

DEVIL ON THE CROSS: NGUGI'S MARXIST INVITATION

By Muzigirwa Munganga Bonaventure, ISP/Bukavu

Abstract: *This paper is a Marxist approach to Ngugi-Wa-Thiong'o's **Devil on the Cross** It seeks to show how Ngugi is committed to the struggle against Neo-colonialism and imperialism. It presents Ngugi's **Devil on the Cross as an invitation for the prole tariat and the oppressed people to act***

Key words: *Commitment, Marxism, Socialist realism*

Résumé: *Cet article est une étude sur le roman de Ngugi-Wa-Thiong'o dans la perspective de la critique littéraire marxiste. Il cherche à montrer comment l'écrit de cet auteur est engagé pour la libération de l'Afrique du Néocolonialisme dont les conséquences constituent un obstacle total au développement autonome. Il invite, de ce fait, tous les prolétaires à s'unir pour démanteler le Néocolonialisme, l'impérialisme et leur corrélatif, le capitalisme.*

Devil on the Cross tells the tragic story of Wariinga, a young woman whose parents are arrested and detained while she is still two. Then, she is taken by her aunt as caregiver, but the latter's husband, because of capitalism, becomes Wariinga's executioner and defiler together with the Old Rich man from Ngorika. This old man makes her pregnant and consequently she drops out school and gets deprived from the chance to study, her only key to repay the corrupt society.

Wariinga starts pondering over her misfortune very early and the scary possibility of the end of her studies looms large in her mind to the extent she becomes traumatized. Trauma pushes her to think suicide would be a solution to her plight as she notices that her dearest ideal is trampled upon. But in order to earn her living, Wariinga accepts to pursue her studies and learns typewriting and shorthand. She then emigrates from her small rural town to the city of Nairobi but there also only to be requested sexual offer by her boss Kihara so as to safeguard her job. As she refuses to offer sex, she is dismissed on Friday morning and her lover John Kimwana, instead of comforting her, rather abandons her the same day, Friday in the evening, as she can no longer earn anything. The next day, Saturday, her landlord fires her out after having increased the rent. The heroine is therefore overwhelmed by series of ordeals and, and attempts to commit suicide for the second time. Fortunately, she is saved by a fantastic character, as this quote shows:

A city bus came speeding towards her. Wariinga shut her eyes. Her body shuddered. She swallowed a lump, and her heart began to beat as if to the rhythm of a prayer: in times of troubles, do not O Father, look the other way.

Do not hide your face from at this time of tears...Now...receive me...

Suddenly Wariinga heard a voice within her: why are you trying to kill yourself

again? Who instructed you that your work on earth is finished? Who has told you

that your time is up? (Devil on the Cross page 12)

Wariinga then decides to journey back home, but not knowing what to do and from where to start. Fortunately, on her way home she meets with helpers such as Wangarii who confronts with “the black short man and his white boss for raising their awareness about neo-colonialism, capitalism and their practices as the scourge of all the fellowmen and women. Thanks to this awareness raising, the helpers come to understand the cause to fight for is common, noble and worthwhile to engage in. They therefore gather masses of peasants, workers and students. But Wariinga somehow passively watches their process towards the cave to fight against the devil and his followers for she does not find it worth to take active part in the struggle while she has not mastered all the lessons on self-reliance, constancy to purpose, sacrifice, courage and endurance.

As the masses’ struggle only succeeded in scattering the private businessmen and resulted in killings of the marching people, the arrest of Wangarii and Muturi’s clandestine life, the victory is seen as partial. Yet it constitutes a shed of light on Wariinga’s way to the total victory of the devil for thanks to this partial failure, she happened to think more on how to dismantle the devil.

Galvanized by lessons learnt from the past and present experience, the different trials encountered by Wangarii, Muturi, Mwireri and all her other duplications, Wariinga takes the responsibility as community spokeswoman and therefore sharpens her forces against forces of evil, gathers means and skills, shows her concern for masses of workers, peasants and students’ welfare above her personal pleasure and satisfaction.

