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Narrating Kenya: Historiography in the Novels of Ngugi wa Thiong'o

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Abstract

Often, the correlation between history and creative fiction sparks off an engrossing intellectual debate. The postcolonial literature is an obvious exemplum of the mutual and artistic intertwining of history and fiction. Since postcolonial writing is a byproduct of the historical process of colonisation, it undoubtedly bears a clear imprint of the historicity of a colonised country, thus an inseparable kinship between history and creative fiction is established. This notion of creative fusion of history and fiction manifests very evidently in African literature**.** Kenyan literature, especially novels, produced during the colonial and post-colonial era reverberates the strong influence of historical elements. The objective of the present paper is to probe the intervention of history in the early novels of Ngugi wa Thiong'o. The paper examines the persistent use of historical elements in the novels *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965). His novels document the historical, political, social and economic events of Kenya of colonial era and often address the pressing historical and the political issues of his time. The research is based on the close textual analysis of the two novels mentioned above. The researchers have made an attempt to scrutinise these novels linking the events and circumstances in the novels to the real history of Kenya.

Keywords: Colonialism, exploitation, history, post-colonialism, struggle

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1. Introduction

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a renowned African novelist and political activist, perceives literature both as a means of aesthetic gratification and as a mirror that reflects the socio-political reality. By dint of his artistic creative process being conditioned by pressing social, economic and political forces, Thiong'o harnesses literature as a tool to harbinger social changes. His novels are the 'novels of ideas' that are mighty in content. In this sense, his opinion is very close to the idea that "...literature should hold the mirror up to nature. It should be life-enhancing, a criticism of life" (Rees 5). Accoladed with numerous prestigious awards for creative contributions in the arena of post-colonial writings, Thiong'o never stops to fascinate his readers with his artistic feeds. His novels *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between* reflect the pathos of the most turbulent incidents in Kenyan history in a creative manner. In his works, he does not just chronicle the straight-forward account of the historical happenings. Rather, he decors them with his own artistic style and social vision.

Post-colonialism, as defined by M. H. Abrams, is "the critical analysis of the history, culture, literature and modes of discourse that are specific to the former colonies of England, Spain, France, and other European imperial powers. These studies have focused especially on the Third World countries in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean islands, and South America" (305-06). Eventually, the postcolonial literature emerged out of pressing need to address the historical events in a rather alternative way – voicing the suppressed voices. Thus, any of the postcolonial writings has an adamant knot with historical discourse. Thiong'o vigorously attempts to challenge and counter the meta-narratives of the colonialist through the critical reading and re-interpretation of the colonial discourse.

In order to reclaim the muted past of Kenya, Thiong'o uses his creative space as a vital constituent of his narratives. In this sense, his novels are powerful and authentic counter-narratives that starkly differ from the discourses created by the colonial power. Ursula Brumm affirms that "The service that history offers to the writer's imagination is that it creates parts of the plot or constellations of events which express an insight into human life" (321). For Thiong'o, history works as a lifeline for postcolonial literature. He demands objective rewriting of history for the true representation of Kenya. His novels are powerful refutation of the distorted history produced as an outcome of the cultural needs of imperialism.

In the novels under study, Thiong'o imagines, dissects, and challenges the histories of the Kenyan state. His narrative voices impinge on the need for an alternative

perception of history, which is based on his firm belief that there cannot be only one legitimate version of truth and fact. Therefore, his fiction does not tend to be mimetic. Instead, his treatment of history is that of a terrain open for re-interpretation and revision. Along with the documentation of the history of Kenya, Thiong'o's novels facilitate the writer to rethink, revise, and redocument the history from the perspective of the formerly silenced and repressed colonised subjects.

