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**“Not Yet Uhuru” and “Aborted Voyage”:
A Comparative Study of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s
Petals of Blood and George Lamming’s
*Natives of My Person***

Kabir Ahmed

“Postcoloniality was not just the continuation of colonial structures of power, economics, relationships . . . post-colonialism represents both a change and a lack of change. The lack of change was the fact that the institutions of colonial rule and power, of course, had been inherited by the colonial elite and continued to define what the postcolonial landscape was”¹ *Simon Gikandi*

Abstract

*The essay explores Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s and George Lamming’s disenchantment with the political dispensation of their countries with flag independence as opposed to actual liberation. The paper adopts a comparative approach to analyze the neocolonial predicament in Kenya and the legacies of the slave trade in the Caribbean through their respective novels *Petals of Blood* and *Natives of My Person*. A close examination of both novels reveals that the writers focused on the histories of Kenya and the Caribbean, attributing the predicament of the modern period to the past. The two writers, the essay will reveal, offer diagnoses of the problems of society and of human beings with Ngugi attributing malignancy to the political structures in Kenya, and Lamming arguing that malignancy is embedded in the human personality. While Ngugi’s radicalism sees hope for social change through a political revolution, Lamming’s psychological orientation as a novelist upholds internal change as a panacea for the Caribbean post-colonial predicament. In Kenya, the journey to Uhuru failed to materialize in the same way that the voyage to San Cristobal was aborted. Despite the author’s differences in political orientation, both novels draw upon historical and cultural experiences between Africa and the Caribbean providing a powerful assessment of the shared neocolonial condition.*

Keywords: Abandonment, Deracination, Betrayal, Brutal Exploitation, Environmental Degradation, Economic Instability, Rootlessness.

Introduction

This paper analyzes Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* and George Lamming's *Natives of My Person* and connects the literature to the authors' disillusionment with the political dispensation of their respective countries post-independence. Comparing these two novels side by side reveals resemblances in the authors' narrative approaches and political positions drawn from the common colonial experiences they shared, but addresses the ways the two authors critically diverge.

Born in 1938 in Limuru in central Kenya, Ngugi started writing at an early age. It was as a post-graduate student at the University of Leeds that Ngugi wrote his first novel, *The River Between* (1965), and concentrated on studying Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, which strongly influenced the former's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967). I treated this influence extensively in an essay I wrote and published in 2014.² I argue that the author's Marxist leanings take their fullest and most developed expression in his 1977 novel, *Petals of Blood*. The novel upends the concept of a single-person hero by instead showcasing a cast of several characters taking center stage.

Across the Atlantic, fellow anticolonial thinker and novelist, George Lamming, was born in 1927 in Carrington village, Barbados of mixed African and English parentage. After his mother remarried, Lamming split his time between his birthplace and his stepfather's home in St. David's village. He attended Roebuck Boy's School and Combermere School on a scholarship. He wrote and published several novels, most notable among them *In the Castle of My Skin* and *The Emigrants*.

Natives of My Person dwells on the contemporary Caribbean dispensation but goes back to the time of slavery to reveal that the present is strongly influenced by the past. Lamming was one of the foremost postcolonial novelists produced by the Caribbean, who passed on 4 June, 2022 in Barbados at 94 years¹. Lamming was created by a tradition which was a conglomeration of the bohemian lifestyles of the white settlers, (who in 1627 destroyed the original

Carib inhabitants), and survivals of the African tradition. Lamming asserts in “The West Indian People” that:

The West Indies, whether French or British, did not evolve out of [the] system [of] colonialism nor did they degenerate into [It]. They were actually created by it. And upon whole kingdom of values were founded.²

He came from an intellectual and literary tradition that produced writers such as Sam Selvon, Andrew Salkey, Edgar Mittelholzer, Derek Walcott—most of whom traveled to England on the same boat as George Lamming, to begin a life in exile. They were united by “exploration of themes of innocence, exile and return to the motherland, resistance and endurance, engagement and alienation, self-determination and domination.”³ In London, the budding writers worked and trained with *BIM*, a journal edited by Frank Collymore, and *Caribbean Voices*, a BBC Programme regularly broadcast to the Caribbean. These two creative media provided a literary training ground and a platform of expression for young writers who wrote poetry, short stories, and other works of fiction.

In this essay, I argue that both George Lamming and Ngugi wa Thiong’o were not only anti-colonial novelists but also political and social activists within and beyond their works of literature who aimed to eliminate all vestiges of slavery and psychological mentality of inferiority. In some ways, the work of Lamming anticipates the themes that famed Martinican anti-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon later explored as a psychologist and revolutionary in the wake of the Algerian liberation struggle. Though both writers were vehemently opposed to imperialism, Ngugi’s works powerfully expressed his Marxism. A good number, written later in Gikuyu, concentrated on the theater, as a medium through which to directly reach the common people—encouraging spontaneity and audience participation in the performances.

