With Petals of Blood (1978), Ngugi enters that phase of his creative evolution as a writer from where his attack on capitalism as a subtle form of economic colonialism becomes visibly bitter. In the post-independence scenario of Kenya, Ngugi views capitalism as a demonic power that crushes every aspect of human life – starting from the social to the political. Harish Narang is of the view that with Petals of Blood, Ngugi has finally succeeded in writing a political novel, while Simon Gikandi is of the opinion that in this novel “political idea and ideology and are not merely aspects of ‘local colour’ but function as determinates of form and content.” This novel takes the theme of disillusionment and betrayal by the chosen people to higher levels. The sense of betrayal by the people’s representatives was hinted at in his previous novel, A Grain of Wheat, in which the people’s representative betray the people by buying for himself the farm that the latter had wanted to buy by pooling in their resources and a loan from the bank. They had approached the Member to discuss on the possibility of getting a loan from the bank and the formalities for it. The Member had seemed to be greatly delighted to see the efforts of the people to start a co-operative effort and praised them highly for their spirit of harambee, but a few days afterwards when they had gone to see the member on the matter they had found that the farm which they wanted to buy had already been sold, and to add to their dismay, the buyer was none other than the same Member whom they had approached and discussed for the loan. It is one instance of how the dream of the people of enjoying the goods in free Kenya is destroyed by those who have come into power.

Anger at the betrayal of the people by the collaborators has been one of the chief themes of the novels of Ngugi, and this bitterness and anger seems to have grown with the passage of time. Petals of Blood expresses this bitterness through the experiences of persons who have failed in achieving their objectives. A novel that begins like a detective thriller with “Murder, he wrote…”, Ngugi goes on to discuss serious issues that grow out personal experiences and dilemmas into that of social concern. Written in the form of confessions by the teacher, Godfrey Munira, the novel takes into view the experiences of three other major characters, all of whom
seem to be in the search for their self, or at least to answers to those questions that have been troubling them for long. In this search for the fulfilment of the self, fate throws these four characters together and all have a share in the collective experience that follows. Set in the wasteland of Ilmorog, the novel records the transformation of an unsophisticated hamlet into an urban area under the impact of urbanisation and globalization. This transformation of the landscape is a simultaneous one along with the transformation that goes on within the characters. It is the triple murder of three prominent persons at Ilmorog that sets the ball of action and inquiry rolling in the novel. The police cannot ascertain whether the three were murdered and burnt or it was an accident. Inspector Godfrey is called in for investigation and during the enquiry a fine game of power dynamics is revealed.

As the investigation goes on, the reader is presented with a gripping narration which that reveals a story finely woven around the theme and the dynamics of power. In this novel it seems possible to study the theme of power by focussing on the different levels at which it operates – individual, social, and economic. The study at the individual level takes into consideration the gender issue over power also, while these three levels exhibit the operation of power from the colonial and the neo-colonial perspectives too. The idea of education as empowerment that Ngugi had debated so much in his earlier novels like *Weep Not, Child* where he shows western education as paradoxical in the Kenyan context, especially during the nationalist phase of Kenyan history takes on a new dimension in the neo-colonial context where it is shown that the process of creating collaborators is not over and that it will continue as long as people do not become aware of the evils of neo-colonial capitalism all by themselves or till the curtain of greed is not removed from their eyes. Ngugi’s anger against the collaborators has worked as an important force in shaping his literary sensibilities and his creativity as a novelist. In more than one of his novels he pours forth his bitter disgust against the breed of such persons who are prepared to sell off everything for the sake of money and power. *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between* contain characters in the colonial set-up that function as collaborators, sometimes willingly and sometimes unknowingly. *A Grain of Wheat* acts as a mediating point in Ngugi’s portrayal of collaborators since in this novel he portraits characters that function as watchdogs of the empire in the colonial as well as in the newly-gained independence phase.
Again it is from this novel that Ngugi begins to throw his focus on the manner in which the capitalist powers create their henchmen to maintain and continue the process of exploitation even after they have left these colonies (Kenya, in this context). From *Petals of Blood* his attack on the people who continue to be the carriers of colonial/capitalist exploitation becomes virulent. His next two novels, *Devil on the Cross* and *Matigari* take this attack to newer heights. *Matigari* also seems to be the statement of his view that a change in the existing system of corruption and exploitation in Kenya can be brought about only through violent means when he writes: “Justice for the oppressed comes from a sharpened spear.” Indeed such has been Ngugi’s anxiety over the state of affairs in post-independence Kenya that power has continued to be one of the dominant themes in his novels.

As already mentioned, Ngugi’s handling of the theme of power shows a steady development when one examines his novels in a chronological manner. In his first two novels, viz. *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between*, Ngugi deals with the process of the establishment of power in a colonial society through an examination of the various mechanisms of colonial control, while in *A Grain of Wheat* his focus is on how the dreams and aspirations of the people for a free and liberated Kenya with enough provisions for fulfilment of the political and economic aspirations of the people is threatened by the transfer of power into corrupt hands. In the present novel under discussion, Ngugi presents the dynamics of power relationships and power-conflict under the neo-colonial set-up of recently independent Kenya. It may be mentioned here that from this novel onwards, the examination of power dynamics in the neo-colonial socio-political structure becomes the major focus in Ngugi’s novels and as his development as a writer continues with the writing of each successive novel, there is a visible increase of his anger and indignation of how the true fruits of *Uhuru* was being gathered by those few who had not contributed in any way to the attainment of Kenya’s independence, and how those who had truly fought for or supported the liberation movement were now sidelined and barred from tasting the sweet fruit of freedom. It pained him all the more to see how many of the persons who had benefited most in the new set-up had been previously blatant supporters of the colonial regime and how they were collaborating to maintain the same process of exploitation and drain of national wealth to “foreign investors”. In other words, they
had continued to be the watchdogs of their former masters and bearers of the torch of colonial exploitation under black skin. In the backdrop of a society where the shepherds do not care for their flocks and with the image of the God-forsaken ‘wasteland’ the novelist portrays at the beginning of the novel, the theme of power is staged out through an intricate web of power dynamics that involves many players in the game of the struggle for power. The players in this game range from a small-scale shopkeeper (Abdulla) to a rich businessman, from a whore (Wanja) to a union leader (Karega), from a former student leader who later turned into a stern watchdog of the colonial values (Chui) to an errant teacher (Munira). The list of people involved in the struggle for the acquisition of power and resistance towards it can be stretched further but an examination of the dynamics of power that exists among these few named above will give us a fair view of the manner in which Ngugi makes power an important theme in this novel.