At times, Thiong'o's imagination takes the form of the fancy and the bizarre as he clings to the primitive beliefs and myths to retain the originality of the African culture to prove his leanings towards the creative impulse. He has opted for a different lens in the hope of grasping broader conceptions of the nation's reality. In his seminal work *Writers in Politics* (1981), Thiong'o mentions that "a writer's subject matter is history; i.e. the process of man acting on nature and changing it and in so doing acting on and changing himself" (72). He further writes "Literature has often given us more and sharper insights into the moving spirit of an era than all the historical and political documents treating the same moments in a society's development" (72). This paper is an attempt to gesture such a 'moving spirit' of Kenya's changing times through the artistic visions of Thiong'o. It studies the novels *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between* as visionary and critical voices that speak of Kenya's past, present and speculates its future. The major focus is to offer a critical insight into the histories of the post-independence Kenyan state. The careful consideration is given to the idea of 'private history' which is indicative of social histories.

Gurminder K. Bhambra opines that post-colonial thinking "is more about re-inscribing 'other' cultural traditions into narratives of modernity and thus transforming those narratives- both in historical terms and theoretical ones rather than simply renaming or re-evaluating the content of these other inheritances" (116). This is exactly why a postcolonial writer like Thiong'o employs the carnivalesque and the magical realistic modes as alternative ways of conceptualizing egalitarian polities in his novels *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between*. His project of rewriting history in his fiction critically cuts open the bodies of master histories and provides a new insight to the same history with different perspective. In this sense, the article aims to reflect the crucial ideas of reconfiguration of Kenyan history in the selected novels, employing the tenets of New Historicism. William J. Palmer marks that "New Historicism emphasizes a verticalizing of the historical text as opposed to the horizontal and linear story of history based upon major, often cataclysmic, events and

very powerful people" (175). Thiong'o's novels also perforate very sharply and acutely into every working class and social class. Palmer further writes, "New Historicism strives by the act of verticalizing history to represent and examine the relationships betweenthe power-centered classes and the marginalized population that together form the dynamics of history" (176). Thiong'o questions the extant master texts of history and in addition, supplements them with new dug up historical documents and artifacts, and enriches the existing history with new information. In doing so, he is widening and thickening, and discovering new dimensions of the accepted master texts. The novels under study prove how through artistic compression and condensation, Thiong'o gives emergence to an alternative historical reality exhuming the metanarratives.

Discussion

Thiong'o's proficiency in writing is always marked by his grave commitment towards his arduous search for *a socialist order*, and *a revolutionary culture*. His early novels whirl around the historical affairs of the brawl for independence and resistance to the injustices inflicted upon the Kenyan people. His untiring effort "to reclaim African history from the distortion and its Western derogatory version and present it to the world in its correct and original version" (Thakur 16) is evident also in the novels under discussion.

Weep Not, Child (1964)

Set in a Gikuyu village in Kenya during the 1952-1960 Emergency, Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* is a graphic portrayal of the tumultuous and vicious period of Kenyan history. Written in a bildungsroman form, it is a tale of a young, aspiring boy, Njoroge and his strong desire for education for himself and his Agikuyu community that is in the agony of transmogrification. The heart-throbbing struggles of Njoroge and his poor Kenyan family who dream of an independent, peaceful and prosperous life amid a turbulent phase of Mau Mau insurgency covers the major plot of the novel. Parallel to this story moves an unrequited love story of Njoroge and Mwihaki—daughter of the family tormenter of Njoroge. The novel is a true depiction of the disruptive practices of European colonisers and the dichotomies that are all knitted well in the nuanced historical backgrounds.

The novel opens with an unexpected announcement by Njoroge's mother that he is going to attain education in order to bring good fortune for the family. The thought ignites a ray of hope among all the family members. The lines "The vision of

his childhood again opened before him. For a time he contemplated the vision. He lived in it alone. It was just there, for himself a bright future … Aloud he said, 'I like school'" (1) truthfully manifest Njoroge's delight. In the pursuit of cherishing his dream, an underprivileged Njoroge and his destitute, colonially repressed family confront several heart-rending hardships. In the troublesome journey of a passionate adolescent, we see the reflection of political violence in the backdrop of an underground armed resistance commonly known as Mau Mau. In *Ngugi's Concept of History and the Post-colonial Discourses in Kenya* (1997), James Ogude asserts that "Ngugi's narrative is steeped in Kenya's historical landscape and indeed, at times borders close to direct allusion on actual historical personages and events" (88). The presentation of the social and political realities of Kenyan society, the root of betrayals, the baffling case of loss of land, the ceaseless inferences of colonial rule and the involvement of young men in the armed resistance in the novel verifies Ogude's statement.

