

Post-Independent Kenya in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*: A Neo-Colonial Study

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Abstract

For most of the colonized nations, the achievement of independence turned an illusion with the perpetuation of disguised imperialism which most of the postcolonial critics have termed as “neocolonialism”. Neocolonialism can be defined as the deliberate and continued survival of the colonial system in independent states by turning them into victims of political, psychological, economic and social domination carried out through subtle means that exclude direct violence. An inspiring advocate for freedom, justice, and human rights for the downtrodden peoples of the world, Kenya's most celebrated postcolonial writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o has depicted neocolonialism in many of his fiction and non-fiction works among which the novels *A grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood* are most influential. This study aims to show the emergence of local elites in the wake of independence in Kenya where white colonizers are replaced with them in order to initiate a new phase of exploitation. By depicting the major characters and their association with the former colonial forces and delineating various aspects of post-independent Kenya, this study will focus on the existence of neo-colonialism and its fatal impacts on the masses as represented in the respective novels. On the basis of the philosophy of neocolonialism by scholars like Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah and Ngugi himself, this study will also showcase how Ngugi sketches the continuation of classism and the prevalence of bourgeoisies in his novel *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*.

Keywords: neocolonialism, exploitation, classism, bourgeoisies, inferiority complex

1. Introduction

After the official end of colonialism, a group of indigenous elites continue to follow the

footsteps of the former colonizers by oppressing and subjugating the masses. This new format of the perpetuation of imperial domination is termed as ‘neo-colonialism’ by some prominent late twentieth century scholars and critiques. This term has become a fundamental leitmotif in African political ideology. Jean Paul Sartre in his book *Colonialism and Neocolonialism* (1964) used the term ‘neo-colonialism’ for the first time. In this book Sartre contended for the prompt severance of France’s political, economic and cultural influence from its ex-colonies (Sartre, 1964). The concept of ‘neo-colonialism’ became the center of public attention when Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Ghana, used it in 1965. Since then, a body of literature has been developed and studied by scholars in sub-Saharan Africa where ‘neo-colonialism’ become a theme of African philosophy. Generally, ‘neo-colonialism’ can be defined as the delicate proliferation of socio-economic and political activity by former colonial rulers aimed at reinforcing capitalism, neo-liberal globalization, and cultural subjugation of their former colonies.

From the late nineteenth century to the last half of the twentieth century, European countries like Britain, Portugal, and France had colonized a number of African nations for economic, political and cultural exploitation. After World War II, these European nations exited from their colonies in Africa granting independence to them. Even after that, they (the colonizers) continue to retain their economic influence and power over the former colonies. This practice of indirect subjugation occurs because the natives continue to imitate the colonizers even after the ending of formal colonialism. In that case, the inferiority complex of the former colonized people let them to follow the path of the colonizers. For years, they were internalized by the idea that they are inferior to the powerful colonizers, and this idea prevails sustainably in their mind. As a result, they keep emulating the culture of the former colonizing power. The reason for the sustainability of colonialism is best explained by the French philosopher Frantz Fanon. According to him, every colonized native suffers from inferiority complex due to the loss, and devaluation of his own culture. In this circumstances, s/he (the colonized) immediately adopts the ‘civilized culture’ of the colonizers as a means of self-improvement just after confronting their cultural standards (Fanon, 1994).

From the 1950s when many African colonies began to gain independence, they soon realized that the actual independence that they dreamt for was not achieved. The economic and political atmosphere of the so called independent African nations were still under supervision of the former colonial rulers. Nkrumah clarified the condition of the neocolonial states by saying that, “The nature of neo-colonialism is that it apparently grant independence to the State which is subject to it, and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and political mechanism is directed from outside (Nkrumah, 1965). Several African writers have talked about the existence of neocolonialism in Africa. Postcolonial writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Nadine Gordimer, Ama Ata Aidoo, and so may have always tried to recuperate the true history of Africa hidden under the wrecks of colonialism through their writings. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, the Kenyan writer and perennial Nobel shortlister is much concerned about Kenya’s cultural, social, and economic domination and thus wrote against cultural imperialism and neo-colonialism. For Thiongo, novel is a powerful weapon to form nationalist consciousness. In an interview, he said that he believed

