

## THE SPIRIT OF DECOLONISING NATIONALISTS MINDS IN THE PLAY 'TRIAL OF DEDAN KIMATHI'

**Dr. Baburam Swami**  
Assistant Professor  
Head Department (English)  
MBB College, Agartala  
West Tripura

### Abstract

The penetrating struggle of the Kenyan farmers during the British colonial and neocolonial period had been the subject of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's writings. His innovative play 'The Trial of Dedan Kimathi' (1976) deals with freedom struggle, patriotism, internal colonisation, influence of Christianity and the effects of decolonisation which are central to Kenyan and Indian society. Though the play was written successively, the period of dramatic events connects the history of Kenya through anti-colonial risings and post-independent neo-imperialist practice, which rationalises the text selection. This research paper pursues to reconnoitre and highlights Thiong'o's purpose of calling the attention of the mass to the nation's significant moments of historical struggles and revolts. The researcher aims to scrutinise the crucial historical events of the 1950s. The role of Gikuyu peasants, their means of confrontation against injustices and the impacts of neocolonial power politics. Through close textual analysis of the plays, the researcher will highlight the necessity to revive the historical consciousness of the mass. Further, to authenticate the revolutionary motifs of confrontation, the text will also be analysed, evaluated and discussed in details.

**Keywords:** Peasants, Consciousness, neocolonial power politics, revolutionary ideas.

### Introduction

The academic and social activist of Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, was born on 5th January, 1938, in the Kamiriithu village, near Nairobi, in Kenya, East Africa. He was baptised as James Thiong'o Ngugi. Later Ngugi realised that James is the name he acquired when he was baptised, which is used in the Bible and still felt as part of colonialism. In reaction to this, Ngugi changed his name as he not only refuses Christianity but also the Western identity. "As religion (Christianity) and education (English) were instruments used by the colonial powers to oppress and demoralise his country, he shed both" (Smit, 2007, p. 39). He felt secure in the ancestral name symbolising his ethnic origin and cultural identity. Ngugi comes from an extended polygamous Gikuyu family. He was the son of a peasant who grew up like most of the Kikuyu. Ngugi's father has lost his land and become a worker in the lands owned by others. As a result, since his childhood, Ngugi was brought up in an unsafe environment that developed extremely disturbing psychological nuances which later became the moving spirit behind his works. While

Ngugi was pursuing education, his brother Wallace Mwangi wa Thiong'o has joined Mau Mau He was constantly persuaded by his brother to continue his education for he wants Ngugi to politically revolt against the government through educational means in the future. In the following year, Ngugi's mother had to undertake three months of torture at Kamirithu home-guard post. It was during this period, his family house and village were completely razed and had to be re-built for being part of the anti-Mau Mau campaign. The involvement of Ngugi's family in the revolt and freedom struggle moments, his achievements and successes in the school compelled the headmaster to warn him to avoid political agitation. His parents got separated when he was ten but he continued his creative writings. He studied initially in Kamaandura Church of Scotland Mission School and a Gikuyu Independent school. However, in 1954, the government took over control of the school and made English the medium of instruction. Ngugi had the privilege to study in the elite Alliance High School of Kikuyu, as he was talented and well versed in English and became the only student from the whole of Limuru. This school became a training ground for colonial administrators because the masses were taught the Bible and English which was given priority in this school. If the students were found speaking in native tongue "Gikuyu," they were humiliated and punished by the British.

**Socio-economic and political milieu:** -The history of African literature during the pre-colonial period possessed only the oral tradition rather than the written. Oral literature includes stories, songs, dances, and music. In the twentieth century, written works emerged in English and Africans'. A number of universities in Nigeria started courses in drama and theatre under the department of theatre arts which aimed at reviving African personalities from colonial domination. Moreover, due to political challenges, there was a shift in the playwrights' pattern of writing literature from earlier metaphysical and the supernatural perception to secular political concern which denigrate the oral history of African literature. The twentieth-century writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Mugo had university-based education with courses in English literature which exposed them to various Western theories and philosophies of art, science, and metaphysics. They were also exposed to Drama and theatrical aspects and even exposed to the Western playwrights, poets, novelists, and essayists of Latin, English, and French such as Geoffery Chaucer, Alexander Pope, William Shakespeare, and John Donne. The concept of the French revolution also enabled them to apply their knowledge and experience as an influential weapon for socio-political change in Africa.