Thiong'o deals with the realistic subject matter of the conflict over the land, which is expropriated by the British settlers. The loss of land acts as metaphor for the loss of the identity of the Gikuyu people and loss of connection with their ancestral deity. The concern over the land becomes the core of the plot as it symbolizes dignity, selfhood, independence and language. Meanwhile, the novel derives its rootedness, its pathos and extensive feeling through this symbolic representation. The connectivity of the Gikuyu dwellers with their land is expressed in the novel by the Mau Mau— the anti-colonial strugglers' group. The Mau Mau elements insinuated through the characters like Boro, Ngotho and other rebellious characters who fought fiercely against the atrocities of British invaders lodge profusely in the novel through the reference of the Kenya Emergency. The employment of Gikuyu myth by Thiong'o validates the authentic ownership of the African land to the Blacks. The fact is justified in the lines as Thiong'o writes, "God showed Gikuyu and Mumbi all the land and told them: This land I hand over to you. O Man and woman. It's your to rule and till in serenity sacrificing. Only to me, your God, under my sacred tree..." (24).

While narrating the prophecy by Mugowa Kibiro, Ngotho's tone reverberates the feeling of gloom, fear and terror. The problematic question of the land and the never-ending implications of the colonial rule are endorsed by his statement:

> So the white man came and took the land. But at first not the whole of it. Then came the war […]. The land was gone. My father and many others had been moved from our ancestral lands. He died lonely, a poor man

> waiting for the white man to go.Mugo had said this would come to be. The white man did not go and he died a *Muhoi* on this vey land. (25)

The mythical narrative justifies the move of the Mau Mau rebellion as a formative agent in the restoration of the ancestral ownership of the land. Thiong'o sees Mau Mau "as a cultural, political and economic expression of the African peasant masses […] in its revolutionary context" (*Homecoming* 30).

It is sarcastically ironic that Ngotho is a labourer on his own ancestral land which is now a property of Mr. Howlands, who is personified as British colonial enterprise. In the words of Patric Williams, "British colonialism wears literally a single face, that of Howlands as farmer, employer, usurper of their ancestral lands, District Officer, torturer etc." (43). The land possesses profoundly different meanings for the colonialist and the colonised. To the former, it is a source of power and an act of conquest, but to the latter, it is life. The embezzlement of land by Britishers is rectified in the lines: "Mr. Howlands always felt a certain amount of victory whenever he walked through it all. He alone was responsible for taming this unoccupied wildness" (32). Mr. Howlands is a type character who is representative of the White settlers who encroached the land of Blacks to escape the disillusionment of the First World War. The appropriation of the land by Mr. Howlands and its persistence by his Kenyan collaborator, Jacobo, gives rise to a rigorous struggle over identity and liberation. In this context, Ogudeaptly notes that:

> If political freedom in Kenya became synonymous with repossession of the land, the spiritual and moral justification for this quest for freedom lies in the fact that this land is linked to the spiritual right of the people, the Agikuyu. The land was God-given; it was entrusted to them by their legendry ancestors as a form of covenant between God and his people. (*Ngugi's Novels and African History* 21)

The novel, in its truest sense, holds at its core, the repossession of the land and reconnection with their true cultural identity.

