

The Polemics of Class, Nationalism and Ethnicity in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*

by

Amitayu Chakraborty

amitayu.chakraborty@nirmauni.ac.in

Assistant Professor of English

Department of Mathematics and Humanities

Institute of Technology, Nirma University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India

Abstract

This article explores how Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Marxist novel *Petals of Blood* addresses the issues of nationalism and ethnicity within the matrix of class. In so doing, the article also foregrounds the nuances of the polemical constructs concerning class, ethnicity and nationalism. Thus, a close textual analysis is substantiated with discussions on the political history of Kenya with a special emphasis on the Mau Mau phenomenon in an aim to examine the complex discourse of resistance in Thiong'o's work.

Introduction

In the novel *Petals of Blood* (1976), Ngugi uses a panorama of characters (Munira, Karega, Abdulla and Wanja) torn apart between tumultuous past and uncertain future. His disillusionment with the *Uhuru* (Independence) and the native (comprador) bourgeoisie is evident. The text emphasises the state of underdevelopment in the post-Independence Kenya. The nexus between the native (comprador) bourgeoisie and the international bourgeoisie underpinned by the power structure of capitalism is shown as the cause of the economic impoverishment of the non-elite in Kenya. The draught that impels the exodus of the villagers to the city is merely one of the several manifestations of the economic impoverishment that they undergo. For instance, Munira once wonders why there is the "preposterous" project of building an "international highway" through Ilmorog when the village needs "smaller serviceable roads" (*Petals* 48). At the very early stage, the novel thus doubts the post-Independence government policies for economic development of the nation: international highways are prioritised over smaller roads for the sake of leveraging the foreign capital to penetrate the potential markets available at the impoverished parts of Africa. It functions in a manner similar to that of the railroads in the colonial period.

Munira's reflection also points out the scenario of uneven development spawning the opposition between the country and the city. As he significantly laments, "Our erstwhile masters had left us a very unevenly cultivated land: the centre was swollen with fruit and water sucked from the rest, while the outer parts were progressively weaker and scraggier as one moved away from the centre" (49). A reference to the legend of the Gumbas is pertinent here (49). The post-Independence Kenyan nation-state is compared with the dwarfish Gumba having disproportionally large head that rests precariously on its small body. Consequently, if a Gumba falls down, it requires help from outside to stand again. Similarly, in the time of crisis, the Kenyan nation-state needs foreign aid. In this article, I explore the highly polemical aspects of class, ethnicity and nationalism related to the discourse of uneven economic development.

Exploring the Polemics of Class

In *Petals of Blood*, in the wake of the prominence of the Ilmorogians at the national political landscape, a group of university students named Jaribu Bahati calls for "the immediate abolition of capitalism" and writes a paper relating the uneven economic development to neocolonialism (185). The term "neo-colonialism," as used by Kwame Nkrumah, denotes a socio-politico-economic scenario in which the nation-state has a semblance of "international sovereignty," but, in reality, "its economic system" and thus its political policy" are "directed from outside" (Nkrumah ix). Being a monumental book in the history of African socialism, Nkrumah's *Neocolonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965) markedly projects the international arena as the space of socio-politico-economic struggle. For him, the primary conflict between the rich and the poor has been transposed to the conflict between the developed countries and the underdeveloped countries: "the developed countries succeeded in exporting their internal problem and transferring the conflict between the rich and the poor from the national to the international stage" (Nkrumah 255). Neil Lazarus points out this tendency to displace the focus from class to nation, from capitalism/socialism to centre/margin, not only in Nkrumah's *Neocolonialism* but also in Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972) and Chinweizu's *The West and The Rest of Us: White Predators, Black Slavers and the African Elite* (1975) (Lazarus 51-52). For Lazarus, this is a common fetish of the West which exists in those writers and is betrayed by their works.¹ However, Ngugi's idea of neocolonialism, as enunciated in *Petals of Blood*, emphasises the intranational exploitation engineered by the comprador bourgeoisie; the Gumba-like situation in which the rich and powerful thrive at the expense of the poor and disempowered. For Ngugi, "the neocolonial" refers to the exploitative bourgeoisie and the socio-politico-economic system adhered by them in the post-Independence Kenya. This is remarkable because the novel was produced in the time when *Neo-colonialism*, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* and *The West and The Rest of Us* had already made themselves prominent in the postcolonial African intellectual climate.

The uneven economic growth in and the consequent dependency (on foreign capital) of the post-Independence state are considered by many researchers of political history of Africa/Kenya to be results of colonialism (Zezeza 8). After Independence, the new state implemented authoritarian, repressive but flawed economic policies to recuperate the shortfall of economic development caused by the colonial state (9). The coveted bourgeois (the ruling elite) hegemony could not be established in Kenya at the time of gaining Independence. The new rulers were economically and politically backward in comparison with the ruling class of the so-called “First-World” states. Hence the state became the means of self-aggrandisement for the native rulers who perpetuated the pre-existing exploitative power structures. The post-Independence state was therefore shaped by “the capacity and knowledge structures of government developed during colonial rule” (Branch and Cheeseman 14; Berman 189). The developmental discourse of modernity which had been guiding the British colonial administration, especially during the period between 1945 and 1963, continued to predominate governmental policy-making in the post-Independence Kenya (Burton and Jennings 6, 8-10; Berman 189). After Independence, the urban elite started securing their grounds in economy at the expense of the rural populace. Thus arose the Gumba-like situation. The state continued to abuse its power to exploit its nation. The overburdened citizens continued to suffer from economic underdevelopment and/or uneven development. In fact, in the 1970s, “Kenya was found to be among the highest in terms of the degree of inequality” of income (Burton and Jennings 13). Moments of crises did necessitate the advent of “foreign aid.” By providing monetary aid, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) exacerbated the economic condition of the African nation-state. These two bodies ensured an inflow of the international capital into Kenya “with no capital in the hands of Africans” (Mwaura 8). From pressing “for the implementation of trade liberalization,” to enforcing the “foreign direct investment,” to effecting “the privatization of all parastatals” (such as banking, healthcare, transport and so on), the IMF and WB have been instrumental in the underdevelopment of many African countries like Kenya (Mwaura 17, 21-22). On the one hand, the IMF and WB urge the state to compromise with the foreign investors regarding the import taxes and their margin of profit in the business of products consumed in Kenya but manufactured in, for instance, USA, a country that finances and provides base to the IMF and WB. On the other hand, the state’s debt to the WB & IMF increases as it loses its capability of self-sustenance due to the unbridled business made by the foreign investors (35). The anonymous Lawyer and rescuer of Wanja—who finds herself trapped in a sex racket—remarks, “This [sexual exploitation of women] . . . happens when you turn tourism into a national religion and build its shrines of worship all over the country” (Thiong’o, *Petals* 134). In another occasion, tourist resorts in Mombasa are deemed by a foreign newspaper to be “special places where even an ageing European could buy an authentic African virgin girl of fourteen to fifteen for the price of a ticket to a cheap cinema show” (175). These passing remarks are a dig at the tourism industry which flourishes in the impoverished nation-states of Africa where other industries cannot develop. The development of tourism in Kenya is actually an indicator of economic underdevelopment. It does not ameliorate the state of the peripheral areas as foreign companies receive “80% of all profits earned from tourism” (Mwaura 11).

