

# Chapter 12

## Global Connections on a Local Scale: A Writer's Vision



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### Introduction

While literature has always addressed events in the public sphere and provided its reflection in an imaginative way, the ongoing debate about the role of writers as well as their involvement in political discourse will probably not die down any time soon. In the wake of recent political happenings all around the world, be it the Arab Spring, the outbreak of civil war in Middle East, or the uncertainties tied to the outcome of Brexit, writers are, more than ever before, engaged in an intense dialogue about the very nature of literary production and its response to these events. The idea of a novel saturated with ideology and political beliefs is in stark contrast with what seems to be a generally accepted notion that the aesthetic properties of literary works should remain untainted by any ideological contamination. Yet to assume, in accordance with the views of the Turkish writer Shafak (2016), that fiction is immune and remains untouched by the turbulent events of our time, would be naïve and not reflective of the true nature of literary production. In fact, literary portrayal of larger political and social events, distilled into local, more personal perspectives, may enhance our understanding of the global context.

On the other hand, the idea of treating fiction only as social and historical testimony, or documentation, would be regarded with abhorrence by many literary scholars. Such a reductionist approach, disregarding the aesthetic merit of a work as well as its inherent rootedness in creativity and imagination, would not be helpful in grasping the complex relationship between imaginative art—verbal art, specifically—and the socio-political realm. However, one has to acknowledge the growing contention in academic debate about contemporary literature, be it African, Arabic, or black writing, asserting that it is too political and/or oftentimes reduced to social

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commentary. It is, therefore, of vital importance to examine what happens to a novel when it is engaged in a social, political, and historical arena and how it deals with the pressures coming from this environment while retaining its aesthetic merit.

Besides the discussion on the relation of aesthetic and political properties of literary writing, there are several directions in which the debate concerning the connection between literature and politics may be steered towards. Firstly, it can be argued that literature can be regarded “as a product of the social and political forces that are at work when it is produced” (Rush, 2009, p. 496). This notion correlates with Edward Said’s understanding of the interdependence of literary and historical/political realities, voiced in his seminal work *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), according to which the writer and the text, the social and the individual, exist in a reciprocal relationship. Said comments on the essential connection between fiction and the historical context from which literature stems and clearly notes that “understanding that connection does not reduce or diminish the novels’ values as works of art: on the contrary, because of their worldliness, because of their complex affiliations with their real setting, they are more interesting and more valuable as works of art” (Said, 1994, p. 13). In that respect, Said introduces the concept of what he calls a contrapuntal reading, placing novels in a politically and historically saturated context from which they emerge. He thus encourages critics/readers to look, not only at what is included in the narratives but to pay attention to exclusions as well: “In reading a text, one must open it out both to what went into it and to what its author excluded. Each cultural work is a vision of a moment, and we must juxtapose that vision with the various revision it later provoked” (p. 67).

Secondly, literature may also be seen as a form of political critique or even an inducement of political change. This notion is of particular significance in the context of postcolonial literature since the emergence of postcolonial studies, spurred by the massive wave of decolonization, has, once again, directed discussion to the interconnectedness of literature with the realities of historical, socio-economic and political issues. The obvious connection and interdependence of these phenomena became central to discussing the production of postcolonial literature, which clearly fuses the global perspective with local practices. Given the strong focus on extra-literary phenomena and the political dimension of postcolonial literature, postcolonial literary criticism has been largely preoccupied with the critique of discourses of power rather than with aesthetic inquiries (though this is not, by any means, an absolute statement). In his book *Postcolonial Studies and the Literary: Theory, Interpretation and the Novel*, Sorensen argues that, until recently, “thinking about aesthetics, literariness and literary form within the field of postcolonial studies would have seemed hopelessly reactionary and contradictory” (2010, p. x). Sorensen’s argument is rooted in his observations that much of “postcolonial literature is typically read in a dogmatic and prescriptive way” (Sorensen, 2010, p. xi) which has, in the end, resulted in the loss of literariness in critical discourse. Moreover, Tiffin (1984) adds:

[w]e no longer subscribe to the belief that a literary text can be isolated from the context out of which it was produced, or from the historical conditions of its production. Criticism too

is very much influenced by the social and political context out of which it arises, and its expectations determine both the meaning and the value the critic finds in the literary text. As Roland Barthes reminds us, not only the text but the criticism of it is ideologically various and variable. The context within which a particular literary work is considered thus becomes crucial in that its choice will tend to govern the way in which the work is interpreted and the terms by which it is valued. (p. 26)

These perspectives are valid for any analysis of postcolonial novels which tend to address larger themes and explore the harsh realities of the postcolonial world. Therefore, it seems vital to link the conditions in which a text has been created and to which it might respond with a critical reading of their artistic rendering and the significance the writer attributes to them.

The effect of globalization, often viewed as a residue of the imperial period, on the African continent, has been scrutinized by many postcolonial writers. In fact, the immediate connection between imperialism and globalization inevitably presupposes a detailed examination of the power relations that governed the twentieth century. When the colonies became sources of raw materials and markets for finished goods, their natural as well as human resources were turned into commodities whose cheap price became, in the words of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "the heavy artillery forcing capitulation to the capitalist order" (2004, p. 22). Moreover, the circulation and execution of both the centripetal and hierarchical power within the empire, as well as the transcultural encounters and connections that took place within its framework, further complicate our understanding of the full scale of the process. In order to grasp the complexity of the global interactions and interconnections, one would need to scrutinize the economic, political, and cultural policies of western imperialism and look at its aftermath on a global scale. Such an endeavour, of course, lies outside the scope of a literary scholar.

Nevertheless, postcolonial theory studies the cultural, political, and economic consequences of western imperialism and can thus be "extremely useful in its analysis of the strategies by which the 'local' colonized engage large hegemonic forces" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2004, p. 217). According to the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, "[a] post-colonial analysis of globalization is extremely interested in the ways in which the global is transformed at the local level" (p. 218). Interestingly, literature from the former colonies often provides a clearer picture of various manifestations of such power dynamics in local practices. The cultural, political, or economic exchanges involved in the process are dismantled through local mini-narratives which challenge and reconceptualize the notion of the colonized subject and its position within a larger, even global, framework.

The Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is well-known as a politically and socially active author who regards literature primarily as a medium of social change. In his view, a writer is supposed to reflect the political and economic conditions of his community in his work and thus raise consciousness of the people. In that respect, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o strongly emphasizes the responsibility of the writer to react to historical, political, or economic reality that s/he is a part of. This seems of utter importance particularly in the context of African literature, where, in the words of Nadine Gordimer, politics occurs not "as a vulgar interruption of the

more exalted pursuits of life, but as fate” (1973, p. 33). In Gordimer’s view, African literature has always been a committed literature and from that perspective, “[t]he novel that takes as its theme the political struggle itself simply demonstrates the most obvious aspect of this commitment” (p. 13). She elaborates that “[w]riters are seized by the themes that arise from the living forces around them, and most African writers have been immersed in a life where politics has been embattled in the daily life of the streets and has boldly changed the circumstances of their individual lives” (p. 13).