At the beginning of his vocation as a writer, Ngugi was a cultural nationalist; but through encounters with various influences in Kenya and England, he developed into a Marxist radical committed to both psychological re-orientation as well as the dismantling of the colonial socio-political system in Kenya. He shares the view of Fanon that:

adopting another culture's language . . . is above all to assume a culture. In the presence of the oppressor, the colonized unavoidably assume that because their native language is so dissimilar from the new dominant population, they are intrinsically inferior. The native constantly compares and analyzes his ability to speak like the colonizer and dominant culture. The colonizer develops an inferiority complex, trying at every turn, to imitate the colonizer for it is his only course to freedom and prosperity.⁴

Both novelists are deeply concerned with the fate of their respective communities in neo-colonial Kenya and the Caribbean: ordinary people are portrayed in both their novels as victims of abandonment, brutal exploitation, and betrayal all manifestations of political irresponsibility by the political and business elite who constitute the ruling class in these societies. Ngugi traces the beginning of the economic exploitation of Kenya to a period before the advent of colonialism. Colonialism intensified it and brought it to its apogee with the imposition of capitalism. In *Natives of My Person*, Lamming sees the Caribbean's contemporary neo-colonial predicament and its associated discontents originating during the slave trade period.

Of significance is the fact that neo-colonialism continues to negatively impact the lives of the oppressed in colonized nations in the twenty-first century—through environmental degradation, deracination, the spread of disease, economic instability, ethnic rivalries, and human rights violations.³ The phenomenon has continued to negatively affect the colonized by imposing a false identity on the people which Fanon describes thus: the native (develops) a sense of `self` as defined by the colonial master who develops a sense of superiority while the colonized develops an inferiority complex.⁴ It also resulted in diminishing resources of the colonized communities that resulted in the stunted growth and development in, as far as we are concerned in this paper, the Kenyan and Caribbean communities.⁵ Colonization left the independent nations unprepared to function in the modern global nation-state system and vulnerable to outside influence and encroachment at both economic and psychological levels.⁶ In his iconic reading of “Englishness” Simon Gikandi considers post-colonialism, the period after independence, as a “code for the state

of undecidability in which the culture of colonialism continues to resonate in what was supposed to be its negation.”⁷

Ngugi and the Exploitative Elite in Kenya

Ngugi offers a scathing attack on the political elite in neo-colonial Kenya for turning a blind eye to its responsibilities with dire consequences for the ruled. In the opening of *Petals of Blood*, the inhabitants of Old Ilmorog are going through a severe drought. The drought threatens the livelihood of members of the Ilmorog community whose Member of Parliament is unaware of the tribulations his community is going through until a delegation is sent to Nairobi to inform him. During the drought, Munira, a school teacher, arrives in town and joins the villagers in trying to survive the harsh conditions in Ilmorog, a microcosm of neo-colonial Kenya. Munira’s school is described as “a four-roomed barrack with broken walls, a tin roof with gaping holes and more spiders webs and the wings and heads of dead flies.”⁸ Like Ilmorog, the school is abandoned by those in whose care it is entrusted. Mzigo, a school inspector, rarely visits Ilmorog, and when he later takes an interest in the village, he simply goes there to oversee his shop rather than to inspect the school. Its decrepit and barren nature thus reflects the condition of Ilmorog, a “waterless, rainless cloister”⁵ whose inhabitants are left to suffer from the vagaries of natural and man-made disasters.

In the post-colonial Kenya of the novel, ordinary people are subjected to exploitation and despoliation from the Kenyan bourgeoisie. For example, the Ilmorog Member of Parliament, Nderi wa Reira, who belongs to the ruling class has abandoned members of his constituency. He only visits the village when an election is around the corner to canvas for votes. He collects the hard-earned savings of the villagers ostensibly for a ‘Harambee’ water project but uses it as collateral for a bank loan with which “he brought shares in companies and invested in land, in housing and in small business.”⁶

Both Wanja, who turned into a sex worker, and Karega, the trade unionist, are depicted as flowers blighted by the parasitic worms that are identified as the Kenyan middle-class elite. Likewise, Abdulla’s experiences illustrate the fact that neo-colonial Kenya cares little for veteran Mau Mau fighters who sacrificed

their youthful energy and even limbs, (as the crippled Abdulla illustrates) for the nation's freedom.

Following independence, Abdulla waits in vain for land reforms and redistribution and is shocked to realize that he doesn't stand a chance to own a part of the land they emancipated. His failure to acquire a farm left by a departing European made him realize that the system is constructed in such a way that only the wealthy can reap its benefit. He finds out to his dismay that contemporary Kenya is a "New Kenya. No free things without money you cannot buy land: and without land and property you cannot get a bank loan to start business or buy land."⁷ This situation is illustrative of the tendency of Kenya's ruling class throughout the 1960s and 70s to use the slogan "*Hakuna Cha Bure*," the Swahili equivalent of "you cannot get something for nothing." According to Chris Leo, Jomo Kenyatta expressed that sentiment when he was explaining his reasons for accepting a colonial settlement of the land in question.⁹ "We do not believe in being given this or that free," he said "I do not want Africans to adopt that attitude. central proposition in the individualist ideology underpinning Kenya's political and economic system."¹⁰

