

Marxism In African Literature: A Study Of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Devil On The Cross*

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ABSTRACT

Social problems have always been of great concern to creative minds. In Africa, the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor has been of great concern to literary artists. In the light of the foregoing, it is not uncommon for African literary artists to bring to the fore the inequalities existing between the elitist (*nouveau riche*) bourgeoisie and the poor masses (the proletariat) who continue to languish in the chasm of penury. Therefore, using the theory of Marxism, the preoccupation of the authors of this paper is to examine the social imbalance (in the distribution of wealth) among the "haves" and the "have nots" as exemplified in the novel: *Devil on the Cross* written by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o – a celebrated Kenyan prolific writer.

KEYWORDS: Marxism, bourgeoisie, proletariat, violence, struggle.

I. INTRODUCTION

The 19th Century Europe was a world of two extremes namely: the wealth and extravagance of the capitalist class, on the one hand, and the poverty and degradation of the workers upon whose labour the rich depended, on the other. African writers have continued to express their dissatisfaction over this unfortunate state of affairs. In doing so, they have pitched their tents, as it were, with the ideology of Karl Marx (enunciated in his *Communist Manifesto* - 1952) which prescribes violence and admonishes the working class (the proletariat) to be united in their struggle to free themselves from the captivity of the capitalist class. By doing so, they (the proletariat) would be able to address their misery in the revolution to destroy exploitation by a privileged few and to restore a classless society. This is the view upheld by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in his novel: *Devil on the Cross*.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this paper is "Marxism." The theory is used to explain a popular philosophical movement of the nineteenth century. Its leading proponent was Karl Marx. Basically, Marxism is a materialistic doctrine resting on an economic base. As a doctrine, Marxism divides the society into two: the bourgeoisie (the capital holding class) and the proletariat (the wage earners). To Marx, capitalist profits are possible because the value is "stolen" from the workers and transferred to employers.

The doctrine argues that the power relationships between the capitalists and the working class are inherently exploitative and would inevitably create class conflict which would ultimately lead to a revolution in which the working class would overthrow the capitalist class and seize control of the economy. Consequently, private ownership of the means of production would be replaced by collective ownership, under a new economic system: socialism, first, and then communism. In the final stage of human development, social classes and class struggle would no longer exist.

According to the Marxian ideology, the state has no claim to respect or obedience; it is merely the instrument by which an economically dominant class consolidates its grip on power. This trend, according to Marxism, must be overthrown by the proletariat in a revolution which cannot be other than violent. Lending credence to this view, the web source: investopedia.com/terms/m/marxism.asp posits that Marxism:

...examines the effect of capitalism on labor, productivity, and economic development and argues for a worker revolution to overturn capitalism in favor of communism. Marxism posits that the struggle between social classes—specifically between the bourgeoisie, or capitalists, and the proletariat, or workers—defines economic relations in a capitalist economy and will inevitably lead to revolutionary communism. (investopedia.com/terms/m/marxism.asp)

Furthermore, the above source repudiates Capitalism in all ramifications and goes on to juxtapose the elements of Marxism and Capitalism – indicating how class conflict would play out in a capitalist system thus:

- Capitalist society is made up of two classes—the bourgeoisie, or business owners, who control the means of production, and the proletariat, or workers, whose labor transforms raw commodities into valuable economic goods.
- Ordinary laborers, who do not own the means of production, such as factories, buildings, and materials, have little power in the capitalist economic system. Workers are also readily replaceable in periods of high unemployment, further devaluing their perceived worth.
- To maximize profits, business owners have an incentive to get the most work out of their laborers while paying them the lowest possible wages. This creates an unfair imbalance between owners and the laborers whose work they exploit for their own gain.
- Since workers have little personal stake in the process of production, Marx believed they would become alienated from it and resentful toward the business owner and their own humanity.
- The bourgeoisie also employ social institutions, including government, media, academia, organized religion, and banking and financial systems, as tools and weapons against the proletariat with the goal of maintaining their position of power and privilege.
- Ultimately, the inherent inequalities and exploitative economic relations between these two classes will lead to a revolution in which the working class rebels against the bourgeoisie, seizes control of the means of production, and abolishes capitalism. (investopedia.com/terms/m/marxism.asp)

As a theory, Marxism essentially deals with the issues of class struggle in the human society. Mbah, B. M. and E. E. Mbah (2017:273) explain the nature of the class struggle thus:

In a nutshell, Marxism argues that the way goods and services are produced, distributed, used (and by whom) in a capitalist economy inevitably leads to conflict between social classes; the conflict will be between those who own the processes of production, and those who expend their energy to produce the goods and services, who ultimately get less than their fair share in the distribution of the gains of their sweat. The rich hold the belief that their class is superior to that of the others and inclusive of those therein and would want to perpetuate the status quo ante bellum.