As an advocate of socially committed writing that exercises the power of literature to contribute to social transformation, Ngũgĩ places the writer right at the centre of action. His views on writers’ responsibilities concerning their influential role in social processes stem from his beliefs that writers act as active agents of vision, moral guidance, and potential change. Although Ngũgĩ is aware that the power to transform reality lies with the people, he nonetheless stresses the significance of literature in the process. Fiction, in his view, provides writers with the space to question, challenge, and reimagine both former and current conditions of the nation and question its organization as well as the distribution of power. These ideas clearly align with a prevailing stream of thought among African intellectuals based on the assumption that a writer should not only fulfil his literary ambitions but should actively pursue his social duties as well. As Ngwane (2008) suggests, “The writer has always functioned in African society as the record of mores and experience of his society and as the voice of a vision in his time” (p. 2). He has often been put into the role of a social conscience (Soyinka), an agent of change (Ngwane) or a teacher (Achebe), a person whose ultimate mission is to “liberate both the minds of the oppressed and the oppressors in order to cultivate a harmonious society” (Ngwane, 2008, p. 2). To a certain extent, African writers seem to be expected to ponder on external realities, especially if they are dire and/or oppressive, and they are compelled to articulate their responses to such events.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s fiction provides useful material for examining the connections between local practices and larger global forces (primarily economic and political although he was concerned intensively with linguistic implications of cultural domination) that shape the character of postcolonial world in the post-independence period. Starting with *Petals of Blood*, his seminal work, the writer relocates his attention, from the colonial enterprise and the struggle for independence, to the portrayal of neo-colonial influence in formerly colonized countries, and the consequences, mainly economic and cultural, of imperial policy. His fiction clearly mirrors the tendencies and transformations in Kenyan society which are aptly portrayed and commented on since he acknowledges the fact that “with independence there was no real break with the economic and political structures of colonialism. So that what you get with independence is more or less the continuation of the same economic and political structures, but of course these have a cultural reflection which in practice means the total identification of the ruling regimes with the values and outlooks of the former colonial masters, and this is seen even in its exercise of power” (Sander & Lindfors, 2006, p. 229).

Ngũgĩ's ideological background is deeply rooted in the works of Franz Fanon and the political literature of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. In his view, globalization in its current form is characterized by "the ideological and practical imperative of capitalist fundamentalism", wherein capitalism is regarded as "a religious system, with the market as the god-like-mediator in the conflicting claims of its adherents" (Thiong'o, 2004, p. 23). In his understanding, "he who produces should be able to control that which he produces" (Sander & Lindfors, 2006, p. 105). Otherwise, "the so-called underdeveloped world feeds and clothes and shelters the imperialist world" while it "remains impoverished and an object of charity, like the hunting dog that ends up feeding on bones after the master has finished all the meat" (pp. 105–106). The worshipping of the market, that consequently affects other areas of social and political life, leads to further impoverishment of the peasantry which he considers to be the driving force of the Kenyan society.

Ngũgĩ's views on foreign domination and the cycle of economic and political oppression are clearly documented in his novels *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*. Set in the small fictional village of Ilmorog, *Petals of Blood* articulates a highly critical view of neo-colonial rule, manifested through a markedly negative portrayal of the new black ruling class. The novel is firmly "rooted in a definite economic and political setting, so that the cultural and psychological conflicts are seen as [...] reflections of the material reality under which the peasants and the workers in Kenya are living" (Sander & Lindfors, 2006, pp. 68–69). The novel provides "a panoramic view of the neo-colonial state in the process of consolidating its authority" while foregrounding "the contradictions of modernity in the post-colony, highlighting the presence of unequal economic arrangements, coercive politics and a fetishized national culture" (Gikandi, 2009, p. 129). The story clearly shows that collaboration with foreign investors contributes to the "eternal interminable cycle of destitution and deprivation" (Thiong'o, 2005, p. 377) and paralyzes the country on its way to prosperity. It is infused with Ngũgĩ's "undisguised narrative commentaries" (McLaren, 1995, p. 88), relying heavily on his socialist ideas, which serve a distinct authorial purpose. In fact, "*Petals of Blood* showed Ngũgĩ's willingness to risk a conception of novelistic form which had earned him his initial successes in order to assert political ideas which he considered crucial to the righting of Kenya's social dilemmas" (p. 88).

The novel's polyphonic structure oscillates between individual, yet mutually intertwined stories of four main protagonists: the schoolteacher Munira; the former guerrilla fighter Abdulla, now a shopkeeper; the barmaid/prostitute Wanja; and the young idealist Karega. Their lives intersect in the rural community of Ilmorog, shortly after the exhilaration of the newly acquired independence died down and was supplanted by disappointment and harsh daily realities. Isolated from the prosperous city of Nairobi, Ilmorog epitomizes the overlooked peasant who has to rely on his own resources and hard work. The village and its citizens pay for the ignorance and greed of the new political elite which favours its own interests and profits at any cost, casting the rural community into despair, manifested in its fight with the, both literal and symbolical, drought. The writer thus elucidates how global

interests and corrupt practices at the local level inevitably affect the most vulnerable part of the population.