Abdullah, a shopkeeper and donkey cart transporter is one of the victims of the political irresponsibility of the new Kenyan bourgeoisie. His inability to get a job shows the hostility of the new system to the underprivileged class. The company which denies Abdulla a job has offered Kimeria, one of the villains in the story, a lucrative contract. As Abdulla is about to leave the company's premises, frustrated, he encounters Kimeria in a black suit, coming out of a Mercedes Benz and remarks, "Kenya's new bourgeoisie were offered privileged access to land and were able to use franchises, directorships, and trading licenses as avenues to wealth easily – or not earned at all. Mwenye nguvu mpishe – power will have its way."¹¹

Later, when full-scale industrialization comes to Ilmorog, Nyakinyua and other Ilmorog peasants accept loans from the African Economic Bank. Little did they realize that they are falling into a trap set by the apostles of big business. Unable to pay back the loans, their lands are auctioned to the highest bidders. They experienced dispossession and turned into a proletariat in post-independent Kenya. One of the development projects coinciding with the increase in bank loans in Ilmorog is the Trans-Africa

highway. Ostensibly meant to facilitate international communication, in reality it is aimed to allow multinational companies such as “Lonrho, Shell, Esso, Total (and) Agip”⁸ easy access to the hinterland. A powerful symbol, the road is thus a harbinger of the major social changes in Ilmorog, which result in economic progress for the Kenyan elite, but the strangulation of the ordinary people, displaced from their lands and forced to earn a living as proletariat. Those like Abdulla and Wanja, who have started selling Theng`eta, a local drink to “the builders, carpenters, masons [and] contractors”⁹ in New Ilmorog are sold out of business by the combined team of Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria alongside their foreign partners. This pushed Wanja into full scale prostitution and transformed Abdulla into an orange seller. Thus the story of progress in Ilmorog means a catalog of woes, dashed hopes and shattered dreams for the ordinary people, who have been identified by Ngugi as victims of abandonment, betrayal, neglect and economic exploitation by the ruling class of neo-colonial Kenya.

The fate of Ngugi’s characters in Kenya’s neo-colonial condition represents the devastating effects of capital penetration in the region. A process explained succinctly by the political economist Dew Tuan – Wleh Mayson when he argues:

The phase of monopoly capitalism in perpetual and accumulating terminal crises, marked by the feverish pursuit of domination, the plundering of resources, and the intense exploitation of the peoples.¹²

Lamming and the Morally Bankrupt Caribbean Ruling Class

The fate of the Kenyan ordinary people is similar to that of the Caribbean lower classes, who are portrayed by Lamming in *Natives of My Person* as victims of the political irresponsibility of their ruling class. In *Natives of My Person*, Lime Stone represents the contemporary Caribbean, a community whose fate under the neo-colonial dispensation Lamming explores. He reveals the picture of a nation in which political power is under the monopoly of a commercial institution, the House of Trade and Justice. Although Lime Stone has a house of parliament, political and economic decisions emanate from the House of Trade and Justice headed by

the morally bankrupt Lord Treasurer, Gabriel Tate de Lysle. Lamming invites comparison between the Lord Treasurer and Tate and Lyle, a multi-national sugar company, which has monopoly over the sugar industries based in the West Indian Islands such as Trinidad, Jamaica and British Honduras.”¹³ Tate and Lyle portrayed in the novel as Tate and Lysle, is a leading global provider of food and beverages ingredients. Its foray into the Caribbean commenced during the slave trade but it is still active in Islands such as Jamaica¹⁰. In spite of flag independence in the Caribbean, Tate and Lyle, a key multi-national company, continued to control both the politics and the economy of the Caribbean.

George Beckford argues that:

... today we find throughout the West Indies government administrations comprising black people who essentially exercise authority and control on behalf of their financial backers – the white planter, commercial and industrial classes that remain for the most part in that background of political activity.¹⁴

The links which Lamming seeks to establish between the Lord Treasurer and monopoly capitalism are meant to indicate that the House of Trade and Justice plays a role similar to that of a multinational company in the West Indies. Tate and Lyle has control over the Caribbean economy just as the Lord Treasurer controls the coffers of Lime Stone. The power which the Lord Treasurer wields enables him to manipulate ordinary citizens as well as the social institutions (such as the orphanage which he builds in his name ostensibly to assist the poor but, in reality, it is a clandestine tactic to use the nubile inmates to consolidate his hold over men of easy virtue as well as satisfy his unbridled sexual desire) of Lime Stone to his advantage.