She bravely decides to put an end to her betrothal and love with Gatuira (the old Rich man’s son) and chooses a place among the peasants, workers, students and all those who pay by their brain, sweat and body serve the kind of the Old Rich man from Ngorika. She chooses her target and sets up time to shoot at the Old Rich man from Ngorika, mister Gitahi and some of his guests of honour.

THE PROBLEM

The problem this paper tries to solve rises from the title of the novel throughout its whole text. In his dissertation “*The Metaphor of Devil and Cross in Ngugi-Wa-Thiong’o’s Devil on the Cross*” under the researcher’s supervision, Nvunabandi Byamana (2010) tried to show that more than what everybody would be led to put at first sight of this title, that ‘Devil’ and ‘Cross’ are mere symbols, they can be constructed into metaphors after a careful reading of the novel. The findings show that the following metaphors would be correct if based on the novel’s analysis:

- Colonialism was a devil.
- Capitalism is a devil.
- Imperialism is a devil.
- Neocolonialism is a devil.
- Independence was a cross.
- Communism is a cross.
- Unity is a cross.

But the title of Ngugi's novel '*Devil on the Cross*' draws attention to itself and raises some queries whether the devil he is talking about :

- is on the cross;
- was on the cross;
- has been put on the cross; or
- should be put on the cross.

The opening of the book, however, unfolds this initial ambiguity by specifying that the devil should be put on the cross by the oppressed class: thus my interest in the topic because the title appears as an invitation to crucify the devil and this justifies the title of the paper, *Devil on the Cross: Ngugi's Marxist Invitation*.

Still, after agreeing that the title is an invitation, there is need to know who is/are invited to crucify the devil and how they should proceed to crucify him. The analysis in the whole paper seeks to give satisfactory answers to any of these queries.

This paper uses the Marxist approach due to the class conflict and the reinforcement of class distinction portrayed in the novel. The Marxist theory uses traditional techniques of literary analysis, but subordinates aesthetic concerns to the final social and political meanings of literature. It champions authors sympathetic to the working classes and depicts economic inequalities found in capitalist societies. The Marxist view of literary texts focuses on their social significance.

At this point Ngugi-Wa-Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* is a great novel of social relevance: its contribution to social change and the improvement of the working class living conditions.

In fact, a writer is a product of society towards which he has responsibility. This responsibility is for him to speak out, through his art, about the evils that prevail in his society, or say to commit his art to the cause of the proletariat (Eagleton 1976:2) . The same writer stresses the same point when he says:

“Literature results from conscious acts of men in society. At the level of the individual artist, the very act of writing implies a social relationship: one is

writing about somebody for somebody. At the collective level, literature, as a product of men's intellectual and imaginative activity embodies, in words and image, tensions, conflicts, contradictions at the heart of a community's being and process of becoming." (Ngugi quoted in **Writers in Politics** (1981, 5),

This paper seeks to show how *Devil on the Cross* exposes the plight of the masses and workers in the present day political set up in Africa. It is Ngugi's conviction that writers should address themselves to the crisis or conflict between the emergent African bourgeoisie and the African masses.

Ngugi felt that the need to invite the proletariat to gather for crucifying the devil as the beginning of the novel reads:

The Devil who would lead us into the blindness of the heart and into the deafness of the mind should be crucified, and care should be taken that his acolytes do not lift him down from the to pursue the task of building Hell of the people on Earth. (Devil on the Cross, page:1)

Ngugi, as a prophet of justice, embodied in the narrator, felt it his burden to tell out the social evils prevailing in his society and in this way, he overcomes the fear of his "antelope which hates more the one who shouts to alert others to its presence than the one who sees it". The paper describes the way Ngugi takes courage to denounce the presence of the 'devil' and invites the proletariat, including the exploited oppresses people and masses of peasants for freeing themselves from imperialism and neocolonialism is the main concern of this paper.

