CHAPTER VII

Devil on the Cross (1982) is Ngugi’s fifth novel. The novel was originally written in Kikuyu and later translated into English by the author himself. A masterpiece in irony, this novel is a direct and scathing attack on the exploitative process of capitalist economy which for Ngugi is a disguised form of economic imperialism in modern times. In Devil on the Cross, Ngugi’s attack on the international capitalism takes on the shape of the grotesque as he tries to achieve his objective of satirising the capitalist class by blowing them up to the level of the macabre and the bizarre. While Ngugi’s attacks on the form of international capitalism is clearly visible in his earlier novel – Petals of Blood - it is in the present novel that his voice finds a new pitch and edge. Also, the use of the element of the folk-lore which forms an important part of the narrative technique of his previous novel has been developed here to a fuller extent. The role of confessions that was so effective in A Grain of Wheat has been exploited here too. As in A Grain of Wheat, confessions play an important role in Devil on the Cross to give the readers a clearer and deeper insight into the characters in the novel. In fact, the competition of thieves and robbers which forms the crux of the satire on international capitalism is process which is based primarily on confessions through boasting how each one of the thieves and robbers gathered during the feast is an expert in hood-winking and looting the poor. These confessions, while they serve to highlight the nature of the competitors who are vying for the Crown of the Devil’s disciple, also serve to heighten the sense of the grotesque and the macabre ingrained in the process. To the sense of the grotesque is added the sense of the ridiculous when a candidate vying for the crown of the King of thieves and robbers comes forth with the idea of capturing all the land in Kenya and then selling it in small tins and buckets at exorbitant prices to the people who would compete with one another for these small scoops of land. A proposal is also raised for selling air in small packets so that the sellers earn not just sure money but also have ultimate control over the people. In his opinion, if ever the people were to rise in rebellion against them, they could simply cut off the supply of air and force them on their knees. This is taken as the ultimate achievement of their power over others. Such heightening of the sense of the grotesque achieves the effect of creating a hallucinatory vision for the readers and the characters that simply go to watch the
competition out of curiosity. At the same time, while these plans sound absurd, they nevertheless point out the extent of the greed of the capitalists for wealth and power. However, the fear among the rich that someday the poor might rise in rebellion against their exploiters if the latter do not exercise caution in their manner of fleecing and cheating them is an indication of the potential for rebellion among the workers and the peasants. The presence of such potential can be taken as the mark of the existence of a counter-power even though the power might be in an unorganized and dormant stage. It might be noted here that in Ngugi’s novels the potential of the workers for strike is always perceived as a threat by the rich and the capitalists. In two of his earlier novels, Weep Not, Child and Petals of Blood, there are references to and discussions of strikes by the workers against the factory owners. Industrialisation is never seen by Ngugi as good or beneficial for the people; rather from Petals of Blood he views the process of industrialisation as a process of exploiting the wealth of the nation by transporting it to foreign countries. In fact, it will be seen that the very concept of the competition to find out the King of thieves and robbers is based on how effectively one can exploit the poor of the nation.

The Feast of the Devil, which actually turns out to be a competition in proving how much each contestant is capable of serving the interest of the foreigners who have gathered there to chose the most capable of them to look after their empire in Kenya and reap the highest amount of profit for them by exploiting the poor countrymen. The very motif of the Feast thus allows the author to pour out his scorn and satire on the lot of thieves and robbers in Kenya who do not hesitate to rob the wealth of their own nation and hand it over to others in return of a meagre amount of benefit which they would accrue out of it. It is indeed interesting to note how this competition to chose the most capable robber to represent the international gang of thieves and robbers in Kenya is held at a secret place in Ilmorog in front of the foreign delegates who represent different developed countries and are in the lookout for the perfect person to look after their interests in Kenya and further their mission of making the rich richer and the poor poorer. This is indeed the height of international robbery in the name of international capitalism. The description of the competition arranged by the Devil to find out the biggest robber provides Ngugi with an opportunity to examine the theme of power in the socio-economic and political context of independent Kenya. International capitalism is thus presented in this novel.
as a corrupting force and a powerful tool for keeping the former colonies under the
exploitation of the imperial powers even after they have been granted independence.
In the ultimate analysis, it is not unlikely to seem that money serves as the most
potent tool in maintaining disguised authority since the competitors and the organizers
of the Devil’s feast in the novel are ready to cut throats for money. The presence of
the foreign delegates who have been invited to act as judges in the Feast of the Devil
is a proof of the presence of the colonial machinery of exploitation in a disguised
form in Kenya. In order to make the episode the competition interesting and
humorous and with his dislike for international capitalism, Ngugi names the
organisation from which the foreign delegates have come as International
Organisation for Theft and Robbery (IOTR), thereby satirising the entire competition
for the selection of the most efficient robber/thief in Kenya to be chosen by the
foreign delegates to be their representative in the country. It is also interesting to note
how in the address made to the competitors, the leader of the delegates mentions
America as the breeding ground for exploitation (and corruption) and praises the
virtues of money as above everything else:

