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Sommaire

People's Democratic Demands in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's <i>Wizard of the Crow</i> and Jean-Marie Adiaffi's <i>Silence, on Développe</i>	7
--	---

Christophe Sékène DIOUF

The Poetics of African Divinatory Art in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's <i>Wizard of the Crow</i>	21
--	----

Youssoupha MANE

Revisiting the Literary Ideological Orientation of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o as an African Writer "Engagé" or a Simple "Ideologist"?	37
--	----

Aboubacar Sidiki COULIBALY

Ferdinand de Saussure à l'épreuve des poètes	57
--	----

Boubacar CAMARA

De la nostalgie du pays perdu à « la nostalgie de la nostalgie », un phénomène inédit dans les littératures de l'exil. Lectures intertextuelles de <i>l'Odyssée</i> d'Homère et de <i>L'Ignorance</i> de Milan Kundera	69
--	----

Banda FALL

Récit et Peinture dans <i>La bulle de Tiepolo</i> de Philippe Delerm: une expérience minimaliste	81
--	----

Claude DÉDOMON

L'émancipation de la jeune fille dans l'espace sénégalais: regards croisés de Mariama BA et Sally SINGHATEH	99
---	----

Sylvie COLY

Du processus d'émergence et de signification du personnage romanesque: Approche théorique	119
--	-----

Ndioro SOW

L'enseignement du français aux candidats au voyage pour long séjour en France: un prélude à l'enseignement du français langue d'intégration (F.L.I.).....	135
--	-----

Mamadou FAYE

Analyse morphosyntaxique dans l'expression proverbiale baoulé	151
---	-----

KOUAME YAO Emmanuel

Quelques formes sémiotiques de la représentation de la désillusion dans <i>La route des Flandres</i>	165
--	-----

Lydie IBO

Revisiting the Literary Ideological Orientation of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o as an African Writer "Engagé" or a Simple "Ideologist"?

Aboubacar Sidiki COULIBALY*

Résumé

Cet article présente Ngugi Wa Thiong'o comme un géant de la littérature et civilisation africaines. Ensuite, il fournit des informations biographiques sur cet écrivain Kenyan afin d'éclairer le lecteur sur l'homme de lettre dont on explique le point de vue idéologique. A cet égard, il convient de définir le concept du Marxisme en rapport avec les sens connotatifs de l'idéologie comme développés par certains spécialistes du domaine. Après, le texte explique l'engagement idéologique de Ngugi comme décrit dans ses œuvres littéraires et ses essais tels que *Writers in Politics* (1986), *The River Between* (1965), and *Petals of Blood* (1977). Dans ces différentes œuvres, Ngugi croit fermement que tant que le système capitaliste existera en Afrique, les pays africains ne connaîtront jamais la justice, la paix, l'égalité, la solidarité et le développement réel. Il impute cette situation de domination et d'exploitation de l'homme par l'homme à la nouvelle forme du colonialisme que certains appellent aujourd'hui mondialisation ou néocolonialisme. Pour Ngugi, il est inconcevable que les écrivains africains passent sous silence un tel état de fait dans leurs œuvres littéraires, surtout quand les peuples africains sont exploités et opprimés dans leur milieu socioculturel de survie, de combat, de construction et de développement. Cet article se termine en clarifiant la prise de position de Ngugi par rapport au choix de la langue qui doit être utilisée comme le médium le plus approprié pour écrire la littérature africaine. Par conséquent, il montre que Ngugi a une préférence pour les langues africaines qu'il considère comme les médiums les plus fiables et capables de présenter de façon authentique la réalité africaine.

Mots clés: Idéologie, Engagement, Néo-colonialisme, Culture Africaine et Marxisme

Abstract

The paper presents Ngugi Wa Thiong'o as a giant of African literature and civilization. It then provides certain biographical information about this Kenyan writer. This is meant to enlighten the reader about who is actually the man that the paper tries to account for his ideological standpoint. Because of this, it strives to define the concept of Marxism in relation to the connotations of ideology as developed by some scholars. Thereafter, it explains the ideological commitment of Ngugi as it is expressed in his fictional and non-fictional works such as *Writers in Politics* (1986), *The River Between* (1965) and *Petals of Blood* (1977). In these different works Ngugi strongly believes that, as long as there would be a capitalist system in Africa, African countries

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would never ascend to justice, peace, equality, solidarity and development. He attributes this situation of domination and exploitation to the new form of colonialism labeled globalization or neo-colonialism by many people today. To him, in Africa, the African writer cannot and should never accept to be silent or close his eyes on the neo-colonial situation in which the African peoples are exploited and oppressed, especially in their socio-cultural location of survival, struggle, construction and development. The paper ends with the standpoint of Ngugi about the kind of language (indigenous languages) which should be used as the most relevant medium of writing African literature. His preference is for African languages that are considered as the only reliable mediums capable of authentically representing the true face or realities of Africa.

