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THE DIVERGENCE OF ART AND IDEOLOGY IN THE LATER NOVELS
OF NGUGI WA THIONG'O: A CRITIQUE*¹

by

Lisa Curtis

What we demand is unity of politics and art, of content and form, and of the revolutionary political content and of the highest degree of perfection in artistic form. Works of art, however, politically progressive, are powerless if they lack artistic quality.

(Mao Tse Tung)²

With the writing of Petals of Blood Ngugi noticeably moves away from the expository mode of his earliest novels to a more didactic form of expression. This facilitates convenient delivery of a political sentiment; and in attempting to make this the central concern, Petals of Blood is perhaps his most ambitious novel. Both A Grain of Wheat and Petals of Blood are the testing grounds for a narrative technique consonant with a political ideology. Yet Petals of Blood is, I would argue, considerably weakened by the discrepancy between its ideology and its mode of expression. In this novel Ngugi identifies the political solution to the problems of post-independence in Kenya as the replacement of capitalism with a socialist order. As a result, the conflict he portrays takes on a Marxist form expressed in terms of class revolt. This Marxist stance is motivated by Ngugi's conviction that the social order of post-independence in Kenya effectively diverges very little from that leading up to and including Mau Mau.³ Ngugi embraces the categories of Marxist social definition and avows that the role of the artist is to articulate "the feelings behind this struggle."⁴ The intention is primarily revolutionary, and ostensibly the form as well as the content should convey this ideological impetus.

Ngugi's intention, both politically and artistically, is clearly articulated in the collection of essays published in Homecoming. His point of departure is the implicit premise that all art is ideological. Consequently, for Ngugi all writing is effectively political writing:

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*It is only in a socialist context that a look at yesterday can be meaningful in illuminating today and tomorrow. Whatever his ideological persuasion, this is the African writer's task.*⁵

Within Ngugi's proposed framework which yokes together literature and politics, the efficacious imparting of political thought necessarily depends upon the individual work through which it is articulated. Ngugi's mature novels reveal a sequential development towards the attempted unification of politics and literature. Indeed, A Grain of Wheat, Petals of Blood and Devil on the Cross differ markedly from the early novels in their dialectic shift from a prevailing liberal humanism to a socialist stance which proclaims that the "real enemy" is "monopoly capitalism, whose very condition of growth is cut-throat competition, inequality, and oppression of one group by another."⁶

One of the more formidable tasks facing the politically motivated artist is the creation of a cohesive work which does not merely disguise political dogma behind the cover of fiction. Ngugi's difficulty lies not so much in the fact of expressing political intention in a literary work as in determining a mode of expression which of itself conveys a given political conviction. The development of alternative forms of narrative technique marks the successive phases of Ngugi's political thought. The use of multiple narrators in A Grain of Wheat is fundamental to that novel's pervasive humanism. By postulating a village community as a collective narrator in Petals of Blood, Ngugi demonstrates an increasing concern with social collectivism. Yet this broader perspective never advertently disavows the role of the individual.

Indeed, (Karega) thought now, things could never be the same even in viewing the past of his people, the past he had tried to grapple with in Siriana, and at Ilmorog school. Which past was one talking about?... Africa, after all, did not have one, but several pasts which were in perpetual struggle. Images pressed on images... And suddenly as the past unfolded before him, he saw, or imagined he saw, the face of his brother!

(Petals of Blood, p. 214)

The intrusion of personal motives on ostensibly social preoccupations, as in the example above, provide useful structural links in the plot of Petals of Blood, but significantly undermine the intention of collectivist expression. This is a difficulty which needs to be rationalised both at the levels of plot and character, and at the more abstract plane of the author's engagement in the highly personal endeavour of writing. Ngugi avowedly fulfills what he perceives to be that personal responsibility to the

community at large by dedicating his work to "All Kenyans struggling against the neo-colonial stage of imperialism"⁷ and "To all those writers in Kenya and elsewhere who have refused to bow to the neo-colonial culture of silence and fear."⁸

"DOGMATIC" POLITICAL RATIONALISATION

This need for rationalisation of individual intention reflects the difficulties implicit in the direct transposition of Marxist categories onto a very different social and cultural context, and their subsequent expression in the novel form. There is a sense in which it is this particular brand of political expression which is problematic. Liberal humanism lends itself to "conventional" novel forms in a way that dogmatic political writing does not. In my judgement of Ngugi we should refer to Brecht, for example, who has successfully articulated an expressly Marxist political intention through the more direct appeal of the theatre. This raises the question whether the "novel" with its conventional tendency to understatement is the appropriate form to embody explicit political dogma. In this article I propose to begin with a discussion of A Grain of Wheat in which I would argue that artistic achievement and political intention are successfully fused. This may be taken as a standard by which to judge Ngugi's subsequent novels.

HUMANIST INDIVIDUAL ROLE

I

A Grain of Wheat stands apart from Ngugi's later novels in the manner in which it universalizes the human struggle for order and meaning in a changing world. Set at the brink of Kenyan independence, the characters actively seek out patterns in the seeming daily chaos of their lives. Going beyond the sociological or politically demonstrative manner which characterizes Ngugi's subsequent works, the dominant emphasis in A Grain of Wheat is on the individual's role and responsibility in an immediate social context. Past and present conspire to break through the protective shell of self-absorption: man is seen to be more than the "bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast,"⁹ more than the sum total of his daily activities and preoccupations.

Previously (Mugo) liked to see events in his life as isolated. Things had been fated to happen at different moments. One had no choice in anything as surely as one had no choice in one's birth. He did not, then, tire his mind by trying to connect what went before with what followed after. Numb, he ran without thinking of the road, its origin or its end.

(A Grain of Wheat, p. 195)

Behind the novel there is the notion that to admit to a pattern of causation is to acknowledge one's larger responsibilities. Having had no choice in one's birth does not alleviate the burden, if not the compulsion, to create purpose and meaning in life. It is an awareness of this causative thrust which Ngugi repeatedly shows to be lacking in the men of the new world.

Those buried in the earth should remain in the earth. Things of yesterday should remain with yesterday.

(A Grain of Wheat, p. 198)

Throughout the novel, the ghosts of men and their actions rise and point an accusing finger at both characters and reader. Appeals on the grounds of common humanity seek to engage readers' participation in the failure to create the ideal society from the Utopian vision which pinned its hopes on Uhuru. That vision was flawed, its realization repeatedly externalized with each successive refusal to acknowledge personal responsibility; the very condition of that vision renders all action ineffective. The author's vision forces upon the reader a realization that mankind is fallen; Uhuru-Utopia is eternally out of reach. This recurrent failure to achieve projected goals does not in the novel undermine the value of those goals, as each episode reveals man's potential to exceed his self-imposed limitations. Far from embodying a vision of greatness, *A Grain of Wheat* is a compassionate and modest exposition of man's common fragility and his potential for greater strength through self-knowledge.

