

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Petals of Blood (1977): A Narrative of Intertextuality

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to investigate Ngugi's novel *Petals of Blood* as a narrative under the influence western narrative style. Ngugi has admitted the influence of Joseph Conrad's impact on his writings. However, the narrative of the present novel brings Ngugi at the threshold of narrative transformation because it his last novel written in English carrying the burden of Conrad. Perusal of this novel exhibit the varied narrative experimentations which invokes the reader to mull over the covert narrative experiments. Selected narrative strategy 'intertextuality' is incorporated in this paper to offer the flavor of narrative. Ngugi discards time, place, space and aids to cross the confinements of one specific narrative strategy. In persuasion of variety of narrative techniques 'intertextuality' a striking feature is highlighted. The term intertextuality foregrounded by Julia Kristeva enriches the content by connecting it with other texts that turns the novel as a network of texts open for ceaseless interpretations.

Keywords: Narrative, Intertextuality, Space, Place, Time, Joseph Conrad

The following quotation asserts the stand of Ngugi on the narration of the previously written novel *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and the present select novel. Ngugi is of the opinion that *Petals of Blood* takes a step further in terms of technique and content. The confinement of space, place and time in the previous select novel has been discarded in this novel. In other words, the story attempts to cross the boundary of one particular space that is setting. The progress in narration enlarges the scope of story in which the author traces the history and present of twelve years.

The narrative form of *A Grain of Wheat* with its stories within stories in a series of flashbacks was a product of that reappraisal. The multiple narrative voices, apart from helping me in coping with flexible time and space, also helped me in moving-away from a single character navel. In *A Grain of Wheat* all the main characters are of almost equal importance, and the

people – the village people - in their motion in history, are the real hero of the novel. The present action of the novel takes place within four days before Independence Day in 1963. But within that there is constant movement in time and space from the present to the beginning of the century and to other intermediate period. *Petals of Blood* had taken a stage further the techniques of flashbacks, multiple narrative, voices, movement in time and space and parallel biographies and stories. The technique allowed me to- move freely in time and space through the centuries and through all the important landmarks in Kenya's history from the early times and back to the twelve days duration of the present of the novel. (Ngugi 77)

As stated above, the present select novel sets out to break the confinements of story-telling regarding technique and content. The four major characters in the novel and their activities in the village unveil and predict the fortune of the village and country as well. The four characters; Munira, Wanja, Karega and Abdulla are unknown to each other but indirectly connected to each other. They are suspected of the murder of Kimeria, Chui and Mzigo, businessmen of the town. The narrative is limited to twelve days of investigation in which four major characters are interrogated by the police inspector about the murder mystery happened in the village. An act of interrogation is a vantage of the story from where the different versions of the tale of the novel emerge. The spectrum of narrative highlights the multiple sheds of the story. It is a detective story, murder mystery, history of the village and the nation, arrival of capitalism, inception of neo-colonialism etc. As stated in the quotation above Ngugi looms large the context of novel thereby he dares to craft the story in a way that covertly criticizes the above-mentioned sheds of the spectrum. The opening of the novel reads the tone of the narrative through which Ngugi intends to address the time and space of the novel, reads:

1-They came for him that Sunday. He had just returned from a night's vigil on the mountain. He was resting on his bed, Bible open at the Book of Revelation, when two police constables, one tall, the other short, knocked at the door.

'Are you Munira? The short one asked, he had a star shaped scar above the left brow.

'Yes'

'You teach at the New Ilmorog Primary School?'

'And where do you think you are standing?'

'Ah, yes. We try to be very sure. Murder, after all, is not irio or ugali.'

'What are you talking about?'

'You are wanted at the New Ilmorog Police station.'

'Murder, of course-murder in Ilmorog.'

'You never leave the Book behind, Mr. Munira, 'said the short one, impressed, and a little fearful of the Book's power.

'We must always be ready to plant the seed in these last days before his second coming. All the signs-strife, killing, wars, blood-are prophesied here.'

‘How long have you been in Ilmorog?’ asked the tall one.....

‘Twelve years! He told them.

Twelve years! Both echoed.

Yes twelve in this wasteland.’ (3-4)

Along with time and space the module of the narrative is introduced in the very opening of the novel. The symbols like; Book of Revelation, Christ and wasteland bespeaks the upcoming time of the country. The technique of flashback records the history of twelve years through the characters’ memories or interrogation. The four characters reveal the twelve-year history of the village through their experiences in the village which are symbolized through the above-mentioned symbols which Munira utters in his reply to the constables. For instance, the village is called as ‘wasteland’ and the arrival of developmental projects; Christianity and education are interrogated and criticized through the narration of four characters’ story of their twelve years accommodation in the village. The tale of interrogation ends with the act of violence which is continued in the next select novels *Matigari* and *Devil on the Cross*. However, the opening of each section of the novel eludes the poems of other poet which provide the background to the description of the respective section.