That the international capitalist power structure never lets the disenfranchised population come out of their state of crises, and impoverishes the underdeveloped nations is explored at length in the novel. Karega's observations of the city gain pertinence when he wonders "who was better off, the peasant in a forgotten village of the city dweller thrown into these rubbish heaps they called locations? (*Petals* 159). No difference is there between the economic exploitation undergone by a poor man in a city and that endured by a peasant in a village of post-Independence Kenya. Moreover, the learned and benevolent Lawyer who helps the delegation of Ilmorogians in the city shares with Karega and others his discovery of capitalism as the main reason behind the economic divide in the world: "And suddenly as in a flash of lightning I saw that we were serving the same monster-god as they were in America" (165-166). Unlike *Weep Not, Child* (1964) or *The River Between* (1965), *Petals of Blood* indicates the class-laden functioning of Christianity: its critique of capitalism has Christian rhetoric. Capitalism is represented as a blend of suprahuman (god) and subhuman (monster) entities (163). It is extremely powerful and widespread. At the same time, it is unfair and ruthless. The fable of Abdulla, in which a hare exploits an antelope, points out the unethical structure of capitalism as well (179). In the Lawyer's censure of the post-Independence nation-state, the comprador bourgeoisie become the "priests" and the bank or banking industry is said to be the "shrine" (163). Thus Ngugi's disillusionment with Independence surfaces here: "They fought . . . shed blood, not that a few might live in Blue Hills," says the lawyer (164). The political decolonisation is a sham. The new ruling class of African origin is as exploitative as the British colonial rulers were. The colonial education system complicit with Christianity is said to obscure the idea of racial and economic exploitation (165). The domains of praxis and gnosis are thus controlled by the same power structure. In the post-Independence period, the economic base and the ideological superstructure are manipulated by the same unethical but powerful system of capitalism that engendered colonialism.

Capitalism is also critiqued for its propensity towards reification. The caricaturish Member of the Parliament Nderi wa Riera is found to be saying "Africa needed capital and investment for real growth—not socialist slogans" (174). At the same time Nderi is known to be an advocate of African authenticity in the field of business (174-175). When surrounded by his friends who want to know about the delegation of villagers coming from Ilmorog to meet him, Nderi mistakenly comments on the controversy about the news of the availability of "authentic African virgin girl" at Mombasa tourist resorts (175). His unnecessary, casual repartee in response to the foreign newspaper's controversial news indicates callousness of the post-Independence ruling class vis-à-vis the reification of the African culture. Nderi also mummifies "the songs and dances of older generation" (303-304). Thus abstractions such as "the African Culture" are produced and commodified for the international market dominated by the capitalists. Contrary to this, there is Karega's imperative, "we must not preserve our past as a museum: rather, we must study it critically, without illusions, and see what lessons we can draw from it in today's battlefield of the future and the present" (323).

Earlier in the novel, Munira is taken aback by the “truly culturally integrated party” at Chui’s residence (151). In the party, both Swahili and English men and women are found to sing and laugh at “the juicy sections of songs normally sung at circumcision” (150). Munira also laments the loss of “dignity” of the ancient ritual after a while (162). The following depiction of the circumcision ceremony, also known as initiation ceremony, represents the “juicy sections of songs” or explicit references to sexuality in a different way,

The large place given to sex in the initiation ceremonies is often misunderstood by Europeans, as if sexual indulgence is encouraged for its own sake; the obscenity of songs and dances and the profligacy associated with many of these ceremonies are held to prove unusual moral depravity. On the contrary the Africans look upon these ceremonies as a final stage, in which boys and girls must be given full knowledge in the matters relating to sex, to prepare them for future activities in their own homesteads and in the community. In fact all the sex-teaching is given with a social reference. Boys are taught to look forward to marriage as a duty to themselves, to the clan and the tribe. (Kenya 110)

Overt references to sexuality in the circumcision ceremony, according to Kenya, had a connection with a level of social maturity in young Gikuyu men and women to handle responsibilities towards the clan and family in the pre-colonial pristine set-up. This, ironically, might be considered as a counter reification: “What Kenya considered to be culture emerged as much from his recollection of folk beliefs passed on by elders in his family and community as it did from Malinowski’s seminar on cultural change at the University of London” (Gikandi 59). Interestingly, it has correspondence with Munira’s lament at the loss of “dignity” of the ancient rituals.

