

THE STRUGGLE OF AFRICAN WOMEN IN SELECTED WORKS BY NGUGI WA THIONGO

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Abstract

This article treats the various aspects of the resistance mechanisms devised by Ngugi wa Thiongo in order to empower the African women in a male-dominated society. The article shows the wrongs to which women are subjected such as polygamy and wife-beating and analyses Ngugi's firm belief that change is a gradual process as reflected in the novels subject of study. While the early three novels reflect traditional African values of motherhood and are more connected to African feminism, *Wizard of the Crow* breaks new grounds as women acquire more experience and conquer more fields towards empowering themselves through the resistance devices based on such concepts as sisterhood and female consciousness. In this sense, they managed to prove themselves as superior to men.

Keywords: Feminism, womanism, Ngugi wa Thiongo, postcolonialism, African Literature

Introduction

Ngugi wa Thiongo is an internationally acclaimed African writer and human rights activist. His work includes novels, plays, short stories, essays, and literary criticism. He has usually championed for the promotion of African women and other marginalised groups in the African society. He paid dear for his outspokenness and was imprisoned more than once. Adopted by Amnesty International as Prisoner of Conscience, he was released from prison but had to live in exile. He has taught in many European and American universities as a distinguished professor of comparative literature and performance studies. He has frequently been regarded as a likely candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Ngugi has abandoned using English as the primary language of his work in favour of Gikuyu, his mother tongue. He also rejected Christianity which he regarded as a sign of colonialism, and changed his name from James Ngugi to Ngugi wa Thiongo to honour his African heritage. The

transition from colonialism to postcolonialism has been a central issue in a great deal of Ngugi's writings. His *Weep Not, Child* (1964) was the first novel in English to be published by an East African author. In 1994, "over 200 scholars from Africa, Asia, Europe and North America gathered at the Penn State Berks Campus in Reading, Pennsylvania for a conference celebrating Ngugi's work" (Ongaro, 2004, p. 6). He is an artist "who dreamed of a better world and risked everything to make it real" (Erenrich, 2010, p. 81).

This article argues with Eko's claim that Ngugi is "a groundbreaking example of the modern African male author's shift from portraying women as objects to that of subjects" (1986, p. 212), as he wants to project the African woman as a survivor of the harshest conditions. It exposes a number of the patriarchal challenges and constraints imposed upon helpless women by traditional African societies. Actually, the central themes of female assertiveness and post-independence dilemma of the motherland permeate Ngugi's novels. His approach evokes a veneration of the African woman with "mountains on her back." The article also treats "the effort towards the liberation of Africa from the claws and shackles of imperialism and capitalism that provokes the revolutionary undertone in Ngugi's works"(Gutierrez, 1998, p. 17) as the man has struggled "to formulate an aesthetic fully capable of representing the beleaguered, dispossessed, and disempowered African postcolony" (Amoko, 2010, p. 159). The study attempts to mark the notable development in Ngugi's strategies of empowerment in novel after novel. Ngugi also seems to have a strong belief that change is gradual and needs long-term tactics. The article applies some feminist and womanist theories to the novels under study.

It is quite obvious that African women have often been subjected to negative stereotypes and their contributions have been neglected or even omitted. The exclusion of females from social settings and their being denied rightful opportunities to stand up for themselves in their communities also "give substance to the marginalization of females from important decision-making processes in their communities and families." (Peter, 2010, p. 203) 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 characterised by "male superordination and female subordination."(Ubrurhe, 1999, p. 285)

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. Before discussing the four novels, it may be useful to consider the definitions

of some major critical concepts such as feminism and womanism. Feminism is the movement for the social, political and economic equality of men and women. It maintains that women and men are treated differently by society, and that women have frequently and systematically been barred from participating fully in all the available social arenas and institutions. Billington says that “feminism” can be described as:

a movement seeking the re-organisation of the world upon a basis of gender equality in all human relations; a movement which would reject every differentiation between individuals upon the grounds of gender, that would abolish all gender privileges and burdens, and would strive to set up the recognition of the common humanity of women and men as the foundation of law and custom. (as cited in Kramarae and Treichler, 1986, p.158)

Feminism thus seeks social change in women’s status by changing the way in which society views them. It "wants society to change its ideas on patriarchy and accept women as being a valuable part of society." (Peter, p. 30) Cheryl Walker (1991) defines a feminist as "someone who perceives that women in a given society are oppressed as women, and behaves that this should be changed" (p. xxiii) Helen Chukwuma (1994) states: "Feminism means [...] a rejection of inferiority and a striving for recognition. It seeks to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effectual and contributing human being. [...] Women conditioning in Africa is the greatest barrier toward a fulfillment of self (p. ix) due to the fact that men use “the ideology of patriarchy which emphasizes male importance, dominance and superiority” (Njoku, 2001, p. 195) to enslave women and make them second-class citizens.

