



Feminism through political and religious revolution in NgugiwaThiong'o's Devil on the Cross

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ABSTRACT: An award-winning, world-renowned Kenyan writer and academic NgugiwaThiong'o's work includes novels, plays, short stories, and essays, ranging from literary and social criticism to children's literature. His is the strident voice of a passionate activist, resonating with clarity of thought and vision, privileging the cause of the underprivileged and subjugated people of a nation in distress. Women characters have always held a strong position in the works of Ngugi, a position virtually unique in Anglophone African literature. *Devil on the Cross*, a novel regarded as one of the historic staging posts of African fiction is one of Ngugi's striking contributions. He attempts to highlight the struggle against cultural imperialism through the creation of Wariinga, a regenerated and resurgent young African woman who embodies the spirit of resistance. Christianity the religion of the colonizer is in one master stroke subverted and colonized and handed to the masses. A novel of resistance, *NgugiwaThiong'o's Devil on the Cross* is an ideal platform to showcase the re-emergence or rebirth of the new, free spirited woman who erases oppressive obstacles in her path and is ready to use revolutionary means to attain gender equality. Ngugi's vision in *Devil on the Cross* is revolutionary and it is no wonder that he is the most celebrated of African novelists offering a new direction for African writing.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Women play a significant role in African literature, as both objects and agents of familial, societal and national healing, especially in the aftermath of colonialism. African societies that for long have been weighed under the yoke of colonial oppression and hegemony, struggle to keep pace with the resultant cultural imperialism and post-colonial oppression, which usually place women at the receiving end.

Through his heroine in *Devil on the Cross* Jacinta Wariinga, NgugiwaThiong'o exposes the devil in all his many faces. He epitomizes Wariinga as a symbol of the struggle against cultural imperialism and the decadence of African culture in the wake of colonialism, and the subsequent struggle against it. Conscious of her two-fold role as an agent and object, culminating from the vulnerability of her sex, she faces an intense struggle against the poverty, which exacerbates her plight to keep her body and soul intact. The presentation of Wariinga as a round character, however, secures her role as an instrument of both cultural congruence and compromise.

The development of Wariinga as a character highlights the predicament that Africans find themselves trapped in. Mental and psychological fetters anchor them as they battle to shrug off physical oppression. Ngugi's suggested methods of revolution are characterized in part by the feminization of Wariinga. Ngugi uses Wariinga's story of sexual exploitation to try to destroy the power of patriarchy. Ngugi's portrayal of Wariinga and the commodification of her sexuality are directly related to his representation of capitalism. The interplay between Wariinga as worker and Wariinga as woman become one in her self-revolution; her labour and identity cease to be compartmentalized and meld into a whole human being.

A victim of neocolonial culture which taught her that she has no worth, Wariinga, is alienated and convinced that her appearance is the source of all her wretchedness. Though beautiful, Wariinga consistently imitates others. She is misled by the colonizer's definition of beauty. Her horrendous experiences at the hands of inconsiderate and selfish men have made her a defeatist person. In order to find or keep their jobs, women must tolerate the licentious behavior of their employers. Wariinga draws a contrast between a "goat for slaughter and one for grazing" (*Devil* 206) stating that these office women are their bosses' real wives, but not their legal ones. Working women are represented by the consumed animal. Boss Kihara, Wariinga's employer, makes it explicit that women are not given jobs for free as he says "Ah, Kareendi, jobs are very hard to come by these days: But a girl like you [...] it shouldn't be too difficult to find something for you to do. But, Kareendi, a matter

like this can't be finalized in the office. Let's go across to the Modern Love Bar and Lodging to discuss the question more fully." (Devil 13)

Ngugi's understanding of the predicament of females in a post-independence state is reflected in the convincing creation of Wariinga as a regenerated woman. Wariinga breaks the clichéd understanding about women that their jobs are limited to housework. The realization of her life's ambition to become an automobile engineer shows "how the underprivileged in the society have worked hard to improve their condition, in spite of the brutal attempts by the powers that reduce them to nothingness" (Uwasomba, 103).

Wariinga's revolt against patriarchy and capitalism energizes her and this spirit of resistance strengthens her desire to realise her social purposes, "constantly stifled by forces of capital and male oppression. Although the revolt is contrived, it points to Ngugi's hope in the victim type and the possibility of regeneration" (Ogude, 81). And by the time we meet Wariinga in the final phase she has gone through a number of experiences which have transformed her life drastically:

No, this Wariinga is not that other Wariinga. This Wariinga has decided that she'll never again allow herself to be a mere flower, whose purpose is to decorate the doors and windows and tables of other people's lives, waiting to be thrown on to a rubbish heap the moment the splendor of her body withers. The Wariinga of today has decided to be self-reliant all the time, to plunge into the middle of the arena of life's struggles in order to discover her real strength and to realize her true humanity. (Devil 216)