The despairing situation is aptly exemplified by a contrastive description of Ilmorog's past and present. The past holds images of "women scratching the earth because they seemed at one with the green land" (Thiong'o, 2005, p. 29) and of solidarity in the community: "Ilmorog [...] had not always been a small cluster of mud huts lived in only by old men and women and children with occasional visits from wandering herdsmen. It had had its days of glory: thriving villages with a huge population of sturdy peasants..." (p. 145). While in the past "there were no vultures in the sky waiting for the carcasses of dead workers, and no insect-flies feeding on the fat and blood of unsuspecting toilers" (p. 145), "it is the region's economic underdevelopment that comes to shape its character [at present]; in its impoverished landscape and traditions, the outpost becomes an emblem of the failure of national consciousness" (Gikandi, 2009, p. 136). The peasants, who always stand at the centre of *Ngũgĩ's* vision, have been dislodged from their position and find themselves, once again, on the periphery of the elite's interest.

The bleak portrayal of Ilmorog is in stark contrast with the bustling and prosperous city of Nairobi which has become the centre of new industries, international business, and politics and, according to *Ngũgĩ's* socialist ideology, embodies the corrupting impact of capitalist and neo-colonial influence. This duality is also transferred, symbolically, to the geographical division of the country by the Trans-Africa Highway which draws a clear line between those who have power and those who are powerless: "[A]bstracted from the vision of oneness, of a collective struggle of the African people, the road brought only the unity of earth's surface: every corner of the continent was now within easy reach of international capitalist robbery and exploitation. That was practical unity" (Thiong'o, 2005, pp. 311–312). *Ngũgĩ's* ironic stance is apparent in his description of an Ilmorog which completes its transformation "from a deserted village into a sprawling town of stone, iron, concrete, and glass and one or two neon-lights" (p. 313). The idea of prosperity and wealth, associated with the arrival of commerce and investments, is mocked through its association with the local alcoholic drink, *theng'eta*, which draws the investors to Ilmorog in the first place. Once a precious item used in traditional ceremonies, *theng'eta* is turned into a lucrative commodity which loses its original value and is recognized only as a profitable product. Modernization is, thus, literally linked with stupor, lethargy, and apathy of the whole community, and it is seen as only aggravating, if not magnifying, former social differences.

*Ngũgĩ's* disenchantment with new social tendencies and unflattering post-independence development is reflected predominantly in his negative characterization of the representatives of the new ruling class: Nderi wa Riera (a member of parliament), Kimeria (a businessman), and Chui (a headmaster of Siriana). Embodying authorities in diverse yet crucial spheres of social life (politics, economy, education), these characters function as hallmarks of *Ngũgĩ's* critique of capitalism, inequality and betrayal. They are portrayed as "unproductive, essentially parasitic, dependent on foreign input" (Williams, 1999, p. 86) and bear all the qualities the writer associates with a capitalistic mind-set. Their dubious and

somewhat schematic portrayal clearly aligns with Ngũgĩ's socialist opinions and his belief that "[t]he socialist system is the only system which stresses interdependence and the only system which encourages cooperation" (Sander & Lindfors, 2006, p. 55). Ngũgĩ's views on the emerging ruling class are crystal clear:

Imperialism: capitalism: landlords: earthworms. A system that bred hordes of round-bellied jiggers and bedbugs with parasitism and cannibalism as the highest goal in society [...] These parasites would always demand the sacrifice of blood from the working masses. These few who had prostituted the whole land turning it over to foreigners for thorough exploitation, would drink people's blood and say hypocritical prayers of devotion to skin oneness and to nationalism even as skeletons of bones walked to lonely graves. The system and its gods and its angels had to be fought consciously, consistently and resolutely by all the working people! (Thiong'o, 2005, p. 409)