However, sexual references in such songs might be significant as regards the Gikuyu anticolonial nationalist protest of the 1930s. The British administration and the Church of Scotland Mission opposed clitoridectomy deeming it to be absolutely atavistic. Nevertheless, both failed to cease the practice as many Gikuyu—including Kenya (as visible in *Facing Mount Kenya*) and Ngugi (in his first phase when he wrote *The River Between*)—championed it as central to Gikuyu (individual) identity and social formation. It must also be noted that in the 1930s, Kikuyu Central Association or KCA’s intervention into the female circumcision debate “catapulted the controversy into the category of a full-scale political revolt and endowed the practice with new meaning” (Pedersen 651). KCA became instrumental in linking the Gikuyu collective resentment about Christian dominance and access to land with the defence of female circumcision (651). Gradually, the defence of female circumcision was cast as a sign of Gikuyu anticolonial cultural nationalism (651-653).

The “Muthirigo” protest songs had overt sexual references such as the claim that the Church and the British administration were colluding to seduce young Gikuyu women to take away the land (653). Sexual orientation of the Gikuyu “elders” who aligned themselves with the colonial nexus between the Church and the Government was also attacked in the songs (653). The songs are robbed of this potential subversiveness when sung by the partying people in Chui’s residence in *Petals of Blood*.

Moreover, oathing, which gained prominence for the Land and Freedom Army (Mau Mau) and their allies, especially from the 1940s to early 1950s, is hijacked by the comprador bourgeois of the post-Independence Kenya. The mysterious “tea party” which leaves Munira to despair seems to be an oathing ceremony where the “ordinary working people were being given an oath to protect” the interests of the moneyed class (*Petals* 92, 151). However, in the days of armed rebellion against the colonial state, oathing was a means of unifying the economically and ethnically diverse population for resistance. Political meetings for oathing were referred to as “tea parties” (Berman 199). For the pro-Mau Mau Kenyans, oathing rituals were not merely symbolic in nature. In fact, the “symbolism of the oathing rituals refers to indigenous ritual practice” which were consciously construed in the ways which could “create a unity among Gikuyu as a prerequisite for acts of [anticolonial] resistance” (Green 76). Moreover, the vows made in oathing rituals were explicitly political in nature and demonstrated “an awareness of the structures of exploitation in colonial Kenya” (80). For instance, the “oath of unity”

committed the candidate to co-operate with other members of the movement, not to sell land to an Asian or European, not to go with prostitutes, nor to allow a daughter to remain uncircumcised. More significantly, it called for absolute obedience to the “society” and its leaders. Other clauses included a ban on the consumption of European-manufactured beer and cigarettes, and a pledge to preserve traditional customs. . . . That European-manufactured metal and clothing had to be removed prior to taking the oath suggests a level of symbolic opposition to the disruption caused by European-controlled production and wage labour. (80)

The rich minority Kenyans underdevelop the poor majority. In the colonial era, it was done by the European settlers and the Government; after Independence, the Chuis and Kimerias, in collaboration with the Nderis, perpetuate the same. The plan to build a new Ilmorog hatched by Nderi provides a blueprint for the uneven development. The developmental project planned by Nderi, namely Ilmorog (KCO) Investment and Holding Ltd, like the self-help scheme of Mass Tea Party, is lopsided: “KCO would serve the interests of the wealthy locals and their foreign partners to create similar economic giants!” (*Petals* 186). Consequently, the New Ilmorog consists of “one or two flickering neon-lights; of bars, lodgings, groceries, permanent sales, and bottled *Theng’eta*; of robberies, strikes, lockouts, murders and attempted murders; of prowling prostitutes in cheap night clubs; of polices stations, police raids, police cells” (190).

There is a wistful reflection upon this sham development by Munira: “We went on a journey to the city to save Ilmorog from the drought. We brought back spiritual drought from the city” (195). More importantly, the novel registers the economic dimension of the deceitful scheme as well. The Theng’eta Breweries and Enterprises Ltd owned by Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria, has its genesis in the ancient fertility cult involving the harvest and *Theng’eta* brewing, a pursuit revived by Nyakinyua (*Petals* 204-210; Gikandi 137). The corporate organisation is venerated for bringing “happiness and prosperity to every home in the area” and “international fame for the country” by a pro-ruling-class national newspaper (*Petals* 194). The daily, satirically named *Daily Mouthpiece*, regards Chui, Kimeria and Mzigo as great nationalist heroes who have fought for Africanisation of the ownership of *Theng’eta* factories in Kenya:

And now their lives were brutally ended when they were engaged in a bitter struggle for the total African ownership and control of the same *Theng’eta* factories and their subsidiaries in other parts of the country. Negotiations for them to buy out the remaining shares held by foreigners were soon to start. Whom then did their untimely deaths benefit? All true nationalists should pause and think! (194)

Yet, I would not endorse Ogude’s argument that Ngugi grossly generalises the conditions in a postcolony by privileging the class over ethnicity. The dominant discourse of Africanist nationalism (bolstered by Kenyatta’s KANU) reified ethnicity, race and nationality in order to gloss over the realities of class conflict (Savage 522). The novel aims at demystifying Africanisation or Kenyanisation of the economic sphere of the postcolony. The ownership of the *Theng’eta* brewery is Africanised/Kenyanised; but it is accomplished at the expense of the labouring Kenyan people. This happens as an extension of the reification of the rituals of circumcision and oathing. “Independence,” “modernisation” and “development” conspire to satisfy the interest of the dominant class in Kenya. The novel reiterates this in several ways and thereby critiques the dominant nationalism that championed Independence as an epochal event. In the dominant nationalism, Independence is consecrated as a watershed that ushered in a new era of “modernisation” and “progress.” But in *Petals of Blood*, obtaining political control of a nation is portrayed as insufficient for gaining actual freedom. Until the power goes to the hands of the disenfranchised, the nation remains to be a colony under a national (neocolonial) power structure. Therefore, Ogude’s argument that in *Petals of Blood* Ngugi supports a hackneyed “dependency perspective . . . manifested in the suppression of specific and local conflicts and the privileging of the centre-periphery approach” is not valid (Ogude 42). In fact, Ngugi’s novel critiques the dominant discourse of nationalism which reified ethnicity, race, nationality and native/foreign dichotomy, and thereby obscured the reality of uneven development and/or underdevelopment in Kenya.

