CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION:

The six novels of Ngugi taken up for study under the title 'Power as Theme in the novels of Ngugi wa Thiong'o', have power as a recurrent theme in them. The presentation and the handling of the theme of power follow a chronological order when we consider the passage of time in Ngugi's novels from the early days of colonialism to the later years in independent Kenya.

The first two novels of Ngugi are composed against the background of the early days of colonialism and they try to pit the past pre-colonial/pre-historic legends and lores as an inspiring force towards their liberation from the shackles of colonialism. The third novel takes the historical background further as it is set in the twilight zone of the last few days leading to 'Uhuru' – the attainment of independence and continues to a few more days into independent Kenya. The fourth, fifth and the sixth novels of Ngugi are based on the experiences of his characters in newly independent Kenya where they find all their dreams and aspirations of a fulfilling and independent nation disillusioned. These last three novels form a scathing remark on the neo-colonial apparatus unleashed all over Kenya which makes the scenario worse and if not worse, as bad as during the colonial days. The fifth and the sixth novel are more critical of the situation because of the increase in the intensity and virulence of the author's attack on the system.

A gradual shift is seen in the author's perception and understanding of the dynamics of power in the different periods that his novels are set in. Such a shift in the perspective of the author allows for the application of different approaches to the issue/theme of power in his novels. It has been found in the course of this study that most of his novels allow approaches to the theme of power from the Marxist and the Feminist standpoints and the application of Foucault's views on knowledge and the formation of the structure of power in a society, besides the ever present Postcolonial approach.
In his first two novels, written during the beginning of his career as a novelist, and set in the backdrop of the early days of colonial expansion, he tries to argue that it is only the political unity among the people that holds the key to the liberation of the tribe and the nation. The argument of the novelist in these two novels is that Western/Euro-Christian education in the Kenyan context will not deliver the desired goods to the people. A suspect of English education and Christianity, Ngugi wanted to show that westernised education, instead of uniting the people during a crucial period in the country’s history was actually alienating them from the tribe and its ways and was creating a divide, thus weakening them in their nationalist struggle. Through the ordeals and the experiences of the characters in the novels Ngugi shows how the concept of Euro-Christian education in the Kenyan context inverts the Foucauldian concept of ‘knowledge/power’. The Kenyan emphasis on education is seen as a failure until it helps to unite the people towards a larger political involvement. Ngugi’s suspicion of the English language and his rejection of the same led him to compose his later novels in his mother tongue – Gikuyu. He considered the English language as a ‘cultural bomb’ that worked to erase memories of a pre-colonial past and prevented people from looking up to the past for solutions to their present problems. Perhaps it is why Ngugi refers to the past legends and folk-lore as sources of inspiration to the people in the present.

Ngugi’s criticism of the adoption of the westernised concept of education continues in his later novels too. In this context, he holds the introduction of Christianity into the ridges as another important factor. His second novel, The River Between, takes up this issue in a more detailed manner where the conflict is shown as being directly between Christianity and the native culture; particularly over the issue of female circumcision. In these two novels the theme of the chosen individual as the liberator of the community is also focussed on through the introduction of the myth of the Saviour. Both Njoroge in Weep Not, Child and Waiyaki in The River Between think that they are destined to liberate the tribe and the nation through their actions and their inability to understand the immediate demands/desires of the community results in their failure. In the second novel it is also the clash between two potentially powerful rivals over the issue of leadership of the tribe that the theme of power is propelled forward.
Ngugi’s anger against that section of hypocrites who used the name of Christ to further their own selfish needs without understanding the true spirit of Christianity comes under attack in *Petals of Blood*. In this novel the truth behind the loss of an ear by Brother Ezekiel and the sham sympathy shown by the Black priest who tries to quench the thirst and hunger of the villagers by giving them food for the soul are instances of his attack on religious hypocrites. It somehow seems that though Ngugi viewed Christianity as a potent tool in the hands of the colonials, his attack is directed much towards the abuse of Christianity rather than on the religion in its pure form. His feelings are directed much by his experience of the damage that colonialism had caused in Kenya by using religion as means to dull the understanding of the people. However, his attempt to provide a counter-force to Christianity can be traced as far back as *Weep Not, Child*, where he narrates the Gikuyu myth of Creation in juxtaposition to the Christian story of the world.

As already mentioned in the beginning of this Chapter, there is a gradual shift in the author’s perception of the dynamics of power in the Kenyan context with the passage of time and this is reflected in the manner in which he focuses on the different aspects and loci of power in his novels. This shift in his perspective can be perhaps related to his experiences and the socio-political scenario on the nation during different periods.