Class divisions, portrayed as a dire consequence of capitalism, contribute to social fragmentation which hinders communal attempts at social regeneration. Cooperation and collective effort become some of the crucial themes of the novel; its potential to unify the community is best exemplified by the collective initiative of Ilmorog inhabitants to undertake an arduous journey to Nairobi to visit their local MP and ask for help for the drought-stricken village. While the visit itself puts Ilmorog on the radar of international as well as domestic investors, and eventually brings the long-awaited help, the abovementioned satirical rendering of its transformation is saturated with Ngũgĩ's discontent with the continuing exploitation and oppression of the working classes. Even in his previous novels which extensively elaborated on the myth of the Saviour, the writer never glorified the role of individuals in the process of social rehabilitation. Yet, *Petals of Blood* also views individual zeal and activism as a potential constituent of collective awakening as manifested by Karega's intention to visit the local MP, and the powerful speech of Nyakinyua, Wanja's grandmother, which forges a community spirit and inspires people to oppose the culture of victimization and to take matters into their own hands.

The motive of duality, part of Ngũgĩ's aesthetic practice, is also deployed in his discussion of the role of individual effort and responsibility which is exemplified by the opposite approaches of Munira and Karega. Through these two characters, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o examines the idea of social involvement/commitment as opposed to impassiveness and apathy, and points to the interconnection of individual choices to the prosperity of the whole society. Munira's intentional passivity and detachment from social events posit him in the role of an outsider who is reduced to a mere spectator of social happenings. His reluctance to participate in public life is rooted in his resentment towards his father, a successful landowner, who was regarded as a collaborator with the British colonizers. Throughout his life, Munira always stood on the side, isolated both from his family (father and wife) and society, questioning the rationale for involvement: "He had chosen not to choose, a freedom he daily celebrated" (Thiong'o, 2005, p. 85). At the same time, however, he experiences "the guilt of omission" (p. 73) of not contributing his part to the prosperity of his country. Through the character of Munira, who "prefers the culture

of silence to active political engagement”, Ngũgĩ expresses his “sense of disillusionment with the intellectual elite in Kenya” (Ogude, 1999, p. 82).

Similar to Wanja, who is trying to come into terms with her shameful past, Munira sees Ilmorog as an opportunity for a fresh start: “...everything about his past since Siriana was so vague, unreal, a mist.... It was as if there was a big break in the continuity of his life and of his memories” (Thiong’o, 2005, p. 19). His decision to go to Ilmorog, despite its challenges, is seen as “his first conscious act of breaking with this sense of non-being” (p. 19). Despite his wish to detach himself from his father and his own failures, Munira remains isolated within the realm of his classroom. Teaching provides him with a sort of personal contentment; this, however, proves inadequate when faced with acute communal crisis, requiring resolute action and leadership. In the end, Munira’s decision to abandon his comfortable neutrality and passivity results in a misguided arson attack that kills three people.

On the other hand, Karega’s fiery personality and his quest for “a world in which the wealth of our land shall belong to us all” (Thiong’o, 2005, p. 389) manage to ignite the communal spirit and provoke the previously lethargic villagers to action. Karega associates the country’s downfall with its betrayal of revolutionary ideals, as represented by people such as Abdulla, which secured its independence in the first place. As a former student of the now passive Munira, Karega, paradoxically, takes over the initiative to organize the villagers in order to achieve a common goal. His views on the inevitability of solidarity and the need to continue the tradition of resistance provide an optimistic conclusion to a rather bleak novel, and Karega’s attempts to pass these ideas onto his students outline a possible way out of the vicious circle of deprivation and oppression. It is the cumulative power of individual struggles that might, according to him, change the oppressive conditions of Kenyan people:

That Kenya people have had a history of fighting and resistance is [...] a fact. Our children must look at 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 not be afraid to link hands with children from other lands on the basis of an unashamed immersion in the struggle against those things that dwarf us. (Thiong’o, 2005, p. 294)