The structure of *A Grain of Wheat* is central to the expository nature of its narrative. The abbreviated and repetitive episodes heighten the pervasive sense of misapprehension to which the characters are subject. The reader becomes engaged in the uncertainty of the characters, in their limited visions, and with them, gropes towards some larger understanding of a common humanity. The superimposition of time and events is reminiscent of Picasso's technique of portraying a face in several attitudes and at different moments simultaneously.¹⁰ This results in the creation of highly complex characters, moulded by their various circumstances, many of which are beyond their conscious knowledge and comprehension.

Ngugi also employs this technique of multiple perspectives in the consideration of past events: his plot comprises more than the isolated moments of simple heroism in the struggle for political liberation. Even the immediate world is the product of conflicting and frequently unknowable events. Their fragmentary nature is cumulative, and gradually approaches the painful revelation that the enemy in a social struggle is now ourselves.

Each of the characters is in turn burdened by the sense of past events gradually and inexorably stifling them, and forcing them to confession. The novel itself echoes and re-echoes various incidents and viewpoints, heightening the oppressive aura of each incident. Parallels and contrasts between similar events at different periods of time serve as reminders of the tendency of the past to force itself upon present consciousness, and the impossibility of personal dissociation is conveyed by the manner in which it is internalized by individual characters. The two races between Gikonyo and Karanja both climax with the uniting of Gikonyo and Mumbi. Yet the joyous union at the end of the first race contrasts vividly with the more tentative reunion of the second. Mugo's porridge in the opening scene performs a similar function, forcing upon his unwilling conscience memories of suffering and degradation in the detention camps. Experience and suffering have revealed to each of these characters their flaws and shortcomings. The gulf between desire and the will to action is widest at moments such as these, as Ngugi suggests that only greater suffering will bring the moral strength that will allow the characters to rediscover meaning in their actions. This suggestion is implicit in the understanding characters attain of past events, as these are realistically paraded in fragmentary form in the conscious memory. The involvement of the reader depends on this active witnessing of the pasts of the various characters as each encounters his own memories within the framework of the novel.

When the same events are seen from differing points of view, the reader is enabled to perceive the true complexity of the world of the novel, and the limitations of human perceptions. The discrepancy between the facts of Kihika's meeting with Mugo, and what it is thought to have been by the villagers; the two views concerning the incident of the dog attacking Karanja; Thomson's clinical memorandum of spitting in a liar's face, set against Mugo's anguished account of how he betrayed Kihika; the two accounts of the raping of Dr. Lynd; all these add up to a sense of the elusiveness of reality, of truth as an ever-shifting quality which is ultimately undefinable.

The links between the photo-montage quality of the novel's structure are the means by which the historical dimension is introduced into the framework. An example of this occurs in the passage which introduces the train, an image which serves as a vital link between subsequent events.

The iron snake had first crawled along this plain before climbing up the escarpment on its way to Kisumu and Kampala; for a long time Thabai was the envy of many ridges not so graced with a railway line.

(A Grain of Wheat, p. 83)

Already there is a sense of the train being more than a symbolic sociological phenomenon. It touches the lives of men; and the narrative winds with the train's progress to gradually include more particular references ("Love affairs were often hatched there; many marriages with their attendant cry of woe or joy had their origin at the station platform." (ibid.) until it breaks upon the consciousness of the characters in the novel, and becomes intimately woven with the fabric of their lives:

'I rarely missed the train,' Gikonyo now remembered, years later, when this was only a myth. 'I loved to rub shoulders with the men and women.'
'Yet the day I missed the train was the happiest in my life,' he told Mugo.

(A Grain of Wheat, p. 85)

DIDACTIC THRESHOLD

This structural bridge between events before and after the Mau Mau rebellion contextualises the concerns of individual characters within a politico-historical framework. It is by this placing of the concerns of individuals at the centre of focus that Ngugi succeeds in humanising his political expression. When this pattern is reversed, and the broadly political takes precedence over the personal, there is a tendency to overstate the immediate relevance of the political disposition. This change of perspective which is so clearly apparent in Petals of Blood is foreshadowed in A Grain of Wheat at rare moments of authorial intrusion. The second chapter of A Grain of Wheat is primarily concerned with the formation of "The Party," a nebulous organization rendered important by virtue of its longevity. It is one of few passages in the novel not attributed to one of the characters; the narrator here is the omniscient author whose tone apes the prophetic allegorizing of "the Gikiyu seer":

(The Party's) origins can, so the people say, be traced to the day the whiteman came to the country, clutching the book of God in both hands, a magic witness that the whiteman was a messenger from the Lord. His tongue was coated with sugar, his humility was touching.

(A Grain of Wheat, p. 13)

The passage is infused with a sardonic bitterness which does not disappear when the narrative turns to Gikuyu mythology. The ironic mode obscures the symbolic import of such inclusions, so that when a deliberate statement about the birth of the present in the past is made, the connection is largely unconvincing.

Then nobody noticed it, but looking back we can see that Waiyaki's blood contained within it a seed, a grain, which gave birth to a political party whose main strength thereafter sprang from a bond with the soil.

(A Grain of Wheat, p. 15)

The failure here is perhaps attributable to the incidental role of the Party in the framework of the novel, and also to the undisguised didactic intention. Ngugi is more successful in articulating his ideological intentions when this is confined to the manipulating of the expressive aspects of form. In A Grain of Wheat the structural patterns of recurring events evoke a moral order which is internalised by the characters. The episodic form permits a structurally cyclical treatment of themes which contextualises the novel's moral order in a specific synchronic moment in Kenya's past. This technique of generating internal thematic self-reference encircles the world of A Grain of Wheat, and Ngugi's humanism extends outwards from this to the world beyond the novel. By thus providing an enclosed context in which armed rebellion is an integral part of the moral order, the novel's form provides justification for certain violent acts which would otherwise be little more than senseless savagery. The theme of violence for example, is one of several in the novel which is cyclical in its pattern. There is repeatedly the distinction between action where the consequences are understood, and ruthlessness, cloaked in seeming acts of heroism, which masks an underlying barbarity:

...how many took the oath and are now licking the toes of the whiteman? No, you take an oath to confirm a choice already made. The decision to lay or not to lay your life for the people lies in the heart. The oath is the water sprinkled on a man's head at baptism.

(A Grain of Wheat, p. 218)

A Grain of Wheat can be read as an allegorical exposition of the multifacetedness of guilt. This is a major tenet of Ngugi's humanism. The manner in which Ngugi extends his range of reference to include the reader is also the means by which the varied expressions of guilt in the novel are part of his universalised statement about the human condition. The purpose of the confessions is not so much self-exoneration as a re-affirmation of this community of experience.

