

# A Feminist Perspective in Ngugi Wa Thiong's Novel "*Petal of Blood*"

Ahmad Jasim Mohammad Alazzawi

Assistant Lecturer, Mosul University, Iraq  
Ahmad.jasim11@yahoo.com

**Abstract**— *The present research paper attempts to bring feminist perspective in the work of the famous novelist Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. It studies the nature of woman in one of his novels Petal of Blood. It deals with the geographical background of Kenya and the impact of British colonialism. It also analysis the feminist aspects of the novel and the women characters in Petals of Blood are the victims of the patriarchal structure of the African society.*

*Through Ngugi's novel Petals of Blood, the reader comes across the fact that a woman can be a mother, politician, socialist, educator and provider of the family at the same time. Women like Nyakinyua and Wanja struggle hard against colonialism. They strongly desire to curb oppression and exploitation of Kenyan society. Ngugi shows British colonialism becoming responsible for the destruction of Kikuyu-Kenyan society. He strongly believes in women's natural abilities and qualities. Most of his protagonists are women and they play roles in the struggle against oppression and exploitation. They try to break patriarchal barriers and bring changes in their society to liberate themselves. Ngugi shows the nature of woman, he also throws the light on the positive and negative aspects of women in Kenyan society. Ngugi doesn't ignore the impact of colonialism on the society in general and women in particular in his novels". Nyakinyua brings out the state of women and the plight of the poor. Thus, Petals of blood deals with the exploitation of the African women on the basis of race, class and gender.*

**Keywords**— *Petals of Blood, British colonialism, African society.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The history of human civilization obviously tells us that women were treated as inferior to men in spite of their significant contribution in preserving and developing mankind and human civilization. Women were deprived of social, cultural, educational and artistic activities. That is why, throughout the history of humanity, writers have comprehensively discussed women's issues. Aristotle in his book Politics says that by nature male is superior and

female is inferior. Naturally, the male can be ruler while the female can be ruled.

Ancient Africans respected women and acknowledged their roles in the society. The present paper is an attempt to study the selected novels from a feminist perspective because a feminist interpretation establishes the point that women characters in their novels are active in preserving social, cultural, political educational and economic values in their societies.

## II. HISTORY OF FEMINISM IN KENYA

**Ngugi Wa Thiong'o**, was born in 1938, Kenya, East Africa. His first popular novel is *Weep Not, Child* (1964). As he became sensitized to the effects of colonialism in Africa, he adopted his traditional name and wrote in the Bantu language of Kenya's Kikuyu people.

African women were so active members in the struggle against colonial powers and were also fighting for better reproductive rights. African women movement reflects the cultural, social and political organization of the societies in Africa. Many evidences have suggested that the African history contains various examples of violence against women and male dominated. These evidences recommend that African woman movement reflects the traditions of organization that have categorized spiritual and material life in Africa. Women in Kenya were well organized in work parties and in many social and welfare groups among the speaking communities. Nigerian Igbo women were managed as in numerous groups, wives and ladies associations and administered through women councils. Those groups cooperatively set sanctions on their husbands who do mistakes and show capable of prompting extensive civil trouble when they found their interests negotiated. As colonialism gained ground, some of the earlier women's organizations and groups were redirected by missionary groups and colonial governments, often through volunteers with a degree of Western Education. Women used to gather and have a woman talk or women club to civilize African women, usually by instilling Western European Ideologies of home life and offering training in related skills. The women's movement in Kenya has faced many challenges to gain equality in political, social

and economic aspects of the society due to the patriarchal nature of the Kenyan society Wangare Muta Maathai was one of the famous women who has contributed immensely to the feminist movement in Kenya. She also was an environmental and political activist. She organised the Green Belt Movement, a non-profit organization that aimed to promote conservation of the environment and at the same time women's rights in 1977.

