

## **Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Concern for Women in His Major Writings**

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**Abstract.** The present paper describes idea of Ngugi about the situations of women in Kenyan society. He describes how women are treated only as material to be used and oppressed. They are thing of sex and enjoyment only. Ngugi portrays the women who suffered at the hands of the European in different situations. He depicts despondent condition of African women during the period of emergency. They were treated as toys and mere objects of pleasure.

**Keywords :** Hatred; dominance; colonialism; black; barmaids; missionary; prostitution.

Woman, the creator of man, is to be put next only to God. God has attributed woman with the power of creation. But unfortunately, women have been taken as the weaker section in most of the societies. They are subjected to all sorts of miseries. They are source of misery, love and compassion but unfortunately they get hatred, dejection and disillusionment in return most of the time. They have been treated as a toy, as a mere object of pleasure. They are supposed to be surrendered to the will of man, which proves the dominance of man in the world. A call for the women empowerment is at the top in the present world. Different organizations have been devoted to the welfare of women globally. But the situation has not much improved.

Women on the basis of race, class and gender were exploited during the early state of the colonial period and Ngugi did not find any change in the condition even in the post colonial period. Ngugi depicts despair, despondence and hopelessness of women in his novels. Ngugi mostly portrays the women who suffered at the hands of the Europeans in different situations. Racial exploitation in the form of cultural exploitation is brought about clearly in his *The River Between*. Ngugi depicts the despondent condition of the African women during emergency, which is well described in *Weep Not, Child* and *A Grain of Wheat*. Sexual harassment by the colonists as well as the bourgeoisies is revealed openly in *Devil on the Cross*, *Petals of Blood* and *Matigari*. Ngugi ponders over the different problem of women and their causes.

Ngugi reveals through *A Grain of Wheat*, the powerful position of women in a Giluyu society in the ancient time. He writes the echoes of history :

It was many, many years ago. Then women ruled the land of the Agikuyu. Men had no property; they were only there to serve the whims and needs of the women. Those were hard years. So they waited for women to go to war, they plotted a revolt, taking

an oath of secrecy to keep them bound each to each  
in the common pursuit of freedom...Fate did the  
rest; women were pregnant; the take over met with  
little resistance. (*A Grain of Wheat*, 10-11)

This take over proved fatal to women. This was the beginning of decay in the condition of women. Ngugi being concerned about women, exposed the exploitation and humiliation suffered by women in Africa. He exhibits the trauma of women in *Weep Not, Child*. In the colonial period, Mwihaki's father Jacobo indulges in the exploitation of the Africans shaking hands with the white government. Young Mwihaki has to pay for her father's action. She does not have her father's company as her father remains busy in conspiring with whites or giving his services to whites. Besides, the other children of the village keep themselves away from her because of her father's action. Thus she feels alienated in her own community among her own people. The role of her father often puzzles her. She cannot understand his behaviour. And cruelty, Jacobo, himself knows that his fellow persons hate him and want to kill him. He fears death at the hands of Ngotho's sons. This fear of death even surrounded Mwihaki, so she tells Njogore :

I am caught in it and if this goes on, I feel as if I  
could go mad... I am telling this to show you how  
glad I am at the prospects of escaping from it all.  
(*Weep Not, Child*, 44).

It reminds the mental tremor of a French woman in Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of Earth*. She bursts:

I used to wonder, how it was that a human being  
was able to bear hearing those screams of pain...  
Quite apart from the actual torture and so it went  
on finally. I did not even go home. I know almost  
all the families that live there. In the end, I did not  
dare walk in the street any more. K was sure  
meeting hatred anywhere. (49)

Like this French woman, Mwihaki also feels hatred in each one's eye for her. She notices that everyone wants to steer her away from him. She loses friendship of her fellow beings. Her father does not like her intimacy with Njoroge, the son of Ngotho. Howland uses Jacobo as his agent to give him all the information about the planning of the natives. He alienates Jacobo from his community but Mwihaki has to bear the consequences of all the conspiracy. She bitterly suffered the death of her father. She believes, "If one man sins, God punishes all". (*Weep Not, Child* 59) The wretched condition of women is illustrated by Ngugi during the emergency in the colonial period. During the curfew, any man can be taken away by the white soldiers, leaving behind their wives in utter disillusionment. The wives are left to suffer in fear and anxiety, in long waiting for their husbands to return, but often hear about their death.