In this novel, the dynamics of power spiral from the field of academics to that of politics and each major character has an important part to perform in the spiralling of power. Though they appear as mere puppets in the greater web of power, an analysis of the text makes is clear that they are also important participants in the power-structure which includes them and at the same time is highly dependent upon them for its generation and substance. When one follows the accounts of Munira, it may be said that he is caught in the spiralling dynamics of power from his childhood. His father is a minister of the Church and is highly critical of the native ways and habits. A staunch Puritan, he tries to install the virtues of Christianity in his wife and children. He is very strict about it and any non-compliance in this manner is dealt with in a serious manner. For this reason he sends all his children to the best Mission school in Kenya – Siriana Mission School, so that they might get the best of English education and the teachings of the Bible there. But the hollowness of his professed staunch Christianity can be understood when the reason behind his loss of an ear is exposed to the readers. The old man has one ear missing and Munira never had the explanation for it nor had he ever tried to ask his father about it. Later it is revealed to the readers that the ear of Brother Ezekiel was cut off by the forest-fighters because he had tried to force himself upon a woman squatter of his farm. The woman’s elder son who was with the forest-fighters had cut off the ear of the priest as a punishment for that. In vengeance, the woman is asked to leave the farm by Munira’s father. The
old man had demanded physical gratification from a squatter woman on his farm (who later turns out to be Karega’s mother) but is refused and he also does not try to force himself upon the lady out of fear for losing his social prestige. Things however do not go as he had wished and so when the woman’s son, who was linked to the forest fighters, comes back and hears from his mother of the act of Brother Ezekiel, he cuts off an ear of the old man as a punishment for trying to take advantage of his mother’s situation. This incident, while it exposes the hollowness of the priestly class in the society, also points towards the vulnerable position of women that men view them to be in. Above all these, the punishment of Brother Ezekiel by Karega’s brother is an instance of the activities of the forest fighters against such people.

Such interpretations as done of the above incidents in the life of Brother Ezekiel and Karega’s mother with her elder son representing the Mau-Mau, who steps in to deliver justice by punishing the errant clergyman shows the operation of the dynamics of power at three levels – the gender level, the socio-economic level and the national/colonial level. At the gender-level the attempt of Munira’s father can be interpreted as the male desire to dominate physically over a woman. It might be called as the male desire for dominance over a female body. But when the root of this desire is analysed critically, it would be seen that the cause lies in the poor economic condition of the woman as she works as a squatter in Ezekiel’s farm and lacks financial security. It is the lack or the absence of this economic blanket over her that prompts Ezekiel to try to possess her. While her case might be judged as the insecure position of the squatters, it cannot be denied that this insecurity is the result of their lower financial position in comparison to the rich landed farmers. The possession of land, thus, comes up as an important aspect of deciding the empowerment or otherwise of an individual or a family. The importance of land is a theme that Ngugi has dealt with in details in his earlier novels too, especially in Weep Not, Child. In terms of Petals of Blood, land again functions as an important agent for deciding the degree of empowerment that one enjoys in the Kenyan society, thereby deciding the dynamics of relationships based on power. Again, at the level of the colonial/anti-colonial struggle that forms one of the basics of Ngugi’s novels the relationship between brother Ezekiel and Karega’s mother might be interpreted as the exploitation of the (female) colonized by the (male) colonizer and the retaliation of her elder son can be taken as an example of resistance of anti-colonial forces towards established
colonial authority. However, whichever we one tries to look at the incident, it reveals a case of the exercise or the desire to exercise power at the individual and the social level. Though Munira's father reacts by driving the family of the 'unsubmissive' and 'rebellious' family of squatters away from his farm, it is the most that he could do under his limitations as a man of the Church.

Almost the same type of relationship might have existed between Munira and Wanja had not the latter been a woman who was well aware of the fact that her body exercised complete, almost mesmerising effect upon her admirers. Munira was sent to the mission school at Siriana to be educated in the ways of the Whitemen by learning their wisdom and their religion. But unfortunately for Munira, his troubles begin at the Mission School when he becomes involved in a strike led by Chui, who was the star-pupil at the school and other black students against the English Principal, Cambridge Fraudsham. Along with Chui and others, Munira is also expelled from the Mission school and he has to leave his education mid-way. At his home he is considered as a failure by his father for whom English education and monetary success in life count most of all. Such views of his father are quite contrary to the type of life that he is supposed to live as a clergy. It is an instance of how Ngugi satirises the hollowness and the hypocrisy of the Church in the novel. His other brothers do well and hold important positions of power and influence. It is Munira who becomes the black sheep in his family and his father does not hide his displeasure from him. Besides the failure of Munira, his sister Mukami also is seen as bringing stigma to the family because she had committed suicide and the reason was unknown to Munira. However, the reason becomes known to him much later but by this time he is already caught in the dynamics of power that surround him and others around him at Ilmorog. In his relationship with Wanja, Munira projects one of the important strands in the dynamics of power that Ngugi portrays in this novel - the strand of feminine power within the restricted space which is provided to it within the oppressive neo-colonial and patriarchal social pattern. This is visible in the novel from the beginning to the end and through the portrayal of female characters like Wanja, her old grandmother, and Munira's sister Mukami to some extent Ngugi succeeds in proving the point that driven to the edge, even a frail woman like Wanja can turn into a planned murderer. Though there are some other characters in the novel like Munira's wife, they do not show any interest in getting involved in the power dynamics that surround them. They
prefer to live an uninvolved life within the limited space provided to them by the patterning forces of the society. But it should also be kept in mind that even women like Wanja do not get involved in the conflicts of power voluntarily; rather they are sucked and drawn into the whirlwind of power conflicts involuntarily. Left with no other alternative they can do nothing but to jump into the burning fray where the male players of the game decide the turn of events.

