UNIT 4 NGUGI WA THIONG’O—LIFE, LITERATURE AND IDEOLOGY

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

One of the objectives of this Unit is to provide details of the life of Ngugi wa Thiong’o including his educational background. However, the main focus of the unit is on his writings—the time and the place where various books were conceived, written and published. The Unit also highlights various events in his life that have had a direct impact on his writing career. Finally, Ngugi’s views about language, literature, education, religion and their impact on society—both during colonial rule and in the post-colonial situation are discussed in detail at the end of this unit since these have a bearing on his creative writing. In fact, these views constitute his ideological standpoint—his very world view.

4.1 BIRTH AND EARLY EDUCATION

Born in 1938, in the family of a landless squatter on the land of a well-to-do farmer in the Kamiithu village in Limuru district of Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiong’o went to the mission-run Kamaandura school in Limuru and later to a school of the Independent Schools Movement. Later, he joined the Alliance High School—Kenya’s first full-fledged school for Africans—run by an alliance of the Protestant denominations in Kenya. It is here that Ngugi’s religious awareness about Christianity—a fact which is more than obvious from his writings, particularly in A Grain of Wheat where copious references were made to the Bible—was formed.

Ngugi was fourteen when a state of Emergency was declared in Kenya in 1952—on October 20, 1952, to be precise. His passion for education seems to have weighed heavily with him in his decision to continue with it and as a result he missed out on actual participation in the movement. This fact seems to have given him a kind of guilt complex and is perhaps one of the major reasons for making the freedom struggle, particularly the “Mau Mau” phase, repeatedly the theme of most of his books.
4.2 HIGHER EDUCATION

4.2.1 Makerere University College Uganda

After finishing his school education at Alliance High School, Ngugi joined B.A.(Hons) in English at the Makerere University College, at Kampala, Uganda, which was the only university college in the whole of East Africa. It is here that his creative talents developed. Before graduating in 1963, Ngugi had written his first full length play—The Black Hermit—which was performed on the occasion of the Independence of Uganda in 1962. He had also written his first two novels—The River Between and Weep Not, Child. During this period he also became the student editor of Pen Point and wrote a number of short stories as well. During the same period he also contributed a regular column—As I see it—to the Daily Nation, a prominent newspaper published from Nairobi.

It was a conventional course in English literature that Ngugi pursued at Makerere and some critics are of the opinion that the study of D.H. Lawrence and Joseph Conrad left an early influence on his writings.

4.2.2 Leeds University, United Kingdom

Leeds was Ngugi’s next halt for education. Here he soon became a part of Arnold Kettle’s group that provided him with new perspectives on various issues—political, social, cultural and academic. In his own words—“Leeds systematised my thinking.” At Leeds, he started working on Caribbean literature as his dissertation for the M.A. degree—a work that he never submitted and that was later to be published as a part of his first book of essays—Homecoming—in 1972. Leeds also provided him with an opportunity to participate in a number of conferences in Syria, the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. But what is really significant about his staying in Leeds is that it is here that he published his next novel—A Grain of Wheat—in 1967.

4.3 TEACHING CAREER

4.3.1 Nairobi University

Returning home the same year, Ngugi became a lecturer at the English department of Nairobi University. Soon he suggested a number of radical changes in the syllabus, recommending, among others, incorporation of literatures written in African languages as a part of the Programme. These were, however, not accepted. Ngugi resigned from his position in 1969, due to the stiff attitude of the university authorities against students who had been forced to go on a strike for raising various demands.

Back to Makerere where he had accepted a year’s fellowship, Ngugi wa Thiong’o helped the institution reorganize its English department as the African Literature Department with special focus on world literatures rather than on English literature alone. This was very much in keeping with his recommendations at the English department in Nairobi University.

4.3.2 Teaching in the U.S.A.

Ngugi went to the U.S.A. for a year to teach African literature at North Western University, Illinois, where he got an opportunity to observe, as he put it in The Trial...
of Dedan Kimathi. “Neo-imperialism at close quarters.” He was back at the English department in Nairobi University in 1971 where he was able to bring about the desired changes and the department was organized as Department of Literature. The period between 1972 and 1977 proved very fruitful in Ngugi’s literary career. He published a number of books, beginning with Homecoming and Other Essays (1972), Secret Lives (1975) a collection of stories, The Trial of Dedan Kimathi (1976), which he wrote together with his colleague Micere Mugo. Petals of Blood (1977), his next novel, was also published during this period.