Key words: Ideology, Commitment, Neocolonialism, African Culture and Marxism

Introduction

African literature is a field of study highly appreciated by African readers and writers across the continent. This paper revisits the conception and definition of African literature by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o on the basis of the use of African native languages. Ngugi is a well-known literateur and literatus in Africa, and it is pertinent to explicate his standpoint in this paper, especially when the thorny question of the conception and definition of African literature is at stake. The paper is not only interested in demonstrating and explaining the ideological stances of Ngugi, but it also shows the way in which Ngugi Wa Thiong'o has described an indigenous path towards the mental decolonization of Africans. This path is generally related to the appropriate teaching of African literature in African schools by "non-uprooted" African teachers; which could highly contribute to the conscientization of African children about colonialism, neo-colonialism, and their underlying negative effects on their civilization, thought, and behavior. Unlike many African scholars, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o has always thought that when the teaching of literature starts with the teaching of African literature from primary schools up to the university levels, the African youth will eventually grow in perfect harmony with their cultural environment. They will not develop any complex of inferiority towards British and French literatures. It is actually from this particular angle that the paper seeks to see whether Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is a committed writer or just an ideologist who is only motivated by political issues, or if he is at the same time a committed and an ideologist writer.

1. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o: The Man

This Kenyan writer was actually born James Ngugi in 1938 in Limuru in the Gikuyu Highlands of Kenya. Limuru pertains to the central province of Kamiriithu. His father was a peasant and was working as a laborer on the estate of an African landowner. This clearly explicates that Ngugi is from a peasantry family. His mother was one of his father's four wives, and he was one of the twenty-eight children his father had had. As for his education, he spent his primary school education at independent Kenyan schools. He then attended the Alliance High School; an institution based on a western-biased curriculum and Christian teaching. During his high school years, many of his family members were involved in the Mau Mau uprising and the resistance movement. During the struggle, Ngugi's parents were arrested and his stepbrother was killed by government forces. However, in 1958, he went to Uganda to pursue his studies at the Makerere College, the only institution available at that time in all East Africa. The man is now living and teaching in the USA and he has received several honors and awards from around the world. Thanks to his engagement for Africa and her civilization, Ngugi abandoned his European first name, James, to adopt an authentic African first name, Wa Thiong'o. He did this to show Africans that there is nothing shameful about their naming systems. Like Chinua Achebe, he is also a link between the pioneers and the new generation of African writers. By reading these pieces of information on Ngugi, the reader may already imagine the ideological conviction and vision of Ngugi as the paper will demonstrate¹.

In addition, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is an African writer who cannot understand the validity or importance of any African piece of literature if it does not serve a given cause. The implication is that African literature should be committed to a people, a community or society, and this may even be observed in his works such as *Moving the Centre* (1993), *Decolonizing the Mind* (1981), *Something Torn and New: an African Renaissance* (2009) and others. In the same direction, it is noticed that the commitment of this Kenyan writer can be framed and comprehended within the boundaries of Marxism, Afrocentrism, and anti-neo-colonialism. This observation is based on the fact that this African scholar's literary productions, such as essays, novels, plays, short stories, and poems, are all rooted in the principle of defending

¹ Coulibaly, Aboubacar Sidiki. *Culture and Politics in the Sub-Saharan Anglophone Novel: a Reading of Emecheta's Second Class Citizen, Achebe's No Longer at Ease and Ngugi's Petals of Blood*. Fes: University Ben Abdoullah. 2008. The author of this paper relies on the above paper to provide some biographical information on this Kenyan writer.

peoples of Africa and their civilization. They propound the absolute necessity for change through revolution and resistance. This kind of engagement is actually coalesced in his ideological stance which is at heart meant to liberate the African working class and peasantry from the capitalist and imperialist false consciousness. On this basis, his ideological vision of reaching an ideal society for his country and Africa is supposed to be totally enshrined in the Marxist ideology of a fair, just, socialist, and classless social space of daily existence. This is constructed in his literary discourse because he would like to achieve an authentic African society where African native languages, civilization, and model of development are valorized. The below sections therefore seek to demonstrate such a standpoint about Ngugi.

2. Marxism and Ideology

From the outset, it is axiomatic to specify the definitions of ideology and Marxism before elucidating the way through which this Kenyan writer is “engagé” and an “Ideologist”. In concretizing this, let us see how ideology and Marxist ideology could actually be explicated in consistence with the main issue of the paper. In this a frame of mind, Terry Eagleton states:

Ideology is not in the first place a set of doctrines; it signifies the way men live out their roles in class-society, the values, ideas and images which tie them to their social functions and so prevent them from a true knowledge of society as a whole.²

From this definition by Terry Eagleton, it clearly appears that ideology is an illusion which is rooted in the creation of an ‘unreal world’ whereby all relations are done and maintained through a false consciousness. This kind of false consciousness is generally promoted by the hegemonic ruling class or the dominant power. Thus, people may comprehend that ideology is not a mere set of ideas or the science of the mind, or the philosophy of mind but it is more complex and problematic than all the definitions which may be given by different scholars when it is question to really define what is ideology. The answer would probably be to return to the way Karl Marx, himself, had defined it because of the diverse implications that the concept of ideology is subjected to. For instance, Karl Marx says:

² Eagleton, Terry. *Criticism and Ideology: Study in Marxist Theory*. London: Verso, 1976.p.16.

Ideology is false consciousness, a set of beliefs that obscured the truth of the economic basis in society and the violent oppression that capitalism necessarily entails³.