*Your business is not to clear your conscience,
But to learn to bear the burdens on your con-
science.*¹¹

(T.S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party*)

The ubiquitous nature of guilt finds expression from the very opening of the novel. It is significant that the guilt of Mugo, being sublimated, is experienced as irrational terror. This allows Ngugi to delay a confrontation of the theme until its pervasiveness has been established in the novel. Mugo is a betrayer, who, having never taken the oath, has committed a violation of personal honour. His guilt invades the reader before his crime is even suspected:

*Mugo felt nervous. He was lying on his back and
looking at the roof. Sooty locks hung from the
fern and grass thatch and all pointed at his heart.*

(*A Grain of Wheat*, p. 3)

The sense of naked terror in feeling "firmly chained to the bed frame" (ibid.) is heightened as the object of fear comes sharply into focus: a drop of water delicately suspended above Mugo's horrified eyes, gathering "grains of soot" as if in anticipation of an act of overwhelming destruction. With "a final heave" Mugo frees himself from the nightmare, but not from its threatening portents. Throughout the novel Mugo drifts in a state of suspended animation, never fully confident of the distinction between dream and reality. Both for him are infused with a sense of foreboding, anticipating retribution of such magnitude that this existence becomes a death-in-life acted out in the minutiae of physical endurance.

*Now he lay under the blanket and remained
unsettled, fearing, as in the dream, that a
drop of cold water would suddenly pierce his
eyes.*

(*A Grain of Wheat*, p. 3)

The treatment of guilt gives depth to Ngugi's evaluation of heroism - the conflicting demands of personal and public responsibility. In Mugo this treatment is most explicitly differentiated because of the ambiguity of the values attached to his confession (see p. 146).

The irony of Mugo's Messianic vision is compounded by the belief that this fulfillment of social duty will allay all sense of guilt. There are complex moral structures behind this irony. The conditions of freedom-fighting necessitated a moral order in which violence resulted in heroism, not guilt. Uhuru, however, has brought a new order - not the anticipated

Utopia, but a world in which the terms of actions have been significantly altered. Mugo's action is applauded as heroic by the values, however implicit, of the new order, because it is concerned with personal responsibility. It is nevertheless ironic that the confession is motivated by Mugo's reference to the terms of heroic action which no longer obtain. The greater burden is now on the value of action that is not heroic:

*Think,
Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural
vices are fathered by our heroism. Virtues
are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.*

(T.S. Eliot, Gerontion)

Mugo's escape from fear brings other torments in its place. No longer is there the burden of guilt: the climax of self-realization is the acceptance of responsibility.

*No sooner had he finished speaking than the silence
around, the lightness within, and the sudden freedom
pressed heavily on him.*

(A Grain of Wheat, p. 267)

It is fitting that Mugo's climax of self-realization, seen by him as an altruistic gesture, paradoxically isolates him from his fellow men, and results in his execution. It is through this paradox of moral injustice resulting from the need for social redress, that Ngugi attempts to compound the reader's involvement to the point of inviting the reader's self-implication.

'Your deeds alone will condemn you' is the judgement pronounced on Mugo; but is this true moral judgement, and if so, are we then not all also guilty? When General R. discloses that Githua has been fabricating his life as a freedom-fighter and his heroic achievements to play on our sympathies, his reaction is highly revealing: "Don't we all do that?" In his attempt to come to terms with Mumbi's adultery, Gikonyo sums up the moral condition of all the characters:

*'(Mugo) was a brave man, inside,' he stated. 'He
stood before much honour, praises were heaped on
him. He would have become a chief. Tell me another
person who would have exposed his soul for all eyes
to peck at.' He paused and let his eyes linger on
Mumbi. Then he looked away and said, 'Remember that
few people in that meeting are fit to lift a stone
against that man. Not unless I - we - too - turn
open our hearts naked for the world to look at.*

(A Grain of Wheat, p. 265)

In spite of this common fragility - the need to create a fiction in order to render individual action meaningful - there is a sense in which creating such fictions places a better world further beyond reach. In the opening chapter we are exposed to the full subtlety of the author's ironic assault on this propensity. Githua, in a grotesque self-parody, sidles up to Mugo:

'In the name of blackman's freedom I salute you.' Then he bowed several times in comic deference.'

(A Grain of Wheat, p. 5)

That freedom, so easily satirized, is clearly of an illusive nature. Githua in his sentiments echoes Warui, whose earlier encounter with Mugo assaulted the reader's complacent assumptions about the nature of independence:

'Like Kenyatta is telling us,' he went on, 'these are days of Uhuru na Kazi.' He paused and ejected a jet of saliva onto the ledge.'

(A Grain of Wheat, p. 5)

The mildly ironic tone of Githua and Warui is turned upon the characters by the overriding authorial irony in the recording of their actions. As the novel progresses that irony becomes increasingly scathing when seen in terms of individual and social failures which have turned 'freedom' into a new kind of slavery, climaxing with Karanja's suicidal yet sardonic speculations: "Was death like that freedom?" (p. 261)

The characters who cling to obsolete values in a rapidly changing world are those who are seen to be guilty. The only character who escapes the responsibility of making a personal sacrifice which is not heroic is Kihika. His life is confined to a time when physical heroism was of unquestionable value. His moral trespasses (the murder of D. O. Robson) are perhaps justifiable in this context. He never has to cope with the greater moral trials posed by a 'liberated' nation.

The New Jerusalem is a fiction, like the fictional acts of heroism men create, which must crumble before the realisation that no action takes place in a void. Each life that unfolds in the novel touches the lives of others. According to Ngugi, order and meaning in our lives are only attainable through patterns of understanding, where the implications of the past and of projected hopes shape our present actions.

'Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future, And time future contained in time past.'

*If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.'*

(T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*)

At the level of personal responsibility, the progress of the relationship of Gikonyo and Mumbi is a crucial factor in charting the growth of the new society. Theirs is more than a model relationship, growing from an idealised initial union. Their very names are suggestive of symbolic stature, and Ngugi is careful that we should not overlook the connection. When Mumbi brings her panga to Gikonyo to be repaired, the following exchange ensues:

*'Gikuyu na Mumbi,
Gikuyu na Mumbi,
Gikuyu na Mumbi,
Nikihiu ngwatiro.'*

*It was Mumbi who now broke the solemnity. She
was laughing quietly.*

'What is it?'

*'Oh, Carpenter, Carpenter. So you know why I
came?'*

'I don't!' he said, puzzled.