Women were harassed by the soldiers, physically and mentally. Njeri and her son Kori were arrested by the soldiers when they just came out of the house to search Boro. Ngotho, being helpless refrained from the scene. Again when Jacobo was murdered, both the wives of Ngotho, Njeri and Nyokabi were arrested. Even the young children were arrested, imprisoned and tortured for no crime. The atmosphere of panic and fear surrounded the whole nation. The mother of Njoroge was frightened merely at Njoroge's taking name of Mau Mau. She warned him not to take even the name of the movement. The days of poverty and hardship were made rather heavier to the women. Njeri and Nyokabi lost their sons, one by one. They saw their husband broken and dejected helplessly. They even had to face the anger of their husband Ngotho that he could not release show elsewhere. They faced all the worsening effects of colonialism. Even in such atrocity they had faith in suicide after his father's death. They were already broken at the death of their husband but somehow they were able to save their son from committing wade. They remained alive still in hope of better tomorrow. Such is the life of women who go on suffering and suffering and still be hopeful for a better tomorrow.

Ngugi presents women with all their pains, sorrows and dejection, but at the same time he does not forget to reveal the power, courage and fire in them. Different women characters represent variety of faces of women. Waitherero, a distant aunt of Mugo embodies a very hideous picture of woman. She was a drunkard lady full of hatred and disgust. She was widow with six married daughters who never visited her except at her death, that too without tears and emotions. Mugo, after his parents' death, was brought up under her supervision which could be hardly called as care. She could never pour love on him. Her behaviour was so disgusting that Mugo even wished to kill her. Her behaviour could only lead Mugo, to a very discontented, insecure and uncomfortable life.

Mumbi in *A Grain of Wheat* represents a modern woman of substance and self reliance. Different shades of her character embody her as a strong woman of twentieth century. She is projected as a beautiful and attractive girl who is the centre of attraction among the youngsters Gikonyo and Karanja, both friends of her brother Kihika, who loved her very much. She reused Karanja's love for Gkonyo. But her happy married life with Gikonyo ends with his arrest by white soldiers. Gikonyo's love for Mumbi, too was so great that he passed seven long years in detention just in hope to meet her again. Mumbi at village struggled hard for survival as the terror torture of the white soldiers and the homeguards was at its zenith. Women were not at all safe in the village. Most of the men were in detention camp while women were left behind to be tortured physically and mentally by the whites as well as the back homeguards :

The new Do did not mind the cries. He even permitted soldiers to pick women and carry them to their tents. (139)

Mumbi represents a true picture of woman's faithfulness. She enjoyed the company of Kariuki and shared the boy's prattles about anything from school to women. She was also aware of the importance of education. Thus she arranged for the foe of Kariuki even in emergency, as she asserts :

I paid his school fees, in him he saw the hope for the future. There is nothing like education. (142)

Mumbi bears all the responsibilities on her shoulders with full honesty and Karanja often tries to win her favour in Gilinyo's absence. Finally he gave way to his vengeance when she came to his house. He informed her about Kionjo's home coming. The news let her paralysed. Here Karanja took the opportunity to molest her, and she gave birth to his child. When Gikonyo came back he could not accept Mumbi knowing the fact that she had given birth to somebody else's child. His resentment became from bad to worse.

Certainly, Mumbi had tried her level best to keep her chastity. It was only in weaker moment when she got information that her husband was coming back and she lost her control over herself. Karanja got an opportunity to molest her. But Gikonyo, her husband could not understand her properly when he came from the detention camp and took her action as a great crime done by her, though she was innocent. A critic has rightly commented :

Her single affair with Karanja was not adultery after all since she was exploited. His position as a chief and her dazed anxiety.. the moral perspectives bearing upon the Gikonyo - Mumbai plot in which Gikonyo's own breeding slaves of jealousy have been the only known factor, getting the tone so far in the narrative. Mumbai's story is thus, reminiscence, a flash back that also induces a valuable sense, a moral security and complexity in the novel. (41)

Gikonyo treated Mumbi badly and abused her, "I'll make you shut this mouth of a whore." (AGW, 163) Gikonyo beat Mumbi and she felt so hurt that she left his house and went to her parents' house. Thus she embodies a modern outlook of a woman who is not to surrender to her husband blindly. She loved her husband very much but still could not accept the insult at his hand. She told her mother, "I may be a woman, but even a cowardly bitch fights back when cornered against a wall." (176) Thus Mumbi suffered and met a wretched fate. She was exploited by her fellow men, physically and mentally but she did not surrender and fight the situation boldly and courageously.