Therefore, According to Karl Marx, different people have distinct beliefs in various things at different epochs. As a result, he considers, for example, that the very fact of believing that some people are rich and others are poor is ‘natural and inevitable’; or the belief that Blacks are inferior to Whites is ideologically constructed. For him, the goal or rationale behind such beliefs is mainly meant to obscure the truth or reality (the false consciousness) from the masses so that they could not defeat, challenge, and revolt against the economic inequality at work in their society. In this direction, the point that Marx is entitling to reach is that the role of the intellectual is to disabuse the masses (the working class and peasantry) from the virtually established false consciousness so that they could be aware of the manipulation and the injustice at work in their economically divided society. This is ultimately meant to stir up the masses so that they could take some actions to subvert the man-eats-man’s economic system or the hierarchical order of productions and reproductions. In other words, it signifies to change the social status of the exploited by force or by revolution. If this is concretized, the masses could eventually aspire to a better world of equalitarianism, justice, and fairness. In a slightly different manner, Kossi Souley Gbeto states:

L’idéologie est l’ensemble des croyances, des mythes, des idées expliquant l’univers et les hommes .Elle correspond à plusieurs systèmes de représentations du monde et des êtres humains. Nos idées, nos idéologies sont en nous une sorte de reflet psychique des conditions objectives de notre existence⁴.

It now becomes evident that the concept of ideology is defined and understood by scholars, writers, and people from various angles, depending on the ideological orientation of each one. In spite of the existence of certain nuances between the three definitions provided in the paper, it is important to specify that Marxism and ideology should be construed out of the definitions of Terry Eagleton, Karl Marx, and Kossi Souley Gbeto because their conception of ideology and Marxism is

³ Ashcroft, Bill and Ahluwalia, Pal. *Edward Said*. London: Routledge Critical Thinkers. 2009. p.19.

⁴ Gbeto, Kossi Souley. “Idéologie et Vision du Monde de Sony Labou Tansi , Ecrivain de la Post-Independence”, *Revue Baobab*. No: 50 Ans de Littérature ,50 Ans de Postcolonie. (2012), p.8. Online Journal. This quotation is translated into English as follows: Ideology is the set of beliefs, myths and ideas which explain the universe and mankind. It corresponds to several systems of representing the world and human beings. Our ideas, our ideologies are in us as a sort of psychic reflection of the objective conditions of our existence.

consistent with the ideological orientations of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o as indirectly constructed in his literary texts. What we intend to achieve in the above is to remind the reader that Marxism and ideology are not two different things. When people talk about Marxism, they imply Marxist ideology which is the converse of capitalist ideology or imperialist ideology. So, Marxism becomes the particular type of ideology advocated by Karl Marx in writings and speeches against exploitation, capitalism, and imperialism.

3. Ngugi's Ideological Commitment in African Literature

The ideological commitment of Ngugi is, to an extent, clearly imparted in his different essays. It can be noted also in his novels, short stories, drama, and poetry, through literary codes, devices and strategies. However, the very sense of Ngugi's Marxist ideology should be understood within the interstices of the definitions given in the previous section, especially when people have to account for his being a writer 'engagé' and an ideologist. Concretely speaking, what one may be enticed to construe out of this stance is to re-affirm the already-expressed idea that Ngugi is one of the rarest African Anglophone writers to ever preach overtly and defend Marxism for the sake and the well-being of his community and his nations of Africa as a whole. This signifies that he does not always hide his ideological position or orientation whenever the question of freedom, independence, and renaissance of Africa is at stake. For instance, in an interview he opines:

My position here is very simple. As I said in your earlier question, I believe that a people have a right to know how wealth is produced in their country, who controls it and who benefits. I believe that every Kenyan has the right to decent housing, decent food, and decent clothing. I believe that no Kenyan should be able to sleep with any peace of mind for as long as he knows that what he is feeding upon has been taken from the mouths of the thirsty and hungry in Kenya. I also believe that no Kenyan should be able to sleep peacefully for as long as he knows that the wealth of the country is still controlled by foreign merchants.⁵

From the above assertion, people may see that Ngugi is ideologically committed to the cause of his nation, and to the welfare of humanity. For this man, the independence movement, which had led his country to autonomy and self-ruling, has been the object of betrayal. The fact is that the working class and peasantry have been deceived and betrayed by the newly chosen African leaders or the new African

⁵'Ngugi interviewed by Magina Magina', *In Africa Report*, No. 90 (February 1979), p. 30-31.

bourgeoisie ruling class. Hence, this bourgeoisie class has been “looting” the Kenyan economy in conspiracy with foreign powers, causing thus the pauperization of the economic and political systems of his country and of Africa in its totality. Consequently, as a committed writer, he believes in the liberation of the Kenyan masses from any external foreign involvement in the affairs of his country and Africa at large. In the light of such a Marxist thought, as indirectly evidenced in the above quotation, capitalism, imperialism, and neo-colonialism therefore become the true enemies of Africa. For Ngugi, as long as there would be a capitalist system in Kenya, his country would never make ascent to justice, peace, equality, solidarity, and development. This new situation is due to a new form of colonialism known as globalization, and which is after all meant to poach and loot the economy of the African continent. To him, in front of such a state of things in Africa, the African writer should never be silent and blind to the social oppression, exploitation, and marginalization of the African peoples in their immediate socio-cultural location of survival, and regeneration. As an ‘engagé’ and an ideologist, this Kenyan writer explicates that:

The writer as a human being is himself a product of history, of time and place. As a member of society, he belongs to a certain class and he is inevitably a participant in the class-struggle of his times. As a writer in a given society, it does make a difference whether he is allowed to write or not, whether what he writes is controlled or not; and whether he is espousing this or that class outlook. A writer’s subject matter is history: i.e. the process of man acting on nature and changing it and in so doing acting on and changing himself. The entire changing relations of production and hence the changing power relations consequent on mutable modes of production is a whole territory of a writer’s literary concern. Politics is hence part and parcel of this literary territory⁶

At this point, it becomes less ambiguous to see how Ngugi defines the ideological orientation and the duty of the African writer in society. For him, the African writer is the product and the by-product of the social milieu in which he or she was born or lives. The implication is that he is always-already interpellated by society to act as an agent of defense and resistance before social injustice and inequality. This is also explained by the fact that Ngugi considers politics as being the most important characteristics of any society and it is necessary for the African writer to account for it in his literary productions. For this Kenyan writer, the African writer is to be in the front line of class-struggle because he, himself, pertains to a given social class. All these are actually illustrated in the above quotation. From this point, people may subsequently see that Ngugi is advocating the absolute necessity of the commitment

⁶ Ngugi, Wa Thiong’o. *Writers in Politics: Essays*. London: Heinemann, 1986 .p.72.

of the African writer to both: politics and society which are also shaped and formed by history. In this stance, therefore, and to more foreground his position as an ideologist or a writer 'engagé', Ngugi details the accountability of the African writer in society as follows:

Even today the African writer has often refused to see that values, cultures, politics, and economics are all tied up together, that we cannot call for meaningful African values without joining in the struggle against all the classes that feed on a system that continues to distort those very values. We must join the proletarian and the poor peasant struggles against the parasitism of the comprador bourgeoisie, the landlords and chiefs, the big business African classes that at the same time act in unison and concert with foreign business interests.⁷

By the above, people may concretely figure out the entire ideological 'committedness'⁸ of Ngugi to the cause of his society along with all its cultural, economic, and political issues which are interlinked and unavoidable in African literature. It is evidenced in the assertion that, like Ngugi himself, the African writer's primary role is to be fully an agent of protest and struggle within the different spheres of the geo-cultural locus wherein he was born. As a result, the African writer becomes an active and dynamic guide of the masses. In assuming such a role, the African writer would consequently help his people to rise up the false consciousness promoted by the new African bourgeoisie class to land into a new egalitarian world whereby socialism and humanism are the master consciousness of everyone. This actually connotes that such a socialist and humanistic society can never be possible if the African writer does not join in the struggle with the working class and the peasantry by showing them the actual inequality and injustice of their national economy. In short, he should show them the path to follow in their literary texts so that they could transcend the false consciousness of domination and subjugation at work in most African societies. The same ideological commitment of the African writer is also propounded by Kossi Souley Gbeto:

La littérature est le véhicule de l'idéologie. La littérature étant un genre codé, il est important d'identifier les codes esthétiques, thématiques, pragmatiques et sémantiques qui la constituent. De ce point de vue, les écrivains sont les porte-parole de leur société et incarnent les thèses ou idéologie de leur temps. De sorte

⁷ Ibid, p.78.

⁸ This is a term coined by the author of this paper to refer to the social commitment of the Kenyan writer as a writer engagé.

qu'interpréter l'œuvre d'un auteur revient à présenter ces codes qui y transparaissent dans l'œuvre⁹.

Although Gbeto believes that literature carries ideology, he is actually confirming that the African writer cannot be excused from his ideological commitment in society. The writer, wherever he was born and grew up, is forcedly enticed by society to assume his or her responsibility for the well-being of a group of people or class in literature. We therefore comprehend that literature is not and cannot be ideology free because it is in any way ideology-bound.

In the light of Ngugi's Marxist ideological orientation, the reader can acquiesce that he is also an ideologist and a writer 'engagé' who does not hesitate to show and defend his political stances. He does this for the sake of the working class or peasantry as well as for the cultural liberation of his society and the African continent as a whole. For instance, all his novels, starting from *Devil on the Cross Road* (1982) to *Petals of Blood* (1977), promote his African, Marxist, and philosophical vision for an Africa free of imperialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism or globalization¹⁰. His works better certify such an ideological engagement of the man through his characters, style, narrative techniques, plots, and themes. In *The River Between* (1965), for instance, Ngugi writes:

Now listen my son. Listen carefully, for this is the ancient prophecy... I could not do more. When the white man came and fixed himself in Siriana, I warned all the people. But they laughed at me. Maybe I was hasty. Perhaps I was not the one. Mugo often said you could not cut the butterflies with a panga. You could not spear them until you learnt and knew their ways and movement. Then you could trap, you could fight back [...] Arise. Heed the prophecy. Go to the Mission place. Learn all the wisdom and the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites (p.20).

