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The Drama of Dissent: A Study of *I Will Marry When I Want*

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Abstract:

The play *I Will Marry When I Want* (*Ngaahika Ndeenda*) accommodates the voices of dissent and thereby takes issue with the dominant nationalist discourse in Kenya. It deals with the dynamics of myth, memory, history, politics and art. The dramatic representation of history entails mythicization, nationalization and proletarianization of the “Mau Mau.” All these strategies might be considered as a reworking of “ethnosymbolic” elements for the development of a dissenting postcolonial (nationalist) discourse. The article traces the subversive elements in the play, and thereby reckons with the discourses of nationalism and ethnicity that animate the socio-political landscape of Kenya. It shows the ways in which the play deals with the dialogism between elitist and subaltern enunciations of nationalism.

Keywords: *I Will Marry When I Want*, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, nationalism, ethnicity, mythicization, ethnosymbolism, dissent, postcolonialism.

Introduction

The pivot of the production of the Gikuyu play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (premiered in 1977) or *I Will Marry When I Want* is “an idea of theatre as a participatory mode in which Kenyan communities can rehearse their own historical articulations of dissent” (Nicholls 156). Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s conviction to co-author the play with Ngugi wa Mirii (who was already promoting theatrical pursuits for community education in Zimbabwe), and the residents of Kamiriithu, as emphatically presented by him in non-fictional works such as *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), projects the play as an artistic manifestation of his (in)famous “renunciation” of English. His increasing engagement with postcolonial literary theory corresponds with his decision to produce creative works in his mother tongue which is Gikuyu. It was the play that first enabled Ngugi to get popularly associated with the “language question” in the domain of postcolonial theory. The authors’ preference for Gikuyu enabled the peasants, workers and other so-called “non-authors” to modify the text. It might be noted that “popular theatre presented counter-performances that threatened the government’s monopoly of spectatorship and hence power” (Gikandi 166). Thus the Kamiriithu project ushered in his antagonism with the post-Independence government of Kenya. My study of the text explores the polemics animating the play. In the following sections, I try to contextualize the play within its contemporary history, discuss the dissenting elements in the text, and then try to explore the text from the conceptual framework named “ethnosymbolism.”

Contextualizing *I Will Marry When I Want*

The term “neo-colonialism,” as used by Kwame Nkrumah, denotes a socio-politico-economic scenario in which the nation-state has a semblance of “international sovereignty,” but, in

reality, “its economic system” and thus its political policy” are “directed from outside”(Nkrumah ix). Being a monumental book in the history of African socialism, Nkrumah’s *Neocolonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965) markedly projects the international arena as the space of socio-politico-economic struggle. For him, the primary conflict between the rich and the poor has been transposed to the conflict between the developed countries and the underdeveloped countries: “the developed countries succeeded in exporting their internal problem and transferring the conflict between the rich and the poor from the national to the international stage”(Nkrumah 255). Neil Lazarus points out this tendency to displace the focus from class to nation, from capitalism/socialism to centre/margin, not only in Nkrumah’s *Neo-colonialism* but also in Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972) and Chinweizu’s *The West and The Rest of Us: White Predators, Black Slavers and the African Elite*(1975)(Lazarus 51-52). For Lazarus, this is a common fetish of the West which exists in those writers and is betrayed by their works. However, Ngugi’s idea of neocolonialism, as enunciated in *I Will Marry When I Want*, emphasizes the intranational exploitation engineered by the comprador bourgeoisie; it refers to the socio-politico-economic-cultural conditions in which the rich and powerful thrive at the expense of the poor and disempowered. From Ngugi’s work one may say that for him, “the neocolonial” refers to the exploitative bourgeoisie and the socio-politico-economic system adhered by them in the post-Independence Kenya.

The play *I Will Marry When I Want* is a Marxist critique of neocolonialism. The question of legitimacy of the marriage between Kiguunda and Wangeci lies at the heart of the text in which money and matrimony collaborate to maintain class hierarchy. As Njooki reminds Wangeci, “Rich families marry from rich families, / The poor from poor” (Thiong’o and Mirii, *I Will Marry When I Want* 32). Marriage is thus represented as a means by which the moneyed class maintains and expands its power. Gathoni’s desire to marry John Muhuuni therefore is doomed at the outset. Her predicament is too obvious from the beginning. She seems to be a disempowered version of Wanja of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Petals of Blood*(1976) as her ‘extravagant’ sexuality leads her peasant family into bankruptcy. Her assertion “I shall marry when I want” is a mark of her indulgence into extravagance(16). Belonging to the peasantry in a society of stringent class hierarchy, Gathoni has to learn the lesson that being a desiring woman is nothing but a sign of profligacy. Moreover, she seems to indulge in her affair with John more because of the prospect of social upliftment than that of love: “Who is the girl who does not like being well dressed?” she asks rhetorically(51). This dissenting desire intensifies her ‘culpability.’ It is to be noted that Gathoni is associated with a discourse of ethnicity: Kiguunda is addressed as “Kiguunda wa Gathoni” of “son of Gathoni”(36). This association contributes to the oppressive gender stereotyping. Kiguunda’s full name seems to draw a contrast between the Gathonis of the past and present. The Gathoni of the past, probably Kiguunda’s mother or clan, is mentioned with pride by Kiguunda(36). Whereas the modern Gathoni appears to be a travesty of her namesake as she, according to Kiguunda, flaunts the “fineries of a whore”(51). Going by this premise, Brandon Nicholls’ claim that Gathoni (of the present) embodies the prostituted culture of the postcolony seduced by the bourgeois modernity represented by John Muhuuni can be endorsed(Nicholls 156).¹ As Nicholls argues, Ngugi’s “gender stereotyping has played a considerable part in Gathoni’s

predicament”(157). However, considering Nicholls’ claim tangentially, I would take a historical look at Gathoni’s plight. To do this, we need to understand the contemporary moral clutter concerning female sexuality and financial autonomy.