The exploitative colonial conditions changed the peaceful married life of Mumbi into a discontented and miserable marital relationship. But carrying the name after the mother of tribe Gikuyu, she proved her name and not even once

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Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Concern for Women in His Major Writings looked at her illegitimate child with hatred, rather she retaliated when Gikonyo hit the child. Her words exhibit her agony :

What sort of a man do you call yourself? Have you no manly courage to touch me? Why do you turn a coward's anger on a child, a little child ? (163)

She took care of her child and also remained faithful to her husband. But she could not resist the desperate words and disgust of her husband. She could not bear the disrespect at the hands of her husband. Emmanuel Ngara rightly asserts :

The life of Gikonyo and Mumbi is one of the most significant points of attention in *A Grain of Wheat* because it enlarges the traditional conflict between men and women in society and prescribes solution, which is still relevant to the entire situation in the novel. The most important prescription is recognition of equality and mutual co-operation. (183)

Mumbi unable to bear the insult left the house of her husband Gikonyo. Here Mumbi represents a strong individual modern woman who demands love and respect and equal status in the family. She reminds us of Nora, the protagonist in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* who is discontented in marriage with Torvold Helmer and leaves house with the words :

Listen Torvold, I have heard that when a wife deserts her husband's house, as I am doing now he is easily freed from all obligations. You are not to feel yourself bound in the slightest way, any more than I shall. There must be perfect freedom on both sides. (Ibsen, 52)

Thus Ngugi presents a conflict of equality between men and women and advocates balanced relationship of coordination, co-operation and mutual understanding of both the parts for happy married life. The people of Thabai village were hit by the vehemence of black home guards and white governments in one or the other way. One critic has rightly observed :

A considerable portion of Ngugi's novel is devoted to the portrayal of violence that was done not merely to the body – the lands, home and hearts of the Gikuyu but also their soul in the form of a spiritual suffering and agony inflicted on them by the Whiteman. (*A Grain of Wheat*, 198)

Even the homeguards, the black soldiers treated the natives inhumanly. They tortured the natives to their very hearts, even their souls were terrorised. Mumbi described the devilish act of the homeguards when they splashed petrol in the pass thatch of her mother's hut which was already dry :

The leader of the home guards struck a match and threw it at the roof. It did not light, and the others laughed at him. They shouted and encouraged him. One of them tried to take the matchers from him to demonstrate how it could be done. It became a game between them. At the fourth or fifth attempt the roof caught fire. (136)

Women were left there to watch the merciless act of the homeguard. Women wanted to scream but they became voiceless because of their dejected state of mind. They could not move their eyes from the scene. Those huts meant much more than a house to them :

The roofs were cracking. I remember the pain as the cracking noise repeated in my heart. Something gave way in my hearts, something in me cracked when I saw our home fall. (136)

Thus the colonists uprooted the natives from their homeland. They did not want their men to get back their home on coming back to their places from the detention camps. The Thabal village was completely demolished. This was a warning to these villages, never to give food or any other kind of help to the men fighting against the colonialists. The frightful condition is thus explained through Mumbi's words:

We were prisoners in the village, and the soldiers had built their camps all round to prevent any escape. We went without food. The cry of children was terrible to hear. (139)

Even children suffered the torment at the hands of the whites and were inflicted punishment on them. They were forced to dig the trenches without taking rest. Women who stopped working were whipped by the homeguards and the small children had to watch this frightening sufferance of their mothers. Women lived in a constant fear, agony and threat from the white people. The lives of women meant nothing to the oppressors. Wambuku died in the trench. They took her body and threw it into a big dug, a few yards from the trench. The condition of Kenya during the emergency is well depicted through a character Kigondo, a farm labourer in Ngugi's powerful play, *I Will Marry When I Want* :

Our Patriots,  
Men and women of,  
Limuru and the whole country,  
Were arrested  
The emergency laws became very oppressive  
Our homes were burnt down  
We were failed.

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Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Concern for Women in His Major Writings

We were taken to detention camps...

Our women were raped.

Our wives and daughters were raped before our eyes. (73)

Women were led to forced labour, sexual harassment and mental torture. Her identity was not more than a mere article, as the white soldiers and home guards were free to pick any woman, from anywhere they wished. The ruthless and reckless behaviour of the whites and the homeguards lead women to a traumatic condition. They were broken at hearts and body both. The degrading situation of women is displayed through the testimonies of different competitors, who with pride, declare the number of the wives they have; at the same time they also reveal the number of girl friends they have as a status symbol. They think that giving a luxurious car to a wife with some pounds and shillings to spend are just enough to keep her satisfied. Women have such humiliating position in the life of a man. Mwireri goes to the extent of saying :

I won't believe in tribal or social discrimination  
when it comes to women... Women belong to no age  
group, no clan, no country. (*Devil on the Cross*, 160)

Thus he believes in using the body of a woman, no matter if she is white or black or Asian. Thus the organization of marriage is meaningless to the thieves and robbers collected in the Devil's Cave. Ngugi pointed towards the futility of love and marriage in the modern time. He draws the attention towards the impurity and faithlessness in the relationship of man and woman, husband and wife.