The gicaandi player, an improvisational street performer who sings and dances with an instrument, also called a gicaandi, made from a gourd, functions as the narrator and describes Wariinga's mental despair:

Wariinga was convinced that her appearance was the root cause of all her problems. Whenever she looked at herself in the mirror she thought herself very ugly. What she hated most was her blackness, so she would disfigure her body with skin-lightening creams like Ambiant Snow fire, forgetting the saying: That which is born black will never be white. Now her body was covered with light and dark spots like the guinea fowl. Her hair was splitting, and it had browned to the colour of moleskin because it had been straightened with red-hot iron combs. Wariinga also hated her teeth. They were a little stained; they were not as white as she would have liked them to be. She often tried to hide them, and she seldom laughed openly. (11)

The narratorial voice lets us know that Wariinga's hatred of her appearance is sadly misplaced; she has been listening to the voice of the colonizer and is misled by his definition of beauty:

When Wariinga was happy and forgot to worry about the fading whiteness of her teeth and about the blackness of her skin and laughed with all her heart, her laughter completely disarmed people. Her voice was as smooth as perfume oil. Her eyes shone like stars in the night. Her body was a feast for the eyes. Often, when she walked along the road without self-consciousness, her breasts swaying jauntily like two ripe fruits in a breeze, Wariinga stopped men in their tracks. (11)

A once spirited and cheerful personality, full of promise and possibilities, Wariinga's past experience at the hands of men transformed her into a defeatist. Fired for refusing to sleep with her boss, Boss Kihara, evicted from her apartment by a group of thugs for refusing to pay an exorbitant amount of rent unexpectedly demanded of her, and dumped by her sweetheart at the University because he mistakenly and unfairly believed she was sleeping with her boss Wariinga, rises above her limited circumstances. Sexist politics pops up in the manner that Wariinga's sweetheart does not believe her protestations of innocence. Women in Africa often succumbed to the irresistible temptation of becoming a powerful man's "sugar girl" and the material gain associated therein; and hence Jim Kimwana, her boyfriend disbelieved her. This "temptation" was in reality victimization; women like Wariinga who refused to sleep with their bosses were replaced with women who would.

To escape from her imprisoned identity, Wariinga must pursue the identity she desires by rejecting the cultural voice that tells her she is unattractive and powerless, and discover her potential as a woman and an individual. Wariinga gradually changes and becomes impassioned with a nationalist spirit after travelling to her hometown of Ilmorog. She is transformed into a feminist, viewing herself in a different way and rethinking the way she operates in her society. The battlefield for her is not only the reclamation of her sexuality, but also the rejection of what she has assumed to be true about her identity in terms of Christianity, the work force, and the war for national Uhuru (independence). Ngugi relates Wariinga's role in Uhuru to her feminization, and underlines the process through which she adopts feminist values. Ngugi seems to suggest that the very purpose of Wariinga's feminism is its use in propelling the nation to independence through the propagation of the idea of independence of the individual and her cooperative participation in the national struggle for freedom.

A major issue in the novel, Wariinga's sexuality raises questions about her validity as an individual, and illustrates the societal evil of the sexual oppression of women. She succumbed to the pervasive neocolonial voice as a young school girl, and became the sugar girl of a man whom the text refers to solely as the Rich Old Man from Ngorika. Significantly the author retains the unnamed quality of the character for two reasons and he is symbolic of the Kenyan upper class who exploits the poor workers and the sexuality of poor women, and the text later reveals him as her fiancée's father. Her uncle, desiring a boon from the Rich Old Man, enabled the rendezvous between him and Wariinga for his personal gain. It took the Rich Old Man months to weaken

Wariinga's resolve to be a good Christian school girl, but when she fell prey to his enticements of money, riding in a Mercedes-Benz, and taking trips to hotels she lost her resolve, believing his lies that he would leave his wife for her (Devil 143-47). When she became pregnant Wariinga was awakened to the harshness of reality.

Despairing of her abandoned, pregnant state, Wariinga attempted to throw herself before a train (Devil 152). The question that begins awakening Wariinga is the same question Ngugi is persistently, subtly posing from behind his pen, "But had she really chosen hell, or had the hell been forced on her?" (Devil 147). Wariinga's uncle commodified her sexuality and essentially sold her to the Rich Old Man. Wariinga herself has not been taught by her culture that she has worth, or that her physical attributes are more than a commodity. The flower of her youth and beauty is bartered for men's success and sexual satisfaction.

Ngugi's forte is the creation of strong female characters with striking individuality who seem to grow in stature and occupy the main focus of texts and he imbues their struggle against patriarchy with validity. Devil on the Cross operates as a didactic text with Wariinga projected as a positive social model; but given the need for social revolution in modern Kenya, without an answer to the people's cry for true Uhuru, the novel lacks power and force.