In the humanities, generally, and in literature, in particular, the Marxian theory offers explanation to social conditions, which forms the basis of the plot in literary works (notably, prose). In literature, Marxism tries to answer certain salient questions which Lenin (1976:18) sums up thus: “*What determines the motive of people – the mass of people? What gives rise to the clash of conflicting ideas and strivings? What is the sum total of all these clashes in the whole mass of human societies?*” As revealed by this paper, the above questions are tackled in the plot of the novel *Devil on the Cross* written by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o.

KARL MARX – AN ABRIDGED BIOGRAPHY

Karl Heinrich Marx was a German socialist. He was born in Trier on the 5th May, 1818 to German-Jewish parents. His father was a Jewish lawyer who embraced Christianity in 1824. At the age of 17, young Karl picked interest in his father's profession (law) and consequently became a law student at the University of Bonn. Much later, he left Bonn to the University of Berlin where from time to time he engaged himself in the study of a wide range of subjects namely: Poetry, Jurisprudence, and History. His interest finally settled on Philosophy. In 1841, he bagged a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D) Degree in the discipline at the University of Jena. His extreme views on topical issues of his time did not go down well with the authorities. Hence, his prevention from securing a teaching job which led to his taking up a job as a journalist, and later becoming the editor of *Rheinische Zeitung*, a liberal newspaper in Cologne.

Marx's avowed passion was to restore a classless society where egalitarianism would be the order of the day. Unfortunately, in the course of time, powerful forces were against him as he strove to actualize his dream. Hounded into exile and so miserably poor, he could not even afford a coffin for his dead child. This misfortune notwithstanding, he never lost sight of his determination to work for humanity. Marx died of bronchitis and pleurisy in London on March 14, 1883. He was buried at Highgate Cemetery in London. In 1954, the Communist Party of Great Britain unveiled a large tombstone of Marx's portrait with the inscription "Workers of all Lands Unite," an Anglicized interpretation of the famous phrase in *The Communist Manifesto*: "Proletarians of all countries, unite!"

Today, Marx's name is legendary. Within the circle of contemporary philosophers, he is still very influential in the disciplines of sociology, political economy, heterodox economics, etc. His ideas have had a huge impact on many societies, most especially in the communist countries such as Russia, China, Cuba, etc. To the communist world, he represents a prophet, saviour and leader; to the capitalists, he is a dangerous enemy of civilization. In some countries, his writings are sacred, yet, in others, they have been suppressed, banned or burnt. The controversy which rages around Marx and his ideology will no doubt continue for years to come. This controversy together with his great revolutionary theory (Marxism) has made him leave indelible imprints on the sands of time; hence, a history maker.

WHO ARE THE AUDIENCE OF MARXIST LITERATURE?

Towards the end of the 19th Century, arising from Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* and Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, a group of literary artists had emerged whose literary works were motivated by Marxist ideology. The question to be answered is: *Who are their audience?* Before answering this question, it should be borne in mind that Marxist literary artists are always dissatisfied with the state of events at any given time. This is why they are always considered to be intellectually and emotionally rebellious – rebels against current realities for which they seek to offer ideas. The tendency, therefore, is for them to take the whole world as their audience – the universal audience.

In this respect, the literary artists' relationship with such an audience has to be defined. A good definition of this relationship can only be attained by answering the question: *Are the Marxist literary artists of the oppressed or for the oppressed?* A literary artist who is not for the oppressed will only write superficially from a Marxist perspective. For instance, writers like Auden, Lewis, etc. had made gestures in their literary works in defence of Marxism, but surreptitiously returned to the bourgeois class that nurtured them.

On the contrary, literary artists who are for the oppressed consistently and avowedly write to attack continued oppression by the bourgeois class. However, this does not necessarily mean that they are good writers since they belong to a group of the downtrodden. Besides, Marxist literary artists would not require their personal experiences of poverty or that of such a class to which they belong or with which they sympathize. To fully qualify as Marxist literary artists – writing for the oppressed, the artists should acquire some degree of proficiency in their use of language.