in the socialist vision and a writer must write not only for the entertainment of people, but also for the betterment of society (Nagenda and Serumaga, 2006). Being a socialist writer, Ngugi's works pay much heed to the plight of the masses and their sufferings in the postcolonial nation. Neil Lazarus comments on the writings of Ngugi by saying that, Ngugi shows the highest concern for the plight of the common people by representing the activity of urban elites as well as by the response of the local, rural inhabitants to colonialism in Kenya (Lazarus, 1995). Ngugi's critique of colonialism was significantly informed by Marxist and Fanonian influences. He is a great disciple of Fanon whose ideology of neocolonialism make up his (Ngugi's) political philosophy. Ngugi and Fanon's ideas about colonialism match in some points specifically the ways they represented the inner mechanism of authority, which grant privileges to the bourgeoisie and the followers of former colonial nations depriving the common people. Ngugi reflects Fanon's philosophy of neo-colonialism in the novels *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood* and portrays characters, who are merely the new capitalists imitating Britain by betraying their own nationality. Ngugi showcases, how the Kenyan elites are the most advantaged class simply because they are associated with the former colonizers. The portrayal of collaborationist character, Karanja and a corrupted elected MP in the novel *A Grain of Wheat* and the corrupted intellectuals and capitalist like Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria in the novel *Petals of Blood* perfectly depict this fact. All these characters are shown as replacing the former British colonizers by marginalizing the poor and continuing the tyrannical system exercised previously by the imperialist.

2. Discussion

Neocolonialism can be considered as the crucial and most perilous phase of camouflaged imperialism. As the colonizers cannot exercise direct power over the former colonies, they execute indirect control over the economy, politics and culture of those countries. It affects the economic prosperity of neocolonial states by importing the production by the colonizers. It also controls the administrative policies of a neocolonial state by investing foreign funds to run the administration of a neocolonial state and creates economic dependency. A comprehensive criticism on the mechanism of neocolonialism was shared by Nkrumah, who said-

For example, in an extreme case the troops of the imperial power may garrison the territory of the neo-colonial State and control the government of it. More often, however, neo-colonialist control is exercised through economic or monetary means. The neo-colonial State may be obliged to take the manufactured products of the imperialist power to the exclusion of competing products from elsewhere. Control over government policy in the neo-colonial State may be secured by payments towards the cost of running the State, by the provisions of civil servant in positions where they can dictate policy, and by monetary control over foreign exchange through the exposition of a banking system controlled by the imperial power (Nkruma, 1965).

Frantz Fanon identified the intentions of neo-colonialism and suggested that, independence of the former colonized nations is an eyewash where the colonizers wear a mask of good will to

satiated their economic hunger. He said, “In the negotiations on independence, the first matters at issue were the economic interests: banks, monetary areas, research permits, commercial concessions, inviolability of properties stolen from the peasants at the time of the conquest, etc Of civilizing, religious, or cultural works, there was no longer any question” (Fanon, 1969). While elucidating the factors and mechanism of neo-colonialism, Fanon stated that it is the indetermination, lack of unity and sense of inferiority of the native people which are responsible for the birth of neo-colonialism. The objective of neo-colonialism is the refusal of true independence to the former colonies and to execute the cultural and economic domination indirectly. Fanon stated, “The acceptance of a nominal sovereignty and the absolute refusal of real independence—such is the typical reaction of colonialist nations with respect to their former colonies. Neocolonialism is impregnated with a few ideas which both constitute its force and at the same time prepare its necessary decline” (Fanon, 1969). Fanon clarified the mechanism of neo-colonialism elaborately in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* where the opportunistic tendency as well as the neutrality of the intellectuals and activists of the ex-colonies are held responsible for the success of neo-colonialism. The former colonizers subjugate the natives by the continuation of class system that held the national leaders and intellectuals as the members of elite class and the masses as the ‘wretched of the earth’. These intellectuals and leaders carry the legacy of colonialism by imitating their former oppressors and hence they replace the colonizers and establish neo-colonialism. Fanon suggested that, in the time of decolonization, a group of native intellectuals started to communicate with the colonial capitalists. Contrarily, following liberation, the colonialist bourgeoisie started to create contact with the local elites for the continuation of colonial values (Fanon, 1963). He also mentioned about the economic dependency of the independent states on the colonialists power as a strong force behind the perpetuation of colonialism in disguise. Fanon explained, “The formerly colonized territory is now turned into an economically dependent country. The former colonizer, which has kept intact and, in some cases, reinforced its colonial marketing channels, agrees to inject small doses into the independent nation’s budget in order to sustain it. Now that the colonial countries have achieved their independence the world is faced with the bare facts that makes the actual state of the liberated countries even more intolerable” (Fanon, 1963). The influence of Fanonian theories about colonialism and neo-colonialism can easily be observed in the works of Ngugi. Like Fanon, his main concern is the common people and their oppression by the elites. Inspiring by Fanon’s idea of nationalism, Ngugi always tries to enunciate common people’s unified history and identity. Ngugi’s in-depth scrutiny of the post-independent Kenya parallel Fanon’s declaration of the continuation of colonialism through the imitation of the previous oppressors. He describes the working of neo-colonialism by stating that,

