

Theatre as Resistance: The Politics of Touch in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *I Will Marry When I Want*

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Abstract

Theatre in postcolonial contexts functions as a medium for discourse, activism, and resistance, thereby providing a platform for voices that have been historically marginalized. This paper investigates the role of theatre as an instrument of resistance, particularly through the motif of touch in the context of postcolonial Kenya, with reference to Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii's play *I Will Marry When I Want*. The analysis elucidates the multifaceted nature of touch, which manifests on physical, emotional, ideological, and political levels, subsequently engendering an embodied experience that confronts systems of oppression. It endeavors to scrutinize the paradoxical nature of touch as presented in the play, wherein the constraining touch of capitalist exploitation, religious manipulation, and state censorship is juxtaposed with the liberating touch of revolutionary theatre. Initially banned for 45 years due to its incisive critique of economic exploitation, political corruption, and religious hypocrisy, this play has recently re-emerged on stage (2022), thereby reaffirming the capacity of theatre to resonate with the nation's conscience.

Keywords: Postcolonial Theatre, Resistance, Touch as power, Neocolonialism, Capitalist Exploitation, Revolutionary Performance.

Theatre's intrinsic nature entails engagement with the sense of touch, necessitating the physical presence of participants while flourishing the interactive dynamics. The conceptualization of touch within the theatre transcends the purely physical to encompass emotional, ideological and political dimensions. In the African context, theatre is not just an artistic endeavor but a social and political tool, a means to touch the consciousness of the people and inspire resistance. Thiong'o's play *I Will Marry When I Want* serves as an exemplar of this tactile theatre, not solely in its thematic content but also in its performative execution. First presented in 1977 at the Kamiriithu Community Center, the play's interactive dimensions, including the integration of songs, movement, and direct audience involvement, rendered it a tangible threat to the ruling authorities. The subsequent governmental response encompassing the prohibition of the play and the imprisonment of its playwright, underscores the capacity of the theatre to touch fundamental political sensibilities.

In the context of postcolonial societies, the form of resistance is frequently manifested through physical expressions, ranging from protest to more militant strategies. Ngugi's theatrical work encapsulates this style of performance, where actors engage not merely in recitations but rather in the utilization of gesture, movement, and corporality to articulate themes of oppression and resilience. Particularly with the play *I Will Marry When I Want*, the significance of physical touch is illustrated through its representation of power dynamics. For

instance, the forced appropriation of land depicting characters disposed of their properties symbolizes the colonial and neocolonial touch characterized by violence. Furthermore, the church's encroachment upon the lives of marginalized communities exemplifies the manner in which spiritual do functions as a constraining touch influencing belief and behaviors. The elements of songs, dance, and direct engagement with the engagement with the audience collectively transform the theatrical experience into a sensory phenomenon, fostering a scenario where the audience is actively touched by the narrative-both physically and emotionally

The Oppressive Touch: Colonialism, Neocolonialism and Class Divide

Historically, touch has been used to reinforce social hierarchies as exemplified by the caste systems in India which designates certain groups as untouchable. This classification not only restricts access to public spaces but also limits economic opportunities for the affected population. A similar phenomenon is observable in postcolonial Kenya, where the capitalist elite established insidious barriers that inhibit the poor from engaging in the nation's wealth. The theme of oppressive touch manifests prominently through the historical lens of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and the resultant class divide. In postcolonial Kenya, the repressive touch of colonialism is replaced by the equally suffocating grasp of neocolonial elites who perpetuate through economic and social mechanisms that keep the working class in constant subjugation. The persistence of economic inequities reveals that independence did not equate to liberation for the working class. The elite, many of whom were former collaborators with colonial powers, sustained their dominion over land, resources, and labor. This class disparity remains central to the narrative of the play highlighting the lives of peasants characters Kiguunda and Wangeci, whose experiences are intricately shaped by the oppressive touch wielded by the affluent and influential. Ngugi highlights how the wealthy and influential dominate every facets of life. He portrays "a society where decent optimism is replaced by brutal self-interest, without love, idealism, honesty- a society with no more base" (Killam 83). Also further emphasizing that "Classes and class struggle were the very essence of Kenyan history." (Killam 138).

In contemporary society, remnants of colonial era inequalities manifest distinctly through the dynamics of touch, which serves as an indicator of both privilege and deprivation. The capacity to physically possess, modify, or access resources significantly influences social hierarchies thereby rendering touch as mechanism of power and exclusion. This thematic dichotomy is epitomized in the contrasting experiences of the working class, represented by the characters Kiguunda and Gicaamba, against the affluent class, epitomized by Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru and his associates. For individuals belonging to the working class, touch is synonymous with scarcity and the struggle for survival. Within the confines of Kiguunda's home, various elements such as the rag on the floor, the mended coats, and the arid plot of land serve as indicators of his limited ability to maintain possession. His hands, accustomed to the rigors of labor, engage more struggle than with the comforts and securities that would ordinarily denote a stable life. In contrast, the affluent class navigates a reality wherein touch embodies power and authority. Characters such as Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru and his contemporaries don luxurious clothing that signifies wealth, and social standing. As the play progresses, the complexities of widening class stratification and its link to neocolonial exploitation becomes increasingly evident. Nguunda, another worker, remarks, "The Difference between then and now is this! Now we have independence. (Thiong'o 19). Beyond this, however, little has changed-the masses remain impoverished, unemployed, and

financially struggling. They recall the war era, reminiscing about the brave men and women who once believed the land would be restored to them.