The Affiliation Act of 1959 was branded by its critics as a product of “Western modernity” and colonialism(Thomas 169). It was collectively deemed by the then ruling party, namely Kenya African National Union or KANU, to have adverse effects on African women’s sexual and pecuniary morality. The Kenyatta government endorsed the dominant misogynist discourse of nationalism by effecting the repeal of the Affiliation Act and implementing the Vagrancy Act of 1969 “which aimed to clear Kenya’s cities of prostitutes and street beggars by sending them back to the rural areas from which they came”(157). The repeal of the Act can also be considered as a part of the political machination of KANU to underminethe rising popularity of their rival Kenya People’s Union or KPU(156).

After Independence (1963), according to the dominant nationalist discourse endorsed by KANU, it was the time for nation(-state)-building. At that time, “struggles over reproduction were crucial to the construction of political and moral order in Kenya” (173). The paternalistic misogynist nationalism construed women as “calculating predators who used sex to lure and ensnare men and their money,” and therefore to be domesticated as “mothers and wives” (161, 173). Consequently, the act was repealed in 1969; but the repercussions continued in the subsequent three decades (168). Moreover, the post-Independence government of Kenya had to introduce family planning schemes in order to appease the foreign-aid providers who had been fearing for a while that the rapidly increasing population of the colonies and underdeveloped countries “would soon outstrip global resources” (179). The introduction of contraceptives in Kenya also fuelled the existing misogyny: the moral police protested by considering contraceptives to be “morally damaging” and anti-African or antinational (180). Therefore, inthe context of illegitimate pregnancy, debates involving the discourses of African “innocent” women’s promiscuity and “experienced” women’s adultery and prostitution animated the Kenyan political, legal and social milieu of the 1980s (156-158). Extramarital sexual relationships between adolescent girls and wealthy men—school girls and their ‘sugar daddies—’were particularly important in these debates: “The press and popular fiction have portrayed such relationships as a common means by which schoolgirls acquire cash for school-related expenses, clothes, and cosmetics” (165, 170). There are overt references to this phenomenon in *I Will Marry When I Want* as well. For instance, Kiguunda voices the collective anxiety concerning sexual morality of the adolescent girls:

Do modern girls marry,
Or do they only go to the bars
Accompanied by men old enough to be their fathers,
And girls cooing up to them, sugardaddy, sugardaddy!
Even those who have gone to school up to secondary
Or up to the Makerere grade of Cambridge
The song is still the same!
Sugardaddy, sugardaddy!(*I Will Marry When I Want* 18)

Reforms which seemed to offer Kenyan women more reproductive options were considered to loosen women's sexual morality, and thereby lessen their financial dependence on men. Thus moral and financial economies were enmeshed together in the discourse of female sexuality. This is how *I Will Marry When I Want* captures the contemporary moral muddle about female sexuality and women's financial autonomy. We find Mumbi (of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* published in 1967), Wanja (of *Petals of Blood* published in 1976), Wariinga (*Devil on the Cross* published in 1982), Guthera (of *Matigari* published in 1989) and Gathoni negotiating such moral issues because the post-Independence Kenyan politico-legal milieu was fraught with anxiety over female reproduction. Mumbi in *A Grain of Wheat* becomes a single mother giving birth to a child out of illegitimate sexual intercourse. In *Petals of Blood*, Wanja suffers from premature pregnancy and later becomes a madam of New Ilmorog. Wariinga in *Devil on the Cross* is seduced by the Rich Old Man from Ngorika, while Guthera in *Matigari* becomes a barmaid/prostitute after getting sexually manipulated by a debauch policeman. Gathoni is seduced by "extravagance" and turns into a barmaid. Thus it becomes a trope in Ngugi's works.

The Drama of Dissent in *I Will Marry When I Want*

However, to state that the play *I Will Marry When I Want* merely expresses the neocolonial exploitation of the disenfranchised by the men of power in gendered terms (through the sexual/moral predicament of the female characters) might be a hasty generalization. On the one hand, *I Will Marry When I Want* depicts the neocolonial victimhood through the predicament of Gathoni. On the other hand, it focusses on the postcolonial resistance in various ways, which would be discussed in the following sections.

