



Research Paper

Revisiting Social and Political Issues of Kenya in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir*

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Abstract

The present paper aims to discuss social and political issues of Kenya during and after colonial rule through Thiong'o's *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is a prolific writer of African Literature. Through his writing he shows culture, oral literary tradition, psyche and contradictions in African society caused by the colonial rule. He was born under the shadow of World War that's why he mostly discusses the trials of the African people and disturbing political and social conditions. Thiong'o's novels reflect his social and personal ideology and depict the evolution of how African society has changed from a colonial to an independent society. Thiong'o is known for his zealous political activism. In this memoir he tried to represent and rediscover himself in a period when the country is under colonial domination and experiencing the tyranny of British rule.

Keywords: Colonialism, exploitation, Missionary, Modernity, Resistance, Struggle, Tradition, emergency.

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Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is renowned writer of African literature. He was born in 1938 during the period of Second World War that's why his writings mostly depict the challenges of the native during and after colonial power and socio-political issues of the time. His writings also show struggles and hardships of Kenyan citizens in the period of war. The early novels of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o were revolutionary in presenting the terror of colonialism in Kenya through the eyes of Kenyan citizens. Thiong'o's writing is very political and he has written a large number of novels and essays about politics, religious hypocrisy, corruption and the cultural effects of colonialism. Some of his important works are *Weep Not, Child, The River Between, A Grain of Wheat, Home Coming, Petals of Blood and Decolonizing the Mind*. Thiong'o won so many honors and awards for his literary work and his social movements which include, The East African Novel Prize, Unesco First Prize, The Lotus Prize for Literature, The Fonlon-Nichols Prize for Artistic Excellence and Human Rights. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at University of California, Irvine, and director of the university's International Centre for Writing and Translation.

Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir is an autobiography. As the subtitle suggests, these stories are Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's memories of his childhood in Kenya until the day he left home to join Alliance High School. This memoir is his attempt to represent and rediscover himself in an era when the country is experiencing colonial domination under the British rule. The first few chapters of the book show the childhood of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o during the colonial period. It is the period of Second World War and Kenyans were struggling for independence and they did not like the colonial system they were living under. Thiong'o tells about his joining Kĩnyogori Intermediate School. His struggles began when he was a little boy and he had to walk six miles to school and stay hungry all day until dinner time. Due to a lack of resources and money, the young Thiong'o joins his elder brothers and sisters at the nearby colonial tea and pyrethrum plantations to pick tea and pyrethrum. The situation becomes challenging when he encounters the colonial landlord and the African manager who allotted the rows to be picked. The supervisors are unkind and unfriendly individuals who forced them to overwork all day at the order of the colonial landlords. He also refers another incident when Reverend Kahahu's wife Lillian refuses to pay him along with the others for not telling names of those who stole her plums. No one protest against Lillian for this unfairness except Thiong'o. This reveals Thiong'o's bravery and

ability to stand up for his rights from the very childhood. Thiong'o opposes the colonial government's policy of economic exploitation.

The story then shifts to the relationship in the larger family and Thiong'o tells this in a manner that shows how deeply the interactions with the family members affected his life. Family plays a very significant role in the writings of Thiong'o, his mother is the prominent member of the family and he is close to few of his siblings. While Thiong'o's father was a proud and well-known person, his control over wealth was weak. He lived and worked on a piece of land which he bought from Njamba under the traditional system of oral agreement in the presence of witnesses but later Njamba sold that land again to Kahahu and that resale was recorded under the colonial legal system with witnesses and signed written documents. Thereafter, a long legal dispute developed.

At every hearing it was a case of the legal written word against oral testimony. Orality and tradition lost to literacy and modernity. A title deed no matter how it was gotten trumped oral deeds.¹

Despite receiving "a non-inheritable right of life occupancy," Thiong'o's father didn't actually own the property. The issue of such oppression appears frequently in the novel. Thiong'o says that during World War I, English soldiers go to war and rewarded with land taken from Africans, and during World War II, more Africans participated in the war than anyone could have imagined. Despite this, they were rewarded by having their land stolen once more. The squatters provided cheap labor and sold their harvests to the white landlord at a price determined by him. This led to African resistance against colonialism in Kenya under Harry Thuku, which began in 1921. Kenya was a nation of black people, and when Africans and other races struggled over land, African rights were given priority. The families were aware that the law, fairness, and rights of inheritance were on their side. The Kenyan people's relationship with their land was mainly of life, livelihood, and existence.