II. NGUGI AND HIS COMMITMENT

Ngugi clearly appears as a Marxist novelist and a committed writer. Marxist Criticism calls on the writer to commit his art to the cause of the proletariat. The layman's image of Marxist critics, in other words, is almost entirely shaped by the literary events of the epoch we know as Stalinism, which is a movement supporting that the communist party should be the only party and that the central government should control the whole political and economic system (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 2007). The communism believes in an economic system in which the state controls the means of producing everything for the people to create a society in which everyone is treated equally. Once these prerogatives are not met, there is need to raise the proletariat's awareness to claim for a fairer situation. This is according to the Marxist theory, one of the writer's duties. Similarly in *Writers in Politics* Ngugi (1981: .79-80), writes:

What the African writer is called upon to do is not easy: it demands

him that he recognize the global character of imperialism and the global character or dimension of the forces struggling against it to build a new world. He must reject, repudiate, and negate his roots in the native bourgeoisie, and its spokesmen, and find his creative links with the pan-African masses in alliance with all the socialistic forces of the world...He must write with the vibrations and tremors of the struggles of all the working people in Africa, America, Asia, and Europe behind him. Yes must actively support and in his writing Reflect the struggle of the African working class and its peasant class allies for the total liberation of labor power. Yes, his work must show commitment, not to abstract notions of justice and peace, but the actual struggles of the African peoples to seize power and hence to be in a position to control all the forces of production and hence lay the only correct basis for peace and justice.

Such is Ngugi's visions and he finds that it his duty to denounce the prevailing evils that ruins Africans and Kenyans in particular He says that the Devil has not been crucified yet by the independence, as people might think, for his acolytes lifted him down, as this passage reads:

“And there and then the people crucified the Devil on the Cross, and they went away singing songs of victory. After three days, there came others dressed in suits and ties, who, keeping close to the wall of darkness, lifted the Devil down from the cross. And they knelt before him, and they prayed to him in loud voices, beseeching him to give them a portion of his robes of cunning.” (Devil on the Cross, page: 1)

Ngugi shows that the independence for which Africans in general and Kenyans in particular fought and got, and which aimed at crucifying the devil, that is uprooting colonialism, imperialism and capitalism has not been efficient,

so far as the Devil has been resuscitated after three day through neocolonialism which the new African political leaders have adopted.

In spite of the narrative's being disgraceful, shameful, shedding and bringing about tears, Ngugi decides not to hide, as he says, not to cover up pits in the courtyard with leaves or grass, saying that because the eyes cannot see the holes, the children can prance about the yard as they like. Ngugi justifies this position on page 15 of his this novel by mentioning that a man who is able to discern the pitfalls in his path is happy for he can avoid them, and so is a traveler who is able to see the stumps in his way for he can pull them up or walk around them so that they do not make him stumble. This is the determination that Ngugi decidedly takes in his writing. In *Writers in Politics* (1981:81), he shows the danger of avoiding the vision he takes:

“Unless we as African writers embrace such a vision—a vision anchored in the struggles of the people—we shall succumb to self-despair, cynicism and individualism, or else we become mesmerized superficial bourgeoisie which in words of Karl Marx has never been possible without individuals and peoples through blood and dirt, through misery and degradation”.

It comes out that in the first, short but decisive chapter of *Devil on the Cross*, and in *Writers in Politics*, Ngugi explains his commitment as a prophet of justice to write for the society and therefore invites all African, through Kenyans, to free themselves from the claws of vultures in order to get a real independence for the welfare of citizens. This gives the importance of the novel the way Chijoke (2006:12) puts, *in understanding the sorry pass to which Africa has come and the need to mobilize patriotic and concerned people for a collective battle against the forces that have hijacked Africa's development*. This mobilization is sought since free integrate self-development has never been reached and is still far from to materialize. When speaking about this condition in Africa, Chijoke (2006:2) quotes Ngugi as follows:

“ First it has been the external factor of foreign invasion, occupation, and cultural control, and second, the internal factor of collaboration with the external threat. Whether under Western slavery and the slave trade, under colonialism and today under neocolonialism the two factors have interacted to the detriment of our being. The greedy chief and other elements bred by the new colonial overlords, collaborated with the main eternal imperialist factor. The storm repeats itself, in a more

painful way under neocolonialism”.

