

ISSN: 2278-9529



**GALAXY**

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

July 2015 Vol. 4. Issue IV

[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

Editor-In-Chief- Dr. Vishwanath Bite

About Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/about-us/>

Archive: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/contact-us/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/faq/>

## **The Conjunction of Politics and Aesthetics in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* by Ngugi wa Thiongo and Micere Githae Mugo**

**Sanjhee Gianchandani**

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi (1976) written by Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Micere Githae Mugo is an imaginative reconstruction of the trial of Kimathi Wa Wucuri the leader of the Mau Mau uprising. The play intends to initiate a re-thinking of the meaning of the struggle in the theatrical domain. Using social realism, Ngugi and Mugo clearly explicate the relationship between theater and ideology. Chidi Amuta offers a precise analysis of the thematic preoccupation of the play stating, “The Trial of Dedan Kimathi explodes its specific historical prediction to become a gigantic metaphor of history of the struggle among the African people in the past and present as well as envisioning a future of triumph for patriotic and progressive forces” this essay critically investigates the complex relationship between politics and aesthetics in this particular play.

According to Ngugi, “literature is a reflection on the aesthetic and imaginative planes, of a community’s wrestling with its total environment to produce the basic means of life... and in the process creating and re-creating itself in history.” This is also the basic premise of the play which sensitively registers the account of the Mau Mau, which had effectively sublimated in the documented history of the Jomo Kenyatta regime. It is noteworthy that the play opens with a song by a crowd of peasants and also the enactment of the Black people’s History. Through the song, they exhibit their solidarity, demand “uhuru” or complete freedom and glorify the power of resistance. This also penetrates into Ngugi’s project of “people’s theatre” which proposes that the power of drama lies in its capacity for immediate action. G. Odera Ota identifies this as the aim of theatre “to conscientize people as it is an oral, public medium of communication”. Ngugi, through his writing wished to “decolonize the stage”, thereby upturning the Eurocentric conventions of theatricality. For instance, he replaced the script-centered dialogue-oriented western drama with the symbolic and performative version of drama that relied heavily on music and dance techniques.

The play begins with intense and frenzied drum-beating to produce an atmosphere of outrage against the imperial power. Also the repetition of slogans such as “unchain the people!” helps resonate the message quickly whilst also leaving an indelible impression on the people’s minds. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins observe “post-colonial theatre’s capacity to intervene publicly in social organization and to critique political structures can be more extensive than the relatively isolated circumstances of written narrative and poetry.” Ngugi’s historiography also extends to his other works such as *Petals of Blood* which probes into the history of the heroic struggles of the people of Kenya from pre-colonial times to the present day within a comprehensive cultural perspective. The revisionist history propagated in the play is also concretized by the use of dance. In the second trial, a group of dancers are performing, this acts as a counter discourse to the cultural imperialism which sought to undermine indigenous histories of the colonized. Kimathi states “... the colonialist came/and the people danced/a different dance.” Greg Dening remarks “history is not so much fact, as a performance. History is not the past: it is a consciousness of the past used for present purposes” since traditionally orthodox history derives from the contingency of its closure in the written form, discounting all other narratives as fiction.

For a holistic revival, Ngugi had to chalk out the historical lineaments of his theatre, investigate the material forms of people's history and formulate a vision of radical nationalism. As Michel Foucault states "it is one thing to articulate and take up a stance on the political struggles in the midst of which one finds oneself situated but it is quite another to seek an epistemic standpoint outside those ongoing conflicts from which that stance can be validated." For this purpose, Ngugi also used the ideological weapon of language. As Wole Soyinka puts it, "when we borrow an alien language to sculpt or paint in, we must begin by co-opting the properties in our matrix of thought and expression." Ngugi conceived of himself as the representative of the worker or peasant consciousness and as a "part of a living history of struggles." He intended to use writing as a weapon of social change and thus transformed the physical struggle into an ideological war demanding the rehabilitation of culture. In the play, Ngugi intersperses English with Gikuyu language, thereby creating a *mélange* of experiences and also contending that his agenda is to serve native interests. For example, in the "song of Kimathi", he uses "Rwimbo Rwa Kimathi" as well as the directive that "we should tread the paths that he had trodden" also the play significantly ends with a people's song and dance in their native language. Thus for him, history is not static, as he states "development is brought about through social struggles... history is a result of this struggle." He aimed to "arrest the wheels of history" by rewriting it, especially in the framework of drama which is conducive to revolutionary expression.

