

GENDER PERSPECTIVE AND ITS ROLE IN CONSTRUCTING WOMEN IDENTITY IN NGUGI WA THIONG'O SELECTED NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Identity as a notion is necessary for sustenance and the perpetuation of any human realm. The Representation of female identity in the male-authored world has always been a contemporary feature of discourse in African literature. The paper explores Ngugi Wa Thiong'o womanist concerns as he opens up new conceptual space in his novels since the beginning. In his novels, he displaces a prescriptive model of female identity and creates new women. Women characters are not only defined in terms of their relationship with man or society but rather it is through women that he represents the deplorable state of capitalism, the epitome of past African glory. The paper further discusses how Ngugi in his novels asserts new colonial women as an individual agency in a world where the colonial masters are not her perpetrators anymore but her own black native companions. The paper attempts to focus on women as a real subject and explore the image of women in African society through selected novels by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o.

Keywords: Colonialism, Postcolonialism, African Women, Identity, Feminist agencies, Liberation.

Introduction

Colonialism's impact on the African continent was dramatic, colonialism can be defined as control and conquest of other people's land and goods by a nation making their own colonies. There is an obvious state of domination and exploitation in the process of colonization. Ania Loomba in Colonialism- "Postcolonialism gives a broad definition of colonialism and says. It is a settlement in a new country... a body of people who settle in a new locality, forming a community subject to or connected with their parent state; the community so formed, consisting of the original settlers and their descendants" (Loomba, 1998.1). Colonialism is the most important factor in changing the roles of African women in their own lands. African women had a prominent position, which made them indispensable dynamics in the economy. However, they were unable to avoid a variety of challenges because they had lost their social and political power in the new colonial environment. As a result, they have become figures who are silenced and have had their economic, social, and educational rights taken away from them. In the literary world, the condition of African women and their sufferings started to take place when postcolonial authors began to discuss these issues in the 1950s. The challenges faced by black women have been moderately addressed by postcolonial theory; however, it was insufficient to demonstrate the genuine and precise situation of African women in postcolonial society. Although Postcolonial authors have referred to the condition of African women relatively, it could not fully reflect the problems faced by native African women, as it is a male-centered theory. Women in African societies that have been colonized are

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exploited not only by the colonizers but also by their own native people as once Gayatri Spivak, postcolonial theorist says "the effect of biological difference on women is denser than men" (Spivak, 1988:83-85). This idea of 'double colonialism' the African women were double exploited by colonial power and patriarchy the situation was mentioned by Robert Young in his *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* saying ; "For women, the problem centered on the fact that the conditions against which they were campaigning were the product of two kinds of oppression which put the antagonists of the nationalist struggle in the same camp: patriarchal systems of exploitation were common to both colonial regimes and indigenous societies. Women therefore had to fight the double colonization of patriarchal domination in its local as well as its imperial forms" (Young, 2004:379).

One of the most profound act of colonialism was the loss of identity. After having lived many years under colonial dominance, the huge quandary that native people have faced is the identity confusion. The colonized woman experienced identity confusion and eventually lost her identity as a result of falling into a passive position in her own land, where she had once been active, and comparing herself to white women. She has had to accept the lifestyle dictated by others as a result of losing her identity and her place in society. They tried to imitate the white women by dressing like them acting like them to find the accepted identity in the society.

For Bhabha, "identity is never an a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality" (Bhabha, 1994:51).

Postcolonial and postcolonial feminist writers have emphasized how African women are portrayed they have created a new atmosphere in the literature with their works, unlike the works of white, western-oriented writers. They predominantly depicted the colonized individuals