I think there is no one who does not know that theft and robbery are the
cornerstones of America and western civilisation. Money is the heart that beats
to keep the western world on the move. If you people want to build a great
civilization like ours, then kneel down before the god of money. Ignore the
beautiful faces of your children, of your parents, of your brothers and sisters.¹

By mentioning America in particular and the western civilization in general, Ngugi
was pointing out the threat posed by them to the newly-independent nations like
Kenya, since in his view these symbolised international capitalism and the ushering in
of the age of neo-colonialism. This threat is expressed vocally by Ngugi at another
point through the mouth of the delegates themselves:

We have come from many countries, far and wide; from the USA, England,
Germany, France, The Scandinavian countries – Sweden, Norway and
Denmark – Italy and Japan. Now, let us pause and ponder about that. Different
countries, different tongues, different skin colours, different religions – But
one organisation with one aim and one faith: theft.²
The so-called ‘aim’ of these economically and industrially developed countries that Ngugi mentions in the quoted passage can be read as a sign of his dissatisfaction with the manner in which international companies were draining away Kenyan wealth as he had described in *Petals of Blood* where he describes the Trans-African roadway that is built through Ilmorog as a passage for the entry and operation of multinational companies.

The Marxist influence on Ngugi seems to be at full operation when one agrees to such interpretation of the novel. It might be added here that the later novels of Ngugi are influenced by his reading of Marxist and postcolonial writers and his assessment of the contemporary situation in Kenya. The exploitation of national wealth in the hands of the privileged and corrupted few that he presents in his novels is temptation enough to induce readers to go for a Marxist interpretation of his works. It will be seen that during the description of the Devil’s Feast in the Cave, the aim of the competitors gathered there is to rob the peasants and the workers as much as possible and reap benefits. The ‘class’ affiliation seems to be so strong that when one participant (Kihaahu wa Gatheeca) boasts of having robbed his own kind by establishing ‘European’ schools, he is cried down in the most vehement manner. Other competitors make it clear that robbery should be carried out only upon the poor and not upon the members of the same class:

‘Son of Gatheeca, don’t you feel ashamed? Weren’t you embarrassed, standing there in front of us bragging about deceiving people of your class, shamelessly boasting about how you have stolen from people of your class? If we start robbing, thieving and cheating one another, how will our unity as a class take roots? 3

They plead for the unity of the robber class. To allay the fear of a possible revolt by the exploited peasants and workers, one of the candidates (Gitutu wa Gattaanguru) suggests that they (the rich) should get complete control over the essentials of life so that they can make the poor cringe on their knees if such need were to arise. He comes up with the ridiculous idea that they should try to assume control over the supply of air in the country so that in case of any fear of revolt they should be in a position to
cut off its supply to the desired areas and keep people under control. However ridiculous the idea might seem, it points out to a certain point – the greed and the determination of the rich to keep the poor exploited at any means and also deny them any possibility to raise a voice. It also indicates the use of force to impose one’s will over others which is an essential proof of the existence of power in the novel.

There is another facet to the theme of power in this novel to which such discussion of the relationship between the rich and the poor classes leads to. The fear of a possible workers’ and peasants’ revolt which the delegates and the competitors fear is an aspect of the Marxist influence working upon Ngugi. The rise of the conflict between the rich and the poor over the distribution of national wealth, or between the workers and peasants on the one hand and the neo-capitalist class on the other, which aimed at draining the wealth of the nation and the workers and the peasants who are the real producers of this wealth is a theme which he had exploited earlier to considerable extent in Petals of Blood too. Ngugi’s suspicion and anger at international capitalism which he projects in this novel seems to be the consequence of his Marxist inclinations.

Marxism, in fact, is seen both as a threat and a possible way out the process of exploitation that Kenya is in. While Ngugi projects Marxism as a hope for the oppressed masses, it is perceived as a threat by those who are in power in the country. But in spite of making Devil on the Cross a violent criticism of international capitalism with America and other developed nations of Europe and Asia as the epicentre of the exploitative process going on across the world, the novel does not mention Marxism or Communism as a necessary threat to international capitalism as strongly as he does in his next novel — Matigari; though it is clear that Marxism or Communism can be always perceived as a threat to the established socio-economic and political power structure in such situations. The danger that Marxism as a philosophy presents to such power structure is referred to during the conversation that the passengers have in the matatu of Mwaura when one of the passengers named Mukirai who had studied at Makarere and then at Harvard expresses his views on the danger inherent in the talk of his co-passengers:
It is your kind of talk that is ruining the country. The kind of talk has its roots in communism. It is calculated to sadden our hearts and make us restless. Such works can lead us black people astray, and you know how deeply we believe in God and Christianity. Kenya is a Christian country and that’s why we are so blessed. ⁴