Simon Gikandi examines the role of drama in the cultural de-colonization stating: "... Dramatic texts provide both a counter-discourse to the ritualized mechanisms of state control and perform alternative conditions of being; situations which call into question the symbolic economy of state power but also subvert the inflated rituals of governance and domination... Ngugi's plays attest to the fact that it is in performance rather than mere writing and reading that the compromised narratives of state power are contested and discredited." Thus *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is categorized as "hybrid theatre" a compound of realistic theatre, experimental theatre and African song and dance presentation. It is however noteworthy that the play does not invoke a pre-colonial Gikuyu to counterbalance the devastation of colonization but is marked by the desire to seek aesthetic forms to condense the reality of indigenous experience. Ngugi's most agonizing reflections on the political scenario find resolution in his aesthetic. Terry Eagleton states that the "aesthetic provides an unusually powerful challenge and alternative to these dominant ideological forms and is in this sense an eminently contradictory phenomenon." This point is illustrated by Ngugi in his essay "Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams" wherein he states how practitioners of theatre could break down the barrier between producers of art and its recipients and also describes how the state and art are continuously at war. It is precisely for these avant-garde aesthetics that his first novel, *Weep Not Child* was censored by the Kenyan government.

The play is an angry response to colonialist portrayals of the Mau Mau struggle such as Kenneth Watene's *Dedan Kimathi* which was considered to be a part of the intellectual industry. The heated debate about Kenyan history and the dogged determination to deconstruct the traditional discourse, led to the inception of the play. In the Preface, the writers state, "... indeed all African Literature and its writers is on trial...the challenge was to truly depict the masses (symbolized by Kimathi) in the only historically correct perspective : positively, heroically and as the true makers of history." The exercise is of reacting against Western episteme, envisioning the world of Mau Mau in terms of the worker's struggle and producing an alternative to the state-sanctioned memory of the defiance. *Kimathi* becomes a mouth-piece for the liberation movement whose agenda is voiced by the woman as "... [to] unite, drive out the enemy and control your

own riches, enjoy the fruit of your won sweat.” He is a progressive individual who stands for the unequivocal critique of colonialism and the subjugation of the African culture. The political underpinning on the part of the dramatist is explicit: to charge the masses to activism, recasting historical records and make the readers reflect on their place in the continuum of history. Ngugi states, “Kenyan intellectuals must be able to tell these stories, or histories, or history of heroic resistance to foreign domination by Kenyan people.”

For him there is nothing such as “arts for art’s sake”, since he insists on literature to be made relevant to the African situation in his work, writers and Politics. He opposes the stance of Franz Fanon of assuming a culture through speaking a language. For this reason he endows Kimathi with the most charged speeches. He calls it the “jungle of exploitation” and remarks “I despise your laws and your courts”; since he believes that there is no law and order without liberty. He can be compared to Nelson Mandela or Mahatma Gandhi for his enlightening speeches, who taken on to revolution when other social avenues have been exhausted. His words carry emotional and ideological weight concretized through the dramatic spectacle. He states, “For four hundred years, we have risen and fought against oppression, against humiliation, against enslavement of body, mind and soul.” David William Cohen avers that agitation over the Mau Mau continue at present “.... When it was, what it means, how was it individually and collectively experienced.”

Marxism, provided Ngugi a language to articulate his post-colonial position caught between a past haunting the present and the re-invention of an alternate past. He states, “My writing is really an attempt to understand myself and my situation in society and history.” His focus lied in channelizing creative energies for political commitment, thus in the imperative to provide a cultural grammar to his people, he was torn between the everyday experiences of the peasants and the art forms of the bourgeoisie that were used to represent them and the break between the functional authority of art and its inherent autonomy argues Gikandi. The hegemonic structures of society are also dramatized by Ngugi in the figures of Shaw Henderson who is the Judge for the Trial, the Settler, the Politician, the Priest and the Banker. They also introduce the sub-text of neo-imperialism in the economic, social and religious realms in the fabric of the play. Henderson states, “Nations live by strength and self-interest. You challenged our interests: we had to defend them.” This represents the dominant discourse of imperialism and the terminology used for its justification. It also highlights the transition in Ngugi’s oeuvre from liberal humanism to essential criticism. This post-colonial disenchantment is also verbalized in his work, *A Grain of Wheat*.