MARXIST AND NON-MARXIST LITERARY ARTISTS JUXTAPOSED

Marxist literary artists are prophets of revolution – agitating for a change in the status quo that favours a privileged few. To them, after oppression and suffering from exploitation, victory will certainly come for the oppressed. Put differently, Marxist literary artists are concerned with public issues to the exclusion of private issues. On the contrary, Non-Marxist literary artists preoccupy themselves with personal experiences. For instance, T. S. Eliot and W. E. B. Yeats at one time had sought to address (not a universal audience and not even the immediate public available) but a hypothetical audience. It is this kind of audience that Yeats referred to in his *The Fisherman* (1919) as: "a man who does not exist, a man who is but a dream."

Furthermore, Non-Marxist literary artists positions are ambiguous than their Marxist counterparts. This is because they are pessimistic about the prospect of change since the status quo favours their bourgeois class. Hence, change is akin to jeopardy. This stance of pessimism makes them less prophetic than their Marxist contemporaries. Eliot himself attests to this in his *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915) when he says: "I am no prophet." To seek not to address the universal audience, Non-literary artists have both an advantage and a disadvantage. The former because they are free from over-concern for public opinions, and the later, because they might pretend to ignore social and political realities, which of course, they cannot.

MARXISM IN THE NOVEL: DEVIL ON THE CROSS BY NGUGI WA THIONG'O

The novel: *Devil on the Cross* by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is essentially a Marxist novel. But for a proper understanding of our subject, it is expedient to have knowledge of the setting of the novel. In literary parlance, the term "setting" is used in reference to the scene or place in which actions take place in any literary work. With regard to our subject, the setting of the novel is Kenya – an East African nation where Ngugi himself hails from.

The Ottoman Turks and the Portuguese first ventured into Kenya in the 1850s. In the wake of the scrambling for and partition of Africa by the Europeans in the 1880s, a railroad was constructed from Mombasa to Kisumu. The railroad gave rise to extensive commercial activities, consequently encouraging the influx of more Britons and Indians into the area. On arrival, these Europeans cultivated large farms in central and western highlands and the aborigines were hired as labourers on low wages.

Although Kenyans gained educationally and otherwise from these Europeans, their losses were, by far, greater than their gains. They lost much fertile land to the Europeans. In 1920, the Kikuyu formed a central association to protest against their loss of land. Consequently, the British, then, appointed African (Kenyan) chiefs and village heads to act as intermediaries between them and the disillusioned Kenyans. These intermediaries were known as "Homeguards". Kenyans refused to cooperate with the Homeguards and this led to open confrontation that involved the Europeans too.

In 1944, Kenyans, concerned about their political future, formed the Kenyan African Union (KAU). In 1952, another open confrontation and revolt against British rule took the form of nationalist campaigns known as the "Mau-Mau War". According to Professor Arogundade of the Department of History, University of Lagos, the Mau-Mau War represented an "inhuman reaction against inhuman forces which treated Africans merely as labour machines and less than man". For Adrian Roscoe, the Mau-Mau War was: "... the central factor in an equation guaranteeing the economic, social, psychological and spiritual survival of a people (Roscoe, 1977:171).

Under a state of disillusionment, Kenyans (through the Mau-Mau War) fought and won their independence in December, 1963. This victory notwithstanding, a great majority of the masses were still languishing in the chasm of penury. A change in the status quo is what is what Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is advocating in his *Devil on the Cross*.

THE NOVEL

The novel begins with a prologue in which the novelist assigns himself a prophetic role in Kenya. He hears a clarion call from the masses beckoning on him to "reveal what now lies concealed by darkness" (P8). From the text, one would discover that what is concealed by darkness is Imperialism – disguising as Neo-colonialism. For Ngugi, Imperialism or Neo-Colonialism is synonymous with the "the Devil". Hence, no effort should be spared in exterminating it:

The Devil, who will lead us into the blindness of the heart and into the deafness of the mind, should be crucified, and care should be taken that his acolytes do not lift him down from the cross to pursue the task of building Hell for the people on Earth. (P7)

In his acceptance of the people's call for help, Ngugi, the "Prophet of Justice" (P7), goes into seven days of fast. In the course of the fast, he receives revelations about the plight of the masses which he typifies in Jacinta Wariinga – the protagonist and heroine of the novel. Accordingly, Ngugi calls on all and sundry to examine the situation on hand before assigning blame: "... come and let us reason together come and let us reason together now come and let us reason together about Jacinta Wariinga before you pass judgment on our children" (P9).