A sentiment of almost the same nature regarding Marxism and Communism is expressed during the reaction of the participants Feast of the Devil to the introductory speech in parables given by the Master of Ceremonies. Voices and words as those noted below ring in the cave

…the master of ceremonies has told the truth about the unity that exists between us and the foreigners. They eat the flesh and we clean up the bones….That’s true African socialism…Ujamaa wa Asili Kiafrika … not like that of Nyerere and his Chinese friends, the socialism of pure envy, the Ujaama that seeks to prevent a man from holding a bone … We don’t want Chinese ways in our country. We want Christianity.⁵

It is also important to note how the master of ceremonies ended his speech stressing on the need to maintain cordial relationship between them and their foreign investors so as to earn more profit out of such relationship:

‘Long live peace, love and unity between me and my local representatives! What is so bad about that? You bite twice and I bite four times. We’ll fool the gullible masses. Long live stability for progress! Long live progress for profit! Long love foreigners and expatriate experts! ⁶

Though the lines a part of the parable that the master of ceremonies had used in his speech, the lines in italics set the motto of the people gathered there as helping the foreigners in the theft, robbery and plunder of their national wealth for a share in the plunder. Ngugi makes it clear that thought Kenya has attained liberation from colonial rule, she is still reeling under the attack of colonial forces in the garb of international capitalism. Even a matatu driver like Mwaura is keen on making money through any
means. When he is asked to state his views on the present situation in the country, he speaks like a true businessman whose sole aim is to earn as much profit as possible:

Business is my temple, and money is my God. But if some other God exists that’s all right ... Show me where the money is paid and I’ll take you there. 

The pages in the novel dealing with the ‘Devil’s Feast’ also help to throw light on the manner in which the thieves and robbers assembled in the cave consider that their main aim should be to cheat the poor and not the rich. As already mentioned, it is quite impossible for them to think that one of the contestants among them has happily robbed his own kind. When one of the contestants suggests that if they are to rob the poor Kenyans, they should be the only thieves and robbers to do so and that there was no need to invite people from foreign countries to join them in this purpose as he holds that if Kenyans rob their own nation the wealth of the nation is not drained outside. But he is unanimously cried down by other competitors who are all too eager to assist the foreigners in robbing their nation and their people. It is an indication of the author that though the nation has gained independence, the colonial mentality of many Kenyans has not been removed completely. By including such incident in the Devil’s feast Ngugi is striking an ironical remark on the contemporary situation in Kenya where the wealth of the nation is sucked away by foreign investors and international companies through the help of Kenyans themselves. The poor who were the real producers of the wealth of the nation did not get any share in it, nor did they have any say in the manner in which it was distributed by the owners. This was a situation in newly independent African nations. As David Basil has pointed out:

All that emerged from the colonial period, in a structural sense, was an institutional void concealed for a while behind a political safety-curtain painted with parliamentary symbols of European provenance, a mere façade of order on lines drawn by alien cultures.

The theme of power that Ngugi presents in Devil on the Cross is a clear development in the same line of treatment that he had done in his earlier novels; though here the focus is more on the evil effects of international capitalism that has emerged as one of the most potent threats in independent Kenya. The description of
the Devil's feast is perhaps the most important aspect in this respect in the entire novel. But, apart from the feast the theme of power finds it full-fledged handling throughout the narration as power is shown as operating at different levels and through different agents. The scene in the cave where the competition to chose the most capable robber among all those gathered there for the title of the King of robbers has the visual element to remind the readers of the parade of the Seven Deadly Sins in the Morality tradition. The provision for the use of the morality tradition is perhaps provided by the fact that the novel is titled on the inversion of the crucifixion of Christ. Also the conflict between good and evil which is an essential characteristic of the morality tradition is also present in it. The characters and language are clearly reminiscent of the morality tradition. The name of the competitors, the description of their bodies and their mannerisms are based on the morality tradition. Kihaahu wa Gatheeca, for instance, has been caricatured in the following words in order to highlight his parasitic nature:

Kihaahu was a tall, slim fellow: he had long legs, long arms, long fingers, a long neck and a long mouth. His mouth was shaped like the beak of the kingstock: long, thin and sharp. His chin, his face, his head formed a cone. Everything about him indicated leanness and sharp cunning. .. He looked like a 6-foot praying mantis or mosquito.⁹

Similar is the technique used to describe the other characters. Fathog Marura wa Kimeengemeenge is described as a person whose stomach bulges over his knees.¹⁰ In the morality tradition, such a character would necessarily represent the vice of gluttony.