Womanism, on the other hand, has been highlighted as a black women’s liberation movement that seeks to support the enhancement of black backgrounds and the ideals of African life. It is shown through the literary texts of such theorists of the movement as Alice Walker and Barbara Christian that "womanist theory has always played a pivotal role in consciousness-raising, while it also acts in the public spotlight to improve the life of women in general"(Peter, p. 204). Womanism seeks to support all females and to expose all violations committed against them.

Ogunyemi’s definition of the term is apt:"Womanism is black centred; it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism; unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men" (1998, p.60).This movement is “committed to the survival and the wholeness of all people, females and males"(Peter, p. 35). Because the term "feminism" has negative connotations in Africa even by female writers and is sometimes regarded as a curse, African critics have developed a number of alternative terms such as African

feminism. The following pages will argue that while the first three novels in the study are more related to African feminism, the revolutionary final novel has more affinity with Western radical feminism.

Unlike western feminism, African feminism does not work against men but rather accommodates them. This is not a surprising phenomenon since most African women are also committed to the institution of the family and certainly do not want to do without their men. However, they do not want to be maltreated and are readily interested in working out guidelines that defend women and get rid of the prejudice against them. African feminism as a term serves as the domesticated version of the ideology of feminism. It takes into account the African philosophy of life which stresses marriage as a social institution. However, it condemns all forms of patriarchy which dehumanizes woman and portrays her as a second-class citizen. Rooted in African historical and cultural experiences, it advances the view of the complementarity between man and woman by stressing the Male-Female principle in the creative order. (Maduka, 2005, pp. 8-9)

The first three novels dealt with in this article fall under socialist feminism which focuses on different aspects of women's lives that are "most frequently introduced, by capitalist and patriarchal ideologies, as personal aspects of human existence. Such systems insist that (traditional) issues like mothering and motherhood, socialization of children, housewifery and domestic labor, and sexuality" (Maleki& Lalbakhsh, 2012, p. 67) should be dealt with in detail.

Weep Not, Child: the Veneration of Motherhood and Education

Ngugi establishes a collage of all merits and qualities that women have in terms of leadership and messianic role in his *Weep Not, Child*, where he shows us that women's sound judgment and suppressed voice can be an effectively important factor in bringing liberation and equality to people's life. One of the traditional sufferings of women in the novel is polygamy. Ngotho has got two wives and he looks at women and judges them only in terms of their physical appearance. Love does not have the least consideration in his relationship with his wives. As he admits himself he has married one of his wives because he has "pitied her" and because "Nobody could have taken her" (*Weep* 26) – a humiliating justification that does not seem to be true. For Ngotho, a good wife is a "fleshy, black body with sweat [...] a fat woman" not a woman that looks like his Memsahib's wife who is "so thin that [he] at times wondered if the woman had flesh at all" (*Weep* 12). This is a sign of Ngotho's selfish attitude towards women, which rationalizes his insistence on keeping more than one wife.

Ngotho's wives seem to have no voice and no say and have learnt to live in harmony within an obviously hostile polygamous structure. "They

cling to the ways of the tribe passively and uphold the patriarchal structure unchallenged" (Ogude, 1999, p. 110). To these submissive women, however, men are unkind and non-responsive and if there is any response, it is often violent and aggressive. Ngotho's family is a good example of the families where oppressive relations are at work to the benefit of men. Whatever Njeri and Nyokabi – Ngotho's wives – do is to keep the centre safe and sound because the deep-rooted traditional ideology is that "if you have a stable centre, then the family will hold" (*Weep* 46). Therefore, they divide the housework and domestic labour between themselves "while the benefit of all they do goes to the centre, that is, of course, the man who is the head of the family" (Maleki& Lalbakhsh, p. 69). Here Ngugi reflects the image of some African males as heartless colonizers who show no mercy even to their dearest ones.