The family's way of living changed when Thiong'o's father lost his land. His mother was sent away, and later Thiong'o and his brother were then sent to live with her on their grandfather's property. Thiong'o mourns the loss of his family. The experiences of loss and exploitation contributed to his development. As a result of the relocation, he attended a new school which was established by Africans, and the disputes inside the British colony started to affect his personal life. He gains new identities first as a stranger, a mole catcher, and a scribe as a result of all the experiences he has to adjust to the new surroundings and make life comfortable. Thiong'o talks about various education institutions he attended and how colonizers created barriers for African's education. The schools given terms like "Kĩrore" and "Kařing'a", first as applied to missionary schools and later for orthodoxy in both tradition and religion. These schools purposely deprived Africans of knowledge, in favor of preparing them to serve the colonial state, which at first restricted African education to carpentry, agriculture, and simple literacy. Being fluent in English was considered as unnecessary. Thiong'o said about the British that,

The white settler community wanted "skilled" African labor, not learned African minds²

Thiong'o claims that in his early schooling emphasis was on Western ideology rather than African values. He also claims that they were brainwashed in the colonial school because the stress was on white explorers like Livingstone, Stanley, Rebman and Krapf. The students gain knowledge about the establishment of Christian missions that bring light to the people of Kenya. Additionally, they are informed that Mount Kenya and several African lakes, including Lake Victoria, were found by White people. In Manguo School, other aspects of colonialism were evident. Thiong'o gives the example of African children who were forced by the colonial educational system to learn English instead of their mother tongue, Gĩkũyũ. The focus is on English as the one and only path to modernity, wisdom and civilization and achieving political goals. The Kikuyus resisted by ruthlessly taxing themselves in order to build their own schools, only to have them closed by the government repeatedly. This struggle continued until the outbreak of the Mau Mau war, when all Kikuyu schools were closed for several years. The closure of Kařing'a and KISA schools, particularly the Kenya Teachers' College in Gĩthũngũri, was a both emotional and psychological blow to Africa's struggle for independence. The Kenya Teachers' College at Gĩthũngũri was an institution completely devoted to create teachers who would give African students vast, impartial education, enabling them to compete with the best that the governmental and missionary schools had to offer. The situation worsened after the closure of independent schools and the Kenya Teachers' College at Gĩthũngũri especially at that time Thiong'o was preparing for entrance exam for secondary school, Asians and Europeans have to take similar tests but closure of native schools left many students hopeless.

The historical background of the conflict between the Kenyan and British colonizers, which eventually resulted in the Mau Mau war of 1952 which had a significant impact on Thiong'o's personality and character and it was sparked by three significant factors i.e., the economic and cultural effects of land appropriation, the value of education to the Kikuyus and the consequences of its deprivation, and the religious zeal that characterized Kikuyu politics at the time. In this book, Thiong'o concentrates on different combinations of these three elements, and his persistent concern to these problems is largely influenced by his traumatic experiences during the war. The people living on the land of the white settlers supported the Mau Mau uprising in the 1950s. The locals whose lands were grabbed by the colonialists were not happy and they went into the forests and

started to fight guerilla warfare against the colonialists. Colonialism was shaken by the Mau Mau uprising. The Mau Mau War which was an uprising against the British colonial rule in the country has a great recognition in the novel. He believes that war is the reason why his father loses his land. As a result of this war his brother joins the Mau Mau fighters in the mountains just to fight for justice and freedom from the British colonizers. He blames the war for his father's change of attitude and concludes that it is colonization that has brought hatred among African countries. He describes a tragic incident of colonial power that occurs near the end of the story when the train leaves him because he does not have a pass. The new system of identification is introduced as a way of arresting members of the guerrilla. British soldiers harass Thiong'o because they think he sympathizes with Mau Mau. The country is under a new law the state of emergency. The train leaves without him. He stated that,