*The Companion to African Literature* (2000) records the growth of Ngugi as a writer in the following three stages:

The first extends from 1960 to 1964, the year he graduated from Makerere, and was marked by the formative influences of Gikuyu social and cultural tradition, Christianity, and western liberal thought. The second state, from his arrival in Leeds in 1964 to his involvement in the Kamiriithu festival at Limuru in 1976, was influenced decisively by his introduction to Marxism, Frantz Fanon, pan-Africanism, and the cause of black solidarity through his study of West Indian writing and awareness of Black Power Movement in the US. This period was characterized by his increasing disillusionment with the bourgeois nationalism. In the third period which extends from 1976 onwards, the disillusionment is complete and Ngugi loses all hope of improving things.
in Kenya and in Africa except through total revolution brought about by the peasant masses. The turning point in his intellectual and emotional life was his joining the Kamiriithu Cultural Centre, in 1976. His theoretical leftism now assumes a concrete shape, and the change is nothing less than a spiritual conversion. His realization that he has nothing to teach and everything to learn from the Kenyan peasant he calls a ‘homecoming’ that marks the end of the alienating influence of colonial education. One result of the change is his resolution to write only in the language of his people; another is an increasing reliance on the theatre rather than the novel for creating revolutionary awareness.

In the third novel, A Grain of Wheat, the community is shown as being more powerful than the individual. This theme of the conflict between the individual and the community is present in his second novel too but there the defeat of the individual is also seen as the defeat of the tribe. In A Grain of Wheat, the charisma of the individual continues from Waiyaki to Mugo, but while Waiyaki’s charisma in The River Between is the result of his active involvement in spreading education in the society and which consequently makes enemies for him, Mugo’s character is different. His charisma arises from the fact that he lives like a recluse and this builds up an aura of mystery around his name. His impulsive actions on certain occasions make him a legend but as an individual he always shies from active public participation. Though the entire village of Thabai worships him as a hero, Mugo does not consider himself as special or privileged; rather he wishes to shun attention and company as much as he can. His name, however, is chanted like an inspiring tune to remind the people of the by-gone days of the Emergency. His end also is almost in the line of his predecessor Waiyaki as he hands himself over to public justice.

In Ngugi’s novels the presence of resistance and conflict between different forces is a sign of the presence of the dynamics of power and an analysis of the same can lead one to an understanding of the handling of the theme of power in them. In the first novel, the dynamics of power can be understood in the conflict between the colonial and the nationalist forces represented by the settler government and the forest fighters. Conflict and resistance in the second novel is centred round the issue of
female circumcision between opposing religious and cultural forces represented on
the one side by Christianity and on the other by Gikuyu traditional rites. In the second
novel there is yet another dimension to the issue of power arising from the conflict
over control of the ridges between Waiyaki and Kabonyi, the former representing the
call for modernity and the latter advocating tradition in a narrow sense.

_A Grain of Wheat_ deals with the theme of power in a more complex manner
than his earlier works, perhaps because of the multiplicity of its themes (betrayal,
suffering, the position of women in the society, conflict and disillusionment). This
novel, set against the twilight background of the transfer of power in Kenya from the
Whites to the Blacks narrates the experiences of the people of the village of Thabai
during the days of the Emergency and continues to the first few days after the
attainment of _Uhuru_. Based on the basis of the periods of experience, it is possible to
group the different portions of the narrative into two broad divisions – the colonial
and the euphoric days leading to the celebration to independence. The portion of the
narrative which is concerned with the experiences during the colonial days focuses on
the theme of power from the point of the conflict between the colonial government
and the people (including the Mau Mau fighters). In the conflict between the people
and the colonial government the theme of power is complicated as there are people
who side with the colonials to enhance their own power. Karanja in the novel is one
such character who thinks it better to side with the colonial authority to escape from
the ordeals of the concentration camps. Though he gives his explanation for his choice
as a strategy for survival, a visible change occurs in him once he begins to draw
power from his White masters. He begins terrorizing people in the village and soon
becomes a hated name among his own people. In fact, his intoxication of power takes
on such a heady turn that he transforms into a trigger-happy homeguard and finds
pleasure in shooting people. But once the transfer of power is decided fear creeps into
him. He begins to feel afraid of the collective hatred and anger of the people. Because
of his atrocities during his service as homeguard he becomes the prime suspect in the
betrayal and the murder of Kihika, the leader of the nationalist movement from the
village of Thabai. So, the people decide to ‘trap and sacrifice’ him on the day of the
celebration of _Uhuru_ as a tribute to all those who had lost their lives for the nation or
had suffered during the infamous days of the Emergency.
This novel also addresses the question of power on the basis of gender. Though in Ngugi's earlier novel - *The River Between* - Muthoni and Nyambura try to 'exercise their power' in deciding their fate, they basically turn out to be rebels in their homes and the society. Given the context of the novel, even the tribe has qualms in accepting them and understanding their decision. In the portrayal of their mother, Miriamu, one can find the figure of a docile woman who accepts the decisions of her husband without raising her voice even when the decisions are going to have devastating affect on her. Her almost habitual obedience to her husband (Joshua) stops her from opposing his commands. In this connection it appears that too much installation of the Christian doctrines in her by the patriarch in the house has numbed her capacity for rebellion. While her daughters try to cross the threshold of the space allotted to them in the home and the Christian society that they are in, she remains confined to the limited space allowed to her.