In fact, one way of interpreting Devil on the Cross would be to view the novel in the light of the Morality tradition. The physical description of the delegates and the competitors engaged in this competition is remarkable as it gives the readers hints about their nature. It has been seen that in the case of most of those present in the cave, only a particular or some portions of their body would be developed more than other parts depending on the peculiar dispositions of their characters. These descriptions show how most of the participants in the competition aim at swallowing the wealth of Kenya.
Conflict is considered to be an important proof of the presence of power in any place at a given time and one can find different types of conflict between different agents/representatives of power in the novel and in different fields ranging from gender to economic. It is perhaps a regular feature of Ngugi in developing the theme of power in his novels is that he makes his female characters integral in an understanding of the theme and its development. The female protagonist is usually shown as being in conflict with the forces of the outer world which are, in more than one cases, patriarchal and material in nature, as in A Grain of Wheat and Petals of Blood. In Devil on the Cross, Ngugi gives the readers a heroine who evolves from an exploited female to a self-reliant person and ultimately into a gun-toting woman. The development of the female protagonist in this line seems to complete the circle of what Ngugi seems to have envisioned about the evolution of his female characters from submissive and exploited females into armed revolutionaries. This is a steady development from the Wanja of Petals of Blood who uses herself to bring about the doom of her exploiters. It is a long journey from the hunted to the hunter; or from the passive exploited to the active rebel. If it be objected that she does not take up guns to fight for the sake of Kenya like the earlier revolutionaries did, she is at least fighting for the sake of justice for the exploited female in the context of contemporary Kenya and her fight for her rights is the fight for the rights of every other woman who has felt the brunt of exploitation under similar circumstances. However, this change in the character in Wanja does not in any way indicate the emancipation of women in the Kenyan context; rather it shows the pressure under which the Kenyan woman has to survive and eke out a living.

The story of the female protagonist in this novel is almost an echo of the fate of Wanja in Petals of Blood and Mumbi in A Grain of Wheat. The sad tale of the female being exploited because of her beauty and her weak economic/financial condition seems to be a recurrent theme in Ngugi’s novels. In doing so he was perhaps trying to present to the readers the actual condition of women in the newly evolving capitalist society of Kenya. While making it clear that the ‘weak’ female is always a prey to the scheming and exploiting rich, ‘powerful’ male, Ngugi also tries to point out that driven to the wall the female might also wake up and take recourse to revolutionary methods. As already mentioned in one of my earlier Chapters, Ngugi
had lost faith upon the middle class – the so called ‘enlightened’ class of Kenyans since they, in spite of having received the ‘light’ of Western/English education, had unfortunately decided to cut themselves away from the mainstream of the nationalist struggle; rather they had put their education and knowledge to their own selfish use by trying to advance their own position in the ladder of power and status in the society by joining hands with the ruling authority. But to state that it is only the educated and the privileged that form the corrupt section of the society would be gross misappropriation of the role and position of the corruption that is prevalent among the lower class of the Kenyan society. Robin Mwaura, the driver of the matatu is one such character who is ready to cut throats for the sake of money. For him, there is no difference between money and God. In the later part of the novel he actually takes a leading part in the murder of one of the contestants whom the gang of thieves and robbers find unpleasant. The existence of the band called Hell’s Angels who are a gang of cut-throats is another example in the same line. This gang of cut-throats plays an important role in the novel in maintaining the power of the bigger thieves as they operate as agents of execution. The larger organization of thieves and robbers maintains its power and authority over others through them. As such, they help in the spiralling of the power of the corrupt forces in Kenyan society in the context of this novel. Such a description of Hell’s Angels is a reflection of the nexus between crime and authority in most developing and under-developed nations of the world today. In Petals of Blood too Ngugi had shown the nexus between the politicians and criminals; the murder of the lawyer in the novel is an instance of this nexus. The importance of such connection between the criminals and those in authority or the powerful and the rich is an important indicator to understand the theme of power in the novels of Ngugi as it points out how authority is established and maintained by a certain section in the society. The collaboration between the organizers of the competition and the criminals in the context of newly independent Kenya seems to be a development of the earlier nexus between the homeguards and the colonial machinery. In both the cases creation of fear in the minds of the people through violence is the objective. Violence, thus, remains an important marker of conflict and the presence of power in the novels of Ngugi.