### Impact of British Colonization on Woman in Kenya

The African people became slaves of the imperialistic Western world. They influenced patriarchal ideologies into the educational system and encourage boys more to join school than girls. They also supported men to oppress women, Male domination made the African women powerless and disabled, socially, politically, and economically, and caused gender conflict which undermined the stability of Kenyan society. It becomes an obstacle for the development of the country. There are historical evidences that African women during pre-colonial era had economic independence. They had actively participated in social, cultural, religious and political activities and functions. The rule was expected to improve the condition of women in African societies by raising their living and educational standards and free them from farm labour, but colonialism didn't liberate them, In fact, it diminished the rights, the woman had enjoyed during pre-colonial era. Eleanor Burke (1922-1987), an American anthropologist in her book *Woman and Colonization* asserts that the relation between men and women were equal in many fields of basic life, but due to colonialism women were ignored and oppressed.

### Feminist Interpretation of Naugi Wa Thiong's Novels

Naugi views that colonialism obviously and post-colonialism are responsible for oppressing African woman. He clearly shows the problem of patriarchy and its impact on women in pre-colonialism, colonialism and post colonialism Kenyan society through his novel. Naugi believes that the British colonial administration was responsible for destroying the social, political and economic structure of the African society. The Kikuyu life style was deteriorated by the emergence of colonialism. The land was confiscated and given to the white people. The economic life was destroyed and Kikuyu people were forced to work as labours on their own land and asked to pay taxes. Naugi asserts that all Kenyan workers and farmers have the same national aim which was to ask the white men to leave the land. Naugi points that the culture of colonisation is the culture of domination and exploitation. As a result, the Mau Mau revaluation in Kenya occurred to make the country independent. It was the climax of conflicts between Kikuyu and the British colonialists.

Josiah Mwanagi, a Kenyan socialist politician in his book "Mau Mau" explains that the British came with missionaries and traders to colonize Kenya. Kenyan people knew that the British had come with knowledge, education, medicine, farming, and industry which were welcomed by the people of Kenya. Josiah shows the grievances of Kenya people towards Europeans. He also states that Europeans used Kenya as their slaves.

Most of Naugi's novels show that woman struggle to get rid of male domination in many different areas, such as social, economy and politics. They also aim to present the real image of Africa. He also tries to reform the image of the African woman in literature because some African male writers present the woman in negative way and wrote about woman from Eurocentric point of view. Some feminist writers such as Ousmane, Nuagai and Nurudian present through their novel the positive and negative aspects of the African woman while some others like Cyprian and Amadi present the negative aspects only, they consider woman as lustful and seductive. Ngugi portrays patriarchy as a prevalent phenomenon that exists under the skin of society. He shows out how woman been used in sexual, physical and mental way. Rape, verbal and physical violence of woman and low payment had caused the oppression of woman in the African society. The role of colonialism is also responsible to deprive women from their rights. Roopali Sircar (1995) asserts:

*Several anthropologists like Leacock and Gough have concluded that in societies where men and women are engaged in the production of the same kind of socially necessary goods and where widespread private property and class structure has not developed, woman's participation in production gives them access to and control of the products of their labour. It also gives the woman considerable freedom and independence. But where the colonizers introduced cash crop cultivation, women were displaced by men. Women were also deprived of technology with men alone given access to machinery. This reduced woman's contribution, relegating them to the domestic sector.*

Naugi perceives woman from feminist perspective. Most of his novel focuses on woman's issues and Kikuyu culture to reveal woman's major contribution in liberating the society from male domination in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras. He also attempt to show woman characters and their significant roles in the patriarchal system as well as the impact of colonialism on the roles of female character.

### Petals of Blood (1977)

Naguai in his novel *Petal of blood* emphasises on the exploitation of the African woman on the basis of race, class and gender. Ngugi strongly desired to enable women to see themselves as human beings first then

change their lives to become equal with men. Ngugi portrays Mariam, a squatter of Munira's (the central character in the novel and a schoolteacher) father's farm. She is assertive and does not want to be submissive to her husband any more. She complains about her triple duties: to her child Ndinguri; to her husband and to her European landlord. Mariamu does not tolerate this any longer, because, she never sees a cent from her produce. Her husband takes all her money for himself and gives her a little bit. Finally, she revolts against him and he beats her in frustration. She takes her son and runs to Limura where she begs for cultivation rights from Munira's father. In Limura, Munira's father, Brother Ezekiel, a wealthy landowner and a respected elder in the hierarchy of the Presbyterian Church, tries to exploit her and wants to have sex with her but she refuses him. Ngugi describes this to reveal women's plight at home as well as outside.

