

Wanja: A Representative of Post Independent African Womanhood

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Abstract:

Africa relieved from European authority by the second half of twentieth century. This independence becomes a truth after long years of struggle in which both men and women equally participated. Ngugi Wa Thiongo through his works tells us the importance of feminine in African society. *I will marry when I want* (1982) is an attempt in this regard. Europe was successful in demolishing the rich peasant culture of Africa into a westernized modernity and forced its women into prostitution. *Petals of Blood* (1977) is about this English tactics. It tells the factors that dumped the new independent Africa into poverty, prostitution and diseases. This paper is a rationale study about *I will marry when I want* and *Petals of Blood*. Also it takes into consideration the condition of women through the character of Wanja in "*Petals of Blood*". The paper shows a humanistic approach towards the state of such women. Also through *Barrel of a Pen* (1982), Ngugi Wa Thiongo gives a solution for this urban poverty and decadences.

Key Words: Bureaucracy, Modernity, Humanistic Approach, Sexuality, Plight, feminine.

Introduction

During 1950's Kenyan war for independence came to a maximum zenith and led to Mau Mau rebellion. The role of African women in this struggle is praiseworthy. They fought for Mau Mau rebellion in mountains, villages and in forests. Ngugi Wa Thiongo in all his writings tried to reckon the greatness of women. Two important works made for this purpose are *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (1982) and *Petals of Blood* (1977). Thiongo along with Ngugi Wa Mirri made a play which celebrates the role of women in freedom struggle is of great relevance. It was *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (I will marry when I want). These writers were helped by peasants and workers for drafting the play. This play was later stopped from playing by government as it was felt that this is a threat to their regime. *I will marry when I want* is about the condition of women in post independent Kenya. The play gave a realistic picture of Kenya which is dancing to the tunes of US military bases, international monetary fund and World Bank.

One can get an idea that what made Kenya really underdeveloped and bankrupt and forced its girls to dance in the bars. *Ngaahika Ndeenda* is a conversation between a peasant mother and a factory worker. That mother's girl is now earning a living as a barmaid which is very insecure and humiliating job. Gicamba, one of the characters, is of the opinion that their girls should not be blamed for their fate. What all they did is due to their circumstances as when "a bird flights gets tired lands on the nearest tree" (40). Parents in Kenya did not give much importance to the education of girls. Women oppression was there even before colonialism. The

play is a mirror which shows the mistakes of both colonized and the colonizer. *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (1982) tells even if a girl goes for a household work, condition is not so different. She has to take all the dirt of a house, cooking for three times, taking care of the children, work the entire month only for 70 shilling. And when there is no wife they also have to act as master's wife. The play is about the oppression of women from both colonial powers and their own men. Here Thiongo and Ngugi Wa Mirri says that Africa is suppressing its women even before the arrival of imperialists.

After independence things were not at all changed, instead became worse. Another important work with strong feminine consideration is *Petals of Blood* (1977). Wanja the heroine of *Petals of Blood* is pictured as a representative of helpless African woman. The epic like novel is about the changed post independent Kenya and destructive state of its women. Novel's theme is a transformation from an old Kenya to a new Kenya. The story revolves around Ilmorog. The city became technologically enhanced but it lost a sense of liveliness and natural aesthetics as many African cities. It declined culturally and morally. The story tells the bounding of four friends in whom Wanja is the representative of altered Africa. Like thousands of African girls Wanja also changed from helpless sex toy in the hands of her husband to a miniskirt wearing high profile prostitute. Sometimes she even charges her friends for her night. Ngugi with respect to womanhood portrays the character of Wanja, with originality to a maximum core.

Through Wanja the writer is showing the perverted European sensuality. Once a Swahili speaking German turned to be a green eyed nasty animal. Wanja at first feels that Europeans are not at all bad (162). This gentleman immediately changed to a sexually perverted beast. Wanja like many other confident whores changed to an innocent girl as a repetition of many nights. But sensing a nightmare, Wanja succeeded to escape from there by tricking that she lost her handbag in the car. She escaped by entering into a car of a black Samaritan. This man unlike other black fellows did not want to love Wanja physically but gave her shelter and food for two days. Wanja enjoyed two days undisturbed sleep which is a rare thing in her life. This man has a clear answer for all these perversions in Kenyan life-

"This is what happens when you turn tourism into a national religion and build it shrines of worship all over the country. This city is no place for you...well ...it is not a place for any of us...yet!" (164). Thiongo's intention here is to expose that struggle of African sensitivity against perverted European sexuality.

Wanja's life is exposed to readers through her memories about her husband Kimeria and how girls are employed in bars which are mushrooming everywhere in new Kenya. Sometimes barmaids have to change their place when they are not ready to sleep with their boss. Those who tried to get out from this malice faced even more as house maids. Another tried her luck by picking tea leaves and coffee beans for African landlords with a very little pay. At last everyone returns to the same work of prostitution where they at least get good friendships.

For Wanja once a barmaid is always a barmaid. She says "Once I went home. My father said:" I do not want a prostitute in the house!" It hurt me coming from a father. A barmaid does

not take herself to be a prostitute”(156). Later she returned to her old life. These girls are victims of unplanned development and corruption of new bureaucracy which dance along with instructions of developed countries. According to Thiongo both Europeans and African bureaucracy is responsible for this phenomena. After independence only ruler’s faces changed from white to black, not exploitation. Such an incident Wanja mentions when she went with a police man called Kalasingh. He was an inspector and arrested Wanja for selling beer late at a bar in Kikuyu town. He arrested some boys for keeping bhang. The boys were in prison for five years. Inspector took Wanja to his house. Such is the condition of girls which keeps them permanently in prostitution.

Petals of Blood (1977) show a cultural catastrophe in post independent Africa. There happened a rampant change in all walks of life after independence. The peasantry of Kenya who is a synonym for prosperity and culture very soon attracted to modernity. Both men and women from villages were in the myth that their life would get a better change in cities. But there they faced only urban poverty and exploitation. What forced the parents to send their girls to dance bars is the key question. Some girls after their one term in city returns to native village and give birth to a baby and return. Here Thiongo analyses the real cause for such a situation. The answer is proper sources are not allowed to the development of villages in false assumption that development and tradition cannot go together.

In *Barrel of a Pen* (1982), Ngugi Wa Thiongo clearly gives solution for rural poverty and selling of girls-

The destruction of tradition or aspects of tradition and peasant culture

is seen as necessarily evil. Within this false schema the beauty of rural culture rests on a foundation of poverty and abject want. But in fact modern science and technology, if organized, owned and controlled differently, could make possible a total economic transformation of the countryside and the construction of a whole people’s culture on a structure of prosperity instead of on that of backwardness (78).

Here Thiongo is of the opinion that economy of villages and cities can be improved if the wealth is arranged equally.

Frantz Fanon observes that culture of Africa is based on oratory and peasants are the main ambassadors of this skill. By concentrating all the developments in cities they are ruining this oratory and thus the tradition of Africa. These development tactics forced thousands of Africans to relocate to cities. Gradually oratory lost its importance from the minds of peasants who were forced to go for manual labor for a living. The reason behind the under developed condition of colonies like poverty and illiteracy is thus created in the course of colonialism. In all the colonies Europeans played the same tactics of suppressing the culture of colony to a hybrid culture of modernity.

Thiongo in his novels follows a highly sympathetic approach towards women. Wanja being a barmaid and prostitute is not at all pictured as a woman with enormous lust. Through Wanja, Ngugi wa is showing us how women of post independent Africa are transferred as barmaids. The approach taken here is both feministic and humanistic. A rationale enquiry is made to realize what actually went wrong. In Wanja's words everywhere now new hotels are mushrooming. Big buildings, large shopping malls and rapid development. But the fruit from this development is not getting to everyone but only to a group of people.

Conclusion

The novel is filled with many sexual encounters of Wanja with her customers and even with her friends. Here novelist did not want to give readers the excitement of such sexual fervor. But there is a painful plight which comes from that lady who is forced to sleep with many men because of corrupted national policies. Thiongo is highly humanistic in this stage that he saw in the cry of Wanja, thousand women's helplessness. The paper discusses humanistic evaluations based on various thoughts of Wanja.

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