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## ***CLASS CONFLICTS AND THE RISE OF THE 'PROLETARIAN' NOVEL IN AFRICA***

**Keywords:** class conflict; colonialism; the proletarian novel; post-independence; ruling class; political class

**Abstract:** *The post-independence literature of Africa is essentially bleak, dreary and pessimistic in outlook. The reason for this mood inheres in the very nature of the frustration, anguish and disappointment that became evident among the masses of the African people when the immediate gains that followed the attainment of political sovereignty were sequestered by the political class, which took up the reins of government at the exit of the colonial masters. Expectedly, the chasm between the political class and the masses of the African people became widened as a result of the blatant corruption of the members of the ruling class and the virtual exclusion of the masses of the African people from the gains of self rule, which itself was achieved, in some cases, through the efforts of the peasants. In literature, especially the novel genre, this rift or conflict between the ruling class in Africa and the proletariat class wears the toga of a war and it is portrayed by the best of the writers in Africa with all the accoutrements of war. Ideological novelists such as Ngugi wa Thiong 'O, Sembene Ousmane, Alex La Guma and Festus Iyayi explore this class conflict from combative perspectives and enunciate radical solutions, bordering on mass revolt in the true socialist sense of attaining the state of a dictatorship of the proletariat class. This paper addresses the above concern as seen principally in some of the novels of Kenya's most popular writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'O and concludes that the tradition of the proletarian novel in Africa is, by and large, accentuated by the unremitting conflicts between the bourgeois and proletariat classes in Africa and the Marxist writer's commitment to creatively entrench through the novel genre the dictatorship of the oppressed class in the true tradition of Marxist-Socialism.*

### **Introduction**

Written African literature from its beginnings has been reactive, first against the monstrosity of colonialism as it was experienced in Africa and later against neo-colonialism, which replicates the colonial structures, in most cases, even though Africans are now supposed to be in charge of affairs in the nations and states of Africa since the attainment of political independence from their erstwhile colonial masters. The neo-colonial phase of Africa's political evolution has been largely dominated by ill feelings against the political class whose members assumed the mantle of governance at the exit of the colonialists. This was the reason for the euphoria that followed the granting of

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political sovereignty to African nations and states because the gains of this freedom did not percolate to the masses of the African people, and thus their pre-independence expectations have largely remained unfulfilled. While politicians jostle for appointments to plum jobs and lucrative posts in the corridors of power, the aspirations of the common people have not been given the desired attention. Not only are the healthcare needs of the people almost at a zero point, there is massive corruption in the civil service and the staggering percentage of unemployment has accentuated the degree of insecurity of lives as some unemployed youths indulge in armed robbery, kidnapping of hostages with the aim of getting ransoms and other similar social problems.

This unfortunate development has also deepened the despair and frustration of African writers who have had to change their role from being cultural custodians of the African society to using their writings to criticize the putrescence and misdemeanor of members of the political class in post-colonial Africa. This has manifested in the development of a very pessimistic tradition of literary writing in Africa, unlike the colonial period when both the political class and the intellectual elite class saw themselves as nationalists who had the common patriotic cause of driving away the colonial masters and thereby securing for their nations and states political sovereignty. This rift between the intellectual elite class and the politicians has been deepened by the writers' subscription to the Marxist ideology, which is an equalitarian ideology that sees the interactions, conflicts and relations among peoples in class terms, but with a dialectical support for the oppressed class which redeems itself through the dictatorship of the proletariat class - the true vision of every socialist revolution. This tilting towards a literature of praxis has radicalized the outlook of the novels of Ngugi wa Thiong'O, Alex La Guma, Sembene Ousmane and Festus Iyayi "in which the writers assume the role of literary defenders of the masses and prescribe revolutionary solutions in the form of organized revolts and syndicalism to the problems of Africa in very combative and denunciatory ways" (Agho 2011:17).

Essentially, the body of novels written by African novelists of the Marxist persuasion about contemporary post-colonial Africa concerns themselves with proletarian issues, i.e. problems of the common people, written from a perspective defined by the writers' sympathy for the masses of the African people. Such novels, apart from centering their plots on simple folks, usually peasants and members of the working class, also democratize the concept of heroism by censuring messianic tendencies and favoring collective heroism. Such novels embody major revolutions, usually orchestrated by the working class against the oppression of its members by the oppressor or bourgeois class and work towards the redemption of the victims of the oppression by granting them victory at the end of the struggles. This is the pedestal from which radical African writers write about contemporary post-colonial Africa. In a nutshell, class conflicts constitute the central plots in the novels of radical novelists such as Ngugi wa Thiong'O, Festus Iyayi, Sembene Ousmane and Alex La Guma.

