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Discrimination against the African Women in the Novels of Ngugi wa Thiong'o

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Abstract:

Ngugi wa Thiong'o has been acclaimed as East Africa's novelist. His criticism of colonial rule, Christianity and postcolonial abuses earned him admiration from the public. The colonial 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 and the oppression. But colonialism did not liberate them. In fact, colonialism diminished the rights the women had enjoyed during pre-colonial era. As a rebel writer Ngugi has always upheld the view that it is the duty of an artist to provide moral direction and vision to the struggles of the exploited people. Ngugi's literary targets have included governmental corruption, socio-economic exploitation and religious hypocrisy. Through his various essays, novels and plays he reveals social injustice, discrimination and exploitation of the people especially the women by colonizers. His several novels are on the theme of social injustice, exploitation of the weaker sections and women, acute social discrimination and exploitation of the people by colonizers. His novels depict the true picture of African society without any bias.

Keywords: Colonialism, Exploitation, Discrimination, Corruption, Religious Hypocrisy.

Ngugi portrays the sufferings of African women during the most expressive and exploitative conditions during emergency in *Weep Not, Child* and *A Grain of Wheat*. During 'the suppressive times,' Mwhaki's father, Jacobo indulges in punishing the Africans taking side of the White government. Young Mwhaki is not able to spend time with her father in those days. The distance grows between the two as the days pass by. She hears the African begging her father for mercy in terror. Those are the cries of death. Even Jacobo fears death at the hands of the fellow Africans. The cries of fear of death surround her from all sides. At that time, she says to Njoroge:

I am caught in it and if this goes on, I feel as if I could go mad. . . . I am telling this to show you how glad I am at the prospects of escaping from it all. (127)

During the emergency, not only young girls like Mwihaki, but also elderly women suffered. During the curfew, Nganga in *Weep Not, Child*, was taken away from the bed by White soldiers. Wives of Nganga went from one home guard post to the next asking them to be allowed to see their husband. They suffered in fear and in long waiting for their husband, only to hear the death of their husband with five other men in the forest.

Women were imprisoned to make their men suffer. Though it is not a big crime to go out at six O'clock in the evening during the emergency, Njeri and her son Koro were imprisoned when they just came out of the house to search for Boro. When the fine imposed was paid, Njeri alone was released. This is all to hurt Ngotho's feelings as a husband of Njeri and father of Koro. Again, when Jacobo was murdered, both Njere and Nyokobi, wives of Ngotho, were arrested.

During the emergency time, Africans were reduced economically by the Whites. Njeri and Nyokobi could not understand why the Whites reduced them economically and why they imprisoned their innocent young children who had not committed any crime.

'Why do they oppress the Black people?' Njeri bitterly asked. She was growing old. Her days of poverty and hardship are being made heavier by this anxiety. (79)

Njeri and Nyokobi's husband had been thoroughly beaten up by the Whites to extract information about the murder of Jacobo. The wives watched their husbands who suffered both physically and mentally, unable to resist the colonial suppression. They finally suffered the death of Ngotho as his wives. Julian in *Weep Not, Child* also suffered the death of her husband and in the exploitative political conditions by the White colonist Howlands who used Jacobo as a pawns in the game to suppress his fellow Africans like Ngotho.

All the hopes that Njeri and Nyokobi pinned on Nojoroge that he would get himself well educated and would lift up their family's economic position and status shuddered. They had finally to save their disillusioned son from committing suicide.

They were not able to fulfil their desires and watched the disintegration of the family under the oppressive inhuman attitude of the White colonists.

Even in *A Grain of Wheat*, the colonists put women to task. The image of an old mother suffering the death of her only young and strong son Githogo is portrayed in Chapter I of the novel. White soldiers who surrounded Thabi and Rungai killed him, when he ran to save his helpless mother from the cruelty of the European and African soldiers.

Mumbi's happy married life with hard-working and sincere Gikonyo, whom she chose among her many worthy suitors, came to an end with his arrest by White soldiers.

She found herself powerless to save her man. She collected all her will and strength into a cry... the cry was a shriek of terror. And this feverish terror seized the whole of Thabai as later in the night they learned that Gitogo, the deaf-and-dumb son of the old woman had been shot dead by those messengers of Whiteman's peace. (103-4)

Mumbi lived under constant fear even her husband was with her at the possibility of her husband being taken away by the White soldiers any time. Now, the possibility of Gikonyo's death at the hands of White soldiers like the death of other detainees made her suffer more. Added to this, the people of Thabi were subjugated to horrible ripples of terror by the White soldiers and the black home guards. The indirect suffering of the black women in the village is no less than what their men suffered directly at the hands of oppressing White soldiers.