Intertextuality

Roland Barthes argued that the intertextuality of the text challenges the stability of the meaning. The author cannot be the ultimate source of meaning. Once the text is written it is open to the reader. The role of the author pushed at the back and the reader has been given prominence. The role of the reader is to decipher the text and bring out the meaning. "The birth of the reader must be at the cost death of the author"(Barthes 1967). Further, the notion of reading later on developed and extended by Julia Kristeva. She studied Bakhtin and Barthes together and focused the text as referential network. The text refers to the other text to enhance the understanding of the reader. Bakhtin's concept of *dialogism* considers the text as a social and cultural discourse. Within the text, there are various voices which are brought together. Only the author's voice is not dominant. Rather, the author becomes a character like other characters in the novel. In short, the text is a social and cultural phenomenon. From the Saussurean point of view (linguistics) the word in text gets its meaning concerning other word or signifier. The chain of meaning in the text is referential. One word refers to other word and the chain continues. The intertextuality of the text is conducive to comprehend and widen the scope of the meaning. When a writer refers to the other text it means he or she is trying to flesh out the horizon of reading. By elaborating the horizon of reading the writer tries to include different social and cultural issues in the text.

Ngugi cites the following poem at the beginning of the novel and first section of the novel which metaphorically backs up and extends the narrative of the present novel. The poem is written by Derek Walcott which invigorates theme of alienation and disinterestedness. The poem reads as:

Fearful, original sinuosities! Each mangrove sapling

Serpent like, its roots obscene
 As a six-fingered hand,
 Conceals within its clutch the moss backed toad,
 Toadstools, the potent ginger-lily,
 Petals of blood,
 The speckled vulva of the tiger-orchid;
 Outlandish phalloi
 Haunting the travelers of its one road.

- Derek Walcott, from *The Swamp*

Ngugi has observed the development and discussions in the structural, post structural and postmodern studies that turned him to crafts his narratives as intertextual. His concern about the colonial exploitation has been outpoured through his historical, mythical, imaginary, literary references he has inserted in his narration. The poet in the above-cited poem describes an 'unknown place'. It is a 'space' rather than a place. The space is an unknown place while the place is identified locality. As the space is obscure it carries symbolical connotations. The first stanza of the poem begins with adjectives 'fearful' and 'original sinuosities'. The way of emerging nations seems like curving which makes the traveler fearful. The last line of the poem makes it clear that travelers are haunted. They are bewildered and not finding the way to lead. The next image is more visible. 'Sapling serpent like' of mangroves and its obscene roots are like six finger hands. The image of six fingers hand run into the next stanza clutching the 'moss backed toad', 'toadstools', and 'ginger-lily' and its 'petals of blood'. The same tone is continued in the next stanza also. Images used by the poet are touching. The pictorial quality of the poem is spectacular. Derek Walcott describes the 'space' rather than 'place'. The space is an empty place where anyone can design his or her ideas. The poet imaginatively crafts the space. The term 'alienation' is at the background of the novel. The writer feels 'distanced', 'estranged', 'isolated' and 'separated' from the present situation of the village. It leads him towards the sense of 'withdrawal and frustration' which has been reinforced through the thwarting experiences of the four major characters in the novel. The poem is cited here to denote the phenomenon 'estrangement' and 'alienation' from the 'self' and may be from the 'other'. So, the discussion about the sense of alienation crosses the boundary of narration and we have to check the actual background of the writer when he was writing the novel.

The second part of the novel begins with a last stanza of William Blake's famous poem 'London'. The stanza reads:

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
 How the youthful Harlot's curse

Blasts the new born infants' tear

And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

Pity would no more

If we did not make somebody Poor.

From the 'wasteland' and 'fearful original sinuosities' of Derek Walcott's to the 'harlot's curse' and 'marriage hearse', the depiction of the place and time takes the narrative one step ahead. The cause of disinterestedness of the author in the first part of the novel is answered in the second part of the novel. The village seems like curse and hearse despite of the arrival of developments in the village. Ngugi is upset on the betterment of the village. He is not happy because he can see the inherent texture of the development which is based on the feigned exploitation of the mass. On the other hand, the villagers are merely witnessing the projects of development but they are not able to relate themselves with the progress of the village. The inherent fabric of the transformations in the village is, therefore, exposed through the four major characters. These four characters function as mouthpiece of the author. For instance; Munira, a school teacher is aware of the direction of the changes in the village. Being a school teacher, he can read and understand carefully the situations and happenings in the village while Wanja intends to take benefit of these developments. Both of these characters are conscious but the former one takes steady stance while the later one takes in to it in order to gain benefits. Both of this contradictory character reveals the breach in the society. However, the author knows the reason of these bewilderments which is disclosed in the last couplet of the poem 'London'. The third person plural pronoun 'we' stands for capitalism. The pity of the village is an outcome of the act of this 'we'. The arrival of capitalism in the village has brought the pity and development, but only Munira knows it.