III. SOCIALIST REALISM IN DEVIL ON THE CROSS

Ngugi uses socialist realism to picture the evils of the Devil and convince the proletariat to gather for crucifying him and making sure his acolytes do not lift him down. Socialist realism, according to Eagleton (1971: 47) implies besides truth details, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances.

To begin with, Ngugi creates characters, first according to classes they belong to-Muturi, Wariinga, Wangari and Gatuiria represent the peasants and workers; Gitutu-Wa-Gataaguru, Kihaahu and Mwireri represent the bourgeoisie- and typical to circumstances they act in. The circumstance like the one in which the talk among Wangari, Muturi, Gatuiria and Wariinga is typical to people of the underprivileged class as they have no freedom of speech. The Matatu proves to be the place appropriate to talk for people whose freedom is not guaranteed. Likewise, the case is a typical place for people of profit and leisure (Chijoke, 2006:8) by so doing Ngugi translates the language of literature into that of sociology and finds the social equivalent of literary facts. He translates social facts into literary ones. Besides, he presents a socially reflective text, which is not less than an element of socialist realism. Throughout the narrative, Ngugi, in *Devil on the Cross* speaks out about capitalism as a negative acquisition. Worse of it, according to Ngugi, the situation is not lived only in Kenya, as this passage on page 56 reads:

“But it is not Nairobi alone that is afflicted in this way. The same is true of all other cities in every country that has recently slipped the nose of colonialism. These countries are finding it difficult to stave off poverty for the simple reason that they have taken it upon themselves to run their own economies from American experts. So they have been taught the principle and system of self-interest and have been told to forget the ancient songs that glorify the notion of collective good”.

By depicting such a reality about Kenyans, the writer makes it understandable why capitalism has gnawed Kenya and the whole African continent, to the extent that citizens become money worshipers, like the character Mwaura says, ‘*Business is my temple and money is my God...Show me where money is and I’ll take you there.*’ (*Devil on the Cross*, page: 19) It is also for money’s and after all capitalism’s sake that the Devil Feast is organized, wherein thieves have to prove their expertise in theft and robbery, sponsored by Satan King of the Hell.

In addition to capitalism, corruption also gnaws Africa, worse of it, immoral corruption. As Ngugi depicts it, people are not hired in regards of their qualification or merits, but rather thanks to what they offer. The situation is worse

when it comes to ladies' search for jobs. The latter have to offer nothing but their sex, if not for getting the job they are seeking, then for preserving the one they have got. Such is the situation the character Karendi undergoes after having completed her studies in spite of the unfortunate birth she has given to a fatherless child. The narrative stresses that 'the Modern Bar and Lodging has become the main employment bureau for girls, and women's thighs are the tables on which contracts are signed. On page 52 of the novel, the writer regrets that instead of forbidding and condemning such a behavior, Kenyans sing this song:

*"Sister Karendi, the case of a fool takes a long time to settle. Sister Karendi
every court session opens with feasting. Sister Karendi, no man licks an empty
hand. Take of me and I will take care of you. Modern problems are solved with
the aid of thigh"*

This extract shows how African hearts have got rotten because of search for interests, dishonest and immoral ones. It also shows how people are taught to sell everything, their bodies included, in search for money.

After picturing all these evils and others, Ngugi calls the oppressed people to fight against new capitalism preached by the heirs of colonialists. He invites people, the exploited to unite for efficient productiveness in order to modify nature and make things meet their needs, like their shelter to keep out rain, clothes to keep out of cold and sun, food to make the body grow, and many other needs. It is from unity, the writer thinks, that humanity is born as this passage reads:

*"That humanity is in turn born from of many hands working together, for as
Gikuyu once said, a single finger cannot kill a louse; a single log cannot make
a fire last through the night; a single man, however strong cannot build a bridge
across a river; and many hands can lift a weight, however heavy. (Devil on the Cross, page 56)*

The strength of unity the passage preaches is also stressed when the writer speaks about the miserable outcome of bourgeoisie and peasant life.