According to a dark perspective. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is one of these writers, and his works depict the lives of black people in a realistic and dramatic style. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is a prominent Kenyan writer considered as leading novelist of East Africa. His writings are notable for their unequivocal critique of colonialism, the imperial west's exploitation of African cultures, and the oppression of the African masses by the governing neo-colonialist elite. He asserts that the eradication of the communal, economical, and indigenous nature of the African nations was caused by the English colonial supremacy. Through his works, he also clearly demonstrates how patriarchal society affected African women in Kenya during the pre- and post-colonial periods through his writings. Ngugi in his works *Wizard of the Crow* utters "the condition of women in a nation is the real measure of its progress" (Thiong'o, 2007:153). African women are frequently the targets of unfavorable stereotypes, and their contributions have been neglected or even omitted on contrary Ngugi provides female characters a voice and develops powerful female characters that battle against all forms of oppression in their civilizations. He depicts an African woman image who tries to overcome the effects of colonialism and male domination. In his works, we encounter female characters as mothers, daughters, workers, and freedom fighters. Ebele Eko rightly asserts that Ngugi is "a groundbreaking Example of the modern African male author's shift from portraying women as objects to that of subjects" (Eko, 1986:212).

Ngugi believes that colonialism was the major reason to deprive women from their rights in Africa. In pre-colonial African societies, the economy mainly depended on agriculture, hence labor force density was crucial to output. In other words, the more people who worked, the more they produced. Would obtain Because of their bearings, women held a significant position in society. The ability of women to produce and reproduce made them valuable social and economic resources. In African communities, women are expected to bear children, and as the number of children they are bearing is increasing they become more secure in society as a result of their productivity.

The majority of Ngugi's works show that women struggle against male dominance in a variety of domains, including politics, the economy, and society. The paper further talks about how women has suffered both the patriarchy and colonialism and the way Ngugi used the gender complementary by placing and presenting a strong identity of women in African society in selected novels like *The Grain of Wheat*, *Petals of blood* and the *River between* all the novels traces the different time frame of ans struggles of women in pre and post colonialism his third book, *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi emphasized the struggle of the Kenyan people and their fight against the colonizers. Women played an active role for their struggled and freedom and support the Mau Mau movement during this resistance movement, a number of women fought against the colonizers and endured pain, suffering, and even death. Many female characters in the novel suffered from the oppression of the colonizers. Throughout their entire lives, they were mistreated, tortured, and left hungry after the colonizers killed Gitogo, and her mother was left alone in this harsh environment. Consequently, she was unable to resist any longer and

succumbed to severe hunger. Mugo too perished in her poverty. Warui's wife Mukami also passed away from poverty. Njeri is also a victim of the white colonialists, who died in a battle during Mau-Mau rebellion. Ngugi not only showed the struggle of men against the freedom but expresses the lives of women fighters and the plight they suffered during their struggle

"A sacrifice ...and then was Njeri...She was a friend, my friend... She often quarreled and fought with both men and other girls. Anyway, not until she ran away to the forest to fight at Kihika's side. She was shot dead in a battle, soon after Kihika's death" (Thiong'o, 1967.134). The above lines express the suffering of Njeri. Mumbi is the main female character of the novel Ngugi shows the suffering, oppression and humiliation by the colonizers. Mumbi's husband stayed at detention camp Mumbi lived very harsh days. She even slept with Karanja, because he promised her to release her husband if she slept with him. That is, she sacrificed herself for her husband, Gikonyo. Mumbi clearly depicts the postcolonial women identity Mumbi says "I had forgotten that I am a nobody" (Thiong'o, 1967 .29). The lines shows how women has very low position in society. Ngugi portrays strong women figures, too. Wambui is one of these women, who successfully struggled for her country. Ngugi describes her: "Wambui was not very old, although she had lost most of her teeth. During the emergency, she carried secrets from the village to the forest and back to the villages and towns" (Thiong'o 19). She is a strong woman. She does the duties actually men do. "Mumbi tied a belt around her waist and took on a man's work" (Thiong'o 136). We also understand that she is a brave woman as she says "I may be a woman, but even a cowardly bitch fights back when cornered against a wall" (Thiong'o 176).