Ethnicity and Nationalism vis-à-vis the Mau Mau Phenomenon

Petals of Blood holds promise also because it questions one of the ways in which the post-Independence Kenyan state gained a distinctive character. According to Branch and Cheeseman, “the extent to which issues of ethnicity and nationalism complicated issues of class” made the post-Independence Kenyan state function differently from the bureaucratic authoritarian states in Latin America (14). Like many other postcolonial nation-states, the newly Independent Kenya was fraught with the “profound tension between the rhetoric of nationalism and the reality of social and economic domination” (14). As Branch and Cheeseman add, the distinctive characteristics of the Kenyan state were constituted by the ways in which the state demobilised the dissenting forces—the forces which might challenge the state-sponsored authoritarian nationalist project of economic domination. The state achieved this dominance by empowering the political alliance between the executive and the provincial administration (14, 17). It exploited both material and ideological structures that shaped the arrested decolonisation of the Kenyan nation-state. In the following passages, I shall show that the dynamics of those material and ideological constructs are important for us to read Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood* vis-à-vis his interactions with Marxism, the Mau Mau phenomenon and the discourses of nationalism and ethnicity.

The Mau Mau phenomenon (the events and discourses centring the armed resistance put up by the Land and Freedom Army) can be treated as a centrepiece of the historiography of the Kenyan nation-state. An understanding of the phenomenon, as I would show, also facilitates my reading of Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood*. The discourse of “self-mastery” plays a key role in this context as, according to Daniel Branch, the Kenyan Land and Freedom Army held its position by their promise of “self-mastery through land” which underpinned their propagandist promise of “land and freedom” (Branch 292). From the end of the nineteenth century, for a Gikuyu male, self-mastery implied a moral high-ground and social maturity entailing ownership of property, marriage rights, eldership (membership of the council of customary law) and so on within the Gikuyu ethnic group (Branch 294). The economic elite could practise self-mastery by virtue of their patronage to the landless non-elite; the landless (the clients) laboured for sustenance, and thereby pursued self-mastery (295). This “machinery of patronage,” as Branch asserts, was jeopardised by the increasing population of landless people and the increasing economic domination of the European settlers (295). In the wake of the decreasing soil-productivity and increasing population of the landless, many senior patrons expelled their clients from the lands in order to maximise their own profit (295). It is needless to prove that the pro-elite colonial political system worsened the situation: “Collaborative networks of patronage connected rural households to the regime in Nairobi, via headmen, chiefs and the Provincial Administration” (295). The “growing numbers of impoverished Kikuyu were leaving the home territories, now increasingly crowded within their fixed boundaries, to seek land and work as squatters or wage labourers on settler estates or as largely unskilled workers in the towns” (Berman 197, 198). The evicted landless population lost not only their means of sustenance but also their pursuit of self-mastery, a hallmark of their ethnic identity.

They found the impoverished “urban radicals and squatters” who had been evicted by the European settlers (Branch 295). They were united by their class identity, an identity which was becoming increasingly distinct from the landed elite. Hence the authority of the rural patriarchs and the urban colonisers was challenged by the insurgent and united landless urban and rural population. The Land and Freedom Army partially represented this proletarian conglomeration: “Many within Mau Mau saw themselves as the *Irungu* generation, the straighteners, who would overthrow the corrupt incumbent generation of patrons and usurp European power” (295-296). On the other hand, the native elite was complicit with the colonial administration in exploitation of the impoverished (296).

The agenda of the Land and Freedom Army provided the landless population with a hope of gaining self-mastery. By so doing, it obtained its support. However, there was a portion of impoverished population who collaborated with the colonial regime. They were known as “loyalists” (Branch 291). For them, loyalty to the colonial administration was a feasible means to gain self-mastery as many of them were absorbed by the system as home guards, headmen and chiefs (299-300). The factionalism between the loyalists and the pro-Mau Mau Gikuyu grew strong, and consequently, the main enemy of the Land and Freedom Army was not the Europeans but the loyalist home guards, chiefs and headmen (301). To curb the revolt of the Kenyan Land and Freedom Army, in the 1950s and early 1960s the colonial government had to reward the loyalists by providing them “private land titles that guaranteed security of tenure, access to expanding cash crop production, and preferential access to the labour market;” at the same time, the state protected them from the Mau Mau by strengthening the provincial administration (Branch and Cheeseman 19-20; Branch 302; Green 72). This is how a pro-establishment economic elite was spawned during the last decade of the colonial rule: “There were three main features of the attempt [of the British administration] to promote ‘loyal’ African leaders: bias in their favour during elections to the legislative council in 1957 and 1958, preferential treatment in the course of the Africanisation of the provincial administration and the unequal distribution of new economic opportunities” (Branch and Cheeseman 19). The political arrangement thus favoured a particular class at the expense of another. This system remained unchanged after the British formally left the state of Kenya in 1963. At the time of Independence, the state was fully Africanised; yet this “Africanisation of the legislature and the provincial administration established the domination of the state by specific class interests which would come to dominate the post-colonial bureaucratic-executive state” (Branch and Cheeseman 20). In the post-Independence Kenya, on the one hand, the state remained centrally coercive functioning with the help of a far-flung, robust provincial administration; on the other hand, the executive consisting of popular leaders—Kenyatta being the most charismatic amongst them—attained the required legitimacy of the control (19-21). The government thus promoted “an explicitly elitist ideology” (25; Berman 201)

However, there were the Leninist radicals namely Oginga Odinga and Bildad Kaggia belonging to Kenya People's Union (KPU), a party formed by a faction of the Kenyatta-led ruling party Kenya African National Union (KANU), demanding redistribution of land and wealth (Savage 526). They showed "a demonstrable commitment to political nationalism and social equality" and demanded "free education and land redistribution" (Branch and Cheeseman 25-26). However, through the strong alliance between the executive and the provincial administration, KANU neutralised the radical non-elitist elements at the political front (Alam 130-131; Branch and Cheeseman 26; Savage 526-529).

