CHAPTER II

This chapter is dedicated to a brief study of the effects of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya and its far-reaching effects in the Kenyan context. The analysis is done with the view to understand how this important movement in Kenya developed as a counter-force to the colonial/settler government in the country during the colonial period and how their interaction on each other went a great way in shaping the history of Kenya. The analysis will help greatly towards understanding the various strands of power-dynamics that this movement generated in the Kenyan context; particularly as described in the novels of Ngugi wa Thiong’o taken up for study.

In Kenya’s history of struggle for independence the Mau Mau occupies a very important position. A militant African nationalist movement active in Kenya during the 1950s, its main aim was to remove British rule and European settlers from the country. The Mau Mau, though active chiefly during the 1950s was born in 1947 out of a faction among the KCA (Kikuyu Central Association) and the KAU (Kikuyu African Association). By February 1947, the squatter campaign had begun to lose ground as those who went against the district council rules had to pay the heavy price of eviction if any proof was found of their involvement with the squatter movement. So, there was the need for a new policy of resistance to keep the campaign against the European settlers alive. Also, the split between the KCA and the KAU grew to such height that by late 1947 a defacto split led to the emergence of the movement known as Mau Mau. This movement later grew into an important force in the history of Kenya’s struggle for independence. The Mau Mau is also said to represent the authentic voice of the repressed Kikuyus since the common people did not have much hopes on the KAU which was composed primarily of businessmen. The grievance against the KAU was also aggravated because of the fact that many KAU officials saw themselves as intermediaries between the government and the people whom they led.

The oathing campaign organised in Njoro township during September 1947 by the KCA is often taken as the starting point for the Movement. This meeting was attended by Jomo Kenyatta as the main speaker. The oathing ceremony,
references of the type of which Ngugi has presented in *Weep Not, Child*, was designed to prepare the Kikuyu community for stronger action against the settler government in future. Large-scale oathing campaigns were organised by the Mau Mau till 1948. However, its growing popularity was becoming a cause of concern for the KCA which still held moderate views. But till this point, the movement’s political objectives were yet to be defined properly. The only thing that was clear and visible that in future the organization might turn into a powerful adversary for the colonial administration.

It was in the early months of 1948 that the settler government seems to have received some inkling of the existence of the Mau Mau as an underground movement from reports of its collections made from the squatters. But it was only sometime in 1951 that the government became fully aware of the Mau Mau activities from intelligence reports pouring in from different quarters. However, the government did not trouble itself much with the Mau Mau because they had failed to estimate the extent to which the Mau Mau would later rise to. Their first impression was that it was a group formed to carry out pilferage of European properties. Detection of the activities of the Mau Mau was all the more difficult because of the rigidity with which the members observed the oath. Any breach of the oath was supposed to bring stern punishment upon the offending members. It was the strikes in 1950 that led the Settler Government to review the situation and perceive the outfit as a threat. It was intensified when police informers began to disappear from the farms suddenly. It was in 1952 that the movement pushed itself towards its armed phase under the pressure of the colonial government. The repressive measures adopted by the government and the new intelligence machinery formed with collaborators pushed the organization to take up arms openly. The movement now aimed at preparing young militants for future armed struggle.

But the growth of this militant spirit received mixed response from different quarters of the Kikuyu community. There was still a considerable section of African businessmen and professionals who looked for solution through constitutional means. For this group, the KAU still remained to be the torch-bearers of the nationalist struggle. But given the repressive stance adopted by the government, the popularity of the Mau Mau went on increasing and nothing could dampen the rise of the militant
spirit among the people. The organization also involved itself in the elimination of Kikuyus who were linked to the colonial government as collaborators. Police informers, collaborators and police witnesses sometimes disappeared inexplicably or were found dead under suspicious circumstances.

The repressive policies adopted by the colonial administration were to a great extent responsible for the popularity and support that was extended to this movement by the people. When the government could not diminish the popularity and the support of this organisation with propaganda, it resorted to strike on a counter-offensive. A state of Emergency was declared on the 20th of October 1952. The very next day (21st October 1952), Jomo Kenyatta, President of the Kenya African Union, was arrested for alleged Mau Mau involvement and flown to Kapenguria, where he was held excommunicado. Preventive detention, evictions and communal punishment became the order of the day. By the end of October, British troops had arrested over five hundred suspected Mau Mau activists. The Mau Mau also took to guerrilla-type action against the colonial forces. The mass evictions adopted by the colonial government brought troubles for the European settlers as labour became acutely short in many farms. On 24 April 1954, over forty thousand Kikuyus were arrested indiscriminately by the British troops, and on 26 May 1954, the famous treetops hotel was burnt down by Mau Mau activists. The offer of amnesty extended towards the Mau Mau activists by the Governor-general of Kenya, Sir Evelyn Baring is also turned down. The governmental forces adopt more repressive measures and by the end of October 1955 it was officially suggested that over the last three years from the date of the Declaration of the Emergency, more than seventy thousand Kikuyu tribesmen suspected of Mau Mau involvement were imprisoned and over thirteen thousand people had been killed. Of course the statistics of killing included those carried out by the Mau Mau too.¹