4.4 DETENTION AND EXILE

Ngugi got into trouble with government authorities in Kenya over portions of his Petals of Blood in which he dealt for the first time in his writings, situations in post-independence Kenya. Also the text of a play—Ngaahika Ndeenda (I will Marry when I want)—about peasants in independent Kenya which he wrote together with Ngugi wa Miiri in his mother tongue Gikuyu and which was performed at the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre, Limuru in 1977, was objected to by the authorities who eventually banned its performances on November 16, 1977. On 31st December, 1977, Ngugi was taken to a police station near his residence for “routine questioning” but was detained without trial for almost a year—until December 12, 1978 to be precise. He was released as unexplicably as he had been detained. However, he was not restored to his position as Professor and Head of the Department of Literature, Nairobi University despite repeated requests.

During his detention, Ngugi wrote down on pieces of toilet paper—literally—the details of his routine as a detainee as also the strategies through which he was to keep his sanity alive in the face of humiliations and torture—both physical and mental. This was later published as Detained: A Writer’s Prison Diary in 1981. During this period, he also wrote the manuscript of his next novel—Cbeitsi Mutharaba Ini (Devil on the Cross)—in Gikuyu. Ngugi, let us recall, had made his first attempt at writing in his mother tongue Gikuyu as a conscious decision when he collaborated with Ngugi wa Miiri, in writing a play which was published as Ngaahika Ndeenda (I will Marry when I want) in 1980.

His request for the restoration of his position as Professor at the Nairobi University having been turned down, Ngugi wa Thion’o went away to English, settling down as a fulltime writer. It is from here that a number of his books—Writers in Politics, Barrel of a Pen, Decolonizing the Mind, Mother sing to Me, Moving the Centre and his latest novel Matigari—were published. He has also made common cause with all those who were fighting for the restoration of democracy in Kenya. Ngugi wa Thion’o has since shifted to the U.S.A. where he teaches in a college in New York.

4.5 IDEOLOGY

Ngugi wa Thion’o believes that literature and politics are inextricably linked with each other because both are about “living men, actual men and women and children, breathing, eating, crying, laughing, creating, dying, flowering men in history of which they are the product and the maker.”

Therefore, he chose as the subject of his writings that single event in the history of Kenya that has affected its people the most, namely, the most crucial phase of their struggle for freedom—the so called Mau Mau. Ngugi believes—together with many other African writers—that the primary aim of literature is not merely to entertain but also to persuade. Ngugi, therefore, does not confine himself to mere chronicling of events.
factual details of historical events, but he also takes a certain partisan attitude towards them. In his own words:

What is important... is the attitude and the world view embodied in his work and with which he is persuaded us to identify vis-à-vis the historical drama his community is undergoing. (Writers in Politics, p. 75)

It is because of this historic responsibility, which he believes, lies on the shoulders of a writer that Ngugi makes known his partisanship, while portraying the basic opposition between the forces of imperialism and capitalism on one hand and the forces of national liberation and socialism on the other, between a small class of “haves” backed by transnational monopoly capital and the “have-nots” representing the masses of Kenyan people. Ngugi, therefore, has refused to confine his portrayal of the national struggle—as has been the case with many other African writers portraying similar struggles in their respective countries—as a struggle of the black against the white. Once again, unlike his other fellow African counterparts, Ngugi is very forthright—particularly in his later novels and plays—in advocating socialism not only as a viable but the most desirable political system of governance for solving the problems of newly liberated African nations reeling under the covert attack of neo-colonialism.

He is also critical of those writers who seek a solution to all their present, post-colonial ills by suggesting to go back to the past, by making an appeal for adopting the African past completely and uncritically. He suggests—quite candidly—a class approach to these problems and their solutions:

...for as long as there are classes—classes defined by where or how the various people stand in relation to the means of production—a truly human contact in love, joy, laughter, creative fulfilment in labour will never be possible. We can talk meaningfully of class love, class joy, class marriage, class family and class culture.---- (Writers in Politics, p. 79)

Ngugi is therefore quite wary of those writers who talk of humanism, universalism, justice and peace in abstract terms. In this respect he reserves his worst criticism for a section of the bourgeoisie that may be characterized as comprador bourgeoisie—the class of people that collaborated with the ruling colonial forces during the phase of colonialism, particularly during the crucial phase of the national freedom struggle and which wormed itself into positions of political power during the post-independence phase in order to subserve the interests of neo-colonialism and imperialism via the transnationals. The colonial administration-appointed home guards and village chiefs were the most prominent representatives of this class of comprador bourgeoisie.

While tracing the origin of the colonial process in capturing the economic resources of Kenya, particularly the illegal misappropriation of its fertile land—white high lands, as these were called—Ngugi does not overlook another important fact namely what he calls a “cultural bomb.” Culture for Ngugi includes the sum total of all the intellectual, moral, ideological forces that give the social relations of production—what we call society—a unique character, a distinctive mark, a certain identity in a particular historical phase. Culture, therefore, includes for Ngugi wa Thiong’o, the education system, the legal system, the religious system, language, literature, forms of dances and songs. Of these the two most significant instruments of cultural imperialism were the church and western system of education, both of which subserved the interests of colonialism. It is because of this that these two underlie the themes of almost all his creative writing including A Grain of Wheat wherein he exposed the collaborative role of Christianity most forcefully through the character of Kihika, a revolutionary in the struggle for national freedom.