As noted earlier, critiquing the objectification of ethnic customs (such as oathing), and reification of racial identities (in selective, elitist Africanisation of the control of *Theng'eta* breweries), *Petals of Blood* exposes the dominant discourse of nationalism which thrived under the Kenyatta regime. Concurrently, the anticolonial war waged by the Land and Freedom Army is valorised in the text for a related purpose. As it has been discussed, the post-Independence state endorsed an elitist ideology. This dominance of the native bourgeoisie is challenged in *Petals of Blood* through the projection of the Mau Mau and its associates as a nationalist ally of the peasantry (Alam 155). In *Petals of Blood*, Abdulla becomes the locus of this valorisation. By being an ex-Land-and-Freedom-Army warrior, Abdulla appears as "the best self of the community" in the eyes of Karega (*Petals* 228). As the reference to the "community" might become questionable—is it Gikuyu only?—Ngugi adds an anticipatory rejoinder: "symbol of Kenya's truest courage" (228). Karega, unlike Njoroge or Waiyaki, realises that his pursuit of education (teaching) is "romantic," and that it gains "flesh and blood" in Abdulla (228). He initially belongs to the petty bourgeoisie and commits, to use Amilcar Cabral's idea, "class suicide:"

[The petty bourgeoisie has only one choice to participate in the national struggle for liberation:] to strengthen its revolutionary consciousness, to reject the temptations of becoming more bourgeois and the natural concerns of its class mentality, to identify itself with the working classes and not to oppose the normal development of the process of revolution. This means that in order to truly fulfill the role in the national liberation struggle, the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie must be capable of committing suicide as a class in order to be reborn as revolutionary workers, completely identified with the deepest aspirations of the people to which they belong. (Cabral n.p.)

Unlike Githua's crippled leg in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, Abdulla's stump of a leg has a heroic history: Abdulla was shot in his leg when Ole Masai was killed during the Land-and-Freedom-Army assault at Nakuru garrison—a similar attack was led by Kimathi at Navisha and Kihika (the heroic Mau-Mau martyr in *A Grain of Wheat*) at Mahee (*A Grain* 147; *Petals* 137).

Githua's claim that he was shot in the leg because of his Mau-Mau connections is invented by himself. Unlike the imposter Githua, Abdulla has "a badge of courage indelibly imprinted on his body" as the stump (*Petals* 139). Moreover, Abdulla and his idol of anticolonial resistance Ole Masai have plural identities. First of all, "Abdulla" is a Muslim name which the character ridiculously mistakes for a Christian one (61). Then, as Brendon Nicholls argues, there is a convoluted imbrication of identities:

Although Abdulla's name passes as a mistake, it arguably also alludes to the name of the dissident Kenyan Swahili poet Abdilatif Abdalla, who was sentenced to three years imprisonment in 1969 for publishing a pamphlet entitled "Kenya, Where Are We Heading?" ... Ole Masai, Abdulla's comrade in Mau Mau, has similarly plural origins. Popularly known by the Gikuyu nickname "Muhindi," he is the son of Njogu's daughter and Ramjeeh Ramlagoon Dharamshah, who occupied the shop prior to Abdulla's arrival. "Ramlagoon" is, of course, an allusion to "Ramlogan," the troublesome shop owner in V. S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur*. We are told in *Petals of Blood* that Ole Masai hates "himself, his mother, his father, his divided self." His name denotes 'the son of a Masai' and his character is "possibly based in part on Joseph Murumbi (who is half-Maasai, half-Goan), a KAU activist educated in India [and the] first vice-president of Kenya" where, then, should we locate Ole Masai's patronym? Is it Dharamshah, Murumbi, Ramlogan or given by a Maasai man, a Goan man, or his comrades among the Mau Mau insurgents? (140; interpolation author's)

In *Weep Not, Child*, the Indians of Kenya are depicted as a "mercantile class" promoted by the same colonial regime that otherwise exploits the African labouring class (Amoko 56). In *Petals of Blood*, there is an attempt to ameliorate this racialised depiction of Indians or Asians living in Kenya. Through the imbricated origins of identities of Ole Masai and Abdulla, Ngugi tries to divest his literary works of the Gikuyu-centric nationalism. As an extension of this attempt, there is a reference to the political assassination of the nationalist leader of Asian origin "famous in the whole country for his earlier involvement in the struggle for independence and after, for his consistent opposition to any form of post-independence alliance with imperialism" (*Petals* 78).

Abdulla's portrayal of Dedan Kimathi, arguably the most important Mau-Mau leader, suggests that the Mau-Mau leadership had the potential to govern the post-Independence state (*Petals* 141). Kimathi's "new plans for the next phase of war" concerns itself directly with matters of national and governmental importance:

He wanted us reorganised into different zones, and he wanted us to elect a military high command and a separate political and education high command to prepare us to seize and administer power. He also wanted us to make greater efforts in linking with other forces opposed to the British occupation in Ukambani, Kalenjin, Luo, Luhya and Giriana areas and *all over Kenya*. He also wanted us to spread our cause to the court of Haile Selassie and to Cairo, where Gamal Abdel Nasser had taken the Suez Canal and later fought the British and French. (141; emphasis mine).

The rebellion under the leadership of Kimathi supposedly aimed to have a national and even transnational alliance. The Land and Freedom Army is thus exonerated of Gikuyu-centrism. Moreover, Ngugi also attempts at proletarianisation of the Mau-Mau phenomenon. In Abdulla's *Theng'eta*-induced monologue, Nding'uri, Karega's elder brother and Abdulla's childhood friend and co-revolutionary, is found to wonder: "will there come a day when all Kenyans can afford such a decent house?" (221). Historically heroic is therefore not only nationalist but also proletarian. Thus Mau Mau is instrumentalised by Ngugi to take issue with the dominant (elitist) nationalism in Kenya. What is worth mention here is Simon Gikandi's argument that the "examples of the political economy of underdevelopment" in *Petals of Blood* are to be understood as "a part and parcel of a public discourse that was taking place in East Africa at the time" might be refuted. By arguing so, Gikandi, as it may be contended, ignores the ways in which Ngugi's novel takes issue with the dominant discourse of nationalism in the post-Independence Kenya (137-138).