African dramatic literature includes three stages. In the first stage, it consisted of general evolution from oral to written language. In the second stage, the African literature includes discourses on newly formed African independent states and most of the works appeared revolutionary. In the third phase, African literature extended more towards the global literary arena and mostly appeared in the English language. Drama appears to be most revolutionary in form when a talented playwright expresses a revolutionary theme in dramatic techniques. The social economic and political situation demanded the rise and intervention of revolutionary drama in Africa. According to Basu and Kumar:

*“Revolutionary drama is divided into two forms such as service and art. The painting, music, and dance are considered as service of the part form can be revolutionary in two ways by articulating and by revolutionary themes and techniques to realise its effects (2002, p. 103)”*

The revolutionary spirit of writing drama to modern playwright occurred when the masses were deprived of education and their participation in literary activities. There were very

few African privileged to attend formal education. These challenges were unable to be addressed by the mass. Knowing the facts, the contemporary playwrights started to write plays which emerged to be as "protest literature." The drama became adaptable to revolutionary expression, instrumental to the revolutionary situation with intrinsic traits in both drama and revolution. Keeping this essential literary tradition with popular audience in mind, the post-colonial playwrights such as Ngugi and Micere Mugo from East Africa, Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande J. C. De Graft, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Efua T. Sutherland from West Africa, and Athol Fugard from South Africa had greater ideological clarity about revolutionary drama. "All of these writers use drama as an instrument of social motivation and 'cultural education' to create a 'national culture' using drama as a suitable means of informal education of Africans" (Fashina, 2009, p. 7-8). Thus, Ngugi as one of the prominent figures of the post-colonial playwrights wrote revolutionary play, 'The Trial of Dedan Kimathi' (1976) to stir the revolutionary consciousness in the Africans.

*"One of the most humiliating experiences was being caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment... or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY." (Robson, 1987, p. 4-5)*

Ngugi says they introduced their language in the colonies with an aim to make the natives' perception of his own culture as inferior and colonisers' culture superior. The imposition of the Western language to Africans rather prompts Ngugi to write his non-fictional work (essay) with emphasis on decolonizing the mind. Ngugi taught briefly in a primary school in 1959 and later, he was admitted into Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda and graduated with BA honours in 1963. By 1960-1961, his work was getting published, the first major play, 'The Black Hermit' (1962) in English to celebrate Uganda's independence and was staged at the Ugandan National Theatre in Kampala "In this powerful play, he dramatised the betrayal of the legitimate apprehensions of the peasantry at the hands of a bourgeois class. The notices of play brought public attention to him for the first time" (Deurden, 1972, p. 28). Ngugi's writing as columnist helped him to enhance his intellectual capacity in the literary field. He was proved as an academic outstanding in the university. During his college days. Ngugi was impressed by the work of English writers such as D.H Lawrence and Joseph Conrad, and developed a special liking for D.H Lawrence, who had "a way of entering into the spirit of thing, and Conrad who impressed the young writer by his mastery of the morality of action" and the representation of human suffering" (Gikandi, 2009, p. 249). Ngugi was inspired by African literary figures such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka. He developed a growing consciousness through the literature he studied as it made an immense impression on him. Ngugi was stimulated by Chinua Achebe's, 'Things Fall Apart' (1958). Thus, his literary consciousness inspired from Western canon did not alienate him from African consciousness.

Ngugi thought it is insecure to have western control over its resources and cultures. He wrote "Decolonizing the Mind (1986) an attempted to free the natives' minds from the coloniser's control in terms of culture and language. Ngugi urged that the African writer should use their indigenous language instead of the English language. This symbolises the resistance and passes this consciousness of language and the culture to the new generations. This importance of language is echoed by Achebe who was against using the native language. His revolutionary play, 'The Trial of Dedan Kimathi' is written in Gikuyu to proclaim the injustices of neo-colonialism. In one of the interviews, Ngugi says, "writing in Gikuyu is his gesture to distribute

power and subvert neo-colonialism" (Lindford 5 & 6 Sander, 2006, p. 473). Although Ngugi was questioned by many critics regarding the choice to write in his mother tongue, he considers his writing in Gikuyu as a part of the anti-imperialist struggle of Kenyan and African people. Ngugi decided to write in Gikuyu to demonstrate the centrality of language in his thoughts and attempts to convince peasants and the working class. Ngugi in another interview said that:

“When I write in Gikuyu at least some peasants and workers will read my own work. When I write in English not even a single one of them reads the work.... It is more important to encourage people to be proud of their mother tongue.” (Deurden, 1972, p. 40)

He sees the writing by African writers in their mother tongue as a part of the whole process of reclaiming the cultural, economic and political basis of their identity. Thus, to develop African literature through language, culture and tradition Ngugi expressed his genuine interest and emphasis in his native language.

