

## A Postcolonial Rewriting of History: *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*

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### **Abstract:**

*Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo's drama, The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, deals with an imaginary trial of Dedan Kimathi, a leader of the Mau Mau rebellion which broke out in Kenya in the mid-twentieth century. The British rulers claim that the fact that even a rebel like Kimathi gets a fair trial is a testimony to their practice of the western notion of 'Fair Justice'. But, in the course of the play, the authors prove that the decision of the court is pre-determined and the trial only reveals the hypocrisy underlying the high moral position of the colonisers. The objective of the authors is not a mere re-creation of the trial scene but an analysis of the processes through which the whites have been continuing with their exploitation of the innocent blacks. Moreover, there is an attempt to nullify the colonisers' version of Kenyan history which portrays the British as saviours and the blacks as savages. The play stands out as a bold attempt to approach the history of the colonised from a fresh viewpoint that challenges the interpretation of the white propagandists.*

**Key Words:** colonialism, exploitation, Mau Mau, independence, neocolonialism,

The setting up of colonies in non-European nations involved not only a conquest of power but also a deliberate re-formulation of the history of the colonised nations by the predominantly white colonisers. If it could be proved through written documentation that the colonised were engulfed in total darkness before the whites came to rescue them the colonial rule could be justified easily. Edward Said, in his epoch-making book, *Orientalism* (1978), comments, "Every empire, however, tells itself and the world that it is unlike all other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate." What followed the physical conquest of a nation was a systematic destruction of the culture of the natives and an imposing of white, occidental culture upon them. In fact, the white propaganda even denied the existence of any culture of the indigenous people. Pramod K. Nayar comments on this aspect of colonialism, "Colonialism cannot be seen merely as a political or economic 'condition': it was a powerful cultural and epistemological conquest of the native populations. The Europeans acquired knowledge over native cultures through translations, commentaries, and academic study before either destroying it or modifying native systems of thinking." After these nations have acquired or been granted their independence, there has been an opposite tendency to do away with history

created by the colonisers and an attempt to trace and rewrite their own history and culture. However, an important aspect of Postcolonial times is the advent of neocolonialism through which the earlier rulers continue influencing the policy decisions of the former colonies. To quote Nayar, again, “Neocolonialism is the continuing economic exploitation of Asian and African nation-states by European and American powers. What is significant is that the former colonial masters are still in economic control over so-called ‘free’ former colonies. The colonies may not be ‘colonies’ in the strict sense of the term, but their dependence upon and exploitation by former masters continues.” So, it is only natural that any postcolonial text coming out of these former colonies will include an identification of and resistance to the processes of neocolonial exploitation. In this essay an attempt has been made to analyse Ngugi Wa Thiong’o and Micere Githae Mugo’s drama, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976), as a representative postcolonial text. This play actually deals with Kenyan history just before Kenya’s attainment of freedom from British colonial rule; what is, however, important is that there is a deliberate attempt on the part of the authors to put forward a history that is different from that created by the British propagandists.

Towards the end of the 1940s, in Kenya, a non-violent protest movement against the British imperialist government broke out. The reasons were obvious- widespread exploitation and torture of the black natives. The white settlers had earlier, in the beginning of the century, settled in the Kenyan Highlands, thus turning many natives into landless labourers. The blacks were not allowed to grow ‘cash crops’ and a humiliating ‘colour bar’ was practised all over the country. When, under the banner of the K.A.U., the blacks started protesting the government came down heavily upon the protesters, arresting leaders like Jomo Kenyatta and declaring a state of emergency. As an obvious reaction, the protests soon turned violent. A guerilla movement, termed the Mau Mau, became a major cause of concern for the Serikali, the local government. One of this movement’s leaders was Dedan Kimathi. As was British policy in other countries, the rebel Kimathi was branded as a ‘terrorist’ by the propagandists. Thiong’o and Mugo attempt to look at Kimathi from a different perspective- to them, Kimathi is a hero who lays down his life trying to uphold the cultural heritage of the Kenyan tribes. This is a conscious rewriting of the history which has come down to the natives through texts produced by their colonial masters.

There was a conscious attempt on the part of the British imperialists to portray Kimathi as a terrorist rather than a revolutionary fighting for a nationalist cause. In contrast, this play depicts Kimathi as a champion of liberty who has taken up arms to free his beloved country from the rule of the oppressors. During a heated argument with the white Judge presiding over his case, Kimathi boldly states his stance, “There is no order and law without liberty/Chain my legs,/Chain my hands,/Chain my soul,/And you cry, law and justice?/And the law of the people bids me:/Unchain my hands/Unchain my legs/Unchain my soul!” (Second Movement) This speech serves a double purpose- on one hand it nullifies Kimathi’s depiction by British propagandists as an ignorant native without any higher ideology; on the other hand, it also makes evident the hypocrisy that informs the practice of the ‘revered’ notion of ‘Justice’ preached by

the white Occidentals. Kimathi mocks at this fake idea of justice, “Two laws. Two justices. One law and one justice protects the man of property, the man of wealth, the foreign exploiter. Another law, another justice, silences the poor, the hungry, our people.” (Second Movement) Again, another utterance of Kimathi can be quoted in this context: “With the British, we have been losers all the way-yes-but this is a new era. This is a new war. We have bled for you. We have fought your wars for you, against the Germans, Japanese, Italians. This time we shall bleed for our soil, for our freedom, until you let go.” (Second Movement) This cannot be the utterance of a native terrorist concerned with a local cause only. The knowledge that the natives were forced to fight for the British in external wars even hints at the rebel’s awareness of strategies underlying colonial rule. While in custody, like a true hero, Kimathi refuses to be swayed by temptations or even buckle down under physical torture. The extent of torture can be gauged from the description of the authors,