Likewise, Lamming reveals that the control and manipulation of wealth by the House of Trade and Justice has resulted in abject poverty of the majority of people in Lime Stone who are portrayed as victims of an exploitative political system. This is why men of “of every age and sex”¹⁵ in Lime Stone can be seen:

plundering nature in the countryside. No sheep can trust the wool it wears when the kingdom’s army of vagabonds grows so large; men made barbarous and bitter their hunger, eating rats and feeding off the very roots of plants not yet a day

in the ground. Not a rose, dandelion, or the wildest undergrowth of weed can escape this savage massacre of men who battle with swine for their daily meal. From childhood to the grave there are men who have never known the ordinary smell of bread.¹⁶

Hunger, oppression and marginalization are all seen in *Natives of My Person* as symptoms of social inequality in the neo-colonial Caribbean. This picture is vividly conveyed through the material condition of the ship crew recruited by the Commandant for his voyage to San Cristobal. The men are:

A fairly typical reflection of the continent of Lime Stone. Unfortunately born, or with appetites out of all proportion to their status, they had found in the ship their last chance of rescue from the perils of the land . . . some had no memory for the laws which ruled their Region, and so regarded the sea as their safest home. Others had to flee from the ancient afflictions deriving from religious contention in the Kingdom. But hunger had recruited most of the men.¹⁷

The Commandant himself is opposed to the system that concentrates wealth in a few hands and marginalizes the poor. A revolutionary, one of his motivations for the voyage is to “break loose” from a morally decadent socio – political system, and create a new society. The voyage, as we shall see later, was aborted and could not be successfully completed. Thus both the Commandant and the crew attempt to escape from a corrupt system: the crew because they are victims of exploitation, the Commandant because he finds it morally repugnant.

However, Lamming effectively exposes the pretensions of his main character, the Commandant, who represents a post-colonial Caribbean leader, whose action contradicts his statements and who finds it easy to use the ordinary people as pawns. Accordingly, he reveals that the Commandant is guilty of deception. The reader knows, from the Commandant’s diary, that the current expedition is different from all the others – it is not for slaves – but the crew are not aware of this until very late. Thus there is a disparity between the set goals of the Commandant, who wants to create a new society, and those of the crew who joined the voyage essentially “driven by a vision of gold.”¹¹

The intention of the Commandant is to use the ordinary people as objects in his idealistic plans asking them to “sail for a purpose not to their knowing.”¹⁸ His comment to Steward later in the journey that “I would rather lose half of any crew in natural adversity than have a single example of doubt cast on my action”¹⁹ portrays him as a dictator whose caprices must predominate over the views of his followers. Thus although he is opposed to the alienation of the ordinary people in *Lime Stone* he sees his crew as mere social units having no right to self-expression but only a function – the fulfillment of his dream. His treatment of the crew as mere objects in his ambitious plan recalls his occupation as a slave trader who regarded his captives as objects.

The Commandant’s behavior bears a striking resemblance to actual instances of authoritarianism and tendency to disregard public opinion in contemporary Caribbean leadership. During the tenure of office of the former Trinidadian Prime Minister, Eric Williams, his decision to reinstate an erring Minister was met with public protest. He angrily told the nation that anyone who did not like his decision should “Get to Hell outta Here?” His statement became the title and subject of a calypso composition in which *The Mighty Sparrow*, satirizes the Prime Minister thus: “this land is mine. I am the boss/what I say goes . . . Who gave you the privilege to object? I pay your taxes, shut up and have respect.”²¹

In the same breath David Lowenthal, an American historian and geographer, argues that “many West Indian leaders consider the people incapable of independent judgement, lambs to be led, children to be chastised.”²² Viewing their positions as proof of progress, rulers in many territories tend to treat any opposition as ill-motivated if not seditious.²³

In 1968, in response to protest against the government of Dominican Republic, David Lowenthal noted that:

A seditious and undesirable Publications Act that threatened to throttle the local press, a government release urged all sections of the community to recognize that the present government is the lawfully elected government of Dominica . . . and not for ever try to purvey . . . to the world that the people of Dominica have been so foolish as to have elected a totally bad government.²⁴

When petitioned to repeal the Act, the Premier “replied that he had been elected and would rule as he saw fit as long as he held office.”²⁵ While the common people are subjected to the exploitative and authoritarian nature of the administration they are, furthermore, subjected to betrayal from a middle-class elite who have failed to commit themselves to the demands of their political office in neo-colonial Caribbean. The ruling class in the Caribbean bear close resemblance to Ngugi’s middle-class elite in *Petals of Blood* who are willing to enjoy the economic advantages associated with political power. But they cannot for one moment “commit themselves fully to what they felt authority over ‘Natives.’”²⁶ In this case, the natives are the Kenyan common people who are exploited and abandoned by their leaders.

Sexual Violence and Capitalist Exploitation

Both novelists draw attention to the nexus between political and sexual exploitation of the oppressed by the political elite. Ngugi clearly paints Kimeria’s sexual exploitation of Wanja as not only an illustration of the degree of exploitation to which women are subjected in neo-colonial Kenya. It is also portrayed as a symptom of an uncaring society whose leaders ride rough-shod on the ordinary people. For example, Wanja who started a Theng’eta business, was bought out by Kimeria and Chui and pushed into the world of prostitution. Sexual exploitation in Ngugi is therefore a reflection and a powerful symbol of political corruption in contemporary Kenya.