The step of cutting the Mau Mau from direct contact with the local tribes began to yield the desired results for the colonial forces. The fear of the security forces on the one hand and the threat of eviction began to tell upon the common Kikuyus. This made them reluctant of fighting directly or getting involved with the forest fighters. Moreover, the capture Mau Mau leaders like General Katanga and General Tanganyika in March 1954 also affected the armed resistance from the forest. After
the defeat of the forest fighters in the Reserves, a large number of them moved to the
forests in the settled areas to find refuge there. Sometimes they resorted to raiding the
labour lines for food and money. Such actions led to the rise of resentment on the part
of the common Kikuyus against the Mau Mau.

By 1955, the movement died out but the defeat of armed resistance, though a
devastating blow to the squatter movement, made it certain that there could be no
return to a European settler-dominated Kenya. The official death roll for Mau Mau
activists killed by British forces since 1952 is put at 10,173. By forcing the militants
into the forest the colonial administration succeeded in preventing the armed
resistance from taking on a more definitive shape but it did not lead to the
consolidating of European power in the Highlands.

It was only on 16 December 1963, i.e. four days after the attainment of
independence for Kenya that general Amnesty is announced for Mau Mau activists.
Finally on 1st September 2003, the Mau Mau is finally unbanned.

The importance of the Mau Mau movement in the novels of Ngugi is two-fold:
first, his home and family were greatly affected by this movement; and secondly, this
movement is an important presence in his novels as he tries to move from the early
period of colonisation in Kenya to the post-independence era with the onset of
international capitalism. In the context of colonial Kenya, the contribution and
presence of the Mau Mau movement is visible and discernible, but its presence
continues even into the post-independence period in the character of forest fighters
like Abdulla in Petals of Blood and Matigari in the novel by the same name. Again, an
analysis of the role of the Mau Mau in the novels will also help in understanding the
role of force, violence and resistance in developing the theme of power in the novels
of Ngugi.

The element of resistance and revolt, as we find in the novels of Ngugi wa
Thiong’o, has been treated as an organic growth from his first to his sixth novel,
though at times differing in degree and nature. It is in this organic growth of
resistance and violence in the novels that the birth and development of Mau Mau can
be understood. Except in The River Between, the Mau Mau is a strong presence in all
the other five novels of Ngugi. It is in *The River Between* that Ngugi presents resistance on the part of the Gikuyus at a period of time when the Mau Mau is yet to be born. However, the element of organised resistance is present in this novel too as those members of the tribe who believe that the spread of Christianity in the ridges is contaminating the earlier purity and sanctity of the tribal ways and culture come together under the leadership of Kabonyi and plan to attack the house of Joshua, who is the leader of the Christians in the ridges and has turned his home into a temple of Christ. This resistance towards the spread of Christianity is symbolic of the resistance against the colonial machinery. The aspect of physical violence might seem to be absent from the part of the Church, but the actions of the church in trying to convert more and more Gikuyus into Christians and the spread of English education among the ridges is taken by the people as a violation of their culture and custom. The end of the novel itself is violent and the reader is left with the feeling of the loss of a large amount of goodness in the process. Though resistance at this point might be assumed as being directed against the expansion of Christianity and English education in the ridges, it is basically centred round the issue of safeguarding traditional customs — especially the tradition of female circumcision. It might be mentioned here that the issue of female circumcision was one on which the tribe and the church were at loggerheads with each other. What the tribe felt as an integral part of growth in the life of its members was taken as an act of barbarity by the church. It is this gulf in understanding the value of a custom within the context of an alien culture that the process of resistance is necessitated. With resistance comes violence as a means to achieve the desired objective. Given the historical context of the novel, the Mau Mau is not present in the narrative as an organised form of resistance to colonial forces; rather, the group formed to organise and lead the movement for preserving the purity and sanctity of the tribe is given the name of the Kiama. As already mentioned, it is this Kiama led by Kabonyi which assumes the role of the tribe’s moral and customary guardian and enters into direct conflict with the church. The decision of the Kiama to use violence to meet the encroachment of the church into its traditional sphere might be taken as a sign of the formation of the Mau Mau in the later days as an underground movement against the entire colonial machinery in Kenya.