Ngugi ponders over the problem of prostitution which is mushrooming in Kenya very fast. Wanja in *Petals of Blood*, portrays the most exploitative section, the African woman in the African society under post-colonial or imperialistic conditions. She is presented as prostitute and prostitution in any society is seen as a sinful act. Ngugi wants people to examine the causes, the circumstances responsible for prostitution. He also wants the prostitutes to realise the courses of their degeneracy and uses them to fight back the causes and circumstances. In his own words:

Generally in fiction one tries to portray those people  
who seem to be exceptions of the norms. What I  
tried to do in my novels is to show that dialectic  
relationship between various aspects of society and  
reality. When I take prostitute, I want to show she  
is a product of all the forces impinging on the  
society.(73)

The sexual harassment of the African women during the colonial time by the white settlers, white soldiers and even by the missionary people gradually led to the rise of prostitution. In the post colonial times, the rise of bourgeoisie class

among the Africans, the traders from Asia and Europe, rise of bars and tourism encouraged the profession of prostitution in imperialistic Kenya.

African woman lost her traditional status and identity during colonialism. Women used to have considerable economic freedom over the products they produced along with men in the pre-colonial Kenya. But slowly and gradually they were deprived of the economic independence in the colonial and further in post colonial Kenya. Onunwa asserts :

The growing division of labour in the modern economic sector is widening the gap in productivity and in income between them. The status of women is therefore, lower in relation to that of men. (*Petals of Blood*, 81)

The aftermath of colonialism altered the whole way of Kenyans. Inspired by the colonizers, they too, craved for power and thus suppressed the weaker section i.e. the women. The increasing urbanization also lead to the degradation of women. The men moved to the big cities in search of jobs leaving behind their wives to suffer the tormented life in the village and they enjoyed life or rather encouraged prostitution in craze for artificial life induced by the colonists.

Wanja is one of the young girls who became a prey to the artificial way of living. Since her childhood she was fascinated by the life of her cousin glittering in attractive dresses, high heels, shining earrings. She reminds her picture of European women. Her cousin's husband often beats her so she ran away to the city. Her father had been serving whites in war. He was highly influenced by the power of whites and wanted the Africans to learn the ways of earning money from the whites as he thought:

The true secret of the white man's power: money, Money moves the world. Money is time. Money is beauty. Money is elegance. Money is power. Money is freedom... with money we can get rid of our fears and our superstitions.. Give me money and i can by holiness and kindness and charity, indeed by my way to heaven, and the sacred gates will open at my approach. That is the power we want. (277)

These words had definitely influenced Wanja very much. She also wished to be a rich woman in her life. Though her mother was a patriotic woman who did not like her husband's faithfulness to whites, she often persuaded him to leave his service to whites. She told him:

You were brave and strong to kill for the race of white people. Didn't you retain a little courage, a little strength to lift a finger for your people, your

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Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Concern for Women in His Major Writings

clansmen? What did your father tell you?... Why never went back? Not even to see him hanged like a dog by the same white man you faithfully served in the war? (278)

Wanja saw her father beating her mother in bitter rage. She was brought up in a contradictory atmosphere of disillusionment. Her father was devoted to whites while her mother had faith in May Mau movement. Her father worshipped money while her mother had faith in her tribal God. Thus Wanja was distorted and ran away to a city where she could only become a barmaid. She at first enjoyed the new places, new faces, new friends, and new colours. But soon she got tired and wanted to run away but did not know where. She says to Abdulla, "I hate a man thinking he can buy me with money... I am really tired of this wretched hole".(92) Wanja was tired of the ill-treatment and negligence that barmaids received. She explains to Karega the misery in the lives of the barmaids as:

There is only one song, sung by all bar maids. Oh! They give you 75 shillings a month. They expect you to work for 24 hours. In the day time you give beer and smiles to customers. In the evening you are supposed to give them yourself and sigh in bed. Bar and lodging. The owner grabs 20 shillings for getting a couple uses a Wano bed and torn sheets for 10 minutes. (75-76)