The relationship between Joshua and the other members of the tribe brings an important point into focus; the clash between the rebellious spirit of those who still adhere to the traditional tribal custom and the habitual obedience-demanding nature of those who have embraced Christianity as their faith. Even within his family, Joshua is seen as a true patriarch who wants all the other members of his family to accept his word as the law. There is not an unmixed feeling in Joshua that by embracing Christianity he has somehow got a divine sanction behind himself for demanding habitual obedience from others. The conversion to Christianity, instead of giving him a sympathetic understanding of human nature and an all-encompassing expansion of the soul, has only narrowed down his vision. His intolerance of the tribal rites and customs is a proof of his narrow understanding of the Word of Christ. But perhaps what is also important here is that the manner in which he has received the Christian instructions is what has made him what he is – an intolerant and narrow-minded person. This makes his relationship with his wife and other members of the family highly hierarchical. Perhaps it is one of the different ways in which the novelist tries to show how the alien faith was used by the colonizers to create division between the Africans on the basis of faith, and thereby stop them from uniting for a mass movement.

But all said and done, Christianity does remain as an important force behind the writings of Ngugi. A strong Christian presence can be felt in his third novel too. In
A Grain of Wheat, Kihika carries the Bible with him wherever he goes and at different times in the narration the novelist refers to the verses underlined by Kihika in his Bible. In fact, it seems that the Judas-motif operates strongly in the novel. Mugo, the real betrayer of Kihika assumes almost a Jesus-like elevation in his final confession. His action saves Karanja from being lynched by the villagers for he was the prime suspect for Kihika's death because of his role as a cruel homeguard during the days of the Emergency. The final treatment that Mugo receives in the hands of the tribe is very similar to that of Waiyaki in The River Between. Perhaps Ngugi was trying to tell that the people were not yet ready to receive a Messiah among them; thus pointing to the importance of the Redeemer theme in his novels. The Redeemer motif takes on an interesting turn in Matigari where the protagonist is not a figure of humility like Christ, but an ex-forest fighter who believes in wearing a belt of peace but who can also pick up an AK-47 depending on the situation. He seems to represent the final development of Ngugi's belief that things can be made better in independent Kenya not through peaceful means but by a revolt alone.

It is in Mumbi in A Grain of Wheat that we first come across a heroine in the novels of Ngugi who is a woman of self-control and self-possession and also at the same time aware of her power over men. The only time that she is overwhelmed by circumstances and loses self-possession is when Karanja gives her the news that her husband is coming back from detention. She is so overwhelmed by the news that she cannot realize when or how Karanja makes love to her in his office and impregnates her. The biological status of her body as a female makes her vulnerable to Karanja. When this biological status of the female body is approached from the point of empowerment or otherwise of women, it seems to work both ways. While the body seems biologically vulnerable in the patriarchal sense it is the same body which also has the power to captivate the males because of its beauty and sexual appeal.

However, the exercise of power by women should not be interpreted as a sign of their complete empowerment and liberation. In the domestic sphere they are allowed only a limited amount of empowerment since in most matters the decision of the patriarch is final. The issue of female empowerment continues in all the novels of Ngugi and seems to undergo a slow change in the degree of their assertion against the different opposing sources power. While at the end of the novel Mumbi exercises her
authority as an individual while answering to her husband’s request to ‘go home and see that things do not rot’, she seems to be heralding the introduction of heroines who evolve from being the hunted into the hunter. Wanja in Petals of Blood and Wariinga in Devil on the Cross try to resist their exploiters and assert their individuality. But such change comes only after a long period of suffering and exploitation in the circumstances that they are in and though they might as appear as championing the arrival of the emancipated female their thoughts and actions are limited by the dominant forces in the society. At the end of the novels too, there is very little relief for them as the sense of loss is very strong, almost reaching the dimension of the tragic in some cases.