What makes matters worse in the novel is that women are looked down upon as they represent vices and bad habits. As the narrator openly reveals it, in such a society women are not to be trusted since they are "fickle, and very jealous [...] no amount of beating would pacify [them]" (*Weep* 12). Ironically enough, Ngotho's home is described as ideal, "well-known for being a place of peace" because Ngotho "does not beat his wives much" (*Weep* 12) in a culture that regards wife-beating as a daily practice passed from one generation to the other. The humiliation of the female characters is also intensified by the incident when Njoroge and Mwihaki are late on their way back from home to school. Finding his mother annoyed by their being late, Njoroge puts all the blame on Mwihaki, thinks of her as a "bad girl," and threatens that "he would not play with her anymore" (*Weep* 18) as if she were an evil creature to be completely avoided.

The silence of women is also portrayed by Ngugi as they are usually excluded from political dialogue. For example, the three men – Howlands, Jacobo and Ngotho – hold lengthy dialogues with one another now and again despite the fact that they belong to different cultures, whereas their wives never once hold dialogue among themselves. "This gender-political strategy situates women outside of history, denying them sites of articulation and occasions for political community" (Nicholls, 2000, p. 77). Ironically, women themselves seem satisfied with their being kept away from decision-making and find it quite justified. For example, when Njeri comments subtly and astutely on the unfairness of Jomo Kenyatta's trial, she says: "It is more than that, and although I am only a woman and cannot explain it, it seems all as clear as daylight. The white man makes a law or a rule" (*Weep* 75). Juliana, Jacobo's wife, is another example of a woman whose timid pieces of advice are usually ignored altogether by men. We find her talking to herself, saying that "a man will never heed the voice of a woman until it is too late"

(*Weep* 63). Ngotho states plainly that as a man he will do whatever he likes and that he will “never [take] orders from a woman” (*Weep* 60).

Education is one of the most significant devices of empowerment highlighted by Ngugi in the novel, conforming to Hansen’s golden statement that “education is the very essence of social change” (1990, p. 237). Bharat (2003) believes that “the role of education in nations struggling for freedom and identity is the central concern of *Weep Not, Child*” (p. 35). In this sense, Ngugi portrays women’s politics as superior to men’s in terms of goal achievement. Unlike her careless husband Ngotho, Nyokabi pays the most attention and care for her children’s education and treats her son and daughter equally. It is by virtue of her limitless unconditional care that her son Njoroge finds a way to school while she still contemplates on the idea of her married daughter going to school as well (*Weep* 18-19). One of Ngugi's messages in the novel is that the only way out of the atmosphere of antagonism governing this society lies in educating the younger promising generation to form a society characterized by tolerance and equality.

In this regard, Mnthali (2004) maintains that “woman remains a beacon of hope and a source of strength to those who do not as yet see the light, which is the sum-total of the struggle for the land” (p. 37). Nyokabi takes her son Njoroge back home “to save him from suicide and to give him another chance to restart his half-finished education in the school of matriculture” (Maleki& Lalbakhsh, p. 73). Ngugi's women believe that education brings knowledge to the life of the oppressed and equips them with the power and understanding to fight oppression.

In *Weep Not, Child*, only female characters can be fully trusted in establishing a political plan to achieve liberation and equal rights, though they are abusively exploited and ignored by the men whose impulsive decisions and miscalculated actions bring ruin to both family and society. Women are clever enough to put emphasis on education “as one extremely important sub-strategy to instruct the next generation’s male members against patriarchy and patriarchal conduct” (Maleki&Lalbaksh, p. 65). Referring to his mother's remarkable role in his education, Ngugi states:

my mother was the one who took care of us; that is, we three brothers and three sisters. She virtually shouldered every responsibility of our struggle for food, shelter, clothing, and education. It was my mother who initially suggested that I go to school. I remember those nights when I would come back home from school, and not knowing that she could not read or write, I would tell her everything that I had learnt in school or read to her something, and she would listen very keenly and give me a word of advice here and there.(as cited in Sicherman, 1990, p.18)

This idealistic mother figure is celebrated by Ngugi. The process of growing up and becoming educated -the key to self-understanding in the novel - is shown to be only possible through the figure of the mother. "It is the mother who weaves simple social processes - being educated and growing up - into a complex knot in which the history of colonialism and African resistance to it is enmeshed with private loss, failure, and mourning" (Gikandi, 2000, p. 82).

Mothers are given due attention and are regarded as nurturers and sustainers of the values of society throughout the novel, where Ngugi focuses on the role played by women in bringing radical changes in society by schooling and socializing their children. Contrary to Ngotho who is obsessed with the idea of revenge, "Nyokabi changes the dream to reality by sending her son to learn and acquire the knowledge he later needs to fight against any oppressive system" (Maleki& Lalbakhsh, p. 72). That is why it is Nyokabi who saves her son at the eleventh hour when he thinks of committing suicide, not Ngotho. Nyokabi comes to him carrying a light in her hand and inviting him back home. Ngugi seems to say that while fathers and brothers represent the forces of darkness, bloodshed and death; the wise women stand for light and hope.