Gathoni's seduction appears to be a contrast to the courtship of Kiguunda and Wangeci and to the marriage of Gikaamba and Njooki. To create the Brechtian *Verfremdung* or "defamiliarization" (also known as "alienation"), Kiguunda and Wangeci recreate their past courtship through song and dance performed on stage by themselves along with suddenly appearing revellers. Instead of a mimetic representation of events, the stage is imbued with an interventionist narration of the past. The singers and dancers appear and disappear abruptly, thereby breaking the illusion of verisimilitude or "trance:" the actors do not let themselves go into a trance because their aim is not to put the audience into a trance (Brecht 193). As Brecht theorizes on "epic theatre," this distancing technique—alienation of the actor from the character and defamiliarization of the known elements—enables the spectator to have an objective, critical attitude towards the events which are diegetically represented on stage. In a Brechtian way, the courtship and premarriage rituals between Kiguunda and Wangeci are portrayed as organic parts of cultivation and freedom struggle (*I Will Marry* 23-28). First, the songs evoke the sensual and occasionally indicate the organic connection between human life and cultivation through proverbial expressions. The lines "Wangeci let's cultivate the fruit garden," "This is your place/Famed for ripe bananas" and "I brewed liquor for you" are marked by the imagery of cultivation. Then there occurs a change: "Songs and voices demanding/ Freedom for Kenya" (25). Later, Gikaamba remarks on the question of sanctity of their marriage: "A blessed marriage is when / Two people accept to be patriots / Defending their home and nation" (64). This is followed by a depiction of the nuptial songs and rituals

performed during his wedding with Njooki (65-67). Again the connection between cultivation and life is evoked through the hymeneals when Aagakiku, the bride's clan, claims "I, woman of Njiku's clan, / Have cultivated hills and slopes" or offers "yam, / And a crop of ripened bananas" (65, 66). There are occasional reminders of the colonial confiscation of land: "Let's now go back to cultivate our fields / While seeking ways of getting back / Lands stolen from us the whites" (66). Women are urged to ululate for the patriots who protect their homestead "holding a gun in the mountains" (67). Then a panoramic projection—asynchronic representation—of significant historical moments sets the tone for rebellion: Muthiriigu dance and songs which were banned during Emergency(1952-1960), the 1948 general strike and oathing rituals are represented in tandem (68-69). Like Kiguunda, Gicaamba venerates the Land and Freedom Army while construing history from a proletarian perspective (27, 70). Thus the text assumes a Fanonist idiom of resistance: the wounded psyche of the colonized subject first recoils and then exhausts the seething "energy by the ecstasy of danceThe colonized way of relaxing is precisely this muscular orgy during which the most brutal aggressiveness and impulsive violence are channeled, transformed, and spirited away"(Fanon 19).After this romantic escapism, the colonized subject, as Fanon adds, becomes conscious of the real threat which is colonialism, and joins the armed rebellion: "During the struggle for liberation there is a singular loss of interest in these rituals. With his back to the wall, the knife at his throat, or to be more exact the electrode on his genitals, the colonized subject is bound to stop telling stories" (20).*I Will Marry When I Want* then probably dramatizes the latter stage, the phase where the subject (a victim of neocolonialism) gains a revolutionary consciousness in which artistic expressions are collectivized and entwined with the discourse of dissent. The marriage rituals are politicized in the synchronic representation of history. It takes issue with the dominant nationalist discourse endorsed by the elitist political leaders in which Independence (1963) becomes an epochal moment as it is supposed to usher in an era of "modernity" and "progress." Addressing a public rally on the Kenyatta Day in 1967, Jomo Kenyatta, the most prominent nationalist political leader and the first president of Kenya, proclaimed that "even if we have done nothing, I think every citizen should be proud of being free. Each man is free and no longer anybody's slave We all fought for *Uhuru* [or Independence]"(Ogot and Robert Ochieng' 98). The speech is a testimony to the ways in which the dominant nationalism in Kenya romanticized Independence and elided the postcolonial factions in the native population.*I Will Marry When I Want*, projects a panoramic view of history, a counter-mythic montage of significant historical moments of revolutionary potential, and thereby, challenges the diachronic representation of history which is underpinned by the elitist nationalism.

Thus a mythopoeic exoneration of the Land and Freedom Army or Mau Mau takes place. As Kiguunda narrates,

But through Mau Mau
Led by Kimathi and Mathenge,
And through the organized unity of the masses
We beat the whites
And freedom came. . .
We raised high our national flag. (28)

Gicaamba carries forward the narrative by telling how he joined the “people’s guerrilla army” (70). Then a pantomime enacts a war scene in which “the Mau Mau guerrillas are victorious” over the British army (70). The polarization between the “loyalists” and the Mau Mau is brought into focus by Gicaamba. Here, we may consider two related matters: one, the history of the peasant rebellion commonly referred to as “Mau Mau;” two, the importance of land within the dominant discourse of Gikuyu (ethnic) identity.