By contrasting the different approaches of his characters to communal life and responsibility, Ngũgĩ clearly sanctions a proactive approach, a view that “Africa has to stop acting the grateful beggar to the West and demand its fair share” (2004, p. 26). It requires a thorough self-examination and a revival of collective memory of resistance to oppose, not the colonial oppressors this time, but “one of colonialism’s principal legacies in the shape of capitalist modernity” (Williams, 1999, p. 81). Its rather devastating effects, manifested in the form of urbanization, exploitation, and commodification of goods, processes and people (Williams, 1999), are conveyed through the convenient relocation of the focus from the global context to the fictional village of Ilmorog, which functions (once its transformation is complete) as a miniature replica of Nairobi, and thus of Kenya as such. Such a glocal



perspective to the issues discussed is consistent with Ngũgĩ's idea of relocating power from the hands of transnational corporations to the hands of Kenyan peasants which would hopefully bring about an African renaissance.

Ngũgĩ's next novel, *Devil on the Cross* (1982), dedicated to "all Kenyans struggling against the neo-colonial stage of imperialism" (p. 5), takes the discussion on the predicament of Kenyan peasants and their oppression even further. Structured as harsh, unrelenting satire (bordering on the absurd) of the contemporary situation in Kenya, the novel dramatizes the unflattering development in the country, as outlined in *Petals of Blood*, and unapologetically unmasks everyone who participates in the economic deprivation of its population. The urge to convey the message in as blatant a way as possible impacts the form of the novel to such an extent that it departs from novelistic conventions and marks an obvious, though for some, a disconcerting, shift in Ngũgĩ's writing. The "lack of concern for decorum and novelistic niceties" (Williams, 1999, p. 107) dismantles both the structure and the aesthetics of the narrative so that it sometimes reads not as a novel but as a political pamphlet or a treatise. Not abiding to the formalities of the Western form, however, can be also viewed as a symbolic overhaul of power, an emphatic gesture of resistance and abrogation. In fact, *Devil on the Cross* was famously written on a toilet paper roll during Ngũgĩ's detention.

The narrative, set once again in the now-developed Ilmorog, is a continuation of Ngũgĩ's political and social concerns, as thematized in his previous work. It focuses on a group of six diverse characters who are travelling to Ilmorog in a *matatu* taxi to attend a competition in international theft and robbery, the primary stage for Ngũgĩ's remorseless satire and criticism. While the characters represent various layers of Kenyan society, they are endowed with symbolic significance and, in fact, function more as types rather than complex individualities. Unlike in *Petals of Blood*, which features four fully developed, psychologically complex individuals (though they do carry symbolical meaning as well), *Devil on the Cross* relies more on the rhetoric of the characters than on their distinct personalities. Their actions are clearly aligned with the requirements of the narrative which draws its potential force from a compilation of evidence convicting authorities from various spheres of social life of their crimes.

Wariinga, the main female protagonist, seems to be the only exception that escapes a complete typological definition since she is given more space to develop than the other characters. It is through her character that the writer demonstrates the devastating effect of oppression as viewed from a personal standpoint, shifting the focus from the functioning of large corporations and international businesses to the daily life of people who are affected by their mechanisms. At the beginning of the novel, Wariinga finds herself in an unpleasant situation: she has just lost her job because she refused to sleep with her boss; her boyfriend left her because he believed she had an affair with the said boss; and she is also evicted from her apartment because she refused to pay the unreasonable rent. Her frustration and disillusionment leaves Wariinga broken and she battles suicidal thoughts. Wariinga's transformation is ignited precisely by the mysterious competition in international theft and robbery. Hearing the outrageous presentations of the

speakers bragging about their abuse of the community, Wariinga discovers her fiery and passionate personality as well as her nationalist spirit.