The mother here acts as a spiritual guide who takes her son by hand and shows him the right path of knowledge and light. In Jennifer Evans' view, "Ngugi's female characters" are all in their own ways "resistance heroines and the strongest symbols of cultural identity, community and continuity"(1987, p. 131). Cook and Okenimpke (1983) praise the concluding events in the novel for "reversing the negative trends, and thrusting us out hopefully and actively into the future" (p. 84).

A Grain of Wheat: Women as Fighters for the Freedom of Land

The Mau Mau revolutionary movement refers to some Kenyan people, mostly Gikuyu, who fled to the forests and prepared themselves to get rid of the British colonizers and the Africans supporting the imperialist project. They refer to themselves as the "Kenyan Land and Freedom Army" and solidified themselves through the practice of "oathing" (Ongaro, 2004, p. 63). The movement included both men and women. Women freedom fighters made up five percent of the total movement. Given the Gikuyu women's very limited access to decision making during the Mau Mau era, this percentage would seem very considerable for women to leave their home and take up the struggle. Many women went to the forest voluntarily and those who stayed in their villages supported the movement by secretly transporting weapons and food to the fighters. Itote (1967) argues that some of these women have gone as far as to arrange parties "for police and Government soldiers" and this has "often yielded valuable supplies of arms and

ammunition" (p. 78). Mau Mau women were banned from prostitution "although they were allowed to flirt with the enemies for the purposes of gathering vital information" (Kanogo, 1987, p. 145). They challenged such laws that regarded any sort of help to the fighters as "consorting with terrorists" and "supporting and aiding terrorists," (Maloba, 1993, pp. 92–93) crimes then punishable by death.

Ngugi pays respects to these women and celebrates their limitless sacrifices and their contributions to the struggle for freedom and the liberation of the homeland in many of his novels, particularly *A Grain of Wheat*, where heroic women are described as providing the invisible backbone to the movement. Ngugi also made use of traditional African values of womanhood to fight the enemies. Thus, women were able to conduct Mau Mau's business unnoticed, relying on the traditional notions of women as victims. Speaking of Mau Mau scouts, Itote says, "Girls found it simpler to disguise themselves, or at least to be inconspicuous," (p. 78) and that "all a woman had to do to escape attention when cornered was to pretend to garden" (Nicholls, p. 71). Women represented the vital link between the forest fighters and the passive wing in the reserves. Those women who went to the forests usually tended to be engaged in key responsibilities, acting as "transport, signals, medical corps and ordnance to their male counterparts" (*Grain* 67).

Wambui, the major character in the novel, is a model of the resistant woman. During the Emergency, she carried secrets from the villages to the forest and back to the villages and towns. Once, she carried a pistol "tied to her thighs near the groin" (*Grain* 19) when she was suddenly stopped in one of the police check points. When her turn to be searched came, she pretended to be an old woman but the police man:

started from her chest, rummaged under her armpits, gradually working his way down towards the vital spot. And suddenly Wambui screamed, the man stopped, astonished. 'The children of these days,' she began. 'Have you lost all your shame? Just because the white man tells you so, you would actually touch your own mother's [...] the woman who gave you birth? All right, I'll lift the clothes and you can have a look at your mother, it is so aged, and see what gain it'll bring you for the rest of your life. She actually made as if to lift her clothes and expose her nakedness. The man involuntarily turned his eyes away. (*Grain* 19)

In this story, Ngugi stresses the significant sacrificial role played by African women as Mau Mau arms couriers, roles which are bracketed in so many historical accounts of the rebellion. But more importantly, "Wambui's evasion of colonial strategies of detection is conducted via an ingenious appeal to her revered position as a mother within traditional society"

(Nicholls, p. 99). Through the depiction of the ideal patriotic women, Ngugi pays great tribute to the African women especially in those dark days. He believes that though men are fighting openly, the invisible war led by women in fighting for freedom is as much important as men's. He wants to demonstrate that if African women had not been such an inner- force, Kenya would have never got independence.