But as has been alleged against Ngugi that he turns his heroines either into goddesses or into whores, thereby swinging between the two extremes, in this novel too, Wanja has been portrayed as a whore for quite a considerable period of time, except during her short stints as barmaid cum helper in Abdulla's shop and her later return with Munira and Karega to Ilmorog. It is indeed paradoxical that her physical vulnerability as a woman later becomes her strength as she uses her physical attraction to bring about the end of the three persons whom she wanted to kill. Her beauty works both ways for her, sometimes as an enemy and sometimes as a weapon of seduction and execution. The power of her beauty is so strong that men find themselves attracted towards her like moths to a flame. Whenever she wills she can make men cringe before her but it is only on rare occasions that she does so. As a young girl she had been exploited by a rich old man older to her by years and this had destroyed her life and career as a student. She had to run away from home as she was not brave enough to risk the stigma of becoming an unmarried mother. She finds herself the job of a barmaid as this was the only job easily available in Kenya for stray young girls like her. It is indeed a grim fact that thousands of other girls like Wanja need to survive on the strength of their body alone being at the same time fully aware of the fact that they would be left with nothing once their beauty faded. The desire for a family and a home remain distant dreams for them. Their existence is on a day to day basis without the future holding any promise for them. It can be again argued in the same vein that even though the men might pride themselves in dominating over their women, in cases like Wanja the reverse is the reality as the men themselves are the victims of the very section that they want to dominate. The female body has long been considered by men as their prerogative and the possession of a beautiful female body has been seen as adding to the vain prestige of men. But unknown to the vain males, it is sometimes their lust for the female body that becomes their most terrible weakness. So, it is not unnatural that men, whether rich or poor, find themselves
cringing before Wanja when their lust gets the better of them and it is perhaps best seen on two occasions, first when during the trip to the city Wanja, Karega and the others who accompany them find themselves imprisoned when they accidentally enter into the farm of the same person who had seduced and dumped Wanja when she had been a young student, and the second instance happens to be the climactic one in the novel when lured by Wanja’s beauty the three – Mizigo, Chui and Kimeria walk into her trap and lose their lives. It is indeed hilarious to see how the old lecher first tries to seduce the beautiful Wanja with sweet words and promises and finally loses his composure when she goes on declining his offers steadily. All this goes to show the paradox inherent in the men-women relationship which exists in the novel and which projects an altogether different dynamics of power-relationships than that which is projected on the surface. However, the manner in which the male predatory approach towards Wanja’s body has been projected in the novel, it provides scope for trying to understand the female body as the arena for men to fight out their vain ego. At the same time it makes possible for the reader to see the female body as an object of desire – either to be obtained or to be punished. In the context of the present novel the latter interpretation seems to be more correct as one of the objectives of the novelists in this text has been to show the law of the jungle prevalent in the heart of sophisticated people; the motto that in the contemporary Kenyan situation one either eats or gets eaten.

The experiences of Wanja with the various men in her life leave her hankering after true love that does not take only the physical aspect into consideration; though it takes her a long time to realize the goal of her heart she finally seems to find it in the person of Abdulla. In him she finds what she had searched for in Munira and Karega but had not found. Perhaps except in her relationship with Abdulla in almost all her other relationships with men the reader can very easily discern the play of the dynamics of power. Munira wanted to possess her only for himself without trying to understand the thirst of her feminine soul. His possessiveness ultimately leads him to see his own former student Karega as his competitor in his desire for Wanja. Karega too, though he is favoured initially by Wanja, suffers from the same sort of myopic vision of Wanja that Munira had. Though the relationship of Wanja with Karega is far better than the one she had with Munira, she can sometimes feel the signs of reproach of that Karega has for her in his eyes. Particularly after her taking back to harlotry,
she finds it very difficult to return to the earlier understanding which she shared with Karega. Perhaps it is what leads her to regard Abdulla as the right man for her. Of course it must be added here that in her choice of Abdulla who is a lame and poor man she was exhibiting her own power over those who had been responsible for her sufferings earlier or had tried to possess her by a sheer show of wealth and power. In deciding to present Abdulla in front of her hypocritical lovers she was making them feel impotent before her in spite of their wealth and influence. Both her admiration and love for Abdulla and her desire for vengeance work together in leading her to this decision.

With Wanja things take on a different turn as she tries to compensate for the baby that she had lost by becoming a mother again. Rather it might be said that she feels a compulsive desire to feel a living form within her again. For this she returns to the village (Ilmorog) where her old grandmother lives and goes to meet the soothsayer who advises her to enter into physical union on the full moon night so that she might be blessed with a baby again. To fulfill this desire of hers to be a mother again she desires a union with Munira who is already under her spell. But on that very fateful night Karega comes searching for Munira for an answer that had been tormenting him for long and things get quite muddled as the lamp in Wanja’s home trips and a curtain catches fire. However Karega leaves after sometime and the union between Wanja and Munira takes place. Though in the long run this union between Wanja and Munira turns out to be fruitless it nevertheless points the power which her body exercises over others.