The third part of the novel again refers a poem written by William Blake and lines from the Song of Solomon. These lines connote an aspiration of love and rejuvenation of the life. The image of erotic love is supported by the love relationship between lover and beloved in Song of Solomon. The Song of Solomon celebrates an erotic love relationship between the lover and beloved which aspires the fertility of newness. The depiction of lover's courtship in the garden is compared with nature. For example; beloved's breast is compared with the cute animal like antelope which is enriched among the lily flowers. The images and symbols of rebirth, freshness and resurrection impels at the background of the third part of the novel that leads the narrative contrary to the previous two parts of the novel. In the last two parts of the novel the author is worried and agonized about the present and future of the village. The tone of these parts is pessimistic while the last part of the novel strives to be pessimistic but fails! The act of violence is at the bottom of the narration of the novel. The four characters are summoned to interrogate about the murder mystery. The image of the earth in Blake's poem is 'groan'd beneath'. The groaning of the hearth under the trembled heaven problematizes the discovery of the love. These two opposite sets of line connote the nature of the narrative. The lines are:

The morning blush'd fiery red:

Mary was found in Adulterous bed;
 Earth groan'd beneath, and Heaven above
 Trembled at discovery of love.

William Blake

Your two breasts are like two fawns,
 Twins of a gazelle,
 That feed among the lilies...

Song of Solomon

The voice of my beloved!
 Behold he comes,
 Leaping upon the mountains,
 Bouncing over the hills.

Song of Solomon

In a nutshell, an inter-referential exercise of Ngugi heightens the network of reading of the novel. The lines cited at the beginning of every part of the novel have provided the space to reader to comprehend the nature and the reach of the novel. Ngugi has stated in the earlier quotation that this novel is a step further in terms of technique and content.

The depiction in the present novel carries forward the story of *A Grain of Wheat*. The mature and extensive accommodation of history, fables, flashback technique and the art of story-telling of *Petals of Blood* is an outcome of the exercise made by the author in the previous novel. The post-independence scenario of the village called Ilmorog covers vast canvass transformations in the village. The story has been explored with the help of characters; Munira a school teacher, Wanja a woman (Whore), Abdulla a bar owner, Karega an assistant to Munira. Like the previous discussed novel Ngugi weaves the narration through the expressive outpouring of characters. Along with this he accommodates the reader into the story as a part of narration. However, the characters are sketched expressing ideological, political and economic concerns regarding the village New Ilmorog. Though the characters have their traumatic past but they try to trespass it. They are worried about the reality of the village rather than their personal life. The reality of the village is unexpected to the author as it is beyond his anticipation. Ngugi says:

But what happens when reality is stranger than fiction? How does a novelist capture and hold the interest of-the reader when the reality confronting the reader is stranger and more captivating than fiction? And yet this is what confronts a novelist in a neo-colony vis-a-vis the audience most adversely affected by that very reality of a neo-colony. (1993 78)

The difference between the two novels, the present one and the previous one, lies in the way the reality is projected. The narrative of *A Grain of Wheat* is detained by Mau-Mau revolution and immediate consequences of independence. Yet, the villagers in this novel are incognizant about the coming version of independence. Even though, the author has inserted few elements in this novel which predict the post-independence occurring in the village. So, *A Grain of Wheat* is speculative because it assumes the future of the village. On the other hand, *Petals of Blood* directly discusses the transformation of the village from Ilmorog to New Ilmorog. "The New Ilmorog of one or two flickering neon lights, of bars, lodgings, groceries, permanent sales and Theng'eta of robberies, strikes, lockouts, murders and attempted murders....."(228). The reality of the village disturbs Ngugi. So, the narration is based on the real aftermaths of freedom yet the assumptions about the succeeding movements in the village plant the narrative as speculative. As a result, the narration takes charge of forecasting.

Conclusion:

The narrative of forecasting is not linear. In the first two part of the novel, the village is depicted like any other villages. The four characters and their personal lives are given enough space. Their acquaintance with each other and living together as friends and companions initially does not create any sort of ups and down in the village. It seems the author is not in hurry to narrate an unexpected happening except the arrest of four characters at the very beginning of the novel on the charge of murder of three VIP businessmen in the village. The beginning is mysterious but the writer has deferred the suspension unto the last. Moreover, the narration obliges the reader to forget about the murder, interrogation and arrest of these four figures. The narration moves forward smoothly without any thrilled depiction about the murder mystery. While reading novel, the tale of murder of three businessmen and the arrest of four characters goes at the back of the mind of readers. The incident of murder does not channelize the story. The narration switches over to the character portrayals and story-telling of either their past or the present happenings in the village. The story sways back and forth through biographies of four characters and present happenings in the village. The strength of the novel lies in the intermingling of these subjective as well as objective elements. The story goes ahead forgetting the murder of three businessmen till the last part of the novel. It seems, the author has added the murder mystery to explore the ideologies of the characters behind the act of killing.

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