This quotation is about a discussion between Chege and his son, Waiyaki. They are talking about the way in which they can efficiently deal with the colonial system in their lands. Ngugi uses these characters to explain the way in which Africans may

⁹ Gbeto, Kossi Souley. "Idéologie et Vision du Monde de Sony Labou Tansi, Ecrivain de la Post-Independence", *Revue Baobab*. N°: 50 Ans de Littérature, 50 Ans de Postcolonie. (2012), p.8, Retrieved on 04-11-2015. Online Journal. This passage is also translated into English as follows: Literature is the vehicle of ideology. Literature being a codified kind of discipline, it is important to identify the aesthetic, thematic, pragmatic and semantic codes which are its constituents. From this point of view, writers are the spokesmen of their society and incarnate the doctrines or ideology of their time. This is done in a manner that the interpretation of a literary text will require the decoding of the codes that are found in the literary text.

¹⁰ The term globalization should be understood in this paper as synonymous with neocolonialism because the researcher is convinced that both operate in the same manner.

get rid of the colonial “master” in most African countries, especially in the late fifties and early sixties. The above excerpt actually attests and confirms the particular ideological orientation of Ngugi and his engagement for the preservation of African cultural values. However he believes also in cultural complementarity between Western and African civilizations as coalesced in the quotation. Ngugi is ideologically Marxist because, like in *The River Between*, his works advocate equality, justice, and freedom. Besides, he believes that revolution is the only appropriate means for the oppressed and exploited Africans if they aspire to real change in their society, especially to subvert the colonial, or even the neo-colonial hierarchy of exploitation, domination, and oppression. It is because of this that Ngugi characterizes Waiyiki as a committed and visionary hero in *The River Between*. Waiyiki quickly understands his social duty, and therefore struggles to educate his community about the new colonial situation of the country, and toward freedom. As for *Petals of Blood*, Koku Amazu further emphasizes that:

Petals of Blood seems to be the most ambitious and important of Ngugi's works. It deals, in the main, with neo-colonialism in all its manifestation: oppression, exploitation, social abuse, and social injustice. It probes the history of the heroic struggles of the people of Kenya, from pre-colonial times to the present day, within a comprehensive cultural perspective which embraces the political, religious, economic and social life of Kenya. In a bold way, it attempts to rewrite the history of Kenya and neo-colonial Africa from the standpoint of the oppressed¹¹.

It therefore becomes clearer for the reader that the ideological orientation of Ngugi derives from his penchant for Marxist ideology. This ideology is promoted by Ngugi for the sake of reaching a humanistic and classless society whereby all the Kenyan people would profit from the national wealth, assets, and fruits of their daily struggling effort. Such an ideological positionality of the writer is also detailed in like manner:

Unless we as African writers have such a vision — a vision anchored in the struggles of the people — we shall succumb to self-despair, cynicism, and individualism, or else we become mesmerized by superficial bourgeois progress which in the words of Karl Marx has never been possible without dragging individuals and peoples through blood and dirt, through misery and degradation. To borrow words from the same author, bourgeois progress resembles that hideous pagan idol who would not drink nectar but from the skulls of the slain. The role of that pagan idol in Africa is doomed. African

¹¹ Amazu, Koku. *Beyond Ideology: Literary Technique in Ngugi's Petals of Blood and Devil on the Cross*. Accra: Pro-Writing Limited. 2013. p.18.

writers must be with the people in burying the imperialist idol and his band of white and black angels, forever.¹²

In addition to what Amazu Koku said about Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, the content of this literary text is fraught with the notion of class and the role of the capital in the definition of social roles and relations. In this vein, people may see in *Petals of Blood* that the Ilmorog village which is described is presented as a land where people used to live peacefully and prosperously years before the arrival of the white man. But after the advent of the white man's capitalist system, which is always based on the making of as many profits as possible, this newly established system comes as an abrupt disruption to the development of the village. Hence, all the problems which the village is now facing are primarily reported to be the consequences of capitalism:

You are right about the shortage of land .It was the words of my youngest son before he left for the city. It was soon after a harvest like the ones we have had these last two years. He said: "I have worked on this land for a year. It mocks the strengths in these arms .Tell my father when the tax gatherer comes round, what shall I give him? When I go to Ruwa-ini and I see nice clothes, where shall I get the coins to give to the shopkeeper? 'This land used to yield. Rains used not to fail. What happened?' Inquired Ruoro.It was Muturi who answered. 'You forget in those days the land was not for buying. It was for use...That was also covered with forests .The trees called rains. They also cast a shadow on the land. But the forest was eaten by the railway. You remember they used to come from wood as far as here—to feed the iron thing .Ah, they only know to eat and how to take away everything¹³.

At the heart of the above it can be understood that the Ilmorog village used to be a true and peaceful place for the peasantry. The land was the property of the people and they could make good use of it by profiting from the benefits of their effort and endeavor. The implication is that the place was the one of a classless society whereby all the people were peasants. But, as soon as the white man came with his capitalist system which revolves around commodities, profits, sell and buy relations, the traditional village of Ilmorog has lost its very essence of collectivity and human development. The quotation is therefore meant to show the reader the way capitalism has gradually and efficiently made its own way into the village of Ilmorog and Africa at a larger scale. Then, what is striking in the novel is that from the beginning of the story, people are introduced to the four main characters (Munira, Karega, Abdulla and Wanjia) who are summoned to the police to be questioned about the death of three capitalist African figures such as Chui, Kimeria, and Mzigo. Instead of relating

¹² Ngugi, Wa Thiong'o. *Writers in Politics: Essays*. London: Heinemann, 1986 .p.81.