This study is conceived and structured in its entirety on the Marxist critical viewpoint, especially since it discusses the conflicts between the ruling bourgeois class and the deprived masses of the African people. It seeks to mobilize the deprived masses

of Africa by conscientizing and enlightening them on the practical possibilities available through their banding together in organized revolts to topple the oppressor class as a way of reclaiming their dignity and putting an end to their oppression. This is the very dimension of revolution espoused in the writings of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Lenin as well as later Marxist theorists such as Georg Lukacs, Raymond Williams, Louis Althusser, Ernst Fischer, Terry Eagleton and a host of other Marxist scholars.

### **Fiction as Praxis: Class Conflicts as Recurring themes in the Novels of Ngugi**

The tapestry of contemporary post-colonial African fiction is centred squarely around the class conflicts between the ruling class, whose members are ensconced within the corridors of power and the teeming mass of the African people, who are pauperized by the inanities of the wielders of power, who indulge in pillaging the resources of the nations and states of Africa for the selfish use of members of the ruling class. This is the reason for the consecration of corruption as a national ethos in most of the countries of Africa and the unremitting presence of poverty, unemployment, high crime rates and other social problems in post-colonial Africa. Accordingly, the situation described above has given impetus to a shade of writing in Africa, identified as social criticism, where writers employ creative and imaginative literature to censure the ills and the incongruities of wielders of power in African nations and states who use their positions in government to amass wealth and enunciate anti-people programmes and policies. Although this writer has called on the writers within this tradition of writing in Africa to tone down the violence, pessimism, angst and alienation that are significant markers of the mood of post-colonial writers in their writings, (Agho 2011:18), one is not suggesting here that protest literature cannot validly exist as creative literature, since the conditions that foisted the mood in the writers in post-colonial Africa are everywhere still present in countries of Africa till date.

Ngugi wa Thiong’O, the eminent Kenyan novelist, has in novels after novels portrayed with dazzling brilliance the unfortunate irony evident in the situation where those Kenyan peasants who fought for the country’s independence in 1963, with many losing their lives or getting maimed in the process, are not now the reapers of the gains of Uhuru or freedom, but the politicians, many of whom stayed away during the fight to achieve decolonization in Kenya. These are now the people in the corridors of power in present-day Kenya. From *The River Between*, *Weep Not, Child*, through *A Grain of Wheat*, to *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross*, *Matigari* and *Wizard of the Crow*; the author’s major novels till date, Ngugi has shown that he is a ‘proletarian’ novelist concerned majorly with the oppression, dehumanization and relegation of peasants and women by the political class in Africa, especially Kenya, his country of birth.

Ngugi’s novels have grown contextually toward total political commitment, starting with *The River Between* through *Wizard of the Crow*, his latest epic-like novel and understandably the theoretical formulations of his ideological belief are to be found not so much in his fiction as in his polemics. As Ngugi says in “Writers in Politics”, “because of its social involvement, because of its thoroughly social character, literature is

partisan: literature takes sides, and more so in a class society” (6). Thus Ngugi has felt right from the outset of his career as a writer that writing should serve a social and political purpose. Understandably, the writer is concerned with the history of his people and seeks, as G. D. Killam puts it, to “extrapolate from his consideration of the influence of Europe on Kenya the means for making a better future” (11).

Apart from detailing the pre-colonial history of Kenya and the militant struggles of the Gikuyu people to emancipate themselves from the clutches of the Christian religion and the desire to resuscitate the traditional ways of the people through the instrumentality of education conceived from the African standpoint through Waiyaki, the novel’s protagonist, *The River Between* shows the rift and unnecessary division between a once united people foisted by the new religion which antedated colonialism proper. In this novel, Christianity contributes, by and large, to the emergence of class division which will come to assume monstrous proportions in later novels such as *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*. This is seen principally through Joshua, a leading convert to Christianity who is set apart from the other characters, at least as we can see from the architectural design of his home, which though not a rich man’s house, is different from the hovels and cramped diminutive houses of the other Africans in the novel. Joshua in this novel belongs to the world of the white missionaries and thus he is the major antagonist in the novel. This is the very beginning of class conflict or class differentiation in colonial Kenya, i.e. different from the obvious class differences between white and African characters in Ngugi’s fiction.

Ngugi’s censure of this development is a pointer to his castigation of the colonial church and Christianity as a religion in Kenya. Again, the kiama, which represents the African voice on serious matters in the world of the novel, represents the earliest attempt in Ngugi’s fiction to provide a platform for Africans to collectively agitate for their rights; a precursor to the later Mau Mau revolutionary group that will confront colonialism and the colonial government in Kenya in pitched battles to bring about decolonization.