After the men in Thabi village were arrested, their women were not left with even a piece of land from which they could earn their living. Heavy taxes were also imposed on them. Children stopped their education, unable to meet the expenditure on it. In such conditions, women struggled to feed the aged and children at home. A woman in *A Grain of Wheat* cries in vain to meet the M. P. in the town, every day spending all her time there with hungry stomach.

While mothers suffered thus, young women like Wambuku suffered waiting for their men when they were held up as Mau Mau warriors in the forest or when they were shot dead. Mumbi recalls the whole thing before Mugo:

Kihika was arrested and hanged on a tree, something strange came over her. For a few days she never left her home, and when she did so, eventually, well, she only destroyed herself with soldiers and home guards. But she refused, so it is said, the advances of this particular homeguard, who got his chance for

revenge during the trench. She never recovered from that beating and died three months later in pregnancy. (137)

Wambuku thought patriotic Kihika had betrayed colourful rainbow of her hopes and desires, unable to keep his promise that he would live forever with her. The exploitative and suppressive conditions caused psychological damage to her. She became a victim of sexual exploitation by home guards. Women like Njeri sacrificed their lives in cause of their wearied lovers. Njeri ran away to the forest to fight at Kihika's side. Soon after Kihika's death, she too was dead.

Not only Wambuku, all the people of Thabi village were hit by the violence of homeguards and White government in one way or the other. In the words of Govind Narayan Sharma: "A considerable portion of Ngugi's novel is devoted to the portrayal of violence that was done not merely to the body – the lands, home and hearts of the Gikuyu people – but also their soul in the form of a spiritual suffering and agony inflicted on them by the White man."

The condition of Kenya during the Emergency is described by Kigonda, a farm labourer in Ngugi's powerful play, *I Will Marry When I Want*. We see this atmosphere of emergency in *A Grain of Wheat*.

That the state of emergency was declared over Kenya

Our patriots,

Men and women of

Limuru and the whole country

Were arrested

The emergency laws became very oppressive

Our homes were burnt down

We were jailed

We were taken to detention camps

Some of us were crippled through beating

Others were castrated

Our women were raped

Our wives and daughters were raped before our eyes. (27)

Women and children of Thabi village in *A Grain of Wheat* were arrested by White district officer Robson to vacate their huts and move into a new place within the given time. Their huts were burnt down when they were sleeping at night. Mumbi describes the sadism of homeguards when they splashed petrol on her hut, which was already dry.

The leader of the homeguards struck a match and threw it at the roof. It did not light, and the others laughed at him. They shouted and encouraged him. One of them tried to take matches from him to demonstrate how it could be done. It became a game between them. At the fourth attempt the roof caught fire. (140)

When the fire spread to other huts, women were not able to scream. At odd hours they were left to sit and grieve without a place to hide themselves from the evil eyes of White soldiers and homeguards. The burning away of the huts has been more than the loss of money and security to Mumbi's mother-in-law.

For those huts meant to her because she had built them after Waruhius, her husband in the Rift Valley, had divorced her from his side. (140)

Burning the house means removing old thoughts from their minds which they have shared with their men. When they moved to a new place, it would be difficult for their men to search for them after they come back from detention camps. Thus, Thabi village was completely demolished. The punishment to Thabi village was warning to other villages, never to give food or any kind of help to those black men fighting against the White government. Mumbi said:

We were prisoners in the village, and the soldiers had built their camps all around to prevent any escape. We went without food. The cry of children was terrible to hear. (143-44)

Even children were not spared from whipping. All were made to dig trenches within the given time. To escape from this communal labour, women mostly tried to work in European farmhouses, tea-plantations and digging Muthangari grass for White people. Thus, Thabi women were forced to become workers in various fields.

In the highly disturbed Thabi village, Mumbi describes the constant fear and threat she has faced along with other women there.