¹³ Ibid, p.81.

the resolution of these three murders, the narrator delineates how capitalism has deprived the peasantry of their land, and undermined their social established values gradually. As ideologically engaged against exploitation and oppression in *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi successfully strives to dissect the bloodsucking nature of capitalism and its different modes of functioning within the African and Kenyan context. As a counter discourse or power to this Western capitalist system, the novelist therefore promotes socialism as an important and humane system. For the writer, socialism is the most relevant system for Africa owing to its advocacy for a democratic and humanistic society wherein equality, justice, opportunities, and solidarity are the right and property of every man and woman belonging to such a system. This novel, *Petals of Blood*, is a Marxist text which accounts for the different negative changes brought by capitalism in Ilmorog as symbolizing Africa. Capitalism and neo-colonialism are described as synonymous and as responsible for the alienation of the Kenyan people or Ilmorog villagers from their culture, values, arts, and land. In other words, this text of Ngugi reveals that the root cause of the disasters and misery of the African working class and peasantry is par excellence enshrined in neo-colonialism:

It was a new Kenya. It was a new Ilmorog. Nothing was free...Indeed, changes did come to Ilmorog, changes that drove the old one away and ushered a new era in our lives. And nobody could tell, really tell, how it had happened, except it had happened within a year or so of the New Ilmorog shopping centre being completed [...]. The new owners master-servants of bank power, money and cunning, came over...The peasants of Ilmorog had also changed. Some had somehow survived the onslaught. They could employ...Most of the others had joined the army of workers who had added to the growing population of The New Ilmorog. But which Ilmorog? There were several Ilmorogs. One was the residential area of farm managers, County Council officials, public service officers, the managers of Barclays, Standard and African Economic Banks, and other servants of state and money power. This called Cape Town. The other — called new Jerusalem — was a shanty of migrants, floating workers, the unemployed, the prostitute and...¹⁴

In such a passage, it is shown that capitalism, as a process of modernizing Ilmorog and instead of bringing real and good opportunities for the well-being of the population of Kenya, has come to create and even deepen the misery and poverty of the African peasantry and the working class. Hence, the Ilmorog which is described in the quotation has broken all the promises of its citizens due to the advent of capitalism. In such a capitalist Ilmorog, everything is therefore entangled upon interest and profit regardless of the suffering and inhumane exploitation of the

¹⁴ Ibid, p.280.

masses who cannot cope with money power instances such as banks. As a matter of fact the poor of Ilmorog have become poorer and the richer capitalists have consequently become richer and richer out the sweat and the blood of the masses. The position of this writer is that capitalism implies inequality, injustice and social divisions on the bases of the economy. According to Ngugi as seen in the text, *Petals of Blood*, the existence of a capitalist or neo-colonial system in New Ilmorog has given way to a new mode of living enshrined in individualism, self-interest and cupidity and the sum total of all that is the concrete antithesis of the pre-capitalist Ilmorog whereby solidarity and the interest of all the entire communities were at the heart of all human activities. This therefore signifies that the Ilmorog which was born out of the implantation of capitalism became that of materialism and that of the exploitation of man by man. This also means that the stronger always survives over the weaker like in the jungle and it is against this that Ngugi is or can be labeled as being ideologically Marxist and a writer “engagé”. His struggle for the cause of Africa and the African masses (peasantry and the working class) is undeniable and the above mentioned literary texts concretize and support what the paper tries to account for.

As in the foregoing, the below section also continues explaining the thought of Ngugi through literature and how they are related to Marxism and Afrocentrism. In so doing, it strives to show how the thought and ideological conviction of Ngugi are greatly influenced by Marxist ideology as already foregrounded in his works. In addition, the section re-assesses and contrasts the views of Ngugi on the use of African languages as the most appropriate medium of conveying and promoting African culture. This is done within the framework of a contrastive analysis of scholarly views on the issue of the language of African literature. However, it mainly focuses on the views of Ngugi and Achebe who have struggled for the decolonization of African literature as well as the decolonization of the African mentally, culturally, politically, and economically. The views of these two literary men are highly salient because they belong to the first generation of African Anglophone writers.

4. The Language of African Literature: The Standpoint of Ngugi

Another key ideological engagement of Ngugi is seen in his positionality for the use of indigenous languages in African literature. It is in this domain that he can be seen as a writer “engagé” because of his everlasting defense of Africa and his struggle against Eurocentrism and neo-colonialism. However, dealing with the language of African literature is a problematic issue which has not yet found a

unanimous or consensual agreement among African literary scholars, writers, and critics. It means that they did not agree upon a given language that can be accepted by all as the true and relevant medium of writing African literature. Yet, they can be categorized into two groups: those who claimed the complete rejection of European languages and those who propounded the Africanization or hybridization of European languages. In this dynamics, one would consequently try to elaborate on this idea of the language question in African literature, and it is done in relation to two well-established African writers whose positions are almost completely different, especially when the choice of the medium of writing African literature is raised. To specify, the reference is made to Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. The first writer may be rated as being much more open to the validity and relevance of the use of English or French as the medium of African literature; whereas the second may eventually be regarded as being radically against such an acceptance.