The Banker represents economic imperialism who states that the “..... ten-year armed resistance only ruined the chances of progress.” He is a colonial sympathizer who intends to build the idea of ‘neo-slavery’ through modern institutions like Banks, Insurance Companies and Industries. But Kimathi’s battle is not against the economic sector and he refuses to surrender. The Politician provides the legislative reasons of dividing the country into District and Provincial political parties and independence on the central province. However Kimathi refuses to negotiate this arguing that “Kenya is one indivisible whole. The cause we fight for is larger than provinces....It is a whole people’s cause.” On the other hand, the Priest forces him to surrender using religious terms from the Bible, rendering the struggle not as earthly but as a spiritual struggle between God and Satan. He also proffers the theological motive of “Africanizing the Church” and making it a part of the native culture. But Kimathi vehemently rejects him too, on

account of speaking to god in his dreams who predicted the creation of a new heaven on a New Earth.”

Having denied the “chequebook revolutionaries”, Kimathi’s standpoint bears out the observation of Ian Steadman who believes that “the real potential of dramatic art lies in its ability to teach people how to think.” beyond the narrow parameters of the status quo of political oppressiveness and political correctness. In the play, this faculty has been granted to the woman, the boy and the girl who represent the future of Kenyan civilization. The boy’s history details a history of exploitation and the woman tells him that the day he asks himself, “what can I do so that another shall not be made to die under such grisly circumstances?” is the day he will attain true manhood. Kimathi’s speeches are directed towards the youth of his nation so that his motives can be carried forward by them for the attainment of “uhuru”. He states that “we must know our history, especially the deeds of those, who have always resisted the rape of our beautiful Kenya”. As Helen Triffin famously remarks, “decolonization is a process, not arrival”, thus it is vital for Kimathi to implant its seeds in the mindscape of the future generation. He also recognizes the importance of education for the perpetuation of liberation and thus insists on awareness through weapons of propaganda “the radio, newspapers, schools and universities..” he also ‘laughs’ when he is ordered to be hanged as he know that he has ignited the minds of his people through his person and his rhetoric. Therefore the central symbol of drama is the enlightened collective will and the rectification of a shameful misrepresentation of Kenyan history. Dilip. K. Basu calls it as the “drama of realization” of a people’s strength and not merely the drama of a martyr attempting to arouse the consciousness of his people.

Thus we can see how Ngugi’s *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is a conjunction of the political and aesthetic spectrum. He uses he vocabulary of dramaturgy to redefine and rehistoricize the perspicacity of his people in a forward looking narrative structure that blurs the distinctions between past, present and future. Ann Laura Stoler defines this as “the meeting of practice and ideology and art and politics is not often represented in this sort of ideological shift, but Ngugi speaking from a position on the cultural frontier exemplifies this intellectual journey from art to politics and back again, seamlessly weaving into one another.” Thus by melting art and politics in his play, Ngugi was able to “examine class co-ordinates of Kenyan National history, define the role of language in a re-emerging national culture, situate the Mau Mau rebellion within the theoretical structure of Kenyan politics and to assist in the emergence of new forms of cultural activism”, to conclude in the words to G. Odera Outa

### **Works Cited:**

Amuta Chidi “Drama and Revolution in Africa” in *The theory of African Literature: Implications for Practical Criticism* Virginia: Zed Books, 1989

Ashcroft Bill, Griffiths Gareth and Triffin Helen *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* New York: Psychology Press, 1995

Cohen David Williams “Position Papers Fifth International Roundtable in Anthropology and History”, Paris, 1986

Dening Greg in “Dramatizing Post-coloniality: Nationalism and the Rewriting of History in Ngugi and Mugo’s The Trail of Dedan Kimathi” ed Oyeniyi Okunoye in *History of Africa*, 2001

Eagleton Terry “The Ideology of the Aesthetic” Oxford: Basic Blackwell, 1990

Gikandi Simon *Cambridge Studies in African and Caribbean Literature: Ngugi Wa Thiongo* Cambridge University Press, 2009

Gilbert Helen and Tompkins Joanne *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* London: Routledge, 1996

Gutting Gary *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* Cambridge University Press, 2005

Helsinki University Press, 1998

Outa George Odera “The Dramaturgy of Power and Politics in Post-colonial Kenya: A Comparative Re-reading of ‘Forms’ in Texts by Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Francis Imbuga” in *Nordic Journal of African Studies*

Soyinka Wole *Art, Dialogue and Outrage* New York: Pantheon Books, 1995

Stoler Ann Laura “Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate Colonial Rule” Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002

Thiongo Ngugi Wa “Writers and Politics” London: Heinemann, 1978; “Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams: Toward a Critical Theory of Arts and the State in Africa” London: Clarendon Press, 1998; *Secret Lives* London: Heinemann, 1975; “Moving the Center: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms”, 1993

Thiongo Wa Ngugi and Mugo Micere Githae Preface to *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* London: Heinemann, 1976