

Vol. 8, Issue-VIII (July 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

# The Criterion

*An International Journal in English*

Bi-monthly, Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal



*The Criterion*

UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Jr. No. 768]

*Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite*

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ISSN 2278-9529

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**

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## **Uncovering the Abnegation of Women's Space and Gender Inequity as Pictured in the Novels of Ngugi Wa Thiongo**

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**Article History:** Submitted-12/05/2017, Revised-01/07/2017, Accepted-20/07/2017, Published-31/07/2017.

### **Abstract:**

Living and non-livings do possess some space or place on the earth. There is an organization of all the species possessing their own space and place in the world. Sometimes, the powerful in this organization starts gulping the space of the fragile species making it 'out of place' or 'out of space'. In this fashion, human beings in full swing initiated the progress of demolishing the space of animals in the name of evolution. Later, following the same strategy of the power, taking over the space of the weaker, women were forced to the platform of 'out of space' or 'out of place'. Ngugi Wa Thiongo, the prominent East- African writer has given the picturesque view of how women were enforced to be 'out of space' or 'out of place' in his novels. This paper focuses on the highlights of space denial and gender discriminations in the novels of Ngugi Wa Thiongo.

**Keywords:** Out of space, Gender discrimination, Space denial, Ngugi Wa Thiongo.

### **Introduction**

The world is encompassed with the organization that holds all the living beings and non-living beings in a balance with each other. The organization has weaker and powerful in the same concern with equality. Making the weaker 'out of place' or 'out of space' would correspond to thrashing their survival because the space that one possess bequeaths them the power to live their own life exploring their tenacity that the nature has gifted them. However, when it comes to the level of humanoid, the men abnegates the space of women in turn, denying their successful survival. Women are forced to be the weaker sex in the patriarchal society. Their strength and power were kept under the control by various norms like culture, tradition, and patriarchal power. Ngugi Wa Thiongo most effectively voices the inequity in gender and denial of space towards women by so-called powerful patriarchal society through his novels.

Does rough weather choose men over women? Does the sun beat on men, leaving women nice and cool? Women bear the brunt of poverty. What choices does a woman have in life, especially in times of misery? (WC 82).

Ngugi Wa Thiongo, the prominent East African writer is well known all over the world for his works. He has used his novels as a voice to impart the untold miseries of women, exploited and suppressed under the male-controlled society. As Judith Cochrane

says, Ngugi's women are 'Guardians of the tribe'(1). They are characterized as the centre of culture , tradition and the symbol of Gikuyu identity. Ngugi depicts not only the struggles faced by Kenyan women in his novels but of women all over the third world developing countries. "All major women characters in Ngugi's novels, without exception, are sufferers and victims of exploitation either directly or indirectly, in spite of being attractive and independent" (TCR 111). This paper focus on the highlights of space denial and gender discriminations in the novels of Ngugi Wa Thiongo. His works represents the oppression of African Women in patriarchal society, bicultural, marginalization of woman, unfair gender stereotype, and slavery.

### **Abnegation of Women's space as portrayed in the novels of Ngugi**

'Space' or 'Place' is what defines one's perseverance of survival. Losing the space to which one belongs, or forced to be 'out of space' or 'out of place' is the outcome of suppression by a specific group. Though women are not the central characters in some of the novels of Ngugi, he has never failed in his authentic depiction of the forceful space denial faced by women. This space denial in parallel, affects the growth in whole of the women gender. Massey says,

Moreover they are gendered in a myriad different ways, which vary between cultures and over time and this gendering of space and place both reflects and has effects back on the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the societies in which we live (Massey186).

Only limited choices were given to women to explore their power and make progress. Whenever women started accelerating to progress in achieving their goals, they were suppressed and exploited on the basis of many patriarchal norms like culture, tradition and gender discriminations stopped them in every means possible.

While men are afforded the freedom of public affairs, women are marginalized, confined to domesticity, to an ideology of oppression that is experienced both as a spatial limitation and in limiting the roles open to women, a way of denying them autonomy and self-fulfilment (IJCS 57).