Likewise, by sensitizing us to the degree of sexual exploitation of women in his society, Lamming is reflecting in fiction the violent history of the Caribbean, which in Merle Hodge’s view has in the present:

not evaporated . . . it is there in the relations between adult and child between black and white, between man and woman. It has been internalized, it has seeped down into our personal lives.²⁷

Like Ngugi, Lamming is not merely reflecting a reality of his environment in fiction, but is also attempting to symbolize the negligence and betrayal of the West Indian elite towards the ordinary people through the sexual exploitation of women. But unlike

Ngugi whose novel treats sexual exploitation as just one among several aspects of political exploitation in neo-colonial Kenya, Lamming, whose allegorical message lies mainly in the relationship between men and women in *Natives of My Person*, weaves an intricate pattern between politics and sex. Lamming more forcefully elaborates on this relationship in which marital desertion and sexual exploitation symbolize abdication of political responsibility. The neglect, betrayal and abuse of women by men stands for political failure and disregard toward the needs of the Lime Stone community, where men are “made barbarous and bitter by their hunger, eating rats and feeding off the very roots of plants not yet a day in the ground.”²⁸

This pattern of sexual exploitation is portrayed in *Natives of my Person* through the relationship of the Commandant and his mistress. Although the Commandant’s mistress “was a colony of joys given over entirely to his care”²⁹ he does not reciprocate this love. Instead, he is married to his profession of `conquest` and `command.` “I have no plans outside my order,”³⁰ he tells her prior to his departure for yet another expedition not long after his return from one. When his lust got the better part of him, he took his mistress in one of the most sexually vivid scenes in Lamming’s fiction. As soon as it is over, his habitual silence—which she finds even more painful than his frequent departures,—predominates. The Commandant’s persistent silence excludes his mistress from his world most of the time he is awake, and when he is asleep, his dreams are about his past adventures into African jungles for slaves. Although his partner shares his bed, the deep emotional involvement of the Commandant is elsewhere, as he sleeps:

There was a treasure of naked flesh in his arms, heaving and sobbing like the wind. But he couldn’t feel her legs grow tight and quivering between his thighs; his desire was elsewhere. An imperial joy had shipped his pride over the ocean seas. Her breast shook and heaved over his own. She was kneading her hands down the root and testicles of his strength; his sperm, however was nurturing a different soil, his star was ascending a foreign sky.³¹

The Commandant’s treatment of slaves as objects guides his relationship with his mistress whom he sexually exploits and neglects afterwards. Here, his sexual practices are a reflection of his

occupation. In both, the story is that of violation and exploitation without commitment.

Organized Religion and the Status Quo

Both novelists address the relationship of organized religion to the successful maintenance of the capitalist system and its exploitation of ordinary people. Ngugi and Lamming explore this as a central theme through morally bankrupt characters who skillfully manipulate religion merely to prop the system of exploitation.

In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi establishes a link between Christianity and acquisitive materialism. Through the character of Ezekiel Waweru, a respected member of the Presbyterian Church, Ngugi shows how material advancement is closely tied to conversion to this new protestant faith, which first came to Kenya in 1895. Although Waweru masquerades as a holy man complete with his exalted Presbyterian position, his moral depravity is illustrated by his advances to sexually exploit Karega's mother, a member of his plantation workforce. His pretensions as a holy figure are thus exposed so that his link with the sinister Kamwene Cultural Organisation (KCO), can be more convincingly established.

In order to expose how organized religion is used to buttress the system of private ownership in neo-colonial Kenya, Ngugi alerts us to the "new alliance of the church and KCO, which is ostensibly "a cultural organization to bring unity and harmony . . . between the rich and the poor."³² But in reality, it is a coercive instrument designed to "defend the holdings of the rich."³³ It does so by organizing oathing ceremonies in which ordinary people are forced, sometimes violently, to swear loyalty to the Gikuyu tribe so as to protect their "hard-won property and accumulation of sweat [which is under threat from] another tribe."³⁴ Ezekiel Waweru, architect of the K.C.O. provides a religious justification for the oathing, arguing that it "is for peace and unity and it is in harmony with God's eternal design."³⁵

The use of oathing ceremonies, which the Kenyan elite preach are allowed by religion, historically goes back to the appeal to tribal sentiments by the Gikuyu bourgeoisie in 1969 "to keep the government in Kikuyu hands,"³⁶ following the assassination of a popular Luo politician, Tom Mboya. He was seen by the Gikuyu power brokers as a threat to the Gikuyu monopoly of

the presidential seat, then occupied by the aging Jomo Kenyatta. Following the assassination, engineered by the Gikuyu-dominated security service (General Service Unit), it might have occurred to the Gikuyu elite that popular support and sympathy might swing to the Luo direction. The Gikuyu therefore decided to take a step to avert this possible development.

