of the cave feast. The paradox, however, is that in spite of all these elements of the romantic, Devil on the Cross is a solidly realistic novel, with the fantastic aspects merely serving to heighten the novel's objective depiction of Kenyan contemporary reality. In other words, fantasy in this novel is only the gateway to realism.

Three factors explain Ngugi's ability to transform fantasy into realism. These include (1) his judicious balancing of the elements of romanticism throughout the novel's plot development, (2) his use of the style of psychological realism, and (3) his reliance on a narrative language heavily saturated with common folk patterns of speech. Although the story begins with the fantasy of a biblical prophet turned into a twentieth century narrator, the fantastic nightmare of Wariinga, her mysterious voices, the recall of her miraculous escapes from suicidal death and the incredible coincidences that brought so many misfortunes on her at the same time, the center of narrative focus remains Wariinga's predicament of sudden joblessness, homelessness and her emotional reactions to these misfortunes. Her predicament is so vividly presented in concrete realistic details that the fabulous elements of the story unintrusively dwindle into insignificance. For instance, the scene of the attempted seduction of Wariinga, her refusal to cooperate, the predictable reaction of her boss (the seducer), the subsequent loss of her job, the unjustified eviction from the rented room and her emotional reactions are all convincingly depicted apart from being predictable and realistic. Indeed, they are all part of the sordid immorality and corruption routinely witnessed today in most modern African cities.

The journey from Nairobi to Ilmorog which constitutes the complication of the plot is almost entirely realistic with hardly a trace of the fantastic apart from the cloak of mystery still surrounding the yet-to-be-revealed new characters and the exaggerated comic description of "Mwaura's Matatu Matata Matamu Model T Ford, registration number MMM 333."

The central action of the novel - the cave feast - returns us once more to fantasy. In fact, this section threatens to become a

farcically absurd fairy tale with its fabulous setting, the cave, and the assembly of so many characters, all of who are multi-millionaires, and whose testimonies of unbelievable atrocities and exploitations read like chapters in a book of nightmares. But even this fantastically unbelievable part of the novel is clearly transformed into a realistic affair. To begin with, in spite of some exaggeration, the testimonies of exploitation and corruption depict the factual history of how the typical African multimillionaire is made in countries like Kenya and Nigeria. The trade-mark bulging belly, the arrogance of power, the uncurbed ambition and the cynicism characterizing African imperialist stooges in their pursuit of wealth are all sad facts of life in today's Africa. More than the realism of subject matter, however, what transforms this romantic portion of the novel into realistic depiction is the well-balanced alternation of the fabulous and realistic details. The eerie feeling in the cave created by the fantastic testimonies is judiciously interrupted and replaced by a feeling of tangible reality achieved through a technical break in the plot and an emphasis on the ordinary details of life. A lunch break is called and during this interval the narrator takes us through a topographic tour of Ilmorog's exclusive quarters and slums and also provides the mundane biographical details of Wariinga's earlier life.

The end of the lunch break and the return to the cave mark a fresh flight into the fantasy of the testimonies and Wariinga's new dream of an encounter with, and temptation by the Devil. However, this return to fantasy is soon terminated by the brutal interference of factual events. Gatuiria wakes Wariinga from her dream and tells her about the arrest of Wangari. Soon after, they witness the revolt of the proletariat and the subsequent bloody intervention of the army, both of which actions constitute the climax to this part of the novel. A major interlude in the plot follows and when the narration resumes two years later, the final developments in the plot from Gatuiria's wooing of Wariinga to the climactic termination of the novel with Wariinga's murder of Gatuiria's father are all given in realistic details. That the plot ends on a tragic note for the heroine is itself a realistic detail in that it shows that there is no easy solution - as in real life - to the class problem.