Land or access to land implied a moral and social recognition amongst the Gikuyu. This entailed the discourse of “self-mastery” implying entitlement to, say, take crucial decisions for the community, get married or expand the family, become an “elder” (a position of power) and so on. Even if a Gikuyu could not own a land, access to land (as labourers) was considered to be a means to pursue self-mastery (Branch 292, 294). With the decrease in the productivity of the soil and increase in the European population (getting all favours from the colonial law), the landless “clients” who previously had accessed land as labourers lost their means of self-mastery as well as self-sustenance (295). Moreover, the colonial government leveraged the landed elite to consolidate their administration: “Collaborative networks of patronage connected rural households to the regime in Nairobi, via headmen, chiefs and the Provincial Administration” (295). The Land and Freedom Army or Mau Mau partially consisted of a proletarian congeries (the landless urban and rural mass): “Many within Mau Mau saw themselves as the *Irungu* generation, the straighteners, who would overthrow the corrupt incumbent generation of patrons and usurp European power” (295-296). The rebels gained support by claiming that they would provide the landless population with self-mastery. However, one portion of the disenfranchised population, later came to be known as “loyalists,” supported the colonial administration in the hope of getting absorbed by the system (291, 299-300). Gradually, conflicts emerged between the Mau Mau and the loyalists (301). In the 1950s and early 1960s the colonial government had to reward the loyalists by providing them “private land titles that guaranteed security of tenure, access to expanding cash crop production, and preferential access to the labour market;” at the same time, the state protected them from the Mau Mau by bolstering the provincial administration (Branch and Cheeseman 19-20; Branch 302; Green 72). Thus emerged a pro-establishment economic elite: “There were three main features of the attempt [of the British administration] to promote ‘loyal’ African leaders: bias in their favour during elections to the legislative council in 1957 and 1958, preferential treatment in the course of the Africanization of the provincial administration and the unequal distribution of new economic opportunities” (Branch and Cheeseman 19). This disagreement remained after Independence and manifested in some form or the other. By then, the state was fully Africanized; yet this “Africanization of the legislature and the provincial administration established the domination of the state by specific class interests which would come to dominate the post-colonial bureaucratic-executive state” (20). As Bruce Berman contends,

The elite nationalism of this class was definitively formed during the Emergency itself among the Kikuyu loyalists and the educated elites from other ethnic communities, who shared literacy in English and who travelled their national pilgrimage in less than a decade through increasing access to the

bureaucracy of the colonial state and to the expanding “national” political institutions at the centre, created by repeated rounds of constitutional reform. (Berman 201)

In addition, we must also note that the Mau Mau was probably never an organized resistance. During the Mau Mau violence that killed more loyalists than the colonial officers, the administration legally banned it. Thereby it unwittingly aided the armed struggle to emerge “as a political force, as people responded to the prohibition by supporting the colonial administration (as “loyalists”) or opposing it (Green 75). There was no unity in Mau Mau, and ironically, “[t]he colonial authorities’ version of Mau Mau as a conspiratorial secret cult attached to it an illusory unity of organization and ideology” (Berman 200). In fact, the Land and Freedom Army was fraught with the “conflicts between the literate leaders like Kimathi and Karari Njama and many of the primarily illiterate rank and file of peasants and dispossessed squatters led by men like Stanley Mathenge” (Berman 200; Lonsdale 142; Berman and Lonsdale 456). Amidst such inconsistencies, one may claim that “Mau Mau” refers to an ambivalent discursivity from which apparently coherent narratives have been constructed by various proclaimed or concealed historiographers (Atieno-Odhiambo 302-303; Berman 181-182). In other words, Mau Mau histories have been instrumentalized or adapted to suit various needs by many. The colonial state downplayed the Mau Mau rebellion. The dominant nationalism—forged by centrist elites like Kenyatta—maintained an ambivalent attitude towards the revolt in the post-Independence Kenya (Berman 201-202). Ngugi’s representation of the Mau Mau, understood in this context, appears to be a challenge to the dominant colonial and post-Independence/ neocolonial instrumentalization of the Mau Mau; but it is also another instrumentalization (Atieno-Odhiambo 300, 305; Berman 181, 203).

As Gicaamba of *I Will Marry When I Want* implies, it was because the peasants and workers chose to join or support the Land and Freedom Army that Kenya got its Independence (71). Undermining the discourses which located conflict of interest between Kimathi and Mathenge, lack of organization, and above all, Gikuyu-centrism in the controversial armed protest, *I Will Marry When I Want* nationalizes and proletarianizes the Mau Mau. The discursive ambiguity concerning the Mau Mau is blatantly elided for the sake of Marxist postcolonial instrumentalization of history. The pantomime in which the Mau Mau rebels defeat the colonial army (mentioned before) is therefore imbued with the playwrights’ attempt to mythicize the Mau Mau as they actually never won any battle against the British.

More importantly, this mythicization is accomplished from a subaltern perspective: it is Kiguunda and Gicaamba who construe their national lineage.² In Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976), the Mau Mau is depicted as an organized proletarian, nationalist uprising; but this projection does not seem to approximate the subaltern representation to the extent to which *I Will Marry When I Want* does. This projection of the non-elite as a “maker of history” highlights the self-referential aspect of the text. The Gikuyu version of the play was considerably modified—at the time of its rehearsals—to the demands of the Kamiriithu workers and peasantry by themselves (Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind* 152-153). In this way, the play showed “a firm allegiance to the Boalian tradition of mass-

controlled theater,” that is to say, “the audience-performers controlled the scriptwriting as much as the written text controlled the performance” (Desai 83). It was performed by villagers of Kamiriithu. The workers and peasants retold their story in the Brechtian-Boalian format of “forum theatre” in which, as Augusto Boal contends, “the participant has to intervene decisively in the dramatic action and change it” (Boal117). Moreover, as *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)* was a part of an adult literacy programme at Kamiriithu, the theatrical pursuit spawned “organic intellectuals,” in the Gramscian sense: the participants developed a class consciousness and shaped discourses of the class to which they organically belonged while “attaining the potential privileges of literacy” (Desai84-85).³ There had already been an adult literacy programme at Kamiriithu under the Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre which was run primarily by the local workers and peasants who worked in the Bata shoe factory and Brooke tea plantation (Eyoh59). They invited the two “university wits,” Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Ngugi wa Mirii, to write a play for them, and after considerable modifications, the play was performed by the villagers “as a part of their cultural activity” (59). This cultural empowerment of the subaltern produced tangible results in favour of the proletariat: “A group of women tea leaf pickers demonstrated the emergence of organic intellectuals at Kamiriithu by the manner in which they succeeded in increasing their wages” (Desai85). Moreover, despite the demolition of the theatre and detention of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, the struggle of the cultural front of Kamiriithu continued (85).