*'But you sing to me and Gikuyu telling us it
is burnt at the handle.'*

(*A Grain of Wheat*, p. 92)

It is significant, however, that Gikonyo's name merely echoes that of Gikuyu, child of God and progenitor of the race of men. In this way the couple are both symbolic and firmly rooted in the living world of suffering and guilt. The rift in their relationship develops as a result of circumstances which affect all the other characters. Gikonyo is also a betrayer of the oath, consumed by guilt, and seeking to project his fears and inadequacies onto the woman he had idealised, and, by implication, for whom he had sacrificed his personal integrity. Mumbi's own fallibility is the self-justification Gikonyo needs for his arrogance. His repeated rejection of self-evaluation ("God, where is the Mumbi I left behind?") is concomitant with his refusal to understand or know why Mumbi faltered. Yet his self-righteousness becomes increasingly ironic as his subconscious self-accusation haunts him in the imagined sound of pursuing footsteps. At a higher level, the failure of the model relationship echoes the disruption and fear which haunts a nation. Thus the reconciliation brings symbolic reference to the conclusion of the novel - its image of anticipated domestic stability heralds the arrival of the new nation - an extended family of men for whom social stability is also an attainable possibility.

In spite of the overwhelming sense of hopelessness in the novel, Ngugi's closing vision is of a brighter future. The imminent reconciliation of Gikonyo and Mumbi is central to this. The emphasis of the narrative is on the stool Gikonyo will carve for Mumbi - a long-awaited wedding gift, symbolising their anticipated emotional remarriage which will be firmly rooted in the world of experience. At a different level, the stool is self-consciously a work of art, as is the novel in which it is described. There is therefore an implicit awareness of the limitations of human perceptions which is carried over into creative works.

A more convincing and complete vision of the future is embodied in Mumbi's child. It is significant that we see very little of that child - references to it are largely oblique, and this is vital if it is to represent living hope. Lives cannot be fashioned as Gikonyo fashions his stool, since they are the products of uncontrollable forces. Like the liberated nation, the child's beginning was surrounded by guilt and moral failure. The bastard conceived in fear and hate that needs to be reared and nurtured at the expense of great personal sacrifice is the crowning symbol of the new Kenya.

II

In the years following Independence, the hopes that had been pinned on Uhuru failed to materialize. In Petals of Blood Ngugi portrays the condition of moral invasion and economic exploitation which he perceives in Kenya as part of a historical pattern. It is in this respect that his ideological stance most clearly differs from that in A Grain of Wheat. The past is no longer an uncertainty, and man's place in a historical context is no longer shaped by unknowable forces; rather, past events are seen as part of an inexorable cycle of historical determinism which the revolutionary consciousness needs to overcome.

APPLIED ARTIFICE

Ngugi's political stance is clearly apparent in Petals of Blood, although the precise terms of his ideology tend to be simplistically articulated. The greatest difficulty lies in the imaginative expression of a polemic which cannot always be made to fit the context to which it is applied. Characters and situations must be made to conform to a pattern that will reveal set theories relating to such concerns as the class struggle, the role of women in society, and the effects of Christianity and colonial education in a developing country.

The historical overview which informs Petals of Blood is equally inflexible. This view is that all men in its world are

either exploiters or exploited, and the colonial and post-Independence areas of Kenya are used as analogous examples to that effect. Equally, the local histories of Kenyan people reflect each other and the larger social setting through a discernible pattern of similar characters and events. Munira's history of Limuru "jumping from the Tigon lands stolen by the Europeans from the people of Limuru and later becoming the storm-centre of Kenya's history, to what later was called the massacre at Lari" echoes the events of Ilmorog's past as recounted by Nyakinyua, and the omniscient narrator's sardonic parable relating an abbreviated history of the coming of the whiteman.

The missionary had traversed the seas, the forests, armed with the desire for profit that was his faith and light, and the gun that was his protection. He carried the Bible; the soldier carried the gun; the administrator and the settler carried the coin. Christianity, Commerce, Civilization: the Bible, the Coin, the Gun: Holy Trinity.

(Petals of Blood, p. 88)

In the post-Independence era the white exploiters are replaced by black counterparts in shape of Nderi, Mzigo, Chui, Kimeria, and even Munira's father. They too are subject to formulaic treatment, and become virtually indistinguishable in their universal voraciousness. In addition, Chui, in the role of Siriana's headmaster, is inseparable from Frausham, his white predecessor.

The structure of *Petals of Blood*, then, forcefully expresses patterns of historical inexorability against which its revolutionary sentiments are pitted. This implies a strained separation of formal and material intentions in the novel. Yet even with this structural dichotomy, Ngugi repeatedly introduces the terms of historical determinism into the 'content' of the novels as if to reinforce their contextual validity.

From Agu and Agu, Tene wa Tene, from, long, long before the Manjiri generation, the highway had seen more than its fair share of adventurers from the north and northwest. Solomon's suitors for myrrh and frankincense, Zeus' children in a royal hunt for the seat of the sun god of the Nile; scouts and emissaries of Ghenghis Khan; Arab geographers and also hunters for slaves and ivory; soul and gold merchants from Gaul and from Bismark's Germany; land pirates and human game-hunters from Victorian and Edwardian England: they had all passed here bound for a kingdom of plenty, driven sometimes by holy zeal, sometimes for a genuine search for

knowledge and the quest for the spot where the first man's umbilical cord was buried, but more often by mercenary commercial greed and love of the wanton destruction of those with a slightly different complexion from theirs.

(Petals of Blood, p. 68)

"MARXIST IMPOSITION"

In this passage the pattern of invasion and exploitation is shown to be older than memory ("from long, long before the Manjiri generation"); and it is against this relentless unfolding of historical purpose that Ngugi advocates a revolution of the workers that will bring a new order to the Kenyan nation. Although the aspirations of the central characters to find a better world suggests the importance of concerted popular action to change the historical patterns of power groupings, their visions are constantly undermined, both by the force Ngugi ascribes to the historical patterns, and by the ineffective forms taken by popular organizations. The occasional insertions of lists of social revolutions in the narrative seem paltry attempts to universalize the revolutionary theme. It is a conflict of political intention and artistic expression which remains ultimately unresolved. The uneven quality of the narrative - its vacillations between the simple accounts of past events given by the characters, and the omniscient authorial intrusions into the supposed collective narrative of the people of Ilmorog - reflects repeated attempts to overcome this difficulty. The fact that Ngugi is unable to sustain the collective narrative voice is perhaps itself indicative of the sense in which the traditional African society he describes is resistant to the imposition of Marxist social categories.

For this reason it is significant that the central ideological and intellectual drama is acted out in an isolated setting. Ilmorog, virtually a forgotten village, is both representative of other rural communities and equated with the larger Kenyan context. Its isolation from the rest of the nation echoes the sense in which the Kenyan problem is at best confined to an African context, undermining the attempts to impose alien social and political structures. The sense of Ilmorog's separateness is reinforced by the fact that the four central characters are outsiders; the reasons for their presence in Ilmorog are never in question.

They returned to Ilmorog, this time driven neither by idealism nor the search for a personal cure, but by an overriding necessity to escape.