Charles A. Nama (1986) argues that Ngugi's heroines occupy a special place in his fiction, especially with respect to their function as "custodians and defenders of traditional Gikuyu culture" (p.142). For example, "When Karanja, Kihika and Gitongo encounter Mumbi at Gikonyo's workshop she is addressed respectfully as Karanja calls her "Mother of Men, we have come make us some tea" (*Grain* 70). These tributes to Mumbi also illustrate her role in the world of the novel. Female identities and anatomies become symbolically bound to motherhood and to the nation. We find a privileging of motherhood in Ngugi's fiction. Kihika, the Mau Mau hero in the novel, refers to the homeland as a mother as he proudly says, "With us, Kenya is our mother" (*Grain* 53). Here again, one may recall the significant role played by Ngugi's mother in changing the course of his life as shown earlier in the article. Though the novel reflects the Kenyan culture and its underlying patriarchal conduct very effectively, still Ngugi portrays strong women with highly sensitive minds and exceptional intellectual abilities that often result in sound judgment.

Devil on the Cross: The Beginning of Women Protest

Devil on the Cross tells the story of Wariinga, whose name means "Woman in Chains" (Brumley, 2007, p. 2). The betrayed young woman is representative of the Kenyan working class and the struggles she faces are illustrative of a post-colonial state, captivated by the neo-colonizers whose main concern is to milk the riches of their motherland.

Wariinga has suffered a series of misfortunes at the hands of some irresponsible men in the society. We are told that "On Friday morning Wariinga was dismissed from her job for rejecting the advances of Boss Kihara, her employer who was the Managing Director of the firm" (*Devil* 104). She was thrown out of her one-room apartment for her inability to pay the rent which the landlord had suddenly increased. (Uwasomba, 2006, p. 102) She was abused and abandoned by the rich old man of Ngorika who has deflowered her and made her pregnant. She attempted suicide more than once and has been let down even by her nearest relatives. Her shameless uncle sold her to the Rich Old Man. "The co-conspiracy between Wariinga's uncle and the Rich Old Man, bartering the flower of her youth and beauty for men's success and sexual satisfaction"(Brumley, p. 9) shows the class struggle between the poor and the rich, the exploited and the exploiters.

Wariinga is also a victim of her culture which taught her that she has no worth. Her neo-colonial culture causes her to be alienated as she is convinced that her appearance is the source of all her wretchedness. Though beautiful, Wariinga is plagued with apemanship. She has been listening to the voice of the colonizer and is misled by his definition of beauty. Her past experience at the hands of thoughtless men has also turned her to a defeatist person.

In order to find or keep their jobs, women must allow licentious behavior in their employers. Wariinga states that these office women are their bosses' real wives, but not their legal ones; the contrast she draws is between a "goat for slaughter and one for grazing" (*Devil* 206). The working women, it goes without saying, are represented by the consumed animal. Boss Kihara makes it clear that no jobs are given to women for free as he says:

Ah, Kareendi, jobs are very hard to come by these days: But a girl like you [...] it shouldn't be too difficult to find something for you to do. But, Kareendi, a matter like this can't be finalized in the office. Let's go across to the Modern Love Bar and Lodging to discuss the question more fully. (*Devil* 13)

Wariinga is finally awakened to the harsh realities of the neocolonial state as she discovers that the capitalist "devils" expound on their personal exploits of the poor and rape of their motherland. Little by little, Wariinga begins to acquire more courage and to look ahead. "It has become necessary to demand change. This phase embodies a revolutionary impulse that not only demands, but also imputes action" (Obiechina, 1992, p. 18). As Gikandi states, Wariinga's project is "to break out of the prison house of self-hate and victimization and to assert her identity outside the culture and economy of arrested decolonization" (p. 220). Wariinga begins to train as a secretary and then manages to get a degree from the polytechnic university to be a mechanical engineer. She becomes a representative of the working-class women in their tireless search for recognition. "Ngugi is not compartmentalizing women in the quest for Uhuru but rather he is stating that Uhuru will never happen without the free willed independence of the individual" (Brumley, p. 14)

Wariinga begins to feel the misery of her community under the colonial and neo-colonial rule and starts to question the position of women and the working class in her society:

We who work as clerks, copy typists and secretaries, which side are we on? We who type and take dictation from Boss Kihara and his kind, whose side are we on in this dance? Are we on the side of the workers, or on the side of the rich? Who are we? Who are we? Many a time I've heard women say: "*Our* firm does this and that", "In

our firm we employ so many workers, who earn this much", "Our company made this much profit", and as they speak, they do not have a cent for their bus fare in the evening. Yes, I've often heard girls bragging about their bosses, and when you check carefully to see what they're bragging about, you can't find a thing. A few hundred shillings a month for a woman with children to feed, and we proudly call that a salary? And in exchange for so little we have sacrificed four things. (*Devil* 206)