Ngugi was awarded the British Council Scholarship at Leeds University, England in October 1964. It is in this University; Ngugi was quickly recognized for his calibre in writing but unfortunately could not complete his postgraduate research upon disagreeing to listen to his supervisor for necessary changes in a research dissertation. He returned to Kenya and became a Special Lecturer in English. Later after two years, "Ngugi had resigned from the English Department to protest against violations of academic freedom in the university" (Thiong'o & Mugo, 2002, p. 32). Ngugi actively participated in the move to change syllabus in the Department of English to focus more on Kenyan literature rather than Western centred syllabus. This emerged as a principal goal in his life of anti-colonial cultural politics. Eventually, as proposed by Ngugi, the Department of English was re-named as the Department of African Language and Literature in 1970.

He re-joined the University of Nairobi in 1973, as an Associate Professor and soon became the first African to Head a newly-created Department of Literature. He, then instantly set about changing the focus of literary studies that best suited the African context. During this period, Ngugi started to voice his anti-imperialist thoughts and tensions against the ruling government because even after independence the poverty-stricken peasantry did not get back their land. In order to voice their concerns, appropriation and expropriation was one of the major colonial concerns continuing through colonial and post-colonial era of Kenya. Thus, the historical play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* coauthored with Micere Githae Mugo in 1974.

Thiong'o's historically sensitive and revolutionary play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* set in Kenya during the pre-independence era of the 1950s consists of 85 pages with opening, three movements and fourteen scenes which are different from the usual divisions of plays into Acts and Scenes that are numbered and referred to as Act I Scene 2 and so on. According to G.D. Killam, it refers to them as "characteristics of the non-naturalistic theatre" (1980, p. 39). In this play, all three movements are viewed as a single movement. Ngugi depicts and reconstructs Kimathi as a legendary hero; a peasant and the Mau Mau uprising, the struggles of peasants against the colonial forces of domination and exploitation. It is an imaginative reconstruction of the history of Mau Mau freedom struggles for Kenyan independence. Kimathi is a type or a prototype of the ideal leader that the Kenyan masses need, to bring out the best from them. Kimathi, who in the eyes of the imperial British government was a terrorist and a threat to the imperial power, is given a new identity by Thiong'o and Mugo- one that rehabilitates his image and depicts him as an advocate of freedom, liberty, and voice of the Kenyan people.

Although the play is not a factual representation of Kimathi, the author creatively reconstructed it into three movements of trial into reality. The play is tightly woven into dramatic narrative and has thematically connected episodes. The scene in the courtroom is interspersed with episodes from Kenyan history of two hundred years, scene of Kenyan people attempting to help Kimathi escape, scenes of Kimathi in prison, scenes of Kimathi's interactions with guerrillas, and scenes of his torture. The playwright includes Gikuyu songs and dances, and even mime which represents:

Kenya's history in three stages: before the colonialist came, different people of Kenya living their lives in normal rhythm of peaceful pleasure; after the colonialist came, living in humiliation and fear, and then the militant resistance, the cultural preparation for it by the Kenyan youth, the open-air theatre for revolt in support of the nationalist cause which brings it to date, to Kimathi's life. (Thiong'o & Mugo, 2002, p. 26)

Ngugi has projected two sets of characters in the play; the lawyer, Banker, Home guards, European masters represent the elite group and Kimathi, Women, the boy, and the girl represent the suppressed and downtrodden mass. Ngugi used history to revise it and to deliberately spread falsehood and attempts to help his people aware of its legacy of oppression. The political and economic settings portray that socially the society is divided into upper and lower class. The few bourgeois enjoy and ripen all the social privileges such as best shelter, clothing, transport, and education, while the lower class survives in poverty. The actions taken by the home-guard against fellow Africans were perceived by Ngugi wa Thiong'o as treacherous. Thus, this motivates Ngugi to write revolutionary plays to revive the consciousness of the masses, revolt and resist against colonialism and its practices.