Under actual circumstances, Ngugi had come to pin his hope on the workers and the farmers as he believed that any change in the present scenario of Kenya could
be brought about only by a revolution by them. Since he saw the farmers and the workers as belonging to the exploited class, it was natural for him to include women in the same category of the exploited because of the continuous subjugation that they are put to. The fear of a peasants’ and workers’ revolution is also felt during the Devil’s Feast when the contestant who proudly expresses his plans for selling land and air to the people in small amounts is cried down for fear that such measures would lead the working class to revolution. So it can be understood that the capitalist class viewed the working class as a potential element for revolution. In the course of the narration, the capture of the thieves and robbers assembled in the cave is brought about by the initiative of those characters that belong to the section of the oppressed. The view of the working class as a potential threat by the capitalists is present in his earlier novel, Petals of Blood too and at the end of that novel there is a hope that one of the central characters, Karega, will be rescued by the workers who are planning to go on a massive strike aimed at paralysing the entire economic system of the nation. In Ngugi’s next novel – Matigari – protest takes on the shape of violent struggle for Matigari, the protagonist of the novel, thereby culminating his idea of an armed revolt by the suppressed. The point that Ngugi wants to establish in Matigari is that justice in a corrupt society like that of contemporary Kenya which he represents in the novel does not come in its due course and so it should be snatched by force.

Violent revolt thus seems to occupy an important position in the development of the theme of power in Ngugi’s writings. The belief on violent struggle also adds the element of resistance to the narrative which is an indispensable part of any narrative based on or around the theme of power. Resistance, active or dormant, is a strong element in this novel. Resistance in Devil on the Cross can be seen in the actions of Wariinga and others. In fact, the development of her character in the novel can be taken as an important example of the presence of conflict and resistance. In Chapter Nine when the competition in the cave is interrupted by the crowd of workers and peasants brought by Muturi, the ‘forces of bourgeios law and order’ arrive soon but instead of arresting the real culprits they arrest those who are trying to catch the thieves of the nation’s wealth. It is clear that the nexus is not just between criminals but also between them and those whose duty is to nab criminals and see to it that law and order is maintained.
Writing with such views, Ngugi places himself directly in the canon of writers for whom writing is primarily and clearly an act of observing and commenting upon the real repressive state policies. Such a position puts him directly in opposition to the state and the circumstances under which Devil on the Cross was composed is proof enough of his conflict with the state machinery.

While such discussion adds the element of class-struggle to the novel, it can be said that the element of class-struggle which adds a Marxist angle to the text is an inseparable part of understanding the theme of power in Ngugi's novels. It is possible to quote Ngugi in this context regarding what he thinks of the role of class-conflict in literature:

"...literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he can choose is one or the other side in the battle field; the side of the people, or the side of those social forces that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics."\(^{12}\)

Such remarks by the author himself put him in the category of the socially committed writers for whom writing is a way of highlighting the prevalent sores of the society. In fact, before the workers and the students are arrested and attacked by the police for disturbing peace and harmony, the workers' anthem goes like this:

I believe that we, the workers, are of one clan,  
And hence we should not allow ourselves  
To be divided by religion, colour or tribe.  
I believe that in the organization of the workers  
Lies our strength,  
For those who are organized never lose their way,  
And those who are not organized are scattered by the sound of one bullet.
I therefore believe in the unity of the workers,
Because unity is our strength.
I believe that imperialism and its local representatives are the
enemies of the progress of the workers and peasants and of
the whole nation.
I therefore vow always to struggle against neo-colonialism,
For neo-colonialism is the last vicious kick of a dying
imperialism.$^{13}$

Neo-colonialism has finally been mentioned by the novelist as the ‘last vicious kick of
a dying imperialism’ – thereby perhaps indicating that if it can be checked than a
nation will be said to have attained complete independence; and the check is supposed
to come in the form of a workers revolt. Devil on the Cross is indeed written as a
revolutionary novel, making the people aware of how they are being duped and
exploited by the moneyed and the powerful and stirring them into action.

From the beginning of the novel, if we follow the narration of Jacinta
Waringa, the process of class exploitation can be seen as following her till the end.
However, the position of the women among the exploited ones is in itself an elaborate
question and they form a separate class of exploited on their own. The manner in
which her former Boss, whom she tries to fictionalise in her narration at the beginning
of the novel as Boss Kihara, tries to exploit her sexually and how on her refusing his
advances she is blamed for insincerity and is thrown out of her job; and her
subsequent experiences with her lover and other potential employers throws light on
two things – first, the male vanity of thinking himself as more powerful than the
female because of biological reasons and second, the circumscribed space that is
provided to the female in a patriarchal society. Also, the awareness that in case of
spoiled relationships it is always the female who bears the stigma seems to add greater
aggression to the males. Whichever office young Waringa goes, she is confronted
with the types of Boss Kihara demanding not her excellence as a typist or a secretary,
but her proficiency in the bedroom:

She enters another office. She finds there another Mr. Boss. The smiles are the
same, the questions are the same, the rendezvous is the same – and the target
is still Kareendi’s thighs. The Modern Love Bar and Lodgings has become the main employment bureau for girls and women’s thighs are the table on which contracts are signed.\textsuperscript{14}

The demeaning attitude about women in the novel can be further understood when one considers the speeches of the contestants during the Devil’s Feast where each of them boasts of having one or more mistress or ‘sugar girl’. The fact that most of these corrupt but wealthy persons keep one or more women besides their legally wedded wife adds to their position as it is seen both as an evidence of their virility and their affluence. But on the other hand such an attitude reduces the women to the position of mere commodities. Their attitude towards the female body is that of lust and not that of love or admiration. Even people who are quite old keep “sugar girls” who are young enough to be not only their daughters but sometimes fit to be their granddaughters. Though it goes beyond doubt that these young girls are provided all the amenities and the luxuries of life that they could wish for - starting from luxurious flats to the most fashionable cars, the relationships lack the real essence of freedom and love.