Through its examination of post-independence Kenya, the play portrays a societal framework in which touch is perceived as a privilege rather than an inherent right accessible to all. The powerful delineate what may be held, altered, or aspired to, leaving the working class grappling with unfulfilled promises. The play not only critiques economic inequalities but also interrogates the fundamental structures that determine who has access to progress and who remains ensnared in a perpetual cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement.

Religion and the Politics of Touch

The essence of religion lies in its capacity to provide a sensory and tactile engagement for its adherents. This intrinsic connection, characterized by emotional resonance, possesses significant potential as an instrument of influence. Consequently, it can be strategically employed to elicit fervent devotion, govern behavioral patterns, and mold belief system. In this regard Ngugi openly explores how religious factionalism affects individual and personal relationship, tracing its root back to colonialism. Through his writings, he brings these conflicts to life, showing their deep impact on people's emotions and connections. In the play, the church is portrayed as an entity that collaborates with the ruling elite, employing religious conversion as a mechanism for exerting control over the populace. The characters Kioi and his wife play an instrumental role in persuading Kiguunda and Wangeci to participate in a Christian wedding for which they have mortgaged everything. This event, rather than serving as a moment of spiritual elevation, transforms into a scenario characterized by humiliation and economic subjugation. Such dynamics illustrate the alignment of religious institutions with economic power structures, wherein moral justification are provided for acts of exploitation.

In post-independence Kenya, Christianity is portrayed as deceitful and as a vehicle of neocolonialism, attempting to dismantle the Kenyan native set up, ingrained in its communal standard and ethics, which the people had initially embraced in the conduct of their lives. In this sense, touch represents both incursion and manipulation the forceful imposition of foreign ideologies and economic institutions on the indigenous way of life. The elite class's tendency towards exploitation, often masked by a façade of Christian values, is compellingly critiqued through the perspective of Gicaamba "All the missionaries of all the churches Held the Bible in the left hand And the gun in the right hand....forcing us to make a living from ploys on road sides Like beggars in our own land" (Thiong'o 56-57). He draws attention to the portrayal of Christianity as a foreign imposition during the colonial period, indicating a deep seated apprehension among Kenyan peasants regarding land dispossession perpetrated by the Kenyan Christian elite. This land eviction is articulated in two distinct phases. Initially, the narrative surrounding Christian salvation requires a dual approach of persuasion and intimidation directed at the peasants, who are categorized as pagans in need of repentance from their ancestral practices. Subsequently, the requirement for conversion is accompanied by an expectation of complete submission, wherein the individual is compelled to relinquish land ownership to the caprice of church leaders, who subsequently assumes total control of the property. In this sense, Christianity's touch is one of dispossession and betrayal, rather than comfort. It reflects the broader neocolonial forces at work, in which the church and elite extend their influence over people's lives not to uplift them, but to strengthen their hold on resources and power. It reveals how this touch is used for exploitation rather than faith.

Theatre as a Reclaiming Touch

Theatre, as conceived by Ngugi, represents a touch that awakens its audience. The recent staging of the play during Kenya's 59th anniversary of internal self-rule exemplifies as a poignant reminders of the nation's tumultuous history and its ongoing pursuit for freedom and justice. In this context, theatre functions as a medium that facilitates the connection between the past and the present. The performance of history on stage transcends mere aesthetic engagement; it embodies a tangible interface that compels audiences to confront the enduring effects of colonial violence and the disillusionment of the postcolonial era.

The potency of theatre stems from its ability to touch into a society's emotional and psychological core, breaking silences and rousing suppressed voices. The play's appeal reflects a desire for tales that do more than simply narrate history, allowing viewers to experience its impact. Recognizing the transformative power of theatre, Ngugi utilized it as a means of political, cultural, and social development, transforming it into an educational tool. He created "collective theatre, which not only reflected popular struggles but made an important contribution (Hutchison 15) to the concerns and ambitions of the people through art. Ngugi asserts "Theatre..an expression of the drama in the lives of the people-that is, as an expression of their struggles, their conflicts, their hopes, and fears...can make people view themselves positively, and even be the awakening of the slumbering powers within them" (Barber 131). As such the efficacy of theatre resides in its capacity to resonate with the emotional and psychological dimensions of society, effectively disturbing silence and revitalizing suppressed narratives. The popularity of the play indicates a deep seated longing for narratives that transcend mere historical recounting, enabling spectators to experience the profound impact of these events. The absence of the play from Kenyan theatrical landscape is paradoxically a testament to its significance; if it posed no threat, it would not have been banned, and if it were inconsequential, its return to stage would not elicit such celebration.

Ultimately the play *I Will Marry When I Want* embodies a theatre of disruption. It challenges the sanitized narratives of postcolonial advancement, exposing the profound fractures that persist beneath the façade of national independence. The critique articulated within the play is unequivocal: genuine liberation cannot be attained through political rhetoric alone; it necessitates an active reclamation of economic, social and artistic arenas. In addition the play's employment of oral traditions, songs is significant as it taps into the cultural memory of resistance, thereby linking contemporary struggles with historical acts of defiance.

Conclusion

In reclaiming the touch of silenced voices, the play *I Will Marry When I Want* transcends mere critique; it compels a reckoning with the present. Theatre in this regard, operates not as an escape from reality but as a confrontation with it. It guarantees that history is not solely recorded but re-experienced, that voices are not only remembered but reinstated. If oppression seeks to impose silence, theatre ensures that such silence is never enduring. If power attempt to control touch, theatre's touch remain an instrument of resistance. Consequently the theatre of Ngugi is not merely a narrative; it embodies a profound engagement that resonates, ignites and embodies a robust force that defies suppression.

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