Therefore, Ngugi as the post-independent neocolonial Kenyan writer with firsthand experience on colonial pressure, the humiliation, and injustices received from colonisers wrote many plays, novels and critical essays. His successive historical revolutionary plays motivated the researcher to explore in-depth into his motifs of reviving historical consciousness among the Kenyan mass. The Trial of Dedan Kimathi is the history of the last phase of the British colonial rule in Kenya about the Land and Freedom Army (Mau Mau) of 1952-1962.

The postcolonial writers focused their key aspects of actions of anti-colonial freedom fighters and activists while the freedom fighters' combat was in "the battlefield", the writers' battlefield was "the mind" to challenge Eurocentric assumptions that 'whites are superior and the blacks are inferior. Thus, postcolonial literature is born out of the struggle of colonised peoples' demand for justice, equality and freedom. In Kenya, the literature includes a large body of Oral and written folklore collected by British anthropologists during the 18th century which exists till today in several languages. Kenya's history has been distorted by the colonial writers and by Kenya's professional or group of historians, trained and schooled in Western critical modes of thought. Contemporary cultural critics assume that history is not given, but constructed. Historians are considered as narrators who impose their point of view on their account and dictate how people, events, and issues are viewed in a narrative. As such historical events are reconstructed and are fashioned in the postcolonial world. In this context, the reconstruction of history has become necessary and was undertaken by indigenous historians and leading nationalists to retrieve and rehabilitate marginalised perspectives in the representation of historical experiences.

He narrates the struggle for independence, the exploitation that is practised by the colonialists and the way exploitation continues even after Kenya attained independence. Through the exploitation of such themes as exploitation, colonisation, and education, he tries to bring out what mattered to the people of Kenya. Achebe's re-examination of traditional African society and culture in his novel, 'Things Fall Apart' (1958).

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi is a representative East African play that provides a paradigm for the African historical plays committed to interrogating received assumptions about Africans with regard to their historical heritage. Ngugi's common theatre served as a powerful mode of expression for the oppressed people to communicate their feelings and experiences. Ngugi also used his plays to discuss a new association of structure, content, and occasion of performance using recurrent African oral and traditional motifs. "Ngugi combined elements of realism, orature, and history into the theatre. The form itself performed a cultural purpose. Ngugi called for a decolonising of the mind so that people would reclaim their heritage.

There is a controversy that the regional dramas that existed during the postcolonial period were dramatic performances presented by the colonial officers and their family members. Indigenous initiative in dramatic production was arrested by a cultural policy which represented European drama as the ideal. Ngugi, on the other hand, worked to inculcate the sense of consciousness in Kenyan mass. Melodrama is a piece with exaggerated characters and exciting events intended to appeal to the emotions. Melodramatic formula is effective as a dramatic strategy because it is capable of raising the entire mind of the audience to the very height of revolutionary action. He proclaims that melodrama enables to create high spirits and can psychologically persuade the audience to take revolutionary action against the forces of oppression and exploitation.

Thus, it is understood that the playwrights engage and adopt drama to advance a revolutionary spirit in their writings. It is not surprising that Ngugi exhibits drama as an unpretentious postcolonial temper. The overwhelming presence of the colonial establishment in Africa during the colonial era prepared the ground for this. This is to examine Ngugi's purpose in recalling the attention of the masses to the nation's significant moments of historical struggles and revolts. To this effect, Ngugi has used the indigenous term (Gikuyu) in his plays to revive the consciousness and decolonize the mind of the Kenyan masses to unite and resist against the way and means of colonial injustices. The choice of language and the way a language is used play a crucial role in people's definition of themselves about their natural environment, society, and to the entire universe. It is through language, one's thoughts, feelings & imaginations are expressed. Even oral form of literature uses oral language. He states that, when the British came to Africa, they made English the language of communication, got hold over the educational institutions, banned the indigenous languages. They declared and implemented, English as being mandatory in the schools and higher education. Nevertheless, Ngugi argues that language is not something that contaminates the culture, but simply something that frames an identity. If the language is English then it is not possible to create a true identity of the one living in Africa. Ngugi's use of Gikuyu is not a threat to national unity, but rather an authentic expression of African identity which reflects its cultural and linguistic diversity. Ngugi's strategy of writing in Gikuyu can be seen as one of several counter-discursive employed to achieve the goal of decolonization of the mind. According to him, the use of the appropriate linguistic medium for African literature has become an essential focus in debates about language in the post-colonial period. This is due to the fact that newly independent nations struggled with the issues of national identity, national culture, and national consciousness. He said that Ngugi is one of many

African writers who have criticised the use of colonial languages as the main vehicle for African literature and he preferred writing fictional literatures in his native language.

