

# Ngugi's Critical Consciousness Turn in *Devil on the Cross*

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## ABSTRACT

Ngugi wa Tiango's novel *Devil on the Cross* employs a variety of oral elements of Kikuyu tradition as anti-colonising linguistic strategies. This paper intends to explain Ngugi's subversion of the traditional Western narrative discourse by the narrative mode constructed in national discourse from the anti-colonising linguistic strategy that the novel has. It examines the critical consciousness behind Ngugi's anti-colonial linguistic strategy, explores the realistic concern in the novel's historical context, and reveals the anti-colonial consciousness and critical consciousness turn in the novel's linguistic strategy.

## KEYWORDS

Devil on the Cross; Ngugi; Critical consciousness turn

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ngugi's novel *Devil on the Cross* (Caitani mutharaba-Ini), published in 1982, centres on the life experiences of a rural girl, Wari Ngah. The novel focuses on the life of the protagonist, Wari Ngah, who, after being seduced and abandoned by a rich old white man, and then dismissed for refusing to become her boss's mistress, is disillusioned and becomes involved in a "devil's feast" to divide up Kenya. After experiencing this "feast", Wari Ngah revitalises her confidence, and when she is about to get married to an intellectual, Gatulya, she accidentally discovers that her fiance's father is the same old rich man who raped her many years ago. In the face of this unacceptable reality, Wari Ngah shoots and kills the old rich man, and leaves in the midst of everyone's horror and anger.

The novel employs a great deal of traditional Kikuyu oral elements, and the traditional oral narrative style demonstrates the decolonisation strategy of the Ngugi language. As a literary work in Kikuyu, the novel's linguistic style and its narrative elements have generated much discussion. The article "Ngugi and Cultural Education" in the African Seminar online journal *African Studies in Education* states that "Ngugi uses Kikuyu myths, legends, and folklore as the core of his novels," and that in *The Devil on the Cross*, he subtly employs elements of traditional oral narratives to advance traditional Kenyan literature. Johnson Mugo Muhi, on the other hand, looks at the process of the development of oral literature in Africa as "a conscious deconstruction and subversion of colonial and neo-colonial practices", elevating Ngugi's use of traditional language to the level of a decolonisation strategy. Thus, in addition to the discussion of the traditional oral narrative elements in Ngugi's novel *The Devil on the Cross*, and the value of the use of Kikuyu for the existence of the national language, Ngugi's decolonising tendencies in the use of language and in the characterisation of his narratives are of greater interest.

While making detailed analyses of the novel's language and narrative style, the above researchers have also noted the decolonising implications of the novel's themes. However, these studies have been limited to the exploration of writing in national languages, and traditional Kenyan oral narratives,

often ignoring the significance and value of the critical consciousness of traditional linguistic strategies in the creation of the novel. Indeed, the novel is a complex and deeply symbolic and allegorical critique of the complicity between the ruling class and foreign capitalism within the country and the social crises that resulted from the collapse of the Kenyan 'myth of independence'. From this perspective, the paper focuses on the novel's internal linguistic strategies and the critical turn behind them.

## 2. CRITICISM OF THE "INDEPENDENCE MYTH" AND THE WRITING OF NATIONAL FABLES

*The Devil on the Cross* was written by Ngugi in prison on toilet paper after he was arrested and imprisoned in 1978 for participating in a demonstration in Kamiriithu in 1977 for the public performance of the play *I'll Get Married Whenever I Want*. Given the author's limited freedom of expression, the novel employs numerous allegories with clear symbolic meaning. *The Devil on the Cross* is not Ngugi's first novel to employ symbolism and allegorical writing. The portrayal of inter-tribal conflicts, the portrayal of early black intellectuals, and the concern for nationalism in his earlier novels, *Children, Don't Cry*, *Both Sides of the River*, and *A Grain of Wheat*, all have a general symbolic connotation. With the development of society and the destruction of the "myth of independence" in Kenya, the author's creative work underwent a great transformation. *The Devil on the Cross*, as a representative work of his creative turn, is very different from his previous works, both in the selection of the main character and in the symbolism of the characters.