It is interesting to note that the word ‘Wanja’ in Gikuyu means ‘the earth’. From this aspect it might not be too far-fetched to claim that by representing Kenya as the exploited female, Ngugi was trying to highlight the plight of the nation in the contemporary context. But, by giving them a voice in his later novels, was he trying to send the message that Kenya as a nation would rise in rebellion against the oppressive neo-colonial apparatus ruling over her?

Though Ngugi presents the readers with his gun-trotting heroines in his later novels, the fact remains that they do not strike the readers convincingly as characters functioning outside their prescribed boundaries or on their own accord; maybe a reason why it is alleged against Ngugi that though his female characters sometimes strike the readers as being laden with great potentials, he always portrays them as the subordinated sex in the society. But perhaps in doing so he was trying to show their actual position in the society decided by the dynamics of relationships aimed at the issue of power. Through their experiences and ordeals he succeeds in throwing focus not only on the thematic concern of the issue of gender but also on the conflict between the colonizer and the colonized. Inside the family the females are the dominated sex, and outside they are the dominated class/group. The introduction of the colonial and the neo-colonial concerns over power complicates their position further. For example, prostitution becomes a recurrent issue in the later novels of Ngugi which are set in independent Kenya. This goes to point towards the commodification of the female body in the neo-colonial context. The narrow escape that Wanja has from the German sex maniac who has come to Kenya to satisfy his
deviant cravings can be cited as an example in this connection. *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* satirise the blowing up of prostitution as an industry run by the industrialists and the corrupt in power under the name of tourism. Potential employers like Wariinga’s boss in *Petals of Blood* are more interested in the warmth of the thighs of their secretaries rather than in their dexterity or efficiency as typists or stenographers. The clandestine position that the young female secretaries enjoy is a direct indicator of the carnal cravings of the employers who want somebody besides their wedded wife.

Land is another object in the novel which decides control and power in Ngugi’s novels. Perhaps it is relevant here to quote what Jomo Kenyatta has said about the taking over of the control of the land by the colonizer in the Gikuyu culture:

> When the European comes to the Gikuyu country and robs the people of their land, he is taking away not only their livelihood, but the material symbol that holds family and tribe together. In doing this he gives one blow which cuts away the foundations from the whole of Gikuyu life, social, moral and economic.³

In *Weep Not, Child*, almost all activities and decisions are guided by the concern for the recovery of the lost land; even Njoroge’s education is important in the sense that it can serve as a means to liberate the land. It is not only the occupation of the land but also the description of the topography that speaks of power and authority. Though the much discussed description of the ridges in the opening pages of *The River Between* is an example of the latent power of the ridges and their tentative conflict, the transformation of the landscape of Old Ilmorog to New Ilmorog in *Petals of Blood* is symbolic of the introduction of capitalism in the region; and once the transformation begins there also begins a corresponding transformation in the lives of the people. Of course it is needless to say that the conflict over land is one of the most important issues in postcolonial literature. Given the Gikuyu context this issue gains higher importance because for the Gikuyus’ land is something more than the means of their livelihood through agriculture. It bears social and spiritual connections for them. This is the reason why Ngotho in *Weep Not, Child* is so attached to his ancestral land even
though he is only a squatter in the farm of Mr. Howlands. He feels that as long as he is alive he has a duty to the land of his ancestors.

The issue of armed resistance which can be interpreted as a sign of conflict and resistance is another vital point to examine the theme of power in the novels of Ngugi. Though there are some references to ancient warriors in Weep Not, Child revolt as a possibility is seen for the first time in The River Between. In The River Between there is the hint for a possible attack on Joshua, the Christian leader in the ridges. While this attack in the context of the novel is shown as a bid on the part of the Gikuyus to preserve their traditional culture and religion against the onslaught of Christianity it can also be interpreted as a fight for power. In the first place if Christianity be taken as a tool or an off-shoot of imperialism in Africa, then the possible attack on Christians may be taken as an attack on the empire; and in the second place, this attack on the Christians on the valley is the result of the conflict over power between Waiyaki and Kabonyi.