The cultural empowerment of the subaltern effected by the Kamiriithu project has its resonances in the text through the song and dance performances, pantomimes and interventionist narrations by Kiguunda and Gicaamba. Evidently, Gicaamba is more active than others as he “speaks with a conviction that shows that he has thought deeply about” the exploitative power structures and “uses a lot of movement, gestures, mimicry, miming, imitation, impersonation, any and every dramatic device to convey his message”(Thiong’o and Mirii 33). The monologue of Gicaamba that follows this stage direction is not only about the neocolonial exploitation of the workers but also consists of performances of exploitation put up by Gicaamba:

GICAAMBA:

Look at me.
 It’s Sunday.
 I’m on my way to the factory.
 This company has become my God.
 That’s how we live.
 You wake up before dawn.

 Before you have drunk a cup of milkless tea,
 The Sirena cries out.
 You dash out.
 Another siren.
 You jump into the machine.
 You sweat and sweat and sweat.

Another siren.
 It's lunch break.
 You find a corner with your plain grains of maize.
 But before you have had tow mouthfuls,
 Another siren,
 The lunch break is over.
 Go back to the machine.
 You sweat and sweat and sweat.
 Siren.

 Day in, day out,
 Week after week!
 A fortnight is over.
 During that period
 You have made shoes worth millions.
 You are given a mere two hundred shillings,
 The rest is sent to Europe.
 Another fortnight.
 You are on night shift.
 You leave you wife's sweat,
 Now you are back at the machine.
 You sweat and sweat and sweat,
 You sweat the whole night.
 In the morning you go home.
 You are with sleep.
 Your wife has already gone to the fields.

 Evening is here!
 You meet your wife returning from the fields.
 Bye, bye,
 You tell her as you run to the machine.
 Sweat.
 Another fortnight.
 Here, take this
 Two hundred shillings.
 The rest to Europe. (33-35)

The above passage is not only a part of Gicaamba's monologue but also consists of his performance as himself, an ordinary factory worker—Kiguunda, Wangeci and Njooki become his on-stage audience. The prominent elegiac tone of the passage is partially diluted by that of mockery. The iterating references to the laborious task ("You sweat and sweat and sweat"), the passage of time ("Another fortnight") and the low wage ("Here, take this/ Two hundred shillings/ The rest to Europe") foreground the exploitation of the factory worker in a tone of poignancy and mockery, thereby creating dark humour. References to the crying

Sirena, an aquatic femme fatale of Greek myths, and to the preoccupation with the machine seem to have a bawdy undertone: the siren is heard (or Sirena cries) and the worker leaves his house (and wife) and jumps onto the machine to sweat only to get exhausted. Gicaamba's performance is a bawdy parody of the neocolonial/ capitalist system of exploitation: through the performance of a seduced worker, Gicaamba combines farce with eroticism to provoke radical thought and action against the domineering neocolonialism. His parodic tale of repetitive seduction tends to denaturalize the otherwise grave and ruthless neocolonial system of victimization.

The play thus envisages the emergence of a proletariat who is not a subject of enunciation but an enunciating subaltern. This enunciating subaltern, namely Gicaamba, can provoke thoughts with his well-informed expressions. "The spear of Gicaamba's words/ Has truly pierced" Kiguunda's heart. Gicaamba is self-critical acknowledging misogyny in the precolonial culture (72, 105). For him, nation "belongs to boys and girls" because both have fought and sacrificed for *Uhuru* (105). He advocates "holding a dialogue" between men and women to remove "darkness from the land" (105). His goal is to conscientize the fellow disenfranchised when he claims that "our nation took the wrong turn. . . They forgot all about the people's movement / And they took over the programme of the homeguards" (113). Dedan Kimathi's armed revolution seems to be considered as the starting point for the modern revolution. However, in neocolonial situation, armed rebellion will not be of use. In contrast to Kiguunda's violent approach—he brings out sword against Kioi but ends up incurring bullet injury—Gicaamba advocates dialogue among and unification of the oppressed people as means of resistance to neocolonialism (101-103). The "Mau Mau" rebellion, in the colonial period, gained its support by endorsing the discourse in which land accessibility ensured the civic virtue of self-mastery for the Gikuyu men. In the neocolonial condition, Gicaamba envisages a new discourse of self-mastery because access to land cannot be ensured. Kiguunda's meagre one-and-a-half-acre land is confiscated when he fails to repay the loan which he has taken for his Christian wedding. From the very first scene Kiguunda assumes the ownership of land as the only means of self-mastery. This is evident in the manner in which Kiguunda brags about the title-deed for his small land. Significantly, he says,

These are mine own,
Not borrowed robes
Said to tire the wearer.
A man brags about his own penis,
However tiny.(Thiong'o and Mirii 4)