Jacinta Wariinga, Wangari, Guthera, Rachael, Nyawira, Wanja, Mwihaki, Mumbi all these female characters shaped in such a wonderful way by Ngugi expose the dreadful side of the patriarchal society which never led the women to progress or to achieve her goal by either limiting her choices or by denying her space in the society. Ngugi's women characters emblemize the female subjugation and oppression in both colonial and neo-colonial Kenya. Sharma states that

Ngugi attacks the traditional female discourse of the African woman as being dominated, exploited, abused and merely used as a beast of burden. Like many other African societies, the Kenyan society is essentially patriarchal; hence men are considered to be more superior to women. Such a society is characterized by "male super ordination and female subordination." Ngugi's early novels assume the influence of an African narrative tradition and culture,

where portrayals of the African woman's experiences reaffirm her position and power within African conceptions of the world (IJELH154).

Ngugi in his *Devil on the Cross*, pictures how the women even with her higher proficiency were not allowed to develop when they refuse to be the puppet for the whims and fancies of man. Jacinta Wariinga, who is an expert in shorthand type writing, has the capability to type eighty words in a minute and who has the Cambridge passed certificate and an eligible candidate of EACE declaring that she is good in English, Swahili and Religion is dismissed from job. The one and only reason for the joblessness of Wariinga, though being such a qualified person is that she refused to obey the order of her Boss who wants her to be his 'sugar girl'. "She enters another office. She finds there another Mr. Boss...and the target is still Kareendi's thighs...women's thighs are the tables on which contracts are signed" (DC 19). When Wariinga declines the approach of her Boss, she stands there again as unqualified for job. Here Ngugi brings out how the space in the society for women is denied forcefully by men. She has the competence of higher education, still the space for her progress is limited by the fancies and desires of men who cannot claim to have any possession over her. Malcolm says "Public spaces remain spaces of power governed largely by patriarchal structures and institutions, in which women have very little visibility and influence" (Malcolm 256). The entire visibility and the power of women are marginalised and are abolished by the cruel power of male-dominated culture. She does suffer more in the hands of male chauvinistic society in the name of culture, tradition and other man created norms to keep her choices limited thus by stopping her progress and making her dependent on him throughout her life.

Women do possess the tremendous power within her of which she is unaware of, or rather she is kept unaware of her power. The place or space to which one belongs to plays a crucial part in the augmentation of their nature and their livelihood. Even the beasts do feel contented only when it is in its own place. So whenever there is an interruption to its space, it stands up to fight for its right. The antagonistic male dominating society does not allow women even to fight for her rights. The victim is victimised repeatedly. Wanja in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* and Wariinga in *Devil on the cross* are a paradigm of a victim being victimised. Both Wanja and Wariinga are prey to the old rich men who are moral, virtuous and respectable in the face of society but deep in the heart they are hunters, who destroyed young innocuous girls' lives and demolished young innocent girls' identity in the society. Both Wanja and Wariinga would have reached greater heights if they were given their own space to progress.

Wariinga's intelligence and her love for learning would not have diminished if her uncle had left her alone in her own space. But their wings are clipped by the male-chauvinistic society that exploited them. Her uncle sold the dreams of the young innocent Wariinga to the old toothless rich man, and Wariinga stood there losing her space and identity in the male dominated society. "He promised his wealthy friend....Wariinga was going to be the chicken whose feathers would be plucked one by one, leaving the flesh naked and unhampered"(DC 142). Wanja too faced the same disgrace when she believed her wealthy old neighbour. Ross Bonnie puts up the character of Wanja rightly as

Wanja succeeds in areas where women literary figure traditionally do not. In her relationship to the land, her strength as a mother/ nurturer figure of the entire village, and her ability to forge her own destiny, Wanja is a female figure rife with agency and power. She steadfastly resolves to accompany others in their return to the city despite the unpleasant memories it holds for her, and she continues the trek even after she is raped (RAL 154)

Wanja started to believe her wealthy old hunter when her parents denied her of her space. However, in her attempt to escape from the fox, Wanja, the innocent goat fell as a prey to the hungry lion. The respectable wealthy Christian adored her until she became pregnant. "So I was pregnant? I ran back to my lover. I will marry you all right, he assured me, if you don't mind being a second wife, and my first is so harsh she will make you her slave" (PB 48). Wanja who lost her space in the society rushed to her cousin unable to face her humiliation and shame. Later on, she does not have courage to bring up the fatherless child and she throws the child in the latrine. Thereafter her soul never had peace; guilt and shame was her only companion. She lost her own identity and the space she had in the society. Both Wanja and Wariinga are enticed by the old rich men and once round bellied they refuse to accept them and the child, proclaiming that they are Ready -to-Yield kinds.