To begin with Ngugi's viewpoint on this issue of language, it is seen in his assertions and writings that he does not believe in the fact that African literature can really be written in Western languages. His position is very interesting due to the fact that language is, for him, the fountain and the bearer of any culture or civilization, and because of the specificities inherent in all cultures of the world. For him, the African reality or culture cannot truly be conveyed by foreign languages such as English and French which were primarily meant to alienate the African cultural consciousness and self-reflection from their culture, and society by conversely adopting the culture and values of the colonizer. In other words, he believes that European languages are responsible for the obliteration of African civilization and they constitute the mediums through which the African has been mentally colonized and uprooted from his collective cultural repertoire of reference, pride, and dignity. In the same direction, Ngugi explains that writing in English or French is the concrete sign that the African of today is still mentally colonized and uprooted from his glorious past. To elucidate this point, Ngugi has demonstrated that African literature cannot be dissociated from its essence which is the African culture and the oral tradition from which the African writer draws his inspirations, plots, styles, literary techniques, and metaphors. This fact, according to him, cannot be accounted for in Western languages which sometimes distort African realities because of the lack of the cultural elements being described in this or that European linguistic medium. For instance, in *Decolonizing the Mind* (1981), Ngugi displays that in many Western languages, the African geo-cultural location has been misinterpreted and misrepresented by many Westerners (Rider Haggard (1856-1925), Joseph Conrad (1887-1924), John Buchan (1875-1940), Joyce Cary (1888-

1957)) and others due to the fact that whatever ever happens in Africa is automatically linked to tribalism, barbarism, and darkness. This particular ramification of Africa obeys the rules and the ideology of Eurocentrism. Or in African languages the true meaning of the word tribal or tribalism does not imply or bear any sense of ethnic conflict or clash. From the stance of Ngugi, it can be construed that European languages are par excellence enshrined in Eurocentrism. The way Westerners have distorted and continue to alter African cultural realities in their languages, the African type of literature which is produced in the languages of the colonizer would eventually continue to vilify and disseminate the same stereotypical and propagandist delineations of Africa and Africans in the collective consciousness of the West. In regard to what precedes, Ngugi explicates:

[...]The ceaseless struggles of African people to liberate their economy, politics and culture from that Euro-American-based stranglehold to usher a new era of true communal self-regulation and self-determination, it is an ever-continuing struggle to seize back their creative initiative in history through a real control of all the means of communal self-definition in time and space. The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe. Hence language has always been at the heart of the two contending social forces in the Africa of the twentieth century.¹⁵

It is therefore important to notice in the excerpt that language is vital to the self-definition of any people and his culture, without which one cannot assert and position himself within the spectrum of different cultures. Hence, writing in English or French entails assimilating oneself to the English or French culture at the expense of one's own culture which is prominently enshrined in African languages. Ngugi's standpoint is that producing African literature in European languages is devastating to African culture and psychology owing to the fact that culture is responsible for literature and language carries culture and determines the way of thinking and behaving of any human being within the liminality of his or her culture. This signifies that culture carries the entire body of values by which people can perceive themselves and their place in the world and this, to some extent, leads to raise the following interrogation: how can the African experience and culture therefore be expressed properly and authentically in another language from an African one? In other terms, the Kenyan writer's stance about the use of African languages is that writing in such African languages is a necessary step toward cultural identity and independence from centuries of European exploitation and domination. In order to achieve this, African literature should be written in African languages which is a

¹⁵ Ngugi, wa Thiong'o. *Decolonizing the Mind*. London: James Currey, 1981. P.18.

vital step toward decolonizing the African mind which is somehow till nowadays colonized due to the fact that many African writers, intellectuals and literary scholars continue to use European linguistic tools as the true vehicle of African literature and culture. About this issue of language, the ideological engagement of Ngugi as a writer “engagé” may be summed up as follows:

The question is this: we as African writers have always complained about the neo-colonial economic and political relationship of Euro-America. Right, but by our continuing to write in foreign languages, paying homage to them, are we not on the cultural level continuing that neo-colonial slavish and cringing spirits. What is the difference between a politician who says Africa cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says Africa cannot do without European languages¹⁶?

The above actually concretizes and ascertains the standpoint of Ngugi in relation to the choice of the language of African literature. He does interrogate himself about the relevance of African writers using foreign languages such as English and French at the expense of African languages. His penchant for African languages is now clearer showing his engagement for Africa and her culture.

In opposition to the views of Ngugi about the language question of African literature, stands the Nigerian writer, the *father of modern African novel*, Chinua Achebe. In many interviews and writings, Achebe has always defended the relevance and the validity of the use of English or French as the medium of African literature. His position is not meant to acquiesce blindly all the rules and ideological mechanisms of the English language but he rather prefers to use the language of the colonizer in a particular way that he could subvert the eurocentrist established world order of the West by fighting against the colonizer and the ex-colonizer. In this optics, he once writes that:

Can he, the African writer, ever learn to use it like a native speaker? I should say no, I hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so. The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience. I have in mind here the writer who has something new, something different to say.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid.p.26

¹⁷ Achebe, Chinua. *Morning Yet On Creation Day*. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975.P.61.