The proverb used by Kiguunda seems to adulterate the elegiac—as we see in the long monologue of Gicaamba mentioned earlier. This proverbial light-heartedness of Kiguunda in explaining the value of his small land might indicate the psychosexual association between land and Gikuyu manhood—the idea that plagued Nguni wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (Chakraborty, "Encountering Postcoloniality" 86). Lured into having an expensive Christian wedding by Kioi, Kiguunda mortgages and loses his prized possession in a

predictable way. Kiguunda's efforts to retain his land is impractical and futile. Thus *I Will Marry When I Want* suggests the requirement of a new pursuit of "self-mastery." Gicaamba seems to advocate democratic a dialogue through which the working class can be unified and organized as means of "self-mastery." The instrumentalized ethnic communalistic past—in the mythicization of the Mau Mau—is evoked. The Mau Mau is mythicized as an ideal peasant anticolonial proletarian revolt, and deemed as the origin of the "permanent revolution" (in the Trotskyian sense) which is to be continued by the postcolonial subaltern movement spearheaded by the organic intellectual named Gicaamba.⁴ For sustenance in the neocolonial period, as Gicaamba indicates, the movement needs power of signifying practices, control over enunciation. When the physical space is already hijacked by the ruling elite, the anticolonial movement requires enunciating organic intellectuals of subaltern origin like Gicaamba.

I Will Marry When I Want and Ethnosymbolism

The 1980s was marked by the proliferation of the "popular theatre in Africa" (Desai 66-68; Eyoh 57). Hybridized forms of representation emerging from the interaction between African and European theatrical practices attained a new dimension under the influence of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal. Shaped by the pedagogic theories of Freire and people-centric theatrical practices of Boal, this theatrical phenomenon was instrumentalized "to stimulate community thinking, develop self-confidence, participation, expression, awareness and organizational strengths of popular groups, communities and organizations" (Eyoh 57). As Ngugi wa Thiong'o contends, "writers in African languages should reconnect themselves to the revolutionary traditions of an organized peasantry and working class in Africa in their struggle to defeat imperialism and create a higher system of democracy and socialism in alliance with all the other peoples of the world" (*Decolonising the Mind* 29-30). His conviction regarding the Kamiriithu project was clear: "The real language of African theatre could only be found among the people—the peasantry in particular—in their life, history and struggles (41). Further, he writes, "*Ngaahika Ndeenda* depicts the proletarianization of the peasantry in a neo-colonial society;" it "showed how that independence, for which thousands of Kenyans died, had been hijacked" (44). For Ngugi, the Kenyatta-led independence was a "monumental betrayal into neo-colonialism" (45). With his engagement with the "popular theatre in Africa" Ngugi could develop a new idiom of resistance to neocolonialism taking issue with the dominant form of nationalism in Kenya which was elitist at its core. The Gikuyu playvoiced the seething subaltern protest against the elitist government and its multinational allies. At the same time, Ngugi could learn a new form of expression from the discussions with the villagers of Kamiriithu over the Gikuyu play (45). Ngugi perceives song and dance as elemental forms of expressions organically connected to peasant life through ancient ethnic rituals (45). Hence song and dance performances were incorporated to recreate "the past and the future" (53). Mime was incorporated into the representation primarily in order to serve a symbolic function. As Ngugi's commentary on the form of the play goes, that Kiguunda's Christian wedding is enacted through mime while Gicaamba's traditional wedding is represented with the native grandeur of song and dance, implies that the Christian wedding is "externally imposed and lacks the appropriate symbols rooted in the soil" (53). Here, for Ngugi, incorporation of songs and dance increases the degree of "rootedness" of the

entire project. Moreover, Ngugi adds onto his scrupulous pursuit of “authentic” narration of history. He talks about the ways in which the villagers meticulously contributed to the preservation of the “authenticity”:

The participants were most particular about the representation of history, their history. And they were quick to point out and argue against any incorrect positioning and representation of the various forces—even the enemy forces—at work in the struggle against imperialism. They would compare notes from their own actual experience, whether it was in making guns in the forests, in stealing arms from the British enemy, in carrying bullets through the enemy lines, or in the various strategies for survival. Land and freedom. Economic and political independence. Those were the aims of their struggle and they did not want *Ngaahika Ndeenda* to distort them. The one who made imitation guns for the play at Kamiriithu was the very person who used to make actual guns for the Mau Mau guerrillas in the fifties. The workers were keen that the details of the exploitation and the harsh conditions of life in the multinational factories be laid bare. (54-55)

However, I would argue that this apparently simple, straightforward quest for the “authentic” language of representation has a powerful nationalist ideological underpinning. To understand the discourse of “authenticity” and “rootedness” which informed Ngugi’s Kamiriithu project, we might look at the ways in which the British sociologist Anthony D. Smith conceptualizes the connection between the discourses of nationalism and ethnicity.