The new D.O. did not mind the cries. He even permitted soldiers pick women and carry them to their tents. God! I didn't know how I escaped from that ignominy. Every night I prayed that such a thing should never happen to me. Wambuku died in the trench. They took her body and threw it into a grave dug a few yards from the trench. (144)

Forced labour led to sexual harassment. Cruel White soldiers, African homeguards and even their officer Thomson Robson as articles in the market area. The African women's opposition to such kind of harassment is put to an end by beating them till they die as in Wambuku's case. Then hunger deaths occurred, a number of women "secretly and voluntarily offered themselves to the soldiers for a little food." (146)

Thus not only the Whites, even the Africans exploited the helpless African women ruthlessly. The forceful exploitation of African women by both the Whites and the Africans has been more during the Mau Mau Emergency, just before "Uhuru." E. Palmer rightly observes, the African society was cleverly thrown back into prostitution by the schemes of the White and the new black imperialists.

The inaccessible land of hills and ridges in *Weep Not, Child* is opened up by long broad tarmac road linking up Gikuyu land to the lands beyond. This road has laid the path for sexual exploitation of African women by Asians also in addition to the Europeans and African homeguards. Even when the road was under construction in *Weep Not, Child*, the Italian prisoners who built the road indulged in sexual exploitation and left a name for themselves by leaving White children to African women they slept with. This mixed breed was looked down upon those days. It was said:

Only the children by black mothers and Italian prisoners who were also white men were not really 'white' in the usual way. They were ugly and some grew up to have small wounds... this was a punishment. Black women should not sleep with white men who ruled them and treated them badly (6).

The White settler Holland in *Weep Not, Child*, during his wife's absence, picked up African women and exploited them sexually. In *A Grain of Wheat*, African women are sexually exploited by their own race.

Karanja, the leader of homeguards, tried to exploit Mumbi sexually. He mocked often at Mumbi's hope of Gikonyo's coming back from detention. Mumbi checked his arrogant

advances with great difficulty. Once he called her and said that her husband would come back soon. The grateful Mumbi was overwhelmed with joy and was prepared to do anything. Karanja seduced her and when she realized what had happened, it was already late. Mumbi's situation is similar to that of the protagonist in Ngugi's powerful short story, "The Return," where the woman believes that her husband was dead and so she agrees to marry her husband's friend when he proposes to her. Certainly, Mumbi is placed above her. But Mumbi's husband, on his return from the detention camp, could not understand her properly. Jabbi comments:

For her single affair with Karanja was no adultery after all since he has exploited his position as a chief and her dazed anxiety over her husband's too suddenly eminent return from so many of years of detention. These revelations thus complicate the moral perspectives bearing upon the Gikonyo-Mumbi plot in which Gikonyo's own breeding sleeve of jealousy has been the only known factor setting the tone so far in the narrative. Mumbi's story is thus reminiscence, a flashback that also induces a valuable sense, a moral complexity in the novel.

The exploitative colonial conditions changed the whole pattern of her lovely married life with Gikonyo. Mumbi, carrying the name after the Gikuyu mother, did not abandon the innocent child. Her son, through Karanja, became the barrier to their marital relationship. Her husband grew bitter towards her. But she does everything to keep her husband in good manner. Unfortunately, her husband remains indifferent to her and calls her a whore in a desperate mood. A critic rightly observes,

The life of Gikonyo and Mumbi is one of the most significant points of attention in *A Grain of Wheat* because it enlarges the traditional conflict between man and woman in society and prescribes solution, which is still relevant to the entire solution in the novel. The most important prescription is recognition of equality and mutual cooperation.

Ngugi thus sketches Mumbi as a most beautiful woman of the ridges and makes her a victim as a wife waiting in distressed conditions for her husband who was detained without trial for a long time. She also suffers as a victim of sexual exploitation during the emergency in Kenya and even after his return in the marital relationship. This sexual exploitation portrayed in *A Grain of Wheat* takes a different turn in the next novel, *Petals of Blood*. Wanja in the novel is not a straight girl. She is barmaid and a prostitute whose salary is regulated,

but is paid according to the whims of the employer. She is a ruthlessly exploited Kenyan woman.

With the portrayal of Wanja in *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi starts his depiction of the most exploitative section of the African women in African society under neo-colonial or imperialistic conditions. Generally, prostitutes are condemned as a race of sinful, infectious females by society. People look down upon them. Ngugi wants people to examine the causes behind prostitution, rising above the superficial understanding of the problem. Besides this, he wants prostitutes to realize the causes of their degeneracy and wants them to fight against them. He is on the side of the most oppressed. He says:

Generally, in fiction, one tries to portray those people who seem to be exceptions of the norm... what I tried to do in my novels is to show the dialectic relationship between various aspects of society and reality. When I take a prostitute, I want to show that she is a product of all forces impinging on that society.