To critically appreciate Ngugi's literary representation of the Mau Mau, one must consider that his instrumentalisation of the Mau Mau is a part of the larger set of instrumentalisations of the phenomenon. From its inception, Mau Mau has been lending itself to a conflicted discursivity. The name of the insurgency is a misnomer (Rothermund 186). In fact, it is hard to tell whether Mau Mau was a war, a rebellion, a civil war or a revolution: "The point is that there are layers of spoken knowledge, but also of critical silences, that inform one's choice of each word both within the academy and in the larger society" (Atieno-Odhiambo 302). In the 1940s, when the native nationalist bourgeoisie (consisting of leaders like Kenyatta) sought political reform within the constitution, the Mau Mau germinated from the widespread "awareness among the rural population that land was the fundamental issue" (Green 72). On the one hand, the radical KCA or Kikuyu Central Association was contained by the moderate and centrist KANU; on the other hand, "*Anake wa Forty* (meaning those who were circumcised in 1940), consisting mainly of ex-servicemen and the 'lumpen proletariat' . . . together with trade union leaders, pressed for radical direct action" (Green 72; Berman 198). Armed robberies and assassinations of the loyalists and Europeans ensued and Emergency was declared along with enforcement of villagisation or repatriation of the rural Gikuyu. Consequently, many of the repelled Gikuyu fled to the forest and initiated a guerrilla warfare against the colonial administration (Green 72).

In the 1940s, many Gikuyu took what was known as the KCA oath, “land and freedom,” oath of unity, and/or “that of the *Muingi* (the movement) and of Gikuyu and Mumbi,” in order to remain committed to the hasty resistance against the colonial administration and the existing economic imbalance (75). Ironically, by legally prohibiting the unorganised resistance, the colonial government unwittingly aided it to emerge “as a political force, as people responded to the prohibition by supporting the colonial administration (as “loyalists”) or opposing it (75). However, the Mau Mau phenomenon “threatened both the property-holding elders and petty bourgeois *athomi* who claimed the authenticity of Kikuyu civic virtue and authority, and their class counterparts among other ethnic communities in Kenya, who joined together in the leadership of KAU” (Berman 198). There was no unity in Mau Mau, and ironically, “[t]he colonial authorities’ version of Mau Mau as a conspiratorial secret cult attached to it an illusory unity of organization and ideology” (Berman 200). In fact, the Land and Freedom Army was fraught with the “conflicts between the literate leaders like Kimathi and Karari Njama and many of the primarily illiterate rank and file of peasants and dispossessed squatters led by men like Stanley Mathenge” (Berman 200; Lonsdale, “Moral Ethnicity” 142; Berman and Lonsdale 456). Amidst such inconsistencies, one may claim that “Mau Mau” refers to an ambivalent discursivity from which apparently coherent narratives have been constructed by various proclaimed or concealed historiographers (Atieno-Odhiambo 302-303; Berman 181-182). In other words, Mau Mau histories have been instrumentalised or adapted to suit various needs by many. Ngugi’s representation of the Mau Mau, understood in this context, appears to be a challenge to the dominant colonial and post-Independence/ neocolonial instrumentalisation of the Mau Mau; but it is also another instrumentalisation (Atieno-Odhiambo 300, 305; Berman 181, 203). The following passage is pertinent here:

The history of the Mau Mau is the history of power, how it is attained, or lost, manipulated, controlled. It is a confession that society is still engaged in struggle about power and struggle for accountability as well. The narration of the history of Mau Mau is an accounting process with its profits and losses, and yes, scores to be settled. This accounting needs a language, a metaphor; not just one metaphor, but many, because there are several audiences out there to be addressed and captured. (Atieno-Odhiambo 305)

Ngugi’s representation might then be interpreted as an attempt “to settle the score.” The colonial state downplayed the Mau Mau. The dominant nationalism—forged by centrist elites like Kenyatta—maintained an ambivalent attitude towards the revolt in the post-Independence Kenya (Berman 201-202). In the neocolonial situation, therefore cultural nationalisation and proletarianisation of the Mau Mau were Ngugi’s strategies to set in motion a postcolonial permanent revolution, in the Trotskyian sense of the term.

For Leon Trotsky, socialist revolution should not end even with the dictatorship of the proletariat. After the proletariat gains political power at the national domain, the revolution should spread at the world level and establish a new classless society, thereby, gaining a “permanent” character (Trotsky 278-279). More importantly, as Trotsky argues, the spreading of this revolution does not depend upon the nature of the modes of production of the nation; that is to say, in countries (former colonies) where the development of the bourgeois is belated, “permanent revolution” can take place (276). In Trotsky’s theory, for countries like Kenya, “permanent revolution signifies that the complete and genuine solution of their tasks of achieving *democracy and national emancipation* is conceivable only through the dictatorship of the proletariat as the leader of the subjugated nation, above all of its peasant masses” (276).² On this very point Trotsky’s theory differed from “Stalin’s classic doctrine of stages” which emphasises the indispensability of the necessary socio-economic conditions—the completion of bourgeois democratic revolution—to the development of socialist revolution (Lowy 201). For Trotsky, history is an organic combination of bourgeois and proletarian revolutions:

[T]he first distinction between a revolutionist and a vulgar evolutionist lies in the capacity to recognize and exploit such moments [of revolutionary potential]...