Wariinga's individual transformation as a woman (from a victim to an agent of social change) is, therefore, complemented with her growth as a responsible citizen who is deeply rooted in her community. These two processes seem to develop simultaneously and suggest the possibility of a mutual permeation. Her self-realization as a competent citizen, ready to contribute to social change, presupposes a clear sense of her personal identity. Her "desire to realise her social ambition, constantly stifled by forces of capital and male oppression" (Ogude, 1999, p. 81) is satisfied in the final scene of the novel. The story of her empowerment thus locates the potential of social transformation in the people and provides a powerful message to the exploited masses. It is not outlined in an idealized way however; hence Wariinga's last thought that "the hardest struggles of her life's journey lay ahead" (Thiong'o, 1987, p. 254). On the other hand, Wariinga's experience is often interpreted in conjunction with the development of the state itself, again a typical feature of Ngũgĩ's fiction. Wariinga's path to independence and her female identity can be easily paralleled with the awakening of the national spirit in her country.

Wariinga's fully fledged transformation is sharply contrasted with the flat characterization of the distinguished speakers participating in the competition. Here, Ngũgĩ relies heavily on physical descriptions which convey the almost hyperbolic and grotesque personal traits of the characters. The participants of the competition, the primary objects of his ridicule, have protruding bellies and heads shrunk to the size of fists (Thiong'o, 1987, p. 99), they resemble "6-foot praying mantis[es] or mosquito[es]" (p. 108). Their physical shortcomings and deformities clearly embody their greed and the fruits of their exploitative activities which they boast about in front of the audience and distinguished foreign guests. In the words of James Ogude, "[e]ach and every speaker that takes the stage demonstrates, in blunt testimonies, that the postcolony has been turned into a stage for bizarre self-gratification; an absurd display of buffoons, fools and clowns in the feast of 'modern robbery and theft'" (1999, p. 57).

The presentations of the competitors' achievements and their creative ideas concerning the robbery of Kenyan people (some of them even suggest selling air to Kenyan workers) document the predatory nature of the oppressors and their reckless abuse, both of the peasantry and the country's resources. Their subservience to foreign capital is documented by their sycophantic attitude towards investors and businessmen who attend the competition as respected guests. Indeed, the competition represents the culmination of Ngũgĩ's critique as it highlights all modes of exploitation that perpetuate the legacy of imperialism. The testimonies of individual competitors as well as the responses from the audience unmask the gravity and absurdity of neo-colonial exploitation. Clearly, only the fittest—those who are able to adjust to the rules of the environment which idolizes money, avarice, and cunning—survive. According to the master of ceremonies, "[...] theft and robbery are the cornerstones of America and Western civilization. Money is the heart that beats to keep the Western world on the move. If you people want to build a great

civilization like ours, then kneel down before the god of money [...] Look only on the splendid face of money, and you'll never, never go wrong. It's far better to drink the blood of your people and to eat their flesh than to retreat a step" (Thiong'o, 1987, p. 89).

The collaborative nature of the relationship between Kenyan, in Ngũgĩ's words, robbers, and representatives of foreign institutions is problematized further in the portrayal of their unequal positions. According to Patrick Williams, the power of the black capitalist class in Kenya is derivative since it is given or withheld by the international capitalists (1999, p. 106). In fact, he says, "they have no power whatsoever beyond their national borders, even though they do possess enormous repressive as well as exploitative powers within those borders" (p. 106.). This fact is displayed by the writer in such an explicit manner that there is no room for doubt about their actual impotence. In other words, this class "cannot survive without the patronage of their foreign masters. Part of their fundamental weakness is that they are disposed to parasitism, selfishness, greed, and naked exploitation of workers and peasants through cunning rather than creative entrepreneurship and hard work" (Ogude, 1999, p. 64). The novel thus exposes their blatant complicity in the perpetuation of the cycle of deprivation:

[...] from now on I shall no longer call you slaves or servants in public. Now you are truly my friends. Why? Because even after I had given you back the keys to your country, you continued to fulfil my commandments and to protect my property, making my capital yield a higher rate of profit than was the case when I myself used to carry the keys. Therefore I shall not call you servants again. For a servant does not know the aims and thoughts of his master. But I call you my friends because you know [...] all my plans for this country [...]. (Thiong'o, 1987, p. 86)