His five other novels, viz. *Weep Not, Child, A Grain of Wheat, Petals of Blood, Devil on the Cross* and *Matigari* are marked by the presence of the Mau Mau
as an important force in guiding the narrative to a large extent in them. *Weep Not, Child* is another novel with *The River Between* which is set in the days of early expansion of colonialism in the ridges and has the element of resistance to this expansion. However, given the period it is set in, the Mau Mau is represented as an organised force and much of the action is the result of the association of one of the members from the family of the protagonist with it. In fact, this association with the Mau Mau is one of the determining factors in the later part of the novel. Organized, armed resistance to the colonial machinery, especially the settler administration is evident in this novel through the Mau Mau. While the killings carried out by this organisation can be marked as acts of violence against the settler/colonial government, it is to be understood that such acts are necessitated as acts of retaliation and preservation. The murder of Mr. Howlands carried out by Boro as an act of revenge for his father’s death and the destruction of his family might be justified in light of the atrocities of the police and the homeguards under the command of Mr. Howlands. In fact, the entire process of violent activities can be interpreted as a chain of actions and reactions stemming from a common cause – the diabolical process of colonisation. Besides Boro’s act of revenge for his father’s death, there are other instances of violence in the novel which are caused by the colonial machinery – particularly the incidents at the meeting of the workers when police was used to avoid the workers from standing united against the owners.

*A Grain of Wheat* is marked by direct conflict between the colonial forces and the Mau Mau. In this novel, set during the euphoric days leading to the attainment of independence, goes back to the infamous days of the Emergency when life was miserable in Kenya (including Gikuyuland) under the repressive policy of the colonial government. The repressive measures taken to curb the growth of rebellion under the leadership of the Mau Mau had brought untold difficulties in the life of the common people. A good portion of the narrative deals with the condition of the people during the gruelling days of the Emergency when almost all the young people had to pass through a rigorous process of scrutiny known as the ‘pipe line’. This process was meant to make the people afraid of the coercive power of the government but what happened in turn was that it sent more young men into the jungles to join the movement against colonialism. In *A Grain of Wheat*, Kihika symbolises the spirit of revolt against colonial machinery. He, as the leader of the forest fighters and in his
design to spread the movement throughout the ridges and villages, is symbolic of the growing discontent with the government. It is in this novel that Ngugi shows violence being used by both the sides to assert their power; and it is not just violence, but violence of the extreme degree which the colonial government resorts to keep the people under control. At the same time, the need for resistance drives the rebels too to adopt similar measures. The novel reverberates with the presence of the Mau Mau as a force of resistance against the colonial forces and this conflict results in acts of violence from both sides. The attack at Mahee outpost, the experience at the concentration camps, the hanging of Kihika etc. are all instances of violence. The violence at the concentration camps and the inhuman torture that the prisoners had to undergo have been described by Ngugi in a manner which without entering into the realm of Violence in this novel can be interpreted as a cyclical process in which one incident results out of another, and in which the conflicting agents are seen as contributing to this cycle in an unconscious manner. Violence thus spirals out of their mutual actions upon each other. In the view of the people’s desire to punish the traitor by ‘sacrificing’ him on the eve of independence can also be interpreted as a potential for violence on the part of a people which has been subjugated to the same experience for years and their hatred for those who had collaborated with the colonial masters to maintain their command over them. The hatred of the people for Karanja who had served as a homeguard for the colonial government during the days of the Emergency and their suspicion that he might have been the betrayer of Kihika is indicative of a stage in the struggle for Kenya’s independence when to wipe out collaborators and informers was one of the prime agendas of the Mau Mau. In this novel there is an attempt on the part of the author to acknowledge the contribution made by the forest fighters towards the attainment of independence. The idolisation of Kihika in the novel is an attempt in this process; at the same time it is also an act to commemorate the sacrifices of thousands of unnamed freedom fighters who have not found a place in the records of the struggle.

With his next novel, Petals of Blood, Ngugi takes the historical setting of his novels into the post-independence scenario of Kenya. By this time, the Mau Mau as an outfit has dissolved with the attainment of the nation’s independence from colonial rule but the kind of Kenya that the freedom fighters had visualised in their struggle for the nation’s independence still remains a far dream as power and authority have
passed into the hands of those who use it for their selfish end only. The euphoric feeling which was there during the early days of independence has vanished into thin air as people are now becoming aware of the rampant corruption in new Kenya. Set in the village of Ilmorog, the novel shows how the wave of neo-colonialism takes the shape of international capitalism and how it slowly, and at times in a fast manner, ushers in a change which is in no way helpful for the common and the poor people. It is in this context of gradual, yet undesired, change that the novelist presents the ‘actual’ living conditions of the ex-forest fighters like Abdulla who are now left with nothing in the whirlwind of change brought about by the introduction of international capitalism in the countryside. Prior to the change being introduced into the countryside and the change of Ilmorog from Old Ilmorog into New Ilmorog, Abdulla was a small-time shopkeeper, making a living with whatever he earned from his small shop, but when the change from Old Ilmorog to New Ilmorog occurs, he is reduced from a small shopkeeper to a pauper. However, there is a phase in his life when the village begins to undergo change when he makes some money with Wanja by the sale of Thenget’a. However, his happy days soon come to an end when moneyed entrepreneurs take over the brewing of the liquor by managing to patent it. The pitiable condition into which Abdulla falls in his later days is indicative of how the members of the Mau Mau, who had shed their blood in the fight against colonialism are not given their due status in the post-independence era.