However, it is not that only the rich exploit the poor girls. Even young lovers who are not rich also do not hesitate to leave their lovers and girlfriends in the lurch and adopt light feet when they find that the situation does not favour them. The story of how Wariinga is deserted by her young lover when she tells him how she had to leave her job as a result of rejecting the advances of her Boss is a clear example in this regard. If one refers to the folk legend that Wariinga herself mentions in the novel, it becomes clear that it is not just the old ogres who exploit young girls but the young lovers too, as they turn out to be no good. The awkward position of Wariinga has been described by Ngugi after she has told her young lover of how she has rejected her Boss for him and his refusal to believe her in the following words:

‘Kamoongonye is the one who lowers his eyes like the shy leopard or like the lamb cropping grass. But he is motivated by hypocrisy. He lectures Kareendi. He declares that he knows very well that Kareendi has rumpled Waigoko Kihara’s bed, that Kihara is not even the first to eat from Kareendi’s thighs, that a girl who has sipped at the delights of money can never stop drinking. He
who tastes develops a penchant for tasting. A chameleon will always be a chameleon. A girl who starts going with men old enough to be her father while she is at school, to the extent of giving birth to babies when still a student, how can she stop herself? 15

It is perhaps the biological status of woman that makes her a vulnerable to exploitation in a corrupt society.

Such interpretation of the position of the female characters in the novel in their relationship with the males allows for a gender and class based analysis of the power-relationships that exist between the two sexes in this novel. It is perhaps during Wariinga’s short stint as a mechanic that she feels herself to be equal to her co-workers as they respect her efficiency in the trade. This sense of respect that Wariinga draws from her co-workers also serves to illustrate another point – that the gender-based difference is much less among the workers while it gains higher degrees when it comes to a relationship between the working and the capitalist class. The Wariinga that the readers encounter in the later part of the novel is a Wariinga who is totally different from the earlier Wariinga who was weak and meek – an easy target for the exploiting males. There is a visible rise in the confidence level of the girl which she has gained by taking karate classes and the economic freedom which she enjoys by virtue of her job as a mechanic. She even teaches a lesson or two to some of the more ‘aggressive’ male customers.

It is this confidence which later allows her to face her lover’s father but it is her misfortune that the old man turns out to be the same man who had tried to exploit her earlier. Here, one can almost see the repetition of Wanja’s story in Wariinga’s case. Finally, Wariinga asserts her will desperately by shooting down the old man. Though she seems to have won the battle against injustice, corruption and exploitation, she loses her love and her happiness in the process. It is indeed unfortunate that the heroines in Ngugi’s novels should suffer thus in the end. Whether it is The River Between, Weep Not, Child, A Grain of Wheat or Petals of Blood, love seems to suffer and go wrong in the end. However in A Grain of Wheat and Petals of Blood there is some sense of fulfilment for the female protagonist towards the end; Mumbi of A Grain of Wheat understands her true position in a male-dominated world
and leans to assert her individuality and Wanja in *Petals of Blood* realizes her power upon her male exploiters. In her case she finds the sense of fulfilment in love through her union with Abdulla.

Regarding the suffering of the female characters in the novels of Ngugi, and more precisely in the case of Wariinga, one might be tempted to conclude that fate seems to be a powerful agent in leading them to their suffering. In the case of Wariinga, fate seems to be conspiring against her in the form of coincidences. How can one explain away the sad fact that the father of her lover finally turns out to be the same man who was responsible for her ‘fall’ but by ascribing it to fate and coincidence? Viewed from this angle, the suffering of Wariinga seems to be quite contrived, and if it be so, when what was Ngugi possibly trying to project through the predicament of Wariinga? Maybe he was trying to portray the plight of women in contemporary Kenya through the undeserved suffering of his heroines. However, in his portrayal of Wariinga in the later part of the novel (after she has acquired a degree in automobiles repairing) where she is shown as a self-assured character is the type of enlightened ‘modern’ woman that Ngugi envisioned of in independent Kenya.