Ngugi's use of psychological realism creates a situation whereby even the most fabulous episodes in the novel are realistically motivated. Wariinga's mystery voice, for instance, is nothing but the voice of her inner mind offering advice and suggesting solutions to the problems raised by her troubled emotions. Being a devout Christian and spiritually inclined person,

she usually internalizes her experience and gives expression to them in religious terms. For instance, since her young religious mind cannot conceive of any being other than the devil to be capable of such heights of religious hypocrisy, social-political corruption and the brutal sexual and material exploitation suffered by the Kenyans at the hands of their bourgeoisie, she consequently equates the latter with the devil incarnate. Thus, during her moments of meditation in the church and at the cave these characters become transformed into the nightmare devils that haunt her thoughts. Indeed, it would seem she has subconsciously found a most appropriate metaphor to express her total abhorrence for the inhumanity characteristic of the bourgeoisie depicted in the novel.

Similarly, Wariinga's conversation with the devil during her day dream at the golf course while taking a short break away from the testimonies at the cave is nothing but the subconscious dramatization of the intellectual doubts, questions and answers prompted by the spiritual and emotional crises she was in at the time. Wariinga's problems would not only end but life would actually be transformed at least for a time into a continuous sea of luxury if she were to surrender her principles and become the mistress of any of those aging multimillionaires ready to pay any price to own "sugar babies" (p. 22, 192). The temptation is indeed a great one. Lured, on the one hand, by abundant wealth in the world of the "sugar daddy" multimillionaires, and repulsed, on the other hand by the inhumanity associated with this wealth, Wariinga is forced into the critical position of making a final moral choice: to follow the easy life of loose morals and wealth or the difficult path of proletarian resistance! It is the psychological agony of resolving this issue that is dramatized in the novel as her day-dream encounter with, and temptation by, the Devil, whom - as we remember she equates with the Kenyan bourgeoisie.

Finally, another source of the earthiness, the palpable realism of *Devil on the Cross*, in spite of all its fantasies, is the folkish nature of the novel's language. Hardly does any character make a statement that is not couched in some choice proverb or folk saying. The pages of the novel literally overflow with these traditional modes of Gikuyu common speech which, being a common property of the people, is generously used by both positive and negative characters alike, including the narrator. Apart from anchoring the novel in a familiar realistic world, the folk language is also a source of aesthetic pleasure to the reader because of its wisdom and the shared beauty of expression, as is evident in the

## UFAHAMU

following examples:

The wise can also be taught wisdom,  
So let me tell you:  
Gikuyu said that talking is the way to loving.  
Today is tomorrow's treasury.  
Tomorrow is the harvest of what we plant  
today.  
So let us ask ourselves:  
Moaning and groaning - who has ever gained  
from it?  
Change seeds, for the gourd contains seeds  
more than one kind!  
Change steps, for the song has more than one  
rhythm!  
Today's Muomboko dance is two steps and a  
turn! (p.16)

. . . Boss Kihara waits, hoping that Kareendi will eventually yield. Too much haste splits the yam. One month later, he again accosts Kareendi in the office. "Miss Kareendi, this evening there's a cocktail party at the Paradise Club." Once again Kareendi disguises her refusal with polite phrases.

The day comes when Boss Kihara reasons with himself in this way: The hunter who stalks his prey too stealthily may frighten it off in the end. Begging calls for constantly changing tactics. Bathing involves removing all one's clothes. So he confronts Kareendi boldly. "By the way, Miss Kareendi,..." (pp. 20-21)

Thus, Devil on the Cross is an exceptionally well written proletarian novel. It seems to me that in deploying the Christian religion to the task of undermining those who claim it but abuse it, like the hypocritical African imperialist stooges testifying at the cave, while supporting a proletarian idealist heroine like Wariinga, Ngugi is indicating a new positive direction to organized religion in today's Africa.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Devil on the Cross (London: Heineman, 1982). Page references are indicated in parentheses within the essay. The novel was originally published in Gikuyu as Caitaani Mutharabaini by the author in 1980 under the imprint of Heineman (East Africa) Ltd. According to a report by Ngugi published in World Literature Written in English, vol. 24, no. 1 (1984), p. 7, the novel in the original Gikuyu was enthusiastically received in Kenya where it had three reprints of five thousand copies each within the first year of its publication.