Ngugi's description of Nyakinyua as the essential female character, having a great deal of respect in Ilmorog is an illustration of his strong beliefs in women's potentiality. He makes her narrate the history of Ilmorog that the villagers strongly believe in hardworking and goals. Nyakinyua successfully brings the villagers together and guide them efficiently. She describes Ilmorog as the thriving community to inspire people to prepare themselves for a bright future.

Ngugi shows that women are active and love farm work. Wanja, granddaughter of Nyakinyua wanders around Ilmorog with her grandmother, Nyakinyua during the subsidence of the rain. Ngugi describes Wanja as an active woman who forms a group which is called Ndemi-Nyakinyua to cultivate and weed the land. The purpose is to work in group and help other women to increase their efficiency in work. She also works as a barmaid. Her salary is paid to her according to the whims of her employer. She wants to quit the job, but does not have any other option. Her father runs after money and does not care of her. As a result, Wanja becomes a prostitute and open a brothel. Ngugi portrays her as an example of Kenyan woman's exploitation. According to him, neo-colonial and imperialistic conditions are responsible for this. Wanja tries to go beyond tradition and is caught in the clutches of the colonial capitalist society. Mala Pandurang writes:

*Kenya's brutalized and exploited womanhood finds expression in the portrait of Wanja Kahili the barmaid whore. And in her portrait is etched the agonies of the lumpen classes of Kenyan woman who are victims of Kenya's capitalist structures. Wanja had started life as a brilliant public from a working-class family. But her working class background was to be her undoing since her parents. Long exploited and brutalized by the power of capital.*

Wanja financially is in a critical condition. She says, Kimeria who has ruined my life and later humiliated me by making me sleep with him during our journey to the city. Kimeria was one of those who would benefit from new economic progress of Ilmorog<sup>69</sup>. It strikes her that Kimeria is being benefited from the new economic progress of Ilmorog, but she cannot do anything due to existing social system. Wanja doesn't like city life. She decides to go back to Ilmooge but due to the death of her grandmother, the advent of new economic and Karege's (a young man who works in Munira's school as an assistant teacher and who is also Wanja's lover) escape, she does not stay in Ilmorog, she goes back to the city unwillingly decides to establish a brothel on the basis of the law, "you eat or you are eaten"

*If you have a cunt. If you are born with this hole, instead of it being a source of pride, you are doomed to either marrying someone or else being a whore. You eat or you are eaten. How true I have founded it. I decided to act, and I quickly built this house.*

The above comment reflects women's helplessness. Of course, Ngugi draws both positive and negative aspects of female characters and doesn't create unrealistic and fanciful female character. The negative and positive points which build Wanja's personality are clearly described in the text. For example, Wanja hears the voices of children as they suffer due to starvation, she feels a wound inside her smart so sharply that tears would press against her eyelids. She feels as excruciating love for them and she would have liked, at such moments, to embrace and give milk to all the little ones on the earth. And at the same time, the negative point of Wanja is clearly shown when Karega says; 'how could such a woman (Wanja) be trading on the bodies of the other girls? Ngugi shows that Wanja is a strong and loving woman but the society cruelly drives her to be a prostitute and makes her life tragic. Kimeria lustfully rapes her and she later on kills him. She had killed Kimeria stuck him dead with the panga she had been holding.