According to Chris Leo, the ruling party “K.A.N.U in order to solidify its political support, resorted to a campaign of compulsory oath-taking across Kikuyu country”³⁷ Oath taking is an instrument of coercion which ordinary Kenyans were forced to take as an indication of their loyalty to the current regime. Both Chris Leo and Colin Leys on different occasions argued that:

In Nyandarua, people who expressed their reluctance to take the oath were harassed and threatened”³⁸ and a “a good deal of violence was used against reluctant oath-takers.”³⁹

The violent aspect of the ceremony is exemplified by Ngugi, in *Petals of Blood*, through the picture of a recalcitrant participant at the oathing ceremony who is hit “with a flat panga by a man who emerged from nowhere and as suddenly disappeared into nowhere.”⁴⁰ In *Petals of Blood*, Munira narrates that:

another peasant who refused to take the oath . . . who had been to Gatundu for “tea,” a euphemism for the ceremony, is beaten “in front of us. They stepped on his neck and pressed it with their boots against the floor, and only when he made animal noises did they stop.”⁴¹

In the view of M. Tamarkin, “ political stability [in neo-colonial Kenya] is enhanced by the emasculation of the masses as a political factor . . . Stability is [also] served as a policy which combines a selective use of coercion against disruptive elements,”⁴² such as those who are reluctant to take the oath to protect the wealth of Kenya’s power elite, who are as willing to use physical violence as they are ready to use religion to protect their economic interest.

Like Ngugi, Lamming too undermines organized religion in his novel, upholding it as an instrument in the service of neo-colonial capitalism. Lamming reveals the link of slave trade with the system through Priest, who is in alliance with the local bourgeoisie and the slave traders. This is an endorsement of Eric William’s assertion in *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) that “the church

(consisting of the Jesuits, Dominican and Franciscan denominations) did support the slave trade.”⁴³ If Ngugi reveals how the holy pretensions of his religious figures is phony because it is only skin-deep, Lamming reveals how the power of sin frustrates the spiritual efforts of Priest on board ‘Reconnaissance’, notably during the death of the Commandant and two officers, when he discovers that he had “lost the power to name that word which would bring them within the orbit of your mercy.”⁴⁴

Just as Ezekiel Waweru uses religion to justify coercion through KCO to defend the wealth of the privileged class in Kenya, Lamming’s Priest defends the slave trade and consequently his economic interest and that of his sponsors. We know of this through his reminiscence of “the glorious days when faith was a weapon in his hands and man waged a war with words to justify some divinity of night over these black cargoes.”⁴⁵ A Caribbean novelist concerned to probe the slave past of the West Indies so as to show how simplistic assumptions are made to link slavery with salvation, Lamming echoes here how certain European slave traders tried to psychologically cope with the burden of enslaving human beings. Lamming is conscious of and shows the false myth created by Europeans who had to psychologically degrade blacks as non-human before they can enslave and torture them. William’s speaks of an elder of the church in Newport who before the arrival of a slave ship from the coast would thank God that “another cargo of benighted beings had been brought to a land where they could have the benefit of a gospel dispensation.”⁴⁶

This corresponds with how Pierre in *Natives of My Person* sees the depiction of enslavement of their counterparts taken to the New World. Pierre deceives himself into thinking that slavery equals “great liberation”⁴⁷ so that the capture of human beings for sale can be seen as a religious duty. As one of the recruits of the Commandant on ‘Reconnaissance,’ Pierre believes that he is a religious figure out on a missionary enterprise to save the “heathens” from the iniquities of their own leaders for, when eventually transported to Lime Stone,

“[They] do show a great improvement in their nature, which being slow to change, may yet if it be the will of God approximate in time to some resemblance of a true Christian piety.”⁴⁸

Since we know that slavery is not liberation but naked exploitation and bondage, the character of Pierre reveals the false pretension of the champions of a religion whose aim is to `civilise` and `enlighten` even as they economically exploit, an enterprise which in Lamming's view has far-reaching psychological consequences on both the slavers and the enslaved. The Commandant is portrayed as a psychological wreck. The enslaved are subjected to physical torture which reflects on their mental state of fear and lack of self-esteem.

Competing Views on Social Change

Each novel reflects the respective authors' disenchantment with the socio-political systems they examine. Ngugi attacks a political system operated by a set of leaders whose callousness has made it impossible for them to minister to the needs of the ordinary people, whose cause he champions. Lamming, in his own novel, lambasts the West Indian middle-class elite who are insensitive to the yearnings of the masses. But the scars of misrule are manifest in both the leaders and the led. If Ngugi's ordinary people are portrayed as socio-economic victims of a decayed political system, their leaders are depicted as "capitalistically corrupted types,"⁴⁹ victims of spiritual aridity, which calls their humanity into question. Also if the masses in *Natives of My Person* are victims of political chicanery which results in economic dispossession, Lamming draws our attention to the psychological casualty sustained by their leaders.

However, both writers reveal the disenchantment of the masses with the kind of leadership they get and show their attempts to bring about change. Ngugi's socialist vision has led him to emphasize a change of the political order, which he sees as the primary solution to the neo-colonial predicament of Kenya, in contrast to Lamming who underplays socio-political change, (important as it is to him) , and emphasizes a psychological therapy to the West Indian predicament. A good number of the characters are emotionally devastated by the experiences they went through the middle-passage to the New World. Upon reaching their destination they are tortured and made to work on sugar plantations for lengthy periods.