2. Beginning with Marx and Engels, marxist intellectuals have always regarded religion, which they call "the opium of the people", as an instrument of bourgeois exploitation. Bourgeois intellectuals, on the other hand, have invariably used atheism as a pretext to attack Marxism. To cite an example, in an article titled "Soviet Threat Is One of Ideas More Than Arms" published in The Wall Street Journal (Monday, May 23, 1983), David Satter made the following comments;

For this reason, and others, it is at last possible to mount the ideological counter-offensive now 65 years overdue, which may offer the best hope of stopping communism without war. The only requirement, if the U.S. is to enter seriously the competition to sway men's minds in every country of the world, including the Soviet Union, is that we understand not only what we are against but also what we are for. Whatever we may think of communism, we must recognize that it attempts to answer basic questions about the nature of history and the source of values, questions that have plagued mankind since the beginning of recorded time.

It is therefore essential that we answer in kind. If our notion of an ideological counter

offensive is to try to generate the fervor on behalf of free enterprise that communists are able to inspire on behalf of socialism, we will only succeed in making ourselves look ridiculous. Capitalism stands in need of values to restrain and guide it. It can never be the source of such values. If representatives of the U.S. are able to clarify for the world, the difference between universal Judeo-Christian values and the "class values" of Marxist-Leninism, the world role of the U.S. will be seen as inherently honorable as it is.

3. For the treatment of the theme of religion in Petals of Blood see G.D. Killam (ed.), Critical Perspectives on Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Washington, DC; Three Continents Press, 1984), pp. 283, 269-299 and F. Odun Balogun, "Petals of Blood: A Novel of the People," Ba Shiru, vol. 10, no. 2 (1979), pp. 49-57. The way Ngugi handled the theme of religion in earlier novels is also discussed in Critical Perspectives, pp. 146-160, 201-216.

4. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Writers in Politics (London: Heineman, 1981), p. 22. This book of essays appeared a year before the English translation of Caitani Mutharabaini (Devil on the Cross).

5. There are indications that the negative characters bear self-demeaning Gikuyu names. One of the multimillionaires bragging with the records of their inhumanity and exploitiveness is called Fathog Marura wa Kimecengemeenge. The first name is English - Fat hog and it alludes to the physical characteristics of the Devil in the novel: obesity and red skin. The promiscuous rich old man who lured Wariinga away from the path of virtue has these comically acculturated names: Hispaniora Greenway Ghitahy. The hotels frequented by the negative characters to engage in sexual immorality are ironically named Modern Lovebar and Lodging, Paradise Club. Unfortunately, my efforts to get the Gikuyu names translated were unsuccessful.

## INTERVIEW WITH BUCHI EMECHETA

*Buchi Emecheta is a well known Nigerian Novelist whose talk, 'Have Women Progressed', given at UCLA in November 1987, provided UFAHAMU the opportunity to conduct this interview. The interviewer, Joyce Boss, is a member of the editorial board.*

### On Cultural and Linguistic Issues.

**JB:** One of the criticisms leveled against Alice Walker, in The Color Purple, is that she presents the end results of oppression without diachronic analysis, without looking at the root causes of that oppression. Would it be fair if the same were said of your works?

**BE:** Well, I don't know. I think it's really left for the critics. As a writer, you just write books, and then the critics start analyzing what it ought to do or what ought to have been put in it, which doesn't enter the writer's mind [when she's writing].

**JB:** So in writing, you go by the writer's sense rather than the critic's analyses?

**BE:** Yes. In fact, sometimes you just write a story, and it's when the critics come to analyze it that you know what you've done. But as far as you're concerned, you have just written it. You just write the story, and when other people come to read it, they read something else into it which you didn't intend.

**JB:** Do you feel all interpretations are equally valid?

**BE:** [The interpretation] depends on the cultural background of the interpreter. When people evaluate a book, they usually do so according to their own culture, which may not be the same as the writer's.

## UFAHAMU

**JB:** In all of your books, we see the difficult situations encountered by women who challenge what is traditionally expected of them. Is there a point which saying "no" to those expectations becomes a denial or betrayal of one's culture?

**BE:** It can't be. In my own case, I might say, "I'm all right in England; I have everything I need, my children are here--why should I go back?" But even though my own parents are not alive, I feel there is this thing inside of me which says, I must go there, I must share. It's part of you. To completely say "no" to that culture would be a denial of my own personality, as an individual. I go to the village more often than some people who are in Lagos. [Laughs]

**JB:** So for you, the ties are still strong?

**BE:** Yes they're still there. Even though [in Nigeria] I don't like the oppression, the way women's achievements are pushed down--I don't like that. But there are many things in that culture that you don't get in Western culture.