Pictured as a larger than life social heroine, Wariinga possesses the power to overcome her situational difficulties and the ideologies of men that restrict her and her life is a vivid example to be followed simply because very few women participate in the struggle for a feminist identity. Wariinga, a heroine of the working class is uncommon, extraordinary, and successful. The ability to hold herself in diversity makes her an effective leader or heroine for women. Furthermore, by making the main character of his novel female, and by characterizing her story with initial struggle, her troubles with Boss Kihara, Jim Kimwana, and the Rich Old Man, and then success, her graduation from the Polytechnic University, subsequent employment as a mechanic, and prowess at self-defense, Ngugi is not compartmentalizing women in the quest for Uhuru but rather he is stating that Uhuru will never happen without the free willed independence of the individual (Devil 17-25, 138-47, 216-23). He is not even including Wariinga in a typically male endeavor; rather he stresses gender equality through the levelling act of revolution. The struggle is that of the people of Kenya; if Kenyan women were to follow Wariinga's example there would be no room for patriarchal rule to flourish once Uhuru had been established-the revolution would be complete.

The four "things" Wariinga goes on to discuss metaphorically are "our arms", "our brains", "our humanity", and "our thighs" (Devil 206). Arms are representative of the labour the women perform for their male bosses as, "our hand become their hands; our power becomes their power". No boss wants an independent thinking woman in his employment and hence brains are sacrificed, "the Boss is always right: hang your brain from your fingers or your thighs". Their humanity falters in their office as whatever personal frustration the boss experiences is vented on their unsuspecting shoulders and yet these women are expected to keep quiet and show no pain because they are meant to be machines, useful only in their utilitarian functionality (Devil 206). Thighs are the last "things" on Wariinga's list of sacrifice because in order to keep their jobs, licentious behaviour by their employers is justified. Her final cry is the marked moment when what she has previously been inclined to accept becomes unacceptable, Who are we? Who are we? Who are we? (Devil 206).

In feminist terms, the Christian motif of Devil is the subversion of its imagery and doctrine. The beatitudes of the rich and the imperialists speak thus:

"Blessed is he who bites and soothes, /Because he will never be found out./Blessed is the man who bums down another man's house/And in the morning joins him in grief/For he shall be called merciful/Blessed is the man who robs another of five shillings/And then gives him back half a shilling for salt,/For he shall be called generous." (Devil 210)

Evil men claim their status as men of the church repeatedly in the novel. Their religion furthers their material gain and justifies any means to acquire it, though women's acceptance of Christianity only enslaves them to men. Christianity is no solace to Wariinga as a girl when she gets pregnant, or even when she loses her lover and is thrown out of her job. Death to her seems to be the only release from this vicious cycle. Christianity a religion that Western societies generally accept as a text of love is manipulated to a religion that allows men to justify crime and is further used by Ngugi to call for revolution from the masses. He masterfully takes the religion of the colonizer, a tool of oppression and control, and colonizes it on behalf of the oppressed. The tool of religion is removed from the dominant and placed in the hands of the people. The white devil is crucified by Uhuru, but in Wariinga's dreams, "Instead of Jesus on the cross, she would see the Devil, with skin as white as that of a very fat European she once saw near the Rift Valley Sports Club, being crucified by people in tattered clothes-like the ones she used to see in Bondeni-and after three days, when he was in the throes of death, he would be taken down from the Cross by black people in suits and ties, and, thus restored to life, he would mock Wariinga" (Devil 139).

The motif of the resurrection is subverted and equated with evil; it is not until Wariinga is portrayed as Christ and kills her own devil, the Rich Old Man, that this disturbing imagery is resolved. In a unique manner Ngugi subverts Biblical stories and imagery and reveals Christianity as a tool of oppression in the mantra of

thieves and robbers, while Wariinga's redemption is powerfully illustrated with Christ like imagery. Religion is presented as a source of power that is not one-dimensional while the power of Christian parables and icons are hitched to the wagon of revolution.

Wariinga's first call to her personal Uhuru, and subsequently the freedom of the nation (the two are inseparable), comes in the form of a dream. What is different about this dream is the messenger and the message; Wariinga is visited by Satan. Through his eventual tempting of Wariinga the link between capitalism, Christianity, and oppression is unveiled. The true path to freedom, the freedom obtained through revolution is discovered eventually by scrutinizing the opposite of what the Devil puts forth.

An agent of transition, Wariinga epitomizes the restoration of African culture and identity, when she becomes conscious of the enchanting beauty of the African dress and skin. The mindset should be changed first, as oppression starts there. The artist is contemptuous of the patriarchal inclinations of society and all forces of exploitation that reduce women to mere objects of pleasure, without rights to perfection. The critique of capitalism that is clearly enfolded in this tale is the pain, confusion, and alienation Wariinga experiences in the big city of Nairobi resulting in another attempted suicide.

The many battles that she has won though far outweigh any disparaging remarks that the Devil may use to bring her down. She remains a paragon of the struggle against cultural imperialism and oppression of women. With the right mindset and willpower, women as agents of familial, societal and national healing, can indeed nail the "Devil on the Cross".

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