In order that the proletariat of the Eastern countries may open the road to victory, the pedantic reactionary theory of Stalin and Martynov on “stages” and “steps” must be eliminated at the very outset, must be cast aside, broken up and swept away with a broom. (Trotsky 240, 248)

Drawing upon the abovementioned discourse of Marxism it might be argued that, Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood* concerns itself with the prospects of a permanent revolution in Kenya. Ngugi’s narrative counters the state-sponsored colonial and neocolonial undermining of the Mau Mau history and invents a heroic history of the movement. He exploits the indeterminacy of the Mau Mau historicity for revolutionary purpose. The revolutionary consciousness necessary for permanent revolution is hence forged by him. Mau Mau becomes the origin of the nationalist class resistance to be undertaken by the revolutionary proletariat in the neocolonial Kenya. Abdulla represents the point of origin of that resistance while Karega, the “organic intellectual” in the Gramscian sense, who engages actively in the working-class movement towards the end of the novel, assumes the present. The future of it lies with Akinyi, the girl who meets Karega in prison (*Petals* 343-344). Thus the revolution gains its permanent character in the nationalist Marxist discourse of Ngugi. Towards the end, Karega’s reaction to the news or rumour of the return of Stanley Mathenge emphasises this continuity of the revolution:

“It could be possible? But what did it matter? New Mathenges . . . new Koitalels . . . new Kimathis . . . new Piny Owachos . . . these were born every day among the people . . .” (344). Factions within Mau Mau (for instance the conflict of leadership between Mathenge and Kimathi) are elided by Ngugi in order to construct a coherent narrative of postcolonial resistance based on the theory of permanent revolution. What for Berman becomes “failed efforts to define a Kikuyu nationality linked to a militant populist politics of the poor,” turns into a source of postcolonial Marxist resistant nationalism for Ngugi (Berman 200).

Conclusion: Class, Ethnicity, Nationalism and Resistance

Reverting to the discussion of ethnicity and nationalism it might be argued then that Ogude’s argument that Ngugi grossly generalises the postcolonial situation (by privileging class over ethnicity) is misleading. There is a distinction between “political tribalism” and “moral ethnicity,” according to Lonsdale and Berman. Political tribalism is considered to be detrimental to anticolonial resistance (Lonsdale, “Moral Ethnicity” 140-141). There is a strong notion of belonging to a nation or race or ethnic group, which is akin to the discourse of what Peter Geschiere calls autochthony—a “drastic exclusionary tendency” that comes with a quest for a purity of belonging (Geschiere 224). According to John Lonsdale, this is the crux of “unquestioning political tribalism” (Lonsdale, “Re: Query”).³ Political tribalism or “external patriotism” pertains to the manipulation of regional inequalities and thereby poses a threat to “moral ethnicity,” “a desire to live well together in the modern world” (Lonsdale, “Ethnic Patriotism” 18, 12). As discussed elsewhere by myself, we must understand ethnicity in terms of nationalism and/or the formation of the nation-state: due to several factors of colonial administration, such as lopsided delegation of authority to the Africans within the state mechanism, introduction of literacy along with the creation of standardized vernaculars, and promotion of local dialects in place of consolidation of the lingua franca of a nation, ethnicity prevailed as a phenomenon, “a creative response to industrialization, urbanization and intensification of state power,” in Africa (137).⁴ In this context, Lonsdale conceptualizes the discourse of “moral ethnicity” (138-141). He argues that colonial capitalism ushered in moral ethnicity, a highly contested discursive field in which formerly established moral economy or evaluation criteria for civic virtue for a community began to be questioned, subverted, modified or distorted. Colonial capitalism changed the social roles of men and women in African communities. Less empowered members of the community started to have education and earning. This enabled them to compete with the more empowered members for social reputation, “the means by which people pursue their self-interest,” the core of the moral economy of any ethnicity, be it African or not (138). This change in society spawned new arguments regarding the criteria for a good member of the society. The competitive social milieu often evoked the social morality of an imaginatively virtuous and communalistic past, a past that is ethnic in nature.

Therefore, moral ethnicity, for Lonsdale, is a discursive formation that allows for the possibility of questioning the legitimacy of the normative social frameworks established within the age-old moral economy. Ngugi's instrumentalisation of the Mau Mau as a historical origin of the postcolonial proletarian resistance might be interpreted as his attempt to construct a nationalism grounded on the discourse of moral ethnicity. His refashioning of the armed resistance is a reinvigoration of the discourse of ethnicity in which "self-mastery" is a coveted pursuit, a morally high ground determined by one's access to land. However, this does not mean that Ngugi romanticises the discourse of self-mastery endorsing land accessibility as the means of resistance to neocolonialism. In fact, in *Petals of Blood* he depicts how the unrealistic pursuit of retention of land (hence that of self-mastery) proves futile. Nyakinyua dies in her courageous but otiose efforts to retain her land; moreover, "a whole lot of peasants and herdsmen of Old Ilmorog who had been lured into loans and into fencing off their land and buying imported fertilisers and were unable to pay back were similarly affected" (*Petals* 175-176). There is also a reference to the ideological debate between Karega and Abdulla over the rise of the working class or the proletariat as the leaders of the postcolonial resistant movement (320). As Abdulla says,

I thought he [Karega] was going too far in overstressing the importance of workers' solidarity aided by small farmers. What about the unemployed? The small traders? I believed, and I told him that land should be available to everybody; that loans should be readily available to the small man; that nobody should have too many businesses under him—in a word, fair distribution of opportunities. But he always argued that loans would only hasten the ruin of the small businessman and alienation of the small farmer . . . that workers as force were on the increase and were the people of the future. (320)

This debate is crucial to the development of the discourse of moral ethnicity. The old pursuit of self-mastery—by having access to land—is no more feasible in the neocolonial scenario. New social formation (capitalist economy) requires new codes of civic virtue. As colonialism disrupted the flow of life and spawned new competitive social milieu, neocolonialism demands new pursuit of self-mastery. This is symbolically suggested in the "opera of eros," the sensual ceremony of dance and song at the *Theng'eta* brewing: "when the old thread was broken, it was time for the whole people to change to another tune altogether, and spin a stronger thread" (209). Therefore, revamping of the old moral economy is required. The debate between Karega and Abdulla enunciates the signs of moral ethnicity, a discursive zone where established frameworks of virtues are questioned and an imagined (instrumentalised) ethnic communalistic past is evoked. The workers' protest (the proletarian revolution having the spirit of permanent revolution in the national arena) in the neocolonial condition is deemed to be the way to achieve what once the Land and Freedom Army (the signifier of the seamless ethnic communalistic past) promised to its people. Therefore Ngugi's polemics of class resonates with Lonsdale and Berman's historically grounded concept of moral ethnicity.

