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REPRESENTATION OF AFRICAN HISTORY IN NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts a critical analysis of Ngugi Wa Thiongo's novels in terms of history and how much importance Ngugi has given to history in his narratives. According to Ngugi, History has left an indelible mark in the minds of natives during colonization. In his novel, Ngugi has highlighted how Mau Mau has struggled a lot in their protest against colonial domination in Africa. Ngugi is very much interested in representing history in his novels. In his novels, Ngugi has painted the exact picture of Kenya in particular and Africa in general in a detailed manner. His first novel *Weep, Not Child* ends with the initiation of the Mau Mau rebellion and the approach of the emergency (1952). In his second novel, *The River Between*, Ngugi has focused the impact of colonialism and how the Whitemen have tried various means to annihilate the native people's culture especially, the ritual known as circumcision. In another remarkable novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi has laid stress on a remarkable historical incident known as Uhuru i.e Kenya's Independence in December 1963 and he has highlighted the unconfessed events which took place in 1950's and the white settlement on African soil. Ngugi has also highlighted the declaration of the emergency in the 1950's and how the emergency has suppressed the Mau Mau, a terrorist group who fought against European settlements in the highlands of Kenya. He has also portrayed the dismal picture of the natives who have been forced to work as laborers and squatters on their own land, Ngugi novels have dealt with history of peasants and workers, the wretched of the earth who fought against foreign colonial domination. Both *Petals of Blood* and *Wizard of the Crow* deal with the history of post colonial Africa.

**Keywords:** History, Narratives, Colonialism, European Native

Introduction

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, a renowned East African man of letters, has highlighted pre-colonial and post colonial African History in his various works. He is a Kenyan playwright, novelist, essayist, short story writer and Children's writer and critic. Ngugi has been hailed as a crusader for his native people. His first and foremost duty is to redefine Africa's past and present in his novels. Slavery and colonialism are the two important factors in African History. The Scholars and Artists who have paid more attention to various features of slavery and colonialism .They are : Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah, Olaudah Equiano, Ferdinand Oyono and others also. One among them is Ngugi wa Thiongo. The study of how Ngugi probes African history in his works especially in his novels is indispensable.

## Discussion

Ngugi Wa Thiongo has been acting as a spokesman for his natives and a chronicler of the modern history of Africa. *Weep,Not Child* (1964) is the first English novel to be published by an East African novelist. He wrote this novel as he was a student at Makerere. His early novels *Weep,Not Child*, *The River Between* and *A Grain of Wheat* relect the history of colonialism and Imperialism.

Ngugi in his theoretical work entitled "Decolonising the Mind, The Politics of Language in African Literature" has rightly said that Imperialism has made the natives to see their past as one wasteland :

The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and Ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. (3)

Ngugi has interpreted African History in Marxist and Non- Marxist terms. He has given the historical details not as a historian but as a novelist in his novels. Nationalism is an important aspect in the modern history of Africa. Nationalism had influenced Africa's intellectual history. His ideas reflect the notion of African socialism. At the time of Independence, African writers rarely emphasized Africanness and African dignity in their works.

In all of his novels, Ngugi discusses historical details. In *Petals of Blood* Ngugi has focused much on historical details.This novel can be called as historical novel. Ngugi has laid stress on Marx and Non-marxist terms. Even Ngugi has admitted in an interview with a Nairobi weekly that the novel deals with the history of Kenya.