The imperialist tradition in Africa is today maintained by the international bourgeoisie using the multinational and of course the flag-waving native ruling classes. The economic and political dependence of this African neo-colonial bourgeoisie is reflected in its culture of apemanship and parrotry enforced on a restive population through police boots, barbed wire a gowned clergy and judiciary; their ideas are spread by a corpus of state intellectuals, the academic and journalistic laureates of the neo-colonial establishment

(Thiong’O, 2005)

The influence of Fanon can easily be perceived in Ngugi’s novels *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*. Before writing *A Grain of Wheat* he was studying *The Wretched of the Earth* by Fanon, which became an eye-opener for him to depict the real scenario of post-independent Kenya (Irumba, 2006). In *A Grain of Wheat* Ngugi depicts the misery of the distressed inhabitants in a small village named Thabai and reveals the malformation of new government in contemporary Kenya. The depiction of the collaborationist figures like Karanja and the black bourgeoisie like the MP who replaces the former imperialists shows the real picture of neo-colonialism.

Karaja, who betrays his country by joining the British colonial force, represents the commitment to self-interest at the expense of one’s community. He believes in the power of Whiteman’s technology and weaponry and puts himself as close to it as possible because he believes that, the prevalence of colonialism will be benefited for him by providing power and wealth. Karanja’s intense dependency on the power of colonialism is exposed when he explains Mumbi of his reason for being a collaborator of the colonialists. He explains, “You don’t understand. Did you want us all to die in the Forest and in Detentoin so that the whiteman could live here on this land alone? The Whiteman is strong. Don’t you ever forget that. I know, because I have tasted his power” (Thiong’O, 1986). Ngugi tried to represent Karanja as the agent of encouragement for the perpetuation of colonialism in contemporary Kenya who became the buffer state between the former colonizer and the native Kenyans. Karanja fulfills the need of the imperial power to instill colonial ideology in the native leaders for sustainability of disguise colonialism. He acts ruthlessly towards his fellow Gikuyu natives and enjoys exerting power over them by inflicting pain. Ngugi depicts the mechanism of neo-colonialism through the process of Karanja’s growing as a chief, backed up by colonial power to hold up their legacy in neo-colonial Kenya. Karanja’s state of being the colonial slave can easily be understood through Ngugi’s words. He said, “What we did not know was that we were being groomed to become a buffer state between the propertied white rulers and the harsh realities under which the African peasants and workers lived” (Thiong’o, 1973).