The conflict for power that is shown to exist in contemporary Kenya did not allow the women to develop themselves in a full-fledged manner. The social structure is contrived in such a way and the power of the economy is put in such hands that the female are forced into surrendering themselves to the masked wolves of the society. Driven by desperation and because of some hasty steps taken in youth they become easy prey to these exploiters. It is indeed unfortunate and painful to see an old woman like Wangari going around penniless in spite of the fact that she has participated in the freedom movement of the country; perhaps more pitiful is to see how she does not get any job even when she searches desperately for one. Her plight is peculiar to her alone, it is something which is experienced by thousands of such old ladies across Kenya. The suffering mother-figure had made its presence felt in the novels of the author from the first novel itself. It is possible to cite such instances from all his earlier novels – the mothers of Njoroge in *Weep Not, Child*; Nyambura’s mother in *The River Between*; the unnamed old mother of the dumb boy who was shot by the police in *A Grain of Wheat*; Wanja’s old grandmother in *Petals of Blood*; and now the
old Wangari in this novel. These are only a few of the suffering mothers whom the reader encounters in the novels of Ngugi.

Ngugi's attack on the failure of western education continues in this novel too. While in his earlier novels like Weep Not, Child, the attack on western education was open and direct, in Devil on the Cross it is subtler. In his earlier novels Ngugi had shown how the acquisition of western/English education, instead of empowering the Kenyans was rather driving them away from their own roots and incapacitating them from any participation in the movement for the nation’s liberation by driving a wedge among the people. In the post-independence context that the present novel is set in, Ngugi shows how education fails to deliver the promised fruits to the common people because of the corruption rampant in Kenyan society. Whatever amount of education that the common people might have acquired, it does not qualify them for jobs which they are otherwise eligible for. The job-market is controlled by the moneyed class and because of their connection with the politically empowered, they build a power-structure which is very difficult for a common person to penetrate. The impact of withholding the free and fair entry of eligible candidates into the job-market allows the capitalist class to control the distribution of national wealth in the manner they desire. The result of such gross misappropriation of the national resources results in increasing the gap between the rich and the poor while at the same time increasing the number of the young educated unemployed; a phenomenon which Ngugi had already pointed out in Petals of Blood.

Perhaps the effect of such control over the job-market in the hands of the rich and the corrupt few has greater consequences for the women than for the men. The manner in which Ngugi has described the predicament of the young girls who go around seeking jobs in offices and companies is enough evidence in this manner. They are usually offered the posts of personal secretaries in the offices and the bosses exploit their physical assets more than their secretarial talents. The greater amount of 'accessibility' which they allow to their boss counts more than their efficiency as secretaries. Usually when young girls are recruited in companies, it is almost understood that they would be treated as 'sugar-girls' by their bosses. As already discussed earlier in this Chapter, it provides the middle-aged bosses to satisfy their carnal cravings outside their homes. In the novel, Wariinga is turned out of her job
because she refuses to sleep with Boss Kihara. The condition of those young girls who leave their homes or run away from schools has been described as worse. Under such conditions, it becomes praiseworthy when Waringa manages to carve a place for herself in such a corrupted and male-dominated society as a mechanic.

Waringa’s role in the novel is important from yet another aspect. She can be considered as the representation of the counter-force in the novel. As a female she continues the tradition of revenge by a woman which Ngugi started with Wanja in *Petals of Blood*. Like Wanja, Waringa takes the law in her own hands and brings about the end of the man who had been responsible for her sufferings throughout life. Her difference with Wanja lies in the sense that while Wanja murders her tormentors in disguised manner and the blame does not fall on her, Waringa takes her revenge openly and thus becomes a criminal in the eyes of law. It might be noted here that these two heroines replace the earlier male characters in the tradition of revenge. Seen from this perspective, they represent a new development in the portrayal of the oppressed rebel in the novels of Ngugi. *Petals of Blood* onwards, the role of the female protagonist as a potential force for rebellion is seen. Even in his sixth novel, *Matigari*, the presence of woman as an important inspirational force is present. This inversion of the gender-role as avenger seems to point towards the fact that women as a class formed one of the most exploited groups and Ngugi might have felt that they should assert themselves in a suitable manner. Ngugi’s insistence on the possibility of violent revolt by the oppressed masses finds expression in the action of these female protagonists in his later novels. This shift in the gender-role of the female from the male can also be possibly interpreted as the failure of the masculine sex in facing the problems of real life squarely in the context of the novel. Perhaps it might also indicate towards the participation of men as an exploiting force in the Kenyan context.