Both novels have characters who feel a deep need for secrecy as well as an overpowering need to confess the contents of their traumatized psyches which need regeneration. If the enterprise of neo-colonialism has robbed both the oppressor and the oppressed of their psychological stability in post-independent Kenya, in the Caribbean, Lamming reveals that both the enslaved and slave trader in *Natives of My Person* are “exiled from [their] gods, exiled from [their] nature, exiled from [their] own name.”⁵⁰ In effect, they are alienated from their personalities and identities; they are deracinated. Lamming’s keen literary observations on the transformative effects of such brutality on the psyche and humanity of the oppressed throughout the narrative is a concept that is later analyzed by Fanon as an imposition of a false identity on the colonized.

Although, *Petals of Blood* shows that characters are psychological casualties of the neo-colonial enterprise, this dimension is shown only as secondary in a Marxist novel, which emphasizes the dismantling of a decadent political structure. While psychological therapy for Lamming occupies a primary position, internal change for Ngugi is only a means to an end – the dismantling of the decadent political structure of neo-colonial Kenya. Ngugi draws attention to this psychological wound through Munira. His puritanical upbringing is seen by Ngugi in *Petals of Blood* as being largely responsible for his inability to meet the challenges of the adult world in neo-colonial Kenya. As a Christian, Munira had his circumcision in hospital. Therefore, he doesn’t belong to his rika (age-group) together with whom he should have been initiated into traditional Gikuyu society. He is alienated from it and cut off from its rituals such as circumcision dances which he “only watched, feeling slightly left out, an outsider at the gate of somebody else’s house [because] he did not really know the words, and his body was so stiff.”⁵¹ Munira is also an outsider in the contemporary society of Ilmorog where he is habitually insecure and jittery. When the peasant and herdsmen discuss, Munira “did not take part in such talk, he felt an outsider to their involvement with both the land and what they called “things of blood.”⁵²

When later Wanja arrives in Ilmorog, Munira’s sense of insecurity renders him incapable of winning her love. One day in her company, as insecure as he has always been, it suddenly dawns on him that “he was still a prisoner of his own upbringing and

Siriana Missionary education,”⁵³ a system of education which in Eustace Palmer’s view is not only “irrelevant [but is also] obviously geared towards perpetuating white domination and instilling into the pupils a respect for British institutions and attitudes”⁵⁴. Since there are people like Munira who have been psychologically crippled by Christianity and a colonially-oriented education, Ngugi draws attention to the need for a change of consciousness if a political revolution is to take place in neo-colonial Kenya.

Accordingly, he reveals in *Petals of Blood*, the need for historical awareness. Like the traditional wisdom which is acceptable only on the basis of its applicability to modern needs, African history, which has been mainly Eurocentric, must be retold from the perspective of the ordinary people whose revolutionary roles in it have always been downplayed. Therefore, in *Petals of Blood* Ngugi offers a radical interpretation of the past so as to prepare the community for the future struggle. This is the purpose of chapter four in the novel, which dwells on local history revealing the history of resistance and justifiable violence during the Mau Mau war. The story encapsulates the ethos of resistance by the freedom fighters. It is adequately narrated by the village historian, Nyakinyua.

Also narrated was the `trek` of the members of the Ilmorog community delegation to the city to protest their deplorable conditions. They had harrowing experiences at the hands of both apostle of neo-colonial capitalism, Hawkins Kimeria and a religious figure, Reverend Kamau Jerrod-Brown. During the trek the delegation were afflicted by hunger and thirst. Jerrod Brown refuses to assist them with food and instead gives them a “spiritual diet,”⁵⁵ “the food of the spirit, the bread and fish of Jesus.”⁵⁶ Leon Trotsky termed religion as one of the “social illusions”⁵⁷ used by the ruling class for the purpose of “deceiving and blinding the oppressed.”⁵⁸

In his review of *Petals of Blood*, Homi Bhabha agrees that the trek of Ilmorog villagers is “a journey of knowledge. The illusions fostered by the church, capitalism and the state are shattered and a socialist consciousness is born,”⁵⁹ but notes later that “nothing in fact, could be less dialectical or materialist than such unproblematic portrayal of change and progress.”⁶⁰ Contrary to Bhabha’s assertion, Ngugi does not show that change has actually taken place. He only reveals the development of a revolutionary consciousness, a process which might prepare ground for the

political change he hopes for. After the worker's strike- which didn't usher change- Karega, the union leader, was thrown into jail. And as the last section of the novel (reading *La Luta Continua*) reveals, Ngugi believes that the struggle to alter the system – a complicated process – had just started.