I hope Illmorog is applicable to Kenya, as it is applicable to East Africa. Africa and the Third world. This is because some of the problems raised in the novel affect not only Kenya but the whole world. For instance, the issues of national identity and foreign domination. I am thinking for instance, of the exploitation of workers and peasants by a combination of foreign capital and its local allies, and this is something I think is true of most countries in the world which are dominated by imperialism.(Weekly Review)

*Petals of Blood* is really a history lesson. The novelist demands an answer to the question How can a whole country be taken in by the white settlers . These white settlers are around with the white settlers trinity:" the Bible ,the Coin,the Gun:Holy Trinity"(*Petals of Blood*,106).After the advent of Globalization, Africans have been exploited, oppressed by rich corporations. It was expected that Globalization would eradicate poverty in Africa but Globalization has widened the gap between the rich and the poor people in Africa.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi uses a third person narrative. He speaks with awareness of Kenya's colonial history. The novel opens with protagonist, Mugo.He was an orphan and an isolated man. Thabai people see him as a hero .Ngugi has accurately depicted historical details in this novel, *A Grain of Wheat*. Mugo was arrested during the emergency for intervening to prevent a policeman from beating up a woman, who refused to his advancement of sensual desire. In detention camp, he had been harassed by District officer John Thompson for reusing to confess his 'Oath'. After his release from the Detention Camp, he had returned to his village, he took care of his piece of agricultural land.

Carol M.Sicherman in his article entitled, "Ngugi and the Writing of Kenyan History" highlighted that we must know the political and historical context in order to understand Ngugi's idea of Kenyan Resistance:

we need to know its political, cultural, and historiographical context. We need, further, to recognize that Ngugi blurs the lines between history and literature and that, perhaps a consequence of this blurring of the two genres, the distinction between Ngugi and his narrators and certain characters also becomes blurred..... *Petals of Blood* in which Ngugi's ideas are voiced by Karega and lawyer (348)

Ngugi has felt that there is a close relationship between literature and history .Ngugi first three novels, *The River Between*, *Weep not Child*, *A Grain of Wheat* form a trilogy in chronological progression focus on female circumcision controversy that took place in 1929, development of Gikuyu School, through the emergency (1952 – 50) announced to suppress Mau Mau terrorist group to the moment of Independence. The next novel *Petals of Blood* is full of allusions to historical personages and events. For instance, Siriana is an

allusion to Alliance High School. Ngugi has mixed fictional names with those historical characters. Then and there, Jomo Kenyatta and Waiyaki historical figures are mentioned in this novel. *Petals of Blood* is full of allusions to world history. To Ngugi, the purpose of highlighting historical and fictional characters is to make Kenyan readers reflect on their own place in the annals of history. Ngugi has leveled his charges against the historians in an interview: "Kenyan intellectuals must be able to tell these stories, or histories, or history of heroic resistance to foreign domination by Kenyan people looking at ourselves as a people whose history shines with the grandeur, if you like, of heroic resistance and achievement of the Kenyan people. I feel that Kenyan history, either pre-colonial or colonial has not been written" (Interview, 11). Ngugi wants to concentrate on the history of common people, the wretched of the like peasants and laborers, who had been completely ignored by colonial and post colonial African historians. Carol M. Sicherman in his article entitled, "Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and the writing of Kenyan History" has rightly said that historians have neglected the history of mass movements and the history of heroes:

The second element neglected by colonial historians is resistance to foreign incursions divides into two parts: the history of mass movements and the history of heroes. A focus on certain heroes and on the creation of nation-states can help support the newly independent African states, led by heroes like Kenyatta, so that the postcolonial becomes, in Ngugi's terms the neo colonial. (352)

Ngugi feels that Kenya needs a new historiography. It is evident when Karega speaks for the sake of his creator when he tells Munira:

Our children must look at the things that deformed us yesterday, that are deforming us Today. They must also look at the things which formed us yesterday, that will creatively form us into a new breed of men and women who will.... Struggle against those things that dwarf us." (*Petals of Blood*, 247)

Ngugi understood clearly about the history of his native people's resistance to colonial domination, while he was a undergraduate student. He started to broaden his knowledge about the Mau Mau rising, Waiyaki's resistance and his death in 1890's, Harry Thuku's campaign against colonial restrictions in 1921 – 22, the female circumcision controversy. In the *River Between, Weep Not Child*, Ngugi combines legend and African history. In these novels, he emphasizes the prophecy of the foreteller Mugo Wa Kibiro, with its dual message of the coming of the whiteman and folly of resistance to white power: The seer warned the people of Kamino and Makuyu about the arrival of European colonizers through his prophecy "There shall come a people with white clothes like butterflies" (*River Between*, 2)