I stand there on the platform with my luggage and watch the train move away with my dreams but without me, with my future but without me, till it disappears³

Thiong'o describes a few significant incidents as a result of the state of emergency. The arrest of Jomo Kenyatta and the other individuals was one such incident that influenced Thiong'o's perspective and way of living. He sees Fitz de Souza, Jaswant Singh, A. Kapila, and Chaman Lall, who are on Kenyatta's defence team, as heroes fighting for social justice. According to the Kikuyu prophet Mugo wa Kibiro, a messianic figure would emerge to free the tribe from colonial oppression. During the Mau Mau War, Jomo Kenyatta, the leader of the independence movement and the country's first president, expertly utilized this prophecy to unite the Kikuyu's social and religious sentiments around himself. Therefore, the atmosphere at the time was charged with strong, contradictory emotions and sincere feelings of loyalty, sacrifice, and happiness resulting from messianic expectations and hopes for freedom, liberation, and the restoration of the land were balanced by feelings of fear, uncertainty, bitterness, and despair produced by colonial oppression. Jomo Kenyatta plays the role of Thiong'o's hero from his childhood. According to Ngandĩ, Gĩkũyũ folklore had already been influenced by Kenyatta's struggle against colonialism. Thiong'o is motivated by Kenyatta's accomplishment in advancing his education. Thiong'o was determined to succeed in school and in life by following Kenyatta. Thiong'o says that,

The arrest of Jomo Kenyatta may have been a blow to the public, but to me it was personal⁴

As a true nationalist, Jomo Kenyatta is adored by Ngũgĩ and the community to the level of worship. Some of the African leaders who led the independence movement or who gained power forcefully after independence acted in a similar manner. These African leaders didn't really want to free their people from the burden of slavery instead, they only wanted to be like the white oppressors and enjoy the advantages of power, status, and rewards. An iconic figure from this story would be Lord Reverend Kahahu, who, after becoming a priest, believed he had achieved something bigger than his people and armed with his great understanding of colonialism and with the help of the colonial government he supported, stole land from its rightful owners.

Thiong'o discusses the frightening experience of going to school and growing older during the emergency years. The interaction between the colonizer and the colonized, as well as between social classes, families, and institutions, was characterized by a great deal of previously unbelievable violence. In his criticism on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's emergency narratives, Simon Gikandi states:

Later in his writing career, after reading Fanon's treatise on violence as a weapon of decolonization, Ngũgĩ would come to interpret the state of emergency in Kenya as the highest point of African resistance against British imperialism. His main argument was that since colonialism had instituted violence as an instrument of conquest and rule, the colonized had no option to adopt it as the first step in "deciding to embody" history and thus break down the system of European rule⁵

The consequences of the emergency have been integrated into Thiong'o daily life. During this state of emergency, Thiong'o the young boy suffers both psychologically and physically because he has to constantly worry about his family members. Thiong'o explains the injustice and exploitation of African people in the colonial era by giving the instance of railway platform incident. The railway that transported Indian and European laborers while displacing Africans also served as a real platform for social interaction as people rushed to the Sunday train. Similar to how schools were segregated, railway compartments were also divided as first class for Europeans, second class for Indians, and third class for African passengers. The African was seen as a third-class citizen in his own country due to racial discrimination. Thiong'o experience colonial injustice while returning to school one day, he sees the harsh reality of the situation. The British army, popularly known as "The Johnnies", arrives in Limuru market and begins firing randomly at the crowd. Gitogo, his half-brother, is brutally murdered because he is deaf and cannot understand the White officer's commands.

The residents of Limuru were also being held hostage in their houses while experiencing the terror of the British war machine day and night in state of emergency. However, through the challenges of the war, a strong personality emerges in Thiong'o, a young boy who is hardworking and dares to dream even in the worst of times. He concluded the book by saying that any generation experiencing difficulties might have a dream to transform the world. He was raised during a period of war and colonialism, which had an impact on his life, but

he was able to dream about changing the situations. He had a vision that the natives would succeed in ending colonialism and then obtaining their freedom and this was achieved when Kenya obtained its independence.

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