Petals of Blood focuses on the status of women in postcolonial Kenya through Wanja and Nyakinyua, demonstrating Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's growing interest in strong female characters. Ngugi draws both positive and negative aspects of female characters and doesn't construct exaggerated and imaginative female characters. The text provides a clear explanation of both the positive and negative aspects that contribute to Wanja's personality. Ngugi depicts the hardships bartenders endure under the colonizers and their own people. Wanja says: "We barmaids never settle in one place. Sometimes you are dismissed because you refused to sleep with your boss. Or your face may become too well known in one place. You want a new territory. Do you know, it is so funny when you go to a new place the men treat you as if you were a virgin. They will

Outdo one another to buy you beers. Each wants to be the first. So, you will find us, barmaids, wherever there is a bar in Kenya." (Thiong'o, 1977.) This demonstrates the agony of the barmaids, who are exploited by patrons and owners of the bar alike. Wanja becomes a prostitute, Ngugi emphasizes the predicament of all exploited women in Africa, particularly in Kenya, through the image of Wanja. Despite being viewed as a degrading profession, prostitution is the last resting place for women are prevalent in postcolonial areas. Wanja Additionally, Wanja views prostitution as a business, she is get paid she takes men with all the seriousness like a work, Wanja says "This is New Kenya. You want it, you pay for it, for the bed and the light and my time and the drink that I shall later give you and the breakfast tomorrow. And all for a Hundred shillings. For you. Because of old times. For others it will be more expensive" (Thiong'o, 1977 .279)

Even Wanja believes that there is no distinction between a prostitute and a worker. She says "What's the difference, anyway, between sweating it out on a plantation, working in a factory, or lying on your back?" (Thiong'o, 293). Ngugi draws attention to the destructive effects of capitalism through Wanja's statements; for him, there is no distinction between the exploitation of women as prostitutes and men as workers; They suffer as a result of capitalism. Ngugi's description of Nyakinyua as the essential female character, having a great deal of respect in Ilmorog, is evidence of his firm belief in the potential of women. Ilmorog is a community where there is no gender bias or binaries, Women who are resisting imperialism and colonialism are represented by Ngugi. He portrays Wanja as a strong woman despite her difficult circumstances. He reflects Wanja as a strong woman figure in spite of her hard experiences. Ngugi never puts women above the men there is no comparison but he portrays women in a strong ad use women as a symbol of hope for the Kenya. He brings up a strong identity of women as Munira also sees Wanja as a strong character. He says, "She is the most powerful woman in all Ilmorog. She owns houses between here and Nairobi. She owns a fleet of matatus. She owns a fleet of big transport Lorries.

She is that bird periodically born out of the ashes and dust" (Thiong'o, 1977. 281) Ngugi portrays Wanja as a representation of Kenya's soul and Kenyan women. Wanja's life is a reflection of the lives of all Kenyan women, who face exploitation and oppression from a variety of sources. Ngugi portrays a strong and dynamic female character despite all of her hardships and oppressions. Wanja is seen as Kenya's ray of hope and as the country's rebirth after a number of trying years.

Both parents' equal participation in the ritual indicates the complimentary roles they play, and the fact that this significant rite is conducted on boys and girls on the cusp of adulthood speaks volumes about the equal significance Ngugi grants his male and female characters. For example, Waiyaki sits "between her [his mother's] thigh" (12) during circumcision in *The River Between*, and his father, Chege, is unable to take his son to the hills, the forest, or the sacred groove until he completes the initiation under his mother's supervision. Muthoni, for whom circumcision equates to womanhood, feels the same way. She says, "look, please, I- I want to be a woman. I want to be a real girl, a real UNILAG Journal of Humanities 51 woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges" (26). The knowledge of *Wizard of the Crow*. Trans. from Gĩkũyũ by the author. 2006.

Nicholls, Brendoof the origin and the ways of the tribe is not restricted to boys/men alone. It is to be acquired also by girls/women. This is because both of them (boys/men and girls/women) are equal partners in the socio-political and socioeconomic progress of their society.

Hence, the women character search for her belongings in the nature. The women's are double colonized in the society they are have two types of identity crisis one as a women and other as a community. Ngugi portrays strong women characters in her novel to fight against the power and develop a new true identity in the society with honor.

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