*Famine has increased in our land,
But it has been given other names,
So that the people should not discover
Where all the food has been hidden.*

Two bourgeoisie women

Ate the flesh of the children of the poor.

They could not see the humanity of the children

Because their hearts were empty.

Many houses, and acres of land,

And wounds of stolen money.

These cannot bring peace to a person,

Because they have been taken from the poor.

Now look away from the rich,

At the poor, and at the children

They are all stagger-a-staggering on the highway

Because their hearts are empty.' (Devil on the Cross, page 57)

All in all, Ngugi finds a justification for inviting the proletariat to crucify the 'Devil' as expressed in Wangarii's song on pages 74, 75 and 93.

"Come one and all,

And behold the wonderful sight

Of us chasing away the Devil

And his disciples!

Come one and all!"

However, in addition to this and more importantly, Ngugi invites the proletariat to pay attention after the crucifying of the Devil, for fear that his disciples can lift him down and therefore allow him to continue building the Hell the humans. This is but a warning against the revival of imperialism, and capitalism through neocolonialism by post-independence leaders. Justification for this call is found in Ngugi's *Writers in Politics* (page 81) when the writer quotes Karl Marx to support his vision:

"Bourgeoisie progress resembles that hideous pagan idol who would not

drink nectar but from the skulls of the slain. The reign of the idol in Africa is doomed. African writers must be with the people in burying the imperialist idol and his band of white and black angels, forever”.

All these appeals to the conscience of Kenyans succeed to raise the awareness of Kenyans about the common enemy, the devil, and Wariinga gains the consent of her citizens such as Wangarii, Muturi, and Mwireri. These are pioneers who have understood that they have to unite and unite the proletariat for the common cause, to crucify the devil. Even though they end by being arrested, Wariinga has succeeded in uniting the exploited to revolt against the devil and crucify him.

As the story ends, Wariinga teaches Kenyans that common interest is beyond individual interest for she chooses to shoot dead the Old Rich man from Ngorika, Gitahi, and his honorable guests rather than enjoying love, first with the Old Man from Ngorika, as the latter proposes her, and secondly with Gatuiira, the Old Man's son and Wariinga's new beloved. The passage where Wariinga rejects the Old Man from Ngorika's love offer and decides to kill Gitahi so as to save many lives reads:

You snatcher of other people's 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...He went on, carried away by his words. He did not see Wariinga open her handbag. He did not see Wariinga take out the pistol. "Look at me!", Wariinga commanded, with the voice of a judge. When Gatuiira's father saw the gun, his words suddenly ceased.

Wariinga seems to have succeeded at the end of this novel so far as she crucifies her main antagonist, Gitahi. This success conveys a message to all Kenyans, seen as microcosm of Africans, that capitalism, neo-colonialism, and imperialism should be fought by unity, and communism. In this way the protagonist of *Devil on the Cross* becomes a heroine whose lifeline has been paved with trials, rescued from without until she has restored the harmony she lost in her early age with sexual abuse by Gitahi.

References

Benét, R., W. (1965) *The Reader's Encyclopedia: Second Edition*, New York: Thomas Y.

Crowell Company

Chijoke Uwasomba (2006) "*The Politics of Resistance and Liberation in Ngugi-Wa-Thiong's*

Petals of Blood and Devil on the Cross in *The Journal of Pan African*

Studies, vol.1, no. 6, December 2006

Eagleton Terry (1976) *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, London: Methuen and Co. Ltd

Ngugi-Wa-Thiong'o, J. (1981) *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*, London: Heinemann

Educational Books

.....(1981) *Writers in Politics*, London: Heinemann Educational Books

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

Nvunabandi Byamana (2010) "*The Metaphor of Devil and Cross in Ngugi's Devil on the Cross*, ISP/Bukavu, unpublished third year thesis.

Summerscale, J. (1965) *The Penguin Encyclopedia*, London: Penguin Books Ltd.