The character through whom most of the ambiguities of the historic movement of Mau Mau and the basic inadequacies of Kenya African Union (KAU) are filtered is Njoroge. He naively adheres to modern education as a trope to liberation and communal unity. In the words of Thiong'o, "Njoroge had always been a dreamer, a visionary who consoled himself faced by the difficulties of the moment by a look at a better day to come" (131). Njoroge's idealism associates the future with a buoyant,

syncretic cultural relationship that surpasses race, ethnicity and other divergences. His identification of hope with education is stated in these lines: "He knew that for him education would be the fulfillment of a wider and more significant vision—a vision that embraced the demand made on him, not only by his father, but also by his mother, his brothers, and even the village. He saw himself destined for something big, and this made his heart glow" (41). But this unfathomable hope gets shattered with the imprisonment of Jomo Kenyatta. The situation aggravates with the murder of Mr. Howlands and Jacobo bringing about devastation and disintegration to the family. The event leads to Njoroge's socio- economic deprivation, inhuman treatment and torture, and victimization. This unfortunate condition of an ordinary individual in colonial Kenya brings about ambivalence and disillusionment in Njoroge. His futile attempt to reconcile the racial and ethnic barriers with the weapon of education drags him towards self-destruction.

It is through the eyes of Njoroge that the political nuances of the time is mediated. The tragic inevitability caused by the repressive structure and brutalities of colonial power makes the naïve hero realize that the community cannot reconstitute itself purely on the basis of a modernist vision of nonviolence but it also requires a violent resistance. This frustration is placidly manifested in the lines like "For Njoroge had now lost faith in all the things he had earlier believed in, like wealth, power, education, religion. Even love, his last hope, had fled from him" (145). It now becomes evident that Njoroge's idealism is in stark contrast to his brother Boro's rebellion. And in this sense, Boro represents the true spirit of Mau Mau. Giroux expresses how Thiong'o merges elements of fiction and historical fact by stating:

> A writer's handling of reality is affected by whether he perceives and therefore looks at a phenomenon in its interconnection or in its dislocation: in its rest or in its becoming...But what happens when reality is stranger than fiction? How does …And yet this is what confronts a novelist in a neo-colony vis-à-vis the audience most adversely affected by that very reality of a neo-colony. (78)

Hence, it can be remarked with great assertion that *Weep Not, Child* is a splendid portrayal of the historical nuances, and Thiong'o is justified when he argues:

> For what has been, especially for the vast majority of submerged, exploited masses in Africa, Asia and Black America, is intimately bound up with what might be: our vision of the future, of diverse possibilities of life and human potential, has roots in our experiences of the past. (*Homecoming* 39)

The River Between (1965)

Thiong'o's intense focus on the need of objective portrayal of history demands its appropriate representation in literature. Even though Mau Mau uprising has suffered immense misrepresentation by the colonisers at the time of struggle, its noticeable role in Kenyan history cannot be overlooked. In this regard , Lewis Amanda asserts:

> Although Mau Mau was technically not successful in overturning the colonial government through the means they implemented, they placed the British at a crossroads for granting independence [...] Mau Mau was both the instigators of social change and the victims of social change that resulted from the conflict. Therefore, Mau Mau could be considered to have waged a revolution to expel the colonial government in order to gain a political voice. (29)

In *The River Between*, Thiong'o explores the clash between the Gikuyus and the missionaries in the 1930s. He draws his material from the political situation before independence in Kenya. The novel is a kind of demonstration of destabilisation of African communities occasioned by British cultural and capitalist invasions. The novel encompasses the time of colonial intrusion and portrays a graphic detail of the distortion of pre-colonial idyllic tribal way of life as a consequence of European colonisation with a special focus on the religious and cultural turmoil. It is the integration of two crucial historical periods of Kenya. Primarily, it depicts the Evangelical Movement that represents the era of the 1960s and secondly, it reinterprets the Independent Schools Movement of the 1930s. Moreover, it is evident that Thiong'o's maiden text *The River Between* bears a strong imprint of a nationalist. The text took birth in the agonizing context of the early 1960s that was the period of problematic nationalist discourse. The fiction bears crystalline scars of the contradictions and ambiguities of the period. The writer attempts to give a picture of an animate and consolidated ethnic community intimidated by a foreign force and related to it are two historical delinquencies.