As already mentioned, in the character of Munira’s father Ngugi was trying to satirise the hypocrisy of the Church. In vengeance, the woman is asked to leave the farm by Munira’s father. A further example of the hypocrisy of the caretakers of religion is projected towards the later part of the novel during the march of the people to the city to meet their representative and ask for a solution the near-starvation situation of drought-stricken Ilmorog. On the way to the city, Joseph is taken ill and Munira and a few others decide to knock at the gate of a clergyman for some food and help for the sick Joseph. But even after they have waited for a long time for the priest to finish his evening prayers, all that he can give them is prayers and blessings for the soul. In no way does this priest make any attempt to listen to their grievances or to
help the suffering boy. In the context of the novel his is perhaps the worst example of
the hypocrisy of the religious as he a representative of those who only provided lip
service to religion but always fell short of when it came to performing the very virtues
which they preached.

Ngugi had always been suspicious of English education and Christianity in the
Kenyan context and he brings these two under attack in many of his novels. His first
two novels deal more explicitly with this problem. In *Petals of Blood* he directs the
attack not solely on Christianity alone but on those who exploit the name of religion
and practise hypocrisy. In this novel too, Ngugi shows religion as an instrument for
gaining social prestige and success. Munira's father and the unsympathetic priest both
own enormous landed property and lead a thriving and luxurious life. They are least
concerned about helping the poor rather they are always anxious about increasing
their own property and prestige in the society. They have indeed gone a long way
away from the path of God. Again from another point of view they may be seen as
perpetrating the neo-colonial apparatus of exploitation in their own capacity since
they use religion as a tool for enhancing their own position without performing their
duty towards it.

When one goes for a detailed analysis of the theme of power in this novel
keeping in view the manner in which power is maintained even after the passage from
the colonial to the post-colonial phase, it will be observed that the earlier colonial
form of exploitation is replaced by the new form of capitalist exploitation. The
colonial empire might have left the newly-independent states by granting them
political independence but their exit proves to be only a mockery of the process. The
new masters of the people prove to be of the same type as were the earlier colonial
settlers. It is only a difference of colour in this transfer of power and not a transfer of
motives since the process of exploitation is carried on blatantly by those who wield
power now.

However, there is a subtle process through which these watch-dogs of the
capitalist empire are ‘groomed’. Through a combined strategy involving Euro-
Christian English education, the conversion of the people into Christianity, and the
transfer of European values to them, many were groomed into looking down upon
their own religion and culture and desire for an ‘upliftment’ into the Euro-Christian way of life and be assimilated into the mainstream of European life. But things did not stop at this point. There were many who, lured by the prospect of enjoying power and wealth, joined the group of collaborators to work against their own people and strengthen the power of their exploiters. During the colonial period they served as homeguards and spies, carrying the gun of their own exploiters and using them against their own brothers; and in the later period these very persons turned into the watchdogs of the same power that had sucked and belittled them, enjoying in return whatever small morsels fell for them after their masters had taken away the lion’s share from them. In this novel, Ngugi has portrayed this making of the neo-colonial collaborators most sharply perhaps in the character of Chui, who turns from a leader of the (coloured) boys of the school to a staunch supporter of the ‘white’ ideals of obedience and submission to authority.

This process of turning the Blackman into a blind believer of the Whitemen’s knowledge and religion is a process which Ngugi had earlier criticised in details in Weep Not, Child. In fact, the twin forces of religion and Euro-centric education functioned in such a way upon the Blacks that they wished to be turned into whites; to be transformed into ‘white-washed Blacks’ – scorning their own native culture and adopting whatever the other had to offer.

It is indeed very interesting to note how Chui who had headed a strike at the Siriana Mission School is expelled for organising a strike against the English Headmaster, Cambridge Fraudsham. Quite a considerable period of time elapses before Chui returns to the same school as the Headmaster. In fact, during another strike at Siriana Mission School, the boys demand that they should be provided with a new Headmaster, and their demand is for a coloured person. Chui’s name is proposed as the unanimous favourite because of his record as a leader in leading the earlier strike. But when this very Chui arrives and takes over as the new Headmaster, the boys at Siriana are in for a very rude shock because the person that they have before them was not the same Chui that they had been waiting for. This person who arrives before them is nothing less than a complete Englishman, the only thing that makes him unlike a true Englishman is his black skin. In fact, he becomes an example of how much of the false English values that one can imbibe within oneself and forget.
his own cultural moorings: the perfect example of the ‘white-washed’ Negro. The description of Chui as he arrives to take over the charge of the school tells almost everything about the radical transformation that has taken place in his person after his expulsion from Siriana and subsequent stay in England. His arrival at the school is described by Karega in a dramatic manner in the following words:

‘Chui arrived. Deathly, sepulchral silence. He climbed the steps...up...up...to the foyer. Our eyes were glued to the scene before us. He had khaki shorts and shirt and a sun helmet: a black replica of Fraudsham...’

Chui begins his address at the Mission School by first announcing a set of rules to be followed strictly. He thanked the teachers for the high standards and world-wide reputation which they had established for the school and spoke of his firm determination to build on what was already there. He made it very clear that he was not in support of any form of radical Africanisation. For him ‘Obedience was the royal road to order and stability’ and read a few lines from a Shakespearean play in order to assert the importance of submission to authority and his strong determination to install unquestioned discipline at the school at any cost:

The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre
Observe degree, priority, and place,
Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,
Office, and custom, in all lines of order:
...O, when degree is shak’d,
Which is the ladder to all high designs,
The enterprise is sick!
...
Take but degree away, untune that string,
And, hark, what discord follows.