Likewise, Lamming shows that the psychological wounds members of his society sustained during the colonial enterprise- which continued in the neo-colonial era require internal healing first. In *Natives of My Person*, Lamming understands that irrespective of whether they are the leaders or the led, members of his society have all been internally damaged by a long history of slavery and neo-colonial oppression. If some are victims of socio-economic domination, and others are psychological casualties, there are yet others who have been mentally indoctrinated not to question established authority. The extent of this indoctrination can be gauged through a member of the crew in *Natives of My Persons* who, in the wake of the insurgency championed by Baptiste, threatens to inform the Commandant “that you tried to make rebellion against his command. That you ask us to pollute the name of Lime Stone and the reputation of the Commandant, which everyone in the kingdom honours.”⁶¹

Consequently, Lamming shows that his characters need a re-orientation of consciousness. They all need an internal therapy, the re-integration of the `natives of their persons` - before they can start thinking of rebuilding society. Nevertheless, Lamming, allows his political ideologues in *Natives of My Person* to have their say. The Commandant had earlier, in consonance with his plans to create a new society of gentlemen and women in San Cristobal, ordered that `Reconnaissance` will not take any slaves, and had baffled the “men down below” by doing so:

They could detect no fragment of reason in such a decision. The Commandant had shown surprising generosity in his arrangement from distributing the fortunes that came within the ship's possession. And he made history with his offer of future ownership in the vessel `Reconnaissance` And suddenly-without warning-he had deprived them of the first certain gift of fortune that the enterprise had brought them. It was like a breach of contract, supervised by a man who had lost his memory. They wouldn't comprehend such lack of reason.⁶²

This action amounts to a grand deception of the crew by the Commandant, “a breach of contract” against the people who expected financial benefit from the enterprise. The last straw comes when on arrival at the island of Dolores, he unilaterally orders the expedition to come to a halt because he no longer wants to continue after Boatswain’s disclosure that he had a sexual union with the Commandant’s mistress. In the Commandant’s eyes, the Lady of the House is now an embodiment of the moral corruption from which he is trying to escape. Therefore, for a purely personal motive the Commandant orders the stoppage of the expedition thereby shattering the material aspirations of the crew who feel they have been betrayed. Following the announcement of the Commandant’s order, the men are shocked that their dreams of financial gains have been shattered, “knowledge of their return to Lime Stone would be like a law of doom deciding all their future.”⁶³

In *Ivan and Baptiste*, the crew representing the common people, Lamming shows that there are leaders who are prepared to back and articulate their protest against the Commandant. But the voyage to San Cristobal has been aborted by the Commandant, a powerful symbolism of the grand betrayal of the common people by the Caribbean leaders in the neo-colonial dispensation. Much earlier in the story, Lamming had prepared us for the abortion of the expedition through imagery. In chapter five, this message is conveyed through the picture of the sea-hawk helplessly driving into the sea “the solitary eye of the size of a law, streaked with a pale gold splinter pushing the sleek body feathers around and over.”⁶⁴ Baptiste who watches the bird as it falls, “saw in it some terrible omen of adventure.”¹² Later a sea fowl is shown diving into the sea, “The needle beak was plummeting dangerously down towards the deck . . . The bird flew blind as a bat and finally fell from the sails.”⁶⁵ Shortly afterwards, a huge flock of sea fowls forced the men to ran:

For cover as the first wave of wings crashed over the deck.
The bodies began to pile high, like the total death of an army.
Thy spilled from the deck, rolling in huge numbers over the
ribs of the ship, then sank with a great rush of water into the
deep bowels of the river.⁶⁶

Helen Tiffin is therefore accurate in her observation that *Natives of My Person* is replete with images of “imprisonment, mutilation,

corpses, diseases, violation and aborted resurrection”⁶⁷ which culminate in the aborted voyage of liberation and effort to create an utopia, a new society.

Conclusion

The paper attempted to explore common grounds between two novels, *Petals of Blood*, by Ngugi wa Thiong’o, and *Natives of My Person* by George Lamming. This essay establishes that both deeply political and psychological novelists extensively explored life in their different societies after independence and the onset of the neo-colonial era, which exposed the ordinary people to betrayal, brutal exploitation, economic, economic degradation and despoliation by the middle-class elite, legacies which have continued to negatively impact their lives and countries during the contemporary period. The writers’ drew from their shared experiences in colonized nations that witnessed similar effects of domination by the metropolitan powers, except that in the case of Lamming, the Caribbean went through the slave trade.

The essay also shows that the novelists tried not only to explore the socio-political and psychological effects of the colonial and neo-colonial dispensations but went on to offer diagnoses to the problems of society and of human beings. Through a thematic textual analysis of both texts, this essay demonstrates that both writers are disenchanted with life after independence, which instead of bringing succor to the common people further compounded their suffering revealing that as a political system, “capitalism is fatally tainted by relying on the single drive of greed.”⁶⁸ Capitalism, which fostered slavery and neo-colonialism in Africa and the Caribbean, propped up the elite class which inherited power from the metropolitan powers.

In *West Indian Societies*, David Lowenthal wrote about the Caribbean in a statement which would equally apply to African countries, after independence, which was:

really nothing more than a flag, an anthem, a diplomatic corps that gets rich and ever more pretentious, poverty, exploration of the land by the British and American interests, and governments so fatuous that they believe that true independence is the ability to bar occasional white reporter who says something the ruling class does not like.⁶⁹

This essay explains how the dreams of ordinary people were mortally shattered being unable to reap the fruits of independence `uhuru,` in *Petals of Blood*, or complete the voyage to `Utopia`, fictionalized as San Cristobal in *Natives of My Person*.

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Notes

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