WARIINGA – THE PROTAGONIST

Ngugi, through the protagonist – Wariinga, brings to the fore the plight of the less privileged in the society and calls for a revolution that would change the status quo. Wariinga is dismissed from her job for rejecting the amorous advances of Boss Kihara. The same day, she is abandoned by her fiancé (John Kimwana) who accuses her of "being Boss Kihara's mistress" (P10). The same week, she is ejected from her room by her landlord for objecting to rent increment. Her problems are exacerbated when she receives a death threat by the "Devils Angels" (P10) should she take up the matter with the authorities: "Make the slightest move to take this matter to the authorities, and we shall issue you a single ticket to God's kingdom or Satan's – a one way ticket to Heaven or Hell" (P10).

Wariinga, under the state of illusion, attributes her misfortune to her appearance – she hates her blackness and her teeth. Hence, she starts living a life of travesty in order to change her looks. In the process, she becomes disillusioned after seeing a vision of people crucifying the Devil on the cross. In this respect, she likens Boss Kihara and her landlord to the Devil. Consequently, she is provoked to fight oppression since victory is sure: "And there and then the people crucified the Devil on the cross, and they went away singing songs of victory" (P13).

Wariinga returns to her parents aboard Mwaura's Matatu Matata Matamu decrepit bus. She meets other commuters – one of whom gives her an Invitation Card inviting her to the "Devil's Feast" at Ilmorog. The Invitation Card reads:

The Devil's Feast!
Come and See for Yourself –
A Devil-Sponsored Competition
To Choose Seven Experts in Theft and Robbery.
Plenty of Prizes!
Try Your Luck.
Competition to Choose the Seven Cleverest
Thieves and Robbers in Ilmorog.
Prizes Galore!
Hell's Angels Band in Attendance!

Signed: Satan
The King of Hell
c/o Thieves' and Robbers' Den
Ilmorog Golden Heights

On arrival at Ilmorog, Wariinga discovers the feast to be a forum where Kenyan capitalists vie for honours in their scheming to exploit the masses. Before long, she becomes aggressive in her fight against exploitation and brutally kills Gaturia's father – the rich old man from Ngorika who sometime in the past impregnated her and denied responsibility.

WANGARI

Wangari is another character in the novel who feels the excruciating pains of exploitation. She represents the peasants in the novel and Ngugi presents her as having gone through the unspeakable horrors of Neo-colonialism. She is dispossessed of her land for not being able to pay back the loan she collected from the Kenyan Economic Progress Bank. The bank auctions her land and she is left with none for cultivation. Now jobless, she moves from Ilmorog – a rural area – to Nairobi in search of a job. In the course of searching for a job, she is arrested, charged with vagrancy and awaiting trial in detention. Her only saving grace comes in the courtroom when she offers “to cooperate with the police in rooting out theft and robbery in the country” (P14).

From the courtroom, Wangari unwittingly discovers the “robbers” hideout and promptly alerts the police as she had promised. On arrival at the lair, Senior Superintendent Gakono – with his boys – discovers that the robbers are a crop of home-base and foreign capitalists who had earlier on notified the (the police) of their celebration of exploitation. The Police Superintendent offers apologies to the oppressors and accordingly orders that the “crazy woman” (Wangari) be forced out of the cave and dealt with satisfactorily. This is Ngugi’s attempt at showing the law enforcement agents as accomplices to the crimes by the oppressors to continually exploit the masses: “*So you, the police are the servants of one class only? ... treacherous rats that love to devour patriotism*”(P198).

MUTURI

Muturi is a character in the novel who typifies the workers. He is a carpenter, plumber, mason, painter, etc. He is exploited by the oppressor. His exploiter is Boss Kihara who relieves him of his job for agitating for better conditions of service and calling out his colleagues to embark on strike. In his own contribution to change the status quo, Muturi called out the masses in violent resistance to check the ugly trend. When Gatuivia warns him of the impending danger should he attempt to go violent, he replies: “*But I will not run away. We shall not run away. For us workers, there’s no turning back*” (P205).

In his post revolution speech, Muturi describes all the workers as his “clansmen” (P208). He appreciates them for taking their stand and refusing to be “the pot that cooks but never tastes the food” (P208).

II. CONCLUSION

This paper has brought to the fore the fact that social problems have always been of great concern to creative minds. One of the social problems that have bedeviled Africa for a long time is the inequalities existing between the elitist (nouveau riche) bourgeoisie and the poor masses (the proletariat). This particular social problem has been of concern to literary artists - among them being Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, who, by using the characters in his novel – *Devil on the Cross* – recommends the Marxian paradigm (violence) as the only sane response to crush exploitation of the poor by a rich.

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