**JB:** In regards to culture and cultural background, you write in English, which you have told us is your fourth language. If you are writing in English, which is an alien language for many Nigerians, do you think you can aim to educate or reach them writing in this language?

**BE:** Yes, you can. Most people in Nigeria speak English; even though it is an alien language we speak it. You can't write in a Nigerian language, because Nigeria has something like 249 languages. If you write in one, you just write to a small group of people.

**JB:** Whom do you see as your audience? When you are writing, whom do you see as those you are trying to reach?

## BOSS

**BE:** I try to reach everybody who can read English, and I try to write about Africa as my base for everybody who can read English.

**JB:** Some other writers see a problem in writing in English, because it came as a language of colonial oppression. . .

**BE:** I know you're talking about Ngugi wa Thiong'o; he's my neighbor in London. He wrote in his own language, but he's brought out Devil on the Cross in English because he found that writing in English should be all right due to its wide appeal. Even with Petals of Blood, he had to bring out an English edition.

### On Women and Empowerment

**JB:** An interesting point you brought up in your talk yesterday is the question of whether women have progressed. You say that in some ways, women are going around in circles, but it seems you see education as a way out of that circle.

**BE:** Yes, that is the key. Once a woman is educated up to a certain level, then she will have the confidence to communicate with her sister outside of that culture, and be able to compare notes. And maybe they can learn from each other. Until that is available to almost all women, we will be going around in circles.

**JB:** There is a very poignant scene in the beginning of The Joys of Motherhood where you describe how a female slave is killed after the death of the senior wife, and how the other women of the village look away. They don't wish to participate.

**BE:** Yes. But they didn't stop it. They didn't say anything, which I feel is the situation of powerlessness. That situation is something which still exists. The funniest thing is, when it actually comes to the act [ in traditions which oppress women], there's no men around. It's all women, but they just say, "okay, just go through

## UFAHAMU

with it, it won't take time." They don't want it. The person who's taking part doesn't want it. But they say, "let's just do it, "because they fear that one woman may go tell the men. Still, they don't like what is happening. If a man's wife dies he generally mourns for 40 days, but a widow would have to mourn for 7 or 9 months, wear black, and she wouldn't go into other people's houses; so many restrictions which don't apply to the men.

**JB:** You say that these days the women dislike some of these traditional things. Was this dislike there before?

**BE:** It wasn't as sharp as it is now. I know this, because my brother just died, and my sister and a very young girl had to go through this. I was at home, and I kept shouting that I didn't want her to go through these things, because she had very many children. And her mother kept saying, "I don't want people to abuse my daughter" And I said, "They are not abusing your daughter." So she said, "It is because you live over there. They may discriminate against her here, start giving her children names." Anyway, that is an example. The women don't agree with what is done, but they say, "Let's do it, because we don't want people to say we didn't do this." But it's changing gradually.

**JB:** I wanted to ask you about the heroines in your books. You said yesterday that Debbie in Destination Biafra is one kind of ideal African woman that you picture. . .

**BE:** A dream woman, yes.

**JB:** But when you said that, I couldn't help but think of characters such as Siegbo and the other elder women in The Rape of Shavi who, in the "Women's War," take strong action directly, without malice, but which in fact kills the man who committed the rape. Recognizing that this novel is mythic or even allegorical in many ways, do you think that kind of power exists within women?

**BE:** I think it does. That's what I was saying yesterday about the women of South Africa. I like to support the ANC, but when it comes to actual killing, I can't do it. The trouble you take raising a child to become a young woman and having that child killed, or that young man killed--I'm a coward when it comes to that. So when I have women characters do things like that, in Debbie's case for example, I can't even bring myself to say she was going to die. I just let it happen that way, so that it appears to have been out of her hands; and in *The Rape of Shavi* the same thing. I can't bring those women to actually say, "Okay, this is our war, we have to kill that man"-- I can't bring myself to do that. But we had, for instance, the Aba riots, when women refused to pay taxes; it was the British who shot them. They didn't kill a single white man. But the British killed 60 of them. This happened in 1949. But still they achieved their end, and the British people left the area. It's a different use of power. In the area of Nigeria where Achebe comes from, the women can say "We are not going to cook tonight." All the women will go on strike, and use that to achieve certain things.