In the later novels, violence is a direct sign of conflict over power. In A Grain of Wheat violent repression by the state and armed resistance by the forest fighters are direct implications of the existence of power in the later novels it takes the shape of conflict between the neo-colonial forces and the people. From Petals of Blood to Matigari, violence is used as an important means for ‘keeping the people’ under control. In Devil on the Cross the crooks use violence to kill those who do not agree to their idea of allowing foreigners to ‘invest’ in exploiting the country. Similarly in Petals of Blood violence is used by those in power to murder the young lawyer who becomes famous as an advocate of the poor. Of course sometimes violence is used also by the exploited to revenge themselves upon their exploiters. Wanja in Petals of Blood kills her exploiters and Guthiira in Devil on the Cross shoots the old man who had exploited her earlier and wanted to continue that later too. But it is in Matigari that Ngugi presents violence as the only means for assuring justice and protection for the poor and the oppressed. The beginning of the novel where the protagonist abandons his weapons and wears a belt of peace only to find that his search for truth and justice is leading him nowhere in the independent country and his final realization that “justice for the oppressed comes from a pointed spear” indicate to the belief of the novelist on violence as the only means for the liberation of the poor.
The message given in Matigari is definitely in accordance with the Marxist process of acquiring synthesis through revolutionary means, the insistence on the Marxist principle may said to be the result of the influence of Marx on African thought. In fact Franz Fanon and Karl Marx have greatly influenced African thinkers, and Ngugi himself was no exception. The Marxist assessment of power, which is essentially based on the struggle between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ within a society at any given point time is traceable in all the six novels of Ngugi taken up for study. The Kenyan society as described by Ngugi in his novels, whether in the colonial or in the independent context, the conflict is directly between those who enjoy (and at times appropriate to themselves) the privileges available in the society and those who are deprived of the minimum basic needs to live.

One important aspect of Ngugi’s handling of the theme of power in the colonial context is its scope for the application of the Foucauldian idea of the structure of the Panopticon which he borrows from Jeremy Bentham. In A Grain of Wheat, the colonial system during the pre-independence period in Kenya is shown as one which requires the participation of the Africans to ensure its smooth functioning. The colonial machinery is described as being dependent largely on two factors – first, the use of repressive force and second, on the involvement and participation of people who are ready to assist them in lieu of certain amount of wealth and/or power. The people who formed the group of collaborators for the colonialists were quite considerable in number. In fact, most of the homeguards who carried guns on behalf of the whites and executed their orders of gathering information and killing people consisted of Blacks. They were the means adopted by the Whites to terrorize and control the common people. Karanja in A Grain of Wheat is an example of this kind. Ngugi’s hatred for this group was so much that he attacks them in more than one of his novels. Even in the novels which deal with experiences in independent Kenya, Ngugi locates the breed of collaborators under a new disguise – those who had benefited themselves at the cost of others and the business partners of the multinational companies. He could understand that the change of power from the Whites to the Blacks had failed to deliver the desired fruits of independence because this breed was there to grasp and appropriate to itself all the possible and available

217
opportunities. Even the system of foreign exploitation had continued under the banner of multinational companies.

Historically placed, the role of the collaborators in maintaining the effectiveness of the colonial machinery was such that the Mau Mau viewed them as one of the most potent threats to their movement. There was a period during the movement when the collaborators were the main targets for the fighters and killings were carried out in large numbers. The intensity of the collective anger and hatred for such people has been presented by Ngugi through the response of the villagers towards Karanja in *A Grain of Wheat*.

As discussed in relation to Ngugi’s views on the role and function of the English language in the Kenyan context and his subsequent decision to write in his own mother-tongue is a reflection of his views on the power of language. Language, as Ngugi visualised, was a potent tool for moulding the minds of the people and he felt that in order to ‘decolonize’ oneself properly one must cast off the shackles of an imposed or a foreign language. In his opinion the task of the African writer was to address the people and he felt that it could be achieved only by writing in one’s own language. Writing in English, he felt, was simply writing for the western audience and it did not fulfil the desired activity of the African writer as he wished them to be ‘writer in politics’:

> Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics.

However the act of translating his novels later into English has given wind to the controversy that he has failed to act according to his words. In his stand on language, Ngugi is on the other extreme of the debate regarding the function and use of English in the African continent.

These, in brief, have been my findings on the theme of power in the novels of Ngugi wa Thiong’o. It is my belief that this study will add to the amount of research done on the author and also help to provide a new platform for further research into the subject.
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