The struggles of a Kenyan woman has been characterized in the novel by Wanja, the woman who is forced by the environment that she lived in and she is affected by the people around to use her body and make sex to earn money to support herself but who nevertheless resists the capitalistic class oppression. Wanja's act of violence in this instance is an act of personal liberation, a kind of cleansing and revitalising Fanonist violence. Ngugi condemns the exploiters in the society who drives women to exceed limits, like those who drive Wanja into murdering her child during a desperate situation. Wanja tells a story about her aunt. She explains how her aunt is exploited and has gone through a different life:

*She had married a man who kept on beating her there was nothing that she could do right. He would always find*

an excuse to beat her. He accused her of going about with men. If she had money through working on the land. He would take it away from her and he would drink it all and come home to beat her. So one day she just took her clothes and ran away to the city. my aunt was a clean woman though. She continued she was very good to us children. Her husband was a hard-core Mau Mau. I was even more proud of her when later I learnt that she used to carry guns and bullets to the forest hidden in baskets full of unga.

Ngugi clearly emphasizes the worthy side of his female characters. In telling Wanja's character, he brings out her kindness, resourceful, mental strength and loving nature. James Stephen Robson states,

*Wanja like her predecessor, Mumbi is the most resilient and the most victimized character in petals of blood. Her betrayal is the most complex of all the characters. Like Munira, she faces the memory of past recriminations concerning her father and Kkimeria. Like Karega she leaves Ilmorog during crises situation. She abandons cooperative endeavours for the personal profit of Theng'eta and the Sunshine Lodge. Like Abdulla she is capable of neglect as in the case of Nyakinyua. Yet in spite of these betrayals, she is capable of regeneration. This is evident throughout the novel from personal sacrifices on the Journey to the co-operative farmer organization in Ilmorog to the elimination of Kimeria before the fire in Sunshine Lodge. Wanja's character is later proletarian further through Wariinga in Devil on the Cross, although in her case the possibility of a regenerated political environment is less likely.*

Ngugi maintains that women are more worried about the welfare of the community than man. Nyakinyua is an assertive woman; she is against colonialism and advice people to be aware of colonialism. She thinks that colonialism has oppressed and exploited women more than their men and westernism has affected the people to leave their village and parents and become idlers. She observes the situation.

*Our young men and women have left us. They go and the young women on return now and then to deposit the new born with their grandmothers already aged with scratching this earth for a morsel of life. Others sometimes come to see the wives they left behind, make them round-billed and quickly go away as if driven from Ilmorog by Uuhere or Mutung.*

Nyakinyua's observation brings out the condition of women and the plight of the poor. Thus, *Petals of blood* deals with the exploitation of the African women on the basis of race, class and gender. In this way, Ngugi's women characters are brave, resilient, determined and resourceful. Jennifer Evans observes: "In Ngugi's novel women are shown to have a fundamental role on the

struggle against oppression and exploitation and often courage and hope are ultimately found in their hands.

### III. CONCLUSION

The research paper deals with the geographical background of Kenya and the impact of British colonialism and it analysis the feminist aspects of the selected novel of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. The women characters in *Petals of Blood* are the victims of the patriarchal structure of the African society, the force of which are also unleashed by women. The rebellion of women against the oppression is praiseworthy. The women characters in the novel try to define roles in the male-dominated society. Their struggle to earn living and safeguard the interest of the family is marked by their courage and determination. Ngugi brings out women's natural abilities like love, understanding and determination to educate their children, providing basic needs to the family members and strong opposition to injustice, oppression and exploitation.

Through Ngugi's novel *Petals of Blood*, the reader comes across the fact that a woman can be a mother, politician, socialist, educator and provider of the family at the same time. Women like Nyakinyua and Wanja struggle hard against colonialism. They strongly desire to curb oppression and exploitation of Kenyan society. Ngugi shows British colonialism becoming responsible for the destruction of Kikuyu- Kenyan society. He strongly believes in women's natural abilities and qualities. Most of his protagonists are women and they play roles in the struggle against oppression and exploitation. They try to break patriarchal barriers and bring changes in their society to liberate themselves. Ngugi shows that women in *Petals and Blood* are exploited sexually and racially. He also criticizes the patriarchal performance in educating boys not girls. The boys do not finish school education and fail, such as Karega who fails to continue his studies. Ngugi in his novel maintains that colonial education has introduced gender discrimination and class conflict in Kenya.

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