Regarding the empowerment of women and their role in decision-making in his later novels, Ngugi’s heroines come a long way from the female characters that the readers encounter in his earlier novels like *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between*. Whatever might be the reason, it is clear that the heroines of Ngugi now evolve from the submissive and suffering female into the avenging and gun-totting woman. From Njeri to Wanja is a long journey and a lot of change has taken place between them – the change coming with the portrayal of Mumbi in *A Grain of Wheat*. 183
Though from the second novel of Ngugi, one can see the change occurring in his heroines and the gradual widening of their activity within the family and the tribe, with Mumbi the reader encounters the earliest of Ngugi’s heroines who have a voice and who can decide on their own; an instance being her refusal towards the end of the novel to immediately obey the words of her husband and return home. Prior to Mumbi, Muthoni and Nyambura in The River Between also display a fair amount of capacity for decision-making. Beginning with Mumbi, Wanja and Wariinga show greater capacities to act and take decisions – decisions that have far-reaching effects on them and others. Of course, the debate remains how much Ngugi has actually empowered his female characters.

Another thing notable in Ngugi’s employment of violence in this novel serves as an indicator to the strong statement that he was to make in his next novel – that ‘Justice for the oppressed comes from a sharpened spear’. In doing so, Ngugi seems to have projected a very dark and dismal picture of the contemporary situation in Kenya where everything is up for grabs.

When we consider the theme of power as developed by Ngugi in this novel, the different threads that constitute the power-structure in this novel form a parasitic pattern which draws in anyone and everyone as a potential prey in the hands of those who have money and authority. The power structure which Ngugi portrays in Devil on the Cross is an advancement on the same subject in his earlier novel – A Grain of Wheat – where he had projected the formation of a new corrupted class of politicians in the stage of infancy through the character of the M.P. of the village of Thabai whom Gikonyo had approached for a loan in order to buy a farm on a co-operative basis; but on understanding the value of the farm which Gikonyo and the other villagers wanted to buy, the politician gets the loan sanctioned in his own name and takes over the ownership of the farm. Such misappropriation of assets on the eve of independence might be taken as a sign of the future germination of a new breed of parasitic moneyed and politically powerful class whose aim would be to exploit the common people and the wealth of the nation to their fullest advantage. Devil on the Cross seems to be the result of such fear on the part of the novelist. The contest for the crown of the Master of Thieves and Robbers in which a number of competitors take part in the Cave in the presence of the Master of Ceremony and foreign delegates
is a masterful stroke from the pen of Ngugi in his attempt to portray the growth of thieves and robbers in newly-independent Kenya. Though the manner in which the competitors try to out-perform one another in the contest might appear ridiculous to some readers, it should be kept in mind that Ngugi was trying to achieve a sense of heightened concern about the state of affairs in Kenya under the new comprador bourgeoisie regime which, he felt, was the new face of imperialism. Regarding Ngugi’s dissatisfaction with the bourgeoisie class because of their attitude of taking sides with those in power for their own benefit, much has been already discussed in the earlier Chapters of this thesis. Historically, this class had failed to serve as guiding light to the masses during the days of struggle for national liberation and had somehow managed to place itself in important positions after independence. Ngugi’s disgust with this selfish class comes out very clearly in this novel as he tries to project the ultimate degeneration of this class into a new breed of collaborators.

Such critique of the contemporary Kenyan situation seems to stem from the author’s sadness over the manner in which the real heroes and the common people in Kenya were deprived of all opportunities and avenues even after independence. The change of power from colonial to native hands did not bear any fruit for them. Their lot remained the same, or even grew worse under the rule of their own black brethren. The main focus of this new corrupt class that had the power was to tap on the weakness of the common people and use it to their own advantage. It set up a power-structure which functioned by exploiting the different strata of Kenyan society. The chain of exploitation ran from the top to the bottom and as Ngugi shows in the novel, establishes a sort of a hierarchy with the biggest thugs and cheats on the top and the minor ones at the bottom; those who could not join this hierarchy were the victims. It is interesting to note how petty thieves and small-time offenders who vie for the title Master of Thieves and Robbers in new Kenya are cried down and labelled as ineligible for contesting for such a ‘prestigious’ title and there is an uproar from the crowd and other participants asking the Master of Ceremonies not allow any such contestants from wasting the precious time of the audience and other participants and also out of fear of what the foreign delegates would think of the standard of thieves and robbers in independent Kenya. The contest seems to be an all-out competition to woo the foreign investors who have come to check the capability of the Kenyans in the art of theft and robbery. It is indeed in a very masterly way in which the novelist
portrays the evil of international capitalism as a legitimized process for exploiting the wealth of nations – a process which, however, cannot be completed without the help of insiders. In doing so, Ngugi is making a clear statement of how colonialism/imperialism can find its way back into newly-independent nations, and there is usually no dearth of people who are willing to serve as watchdogs of the new capitalist empire.

Notes:


2. Devil on the Cross, p. 38.

3. Devil on the Cross, p. 120-21.

4. Devil on the Cross, p. 78.

5. Devil on the Cross, p. 86.

6. Devil on the Cross, p. 86.

7. Devil on the Cross, p. 56.


14 Devil on the Cross, p. 19.

15 Devil on the Cross, p. 25.