However, just like in *Petals of Blood* and Ngũgĩ's previous novels, there is a hint of a developing resistance, a wave of disagreement with and protest against the current distribution of power. It manifests its force towards the end of the novel when university students storm the premises of the competition to support the workers in their struggle against the thieves and robbers. Their intervention provides a crucial shift in rhetoric and interrupts the seemingly one-sided conversation focused on constant bragging and uncritical self-promotion of the new elite. It gives rise to a different voice, one that could represent a forceful opposition to the exploitative minority and put an end to their disreputable activities. The power of solidarity and a united community has become a typical trope of Ngũgĩ's fiction, one that draws on the tradition of resistance in Kenyan history and skilfully interweaves past achievements of resistance fighters with the present needs of the society. The leader of Ilmorog's students articulates the need of joint action in the fight against oppression and outlines the function of a committed intelligentsia:

Let us join hands with the working people in their just war against the drinking of human blood, the eating of human flesh, and the many other crimes perpetrated by imperialism in its neo-colonial stage. Let us join hands with the workers as they struggle to build a house that will benefit all the builders. (Thiong'o, 1987, p. 209)

The novel also hints at the idea of violent resistance which has been discussed in Ngũgĩ's previous novels as well. Wariinga's metamorphosis, from a victim of abuse and exploitation into a successful, self-confident, woman who knows her worth, completes the cycle of her regeneration. Roused "from her mental slavery" (Thiong'o, 1987, p. 254), Wariinga takes charge of her life and is, both metaphorically and literally, in complete control of the situation. The game of the hunter and the hunted, which her boss—The Rich Old Man—used to force her to play with him, is concluded with a symbolic role reversal. It is Wariinga who holds the gun in her hand now and has her former abuser kneeling in front of her, clinging to her, pleading for his life. His murder is an emphatic gesture, one that responds to power and authority with a similarly potent and unmistakable force. The act of killing the man who represents the very vices of the modern society is one that "shall save many other people, whose lives will not be ruined by words of honey and perfume" (p. 253). Although the writer never seems to venerate a specific Saviour figure that would (re)establish the system of a balanced division of power, it is, nonetheless, obvious that the process has to start with individual effort. Wariinga's climactic act at the end of the novel thus might propel a communal activity that would wake the people from their slumber.

To conclude, while Ngũgĩ's portrayal of the dominance of foreign capital and neo-colonial elite over Kenyan peasantry is rooted in scepticism and pessimism, his fiction also seeks to engage the target audience in a dialogue about commitment and transformation. It is obvious that although "the levers of power in Kenya are clearly held by the black neo-colonial elite, they are in effect no more than intermediaries: at best self-serving middlemen, at worst puppets whose strings are pulled by the immeasurably more powerful and faceless system of capitalism, operating in its global mode as imperialism" (Williams, 1999, p. 96). The sharp critique of the political and economic stupor in postcolonial Kenya is rendered through stories of local people who struggle with the consequences of the often global actions on a daily basis. It is through the stories of local provenance that the writer dismantles the narratives of neo-colonial exploitation as a residue of imperialism. Both novels document that the power to overturn oppressive tendencies is located in the people themselves. Yet in the wake of Ngũgĩ's socialist vision, change requires a committed society that would operate in a 'solidarity' mode.

Ngũgĩ's writing clearly demonstrates the rootedness of postcolonial literature in global context as it articulates the global rendering of both political and economic events that trouble the postcolonial world. His acute portrayal of global, neo-colonial, domination of former colonies, manifested primarily in the form of economic exploitation of both domestic and international investors, is translated into stern observations about local practices and local communities. Such a perspective enables him to capture processes of global scale, yet it also allows him to cast a critical eye over their local particularities that might otherwise go unnoticed in a more general discussion (or vice versa). The fusion of global and local thus proves extremely beneficial especially in committed writing that strives for social change and transformation since it facilitates our understanding of both local and global context. In case of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, it helps him to engage the readership

with social issues, and to disseminate his vision of potential paths leading to social regeneration, while contemplating the consequences of local economic and political tendencies in relation to the postcolonial world.

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