(Petals of Blood, p. 106)

It is these outsiders who are responsible for the early changes that the village undergoes. Munira's school becomes a permanent fixture; with the help of Wanja, Abdulla's bar becomes a self-avowed moneymaking enterprise; Karega is the author of the fateful pilgrimage to the city. It is perhaps appropriate that four individuals who are misfits in the outside world should seek refuge in a forgotten village. Yet the very fact that changes, on whatever scale, are instigated by outsiders undermines the primary purpose of the isolated setting.

Revolutionary incentive is seen to operate from beyond the narrow confines of an isolated society, with significant implications for the political intentions of the novel. By failing to carry out his ostensible intention of tracing the development of a revolutionary consciousness among 'ordinary' Kenyan people, Ngugi seems to have failed to sustain the political thrust of his argument. Ilmorog and its people remain incidental to the drama of conflicting interests that arise between Wanja, Abdulla, Munira, Karega and the outside world. Indeed, it is not until the 'people' are caught up in the process of industrialization of New Ilmorog and have become workers rather than peasants that a revolutionary consciousness is attributed to them, and even then, it is with limited success. This is because the collectivist expression ascribed to the people of Ilmorog seems insufficient to cope with the social order, so firmly entrenched in historical precedent, which they are attempting to change. The portrayal of New Ilmorog's mushrooming unions, for example, leaves no doubt as to their credibility. Yet the ironic undertones of the passage reveal an authorial self-consciousness which draws attention to the limited effectiveness of the vehicle of revolutionary intention in the novel.

The victory of the Breweries Workers' Union had a very traumatic effect on the hitherto docile workers of Ilmorog. Suddenly even barmaids wanted their own union. The women dancers formed themselves into a Tourist Dancers' Union and demanded more money for their art. The agricultural workers followed suit. Something big was happening in Ilmorog and the employers were shaken and worried.

(Petals of Blood, p. 305)

IDEOLOGICAL INTRUSION

Such inherent difficulties at the level of the creative process inevitably hamper imaginative expression. Thus, although the ideological need for a reinforcing imaginative construction is strongly felt, it in turn diminishes the possibility of developing a narrative technique which in its form will echo the 'revolutionary' content of the novel.

This gap between ideology and its realization is occasionally bridged by an omniscient voice which narrates events beyond the reach of any of the individual narrators. In one instance, in the account of events following the journey to Nairobi, there is a momentary reappearance of the ironic mode which characterized Ngugi's historical narration in A Grain of Wheat.

For a whole month after the group's triumphant return they came: church leaders who conducted prayers for rain and promised a church for the area; government officials... charity organizations... and a group of university students who later wrote a paper relating droughts and uneven development to neo-colonialism, called for the immediate abolition of capitalism and signed themselves as the committee for students against neo-colonialism.

(Petals of Blood, p. 185)

Ngugi's implicit approval of the sentiments voiced by the university students gives an ambivalent edge to the prevailing tone of ironic contempt in the passage. The student's political platitudes seem to be under authorial attack because their interest in a community they have hardly seen is both belated and nominal. Yet the student's ideology seems to be that of the author (the dedication in Devil on the Cross is but one example of this); so it seems that the irony actually undermines the ideological purpose of the passage. Such ambiguity of expression is unlikely to be deliberate, but rather, constitutes one of several instances in Petals of Blood where the demands of imaginative expression seem to inadvertently prevail over the author's political didacticism.

The unity of the novel depends largely on a structure that can embody as well as convey the central concern - in this case it must unify in order to communicate the inherent universal discord it portrays. The dialectical difficulties of Petals of Blood are felt at all levels of its organization. Having stated that there is a discrepancy between the expressive intentions of form and content, it is now necessary to examine that form as an integral part of the work.

EXERCISE IN IDEOLOGICAL TRANSITION

The narrative form of Petals of Blood functions at three levels: the written statement by Munira for the police officer investigating a case of multiple murder which is the alleged motivation for the narrating of events; secondly, the collection of reminiscences of several characters which are articulated in a framework of traditional story-telling; thirdly, there

emerges occasionally a narrative 'we', which is given to represent the collective consciousness of the people of Ilmorog. The plot, as far as is discernible, appears to be a simple weaving of several sub-plots; from this perspective Munira's reminiscences serve as the sole connection between the various narratives.

But Munira's role in the novel goes beyond that of narrator and participant in recollected events. His is a flawed consciousness - driven to Ilmorog in an attempt to escape from a family situation which constantly mirrored his short-comings, he is able to feel a sense of power and achievement in a place where he can forget his past, and create his own terms of heroism.

So within six months he came to feel as if Ilmorog was his personal possession.

(Petals of Blood, p. 21)

His false pride reaches a climax when he is made Headmaster of Ilmorog school; his excessive glee serves as an ironic reflection of the emptiness of the title.

Munira's heart was glowing with pride. And so he was making something of himself after all. A headmaster. And now an invitation to tea.

(Petals of Blood, p. 87)

It is with this gentle irony that we are alerted to the unreliability of Munira's narrative, and, by implication, the unreliability of the narratives of other characters. This narrative technique is reminiscent of A Grain of Wheat, and its function in that novel as a vehicle for Ngugi's humanist treatment of his subject. The humanism is a residual feature in Petals of Blood in terms of the development of Ngugi's political thought. It argues a claim for the novel to be seen as transitional, needing to be read as an exercise in which the author is engaged in working out a narrative form which will effectively express his political ideology.

The highly personal bias of each narrative finds its parallel in the incomplete nature of the relationships in the novel. Each event, or fragment of personal history a character relates, has some bearing on the lives of other characters who hear the confessions. Although all are disturbed by the successive revelations of mutual involvement, the characters repeatedly attempt to disavow these connections, and reassert their individual isolation.

The ostensible effect of the rejection of common bonds between characters is to demonstrate the common propensity for

an egocentric perspective which is fragmentary and isolating. It is partly for this reason that attempts to change the historical pattern are doomed to failure in the context of the novel. This is set against Ngugi's concept of history in which an individual's past is inextricably caught up in a larger historical chain of cause and effect. Here again there is a discrepancy between authorial intention and artistic effect, as the characters fail to make the final imaginative connection between their relative pasts. This is because each man, unconsciously asserting his personal integrity, sees events from an entirely selfish viewpoint as they directly affect his life in the immediate present. The patterns which emerge in the lives of the various characters reflect the larger patterns of events which are recast as the novel progresses. These reformulations, however, are more than internal analogies. The descriptions of the annual seasonal cycles are given a structural dimension and provide points of reference against which other recurrent patterns can also be seen to be cyclical. However, the cyclical patterns of Petals of Blood are of an altogether different order from those in A Grain of Wheat. Again structure serves a functional role in ideological expression, but because that ideology is radically altered, the novel form is itself subject to change. The cyclical patterns in Petals of Blood are again thematic (the recurring images of fire, drought, and the strikes) but these are subordinate to a more general purpose of an enacted historical determinism. The natural order of the world in which the novel is set is no longer coterminous with the (explicitly revolutionary) moral order which Ngugi seeks to define. Nevertheless, the cyclical dimension with which thematic concerns are invested allows them to function as links between the specific events of the plot and the novel's ideological overview. For this reason the drought, for example, functions at several levels of reference. At the level of plot, it is the motivation for the pilgrimage to Nairobi; it brings physical hardship and echoes the emotional and spiritual aridity of the characters.