**JB:** Is that sort of power always enough to achieve ends?

**BE:** It's slower, but . . . I don't think killing is quite right. Once a person is born, he or she has the same rights that I do. When it comes to any sort of killing, I know I can't do that.

**JB:** You talked a little bit yesterday about the psychological entrapment of women, where they are raised with certain expectations, and so they also raise their daughter and sons with those same expectations. In your books, as we've discussed, you portray women who challenge and overcome those expectations. Does this always necessitate some sort of Western element--a university education, for example--or is there a possibility for a thoroughly African-woman-defined concept of self-fulfillment?

**BE:** I think it is a matter of broadening your horizons. For example, at the [United Nations-sponsored] Nairobi Women's Conference,

## UFAHAMU

many of the Kenyan and Ugandan women who came had never been out of their villages before, and their lives will never be the same again. I was not there, but the people who went told me that some of the women who came were peasants, and they had to translate the conference to their level, but the experience of seeing so many women from all over the world--the joy, the happiness--their lives can't be the same. This sort of process doesn't necessarily mean breaking with what you have, but it means viewing what you have in a new light. You start questioning your own beliefs. The actual contact with women outside your culture will start making you think, "Are these things that we do really necessary?" You can start talking about things which people never talked about before, and start looking for solutions.

**JB:** Do you think there is any thing or things in particular which African women can teach other women of the world?

**BE:** I think maybe this sense of community spirit. But I don't think they necessarily achieve more than Jewish women, for example. Or even Asian women. I don't know about here, but in England, the women from Asia--meaning Pakistan, India--they are very powerful, for instance in the field of education. And these are women who, 10-15 years ago, came from the villages as we. But now they have been educated, and their daughters are becoming very powerful in society. So people always have something to learn from each other. For example, in England, the African woman generally achieves more than the West Indian woman, and that is because the African woman who makes it to Britain in most cases is well educated. However, the woman who comes from the Carribean is usually not well educated; she comes to England to work. So you can't really say the African woman is more intelligent, because she came with a higher level of education and higher expectations to start with. The West Indian woman of my generation who came in the 60's and 70's generally have jobs as cleaners and things like that. I was able to go to a good school, and able to get a very middle-class job when I came to Britain.

On Her Own Works

- JB:** In some of your earlier books, such as the The Bride Price, The Slave Girl, and The Joys of Motherhood, although survival is a very strong theme, these works have rather sad, or negative, endings--the heroine dies, or goes from one form of slavery to another. In your most recent books, however--Double Yoke, The Rape of Shavi, and now Head Above Water--the conclusions seem to be a bit more positive, or at least ambivalent. Do you see them that way, and if so, does it reflect a change in how you personally see things?
- BE:** Regarding the last three, I always believe that given the Big E -- Education --the position of women can be very positive. In The Bride Price, the girl was not educated enough so she allowed the custom to overcome her, and she died. In The Joys of Motherhood, in those days people still believed in what tradition made of women--women must have children in order to survive and all that, and of course we know that this is no longer valid. In The Slave Girl, as I explained yesterday, the generation of my mother was more enslaved than their mothers.
- JB:** Nnu Ego, the protagonist in Joys, seems to be in the unfortunate position of being caught just in that historical time between traditional and colonial cultures.
- BE:** Yes--their time was during the war, and then their children would be [the generation of] the child in The Bride Price, and after that you have the people of Second Class Citizen who were adventurers, going forth from the old physical boundaries. Of course they suffered a little, but when they got accustomed to living in the West, then there was hope. But again, for one person who entertains such a hope, there are millions of African women who never left their homes, never left their villages; wives in the villages still remain in bondage. As for my books, they may be positive, or they may not be positive. But I believe that if you create a heroine, whether African or European, with education--not necessarily money, but education--she gains that confidence of being able to cope with the modern world. So in Head Above