Ngugi has said: "Africa's present predicaments are often not a matter of individual choice: they are the result of historical circumstances." In 1963 the Kenya African National Union (KANU) defeated the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) to become the de facto power in Kenya in the first independent government elections. Since then, Kenyan society has become increasingly corrupt under the incomplete "nationalism" of the new Prime Minister, Yomo Kenyatta. The "Devil's Feast" depicted in the novel is a symbolic satire. In this devil's feast, where the best thieves and robbers are chosen, each of the devils who speak on stage has an exaggerated appearance. They have huge bellies, long, sharp mouths and bulbous eyes, symbolising the "ogre" image of traditional Kikuyu folklore. They are the exploiters and thieves of Kenyan society, controlling the country's education and factory operations. One of the devils of Ngongi, after telling that he not only steals the wealth of the common people, but also boasts of his smuggling business. This coincides with the social phenomenon in Kenya in the 1970s when "the elite who controlled the country ..... were still illegally smuggling Ugandan coffee or ivory poached from the Masai Mara". The participation of judges from various countries in the feast expresses a critique of the "complicity" of the Kenyan state-controlling elite with imperialism. Although the feast takes place in the virtual Iwomorog, "it is a story that takes place in today's society". This "Devil's Feast" is both Ngugi's critique of Kenyan reality and his national allegory.

According to Frederic Jameson's "Allegory of the Nation", "postcolonial literature is populated by characters whose lives and experiences reflect those of the nation as a whole". From a people's perspective, Ngugi's fictional discourse as a "long-time critic of the Kenyatta government" is a counterpoint to elitist discourse and a strong critique of imperialism.

The story opens with the plight of Wari Ngah's life in Nairobi. After being fired from her job for refusing to be sexually harassed by her boss, the protagonist is violently evicted by her landlord who raises the rent. In the face of these successive stresses in her life, Wari Ngah tries to give up on life. After being rescued she says, "It was just the endless pain and stress in the city of Nairobi that crushed me". Unlike the symbolism of the black intellectuals in *Children Don't Cry* and *On Both Sides of the River*, Wari Ngah symbolises the wider Kenyan underclass. This shift in the scope of symbolism signifies a shift in the object of Ngugi's critique from imperialism, to the elite and their complicity with imperialism. If the protagonists in *Child, Don't Cry* and *A Grain of Wheat* are merely symbolic

of the black intelligentsia in general, *The Devil on the Cross* is of a broader national allegorical nature. The shift in Ngugi's novels from the portrayal of black intellectuals to this broader portrayal of the subject with a national allegorical nature demonstrates Ngugi's turn towards critical consciousness.

### 3. BIBLICAL COUNTER-WRITING AND COLONIAL CULTURAL CRITICISM

Growing up in colonial Kenya, Ngugi was immersed in the intricacies of the Christian faith and colonialism from an early age. In his autobiography, *dreams in a time of war*, Ngugi mentions that "then one day I found a copy of the Old Testament.....and the moment I realised I could read it, the book instantly became my magic book". Ngugi's keen interest in the Bible has profoundly influenced Ngugi and his later writing. In *Children, Don't Cry* and *On Both Sides of the River*, Ngugi portrays black intellectuals as "black messiahs", and the novels repeatedly link the movement of nationalist elites leading the people against the colonisers to the Exodus, in which the nationalist elites become the black saviours. It was not until March 1970 that Ngugi declared at the Fifth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in East Africa, "I am not a churchgoer, I am not even a Christian." Six years later, Ngugi changed his name from James Ngugi to Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Ngugi's public stance on the relationship between Christianity and himself meant that Ngugi had a deeper understanding of Christianity. In *The Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi draws on the authority of the biblical story to subvert its teachings, using the Bible as a backhanded expression of his critique of Christianity as the "midwife" of colonialism.

Post-independence Kenya continued the colonial power's hold on Kenya. "Several British colonial officials continued to remain in Kenya after independence as expatriate civil servants in the independent country's bureaucracy." The elite's alliance with imperialism meant a continuation of the Kenyan government's policy of Christian dumbing down. "The devil on the cross," as a scene that appears three times in Wari Ngah's dreams, is Ngugi's counterpoint to the story of Jesus' resurrection. "A group of men in sack sheets came out of the light and they pushed and drove the devil towards the cross." This group of men clad in sackcloths put the devil to death and spoke of the nature of Christianity's complicity with colonialism "You brutally kill innocent people and then put on the cloak of compassion"]. Yet three days later "another group of men in suits came out of the darkness and rescued the devil from the cross, pleading with him in unison to give them some words of deception". In this case, the men in sacks represent the strugglers of the Mau Mau Movement, the men in suits represent the elite of post-independence Kenya, and the devil represents the colonial hegemony of imperialism. Here, Ngugi directs his critique at the Kenyan domestic elite, implying that their complicity with imperialism is a betrayal of the Mau Mau movement. The so-called "charlatanism" is evidence of the elite's continued use of Christian teachings in its policy of dumbing down the population.