The novel is a realistic, almost dystopian bildungsroman that explores life on the Makuyu and Kameno ridges of Kenya around the time of the push by the British colonial religious infrastructure to eradicate female circumcision. The plot revolves around the character of Waiyaki, a young boy who is expected to mature into a beacon of hope and bring renewal for his community by encountering the newly arrived white settlers. But at the deeper level, the subject matter is the tension

caused by an intense polarisation between the residents of the two coterminous ridges who owe common cultural genealogical and social ground. The fascinating opening of the novel with an artful depiction of the landscape of its locale is symbolic of the past stability and the present volatility of the region. Thiong'o writes:

> The two ridges lay side by side. One was Kameno, the other was Makuyu. Between them was a valley. It was called the valley of life. Behind Kameno and Makuya were many more valleys and ridges, lying without any discernible plan. They were like many sleeping lions which never woke... And men, cattle, wild beasts and trees, were all united by this life-stream...The two ridges ceased to be sleeping lions united by their common source by life. They became antagonist. (1)

This beginning gives an image of a tension building between the ridges due to competing philosophies. As the events of the novel unfold, it becomes apparently clear that the denizens of Mukuyu have converted to Christianity but contrary to them, the inhabitants of Kamino remain true to their tribal religion. This difference further exacerbates the tensions.

The central character, Waiyaki, belongs to a blood-line of prophetic seer of Gikuyu and gains real insight into the secrets of his tribe through his father, Chege, who reveals:

> Now, listen my son. Listen carefully, for this is the ancient prophecy....When the White man came and fixed himself in Siriana, I warned all the people. But they laughed at me....Salvation shall come from hills….Arise. Heed the prophecy. Go to the Mission place. Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites. (20)

This revelation sets Waiyaki on a path of growth, identifying himself to be a messiah who would reinstate to the tribe their pre-colonial cultural purity. Through the use of traditional Gikuyu mythology, Thiong'o inherently re-establishes robust links to Kenya's cultural past. Henry Giroux argues that tradition is a valuable aspect of history formation. He suggests not to view tradition as unified totalized text but in the ways they "demonstrate the importance of constituting history as a dialogue among a variety of voices as they struggle within asymmetrical for their claims to truth or authority, but for the ways in which they serve to liberate and enlarge human possibilities […] They serve to place people self-consciously in their histories [...] constitute the social and political construction of public life" (231).

In pursuit of establishing himself as a guard of the inherited social mores and tradition against the encroachment of Christian teaching, Waiyaki embraces a fatal means unknowingly. The misconception that the pandemonium created by the invaders can be uprooted by embracing the white man's philosophy ruins him. And to meet the criterion for his messianic role, his father engineers him to be equipped with the colonial education which finally drowns him into the quagmire of 'cultural hegemony'. Moreover, The Sirianna School functions as a vital weapon to indoctrinate the European values to Waiyaki. Much ironically, this separatist education makes Waiyaki internalize some of European values thereby preparing him legitimize the colonial power. The fact is further attested by Meena Pydah's assertion that, "Siriana Mission School functions as the perfect tool of colonial administration alienating young mind from their native culture with an aim to incite an attitude of skepticism and contempt towards their belief of systems" (113).

Despite his loosened connection with tribal values and his ambivalent attitude towards them, Waiyaki willingly endures the traditional ordeal of circumcision in a merry and courageous manner and hence proving himself to be a possible contender for the leadership of the tribe. In the context of the custom of circumcision, Eurica Palmer et al. state that "Traditional male circumcision (TMC) is seen as a rite of passage to manhood and plays an important role in the socialization of boys and men. Initiation involves an informal learning process during which older men transfer the knowledge and skills that they deem necessary for being an adult male in their society" (2). Siweya et al. write: "Among other qualities, a man is expected to be strong, tough and ready to take risks as these qualities enable him to fulfill other masculine roles such as protecting the family and working for the community" (1572). And such communion is evidently noticeable in the lines of the novel: "Blood trickled freely on the ground" (44).