The capitalistic idea introduced by the British imperialist administration is represented through the Member of Parliament of the novel *A Grain of Wheat*. Gikonyo, whom Thiong’O portrayed as the member of working class Kenyans, plans to buy a farm jointly with five men. For this, he needs the help of the MP to get loan. The MP refuses to grant loan and buys the land for himself. A close observation of the novel shows that Gikonyo’s idea of shared business matches with the socialist concept of communal ownership of land. On the contrary, the MP’s self-centered act of buying the land for him conveys the neo-colonial tendency of capitalism. The harmful effect of capitalism on the culture as well as the whole nation is clearly explained by Ngugi in his work *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature*. He said that Capitalism barely give rise to inhuman and factional culture which encourages conflict. In the past, African culture was the most general one where economy was based on communal organization (Thiong’O, 1973). As the MP is a part of government, through him Ngugi also reflects the oppression and corruption of the neo-colonial

government that mimics the former colonialists. This man is a perfect instance of the bourgeoisie who, by purchasing the land for himself not only betrays Gikonyo but also his nation.

In the post-independent Kenya the fruit of independence is consumed by those who betrayed the nation during the colonial period. Neil Lazarus considers the nature of independence in Africa as a liberation for the elite bourgeois and intellectuals, but not for the common people at all (Lazarus, 1995). Kenya gets its independence only in appearance but in reality things have not changed. Only the elites replaced the colonial oppressors. The marginalization of the masses continues. Thus, when Gikonyo passes the street of Nairobi, he observes that, it was “never an African city. The Indians and Europeans controlled the commercial and social life of the city. The African only came there to sweep the streets, drive the buses, shop and then go home to the outskirts before nightfall” (Thiong’O, 1986). Post-independent Kenya has turned into the old wine in a new bottle where independence brings comfort for the betrayal and never ending marginalization for the “wretched of the earth”.

Ngugi’s disillusionment about the concept of independence got its expression in his novel *Petals of Blood*. In this novel Kenya is depicted as spoilt by the neo-colonial forces where the elitists groups accede the principles of colonial administration and continue to enslave their own people by pursuing relationship with the former dominators. While talking about Ngugi’s representation of post-independent Kenya in *Petals of Blood*, Moses Isegawa stated, “The Kenya Ngugi writes about... It is a huge Kenya trampled by earlier colonial raconteurs like Robert Ruwark and Karen Blixen, who celebrated the settler culture of ‘legalized brutality, fear, silence, oppression’ (Isegawa, 2005). In this novel, the village Ilmorog symbolizes the neo-colonial Kenya which turned into a central business district from a backward rural area for serving capitalistic needs of the neo-colonial leaders. The malice of capitalism, modernization and neocolonialism are skillfully portrayed through the corrupted leaders and businessman like Mzigo, Chui, Kimeria and Ndiri wa Riera-aa.

The capricious and venal nature of the leaders in new Kenya is portrayed in Ndiri Wa Riera, the Member of Parliament of Ilmorog. He comes to Ilmorog just for seeking vote and deceiving the villagers by collecting money from them for hrambee water project which he spends for buying private property, shares in companies and invests in different businesses. By the name of unity between rich and poor Ndiri wa Riera, Kimeria and Mzigo jointly introduce a project named (K.C.O) which in reality is another way to fraud the masses. These fraudulent acts of this post-Kenyan politician depicts the corruption of the neocolonial leaders. Eustace Palmer clarified the nature of corruption of Ndiri wa Riera in his review on *Petals of Blood*, “The Member of Parliament appears a real life-size character demonstrating his incompetence, corruption and indifference to the people’s suffering in a number of telling scenes (Eustace, 1995). Ndiri wa Riera is the perfect example of those cruel leaders in post-independent Kenya who does not hesitate to eliminate the obstacles in his way of corruption. Thus, when the lawyer spoke for the Ilmorogians and attempted to reveal the deception behind K.C.O project, the MP killed him. Ngugi said, “Even if it took him ten years, Ndiri would surely have the lawyer eliminated. He would ask his henchman to open a ‘file’ for the lawyer in their minds (Thiong’O, 2005).

The plaguing of post-colonial Kenya by the aggressiveness of the money mongers and settlers is showcased through the character Hawkins Kimeria, a wealthy industrialist. The callous exploitation and broken promises of the neo-colonial bourgeoisie are perfectly illustrated through the character of Kimeria. Moreover, the interrelationship between power and lust gets its realistic expression in *Petals of Blood* by this hideous Kenyan elite when he forcefully holds Wanja hostage and rapes her. His business relation with Ndiri Wa Riera is another prove of co-operation between politicians and bourgeoisie for capitalistic aim in the post-independent nation. Both of them plan to fulfill their capitalist need that revolves round the fake development of Ilmorog from a remote village to neo-colonial city. Kimeria's activities demonstrate the greed and tyranny of the neo-colonial elites that marginalizes the masses. He also exemplifies the betrayal of Mau Mau rebellion who is responsible for the detention of Karega's brother Ndinguri who was a rebel of Mau Mau.