The revolutionary movements which emerged in different parts of the world encouraged many critics and thinkers to articulate their underlying political logic. The critics who paid attention to these movements are Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, Gayatri Spivak, Leopold Sedar Senghor and Homi K. Bhabha whose works helped to flesh out the relationships of this theory to imperialism, colonialism, armed and unarmed resistance, colonial discourse, and nationalism. Abrupt anti-colonial resistance gave birth to political freedom by gaining independence from the colonised countries under the British regime.

### **Aims and objectives:**

This research paper aims to critically analyse the revolutionary play of Thiong'o for its revival of historical consciousness among the Kenyan mass by exploring the dramatic reconstruction of their anti-colonial struggles and its continuity in the post independent phase of the nation. The research also intends to validate Thiong'o's ideas of unity and resistance at the grassroots level. To achieve this aim, the researcher will examine the history of Kenyan freedom struggle with reference to the revolutionary movement of the 1950s and its Gikuyu peasant leaders, analyse Thiong'o's dramatic motif to reconstruct the anti-colonial moments in the post-colonial play.

### **Research Methodology:**

The descriptive methodology has been adopted to prepare this research paper. The qualitative research uses deductive reasoning to interpret the primary text and explore a specific and text-based analysis. Thiong'o's revolutionary play, 'The Trial of Dedan Kimathi' is closely read to grasp the socio-historical reality of Kenyans. This will enable the researcher to accomplish the required aim and objectives. The proposed research will also attempt to scrutinise the crucial historical events such as Mau Mau rebellion of the 1950s, the role of Gikuyu peasant leaders, their resistance against neo colonial power politics. To strengthen and support this study, excerpts of Thiong'o's critical essay Decolonizing the mind, interviews from digital sources, and scholarly articles will be explored.

**Problems:** In countries like Kenya and India was to decolonise the minds of their citizens by facing all challenges.

**Solution:** By imbibing and inculcating social, moral, cultural, ethical, nationalism, patriotisms, ethnicity and identity-oriented values among people of the country one can achieve the goal to solve the problems of individual, institution, district, state and even the nation. In this research paper the initiative taken by the author is same to achieve the optimum goal.

**Conclusion:** Literature is the mirror of society and reflects life in its entirety- political, economic, religious, and social. To portray the writer's reflection of the literary artist, socio-political recording and restoration are important which can call for the revolutionary impulse. Literature and revolution can be said to have a symbiotic relationship as one is capable of inspiring the other. Some past revolutions have been known to inspire literary works just as some literary works have sparked off some revolutions. Ngugi's decision to write fiction and drama in his native Gikuyu describes his vision for an authentic African literature and argues that the role of the writers from "marginalised cultures and languages have the duty and responsibility of

making themselves not only visible in their languages but also to challenge and shake up that view of languages in theory and practice. Thus, it vividly represents the vitality of using native language to promote the indigenous literary culture which he as a playwright and activist struggled to achieve. The resistance in the literary genre was referred to as struggles. Ngugi also considered literature as an important phenomenon to reveal the struggle for cultural domination as well as liberation, and beliefs about the past. Resistance is an important tool to gain independence. The objective of this resistance is the transformation of the political and economic reality.

The researcher has found that various thematic aspects of research such as dramatic art of power, language and ideologies, resistance and consciousness, historical reconstruction, Mau Mau rebellion, revolt and repression, ethnicity, identity and culture have been established. The anti-colonial resistance by the land and freedom army in Kenya emerged during the 1950s in which large pieces of fertile land belonging to the Kikuyu community were expropriated and forced to pay taxes and work for them. The struggles and resistance of the Kenyan masses did not end even after their independence. The leaders of the newly formed nation did not bring any significant change in Kenya rather followed the footsteps of imperialist tactics adopted by past foreign colonisers to oppress their own people. Moreover, the researcher will analyse and explore Ngugi's idea of resistance and revolutionary spirit which aligns Frantz Fanon's concept of revolutionary violence to gain political and psychological liberation of a nation.

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