The women in African colonized societies are not only exploited by colonizers but also by their own patriarchy culture.. African women were double exploited by the patriarchy and colonial powers; Young mentions this situation with these lines:

For women, the problem centered on the fact that the conditions against which they were campaigning were the product of two kinds of oppression which put the antagonists of the nationalist struggle in the same camp: patriarchal systems of exploitation were common to both colonial regimes and indigenous societies. Women therefore had to fight the double colonization of patriarchal domination in its local as well as its imperial forms (Young, 379).

In *Devil on the Cross* Wangari, the old woman fought for her country and was in Mau-Mau rebellion to liberate her country during colonial period. Wangari had sometimes, risked her life to help the Mau-Mau people in the forest fighting for freedom of the country.

I, the Wangari you see before you was a small girl then. But these legs have carried many bullets and many guns to our fighters in the forest...and I was never afraid, even when I slipped through the lines of enemy and their home guard allies (DC 40).

She, who fought for the independence of the country, is denied of her own space after the independence. She searched for job all over the country but she could find none. All she received is disgrace and humiliation from the male society. "I told him my troubles....he told me that the only job he could offer me was that of spreading my legs, that women with mature bodies were experts at that job. I felt a tear drop to the ground" (DC 42). Ironically, the soul that fought for the liberation of the society from the oppressive colonial rule was not able to find its own place and was denied of its place in the same society after independence.

Women struggled hard to feed their children and family when their husbands were taken to detained camps during colonial period. Mumbi in *A Grain of Wheat* epitomize the entire African women's trauma under colonial oppression. Women are subjugated to many tortures. "He even permitted soldiers to pick women and carry them to their tents" (AGW 139). Though she had already enough tortures under colonial exploitation, Mumbi was not given space to live her life. Karanja was always after her and he reduced her space of secureness. Women's struggle do not make any count to men, all they need is to satisfy their own self in spite of other's concern. Men forcefully uprooted social space of women.

Men created all traditional and cultural norms that tie the dreams of women and keep her under the control of the society's notions. Men altered even those traditional norms according to his needs. When Muthoni in *The River Between* wants to be circumcised, she was trapped inside her father's restriction to it. "I want to be a woman, I want to be a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges" "I know it's beautiful, oh so beautiful to be initiated into womanhood" (TRB 25). When Muthoni tried to take the path of her heart, her father denied her of her space in the family. "Tell Muthoni to come back, if she agrees we shall forget everything. If she does not, then tell her that she ceases to be my daughter" (TRB 35). Muthoni lost her space in her family forever as a penance for following the dream of her heart.

Rules, Regulations and Laws were all created to the ease of men by men. Moreover, men were appointed to protect those rules and regulations created by men from violations. These laws created by men do not safeguard and ensure security to the public spaces. Public spaces, mostly dominated by men do not give space to the women folks. Instead, to prevent the spaces that belong to women they gloriously shun women from their own space. Ngugi has given the picturesque description of this situation through his character Guthera in *Matigari*. "A crowd of people stood around Guthera, watching the policeman unleash terror on the woman. She was kneeling on the ground. The dog would leap towards her... some people laughed, seeming to find the spectacle highly entertaining... she was staring death in the face" (Matigari 30). When Guthera refused to the carnal desires of the police officers, she was humiliated in the public and none stood against the police officers to protect the space of young women in the society. The police officers abnegated her social space in a most uncouthly manner by setting their dogs on her. Both in social and private life women are forcefully denied of space by the patriarchal society.

## Conclusion

Ngugi, through his expertise in the narration wonderfully highlighted how women were denied of their own space by men and enforced them to be 'out of space' or 'out of place' in his novels. Though Ngugi has succeeded in voicing the untold miseries of women through his novels, he has also constructed woman as liberated, empowered in his later novels. His later novels portray women, becoming liberated and empowered from the subjugations of society through their continuous effort and struggle. Ngugi's novel unquestionably voices the rights of exploited women and emphasizes the space denied by

men to women in a way, provoking women to fight for their own space both in the social and in domestic scenario.

### Abbreviations

AGW - A Grain of Wheat

DC - Devil on the Cross

WC - Wizard of the Crow

PB - Petals of Blood

TRB - The River Between

TCR - The Commonwealth Review

IJCS - Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies

IJELLH- International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities

RAL- Research in African Literature

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