The attempted solution to the drought, proposed by Karega, is the journey to the city. That journey is itself both literal and metaphoric: it becomes a journey through death in search of life. The road is treacherous, beset by even greater hardships than those the villagers left behind. It reveals all the dangers of life, and none of its beauty; in so doing, it echoes the image of latent violence in nature conjured by the title of the novel. The journey itself is as ineffective a solution to the problem of drought as are the prayers and sacrifices of the villagers, because drought and rain will follow upon each other as they have always done. Yet the difference in the two solutions lies in the fact that the journey to the city brings disaffection to the people; and the seeming success of the sacrifice serves to reassert the value of ritual and man's continued

relation to God. It leads to an overwhelming affirmation of human and social purpose in the circumcision ceremony, in which even the outsiders are able to participate emotionally.

Another cycle of physical phenomena which touch the lives of men occurs in the image of fire as a purifying, purging agent. Unlike the drought, fire is only cyclical by association with the phoenix myth, and this is specifically the role it plays in association with Wanja. Just as the drought highlighted Wanja's physical and spiritual sterility, so successive fires in her life offer repeated opportunities for self-purification and rejuvenation.

*I have felt as if I could set myself on fire.
And I would then run to the mountain top so
that everyone would see me cleansed to my bones.*

(Petals of Blood, p. 252)

In spite of this desire for phoenix-like rebirth, Wanja remains trapped in the vortex of a dehumanising occupation, which is essentially unchanged regardless of its related income, her clients, and the name she attaches to it. Her failure lies in her inability to accept responsibility for her condition. Only when she accepts responsibility for her actions does she display potential for growth, and with this potential comes a long-awaited pregnancy.

*She, Wanja, had chosen to murder her own child.
In doing so she had murdered her own life and
now she took her final burial in property and
degradation as a glorious achievement. She tried
to look at this coolly without this time shifting
the blame onto others.*

(Petals of Blood, p. 328)

In spite of this, the pregnancy which is the code to Wanja's story is unconvincing. There remains a sense in which this is just one more "false start" in the pattern of her life: a sequence in which she will be brought full circle again, by fire and drought, to another new beginning.

These, then, are the problems arising from the historical perspective of *Petals of Blood*. The relentless cycles of time assert themselves at all levels of plot and narrative, undermining the revolutionary theme which finds expression in images of rebirth. The same conflict emerges in the development of characters. The case of Wanja has been discussed at length, and is essentially similar to the revolutionary attempts to create a new life in the other three protagonists. Their failures are predetermined both by the historical perspective and the other characters against whom they struggle.

It is significant that the 'oppressors' of the novel are given morally weighted names which restrict their roles and actions. By comparison, the lawyer, who remains nameless, has no more than a cursory influence on the development of the plot, and the enactment of the social drama. The names of the 'oppressors' are important: Nderi, a Kikuyu mythological term suggesting 'time immemorial'; Chui, a leopard, Mzigo, a burden; Kimeria, the one who swallows. Yet for those characters whose names do not prescribe their actions, the working out of their lives is simply attributed to fate.

(Karega) had responded to Wanja's call as if he were accepting his destiny. Yes, a covenant with fate, he thought, for the future seemed a yawning blank without a break or an opening, like the sky above them.

(Petals of Blood, p. 322)

Also:

Wanja was thinking: maybe nobody could really escape his fate. Maybe life was a series of false starts, which, once discovered, called for more renewed efforts at yet another beginning.

(Petals of Blood, p. 337)

And:

(Munira) felt guilty about being propelled by a whirlwind he neither willed nor could now control.

(Petals of Blood, p. 332)

In the last quotation, Munira's sense of guilt in his powerlessness suggests a level of responsibility which Wanja finally acknowledges, but which he has repeatedly avoided. Nevertheless, there is an overriding sense of the author manipulating events through characters whose actions are prescribed by their moral labels.

The personal revolutions, the almost simultaneous attempts at new beginnings the four protagonists undergo as part of the novel's dénouement, have in common a hollow superficiality and lack of reference to the world they live in. Wanja's spiritual rejuvenation admittedly aspires to be no more than a personal solution; nevertheless, it is impracticable enough in terms of her lifelong record of 'false starts' for it to be taken as a model for common reference. Equally, Abdulla undergoes no process of recuperation from the depths of squalid inebriation beyond his part in Wanja's new beginning. In spite of the

superficial analogy, the symbolism of Wanja's pregnancy and of Gikonyo's stool or Mumbi's child in A Grain of Wheat are worlds apart. The former fails because of the inherent dialectical paradox through which it is articulated; the latter are entirely convincing symbols of the ability to create a new world through personal sacrifice.

Karega and Munira differ markedly in their concluding visions from Wanja and Abdulla. Munira's final conversion to an empty Christianity conclusively assures his separation from his fellow men. It is significant that his religious platitudes echo the language of Karega's revolutionary vision at their respective moments of original inspiration.

*Must we have this world? Is there only one world?
Then we must create another world, a new earth,
(Karega) burst out, addressing himself to all the
countless faces he had seen and worked with...*

(Petals of Blood, p. 294)

And Munira:

*In that second, everything was revealed to me.
And I truly beheld a new earth, now that Christ
was my personal saviour.*

(Petals of Blood, p. 298)

Both these revelations are Utopian visions which point to the common disaffection of two dreamers. The echoes in the language emphasize the element of escapism in the visions, and ensure that neither can be considered as a viable solution to the complexity of the social problem. The unity of workers, who we have seen only through the eyes of Karega, is as remote a possibility as a surfeit of Christian love and charity among the industrial magnates. As a result, Karega becomes little more than a militant mouthpiece. His speeches have the air of having been transcribed from agitator's pamphlets.

*The true lesson of history was this: that the
so-called victims, the poor, the downtrodden, the
masses, had always struggled with spears and arrows,
with their hands and songs of courage and hope, to end
their oppression and exploitation: that they would
continue struggling until a human kingdom came: a
world in which goodness and beauty and strength and
courage could be seen not in how much power to oppress
one possessed, but only in one's contribution in
creating a more humane world in which the inherited
inventive genius of man in culture and in science
from all ages and climes would not be the monopoly
of a few, but for the use of all, so that all*

*flowers in all their different colours would
ripen and bear fruits and seeds.*

(Petals of Blood, p. 303)

Although Karega goes on to uphold Abdulla as a shining example of the noble 'brotherly' gestures man is capable of, there is always a sense in which the freedom-fighter and the revolutionary exist in entirely different worlds. Their only connection (through Karega's dead brother who fought with Abdulla during the emergency) is insufficiently substantial for the terms of freedom-fighting to be convincingly transposed onto the present struggle for social reform.