Ngugi did not portray much about African women suffering in polygamous society. But in *A Grain of Wheat*, the cruel treatment of an economically poor man in polygamous society towards his unwanted wife is portrayed in a brief yet powerful way. Wangari, Gikonyo's mother, lived in Elbourgean area with her husband who worked on European farms.

He gets new brides and complained that the thighs of the first wife did not warmth anymore. He beat her, hoping that this would drive her away. Wangari stuck on. Eventually Waruhia ordered her to leave his home and crushed mother and son to a life of ever wandering on God's earth. (158)

Miriam in *Petals of Blood* unable to tolerate the exploitative nature of her husband breaks away from him. She speaks of the burden under which she lived.

She complains about her triple duties to her child, Ndinguri, to her husband and to her European landlord... expected to work on the European farm; to work on her own piece of land: and to keep the home in unity, health and piece. (11)

It was the pressure under which most of the women characters in Illmorog lived in *Petals of blood*. Later she did not allow herself to be exploited by brother Ezekiel.

Wariinga in *Devil on the Cross* was vibrated and beautiful like Wanja. Like Wanja, she too is sexually exploited while she was still young and innocent at school. Through the story of Mahua Kareendi, Wariinga describes that she has been exploited sexually by men in imperialistic Kenya. When she was young, a young boy at school exploited her. A rich old man, who used to come to their house, encouraged by her own uncle, exploits Wariinga sexually. When she approached this old man, who used to play the hunter and the hunted game with her, he said:

How could you have possibly conceived as if I were the only man who went with you. ... I thought all along that I was going with a clean school girl, a girl I would have loved to marry so that she could be balm for my old bones. But instead, I picked on Kareendi. Ready-to-yeild, did I? (146)

Unlike Wanja who threw her child I latrine pit, Wariinga did not abandon the child she had understanding parents to support her. She learnt typewriting and went in search of a job from one place to another. But everywhere, she faced a similar situation. She was asked to join a modern love bar and lodging that has become the main employment bureau for girls like her. She rejected them all. At last, she joined as a typist. Her boss Kihira was a church person. He too proposed to her to be his 'sugar girl' tempting her by offering luxuries. He tried to exploit her economically poor condition. When she refused and resisted his luring attempts, she was thrown out of the job.

In utter despair, she went to her lover in university. He earlier agreed with her child and expressed words of true love. All her hope to carve her life beautifully is shattered when heh rejects her thus:

A chameleon will always be a chameleon. A girl who starts going with men old enough to be her father while she is at school to the extent of giving birth to babies when still a student... no you are spinning me this yarn only because Waigoko has refused to let you continue making his bed in hostels for modern love. (25)

Ngugi depicts the exploitation of the African women at the hands of other Africans. In the cave, he describes the barmaids who are made to appear as dolls with skin-tight dresses before the thieves. In the world where love and sex have become the things that can be purchased easily, the word 'love' has lost importance. Barmaids wore bands inscribed 'I love you' in an exploitative sense.

The institution of marriage has lost its significance among the exploitative thieves. There are also certain women from the bourgeoisie class who have become "Ready to Yield" kind. Those women do not have much work to do. In their hunt for five minutes' love or an hour's love, they have degraded in their moral values and had joined the exploitative section of people. They robbed another section of women of their husbands. Those men spend time with these 'good time' girls and did not care for their wives. Thus, the degeneration of some women belonging to the bourgeoisie class is also focused on.

Ngugi reveals how the African women have also been exploited in the colonial and the neo-colonial Kenya on the basis of race, class and gender. His women characters become victims of exploitation, directly or indirectly. In *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between*, women are victims of racial exploitation. In *A Grain of Wheat*, the women are exploited sexually both by the White colonists and the African homeguards. In *Petals of Blood*, Wanja, who is sexually exploited, takes cudgels against the exploitative city. In *The Devil on the Cross*, Wariinga, a victim of sexual exploitation, becomes vociferous against the society. The novelist thus identifies the problems of women by depicting "the forces of denigration and self-degeneration."

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