Ngugi’s next novel, *Weep Not, Child*, which concentrates on colonial Kenya, especially the emergency period before the dawn of the era of independence, extends the class conflict barely hinted at in the previous novel. Here, the returnees from the World Wars, mostly Boro and Kori, Ngotho’s sons, confront the colonial operatives and their African collaborators in the person of Jacobo over the vexed issues of land ownership and agitations over decolonization. While Howlands, the white land owner and later the District Colonial Officer in the novel epitomizes the brute force of colonialism and spares none, not even Ngotho whose ancestral land he has appropriated, or even the young protagonist, Njoroge, Boro and other war returnees regroup to form a band of guerilla fighters set to confront the colonial operatives in pitched battles. This is an amplification of the Kiama group in the earlier novel, which, as stated earlier, was precursory to the emergence of the Mau Mau revolutionary group. In fact, Boro personifies the soul of the people’s revolt against colonialism in this novel. To show Ngugi’s endorsement of the activities of the guerilla fighters, the group at the end of the novel succeeds in exterminating the district colonial officer, Mr. Howlands as well as his African collaborator, Jacobo; thus paving way

for the achievement of independence, which is shown in graphical details in the next novel, *A Grain of Wheat*. Ngugi's endorsement of violence as a viable means of attaining decolonization, which is the fulcrum of the operations of the Mau Mau group in the novel, pays off as earlier stated. This is a remarkable departure from the stoical attitude of Ngotho and the other elders in the novel, which is founded on the superstitious prophecies of the old Gikuyu seer, Mugo wa Kabiro.

This is a very justified appropriation of restorative violence as a means of man's de-alienation of himself as propounded by Frantz Fanon in his monumental book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. As I have explained elsewhere, in the "colonial context in Africa, nothing was truer than this fact, especially since colonialism maintained and imposed its power through violence. That this became the mantra and rallying cry of radical African writers on the issue of western imperialism in Africa ... was not a fortuitous development" (Agho 2011: 7). Ngugi in these early novels already understood this very fundamental issue because his childhood experiences bestrode this turbulent period of Kenya's history which became paradoxically accentuated with his immersion into the tenets of Marxism, which were given concrete expressions in his later novels, beginning with *A Grain of Wheat*. According to Ngugi: "Violence in order to change an intolerable, unjust social order is not savagery: it purifies man. Violence to protect and preserve an unjust, oppressive social order is criminal, and diminishes man" (*Homecoming* 28). This, in a sense, is an adaptation of the Marxist mechanism for social change as espoused by Marx and other Marxist theorists within the Kenyan, nay African landscape.

Although *A Grain of Wheat* largely explores the happenings in colonial Kenya, just like its precursor, *Weep Not, Child*, providing a justification for the activities of the Mau Mau freedom fighters, its second sub-plot, which is based on the achievement of independence and the betrayal of the masses of the Kenyan people by those Kenyans who have stepped into the shoes of the retreating colonialists, is particularly instructive. The novel relates the history of Kenya from the pre-colonial era through the colonial to the modern neo-colonial era. This theme of betrayal, which relegates the sacrifices of the peasants who fought for the independence of Kenya to the background in post-colonial Kenya, is crucial to Ngugi in his writing career and has sustained and continues to sustain him novel after novel, almost becoming an obsession. Thus he sees the liberation struggles of Africans as the only viable theme for literature in Africa. In fact, as he says in an interview by Phanel Egejuru:

What is a greater theme than the struggle of a people to liberate themselves? In fact, this is a struggle in essence to liberate man. It is not a literature moving away from man, not a man contemplating his state of helplessness in the world. As long as this struggle for liberation continues, we cannot say that we have exhausted the topic. To say so amounts to saying that the African people have ceased to exist. (114)

Or again as he says in another context: "A consistent anti-imperialist position – that is, a position that struggles against or that exposes the continued neo-colonial control of African economies and cultures by the western bourgeoisie – is the minimum necessary for a committed, responsible scholarship in Africa, or anywhere in the 'third'

world” (“The Role of the Scholar ...” 12). These positions have become the cornerstones of Ngugi’s polemics and even inform the thematic directions of his later novels such as *Matigari* and *Wizard of the Crow*.