The idea of an Africanized or hybridized English suggested by Achebe in these lines is meant to show the reader of African literature that European languages can be used to establish a cultural dialogue between different worldly literatures, nations and continents. This means that the kind of English language which is used is a different one in color and assertion. By the above, Achebe's choice and preference to learn English and eventually to write in English as a means of African literature is at heart entitled to "infiltrate the ranks of the enemy" so as to destroy him from within by prevailing one's own culture and values. Subsequently, for him, it does not matter what language you write in, as long as what you write is good and worth defending. Therefore, in this locus, Achebe thoughtfully admits that English is symbolically and politically linked with the destructor of African traditional and authentic culture. Hence, the different languages of the colonizer used in African literature should become objectively and purposefully a weapon of defense, and of understanding the other so as to appropriately operate within the interstices of the bench of the colonizer. For this giant of African literature, unlike Ngugi, it is pointless to fight a language since it can be manipulated to bear the different specificities of one's own culture. In short, Achebe propounds the Africanization or hybridization of English which can also help his culture to be open to other worldly cultures and societies.

In spite of the fact that Ngugi preaches the writing of African literature in African languages, he also believes that priority should be given to the teaching of African literature in African schools before giving any importance to Asian and European literatures. He is not actually the only African literary scholar to defend the revision of African schools' curricula to give priority to the teaching of African literature and civilization. The Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah also develops and supports such a viewpoint in *Osiris Rising* (1995)¹⁸. However, the path suggested by Ngugi to educate and form new generations of authentic Africans is to introduce African literature at all the levels of the education systems of Africa from the first form of primary education up to the University. As developed by Ngugi in *Writers and Politics* (1986), African literature should be taught by Africans and the teachers of African literature should also be trained by "non-uprooted" Africans and in Africa. If this is not the case, the African child would grow by knowing more about foreign civilization and realities than African civilization and realities. This state of affairs can develop in the African child the complex of inferiority because European literature always promotes the beautiful sides of Europeans' civilization in binary

¹⁸ See this novel of Armah, Ayi Kwei for further information on the role of education in the liberation of the African mind from the narrow euro-consciousness engendered by the colonial past and school through characters like Asar and Ast.

opposition to African, and non-European civilizations¹⁹. His point is that the best way to conscientize a child and help him know more about his own self is to teach him Africa first through African literature because this can prevent him from any mental colonization or complex of inferiority. The danger of teaching European literature in African schools at the expense of African literature from primary schools up to universities is summed up in the following words of Ngugi:

[...] the teaching of only European literature, and mostly British imperialist literature in our schools, means that our students are daily being confronted with European reflection of itself, the European image, in history. Our children are made to look, analyze and evaluate the world as made and seen by Europeans. Worse still, these children are confronted with a distorted image of themselves and of their history as reflected and interpreted in European imperialist literature²⁰.

It can now be expounded that the question of the language of African literature is an ongoing issue which has not yet found a given agreement among African scholars. The fact is that neither Achebe nor Ngugi has had a convergent view about the concrete and true medium of imparting African culture and values based upon the oral tradition. In brief, and like Achebe, many other African writers have accepted the use of a foreign linguistic tool as the medium of African literature to resist the culture of the colonizer and, therefore, to foreground the culture of one's own. Despite the existence of various positions about the choice of foreign or African languages as the most appropriate mediums of African literature, the standpoint of Ngugi is exclusively rooted in the writing of African literature in African languages. This particular choice of Ngugi once again reflects and attests the ideological orientation of this man and determines his sense of Afrocentrism. In the light of what precedes, it can be uttered that Ngugi is not only an ideologist and a writer "*engagé*" separately, but he is at the same time an ideologist and a writer "*engagé*" because he propounds Marxism and defends the African working class and peasantry in his works. In addition, he strongly believes in Africa as the basis of any African cultural regeneration, and the decolonization of the African mind is possible if the African child is first introduced to African literature.

¹⁹ See Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. USA: Vintage Books. 1978. The issue of cultural representation is also dissected in such a work.

²⁰ Ngugi, Wa Thiong'o. *Writers in Politics: Essays*. London: Heinemann. p. 36. 1986

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper has been able to pinpoint that the Kenyan writer's literary works are the loci whereby Ngugi's ideological vision and social commitment are propounded. He does this for the sake of defending African culture and, therefore, contributing to the valorization of African identity. The paper further explains, through concrete examples taken from Ngugi's literary texts, that he is an African Marxist writer who unconsciously or consciously advocates the revolution of Africans by going back to their rich, ancestral, and socio-cultural values, principles, beliefs, and languages. His ideological engagement for the cause of Africa and of Africans is actually evident in the paper, and it is highly motivated by his sense of revolution, Pan-Africanism, and Afrocentrism. In short, he is an ideologist and a writer "engagé" who strongly believes in the political, economic, cultural, and mental decolonization of Africans through cultural struggle, and through the valorization and adoption of African languages as the only relevant means of writing African literature. From his African perspective, this cultural struggle would consequently lead to the revitalization and promotion of glorious historical heritage of great African civilizations which had existed from Black Egypt to the Songhay Empire in West Africa.

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