That the terms of the struggle are now entirely different is also apparent from the different roles played by Karega and Abdulla at their respective moments of action. Abdulla's was a moral choice, not unlike that defined by Kihika when speaking of the oath in *A Grain of Wheat*. Karega, however, takes on the post of union secretary because no other job is open to him. His fervour increases following his employment, and the effects of his efforts are at best questionable.

RESILIENCE OF "HUMAN NATURE" VIS-A-VIS "IDEOLOGY."

The novel's dénouement remains uncertain in its intention. Its tone is guardedly optimistic, and, curiously, Joshua proclaims in his school-taught idealism, that his heroes are Wanja, Abdulla, Karega, and Munira. That the solutions these characters offer are entirely personal, that they fail to be the inspiration for concerted popular action which will break the historical pattern, is of little consequence to Joshua. In spite of the note of optimism which filters through, suggesting that this is where the potential for social change lies, each of the characters retains the sense of separateness that characterized them throughout the novel. As social misfits who served to highlight the injustices of a society which rejected them, their failure to bring about any real change ultimately confirms their individual isolation, and the self-deceiving nature of the worlds they have created for themselves. Having forcefully articulated a catalogue of social ills Ngugi seems ultimately unable to place their solution within the reach of real men. For this reason the peasants of the novel, the 'people' whose duty it is to fight the 'oppressor' seem entirely incidental to Karega's vision. The men and women of Old Ilmorog are gradually lost as the plot progresses- indeed, even during the pilgrimage to Nairobi their presence is only nominal.

Throughout *Petals of Blood* Ngugi attempts to integrate two diametrically opposed visions. The ideological intention is repeatedly belied by the implications of the novel's cyclical form, and is ultimately unable to coerce and sublimate it.

Ngugi's inability to rationalize his more radical political suggestions stems from the difficulty of reducing men to 'oppressors' or 'peasants' or 'revolutionaries' when faced with the complexity of human character.

Thus it seems that a firm political stand is only possible when human nature does not come crashing down upon a delicate ideological framework. That human complexity can only be disavowed when characters are stripped of all individuality and are reduced to caricatures. It is this inflexible framework which forms the basis of Ngugi's most recent novel.

III

Devil on the Cross marks a new phase in Ngugi's fictional writing. It represents his most concerted attempt to break with the traditional form of the novel, a development which was partly anticipated by Petals of Blood. The novel was originally written in Gikuyu, and its form is reminiscent of a Gikuyu story with all the characteristics of an oral tradition: the great proverbial wealth; the simplicity of characterization; and the constant reiteration of the central themes and images. The difficulty arises in the translation of the spoken to the written word. Ngugi retains the highly visual quality of the oral story, creating powerful and colourful images of his moral types. These are the major vehicles for his didactic intention, yet they lack the subtlety of his earlier prose. The direct simplicity and visual qualities which are strengths in the spoken story become limitations in the novel form.

"SIMPLISTIC PARABLE"; "MORAL STEREOTYPES"; "POLITICAL DIDACTICISM"

Having erected a simplistic satirical parable entitled 'Modern Theft and Robbery' as the central focus, the possibilities of dramatic action are severely limited, since the moral stereotypes are predetermined and all that remains is for the author to provide the particular context. The novel comprises a barrage of political didacticism, conveyed both through the accounts of injustices suffered by the victims of the "neo-colonial stage of imperialism," and through the mock-biblical diatribes of speakers at the feast who are advocates of the forces of oppression. These speakers are paraded systematically for our inspection; yet the attempt to arouse the reader's scorn and indignation fails beyond the initial shock-value of the biblical parody. The oversimplifying of the social ills which are exposed, and the overstated irony of the speaker's monologues undermine their potential for serious and instructive political criticism by reducing the terms of the problems confronted and the level at which they are criticized to comic proportions.

And it came to pass that 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 querillas 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 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.'

(Devil on the Cross, p. 83)

Set against such evocative but rough-hewn didactic outbursts are passages of subtlety and strength. The opening of the novel, which introduces the plot and places the work in the context of an oral tradition, is one of the most powerful passages in the novel. The imaginative yoking of symbolic and 'real' characters captures the reader's attention, and artfully leaves his curiosity unsatisfied.

*The Devil appeared to Jacinta Wariinga one Sunday on a golf course in the town of Ilmorog in Iciriri District, and he told her -
Wait! I am leaping ahead of the story.
Wariinga's troubles did not begin at Ilmorog.
Let us retrace our steps...*

(Devil on the Cross, p. 10)

It is at this point that we are introduced to the persona of the reluctant narrator. It is a projection of the authorial voice about to tell a representative story through a sense of moral duty. The fulfilling of that duty elevates the narrator to prophetic stature, and that stature itself is given as the motivation for the telling of the story.

*I, even I, Prophet of Justice, felt this burden
weigh heavily upon me at first.*

(Devil on the Cross, p. 7)

Yet at this stage the prophetic voice interprets its role simply as herald of a reawakening oral tradition.

*It was then that I heard the pleading cries of
many voices: Gicaandi player, Prophet of Justice,
reveal what now lies concealed by darkness.*

(Devil on the Cross, p. 7)

It is an auspicious, lyrical opening, proclaiming the ambitious task of translating an oral tradition intact into the written word. It is for this reason that the prophetic narrator is given

such prominence: the narrative 'I' is to be one of the primary devices in preserving the sense of a speaking voice telling a story. However, the impact of such a beginning is largely lost as the novel progresses. The narrative voice is rapidly restricted to an edifying omniscience which concerns itself with the trivia of Wariinga's life.

What she hated most was her blackness, so she would disfigure her body with skin-lightening creams like Ambi and Snowfire, forgetting the saying: "That which is born black will never be white."

(Devil on the Cross, p. 11)

Interspersed throughout a plot which is frequently suggestive of a latter-day gothic novel are passages of great symbolic and visual impact. The description of Wariinga's dream is an example. The effect here is nightmarish, achieved through the superimposition of allegory (the use of Devil, Cross, and Hell wrenched from their usual contexts and charged with ironic overtones), onto a parable which illustrates symbolic social revolution while simultaneously parodying the events leading up to and including the Passion of Christ.

then she saw a crowd of people dressed in rags, walking in the light, propelling the Devil towards the cross.

(Devil on the Cross, p. 13)

The symbolism of this passage is stark and highly evocative. Yet with the closely observed details of the Devil's person, Ngugi verges on the type of overstatement which is characteristic of the novel.