As novels of post-independence disillusionment, *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* best illustrate the combative will of the oppressed to battle with and triumph over their oppressors and thus it is in these novels that the revolutionary imperative discernible in Ngugi’s fiction finds its most eloquent manifestations. For the rest part of this paper, I shall give a detailed discussion on the novels to demonstrate the proletarian leanings of the author as well as show the prevalence of conflicts between the bourgeois class of exploiters and oppressors in Kenya and the masses of the Kenyan people.

In the first part of *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi establishes the setting (Ilmorog community) and provides in it a mirror through which present happenings in neo-colonial Kenya are projected. Faced with drought, dwindling farm resources and economic recession, the Ilmorogians, acting on the advice of Karega, Munira, Wanja and Abdulla; all strangers to Ilmorog, decide to march to Nairobi to meet their elected representative – Nderi wa Riera, who sustains the image of the MP in *A Grain of Wheat*. The second part of the novel is an account of the journey to the city by the people of Ilmorog. In line with the epical breadth of the story, the particular journey is portrayed as cumbersome, hazardous and fraught with bitter experiences: hunger, thirst and wickedness from city elite such as the Reverend Jerrod Brown, Raymond Chui and Hawkins Kimeria.

But what is the reaction of their representative to their predicament? Part three shows the changes that came upon Ilmorog on account of the journey. There is a gradual transformation of the village from a rural community to an urban city bubbling with industries and economic activities. One can say that the long arm of Nairobi’s bourgeoisie is reaching out at the same time as old Ilmorog begins a gradual gravitation towards death.

Part four, which is also the final, continues the story of the rise of New Ilmorog and reveals the beginning of the exploitation of the peasants of Ilmorog. Not only are the original inhabitants marginalized and pushed to the fringes of the old Ilmorog, they have also been displaced from their jobs and lands by a combined team of Kenyan capitalists, acting in alliance with foreign interests. This is therefore a political novel in the widest sense and it provides a comprehensive statement of its author’s commitment and humanism, which is summed up in his following statement:

I believe that a people have a right to know how wealth is produced in their country, who controls it and who benefits. I believe that every Kenyan has a right to decent housing, decent food, and decent clothing .... I believe in a national economy free from any foreign domination or free from imperialist control. (As qtd. by Killam, 96-7)

We find in the novel a representation of the author’s fears – the antithesis of his beliefs – which has become crystallized in the contemporary Kenyan society.

In Ilmorog’s metamorphosis from a rural home of peasants into a sprawling industrial capital, the very seed of class division which was only slightly hinted at in Ngugi’s early works reaches its greatest heights. In Chui, Mzigo and Kimeria; all three directors of the Thengeta Brewery Ltd., and Nderi wa Riera of the KCO Holdings, we

find the very extreme of property acquisition and ownership. This comprador bourgeois class, in alliance with international finance capitalism, is pitted against characters such as the one-legged Abdulla, a freedom fighter whose only gain for fighting to liberate his country is his stump of a leg, Karega, Munira, Nyakinyua and others in the novel who are victims of even greater exploitation by the class of property owners. Any wonder then that Wanja, obviously a type character representing the most ruthlessly exploited class of women in Kenya, prostitutes her talent in order to survive.

It is the totality of these aberrations that energizes Ngugi to advance the revolutionary alternative. This comes in the author's implicit endorsement of revolutionary syndicalism as a viable method of enforcing changes in the conditions of the workers, and preventing their further exploitation by the class of property owners as well as in the death of the three capitalist mongrels: Chui, Mzigo and Kimeria in the conflagration that consumes Wanja's brothel. Although, it could be argued that the death of the three capitalists is not a solution in itself, it is, however, symptomatic of the final destruction of their base.

*Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi's fifth novel and first in Gikuyu, looks at the present in the light of the future, setting, according to Carol Sicherman, "a satiric critique of contemporary Kenya against a vision of a socialist Kenya purged of neo-colonialism ..." (350). In the novel, the author continues with his onslaught on the Kenyan national bourgeoisie which has continued to unleash a reign of terror, oppression and deprivation on the masses of the people. The novel focuses more emphatically on the particular dilemma of women in a rapidly changing society, and their exploitation in terms of class and sex, using women's position as a measure of the ills of contemporary Kenya.

Jacinta Wariinga, the heroine of the novel, is both a victim of sex and class exploitation, first as a woman and then as a worker, reminding one of the experiences of Wanja in *Petals of Blood*. From her childhood, she nursed the ambition of becoming a mechanical engineer. This was long before the Rich Old Man from Ngorika seduced and impregnated her, thus temporarily making her stall in her ambition. She is later able to complete her junior school certificate course and afterwards a course in typing and shorthand to qualify as a confidential secretary.