Despite her transformation from a scared, suicidal young girl into a mature, independent woman, "Wariinga, the black beauty! Wariinga of the mind and hands and body and heart, walking in rhythmic harmony on life's journey! Wariinga, the worker!" (*Devil* 218). Wariinga's story ends miserably as she shoots the Rich Old Man. She regards this as a sacrificial act: "I'm not going to save you. But I shall save many other people" (*Devil* 253). Thus she sacrificed her future in order to save the community from the devils of neocolonialism. Referring to violence, the Devil says to Wariinga, "Oh, it becomes violence only when a poor man demands the return of his eye or his tooth" (*Devil* 191). However, Ngugi justifies it: "Violence in order to change an intolerable, unjust social order is not savagery. It purifies man. Violence to protect and present an unjust, oppressive social order is criminal and diminishes man" (Ngugi, *Homecoming*, p. 28). The action therefore must be seen in its ideological relevance as a means of overthrowing an unjust social order (Uwasomba, p. 105) and as a symbolic action announcing the death of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

The convincing creation of Wariinga as a regenerated woman attests to Ngugi's understanding of the predicament of females in a post-independence state. Wariinga has broken the common misunderstanding about women that their jobs are limited to housework. The realization of her life ambition to train as an automobile engineer goes a long way to show "how the underprivileged in the society have worked hard to improve their condition, in spite of the brutal attempts by the powers that reduce them to nothingness" (Uwasomba, p. 103).

Wariinga's act of revolt points to a release of a new energy, the spirit of resistance which now strengthens her desire to realise her social purposes, "constantly stifled by forces of capital and male oppression. Although the revolt is contrived, it points to Ngugi's hope in the victim type and the possibility of regeneration" (Ogude, p. 81). And by the time we meet Wariinga in the final phase she has gone through a number of experiences which have transformed her life drastically:

No, this Wariinga is not that other Wariinga. This Wariinga has decided that she'll never again allow herself to be a mere flower, whose purpose is to decorate the doors and windows and tables of

other people's lives, waiting to be thrown on to a rubbish heap the moment the splendor of her body withers. The Wariinga of today has decided to be self-reliant all the time, to plunge into the middle of the arena of life's struggles in order to discover her real strength and to realize her true humanity. (*Devil* 216)

Wariinga has become a figure of female activism against postcolonial patriarchy. She "belongs to that remarkable breed of Ngugi's women—all of them brave, resilient, resourceful and determined" (Palmer, 1979, p. 6). She vows never to sell her soul to the Devil for money and never again to be owned by another man. She is no longer "a woman in chains." She has saved herself and her people from the ghost of colonialism. Womanism endeavors to assist black women to see, affirm, and have confidence in the significance of their experiences and to be able to face the challenges of all the social oppressive forces impeding black women's struggle for survival and for the development of a positive, productive quality of life conducive to women's freedom and wellbeing. (Peter, p. 36) In this sense, Wariinga's experience passes most of the tests of a transformed African woman.

Wizard of the Crow: the Supremacy of Women

Despite containing gender motifs that seem similar to those tackled in Ngugi's earlier fiction, *Wizard of the Crow* constitutes an unprecedented advance in its advocacy of women's issues and concerns. The novel explicitly deals with pernicious social diseases such as wife-beating and the gendering of poverty. For all his endeavors in the empowerment of women, the most notable transformation in Ngugi's work came with his masterpiece *Wizard of the Crow*. It is mainly in this novel that women begin to have full independence and to overcome all kinds of obstacles put in their way by men and society. The novel also introduces the concept of sisterhood—women working together for their collective good as well as that of the society. It is the work that most represents Ngugi as a lifetime crusader for the empowerment of African women.

Wizard of the Crow presents the woman in the post colony as a person who is confined in many ways. She is "trapped in the patriarchal and the colonial past as well as by the emerging male elite in independent Aburiria. The novel captures the position of African woman as complicated by a composite of oppressive forces" (Waita, 2013, p. 48). To begin with, the novel depicts a set of wrongs that African women of all classes and social ranks are subjected to. Rachel, the First Lady, for example, is humiliated by the Ruler of Aburiria himself for having dared to question his sexual violations with the school girls. As a result of her "crime," she is "banished to a mansion built on seven acres of land where the ruler attempts to freeze her life in time and space" (*Wizard* 10) and is thus imprisoned forever. One

of the popular theories advanced for the strange illness of the Ruler is "the tears, unshed, that Rachael, his legal wife, had locked up inside her soul after her fall from his grace" (*Wizard* 6).