The devil was clad in a silk suit, and he carried a walking stick shaped like a folding 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.

(Devil on the Cross, p. 13)

We are left in no doubt as to what the devil represents: "all the evils of the world" has a surprisingly narrow range of reference, specifically, the "monopoly capitalism" which the author so delights in assaulting. The combination of overstatement and the use of symbols which normally carry universal moral reference for such specific purposes somewhat undermine the intention of the passage. Such overbearing didacticism has the effect of alienating the reader, particularly later in the novel when the technique has lost its early freshness.

Nevertheless, the dominant image which results from the yoking together of diametrically opposed symbols (crucifying the Devil) is powerful and resonant. The implications of crucifixion in the biblical context are of physical suffering as self-sacrifice to redeem mankind, as a result of which comes imaginative and spiritual exaltation. Crucifying the Devil thus carries similar connotations of elevation to symbolic stature, although the implications of self-sacrifice are infelicitous for Ngugi's intention. This results in a curious inversion of the biblical pattern: the 'people' may be broadly equated with the Roman troops in Judea, and the "others dressed in suits and ties who lifted the Devil down from the Cross" with the followers of the deity. The inversion is complete. Yet such close textual parody of Christ's Passion necessarily anticipates the next phase, resurrection. And it is in celebration of the Devil risen that the ceremonies at Ilmorog are intended.

Set against this thematic framework is the story of Wariinga, whose exposure to the realities of "Modern Theft and Robbery" awakens her social conscience to a kind of religious fervour, and the realization that her past helplessness was effectively a silent acquiescence to the status quo. Her role in the novel is as it might have been in *Petals of Blood*: to demonstrate the birth of a revolutionary consciousness which is practical and effective.

"REDUCTIVE...."TRIVIAL"..."TERRORIST"

The pattern of Wariinga's life is more than coincidentally similar to that of Wanja: a schoolgirl pregnancy as the result of the abuse of an older man forces her to leave school without qualifications; the difficulties of job-hunting; the temptation to resort to a life of prostitution (to which Wanja acquiesces in all but name); the escape to Ilmorog. Yet even within the radically different form of *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi is unable to articulate the practical implementation of a revolutionary consciousness effectively. The manner in which Wariinga's self-discovery finds expression is reductive and self-defeating, focussing on personal details which seem trivial when set against the larger social ills the novel exposes.

The Wariinga of today has decided to be self-reliant all the time, to plunge into the middle of the arena of life's struggles in order to discover her real strength and to realize her true humanity...These days all her clothes fit her perfectly. For today Wariinga has dresses made for her or she buys them ready-made, but they always suit her shape, colour, and movement of her beautiful body.

(Devil on the Cross, p. 217)

"Wariinga our engineering hero" is a model of feminist improbability. The climax of the story of the woman "beautiful in the tribe" comes when she heroically shoots the "rich Old Man from Ngorika" who is both the father of her fiancé and of her child. As she walks away from the scene of her simple solution to "all the evils of the world" bestowing "judo kicks and karate chops" on those who try to prevent her from terrorizing the world at large, one cannot help but feel that "the hardest struggles of her life's journey" probably lie at the back of a police van.

"CONTRIVED...STILTED...FAILURE"

Wariinga is certainly intended to appear admirable in her attempt to fight a repressive system in which all women are prostitutes and all men either exploited labourers or monopoly capitalists. Yet her character is as wooden as that of the Rich Old Man, or her fiancé-composer. Yet in spite of those aspects of the novel which are contrived and stilted, there is a directness in the language of the characters which conveys the author's anger with a conviction that the earlier novels lacked. When Wariinga eventually condescends to speak to the Rich Old Man "like a people's judge about to deliver his judgement," she is categorically stripped of all semblance of characterization, and pronounces the author's sentence on the complacent powermongers of an unjust society.

You snatcher of other peoples' lives! Do you remember the game you and I used to play, the game of the hunter and the hunted? Did you imagine that a day might come when the hunted would become the hunter? What's done cannot be undone. I'm not going to save you. But I shall save many other people, whose lives will not be ruined by words of honey and perfume.

(Devil on the Cross, p. 253)

Nevertheless, the improbable dénouement of the novel fails to offer a practical solution to such social ills. Wariinga's personal integrity is admirable, but even within the context of the novel its effectiveness is limited. Ngugi's repeated failure to find a solution to the problems he systematically exposes undermines the potential for real change which he ascribes to the political sentiments expressed in his works. It would seem that this failure cannot simply be overcome by the creation of new novel forms. If the new breed of novel is to adequately articulate the spirit of the people, it must express their fears and aspirations, their strengths and power to effect change in a manner which is closely allied to that elusive quality: the peoples' culture.

NOTES

¹Novels by Ngugi wa Thiong'o:

Weep Not Child. (London: Heinemann, 1964).

The River Between. (London: Heinemann, 1965).

A Grain of Wheat. (London: Heinemann, 1968).

Petals of Blood. (London: Heinemann, 1977).

Devil on the Cross. (London: Heinemann, 1982).

Page references to passages cited from these novels are given following each quotation in the text.

²From "Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art," (May, 1942) in Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung. (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1965)

³It is worth noting that political writers have questioned the validity of ascribing revolutionary potential to the peasantry, which effectively underestimates the complexity of rural class relations. For discussions of class in East Africa, see:

Gavin Kitching. Class and Economic Change in Kenya: The Making of an African Petite Bourgeoisie. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980). Goran Hyden. Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania: Underdevelopment and Uncaptured Peasantry. (London: Heinemann, 1980). Also, the ongoing debate in Review of African Political Economy.

⁴Ngugi wa Thiong'o. "The Writer in a Changing Society" in Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature and Politics. (London: Heinemann, 1972, p. 50)

⁵Ngugi. "The Writer and His Past", in Homecoming, p. 46.

⁶Ibid. p. 45.

⁷Dedication in Devil on the Cross. (London: Heinemann, 1982).

⁸Dedication in Writers in Politics. (London: Heinemann, 1981).

⁹From W.B. Yeats. Essays and Introductions. (New York: Macmillan, 1961, p. 509).

¹⁰In this connection it is perhaps significant that Ngugi should employ structural techniques which are strikingly similar to those of Cubism, the artistic movement, which itself drew inspiration from African art.

For Picasso's views on the expressiveness and intentionality of form, see his statement "Art as Individual Idea" published in Ellmann and Fieldson (eds.) The Modern Tradition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965).

¹¹T.S. Eliot. "The Cocktail Party," in The Collected Poems and Plays. (London: Faber and Faber, 1969). Ngugi only once refers to the works of T.S. Eliot, using the opening lines of Four Quartets to illustrate a specific argument (see "The Writer and His Past"). I have found it helpful to include quotations from Eliot where these could help to clarify my argument.