Apollo o. Amoke in his article, entitled, "The resemblance of colonial Mimicry: A Revisionary Reading of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o *The River Between*" has rightly said that the entire history of the tribe is told through the prophecy of seers:

The text suggests that the entire history and destiny of the tribe- from the tribe's originary wholeness in immemorial time, to its complacent immediate past, to its calamitous colonial present, to its future organic restoration – is contained in the body of prophetic at historical knowledge handed down through generations of seer families. (37)

Ngugi feels that past history of Africa is more valuable where as professor Bethwell, a famous Kenyan historian passed a ironical remark on "those who was searching for the valuable past, people who are seeking freedom to tackle present day problems.... Without constantly looking over their shoulder for precedents from the dead and irrelevant past" (31). But, according to Ngugi, past is relevant to the searcher who wants to know the roots of present in the past.

In *Petals of Blood*, Karega, a young man is working as a teaching assistant at Munira's school in Illmorog. He is a well wisher of the downtrodden village people. He has given a brief history of Africa in the following manner

In the beginning he (Mr. Blackman) had the land and the mind, and the soul together on the second day, they took the body away to barter it for silver coins. On the third day, seeing that he was still fighting back, they brought priests and educators to bind his mind and soul so that these foreigners could more easily take his land and its produce." (*Petals of Blood*, 236)

At the colonial Alliance High school in 1940's, the students were taught the positive side of the colonial rule, Karari Njama describes how African history was taught to the students in that school in a detailed manner. And Students were not taught about negative aspect of colonial regime: .

In History we had been taught all the good the Whiteman had brought us the stooping of tribal wars, security.... good clothings, educations and religion, easy ways of communication and travel....and finally, better jobs that would make it easy to raise the standard of living above the uneducated Africans... In teaching Kenyan history, the question of land was cunningly omitted (Barnett and Njama,96)

In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi has shown the background for the school strike in the post- colonial Africa. There is a huge demand that African literature and African history should be taught.

According to Ngugi, local and tribal history should be incorporated to unite the country. A writer or an artist must be familiar with the terms such as resistance, and nationalism. In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi highlights the importance of African past. It is evident through the conversation between Gikonyo and Mugo: One wants to forget the past and another wants to remember the past.

"Mugo vividly remembered Rira and Thompson, who bent him, of Muhia, he could only recall the barbed wire and the flat dry country. But than most camps were in such areas,

'Why do you tell me all this? I don't like to remember'

'Do you ever forgot'

'I try to to the government says we should bury the past'

'I can't forget.... I will never forget, Gikonyo cried' (66)

### Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to highlight the contribution of Ngugi Wa Thiongo for the better understanding of Kenya's historical process through his novels. Ngugi informs the Kenyan readers about historical figures in his novels. Historical figures who are referred to a number of times in his novels are Harry Thuku, Dedan Kimathi and Jomo Kenyatta. William Shakespeare, an Elizabethan dramatist has imparted historical knowledge through dramas, since drama is the right medium to arouse the curiosity of the people towards national history. Ngugi has followed the approach of Shakespeare in informing the history of Africa in his works especially in novels. Ngugi interprets African history in a detailed manner. Ngugi proves that literature and history are interrelated. Undoubtedly Ngugi's novels reflect African history. Ngugi has depicted historical details in a detailed manner. Carol.M.Sicherman has rightly said that Ngugi's intention in depicting African history in his novels is, "to make his compatriots see the history of Kenya for the last hundred years as the story of resistance to colonialism and to neocolonialism..."(347)

To put in nutshell, Ngugi Wa Thiongo contributes much to the understanding of Kenya's pre-colonial, colonial and Post-colonial history of Africa through his novels.

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