

## Original Research Article

### Historical Reconstruction of Resistance in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's Revolutionary Plays: *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and *I Will Marry When I Want*

#### Abstract

The intense struggle of the Kenyan peasants during British colonial and neocolonial era had been the subject of Thiongo's writings. His revolutionary plays such as *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) and *I Will Marry When I Want* (1977), dealt with freedom struggle, patriotism, internal colonization, influence of Christianity and the effects of decolonization as central issues that the Kenyan society faced during the colonial and neocolonial period. Though the plays were written successively, the time period of dramatic events that connects the history of Kenya through anti-colonial uprisings and post independent neo-imperialist practices justifies the selection of the above-mentioned plays for analysis. Through cloze reading and textual analysis of the selected plays, the paper analyzes how reconstructing the history of resistance revives the consciousness of mass in the aftermath of independence, amid continuous oppression, land expropriation, exploitation, and subjugation in terms of material control, resources, prozelytation, and degeneration of cultural values by the imperialist and neo-colonial compradors. The paper also discusses Thiongo's theatrical motifs and ideological standpoints behind the creation of such revolutionary plays in the 1970s. The research findings prove that Thiong'o's ideas of unity and resistance decolonizes the mind of grassroots and renews their consciousness to resist the oppressive influences of colonial and neo-colonial ruling elites which continued in the aftermath of Kenyan independence.

**Keywords:** *Kenyan peasants, historical consciousness, Mau Mau rebellion, neocolonial power politics, revolutionary ideas & resistance.*

#### Introduction

The history of African literature during the pre-colonial period contained oral literary tradition in the form of stories, songs, dances, and music. In the twentieth century, written works emerged in English and Afrikaans with the establishment of universities like University of Nairobi and Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda with courses in drama, theatre, African language and literature alongside English literature to revive African tradition from colonial domination. The twentieth-century African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Frantz Fanon, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Mugo, the first-generation 'university wits', trained in western theoretical canon, philosophies of art, science, and metaphysics were exposed not only to English canon but also to Latin, English, and French literary traditions. Moreover, the concept of French revolution and Marxist ideas enabled contemporary African writers like Thiong'o to apply their knowledge and experience for the socio-political changes in Africa.

African dramatic literature can be divided into three stages. The first stage comprised general evolution from oral to written language, the second stage includes discourses on newly formed African independent states with works having a direct revolutionary appeal and the third

phase extended more towards the global literary arena and appeared mainly in the English language. Of all the genres, drama appears to be evidently revolutionary in form, theme and techniques as the social, economic and political situation demanded the rise and intervention of revolutionary drama in Africa that emerged as protest literature. Keeping this essential literary tradition and popular audience in mind, the post-colonial playwrights such as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo from East Africa, Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande J. C. De Graft, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Efua T. Sutherland from West Africa, and Athol Fugard from South Africa had greater ideological clarity about revolutionary drama: "All of these writers use drama as an instrument of social motivation and 'cultural education' to create a 'national culture' using drama as a suitable means of informal education of Africans" (Fashina, 2009, p. 7). Thus, Thiong'o, one of the prominent post-colonial Kenyan playwrights, created revolutionary plays such as *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) and *I Will Marry When I Want* (1977), as word on page and stage to stir revolutionary consciousness in the African mass.

## Literary Background

During his college days, Thiong'o was impressed by the work of English writers such as D.H Lawrence and Joseph Conrad, and developed a special liking for D.H Lawrence, who had "a way of entering into the spirit of thing, and Conrad impressed the young writer by his mastery of the morality of action and the representation of human suffering" (Gikandi, 2009, p. 249). He developed a growing consciousness through the literature he studied as it made an immense impression on him. At the same time, Thiong'o was also inspired by African literary figures such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Kofi Awoonor and Peter Abrahams. He had the privilege to interact with these writers in the African Writers Conference held at Makerere in June 1962. In particular, Thiong'o was stimulated by Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) and Peter Abraham's *Tell Freedom* (1954) among his readings of West African, Caribbean and South African literature. As a result, his literary consciousness though inspired from Western canon did not alienate him from African consciousness, rather it made him admire the African writers who remained connected to their roots.

However, at Leeds University, England, Thiong'o was influenced by Prof. Arnold Kettle and some radical fellow-students which made him read Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* in 1964 and the writings of Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Lenin. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* drew considerable thoughts in Thiong'o to analyze colonialism in Africa. According to Fanon, it is nearly impossible to gain independence from imperialist powers by passive means. To him violence is necessary for the nation to attain independence: "It was only violence - revolutionary violence organized and carried out by the masses - that can succeed in winning independence" (Kofi, 1975, p. 21). Thus, Fanon's concept of revolutionary violence greatly influenced Thiong'o to believe that only by struggle and revolution Kenyans would get back their land. This motivated him to analyze all situations in Marxist terms with a firm will to voice his feelings about injustices. As the first move, in 1967, when he returned to Kenya and became a Special Lecturer in English, Thiong'o "protest(ed) against violations of academic freedom in the university" (Thiong'o & Mugo, 2002, p. 32) and actively participated in the move to change syllabus in the Department of English insisting on the focus of literary studies that best suited the African context and attempted to re-name the Department of English into the Department of

African Language and Literature. Also, he dropped his western first name James Ngugi and adopted his current Bantu name Ngugi wa Thiong'o for, "changing the name was only the first step reinvented by him for the struggle to which he was committed" (Deurden, 1972, p. 43). Thus, his reputation as an African writer from Kenya is popular in the literary world under the name Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