Thus, to conclude, Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* is a complex depiction of the polemical constructs concerning class, ethnicity and nationalism. His resistance to neocolonialism is animated by this complex polemics. Hence it is a disservice towards Ngugi's discourse of resistance to consider his Marxism vis-à-vis *Petals of Blood* as deterministic and singular. Apparently, the novel seems to privilege the dynamics of class in the discourse of neocolonialism. However, within the matrix of class, Ngugi ingenuously challenges the dominant discourses concerning ethnicity and nationalism, and foregrounds a democratic, resistive postcolonial discourse.

Notes

1. Lazarus deems Ngugi's recent article "Europhonism, Universities, and the Magic Fountain: the Future of African Literature and Scholarship" (2000) to be essentialist and fetishized in a similar manner, and he argues that this essentialism runs contrary to Ngugi's avowed Marxism (53). However, his acknowledgement of Ngugi as "unquestionably a great novelist" indicates that he spares Ngugi's novels of such censure.
2. Though Trotsky does not refer to Kenya in particular, he refers to the European colonies in general for a considerable number of times (Trotsky 259, 276, 279, 280).
3. I am grateful to Prof. (Dr) John Lonsdale, University of Cambridge, for the insightful reply to my queries related to the concept of moral ethnicity.
4. I have discussed the concept of moral ethnicity in a similar way in another article of mine (Chakraborty 33-35).

Works Cited

- Amoko, Apollo Obonyo. *Postcolonialism in the Wake of Nairobi Revolution: Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the Idea of African Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Print.
- Atieno-Odhiambo, E. S. "The Production of History in Kenya: The Mau Mau Debate." *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 25.2 (1991): 300-7. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 Feb. 2013.
- Berman, Bruce J. "Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Modernity: The Paradox of Mau Mau." *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 25.2 (1991): 181-206. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Jan. 2011.
- Berman, Bruce, and John Lonsdale. *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa*. Vol. 2. Oxford: James Curry, 1992. Print.
- Branch, Daniel. "The Enemy within: Loyalists and the War against Mau Mau in Kenya." *The Journal of African History* Vol. 48.2 (2007): 291-315. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 Dec. 2012.
- Branch, Daniel, and Nicholas Cheeseman. "The Politics of Control in Kenya: Understanding the Bureaucratic-Executive State, 1952-78." *Review of African Political Economy* 33.107 (2006): 11-31. *JSTOR*. Web. 29 June 2015.

- Burton, Andrew, and Michael Jennings. "Introduction: The Emperor's New Clothes? Continuities in Governance in Late Colonial and Early Postcolonial East Africa." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 40.1 (2007): 1-25. JSTOR. Web. 29 Jun 2015.
- Cabral, Amilcar. "The Weapon of Theory." *Marxists Internet Archive*. N. p. N. d. Web. 12 Mar. 2015.
- Chakraborty, Amitayu. "Contextualizing Transgression: Dynamics of Gender and Ethnicity in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*." *Gnosis: An International Journal of English Language and Literature* 2.2 (2016): 33-43. Jaipur: Yking Books. Print.
- Geschiere, Peter. *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009. Print.
- Gikandi, Simon. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2002. Print.
- Green, Maia. "Mau Mau Oathing Rituals and Political Ideology in Kenya: A Re-analysis." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 60.1 (1990): 69-87. JSTOR. Web. 9 Dec. 2013.
- Kenyatta, Jomo. *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*. London: Mercury Books, 1965. Print.
- Lazarus, Neil. "(Re)turn to the People: Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the Crisis of Postcolonial African Intellectualism." *The World of Ngugi wa Thiong'o*. Ed. Charles Cantalupo. New Jersey: Africa World P, 1995. Print.
- Lonsdale, John. "Ethnic Patriotism and Markets in African History." *JICA Research Institute Working Papers* 20 (2010): 1-43. JICA Research Institute. 23 Jan, 2016.
- . "Moral Ethnicity and Political Tribalism." *Inventions and Boundaries: Historical and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11 (1994): 131-50. IDS Roskilde Occasional Paper. Web. 2 May, 2015.
- . "Re: Query." Message to the author. 29 Jan. 2016. E-mail.
- Lowy, Michael. *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution*. London: NLB, 1981. Print.
- Mwaura, Ndirangu. *Kenya Today: Breaking the Yoke of Colonialism in Africa*. New York: Algora Publishing, 2005. Print.
- Nicholls, Brandon. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Gender, and the Ethics of Postcolonial Reading*. Surrey: Ashgate, 2010. Print.
- Nkrumah, Kwame. *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. New York: International Publishers, 1965. Print.
- Ogude, James. *Ngugi's Novels and African History: Narrating the Nation*. London: Pluto P, 1999. Print.
- Pedersen, Susan. "National Bodies, Unspeakable Acts: The Sexual Politics of Colonial Policy-making." *The Journal of Modern History* 63.4 (1991): 647-80. JSTOR. Web. 21 Aug. 2011.
- Rothermund, Dietmar. *The Routledge Companion to Decolonisation*. London: Routledge, 2006. Print.

- Savage, Donald C. "Kenyatta and the Development of African Nationalism in Kenya." *International Journal* 25.3 (1970): 518-37. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 Oct. 2011.
- Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *A Grain of Wheat*. 1967. London: Penguin, 2002. Print.
- . *Petals of Blood*. London: Heinemann, 1977. Print.
- Trotsky, Leon. *The Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects*. 3rd ed. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1978. Print.
- Zezeza, Paul Tiyambe. "The Developmental and Democratic Challenges of Postcolonial Kenya." *James S. Coleman African Studies Center* nv. (2010): 2-25. *UCLA E-Scholarship*. Web. 14 Sept. 2015.