It soon turns out that the boys had bargained badly by inviting Chui to take over as the Headmaster for he turns out to more oppressive than the former. He introduces such measures that serve not only to demoralise the students but also to create divisions within them. He established a hierarchy of the school captain, the
senior prefects and the junior prefects among the students to pass his commands around. Privileges were also granted according to seniority, e. g. the students in Form I were not allowed to wear shoes except on worship days while those in Form VI were allowed to wear trousers and jackets and ties. The syllabus was filled up with European writers and Western conquerors, Western inventors and discoverers were drummed into the heads of the students. All that was happening at the arrival of Chui was contrary to what the students had bargained in removing Fraudsham. In Karega’s words the ‘African dream’ had vanished. The students went on a strike to protest against the divide-and-rule policy of Chui but the latter used the strictest form of repression to tackle the situation. When the school re-opened, Karega was one of those who were not allowed re-admission into the institution.

The radical transformation of Chui from an activist student leader to a supporter and perpetrator of the same system against which he had voice his indignation earlier is a clear example of the great character-moulding power of Euro-Christian education and how it had become a potent tool in the hands of the colonizers. The transformation of Chui is further important as an example of the colonial system runs by creating its supporters from the very masses which it seeks to exploit. It can also be interpreted as an instance of how the spiralling of power takes place in a society at a given point of time. The exploiter and the exploited both form different points of development in a strand of power and both contribute towards it either through resistance or coercion. In Chui’s case it turns out to be co-operation with the very forces that he had initially resisted, and this is brought about through assimilation. In course of time this very Chui is hailed as a great educationist in post-independence Kenya. His death in the fire is lamented as a great loss to the educational world of Ilmorog. So Chui forms one pillar of the larger socio-political structure that helps to perpetrate colonial power over the people by regimenting them through education.

It is really interesting to note how Chui figures in the lives of both Munira and Karega and coincidentally both had been a part of the two strikes at Siriana in which Chui had figured. Munira was involved in the strike at Siriana led by Chui against the dictatorial nature of Cambridge Fraudsham while Karega was involved in the strike at the same school against Chui. It is indeed an ironical twist of fate that they are both
brought together in the larger drama of Ilmorog again. Both had to lose their study because of their involvement in the strikes. The transformation that Chui had undergone from his expulsion to his return to Siriana had perplexed the young Karega so much that he had come all the way looking for Munira, one of his former teachers asking for an answer to this question that had been troubling him continuously. Another reason for his coming to seek the answer from Munira was that he had heard of the latter’s involvement in the first strike led by Chui. This brings a young former student and his teacher together and they get involved in a dynamics of power with Wanja at the centre.

The influence that Wanja casts over them has already been discussed above. The rift between Munira and Karega begins when Munira takes him to be his competitor in his love for Wanja. The fact that Wanja should prefer Karega who was much younger than him and who had come in contact much later with Wanja, and that too through him, disturbs him and he tries everything in his capacity to keep them as apart from each other as possible. The final nail in their relationship is driven on the night of the drinking of the Thengeta at the house of Wanja’s grandmother in order to celebrate a good harvest after a long period of drought. On this occasion, the strong spirit unlocks the hearts and tongues of those who drink it and Karega, under the influence of this strong liquor, tells of his relationship with Munira’s sister Mukami and how he was the son of the same squatter woman whom Munira’s father had once tried to seduce but had to pay with an ear.

In the context of newly-independent Kenya, there are still others who serve the same purpose as Chui and form the other organs of the exploitative machinery. These are people from other walks of life and they come from different spheres of socio-economic activities ranging from banking to politics. As such they leave no options for the common man to elude their parasitic grasp. In Petals of Blood the newspaper report on the first page of the novel contains the names of the murdered who were supposed to be the leading personalities in their particular spheres of activity.

As already mentioned at the beginning of this Chapter, the newly elected leaders/representatives of the people also help to highlight and develop the theme of power through their activities of disillusioning the people and bringing in the theme of
betrayal. In this connection the role of the Parliamentary representative of Ilmorog is worth examining. During the entire tenure of his capacity as the representative of Ilmorog he had never once visited his Constituency to enquire about the condition of the people there. So, when faced by a series of droughts the people decide to go and meet him in the city and seek his help, he misunderstands their purpose and interprets their simple act as a calculated move by his political enemies to defame him. He tries to act diplomatically in his misconception and asks the people to try for a harambee project by collecting donation among them and drink tea. This infuriates the people so much that he is given a sound thrashing and the issue is highlighted by the Press. Getting to know about the suffering of the people of Ilmorog and the incompetency of their representative, donations from various individual and organisational sources begin to flow in. When the people return to their village various organisations including the Church and the Government begin their activities to bring Ilmorog into the mainstream of Kenyan life; and the building of the Trans-African Highway through Ilmorog is perhaps the most important part of this ambitious scheme. But when the highway is built finally the outcome turns out to be different from what was expected of it by the people.

The incident which takes place between the people of Ilmorog and their chosen representative can be interpreted as an instance of the power of the suppressed and the neglected people who form the majority in most democratic set-up when they finally rise to demand their rightful dues. It also points out that in the greater dynamics of power in this novel the common people also serve as an important agent in developing the future course of action. It is perhaps an indication of the point that however weak individually, the power of a united people cannot be neglected in a nation.