Due to his exposure to western education and the influences of western culture and language, Thiong'o strongly felt that it is insecure to have western control over African resources and cultures. Thus, he wrote his seminal book, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* in 1986 to free the natives' minds from colonizer's control in terms of culture and language by emphasizing that the African writer should use his/her indigenous language instead of the colonizer's language. This particular standpoint of Thiong'o symbolizes resistance and the desire to pass the consciousness of language and culture to the next generation. In order to practice what he preached, Thiong'o wrote his work in Gikuyu titled *Caitani Mutharaba-ini* (1980) which was translated as *Devil on the Cross*. His community play *I Will Marry When I want* was also written in Gikuyu in an attempt to reach the mass and to stir their consciousness against the injustices of neo-colonialism and therefore, "writing in Gikuyu is his gesture to distribute power and subvert neo-colonialism" (Lindfords & Sander 2006, p. 473). Although Thiong'o was questioned by many critics regarding the choice to write in his mother tongue, he considered it as a part of the anti-imperialist struggle of Kenyan and African people. Thiong'o decided to write in Gikuyu to demonstrate the centrality of language in his thoughts and to reach the grassroots because he believed that, "When I write in Gikuyu at least some peasants and workers will read my own work. When I write in English not even a single one of them reads the work.... It is more important to encourage people to be proud of their mother tongue. (Deurden, 1972, p. 40). He perceives the act of writing in mother tongue as a part of the whole process of reclaiming the cultural, economic and political basis of one's identity.

### **Aim**

This paper focusing on the two revolutionary plays of Thiong'o would first examine the history of Kenyan freedom struggle with reference to the revolutionary movement of the 1950s and its Gikuyu peasant leaders to understand the motif behind dramatic reconstruction of the anti-colonial struggle in the play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976). Secondly, the paper would examine Thiong'o's ideas of unity and resistance at the grassroots level by analyzing the community play *I Will Marry When I Want* (1977) which deals with the continuing struggles in the post independent Kenya of the 1970s.

## **Section II: Discussion**

### ***The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976)**

Thiong'o's historically sensitive and revolutionary play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* set in Kenya during the pre-independence era of the 1950s consists of 85 pages with an opening, three movements and fourteen scenes which are different from the conventional division of plays into Acts and Scenes, referred by G.D. Killam as "characteristics of the non-naturalistic theatre" (1980, p. 39). In this play, all three movements are viewed as a single movement. Thiong'o

depicted and reconstructed Kimathi as a legendary hero of the Mau Mau uprising to foreground the struggles of peasants against the colonial forces of domination and exploitation. The play is an imaginative reconstruction of the history of Mau Mau freedom struggle for Kenya's independence. Kimathi is a type or a prototype of an ideal leader, a recreation from the collective will of the people of Kenya:

Kimathi, who in the eyes of the imperial British government was a terrorist and a threat to the imperial power, is given a new identity by Ngugi and Mugo - one that rehabilitates his image and depicts him as an advocate of freedom, liberty, and voice of the Kenyan people (Mathur, 2017, p. 3).

The play is not a reproduction of the farcical 'trial' at Nyeri rather, according to the preface, it is "an imaginative recreation and interpretation of the collective will of the Kenyan peasants and workers in their refusal to break under sixty years of colonial torture and ruthless oppression by the British ruling classes and their continued determination to resist exploitation, oppression and new forms of enslavement" (Thiong'o & Mugo). This photographic representation of reality in a literary text seem to be a craft and in the case of Thiong'o, the act of playwriting is in itself a process of rewriting and reconstructing the history of Kenya in order to subvert the colonizer's version. But the central question could be which figure of Kimathi is real, is it the Kimathi of history or the Kimathi of the play? To which, one may say that the Kimathi of the play is the Kimathi of history because the former is based on the latter. On the other hand, one also needs to acknowledge that the Kimathi of history too is made up of the representations that cluster around that figure and that name. This symbolic aspect of Kimathi's character is brought out by the writers in the preface by referring him as 'the symbol of the masses'.

Moreover, the writer recreates the same man because people believe in the legendary quality of Kimathi and consider him as immortal, as a respected leader, beloved son, and above all that he is still alive. The woman in the play historicizes the myth of Kimathi as: "No bullet can kill him for as long as a woman continue to bear children" (p. 21). Unlike the Kimathi of history, "The Kimathi of the play is presented in logical-rational terms as a man equipped with a consciousness and grappling with a complex reality. The Kimathi of the play is indeed not a fixed essence or an ahistorical idea" (Kumar, 2008, p. 321). He is characterized in the play as a man (on trial) whereas Kimathi as a real man is of flesh and blood and principles who as a fighter encountered many problems. The problems make textual Kimathi more realistic.

*The Trial* in the play's title indicates the unjust legal proceedings to show how Kimathi undergoes four 'trials' the motif of which is to break his firmness. The play weaves together a variety of strands, which are structured around three movements also indicating the purpose to change the perception by reconstructing the history. The structure, not rigid in time moves forward and backward to present the historical events and the historical figure as a symbol of relentless struggle and unyielding force. The playwrights project history to re-assert Kimathi's value so that the present generations' consciousness can be rekindled to continue with the struggle for liberation. The opening movement of the play present the background to African history, a re-enactment of the onset of slave trade as well as the trial and tribulation of Kimathi and other members of the revolutionary movement. The play mainly concerned with 'the struggle for freedom' is at times against the colonial power or at times against bureaucracy in

general and Bhuvana (2010) affirms, "Getting freedom from the alien rule was, however, not an easy task for the people of Africa" (p. 246). Thousands of people sacrificed their lives for the sake of their country. In the beginning of the play, Thiong'o employs a particular mode of resistance to express the freedom struggle of Black people's history through anti-imperialist slogans, songs and thunderous shouts. The leader and the crowd wanted their freedom fighter Kimathi to be freed and unchained from being tortured. Thiong'o also symbolically refers to the colonist and the neo-colonial African leadership which has betrayed the aspirations of the masses for decades. Following Kenya's independence from British rule, the peasants experience no change in the situation and thus wanted to resist the continuum of oppression and exploitation as shown in the following excerpt:

LEADER: Away with exploitation, Unchain the people!

LEADER: Away with human slaughter!

CROWD: Unchain the people!

FEW VOICES: Uhuruuuuuu-uu!" (Thiong'o, 2001, p. 5-6)

Their aggressive chant 'unchain the people!' not only denotes that the entire Kenyan nation is physically 'chained,' but also implies the metaphorical, psychological, and spiritual imprisonment of the Kenyan people. In other words, the Kenyans are alienated from human rights, social freedom, and justice. Thus, it is ironic that the White imperialists who are alien to the land have turned the 'Sons of the soil' into psychological or spiritual expatriates in their own motherland. The strangers of the land, ironically, become the rulers exercising indigenous rights, while the original indigenes become aliens.

In the first movement, the boy's understanding of Kimathi's braveness and miracles against oppressed ones is supported by the woman's statements. The female peasant activist, simply called 'Woman,' attempts to help the imprisoned Kimathi and in the process motivates two young people 'the Boy' and 'the Girl' to involve themselves in the Movement and respond to, 'the call of our people.' The Boy and Girl in the play throw light on the poor socio-economic situation prevalent in the country. In the initial scene of the play, the condition of the Kenyan peasants during the colonial times is depicted vividly through the boy's conversation with the woman. The boy says, "Naa. Nairobi. I have fought with dogs and cats in the rubbish bins, for food." (p. 19). In response, the woman sums up the general misery of the Kenya masses:

Ngai! It is the same old story. Everywhere. Our people...tearing one another...and all because of the crumbs thrown at them by the exploiting foreigners. Our own food eaten and leftovers thrown to us...in our own land, where we should have the whole share (p. 18).

Thiong'o used the Boy and the Girl to indicate the poor Kenyan peasant being oppressed by the colonizers. The play repeatedly exposes the plight of the peasant class wallowing in poverty, hunger and helplessness to live in dehumanized conditioned under the ruthless oppression of the colonizers. Contrary to it, the settler-colonist enjoy the comfort of large farms, nice clothes, and education. The second movement also shows the existing social discrimination between the settler and native on the basis of race that "in the court, blacks and whites sit on separate sides" (p. 23). Moreover, in each courtroom scene, for instance, Kenyans are shown in tattered clothes

and sit on uncomfortable benches, while White settlers wear fancy clothes and sit in much nicer chairs. There are few instances, where black people are shown in nice clothes to mean that they are collaborators with the oppressive forces of colonialism.

In the first trial, the multi-functional British official Shaw Henderson, who acts as judge, prosecutor and policeman captures the real Kimathi, offers him his life in exchange for a confession which would bring the fighting to an end. Henderson stands for the hypocrisy of imperialism by representing the sinister motives of the settlers. The hypocritical dialogue of the banker is another example: “Kimathi: you must plead. Life comes before pride. You once vowed that no Whiteman would ever get you. ...Hanging between life and death. Plead, plead, plead guilty” (p. 35). Henderson tells Kimathi that his guilty plea will convince the rest of the rebels to cooperate with the British. He tells Kimathi that ‘nations live by strength and self-interest,’ and that his British compatriots tried to defend their self-interest when it was threatened by Kimathi's people. However, Kimathi refuses to plead guilty in exchange for his life because he does not trust the words of an imperialist. In response, Kimathi proclaims, “Life, My life. Give up my life for your life. Who are you, imperialist cannibal, to guarantee my life?” (p. 36). Out of anger, Kimathi retaliates Henderson, who is a former, Kenya-born, Gikuyu-speaking policeman that for years the Kenyan masses had been oppressed, exploited, and tortured by the elites. Kimathi utters, “Henderson! Friend and killer of Africans, ugh!...you cannot deceive me even in your disguise. Just as you came in I had seen you in my dreams. All the slaves you have deceived in the past” (p. 32). The peasants were not passive but for hundreds of years they had risen and fought against oppression, against humiliation, and enslavement of body, mind, and soul. Thiong'o reminds the peasants that our people will never surrender but will fight for the *Uhuruu* (freedom). Although Kimathi bursts in anger against Henderson, the emotions of Kimathi and his outbursts does not touch the man, who had been, “tracking Kimathi for a year and ultimately succeeded in capturing him on 20th October 1956” (Thiong'o & Mugo, 2002, p. 49). Kimathi retaliates and resists the influence of the cannibal imperialist who is the root cause of Kenyan's misery.

The imperialists controlled the native's materials such as natural resources and the land which is considered to be the peasants' heart and soul and their identity. Gikuyu, the largest tribal group of Kenya occupies the central province known as the ‘traditional Kikuyu homeland.’ In 1952 they “comprised 30 percent of an indigenous population of just over five million” (Green, 1990, p. 71), and identified as ‘Highland Bantu’, they are traditionally agrarians. Those and other Kenyan tribal groups were alienated from their land by the European settlers. According to Frantz Fanon's book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, “For a colonized people the most essential value ... is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity” (Fanon, 2004, p. 9). Mau Mau rebellion is primarily a peasant-based revolt of the landless Kikuyu people against colonial rule that had dispossessed them of their lands, the basis of their existence. As stated by Fanon, the peasants are the core of the movement and “...in the colonial countries the peasants alone are revolutionary” (as cited in Agarwalla, 2013, p. 151). Similar to Fanon's views, Thiongo's focal point is also towards peasantry as they are the grassroots encountering the ground realities of colonial subjugation. The revolt led by the Field Marshal Dedan Kimathi organized the Kikuyu peasants to mount a legal challenge against the expropriation of their land and they combined freedom and land together in their struggle for independence at large. One could then argue that the reason behind the evolution of land and freedom army was that the Kikuyu could regain the economic independence which they have had

prior to colonial disruption. Thiongo's post-colonial play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* also critiques the neo-colonial imperialist policy that had affected the socio-political and economic status of the Kenyan masses.

In the second trial, Kimathi face the challenges of economic imperialism represented by a 'Trade-cum-businessman's delegation. Before the delegations visit to the trial court, a group of Kenyan dancers enter and perform a sequence of dance to show that prior to the colonization, Kenya was rich with indigenous cultural forms. Kimathi's passionate emphasis on indigenous cultural expressions as part and parcel of their lives is evident in numerous songs and mimes. Kimathi proclaims, "They used to dance these. Before the white colonist came. In the arena, at initiation, during funerals, during marriage...Then the colonist came. A different dance" (p. 37). The Kenyan peasants enjoyed the fruits of their ancestral cultural inheritance for centuries. But upon the arrival of the Whites, their cultural tradition has vanished and the Kenyan masses were forced to perform 'a different dance' in response to the tune of the colonialist. When the governor enters the court scene, the peasants dismissed him by feverishly singing the song of struggle. It was followed by Kimathi's soliloquy to re-invoke the consciousness of masses that they have no rights even to sing their rooted cultural songs:

KIMATHI: oh, my people! How can we sing and dance like this  
In the strange land? How can we sing and dance like this  
When water everywhere is bitter?  
How can we dance the dance of humiliation and fear? (p. 37)

Through these lines, Kimathi vehemently charges that the native's land is in the hands of strangers, the Whites and as a result, the peasants have no authority to even sing in the stranger's land which once upon a time was theirs. Kimathi questions the present generations whether the dances and the songs can be performed with freedom. This issue of land as a sign of betrayal by the Whites is critiqued and addressed by collective efforts such as 'the war dance' the Land and Freedom Army to invoke a sense of land rights and freedom struggle. According to Ogude, "Thiongo's single most important virtue in traditional African society was common ownership of land which was worked by all, for the common good. When the white colonialist appropriated the land, conflict and general suffering ensued" (p. 89). *This reference makes the struggle symbolic of many African liberation struggles, and makes the hero Dedan Kimathi not merely a Kikuyu hero but a leader and hero of all past, present, and future generation of workers and peasants.*

Moreover, in the same trial scene, the members of the African and Asian middle class tempt Kimathi with visions of material wealth like that of banker. "Confess. Repent. Plead guilty. Co-operate like the surrendered generals. Tell your people to come out of the Forest. We need stability" (p. 40). It is apparent that the banker's visit is to deceive Kimathi by means of economic imperialism and its profit-making methods. Kimathi questions his fellow friends on how long Kenyan peasants are going to remain passive and inactive when Nyeri plains and the land are being stolen by the foreigners. The banker on the other hand tells Kimathi in convincing and impressive words that because of the Mau Mau war, the nation is holding back its investment, the flow of money, and its development. The banker cites the example of foreign banks as the makers of modern Kenya. In response to the Banker or a Trade-cum-businessman's

delegation, Kimathi questions whether money is developments and resorts, “The oppressed of the land ... all those whose labour-power has transformed this land. For it is not true that it was your money that built this country. It was our sweat. It was our hands” (p. 40). Thus, Kimathi retaliates at the banker who claims that Kenyans development is all because of foreign aids. But Kimathi asserts that it was the native’s hard work, their sweat, and their hands are the true means of their development. According to Nita N. Kumar, “without the complicity of the local people, economic imperialists cannot operate. The Banker presents his interest as pan-nationalist or post-colonialist, unconcerned with the complexion of the governments as long as they accept his logical and profit-making as development” (p. 322). The fact is that the wealth of the compradors is all due to the hard work of the Kenyan peasants. Furthermore, the imperialist’s dominating and exploiting nature are shown through the girl’s utterance in the play, “I’m....tired....of.....running. All my life I have been running. On the run. On the road. Men molesting me. I was once a dutiful daughter. I ran away from school because the headmaster wanted to do wicked things with me. Always: you remain behind” (p. 41). The double oppression of Kenyan women under the yoke of colonial rule as colonized subjects and by being female is evident when the girl was subject to sexual exploitation. The girl’s initial passive attitude and her inability to resist her ‘oppressor’ later changes into assertion when she counters the oppression. The girl asserts herself and rejects oppression when she declares: “...Brute. I’ll not run away from you. I’ll never run away from anybody. Never” (p. 42). The girl’s self-reclamation, and self-consciousness lead her to restore her subsequent rights, the moment she is able to identify the weakness in her ‘tormentor’-a mere bull. Thiong’o wanted the same revolutionary spirit of retaliation from the Kenyan mass to regain freedom and decent life which resembles Fanon’s ideology that colonialism, “Is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and will only yield when confronted the greater violence” (p. 23). There were even the internal colonization that neo-colonial regime applies over the native Kenyan masses.

Furthermore, the third trial presents the collision between an African Business Executive, dressed like an English man, a politician and a priest. It is a motley collection of strategies of liberal politics, limited self-interest, pragmatism, and opportunities in the guise of spirituality. The three try to persuade Kimathi to surrender, peoples’ demand has been met and ultimately there is nothing left to fight for. They are pleased upon false claims that colonizers who made no more racialism and no more colour bar. The African Businessman reminds Kimathi that he had stood by him and the principles of Mau Mau contributing money to the cause and his shop at Masira used to be an ‘oathing centre.’ He goes on to ask Kimathi, “That’s why I, we, have come. I have not much time. I wanted to ask you: don’t you think we have won the war?” (p. 44). Their hypocrisy has been misunderstood by Kimathi as victory to their struggles:

What? Have our oppressors surrender? Freedom. We shall drive them out of our land, this earth, my brothers....Break these chains. Unchain my heart, my soul! Unchain four centuries of chains. Kenya, our dearly bought, fought for motherland. (p. 45)

At this point, the politician takes over and tells Kimathi that they had been given the choice of independence ‘province by province’ which upsets the fighter on trial, “Would you too call the war for national liberation a regional Movement? Hear me. Kenya is one indivisible whole” (p.



46). Kimathi realizes the hollow intentions of the visitors who pretend to be patriots but parasites in reality for whom independence is neither their end goal nor their immediate expectation. Kimathi chases them out calling them 'Neo-slave' and 'new drinker of honey' and that he will answer them the next day in court and then they can hear what he has to say. This particular standpoint of Kimathi is in opposition to the internal factions created by parasites fuelled by their self-interests against the national cause. According to Fanon, "colonialism sows the seeds of its violent overthrow by teaching the natives that they are only an animal. But when the native realizes that they are human, they start to rebel against the settler" (p. 8). By driving home such realization among the natives, Fanon decolonizes their minds as, "Decolonization is always a violent event" (Fanon, p. 01). The Priest too urges Kimathi to "Surrender. Call off bloodshed. New Life, New Brotherhood in Christ" (p. 50). He also informs Kimathi that, "We are now Africanizing the Church" (p. 49). The visiting of priest is a proselytization in which religion played a pivotal role to convert the natives in Christian religion. This is one major form of imperialist agenda that the collaborators and the Priest adopt. Kimathi denounces them all out rightly as betrayers:

"Betrayal. Betrayal. Prophets. Seers. Strange. I have always been suspicious of those who would preach cold peace in the face of violence. Turn the other cheek. Don't struggle against those that clothe themselves as butterflies. Collaborators." (p. 49)

Highly disturbed and slightly shaken in spirit, Kimathi assures himself, 'My trial has begun' and soliloquizes, "Who are friends and who enemies? Oh, the agony of a Lone battle! But I will fight on to the end. Alone...Alone, did I say? No. Cast out these doubts!" (p. 51). With Kimathi's soliloquy, the scene shifts to the street where the Boy and Girl are seen talking to the Warder of the jail, asking if he had seen 'a man selling oranges around here.' Stranded with the gun, they depart to devise a strategy to reach the gun to Kimathi. After they have left, the Woman enters, disguised as Fruit seller only to discover that the Warder she had expected to see is not there. The fellow on duty informs her that the fear of an armed rescue could have led to sudden change of guards and she goes away.

Later, in the last trial, Kimathi is confronted with the brute, naked force, the subjugation of body when all the other strategies of domination to shatter his morale fails. It is the body of the native that is tortured to break the spirit when it becomes unyielding to the interest of the colonizers and the neo-colonizers. Through the course of this trial, the internal colonizers are constructed as agents who are neither 'essentialist' nor 'unidimensional.' According to Kumar, "Internal colonization is a field of force marked by diversity and multiplicity in terms of its interest and methods and it worked through agents who could be any colour and nationality" (p.322). During the trial, Kimathi was again visited by Henderson who asks him to 'Stop dreaming' and wake up to reality. Kimathi grows furious, "What more do you want from me?" (p. 54). Shaw Henderson declares that he has done his best to save Kimathi saying that the democratic government has stretched its patience to its farther limits. Since Kimathi does not surrender and is playing rough, its consequence will also be rough was the justification for the brutal treatment of Kimathi. Henderson reacts wildly, striking Kimathi 'with hands, legs, gun, and swearing as he strikes.'

Finally, Henderson orders his soldiers to 'set to work.' Kimathi is blood-stained, shirt torn, enemies from the torturer chamber kicked, pushed from behind until he could hardly walk. Henderson handed him a piece of paper and forced Kimathi to sign, "Now sign, sign-surrender" (p. 57). Kimathi tears it into pieces, 'throws the pieces in Henderson's face' and says, "You...traitors to your people. Sellers of your own people...for what?" (p. 58). This vividly explains how Kenyan masses had been oppressed, exploited, and subjugated by the traitors ever since the colonization of Kenya. By throwing back the pieces of paper Kimathi blatantly opposes and resists different forms of colonial oppression and exploitation against settler-colonizers and their supporters. The imperialist used various psychological pressure and strategies by sending different delegates during Kimathi's different trials as a means of domination. Thiong'o builds the tension in realistic terms only to reject oppression which is expected to evolve the importance of resistance is emphasized through the unity and solidarity of the warring tribes to fight against the dominating superstructure as well as its agents. This is well reflected in the play when the Boy and Girl resolve their differences in the fourth movement of the play. The resolution of their differences enables them to believe completely in *Dedan Kimathi*, and not only join the forces of the revolutionists but also become capable of carrying forward the cause of freedom. Kimathi the leader of the peasants took the oath of unity in the struggle as Kimathi portrayed the hero of the Kenyan freedom struggle during the colonial period. Even in the neo-colonial regime, the oppression and domination of Kenyan masses prevail in the post-independence era. The significance of unity is realized by Woman and Girl:

WOMAN: That is the way it should be. Instead of fighting against one another, we who struggle against exploitation and oppression, should give one another strength and faith till victory is ours. United, our strength becomes faith that moves mountains. (p. 60)

Through the above lines, the woman convinces the boy and the girl the importance of unity and team spirit. Thiong'o's expression in the woman's voice sounds thus: "Kimathi's teaching: unite, drive out the enemy and control your riches, enjoy the fruit of your sweat" (p. 18). The movements of the Woman in the play are followed by the Boy and the Girl which allow spaces for dialogues highlighting the significance of the Mau Mau movement as a means of education for the younger generation.

The course of action is carefully and confidentially detailed for the benefit of the Boy and the Girl whose commitment to the cause takes shape gradually, waiting to be translated into action. The woman says, "Listen. Kimathi is a genius in this struggle. It is therefore important to rescue him even at the cost of a few lives. The struggle must continue" (p. 61). The continued resistance by the Kenyan masses gains momentum in the play to prove that Kimathi is not alone. Moreover, Kimathi satirically opposes the colonial judge and his judgment in the second movement of the play. Upon the false charge of possessing a firearm, namely a revolver, without license, Kimathi proclaims, "By what right dare you, a colonial judge, sit in judgment over me? To a criminal judge, in a criminal court, set up by criminal law: the law of oppression. I have no words" (p. 25). Kimathi does not believe in the legal procedure and judgments of the colonizers' government as it holds neither fairness nor justice. Instead, the judge, the court and its laws are criminal in itself bent on oppression. What is important here, however, is not the audiences' or reader spontaneous recognition of the truth but a guided awakening of the fellow men by a heroic or legendary leader.

The play, therefore, appeals to the readers and to the colonized communities as a relevant representation of an important national experience. It documents the historic struggle of Kenyans and foregrounds the need to adopt the appropriate truth in the narration of the collective experiences of postcolonial societies. But towards the end of the play, Judge Shaw Henderson sentences Kimathi to ‘death by hanging with immediate effect. The whites run out but the blacks remain to sing their sorrowful songs. Thus, one can clearly see how Kenyan playwright Thiong’o critiques the prolonged subjugation of the Kenyan masses by the colonizers. The continuum of Kenyan struggle in the neo-colonial era is vividly seen even in his community play *I Will Marry When I Want*.

## **Section II: *I Will Marry When I Want* (1977)**

Thiongo’s successive post-colonial play, written in native tongue and classified as a community play *I Will Marry When I Want* (1977) also reconstructs the Kenyan history of resistance and the betrayal of the masses by critiquing the post-independence African leadership. With the advent of colonialism and capital investment in Kenya even after political independence, the economic deprivation of peasants and workers continued. The comprador bourgeois implemented a new form of imperialism in order to achieve economic, political, and cultural benefits. This new form of imperialism called neo-colonialism emerged as an offshoot of the post-colonial period. The term was coined by Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah in 1963. According to Nkrumah, “neo-colonialism is a fake illusion of freedom, but in reality, it was a planned shift from old to the new order of ruling” (1966, p. 26). Ten years after independence, when Thiong’o staged the Gikuyu community play *I Will Marry When I Want*, the peasants were still wallowing in poverty, having sacrificed their lives for want of a better life that never came. Thiong’o was challenging the Kenyan government to deliver independence to the people in the true sense as more than one just written on paper.

For this purpose, Thiong’o used theatre to criticize, and convert his writing of art to utilitarian value. In this process, theatre became an instrument or ideological weapon for a social-political change in post-colonial societies. For Thiong’o, theatre was the vehicle for a social and political ideology of liberation in which he incorporates various indigenous theatrical devices and techniques such as songs, dance, gestures, mimicry, imitation, soliloquies, and every other dramatic device to convey the message. Employing these techniques in his plays, Thiong’o wanted the oppressed Kenyan masses to awaken and revolt against the Kenyan elites and home guards, the betrayers of freedom. In an interview with Shashi Khurana, Mugo, the co-playwright has said that “We were using drama specifically in order to conscientize our people, to review our history with them and theirs with us to be able to answer the questions, ‘Where are we?’ and ‘Where are we heading?’” (Khurana, 2017, p. 3). As understood, the problems were deeply rooted in the post-colonial and neo-colonial regime, primarily because of the vested interest in economic and political issues, which remained un-addressed and continued to undermine equality and equity. Also by means of remote control mechanism, there was an ongoing indirect control on the cultures and economies of the developing countries with the help of willing agents, the compradors, who remained economically and culturally dependent upon the European masters.

Through the dramatic devices, the playwrights' wanted the masses to revive and understand the current position of the nation by self-directed questions such as 'where are we?' and 'where are we heading for?'. Thiong'o having identified the power of theatrical activities, established Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre (KCECC) to provide the new literates with follow-up material for collective self-education and would help to raise awareness programs. Thiong'o says, "drama is closer to the dialectics of life than poetry and the fiction" (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 54). As a result, the production of *Ngahika Ndeeda* commenced and was staged in Kamiriithu's community open-air theatre a platform to sensitize and decolonize the mind of Kenyan mass against exploitation and discrimination orchestrated by the African elites and to resist inequalities. This play is not only written in native Gikuyu but also performed by the Kikuyu peasantry in the Kamiriithu community and thus called a 'stage text.' In *decolonizing the mind*, Thiong'o proclaims that, "The bullet was the means of physical subjugation. ...the physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom" (p. 9). Thiong'o questions himself whether his earlier works in English has reached the grassroots in altering the consciousness of the masses. He then suddenly switch to write his successive community plays in his native language 'Gikuyu' by strategically discarding English, although he used it to write his previous play, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. According to Lee (1999), "Ngugi believes wholeheartedly in the ability of people as class subjects to carry out post-colonial decolonization and provide historical change" (p. 165). Thiong'o felt that the choice of native African theatre, is a necessary first step, as his earlier play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* did not automatically bring about the decolonizing effect on African culture.

The play traces the social conditions of modern Kenya as a historical continuum. Killam states that the play *I Will Marry When I Want* projects, "Land, brutality and colonial oppression as the central issues of the conflicts" (p. 256). Through this play, Thiong'o not only re-evokes the fundamental principles of Mau Mau but also re-awakens the dormant consciousness of the Kenyan peasants and workers to bring forth solidarity in them to resist against the neo-colonial exploitation. Since 1950s, the Kikuyu had been economically marginalized as years of white settler expansion snatched away their landholdings. Due to this expropriation of the natives' land by the White settlers, the Land and Freedom Army was formed to revolt against the colonialists and nevertheless, when land issues were rampant in the neo-colonial times, the situation forced Thiong'o to raise the issues of land and freedom struggles of Kenya in the post-independence era. Kiguunda, the loyalist and the landholder in *I Will Marry When I Want* emphasizes the importance of land by relating his one and a half acres of land with his identity and manliness, a symbol of pride and wealth. Kioi's urge to possess the land by crooked means sets forth a conflicting tension between the classes enforced by the high-handedness of power and social stature. The ownership of land which is life to the Kenyan community and a basis of self-dignity is guarded jealously by the peasants, however small the landholding is:

These one and a half acres? These are worth more to me  
Than all the thousands that belong to Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru.  
These are mine own. Not borrowed robes  
Said to tire the wearer. (Thiong'o, 1977, p. 3)

Kiguunda claims that even a one and half acres of land is valued much bigger than the thousand acres owned by the elites. His title-deed stands as a metaphor for his power and autonomy

signifying Kiguunda as his own master and not a slave or a tenant farmer. The land is depicted as a metaphor for life; it is a source of livelihood. "Land is both a metaphor for struggle and the physical space for political contestation in virtually all Ngugi's works. A metaphor for flux, the land is the agent for social change and economic mobility, the agent for social transformation within society" (Ogude, 1997, p. 89). In addition to this, the title –deed is also related to manliness through sexual metaphor, "A man brags about his own penis, however tiny" (p. 3). However tiny the land is, its value is enormous to a peasant like Kiguunda. In that case, the paper affirms that the single most important virtue in traditional African society is the common ownership of land which was protected by all, for the common good. For Thiong'o, the land is an important metaphor for explicating Kenya's past and present history. Even in the neo-colonial time, the comprador bourgeois dominates the Kenyan society and aggravates the land appropriation to construct factories and to own them with cheap labour and production for the global market by sending goods and profits to European leaders.

Thiong'o critiques the existing exploitative practices and wants to evoke the consciousness of landless masses to revolt for their land rights against the Kenyan elites by strategically adopting Gikuyu myth and history. Gikuyu considers the earth as the 'mother' of the tribe, it is the soil that feeds the child through a lifetime; and again after death, it is the soil that nurses the spirits of the dead for eternity. Thus, the earth is the most sacred thing above all that dwell in or on it. Among the Gikuyu, the soil is especially honoured and an everlasting oath is to swear by the earth.

During the colonial times, the masses were oppressed, exploited, and experienced inequalities and poverty which created rural-urban, regional, and class differences in development. These include, "contradictions in the social relations of production between the international and domestic bourgeoisie, between the peasantries and the bourgeoisie, and between capital and labour" (Ndege, 2009, p. 4). Even in the neo-colonial times, the local bourgeoisie habitually resorts to high-level corruption to accumulate wealth and power. They also invoke racial and ethnic sentiments to stay in power. In a fundamental sense, post-colonial governance became even more autocratic. Income inequality and poverty have become more acute since independence. In this sense, the points discussed in this paper validates that the neo-colonial regime rather worsens the situation of the Kenyans masses. As stated by Njooki in her song that the situation of Kenya during colonial time and the neo-colonial era has remained the same as the changes and the socio-economic progress never touches the grassroots. The last part of her song captures the bitter truths, "In the past I used to eat wild spinach. Today I am eating the same" (p. 39). Similarly, when Wangeci asked Kiguunda for some money to purchase salt, Kiguunda comments on the price-hike and how African employers are no different from Indian employers or English Boer landlords. Then, Wangeci mocks at independence by saying, "The difference between then and now is this! We now have our independence!" (p. 19). In the neo-colonial present, the prices of the commodity raised without the raise in wages. Gathoni going to Gicaamba's place to get some salt clearly indicates how economically deprived the Kenyan peasants are in the neo-colonial present and Thiong'o sarcastically delineates the unchanged living condition of the ordinary.

Gicaamba critique the current economic and political oppression and exploitation of the workers by the landlords and factory owners. Gicaamba reasons out that "Religion is the alcohol of the soul! Religion is the poison of the mind! It's not God who has brought about our poverty!"

(p. 61). Gicaamba express the reality that he and his companions have worked hard but the rich elites and their foreign partners have taken away everything. Furthermore, Gicaamba who is the mouthpiece of society, reminds the fact that Kenyan Christians were the ones who, during the uprising, advocated to 'surrender' and says, "Can't you remember. The days of our freedom struggle? Was it not the religious leaders...to tell us, Surrender, surrender" (p. 58). Gicaamba's line explicitly elaborates how Kenyan Christians were preferred to take side with the Whites because they were Christian, rather than supporting their own oppressed members. Gicaamba adds that the colonial church is still around, even in a post-colonial world; the version of Christianity that Kioi practices is a testament to that. Gicaamba says, "All the missionaries of all the churches, Held the Bible in the left hand, and gun in the right hand" (p. 56-57). The intention of the British imperialists is clear in Gicaamba's words. To colonize the natives, the imperialists use Christian religion as a means to subjugate the Kenyan masses. Gicaamba point out the imperialism's goal as to completely soften the native's heart and to completely cripple their minds with religion.

Thiongo's play is also a deep commitment to the social realities of Africans in the neo-colonial time and space. According to Fanon, "The colonized man who writes for his people ought to use the past with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to act and a basis for hope" (Fanon, p. 187). Correspondingly, Thiong'o in these two plays elucidate the situation of the Kenyan past and its continuity in the present scenario. He questions the masses whether the situation of the nation and the condition of the peasant has changed in neo-colonial times. Ndeda (2009), states that, in Kenya, "the post-colonial state was essentially a reproduction of the colonial state at the level of ideological orientation, laws and the basic economic structures" (p. 118). Here, Thiongo's thinks it was an on-going problem; he wanted to stir peoples' consciousness and revolt against the new elites. As the ruling classes have their sets of values and will to oppress, they consider the masses as inferior and subjugate them by force. Their intolerant attitude is an extension of colonialism which Gicaamba critiques:

The owners of these companies are real scorpions.  
They know three things only:  
To oppress workers, To take away their rights,  
And suck their blood. (Thiong'o, 1977, p. 33)

The neo-colonial elites are the real bloodsuckers, exploiters, and expropriators of the natives conveyed through the metaphor of monkey holding the baby. If the baby monkey has to be separated from the mother, the mother monkey has to be bribed with a handful of peanuts which symbolizes the unethical practices of opportunists. Similarly, the neo-colonial elites throw meagre benefits to poor peasant and grab their cheap labour. Here Gicaamba rightly says that "we are the people who cultivate and plant, but we are not the people who harvest!" (p. 33). Thiong'o sees colonial and neo-colonial compradors as the enemy of all working people, the proletariats. Thiong'o also condemns the wealth-distribution as unequal: it went to a few before independence and now after independence it still does. The distribution of the nation's wealth is managed by a minority who milks the nation dry with the help of powerful foreign industrialized countries. They live in luxury, mindless of the vast majority who perish in unthinkable misery. Thus, one may argue that they capitalize like greedy vultures and scavengers on the misery of others causing economic inequality and gross social injustice. The compradors only benefit the capitalists at the expense of the masses as they have no share in the profits of their labour.

## Conclusion:

On the whole, Thiong'o wanted the downtrodden to question the greediness and exploitative nature of leaders and through his plays and novels, he decolonizes the mindset of the grassroots which confirms Fanon's statement that "Decolonization is truly the creation of new men." (p. 2). Thiong'o's revolutionary plays attempt to decolonize the mindset of the Kenyan by instilling a revolutionary spirit in the minds of the native. Moreover, Thiong'o in his best-known and most-cited non-fiction essay *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), argues that there is a persistence of certain colonial mindset in the post-colonial Africa in general and Kenya in particular. Thus, to decolonize the psyche of the Kenya masses and to create a distinctly African identity, Thiong'o's community play *I Will Marry When I Want* is initially written in Gikuyu. In decolonizing the mind, he says, "It is the peasantry and working class who are changing language all the time in pronunciations, in forming new dialects, new words, new phrases, and new expressions" (p. 68). The use of theatre and the use of indigenous language in his community play has greatly enhanced the natives in understanding the revolutionary motif of Thiong'o against the neo-colonial compradors. Thiong'o's theatre, in that sense, could be called a post-colonial theatre, based on the people's collaborative production. Compared to their community project, the previous play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* written in English did not have the same outreach to mark a difference in the mindset of the grassroots. But Thiong'o's code-switching in his community plays *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Mother, Sing For Me* (1982), by writing in Gikuyu with the collaborative effort of villagers and intellectuals who contributed songs and other oral forms in Gikuyu could reach the grassroots. Thiong'o through the use of indigenous language in his play could stir the mindset of the native as majority could understand and comprehend it. The community play clearly shows Thiong'o rootedness to the native soil as well as openness in critiquing to alter the mental make-up of the mind of the Kenyan people at large.

Therefore, Thiong'o plays *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and *I Will Marry When I Want* creates a context within which the past history of Kenya is used to inform the present and to shape its future. It provides humanity with possibilities to set its agendas and attain their realization however difficult the journey could be. As stated by Ifatimehin (2016), "Past. That is history. We should learn from our past. But it would be a great mistake to become its slaves. Must we let songs of a patriotic past, betray the needy present?" (p. 4). Thiong'o's post-colonial plays of the 1970s consciously reflect and reconstruct the historical struggles of the Kenyan peasants and their power of resistance to fight for freedom against colonial and neo-colonial elites. In both the plays, the revolutionary spirit of the ordinary remains an underlying motif to revive the consciousness of the nation.

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