This brief summary of Wariinga's past life, revealed through flashbacks and interior monologues in the later parts of the novel, sets the stage for her other troubles at the beginning of the story. With a professional certificate in typing, Jacinta starts to roam the streets of Nairobi for a job. The story is the same everywhere, except she accepts to be her prospective employer's 'sugar girl', she cannot be employed. Even her brief stint at the Champion Construction Company ends when she refuses to be raped by her boss. This also coincides with her ejection from her apartment, making her decide to go back to Ilmorog, the New Ilmorog of *Petals of Blood*, to join her parents. Through Wariinga's experiences in Nairobi, Ngugi highlights the problem of sex exploitation, which has become prevalent in contemporary Kenya.

Apart from young women like herself, older ones like Wangari are not spared this harrowing experience. Wariinga's anecdote on the fate of Kareendi, the archetypal Kenyan girl, removes the experience of sexual harassment from employers from a

personal to a general level. In fact, as Ngugi argues, modern-day Kenya has become a place where "... women thighs are the tables on which contracts are signed ... [and] modern problems are resolved with the aid of thighs. He who wishes to sleep is the one who is anxious to make the bed" (*Devil on the Cross* 19). It is not surprising that it is members of the national bourgeoisie that indulge in this dehumanization of Kenyan womanhood.

The shift in setting from Nairobi to Ilmorog also leads to a corresponding change in the thematic focus of the novel. From his treatment of sex exploitation, the author proceeds to attack neo-colonialism. He thus amplifies his treatment of the class schism in the novel from the individual to the general perspective of workers and the unemployed who are pitched in opposition to the capitalist class. This transition is achieved principally through Wariinga's journey in company of other characters introduced as Gatuiria, Muturi, Wangari and Mwireri wa Mukirai from Nairobi to Ilmorog. Apart from herself and Wangari who had been humiliated and incarcerated in Nairobi, other characters in the vehicle are travelling to Ilmorog to attend the much-publicized competition (in modern theft and robbery) organized by the Ilmorog branch of the Organization for Modern Theft and Robbery. The author suggests his initial censure of this event by branding it the devil's feast.

The devil's feast in the cave, which is deliberately invested with a religious aura, takes place under the supervision of the police, which in 'third' world countries is an agent of the ruling class. All the participants, except Mwireri wa Mukirai, plan to perfect the system that promotes the exploitation, in one form or the other, of the Kenyan economy with the active connivance of their foreign counterparts. As characters of praxis and as authorial instruments for Ngugi's revolutionary design in *Devil on the Cross*, Wangari and Muturi decide to enlist outside help from the police, students, the unemployed and workers to wipe out the thieves and robbers. This revolutionary attempt is, however, foiled by the law enforcement agents.

The last section of the novel returns to the story of the heroine, Wariinga, who has now transformed herself, years after the devil's feast, to become a student of mechanical engineering, her very first ambition in life. To sustain her new image of the 'wonder woman', she is portrayed as an independent, self-reliant lady who depends on odd jobs like typing, working on cars at a mechanic's garage etc., to sponsor her education. As a step towards preventing her further oppression and exploitation by members of the capitalist class, she joins a local martial arts' club and perfects the art of judo and karate. Ngugi specifically imbues Wariinga with these values, so that she can serve, according to Jennifer Evans, "as a radical example of how a woman can resist being pushed or tempted into accepting subservient, degrading or decorative roles" (134).

*Devil on the Cross* ends in a manner that suggests some possibilities of a new social order in the future. By a twist of irony Ngugi reveals the fact that the Rich Old Man from Ngorika, who had earlier tarnished Wariinga's image is no other than the father of Gatuiria, her fiancé, who is arranging to marry her. Though this discovery shatters the hope of the lovers, it affords the heroine the opportunity to avenge her earlier humiliation as she kills the old man and two of his guests at the reception organized to receive

Gatuiria and his intended wife. Although essentially an individual achievement, this action is also part of the revolutionary process meant to completely exterminate the oppressors.

### **Conclusion**

In this essay, I have demonstrated that conflicts between the bourgeois class and the masses of the African people have become prevalent themes in contemporary African fiction, especially those by radical writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong’O, Sembene Ousmane, Festus Iyayi and few others. This prevalence has also brought to the fore the entrenchment of the tradition of the proletarian novel, which squarely concerns itself with the problems of the common people, structured from an angle defined by the desire to conscientize and mobilize them to take their destinies in their hands and redeem themselves from the stranglehold of the oppressive bourgeois class. This class schism, as stated at the beginning, bears all the accoutrements of war and is portrayed as combative, violent and horrendous as the example of Ngugi’s fiction clearly shows.

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