The barmaids were exploited by the owners of the hotels, physically, mentally and financially. So Wanja tried to get out of this muddy life many times. Once she went home, but her father said, "I do not want a prostitute in the house!" (156)

Thus Ngugi draws attention towards the negative attitude of the people, even the family members of the barmaids and prostitutes. Once they are indulged in this profession they cannot get out of it even if they want. They do not get support from anywhere. Thus Wanja undergoes a traumatic condition :

Sometimes you see what is wrong. You want to get out, you also want to remain. You keep on saying to yourself - tomorrow... tomorrow. I know some who tried. One became a housemaid. She did all the work in the house. She wakes up at five ... She helped in milking the cows. She cooked breakfast. She cleaned the house. She went to the shop or to the field to fetch food to cook lunch. She also looked after the little children. She made afternoon tea; she made supper... and when the wife was away the man wanted to share her bed. And all for what? Seventy shillings a month! She ran away. (156)

Many others tried to get out of this world of ignominy and humiliation, but they could not get rid of the exploitation at the hands of men:

So in the end they all return to the world where  
they have friends and where they know the rules:  
where they know what is not honest and what is  
not honest; what is truth and what is not truth; what  
is good and what is not good. (156)

Suffering the disgrace and disregard they are so degenerated that they can go to any extent to get money, as Wanja tells about a woman, one of the, who married a very old European, over seventy years. After she had made him make a will, she had thrown him down the steps in the house, and she got all his wealth. Though Wanja could not do that, she went to Ilmorog to her grandmother in search of peace. One critic observes:

In some respect Ngugi's character Wanja in *Petals of Blood* is the East African counterpart of Juguna. Both women are strong personalities and both have considerable powers of seduction. The difference is that whereas for Juguna, the captivation of men is a principal source of personal satisfaction, Wanja has inhibition. She is torn between convincingly in the country and greater and greater opportunities of urban including sexual self-expression.  
(McLaren, 386)

Wanja lives in Ilmorog among the innocent villagers. She has always feared that she is barren; incapable of having a child and her urge for a child grew stronger and stronger. She believes:

For children, no matter how we neglect them, are  
what makes may a barmaid feel human. You are a  
mother and nobody can take that from you. (*Petals of Blood*, 298)

She tried a lot to conceive a child. The prophecy of a sage that she can conceive a child on a full moon night in the field failed. She even tried Barabana's treatment that was famous with herbs, especially those to do with women's illness and with child-bearing. She got involved with many men in Ilmorog with the purpose. This great urge to be mother in Wanja reveals her motherly attitude and her wish to prove herself as a complete woman. At Ilmorog, Wanja started brewing Thengeta along with Abdulla and made the drink popular. But unfortunately an order was passed to cancel the license to brew Thengeta. Thus once again she became a victim of new-colonial power. Wanja gathered courage and opened her trade house, The Sunshine Lodge. She shook hands with imperialists like Ghui, Kimeria, and Mizo to worship Mammon:

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Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Concern for Women in His Major Writings

It is origin of Sunshine lodge that elegant brother between Cape Town and New Jerusalem ... eat of to be eaten Wanja becomes wealthy and powerful. Not only hypocrisy is dramatised but also the progressive deterioration of the moral horizon in direct proportion to the consideration of development of new Ilmorog. (71)

Ngugi also portrays such individualistic women characters in his powerful novel *The River Between*. The conflict of traditional culture and the power of new faith describe nicely the strength and vigour in simple girl Muthoni whose father has been converted into a new faith; baptized himself and followed Christianity in a strict sense. Ngugi's concern to women is clearly revealed in a strong portrayal of Muthoni and further Nyamburo.

Nyambura and Muthoni are the daughters of Joshua, a converted Christian who is very conscious about his new faith and wants his family to present an example in the society as well as cultured Christian family to usher a new path to his backward society which according to him is living in darkness. Thus he looks at the tribal ritual of circumcision as a sin and does not allow her daughters to undergo the custom of circumcision. They are not allowed to attend the initiation ceremony. Circumcision is an important custom of the Gikuyus; girls and boys cannot be married unless circumcised. Thus Muthoni wanted to get circumcised to be a real woman, made beautiful in the tribe. She did not like her father's dictatorial and suppressive nature.

Ngugi also portrays a difference between the attitudes of mother and father. Joshua was unable to understand her till her end. When her wound got infected and her health deteriorated, he did not care and did not even once visited her. He remained indifferent even at her death, whereas her mother Miriamu suffered the anxiety and pain of her daughter. