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Author

Nwankwo, Chimalum

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WOMEN IN NGUGI'S PLAYS:
From Passivity to Social Responsibility

By

Chimalum Nwankwo

The tell-tale patriarchy and its concomitant sexism in African societies is not as absolute as the armchair scholar or unwary feminist would have one believe. Before faulting that thesis, one must first question the honesty and accuracy of the vision of those writers or social observers from whose gloomy pictures we deduce misery and passivity for African womanhood.

In trying to characterize the role of women in African societies we find that many observers concentrate on things such as the so-called humiliations of polygamy, the dangers and imaginary deprivations associated with female circumcision and the limited participation of women in social affairs. Hastely drawn conclusions from simplistic observations have resulted in sensational and stereotyping of the African womanhood.

A study of the plays of Ngugi wa Thiongo reveals unstinted efforts to transform the negative image of African womanhood from passivity to social responsibility, from an inferior partner in family and nation building to an equal partner. These artistic efforts have been largely ignored by Ngugi's critics. Perhaps the plays are not Aristotelian enough and therefore should better be passed over in silence. The editor of Contemporary Dramatists argues that:

James T. Ngugi is a better novelist than he is a dramatist. If there is any reason for his inclusion in this work other than his reputation in that field, it is that for several years after its production in 1962, The Black Hermit was the only full-length play in English from East Africa.

Such adverse comments abound and we should indeed better pass them over in silence. The outstanding irony about them is that today Ngugi's political problems³ in Kenya arise not from his great stature as a novelist but from that slim reputation as a dramatist.

One important distinction in Ngugi's plays as well as other writings is his ability to present African women and their roles or responsibilities in appropriate historical and cultural contexts. This kind of approach enables us to

identify African women as the human beings which they are, human beings who may be timid or brave, shy or outspoken, indolent or hardworking; human beings who could be victims of social circumstances or perpetrators of injustice.

Paradoxically speaking, the contact with the West compels Africa to suffer and enjoy the contemporaneity of old and new with their complex psychological, cultural and socio-economic features. The physical environment attests to this fact as much as the continued existence of a rural sensibility even in the most modern circumstances of African life today. Ngugi's plays capture the interplay of these forces. Those plays include The Rebels, A Wound in the Heart, This Time Tomorrow, and The Black Hermit. There are also three other relevant plays co-authored with various writers, namely, The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, I Will Marry When I Want and Mother Cry for Me. The last two are Gikuyu plays, in keeping with Ngugi's commitment to rehabilitate African languages and literatures. All the plays share one thing in common: they offer a new way of interpreting the role of women in African societies, specifically, the Kenyan society which Ngugi writes about. The best way to understand his treatment of women is to look at each play in terms of (1) its cultural or historical matrix, (2) examine the problems posed by the society to the key male and female characters, (3) evaluate the involvement of the characters in the resolution of their problems.

In the first play, the Rebels, the basic issue is that of marriage by proxy, a common situation in traditional African societies. The interaction of characters suggests conflict between elders and the young in the appropriate historical and cultural context of old values versus modern ones. A village elder called Nguru, along with other elders choose Mumbi the chief's daughter for marriage with Charles, Nguru's educated son. Charles returns from the city with Mary, a young woman from other parts, his preferred choice for wife. Mary fails to convince Charles to ignore the prearranged marriage imposed by his people. While Charles prevaricates, Mary leaves the village and Mumbi commits suicide to reject the arrangement by the elders. A broken hearted Charles leaves the village in protest.

Mary and Mumbi, the two women in this play represent the African woman in modern urban and traditional rural circumstances. Both reject passivity in a situation affecting their lives. Despite their different social backgrounds, both demonstrate the same kind of individual will. Their choices place them on the same level with Charles whose individuality is also affronted by the communal spirit of traditional Africa which the elders embody. The actions of the trio are collective demands for a change in the status quo. The

rebellion in the play is not the rebellion of a man or woman but of men and women against a stifling but moribund traditionalism.

In the second play, The Wound in the Heart, the dramatic situation reminds us of the Mau Mau revolution in preindependence Kenya. Part of the point which Ngugi advances through the play is that even in the most seemingly innocuous situations, the contributions and involvement of women are no less noble than those of their male counterparts.

In The Wound in the Heart, a patriotic Freedom fighter called Ruhui returns from the jungle campaigns against the British settler government. He finds his wife Mumbi with a child fathered by the British District Officer. Before Ruhui decides on a line of action, his wife commits suicide. Ruhui discovers this and also kills himself. Here, the action of both man and woman affirm equal partnership in dealing with national and family tragedy. The violation of the woman's human rights and the woman's reaction are as important as the man's active campaign for freedom. Their deaths are "ritual deaths" for the regeneration of their society.

In the third play, This Time Tomorrow, there is a variation of the situation in The Rebels. It is post-independence Kenya. This time the sole custodian of culture and tradition is an old lady called Njango. She is a food-seller, symbolic character, considering the sobriquet, "mother of men" which the customers call her. Njango is one of the squatters in the shanties at Uhuru market, which the government has ordered for removal as part of a cleaning up exercise. There are no alternative housing arrangements for occupants. In a sub-plot, Wanjiro, Njango's daughter desires marriage with Asinjo, a young man described by Njango as a loafer. The two young people sympathise with another nameless stranger who organizes a resistance movement against the government. For Njango, those are perplexing circumstances, foreshadowing the polarisation of the rich and poor, government high-handedness, national lethargy and the debasement of African values in Ngugi's Petals of Blood. In the end, the incipient populist resistance is crushed by the government in This Time Tomorrow. Asinjo and Wanjiro elope.

Njango's role in the play reminds us of the other great female spirit, called Nyankinyua, in Ngugi's novel Petals of Blood. Like Nyankinyua, Njango selflessly assumes collective responsibility for the problems in Kenyan society. Despite her old age she is alert and sensitive, but like the elders in The Rebels, she is so wrapped up in cultural propriety and

nationalism that she is easily overwhelmed by political and social changes and the rebellious ways of a new generation.

Once again, it is obvious from the combined challenge to tradition by Asinjo and Wanjiro that both man and woman are being projected as equal partners in the demand for change in their society.

In Ngugi's fourth play, The Black Hermit, Independence has come to Kenya with great hopes for everyone for justice and plenty. Unfortunately, narrow loyalties to tribe, religion and custom make such a fair world impossible. Remi, the hero of the play, is trapped between these loyalties and his search for wider contact with the representatives of the various groups in Kenya.

The major female characters in the play are victims of the same social circumstances with which Remi has to grapple. Nyobi, a widow and Remi's mother accept the burden of family management. She is not only worried by the welfare about a perplexed Thoni, widow of Remi's older brother, but she is also actively involved in the political affairs of her village that includes the immediate plan of the community to compel Remi to return from the city, conquer his alienation, and help the people to fulfil their needs.

The same custom which requires his late brother's widow, Thoni to marry the next male child in the family also requires Remi to return, marry Thoni and help his people. When Remi returns and refuses to marry Thoni, she commits suicide. Before Thoni's death her sentiments anticipate the fierce and more rebellious attitude of female characters in Ngugi's later works, particularly the novels:

I can't stay here in this place.
To be like an unwanted maize plant
That has been pulled out and flung
on the bare earth
To be trodden beneath men's feet.⁷

Even though Thoni's action is far from being the best in her circumstances, in a way it is the kind of action which induces others to act more positively toward change. Thoni's action leads to a belated contrition, a reaction which underscores Ngugi's strategy for drawing attention to the role of women in society. On hearing of Thoni's death, Remi says:

I never gave you a chance
Nor even tried to understand you
I came back to break Tribe and Custom
Instead I've broken you and me.

The lamentation is an acceptance of the necessity for man and woman to share responsibilities for mutual welfare in society.

The ultimate chance for the expression of that spirit of sharing occurs in The Trial of Dedan Kimathi which Ngugi co-authored with Micene Mugo. If the other plays are casual and limited in their attention to the problem, The Trial of Dedan Kimathi is intense and comprehensive in summing up the capabilities of women in society. In virtually all circumstances in the play, women are portrayed as the equals of men, and they function as such.

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi is involved in the correction of history as rendered by colonial and indigenous writers. In the play, Kimathi, the hero of the Mau Mau revolution is reclaimed, and his image, tarnished by tales of terrorism and humiliation of women, is transformed. He is the moving spirit of African nationalism and that role is accentuated by pairing him with a woman endowed with great wisdom and courage. All through the indignation which leads to the rebellion of African peoples, in the life of the revolutionaries in the jungle, the resistance movement in Kenyan cities during the war, the exploitation and humiliation of the people and the escape strategy of Kimathi; every situation reflects full testimony of the capability of women to participate as competently as men. Besides Kimathi, female counterpart, simply called "woman" is at the hub of the play directing and actuating major events. That woman represents in many situations a moral conscience. In the revolutionary context of the play she is the other part of the creative or societal productive principle which must unite successfully with Kimathi.

This argument is supported in the play through the progressive unity of a young boy and girl whose activities lead to the freedom of Dedan Kimathi. The boy and girl are shown to mature from intensive fighting and bickering to a sudden realization that the destiny of human society actually rests on their acceptance to work like a team. That realization comes through gradual mutual re-examination of individual weaknesses and a practical determination to resolve differences.

A careful study of Ngugi will reveal that all his creative works suggest a careful re-consideration of the role of women in African societies, given the changing cultural and economic circumstances. The writer proffers no simple answers. In one of the Gikuyu plays I will Marry When I Want, recently translated into English, the issue of female responsibility is once more placed at the forefront of the struggle between the rich and poor.

The central figure of I Will Marry When I Want is a woman. That choice is obviously in keeping with the recent trend in Ngugi's works. Using a woman as victim universalizes, for both sexes, Ngugi's campaign for social justice. It enables the writer to delineate a level vision in which the fate of women in society becomes easily analogous to the fate of the poor. If passivity characterizes the female stereotype in Africa that passivity is carefully exploited artistically for positive ends.

Three different women appear in I Will Marry When I Want. Each of them contributes in a unique way to clarifying the image of the African woman. In the first place, Gathoni, daughter of poor Kigunnda and Wangeci have an affair with John Muhuni, the son of the rich Jezebel and Kanoru. Even when Gathoni becomes pregnant, there is still no consent for a marriage. Kanoru demands from Kigunnda's family a conversion to Christianity as a precondition. Kigunnda rejects this. To make matters worse, Kanoru tricks Kigunnda into deeding away his last piece of land. When Kigunnda realizes his errors he attempts to reclaim his land by force to forestall a default and a government auction, which would enable Kanoru to purchase the land. Kigunnda fails and loses his land.

This social situation involves the participation of women at all levels. The family situation of Kiguunda and Wangeci indicates a sharing of family responsibilities from domestic chores to the decisions such as the marriage of Gathoni. In folk situations, when Kiguunda boasts of the valor of Kenyan manhood, Wangeci is given opportunity to respond. All these are done in dramatic flashbacks involving a garnishing of history, and biography, song and dance. The family situation of Kanoru and Jezebel also suggests parity in their activities. In fact, it is Jezebel who intervenes with a gun to disarm Kiguunda when the latter makes a desperate move to reclaim his land from Kanoru. However what distinguishes one family from the other is their socio-economic circumstances. It is obvious from the play that Jezebel has virtually nothing to do within the family household because of the use of servants, while we observe that Wangeci is burdened with household chores.

An understanding of I will Marry When I Want requires a second look at the title. The habit of marrying when one wants is a break with the tradition of old Africa. Such a break is only part of the metaphoric point advanced by the writers of this play. Gathoni is denied the opportunity to dedice the appropriate time to get married. We must see that limitation as part of a social situation rather than as some kind of special conspiracy against women. This is because John Muhuuni, like Charles in The Rebels, Remi in The Black

Hermit or Asinjo in This Time Tomorrow, is also limited by the same cultural constraints. Unless that point is clearly understood, other fictional situations such as the various appearances of prostitutes in works like Petals of Blood are bound to be misinterpreted.

It should be noted that these plays have been spread out over a period of twenty years, that is, between about 1961 to 1982. Time has not vitiated the author's commitment or consistency. All the women in the plays are made to function as equal partners of men. When they appear alone as Nyobi in The Black Hermit or Njongo in This Time Tomorrow, their responsibilities do not suggest inferiority to men in comparable circumstances. When they suffer humiliations or tragic deaths as in Mumbi in The Rebels or Thoni in The Black Hermit, such suffering or death become rituals which assist in the transformation of their male counterparts and the wider community. In the light of the changes taking place on in modern Africa, particularly the transition for rural to urban, it might be safe to conclude that these plays' reflect a reliable corresponding change in women, in the gradual re-characterization of women from passive images to active participants in social advancement.

FOOTNOTES

¹W.J. Howard, "Themes and Development in the Novels of Ngugi" in Edgar Wright et. al., ed., A Critical Evaluation of African Literature (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1973), p. 95.

²James Vinson, Contemporary Dramatists (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), p. 572.

³Ngugi was arrested in December 1977 shortly after the production of his first Gikuyu play, I Will Marry When I Want.

⁴The copy of Mother, Cry for Me was not available in translation at the time this paper was written.

⁵In The Rebels, Charles uses the expression "ritual marriage" to describe the transformation which he anticipates from his marriage.

⁶Ngugi wa Thiong'o, This Time Tomorrow (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau), p. 40.

⁷James Ngugi, The Black Hermit, (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1968), p. 66.

⁸ Ibid., p. 76.

⁹ Ngugi gives full reasons for the writing of this play in the preface to The Trail of Dedan Kimathi and Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary. He explains also that the play is a reaction to Kenneth Watene's Dedan Kimathi.