Any idea of nation is predicated upon a discourse of shared consciousness (Leoussi and Grosby 4). The discourse of shared consciousness, in turn, gains its ground by the ways in which some symbolic elements such as memories, traditions, values, and myths are selectively mobilized by the political actors. On the other hand, anthropologists of recent times claim that nationalist discourse is enmeshed with discourses of ethnicity since both nation and ethnic group seem to signify an “imagined” community.⁵ The approach to nationalism, as adopted by Anthony D. Smith, that recognizes the centrality of these symbolic elements and emphasizes the ethnic component of nation is known as “Ethnosymbolism” (Leoussi and Grosby 4-5). This recently emerging sociological approach to the study of nationalism foregrounds “nonempirical, justificatory ideas about collective existence” yet does not downplay the socio-historical forces shaping human consciousness (Leoussi and Grosby 4-7). There are two dichotomous pairs of well-known schools of approach to the study of nationalism: “*instrumentalism* as opposed to *primordialism*, and *modernism* as opposed to *perennialism*” (Conversi 15). The primordialists consider nation as an ancient phenomenon (Smith 6; Leoussi and Grosby 7). For primordialist, like Franjo Tadjman, nation is a “necessary and natural part of social organisation” (Spencer and Wollman 27). The oft-censured claim of the primordialists is that nation depends on ethnic bonds which are explosive, immutable and given (Conversi 16). “Instrumentalism” or constructivism, on the other hand, “conceives ethnicity as a dependent variable” which is manipulated by the elites (16). In its radical form, instrumentalism considers nation as discursive formations to be constructed and determined socially (17). Eric Hobsbawm and Elie Kedourie can be

categorized under this rubric. The “modernists,” namely Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner see nations—in different ways though—as distinctly modern developments necessarily connected with socio-historical conditions of modernity (Spencer and Wollman 34-45; Conversi 18). As opposed to them, the perennialists define nations “as enduring, inveterate, century-long, even millennial phenomena, certainly predating modernity” (Conversi 18). Anthony Smith’s ethnosymbolic approach deviates from the dichotomies involving these four approaches. It differs from the modernist claim by pointing out several examples of nationalism emerging in countries where the coordinates of modernity, such as industrialization, do not appear to precondition nation (19). Unlike other approaches to nationalism, especially modernism and instrumentalism, “it offers no theory in the scientific sense” (Smith 13). Rather, it offers “some conceptual tools for an alternative approach and research programme for the study of nations and nationalism” (13). Contra instrumentalism, ethnosymbolism considers nation more than a discursive formation invented and manipulated by a social group (13-14). This by no means pertains to the claim that ethnosymbolism resorts to a metaphysics in which national and/or ethnic ties, as primordialism contends, have natural roots (Conversi 17). Nor does ethnosymbolism downplay the contingency of national or/and ethnic bonds on socio-historical forces. In fact, ethnosymbolist approach recognizes the “*double historicity* of nations: their embeddedness in very specific historical contexts and situations, and their rootedness in the memories and traditions of their members” (Smith 30). Ethnosymbolism “underlines the continuity between premodern and modern forms of social cohesion, without overlooking the changes brought about by modernity” (Conversi 21). However, it censures the modernist marginalization of the discourses of ethnicity in the study of nationalism (Smith 17). The modernist scholars of nationalism conceptualize nation as a phenomenon of modernity; and by the same token, they, to Smith’s dismay, regard ethnicity as a “premodern” construct that eroded as societies/civilizations/communities were “modernized.” Disapproving this modernist bias, Smith claims that nation-formation, even in the period of modernization, is powered by “the symbolic elements of different ethnic groups” (18). Ethnosymbolists propound that, “a historically deep ethnic foundation is a prerequisite to the survival of modern nations” (Conversi 22). The importance of ethnicity in the field of nationalism, as Smith continues, also enables the researcher to enquire about “the often intense devotion which the nation evokes:”

Too often, analyses that start from large-scale economic or political factors fail to explain the symbolic and affective dimensions of nations and nationalism. To grasp these, we must explore the ways in which cultural and symbolic elements of myth, value, memory and symbol provide frameworks for understanding and aspiration, and these are often, although not exclusively, embodied in a sense of common ethnic identity and of belonging to a cultural community of imputed common ancestry. (Smith 18)

This particular aspect of ethnosymbolism—investigating the myriad symbolic dimension of myths, memory, values, and traditions to trace the affective aspect of nationalism—urges us to apply it in the field of literary criticism. I consider the economy of ethnosymbolic elements (the ethnically rooted myths, memory, values and traditions which are symbolically