If Ngugi's early novels expose the contradictions between traditional culture and Christianity, then, with Kenya's independence, Christianity and its teachings gradually became a tool for the elite to exploit the people along with the colonisers. Based on Ngugi's deeper understanding of Christianity, Ngugi critiques the complex and profound impact of Christianity on Kenyan society. National culture has been rendered irrelevant by the policy of "forgive and forget" and the erasure of Mau Mau's achievements. The so-called Biblical counter-writing is Ngugi's attempt to expose the prevailing injustices in the society through the subversion of Christian teachings, so as to achieve the purpose of criticising complicity and denouncing the doctrine of ignorance. The novel's shift from using biblical elements as the core of the story to portray the image of the "black messiah" to the rewriting of the Bible not only signifies a change in Ngugi's own attitude towards Christianity, but also a shift in his critical consciousness.

## 4. NATIONAL LANGUAGES AND THE CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS TURN

Since the 1962 Campella Conference on the Expression of African Writers in English, the issue of defining African literature has fuelled heated debates among scholars of African literature. While the conference explored a definition of African literature, it did so because it automatically excluded those writing in African languages. Faced with the unfair treatment of writers in national languages at the conference, Ngugi, in 1986, looked back with a questioning self-consciousness, criticising the "fatalistic logic" of the undisputed place of English in African literature and proposing the idea of "how to enrich our own languages? How to enrich our own languages". *The Devil on the Cross* is Ngugi's practice of "enriching our own language" in Kikuyu. The novel abandons the tradition of writing in English, and instead is written in the language of the people, with a large number of traditional Kikuyu folktales, myths, and spoken words, in order to decolonise the mind.

In *Children, Don't Cry*, *On Both Sides of the River*, and *A Grain of Wheat*, the novels are often based on the three Kikuyu rituals: funerals, weddings, and circumcisions. The author's exploration of the antagonistic relationship between ethnic customs and colonial culture in the novels expresses Ngugi's strong critique of colonial cultural intrusion. However, with the events of the Kalimitu Theatre Festival, Ngugi becomes increasingly aware of the value of the use of national languages in literature for the decolonisation of ideas. *The Devil on the Cross* is based on the traditional Kikuyu image of the "ogre". In the invitation to the "Devil's Feast" received by Wari Ngah, the Devil is described as: "He has seven horns, each with a trumpet, and two mouths: one on the forehead and the other on the back of the head." This fits highly with the image of Marimii, the ogre figure among the Kikuyu. In Kikuyu folklore, the Marimii have two mouths, one in front and one in the back. They are cruel and greedy and live off human labour. Through the author's re-creation of the traditional image of the ogre, the image of the ogre takes on a deeper meaning and reflects the exploitation of the Kenyan people in the post-colonial era. Ngugi's rewriting of the traditional image shapes the ideology of the people and has led to a deeper sense of national identity as the creative value of ethnolinguistic literature.

To fulfil the proposition of "enriching our own language", Ngugi's choice of the "language of the novel" abandons the linguistic patterns of previous European novel writing and incorporates the Kikuyu narrative tradition. "I wanted a simpler plot, a simpler or clearer narrative thread, a stronger story element." *The Devil on the Cross*, which takes as its story line two journeys that unfold in the same place, draws on a wide range of oral language forms, especially fables, proverbs, and songs. This adaptation of the novel's oral tradition by the author enables readers to read it at home or in a pub, enhances its aesthetic pleasure in the collective reception of the art, and is more likely to provoke popular interpretation and discussion.

Ngugi's shift from the narrative language of the European novel to that of the traditional national narrative fulfils the proposition that African literature "enriches our own language" with national languages. If Ngugi's early novels were based on a nationalist critique of colonial culture, then Ngugi's works written in national languages are a critique of colonial culture. However, the works written in the national language are a dual critique of the "incomplete" nationalism and colonial culture of post-independence Kenya. From pre-colonial to post-independence Kenya, Ngugi's critical consciousness shifted from a critique of colonial culture to a dual critique of "incomplete" "nationalism" and colonial culture. From the shift in literary production from English to Kikuyu to the abandonment of the European mode of fiction production, Ngugi not only accomplished a deeper critique of colonial culture, but also made the leap from ideological to practical critical consciousness of anti-colonial culture.

## 5. CONCLUSION

With the changes in Kenyan society, Ngugi's literary production underwent a transformation, revealing different characteristics in terms of both the object of critique and the degree of critique that distinguish it from the critical consciousness of his earlier production. Ngugi abandons his previous singular critique of colonialism, exposes the complicity of the elite with imperialism, and comes to a deeper understanding of the dangers of colonial culture to Kenyan society, completing the critical turn of cultural critique from ideology to practice. This work not only reflects Ngugi's turn in critical consciousness at this stage of the novel, but also explores the possibility of the Kenyan people's struggle for the right to independent and free discourse, and it is the prelude to the transformation of African literature from a literature of resistance to a literature of revolution.

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