The corruption of the education sector in post-independent Kenya is represented through the educationists like Mzigo and Chui. They invest all their attention and dedication on rising their private properties than to improve the education system. They are more businessman than educationists. Thus, when Ilmorog turned into a metropolitan, they invest there to increase their capital. When Wnja and Abdullah successfully ran their Theng'eta brewery in New Ilmorog, Mzigo contributed to the failure of their bar so that he can occupy that business. Chui, once active in Siriana Movement for establishing the African curriculum in education, now becomes an investor under the cover of an educationist. Ngugi depicts Chui as the representative of those opportunist leaders who participates in any movement for taking advantages. Ngugi created these characters to show the prevalence of class system in post-independent Kenya. All these upper class members deprive their own people by parroting the former colonial government. They consider themselves high-ranking than the other natives since they are collaborated to the former colonizers, educationally privileged and politically conscious.

Ngugi addresses religious hypocrisy in neo-colonial Kenya through his critique of capitalist Christianity both in his novels *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*. Christianity is a remains of imperialism which keeps controlling and suppressing the Kenyans even after independence. The corrupted Christian Churches exercise cultural imperialism perpetuated by missionaries as they impose European practices and abolish Kenyan cultural values. Ngugi shows the deception of customized Christianity in contemporary Kenya through Kihika's rejection of Christianity practiced by missionaries which he demonstrates by killing them as he considers them the oppressors. The religious hypocrisy mobilized by missionaries in neo-colonial Kenya gets clearer in *Petals of Blood* through the portrayal of Reverend Jerrod Brown, an affluent priest and churchman, to whom the villagers of Ilmorog asked for help when Joseph fall ill. Instead of helping them practically, the priest pray for those hungry, tired and thirsty villagers. He excuses by saying that Bible is against begging, "The bible is then clearly against a life of idleness and begging. As for the child who is ill, (and why indeed did you not bring him in?) I have already offered prayers for him. Go ye now in peace and trust in the lord" (Thiong'O, 2005). Ezekiel, an elder in the Presbyterian Church and landowner, is the advocate of this type of religious persona whose faith on religion was corrupted by capitalism.

He was impressed and influenced by their power and became a convert which brought wealth for him. He then exercised his authority over his fellow natives.

3. Conclusion

Fanon's assessment of the nationalist elites and their neocolonial activities and mind set up finds a clear expression in both of the novels *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*. He dismantled the capitalistic social system in post-independent Kenya with all the problems of prostitution, social inequalities, misery, uncertainty and inadequate housing which become a menace to the social, cultural, philosophical, economic and political ideals of the nation. The effects of neo-colonialism are so fatal that, even the victims are affected by it. They dangle in a fragmented state of pre-colonial faithfulness and the post-colonial betrayals that makes their life ambiguous. The dilution of Mugo with guilt and anxiety, Mumbi's scattered life oscillating between her love and her child sketches the effects of neo-colonialism in independent Kenya. The disillusionment of New Kenya shakes the life of the common people in such a way that it even changes the most promising character like Wanja with commercial mentality. Human relationship does not appear valuable to her as she claims hundred shillings from Munira for the bed and time and drink. She says, "It was New Kenya. It was New Ilmorog. Nothing was free" (Thiong'o, 2005). Abdullah, the freedom fighter's dream of a free Kenya shattered by the reality of capitalistic Kenya where he gets no recognition for his sacrifice. The dismal presence of neo-colonialism makes each and every life of Kenya uncertain and unrestful. While talking about the catastrophic effect of neo-colonialism, Ngugi stated, "Imperialism can never develop a country or a people. This was what I was trying to show in *Petals of Blood*; that imperialism can never develop us, Kenyans." (Thiong'o, 1981).

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