The failure of the Parliamentary representative of Ilmorog due to his incompetency as a good leader and his greed for money only raises a very pertinent issue regarding power in the Kenyan context. It shows how power is enjoyed by the most corrupt and incompetent persons while the fruits of independence which should have gone to the real heroes who had fought and sacrificed for the attainment of independence are left out to fend for themselves. Abdulla in the novel is one such character whose stump of a leg is the only prize that he had received for participating
in the struggle for the country’s independence from colonial rule. To eke out a living for himself and Joseph, the foundling whom he had adopted, he runs a small shop cum beer bar. His position worsens once Ilmorog is joined to the rest of Africa through the Trans-African Highway. Such fate of the true and worthy sons of the soil was a great concern for Ngugi and his caricaturing of corrupt politicians and businessmen becomes an important source for his expression of disgust towards this breed of self-seekers. Judged from this angle, Abdulla can be seen as an anti-thesis to the corrupt public leaders of the time.

Like Abdulla, there is yet another person in this novel who uses power in the right direction when it comes to question of the welfare of the poor and in this condition he also serves as an anti-thesis to the corrupt public leaders and politicians of the society. This person is the lawyer who had once helped Wanja to escape from the clutches of a German sex-maniac and again provided shelter to the villagers of Ilmorog when they had come to the town to meet their errant leader. On that occasion he had helped them not only by providing them shelter in his own house but also by arranging the release of Munira and others who had been wrongly detained by the police. Later he turns into a furious defender of the poor people and is not liked by the corrupt politicians and businessmen and is murdered. It should be mentioned here that he was well aware of the fact that he was treading a dangerous path by championing the cause of the poor and the down-trodden but he was determined to pit himself against those who were out to snatch their rights. His grim death is another important point in the development and understanding of the theme of power in this novel as it presents a direct conflict of interests over the available resources between the exploiters and the champion of the poor. Finally in this struggle the capitalist class wins by the application of sheer force.

There is one more space in this novel where the theme of power can be seen as operable; and it is the village of Ilmorog itself. It is indeed worth noticing the manner in which Ngugi introduces the place to the readers in the beginning of the novel as Munira arrives at the village to take charge of the school:
Who would want to settle in this wasteland except those without limbs – may the devil swallow Abdulla – and those with aged loins – may the Lord bless Nyakinyua, the old woman.  

Later in the same description, Ilmorog is referred as a ‘drought stricken, depopulated wasteland’. Ilmorog is, thus, represented as a land of the crippled and the old, a place devoid of any youthful vitality; and it is in this wasteland that the theme of the damaging effects of international capitalism is acted out. But before condemning Ilmorog as a wasteland only, it is also important to take note of how the place has been described in its earlier days when the lure of the metallic city had not taken her children away. Ngugi takes the readers back to the distant, undated past when Ilmorog had been a lively thriving village. He describes the Ilmorog of the distant past as:

Ilmorog ...had not been always a small cluster of mud huts lived in only by old men and women and children with occasional visits from wandering herdsmen. It had had its days of glory: thriving villages with a huge population of sturdy peasants who had tamed nature’s forests and, breaking the soil between their fingers, had brought forth every type of crop to nourish the sons and daughters of men.

It is also interesting to note how before Ilmorog is transformed from a village into an industrial town, the description of the landscape alternates between lush green fields of paddy, wheat or peas, as the crops might be during the seasons of sufficient rainfall, and cracked shambas with dried stalks of grass during seasons of drought. The landscape wears the colour of the season and the factors governing it. The reciprocity of the land and the weather is direct and easily discernible. The transition of Old Ilmorog into New Ilmorog comes through the construction of the Trans-African highway that passes through the place, dividing the village into almost two equal halves, and the later part of the novel deals exclusively with the effect of this transition upon the landscape and the lives of the people.

It is the completion of the project of the Trans-African Highway brings about the misery of the people instead of development. When Ilmorog gets connected to the rest of Africa there occurs a complete transformation of this once laid-back hamlet.
into a town teeming with all sorts of industrial activities. The transition of Old Ilmorog into New Ilmorog is not seen equally by all. There are some who look upon this transition as beneficial to this little hamlet as they feel that it is a sign of the development of the place. The newspaper report at the beginning of the novel which describes the contribution of Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria in the so-called development of Ilmorog reads thus:

They built Ilmorog from a nineteenth-century village reminiscent of the days of Krapf and Rebman into a modern industrial town that even generations after Gagarin and Armstrong will be proud to visit. 10

But as is natural with the expansion of industrialism and the introduction of capitalist culture, the poor get poorer and the rich get richer. The Trans-African Highway connects Ilmorog to the cities of Africa and in the context of the novel any contact with the city is seen as contagious/ominous. The city in contrast to the village is seen as a place of false and metallic promises which lures only to abandon 11. In the novel, Munira, in his desperate attempt to get drunk, thinks of the factories in the cities as “the huge smoking complex of machines and hides and skins and polluted air”.12 Ngugi’s dissatisfaction with the manner in which the city was treating the young blood of the nation by luring them towards her and then leaving them derelicts – as unfit social burdens after having sucked out everything from them has been expressed in the novel in very strong terms. The description of the city as a ‘metallic’ monster is enough evidence of this fact. Even a casual contact with the city is seen as polluting and deeply painful; especially in the case of Wanja. Her earlier experience in the city had been painful and her second contact with the place also leaves a bitter taste in her mouth. When Joseph is taken ill suddenly during the journey to the city, she accompanies a party along with Munira to a farmhouse owned by a rich Black but all of them are caught and bound there and Wanja is called by the landlord who happens to be the same elderly man (Kimeria) responsible for impregnating her while she had been a student. The old man tells her that he wanted her to be his ‘sugar girl’ and that he would provide her with all the necessary luxuries. But she blatantly refuses his sweet words and advances. However, she has to sleep with him for the release of her friends.
While it is possible to interpret this incident as the forced imposition of masculine power over the body of a disadvantaged female, it is also possible to see it as the outcome of superior economic condition of the rich old man. It is all the more in the relationship between Wanja and the old man because the earlier exploitation of Wanja was brought about by seducing her with gifts and clothes. It was in fact the economic disadvantage of her father that had led her in this path. While all this is no doubt due to the corruption and the immorality prevalent among the richer section of Kenyans, their intentions become possible only because of their superior economic status. This brings in the Marxist interpretation of the theme of power as it is possible to examine the course of events and the dynamics of relationships from the “class” point of view. The class-based interpretation of the theme of power can be extended further into the novel as it is possible to examine many of the changes taking place in New Ilmorog from this angle. After the completion of the Trans-African Highway through the village that literally divides it into two, the influence of capitalism is introduced into the rural society of Ilmorog. Under the onslaught of organized capitalism, the small time businessmen of Ilmorog find it extremely difficult to compete and survive against their stronger financial contenders. These small businessmen either merge into the bigger enterprises or lose their existence after sometime. Perhaps the best example of this phenomenon is the degradation of Abdulla from a respectable small businessman into a seller of oranges living in a dingy hovel. This is indeed the ultimate moral, social and physical degradation of a person who had served the nation as a patriot during the period of its armed struggle. This is perhaps an example of how far-reaching the evil effects of capitalism can be in a society where power is grabbed by the incompetent and the corrupt. Moving from the individual to the larger level of the community, the destructive power of capitalism can be understood when one takes into consideration the description of New Ilmorog as a place divided into sections on the basis of the status of their occupants:

There were several Ilmorogs. One was the residential area of the farm managers, County Council officials, public service officers, the managers of Barclays, Standard and African Economic Banks, and other servants of state and money power. This was called Cape Town. The other – called New Jerusalem – was a shanty town of migrant and floating workers, the
unemployed, the prostitutes and small traders in tin and scrap metal. Between the New Jerusalem and Cape Town, not far from where Mwathi had once lived guarding the secrets of iron works and native medicine, was All Saints Church, now led by Rev. Jerrod Brown. Also somewhere between the two areas was Wanja’s Sunshine Lodge, almost as famous as the church.\textsuperscript{13}

The naming of the different areas on the nature of their occupants and their profession seems ironical as New Jerusalem houses those who are really in need of salvation – economic salvation.

In the case of Wanja, her fate and position seem to undergo a full circle as she finally takes up the profession of a prostitute once again after her enterprise with Abdulla fails due to the interruption of the business-minded politician who succeeds in patenting the brewing of the Thenget’a, thereby depriving Wanja and Abdulla from their means of earning. But by this time Wanja has become fully conscious of the power which her body exercises over men and she decides to step into the business of harlotry once again, but in a very sophisticated manner. This time she decides to gather some girls who had suffered like her and with the money that she had got from the sale of her partnership of the brewery, she builds a luxurious mansion and takes up the role of the guardian of those girls there. This taking up of the business of harlotry by Wanja is the representation of what was happening in Kenya at the larger scale where prostitution had become a national business. The ‘showcasing’ of Black girls (here, Kenyan in context) and Black culture is exploited by the rich businessmen as a potential means for earning money. But that such showcasing is not without its own risks can be understood in the incident when Wanja has a narrow escape from a German sex-maniac who takes her to his mansion to have sex with his dog in his presence. So, under such circumstances, it is no surprise that within a short space of time she becomes one of the most desired ‘escorts’ and influential people found it prestigious to be seen with her at parties and gatherings. Powerful men now cringe before her and she is sky-rocketed into fame and wealth within a short span of time.

The change in Wanja might be interpreted as the transition of a prey into a hunter, but this change does not come all of a sudden nor is it the result of a decision that is taken within a short while. It is her final decision to act on a realization that she
had had from long; that in order to survive in a cannibalistic world one has to learn to eat back. But it is not to be understood that Ngugi supports Wanja’s decision. Rather he is quite critical of what she had decided. It is only that under the circumstances that she cannot see beyond that. Perhaps this is why Ngugi is often criticised for either hallowing his female characters to the height of angels or to portray them either as prostitutes; thereby adopting extreme stances on both the ends in spite of the fact that he is the first African writer to give space to female characters in novels. Wanja, however, foreshadows the later female characters of Ngugi who are more of extremists in nature and who do not hesitate to return the blow of males with blows. The gun-trotting heroine of Devil on the Cross is perhaps the most potent example of what Ngugi felt what a woman could do when she decided to enter into the world of violence – the so-called domain of the males.

While all this analysis of Wanja’s character seems to put her in an important position in understanding the theme of power in the novel as she represents active and resistant female force in developing the dynamics of power relationships, among the males it is perhaps Abdulla and Karega who represent two important aspects of resistance towards the neo-colonial capitalist forces in the society. Abdulla represents the revolutionary force of resistance as he continues the legacy of armed struggle (as is evident in his desire to kill the man who had been instrumental in betraying his friend); while Karega represents the collective power of the workers against capitalist forces represented by Kimeria and the M. P. of Ilmorog in the novel. Since Karega and Abdulla represent two different domains of social activity in the novel, it perhaps goes to reinforce Ngugi’s belief that any change in the existing scenario in Kenya could be brought about only through a peasants’ revolution; and the novel also ends with a vision of an organized strike by the workers of the town demanding the release of Karega and their rightful dues. It is a vision of the rise of the suppressed and the latent forces of the society in resistance towards the forces of oppression and exploitation. The rise of the workers as shown towards the end of the novel allows for a more elaborate Marxist interpretation of the novel. The success of the workers in bringing to a standstill the industrial machinery of the town is perhaps an indication of Ngugi’s hope that a workers and farmers strike can change things in Kenya.
The implication of Karega on the charges that he was inciting the workers into a strike against the businessmen of the town puts focus on the theme of power from the point of view of the conflict between the workers and the capitalists. The rich businessmen and the industrialists form an important part of the collective machinery of exploitation that has been responsible for churning out whatever was possible from the people and the society. In the economic context, the workers represent the power of labour while the capitalists represent the power of the capital. Their conflict thus represents the conflict between labour and capital. In the context of the novel, the strike towards the end represents the ultimate culmination of this conflict. In the broader context of the novel, this strike however takes on a deeper meaning. This incident can be interpreted as the spiralling of power in a given context where the conflicting agents add to the momentum of power through resistance and conflict. In this sense, the absence of one agent/force would nullify the functioning of the other since in the absence of one there would not be any base for conflict or resistance. In Petals of Blood, the organisation of the strike is the proof of the existence of conflicting forces and their operation upon each other.