The stark contrast between Waiyaki's character and his foibles viz-a viz Joshua and Kabonyi illuminates Waiyaki's 'identity crisis'. Waiyaki strives to find a middle path between Joshua's uncompromising militancy and fanaticism and Kabonyi's partisan fundamentalism. The inevitable failure of Waiyaki's reconciliatory endeavours can easily be prefigured by the tragic death of Muthoni, Joshua's daughter. Joshua is such an ardent follower of Evangelism that he disowns his daughter for ignoring his prohibition against the 'sinful' practice of female circumcision. Joshua has an exuberantly cynical attitude towards the tribal culture and thus blames the tribal initiation ceremony for Muthoni's death. Joshua's devaluing of the tribal culture is

what Ekeh claims to be a weapon to oppress the colonized. According to Ekeh, one of the "ideological weapons employed by the colonial administrators in emphasing the necessity of their rule in Africa consisted of downgrading the contribution by Africans to the building of African nations and history generally" (97).

This brings to our sense how the natives are defamed as inferior and are negated their role in the process of nation making by calling them uncivilized and derogating their culture. This process of attributing negative qualities to the tribal is supported by the lines of Joshua: "The unerring white man had called the Gikuyu god the prince of darkness" (28). The unfortunate death of Muthoni accelerates the conflict of the novel. She literally offers her body as a locus of resolution for two conflicting worldviews and as a sacrifice to bring about a utopia but ends up unfavourably. In the wake of the controversy over Muthoni's circumcision, Waiyaki takes resort in education as a trope of unifying the clashing denizens.

With the acquisition of colonial education, Waiyaki rises as an influential emblem for the community and a fixture in local politics. He even succeeds in being elevated to a reputed leadership position in the Kiama governing body. He gains a new height in politics but he fails to observe the drawbacks of Western education. His constant conflict with Kabyoni and his decision to leave Kiama in pursuit of the expansion of schools gives him a fatal blow. The magnitude of the conflict and his pain increases with his matrimonial unison with Joshua's second, uncircumcised daughter Nyambura. This act of Waiyaki is regarded as a high treason. Still, he meets his heroic end by reinforcing his unswerving adherence to reconciliation by illustrating a rare example of magnanimity. The controversy over female circumcision in *The River Between* has its root in the historical event of 1928, when the church of Scotland Mission denied the access of the circumcised women its membership. The children of Gikuyu who did not reprehend female circumcision were also expelled from school forcing them to establish their own independent schools. Thiong'o has used these historical incidents as a commentary on the social and political issues. M. S. C. Okolo's proposition regarding the capabilities of literary writers is to "offer critical appraisal of the existing political situation and in this way […] mould or redirect the actions of society, its beliefs and values […] affecting political change" (1).

Apparently, Thiong'o's novels are implicated in the complex exploration of historical consciousness as they reflect the complexity of the historical experience and clarify the ambiguities of the moment.

Conclusion

A rigorous scrutiny of the novels *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between* proves them to be inextricably woven with the social, political, economic and historical artifacts of pre-colonial Kenya. Thiong'o has made a profound use of historical realism in a dynamic way. His successful projection of the disastrous effects of westernization and the struggle of the common native people against the exploitation by the new white settlers aids to his socialist thinking. In a tactful manner, Thiong'o revisits the traumatic memories of Kenya's troubled history. Thiong'o's artistic proficiency lies in the fact that he has prudently used the major events of Kenyan history in a subversive way by revisiting the history from the perspective of subaltern. The three crucial events of the presidency of Jomo Kenyatta (1963-1978), the Mau Mau insurgency (1952-1960) and the Protestant mission's opposition to female circumcision (1920s-1930s) have been explored in the novels. The novels relieve and revive the past by dissecting the represented conflicts, tensions and struggles as a way of recalling and meddling Kenya's fragmented past.

The deep engagement with history in Thiong'o's novels makes them more enriching and more layered in meaning. He employs historical events as raw materials to ignite his creative imagination, and to speculate and explore lesser-known viewpoints, marginalised voices, and hidden narratives.

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