A second example is that of Vinjina, Tajirika's wife, whose husband occupies one of the leading positions in the country. She represents the woman who is trapped in the postcolonial structures of the political elite. "Although living in the modern age, her husband views her as a lesser being rather than an equal partner" (Waita, p. 48). She is continuously in dire need for domestication and "her husband views beating her as his male prerogative" (*Wizard* 126). Vinjina is a traditional woman who believes in the holy bond of marriage and she is described as a dutiful wife and as a wise and organized woman who manages the domestic and business affairs skillfully when her husband is confined. She also exerts exceptional efforts in treating her husband when he suffers from whiteache. However, in return for her limitless services and favors to her husband, she is rewarded with a blow every now and then.

Nyawira, the heroine of the novel, is born into the middle class but as her consciousness develops, she rejects her father's attempts to control her. She marries a poor artist, Kaniuru, against her father's wishes. When she realizes that Kaniuru married her for wealth and not for love, she divorces him at once. In fact, Nyawira is the most successful female character in Ngugi's fiction. She is presented as an astute organizer not only of women but of the larger Movement for the Voice of the People. She represents a fresh consciousness of a new woman who can provide meaningful political leadership in a collective endeavor to save the homeland. (Waita, p. 49) Nyawira takes it upon herself to free all women in Aburiria by holding campaigns to fight patriarchal oppression.

The novel promotes a positive image of women, decries violations against them, and projects a kind of feminist social consciousness. In Nyawira, Ngugi creates a character who is at the centre striving to create a new identity and who is ready to reconsider the cultural map of the African continent. Nyawira questions the position of African woman as she is trebly oppressed "on account of her color like all black people in the world [...] on account of her gender like all women in the world; [...] on account of her class like all workers and peasants in the world" (*Wizard* 428). That is why she can be regarded as a socialist feminist who believes in consciousness-raising as a strategy of sharing experiences and hidden fears resulting from the suppression of women in the neo-colonial African society. As Acker and Barry (1984) describe it "consciousness-raising is a technique for revealing experience that has been denied by the dominant ideology" (p. 179). Nyawira is also a pioneer in providing social and moral education to other characters in the novel. Carole Davies (1986) speaks of the concept of

“sisterhood” in the light of its ability to aid the advancement of women in society. (p. 13) Nyawira's schooling of the members of the revolutionary Movement for the Voice of the People has resulted in notable and positive female interaction which gave the ruler and his sycophant ministers sleepless nights.

Janet Todd (1980) says: friendship is "a nurturing tie not pitting women against society but rather smoothing their passage within it. Here the support and acceptance of other women is essential, since through their teaching of female lore, criminal or conventional, women aid and sustain each other" (p. 4). This sisterly feeling is reflected in defending Rachel. In fact, the women protesters that shamed the ruler during the dedication for Marching to Heaven shouted at him to "set Rachael free!" (*Wizard* 250) and exposed his evil practices to the whole world. In this way, an issue that is consigned to the domestic arena is made public and also brought to the attention of global audience. The women protesters kept repeating "You imprison a woman and you have imprisoned a nation" (*Wizard* 253). The novel also sarcastically satirizes the Ruler's pseudo-philosophical tract, which argues that women should be suppressed and "must get circumcised and show submission by always walking a few steps behind their men" (*Wizard* 621).

Also the beating that Tajirika, chairman of Marching to Heaven, received from members of the People's Court on account of beating his wife is situated within the principle that "what happens in a home is the business of the nation and the other way around" (*Wizard* 435). Nyawira, the mastermind of the Movement, insists on the need to intensify "struggle against all gender-based inequalities and therefore fight for the rights of women in the home, the family, the nation, and the world" (*Wizard* 428). *Wizard of the Crow* points to the changing nature of the African public arena by highlighting issues that are usually kept in a reserved area, thereby sending a clear message for the incorporation of such concerns in the construction of a healthy social space (Okolo, 2009, p. 68).