It is also important to take into account the use of violence as a potent factor in deciding the play of power in Petals of Blood. Violence is used by both the colonizer and the colonized with equal effect but with different motives. However, violence is not something new or unique to his novel alone; it has been present in all the earlier novels of the author and they remain a major force/factor in his later novels too. Violence, in the novels of Ngugi becomes a symbol of oppression when it is used by the colonizer while it represents resistance in the hands of the colonized. But it is to be noted that the application of violence changes its meaning according to the context, e.g. when it is used upon the female characters in the novel, it becomes something more than just a means to oppress the colonized subjects – it also allows for a gender-specific interpretation. In this case the female body becomes the locale for the application of power.

The novel contains many instances of the use of violence. In fact, the novel begins with a reference in the newspapers where three prominent persons of Ilmorog – Chui, Mzigo and Kimeria – have become prey to violence; they are burnt to death in the whorehouse of Wanja. It is with this report of arson that the narrative is set rolling.
by the novelist. In the colonial context of the novel, the use of violence can be interpreted as a sign of direct conflict between the colonial government and the forest fighters, thus providing a historical perspective to the theme of power. In this respect, the experiences of Abdulla as a forest fighter are important. His lameness is a ‘gift’ from the colonial administration for his participation in the liberation movement of the nation. But how unfortunate it is that these sons of the soil who had struggled so much to make Kenya an independent country should be deprived of the fruits of freedom. Since Petals of Blood is set in post-independence Kenya, it is in this context that the application of violence should be analysed.

It is interesting to note that a major amount of violent activities take place in connection with the female characters in the novel. The seduction of Wanja in her schooldays by her father’s friend and her consequent pregnancy can be interpreted as a violation of her sexuality. It is equally interesting that she is again trapped by a German who wants to have unnatural sex with her. The violence on women seems to be concentrated mainly on their body – thus making the female body a site for the contestation of power and the use of violence becomes a marker for it. Wanja too has her revenge through the use of violence as she plans and sets fire on all her enemies. Even Munira had planned to apply violence on Wanja in his desire to ‘save’ Karega from her hands. Perhaps the most important application of violence which can be regarded as a consequence of the direct conflict between the capitalist powers and the workers and the poor is the brutal murder of the lawyer who champions the cause of the poor. Violence, thus, becomes an important marker of the presence of power in Petals of Blood.

There is one more aspect to the theme of power in this novel which is a continuance and a development of a thread which Ngugi had started in his earlier novels – the role of the collaborator in extending the reach of the exploiter. In A Grain of Wheat, Karanja figures as one of the worst examples in this regard and the M. P. of the area under which the village of Thabai fell has been portrayed as one who incorporates to himself the benefits which should have gone to the common people. In Petals of Blood, the M.P. of Ilmorog is a development in the same line as that of the M.P. in A Grain of Wheat. He does not know whether the people in his constituency are living a good life or suffering from drought. In the post-independence context of
the novel, the figure of the collaborator also undergoes a refinement; he is changed from the crude figure of the homeguard or the henchman of the colonial settler to that of the sophisticated one like Chui, Mzigo or a rich person like Kimeria. These persons assist the neo-colonial administration and become the extended arms of the international capitalists. The struggle is on for getting the largest share in exploiting the economy of newly-independent Kenya. As already mentioned, the building of the Trans-African highway facilitates this process of transferring the wealth of the land to other countries. The lorries and tankers that ply on this newly-constructed highway are labelled with the names of international companies. Ngugi perhaps wants to show the plight of the common Kenyan who does not have any share in the economy of his own land even after the attainment of independence. This growing tentacle of international capitalism has been dealt by him more bitterly in his next novel – Devil on the Cross. In Petals of Blood, the growing conflict between the workers and the management which has been earlier discussed from a Marxist angle can also be seen as a form of resistance of the common people against the growth of capitalism in the country. It is equally interesting to note that like the earlier colonial/settler government, the owners of the factory also use the policy of divide-and-rule to weaken the agitation of the workers. However, the news towards the end of the novel which tells of the decision of the workers to go on a strike is a ray of hope towards the unity of this exploited class. It can be hoped that this time the proposed strike of the workers will not fail as it did in Weep Not, Child.

The theme of power, as Ngugi has developed in Petals of Blood, has various dimensions to it as the above discussion of the novel has shown. It is the richness of this theme that allows for a variety of approach towards the study of this novel. An analysis of the theme of power in Petals of Blood also helps the readers to grasp the real position of the various classes and sections of Kenyans in this newly-independent nation. The conflict for power in this novel is not just among the rich and the poor, or the common people and the neo-colonial apparatus, or between the two genders: it is an intricate and unfortunate web of all these various strands and it is this virtue which makes it something more than just a political novel – a compelling novel.
Notes:


2 Politics as Fiction, p. 113.


5 Petals of Blood, p. 171.

6 Petals of Blood, p. 172.

7 Petals of Blood, p. 173.

8 Petals of Blood, p. 5.

9 Petals of Blood, p. 120.

10 Petals of Blood, p. 5.

11 Petals of Blood, p. 123.

12 Petals of Blood, p. 100.