rediscovered in order to forge or bolster a nation) has relevance to our understanding of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's engagement with the discourses of "rootedness" and "authenticity" discussed earlier. As Smith contends, in their nation-building pursuit, intellectuals use the symbolic elements to mobilize the mass, these elements are not invented *ex nihilo* (57). The nationalist intellectual reworks the ethnic elements; elements which are preserved in rituals and cults, thereby somehow surviving the vicissitudes of history. When Ngugi involves himself in the Kamiriithu project, his pursuit is not a quest for a pristine past but a reworking of the past. The popular ethnic elements are reinvented, rather than discovered, to forge a revolutionary nationalism through the Kamiriithu project. According to Smith, as "the nation is forged through the interplay of elite proposals and majority responses. . . it [is] necessary to base the proposed category of the nation on a carefully selected range of symbols, traditions, memories, myths and values that will strike a chord (31). Contrary to the instrumentalist scholars of nationalism and ethnicity, Smith claims that "only those symbolic elements that have some prior resonance among a large section of the population (and especially of its dominant *ethnie*) will be able to furnish the content of the proposed nation's political culture" (31).⁶ This entails that the nationalist intellectual should "adapt well-known symbols for political ends, modify traditional values and politicize existing myths of heroes and saints" (32). Smith cites the example of Elie Kedourie's reading of nationalism in the Indian context—the way in which Kedourie perceives "Tilak's use of the cults of Shivaji and the dread goddess Kali in early Indian nationalism" in the negative light—and points out that the latter "fails to grasp the two-way process in which national projects initiated by elite or subelite circles can be modified by various segments and strata among the non-elites" (32). The dialogism mentioned by Smith is of utmost importance for us because this is what loomed large in the production of *Ngaahika Ndeenda*. This process of nationalist modification of the exiting ethnic symbols probably starts earlier with the writing of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1976) and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (premiered in 1976)—works that venerate the Land and Freedom Army as an ultimate icon of the Kenyan freedom struggle (Chakraborty, "The Polemics of Class" 287-288). With *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o gets an opportunity to effect a dialogue with the "non-elite" and forge a national consciousness by reworking the ethnically grounded symbolic elements. The English version of the play that I read for textual analysis seems to voice this subaltern participation in the process of nation-building through the projection of Gicaamba as an enunciating subaltern. To use Fanon's words, the play thus enacts "the heroic saga of the people hacking their way into history" (Fanon 162). Fanon, on the context of the role of the intellectual in the development of national culture under colonialism, contends that "National culture is no folklore where an abstract populism is convinced it has uncovered the popular truth" (168). In the case of *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, it was not merely an uncovering of the "popular truth" which Ngugi seems to claim, unwittingly, in the *Decolonising the Mind*. Ngugi's claim that the villagers of Kamiriithu helped them have historical accuracy and authenticity is quite misleading. What the collective production of the play did can also be considered as a Fanonist attempt to forge a national culture/consciousness under neocolonialism. As Fanon argues, "National culture is the collective thought process of a people to describe, justify, and extol the actions whereby they have joined forces and remained strong" (168). Hence the representation of the Mau Mau in *I Will Marry When I Want*. The Land and Freedom

Army gained its popularity among the landless peasantry by promising access to land (Chakraborty, “The Polemics of Class” 282; Branch 292). In *I Will Marry When I Want*, the Land and Freedom Army figures as a symbolically significant factor in creating a national proletarian consciousness. In both occasions, a political reworking of ethnosymbolic elements thus becomes the decisive factor.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of the play *I Will Marry When I Want* the article thus shows the ways in which historical, political, anthropological and literary discourses overdetermine each other in the postcolonial paradigm. The first section attempts to contextualize the play by discussing a relevant moment in the history of Kenya which involved the socio-political upheaval concerning the Affiliation Act crises. The contextualization foregrounds the discursive underpinnings of the text: the contemporaneous moral muddle about female sexuality and women’s financial autonomy informs the play. In this light, the text might appear somewhat regressive.

However, in the second section of the article, the dissenting elements in the play are projected. It is argued that significant historical moments are synchronically represented in the text. The emphasis on synchronicity and/or plurality vis-à-vis the history of “Mau Mau” seems to be at variance with the dominant discourse of nationalism which is championed by the elite nationalists of Kenya. Within that discourse, history of Kenya is diachronically represented; the year of Independence, that is, 1963 becomes a watershed as it is supposed to usher in a new era of “progress” and “modernization” along with the “birth” of the nation-state. Through its synchronic representation of history/time, the play thus takes issue with the dominant discourse of nationalism. More importantly, this challenge is initiated from a subaltern perspective: Kiguunda, the peasant, and Gicaamba, the factory worker, mythicize, nationalize and proletarianize the “Mau Mau” for upholding their dissenting voices. This enunciation of the disenfranchised especially Gicaamba, who advocates unity and organization of the masses, is “ethnosymbolic” in nature as it offers anew discourse of Gikuyu “self-mastery—” the third section of the article substantiates this claim.

To conclude, *I Will Marry When I Want* is vibrant with the dynamics of myth, memory, history, politics and art. It registers a postcolonial reworking of “ethnosymbolic” elements for the bolstering a dissenting nationalist discourse. In so doing, the play facilitates an understanding of the fluidity of discourses of nationalism and ethnicity. The subversive potential of the text is probably testified by the fact that it contributed to the incarceration of many participants in the Kamiriithu project, including Ngugi wa Thiong’o: he was detained without trial in 1977 by the Kenyatta government for—as per the order signed by the then Minister of Home Affairs, Daniel Arap Moi, the president succeeding Kenyatta— “the preservation of public security” (Thiong’o, *Detained* n.p.). Tracing the subversive elements in the play, we reckon with the discourses of nationalism and ethnicity that animate the socio-political landscape of Kenya. The play gains its significance in the Kenyan/African dramatic milieu by dealing with the dialogism between elitist and subaltern enunciations of nationalism.

Notes:

1. Brandon Nicholls, however, does not follow this line of reasoning (Nicholls).
2. By the Gramscian word “subaltern” I want to denote the marginalised class (male population) of the post-Independence Kenya.
3. This refers to Gramsci’s distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals (Gramsci 418). For Gramsci, organic intellectuals have better correspondence with the community he represents than the traditional intellectual who tend to enjoy certain autonomy being within the mores of the community.
4. This obviously refers to the famous phrase of Benedict Anderson.
5. “Ethnie” is a French term which stands for ethnic group. The term is often used by anthropologists and sociologists working on the field of ethnicity.

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