*Kimathi, blood-stained, shirt torn, emerges from the torture chamber kicked, pushed from behind. He can hardly walk. He falls on his hands and feet. Henderson, Waitina and Gatotia and the two soldiers follow, holding some of the instruments of torture...Kimathi is obviously broken in body...But not in spirit.* (Second Movement)

A sham of a trial is held the main objective of which is to showcase to the outer world that the British rulers accept the right of even a heinous criminal to put forward his case. But the interesting fact that Shaw Henderson, a Scot, plays the double role of both the Judge and the torturer brings out the hypocritical attitude of the colonial masters. For Dedan Kimathi, the more tragic, rather shameful, aspect is the participation of the black natives in the torture and exploitation of their own countrymen. He warns these traitors thus, “You...traitors to your people.../sellers of your own people...For what?/Your own stomachs. A seat at the master’s/table. A bank account. A partnership in/business. Partnership? To rob your people.../murder your people...for...medals and/leftovers! Our people will never forget you, fat traitors.” (Second Movement) Through a flashback we even get to know that Wambararia, his own brother, has betrayed the Mau Mau and has joined the British side. However, towards the end of the play is revealed Kimathi's realisation that a few traitors cannot stop their country from gaining freedom, “But now I know that/for every traitor/there are a thousand patriots”. (Third Movement) Just before Judge Henderson announces the death sentence, Kimathi exhorts his countrymen to continue the revolution in his absence, “In the court of Imperialism!/There has never and will never be/Justice for the people/Under Imperialism./Justice is created/through a revolutionary struggle/Against all the forces of imperialism./Our struggle must therefore continue.” (Third Movement) Whatever Kimathi does or says in the play only serves to stress on his patriotic fervour and his heroic qualities. At the end of the play, the audience or the reader is convinced that Dedan Kimathi is nothing short of being a national leader who deserves a special mention in the history of Kenya. Thus, from this context, this drama is a clear re-writing of the history composed by the British historians which looked upon Kimathi as an insignificant, ignorant rebel

and which branded the Mau Mau rebels as terrorists who were just trying to take the country backward to its pre-colonial 'dark' stage.

The authors try to refute the British side of the story that Kenya was a desolate land before they arrived and whatever development has taken place there has been due to the British sympathetic policies inspired by enlightened values. They instead accuse the colonisers of destroying the unique cultures of the indigenous tribes residing in Kenya. Again and again, particularly through the speeches of Kimathi, it is revealed in the text that the British have come to this African state not to help the blacks raise their standard of living but to plunder, to gather as much wealth as possible. For instance, Shaw Henderson, whose father came from Scotland and settled in Kenya, himself admits to Kimathi that his family would never have flourished as much in Scotland where fortune was like the famous 'Lochness Monster' - many dreamt of it but very few found it. Right at the beginning of the First Movement of the play are enacted the four phases of the black men's history: in the first phase, a deal between a 'rich-looking' black chief and a 'hungry-looking' white slave trader takes place and several strong black men and women are given away in return of which the black chief gets "a long, posh piece of cloth" and "a heap of trinkets"; in the next phase is enacted the plight of exhausted slaves who are tortured and forced to perform heavy tasks; the next phase depicts many more blacks toiling on a plantation owned by a white man "under the supervision of a cruel, ruthless fellow black overseer"; the final phase shows a procession of "defiant blacks, chanting anti-imperialist slogans". The description of these four phases clearly brings out the belief of Thiong'o and Mugo that the actual history of the Kenyan blacks, even all blacks, substantially differs from the history portrayed by the whites: it is one of exploitation by the white 'messiahs' themselves. In the Second Movement, a group of dancers is shown as performing a sequence of dances. At first, they are seen dancing the traditional dances of the different Kenyan tribes. Kimathi is proud of this cultural heritage of Kenya, and comments that these were the dances that the blacks used to perform during various occasions: at initiation, during funerals, during marriage, and so on. But he is also quick to point out that after the whites came to their country "the people danced a different dance". On the stage also is shown the arrival of a colonial governor among the dancers, and the dancers start dancing feverishly. Their dance now symbolises fear and humiliation. This is a symbolic enactment of black history earlier done explicitly in the text. The authors, moreover, announce a sort of symbolic protest by using songs in the text written in the native language. This can be interpreted as another attempt on the part of the authors to stress on the fact that they were not without their culture or language when the whites invaded their country. The structure of the play itself deviates from the accepted norm of western drama. Instead of the normal division of the plot into Acts and Scenes, the play has been divided into three Movements, a novel introduction.

A white banker's conversation with Kimathi reveals the fact that even after gaining independence the previously colonised countries' policies will continue to be governed by their earlier rulers, though indirectly this time. The banker tells Kimathi that Kenya can be granted

freedom only after the rebels put down their guns and peace is established in the country. Only in the condition of peace being established and stability being restored the white-governed banks will invest in free Kenya. They are willing to invest in hotels, seaside resorts, casinos, oil refineries and pipelines. However, Kimathi is quick to realise that the development of Kenya can never be the objective of these banks. What they are eyeing for is an exploitation of the country's resources for their own benefit. The exploitation will, thus, continue, albeit implicitly, even after the country has gained freedom. When Kimathi asks the banker what will happen to the common oppressed people of his country the nonchalant reply is that there has always been "servants and masters...sellers of labour and buyers of labour". Neocolonialism, like its predecessor colonialism, is indifferent to the overall good of the masses and is driven by the interests of the erstwhile colonisers. The play, as a true postcolonial text, clearly reveals the authors' concern about this post-independence exploitation of the former colonies by their previous masters. The text, as a whole, also does not remain merely the story of the trial of a valiant son of Kenya. Various issues related to colonialism and its drawbacks are reflected upon and discussed from a postcolonial perspective.

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