Hudson-Weems feels that African womanism is aware that there has always been bonding among African women. This bonding cannot be broken because it is genuine sisterhood. The traditional family is so important to the African womanist who recognizes the need for a genuine connection between women. The kind of family gives them support in their search for solace in their time of need and can offer them insight in their time of confusion. (as cited in Peter, p. 40) The concept of sisterhood is also emphasized as Nyawira is able to recruit Vinjinia though the latter is married to one of the leading figures in the country-the centre of dictatorship. Vinjinia kept the Movement in touch with the latest news and by doing so she proves her loyalty to the women's cause more than to her husband. She

also reports the incident of her husband's insulting and beating her to the Wizard of the Crow who in turn organizes a women's court that punishes Tajirika and disgraces him all over the country (*Wizard* 431).

To sustain powerful resistance calls for continuous re-strategizing, creative applications and the ability to be many steps ahead of the oppressor. During the ceremonies, sometimes members of the Movement, captained by Nyawira, enact an ancient and obscene dance of women as a protest against the project. Machokali, ashamed before the Global Bank messengers, had to tell them that the shameful acts they saw in Eldares represent "a sacred Aburirian dance performed only before most honored guests" (242). Moreover, disguised in various shapes and identities; as a limping witch, a beggar, a wizard, a dancer, or a garbage collector, among others, many a time Nyawira escapes death only with the skin of her teeth, renewing the world's hope in a better tomorrow.

Even when the Ruler instructed his policemen and ordered them "to use all means, necessary and unnecessary, to capture dissidents dead or alive and put a stop to leaflets and plastic snakes" (136) used by the Movement to educate the counter government's unpopular policies," (65-66) Nyawira never feels terrified though she herself has been described by the regime as "terrorist" (317) "disease and virus" (369) and "public enemy number one of the Aburirian State" (683). The fighting spirit displayed by Nyawira remind one of the brave Mau Mau women as the fearless lady can be related to the tireless and courageous freedom fighters in many parts of the world.

Finally, the novel is a groundbreaking work in the transformation of man-woman relationship. We are told that Nyawira refuses to have sex with Kamiti early in the novel, telling him that

If a person refuses to wear a condom in these days of the deadly virus and he still wants to go the distance, he is my enemy, not my lovemate, and I should not let him touch me. That is why I threw you off, because I thought you were one of those men who think it unmanly to wear condoms. (145)

Thus, topics that used to be regarded as taboo in African literature such as intercourse are now discussed openly by Kamiti and Nyawira. The institution of marriage that was regarded as the paragon of idealism in the past is now described as no more than a troublesome affair. Nyawira is Ngugi's most truly feminist female character. The final triumph of Nyawira's characterization is that she has to assume Kamiti's duties as the Wizard of the Crow when he is imprisoned. In their union, "the pair is the symbol of the indomitable human spirit- a spirit that can never die- a spirit that can consistently resist the constant cycles of repression and exploitation in postcolonial Africa"(Waita, p. 49).

Conclusion

This brief survey of the role played by women in the African society concludes that Ngugi's message all through his novels is that women can only empower themselves by taking the initiative and devising novel strategies that enable them to face the patriarchal society. Most of the women in Ngugi's works possess a fighting spirit which can hardly be expected at the beginning of the novel. Those women who fight without giving up hope, herald the impending change in the position for both men and women as they reconsider their social roles.

The first three novels in this study may be regarded as a first step towards total freedom. In these novels, women try to cope with the traditional African culture that regards them as silent in their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. The women characters in these novels try to invisibly change some patriarchal values by schooling their children and teaching them values of tolerance and equality. Ngugi's female characters in these novels become primary sites for testing the reconciliation of betrayal and hope as well as the possibility of regeneration. This is an important prelude to women's emancipation and quest for rights and status today .

More and more fields are conquered by Ngugi's women characters in novel after novel. Ngugi's works witness the rebirth of women characters and how they begin to acquire new identities. The women move from self-ignorance to awareness, assurance, and self –reliance. Ngugi's female protagonists become increasingly resourceful as the novels progress. While the early novels belong to African feminism, *Wizard of the Crow* is more inclined to Western revolutionary feminism. In *Wizard of the Crow*, subjects like circumcision have disappeared altogether and are replaced by the image of powerful superwomen as leaders who sponsor and mastermind resistance movements that aim at freeing not only women but all enslaved people. It is mainly in this novel that women shed no more tears and openly ask for divorce when marital relationships get complicated. There is hardly any mention of polygamy or such past practices. Rachel dared to blame the ruler himself for his notorious behaviour with the school girls and she paid a dear price-her freedom-for it. Instead of polygamy, free love exemplified by Nyawira and Kamiti is enhanced and even celebrated. The reappearance of similar female characters in different novels by Ngugi sometimes makes one feel as if he were reading the life story of only one character in different stages of her life.

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