The other major component of the British colonial cultural bomb in Kenya has been education—the western system of education. Once again, the western system of education which, like Christianity, had been first introduced by the missionaries as a part of the church activities to lure and bribe the fallible, had the
objectives of disrupting the traditional way of life in Kenya and to create a class of obedient Kenyans who, mouthing cliches and phrases from English language, expressed their allegiance openly to the power of colonialism. No wonder this class received a big patronage from the colonial administration through nominations as village chiefs and employment in the home guards system, both of which played a very nefarious role of collaborating saboteurs during the height of Emergency between 1952 and 1957. Karanja in *A Grain of Wheat* is Ngugi’s most powerful portrayal of such collaborators.

In fact, this class of comprador bourgeoisie became the subject of Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood, Devil on the Cross* and *Matigari* wherein he has shown this class to be essentially a parasitic class with an insatiable wish for permanent identification with the culture of imperialist bourgeoisie. They are the ones who promote prostitution, alcoholism and gambling by setting up massage parlours, beer-bars and casinos in the name of encouraging tourism and effecting ‘development’ of Kenya, particularly the rural areas.

Ngugi, however, is not satisfied by mere portrayal of the socio-political-cultural situation in Kenya during and after the national struggle for independence. He suggests, in a book of the same title, “decolonizing the mind.” By this he means a kind of “dialectical negation of the colonial process,” dismantling, as it were, of the various psychological structures that had been in the minds of men as a result of sustained colonial propaganda, covert as well as overt, during the period of colonization. In his book *Writers in Politics*, he suggests to the writers and intellectuals the task of ‘going back to the roots’ with the aim of restoring the African personality to its true creative potentials in history, so as to enhance the quality of life. To teachers and educational institutions he exhorts to emphasise African languages and literature while pleading with African writers to write in their own languages rather than in European languages.

Ngugi then goes on to define the function of literature in society:

> Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a society. The relationship between creative literature and these other forces cannot be ignored, especially in Africa, where modern literature has grown against the gory background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations. Slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. (*Home Coming*, p.xv)

Based on this, Ngugi differentiates the social role of a contemporary artist in Africa from that of one in Europe:

> There was never, in any African society, the cult of the artist with its bohemian priests along with the banks of Seine and Thames. Today, the artist in Europe sees himself as an outsider, living in a kind of individual culture and obeying only the laws of his imagination. (*Home Coming*, p.6)

It is for similar reasons that Ngugi advocates the use of African languages as the vehicle for the writings by Africans. For many years, he observes, members of the petty bourgeoisie class comprising students, teachers, journalists and bureaucrats continued to compose what Ngugi calls “Afro-European literature” in the languages of Europe, for a readership that also came from the same class. It meant that the moment of truth for Ngugi had arrived. He had to link up his struggle through creative literature with the struggle of the Kenyan masses—now pitted against the comprador bourgeoisie that had usurped power in Kenya and was clinging to it. Thus, in a statement prefixed to *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi declared that—

> This book, *Decolonising the Mind*, is my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way. (*Preface, p. xiv*)
It is therefore not at all surprising that Ngugi assigned a very radical role to a writer in a society, particularly in a society based on sharp class distinctions:

...literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he can choose is one or the other side in the battlefield: the side of the people, or the side of those social forces and classes that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics.... ([Writers in Politics, Preface])

It is on this very powerful statement about the ideological obligations of a writer that we would like to end this discussion about Ngugi's world-view.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have learnt about the life and works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o. We have learnt about the early influences on his writings. We have also discussed Ngugi's decision to shift from English to Gikuyu as the medium of his writings. Finally—and most significantly—we have discussed in the last part of this Unit his views about language, literature, education, religion and the impact of all this on writers in post-colonial societies. This is what constitutes his ideological standpoint—his very world-view.

4.7 QUESTIONS

1. Why did Ngugi wa Thiong'o write repeatedly about the theme of Mau Mau? Discuss.
2. Discuss Ngugi's views about the British colonial rule in Kenya as depicted in his writings.
3. Why did Ngugi decide to shift from English to Gikuyu as the medium of his writings?
4. What are Ngugi's views about the role of writer in society? Discuss.
5. Discuss Ngugi's formulations about the comprador bourgeois class in a neo-colonial society.

4.8 SUGGESTED READINGS