The next novel to follow – Devil on the Cross – takes violence and resistance to another level with Ngugi’s criticism being targeted basically on the evils of international capitalism, which, needless to repeat, represented for him the face of colonialism. Composed in the form of an allegory, the attack in this novel is on that section of Kenyans who function as collaborators in the context of newly-independent Kenya. This section of Kenyans has been represented as the new breed of parasites which digs into the vitals of the nation by helping to drain the wealth of the nation into foreign economies for a petty share. Ironically again, the major positions in independent Kenya have gone to these corrupt few who control the major activities in the economy. They are the one who run the offices and enterprises and control the job-market, and it gives them great power to exploit others – especially the young girls who are exploited in large number. The efficiency of a girl does not depend on how well she performs her job but on how well she performs in the bed. The case of
the runaway girls is even more pathetic as they become soft targets for these predators sitting in their air-conditioned chambers and offices. Violence, in this sense of gender exploitation is targeted on the female body but the scars are left on the mind too.

The novel also contains other forms of violence other than the one mentioned above. Violence in the form of murder and killing are also present in it. While the events in the cave point towards the potential for heinous crimes, murder of one of the contestants does actually take place on the instigation of the organizer of the Feast of the Devil. The presence of a band called ‘Hell’s Angels’ in the cave is also indicative of the employment of violence as a tool of control in the hands of criminals. Violence is also shown as begetting violence in this novel when Wariinga shoots the man who had been responsible for her miseries but who ironically, happens to be the father of the man whom she loves. However, the novel is conspicuous by the absence of the Mau Mau in the narrative though we have old Guthiraa as a reminder of the past days of struggle in Kenya. Violence, in this novel, goes beyond the realm of the individual and takes over the entire nation in the process of passing on the nation’s wealth into the hands of foreign investors.

It is in his sixth novel— Matigari — that Ngugi revives the spirit of the Mau Mau which had been such an important force in his works. This novel which has an ex-forest fighter as the central character, can be interpreted as the return of this rebellious force into the fictional world of Ngugi. Of all the novels of the author that have their historical setting as the newly independent Kenya, Matigari is perhaps the one which is most replete with violence. In the context of independent Kenya, resistance takes on the shape of struggle between contradictory forces within the same society. The absence of the colonial master, since it is independent Kenya, makes it a fight between the seeker of justice and that section of Kenyan society which Ngugi was very hateful of — those few who had misappropriated to themselves all the fruits of independence that should have gone to all the people. While the novel begins with the burial of the weapons of Matigari as he feels that he has no need for them now since his nation has gained her independence, it only ends with his disillusionment with the present state of affairs and with the ironical realization that it is only through the use of force that the poor and the oppressed in the society can get their just dues and only violence can establish a new society by uprooting the present one based on
corruption and injustice. The novel can be read as the culmination of the Marxist influence upon the author. As in the case of those novels set in the colonial phase of Kenyan history, this novel too represents the introduction of the Mau Mau as a force which is resistive to social injustice and corruption. The ending of the novel with the struggle being carried on by the new generation seems to bring the representation of Mau Mau in the novels of Ngugi a full circle.

It might also be added here that the representation of the Mau Mau, as Ngugi has projected from the viewpoint of the European characters has never been in a good light. The movement has been always referred to in negative terms by the settlers and the colonial government. Instances can be cited from the references regarding the movement as made in Weep Not, Child and A Grain of Wheat. Mr. Howlands in Weep Not, Child, hates the Mau Mau since he seems them as a threat to his holding on to the farm of Ngotho. His attachment to the land makes him blindly infuriated against the Movement; and in A Grain of Wheat, Thompson begins his work 'Prospero in Africa' with the very premise that Africa cannot do without Europe, and that Africans are a savage race needing to be civilized. Matigari too, is another novel which contains negative view of the colonials and their collaborators regarding the forest fighters. The image that the European settlers had about the Mau Mau is an aspect which Ngugi has tried to contest through his representation of the movement in his novels.

The Mau Mau movement in Kenya, thus, provided Ngugi wa Thiong’o with an important force to represent his own ideology of resistance towards colonial rule and colonial culture in the context of colonial Kenya; it also provided him with a means to criticize the influx of capitalist ideas and corruption rampant in independent Kenya. The influence which this movement had upon Ngugi coloured his artistic potential to a large degree and made itself a strong presence in his novels.

Notes:
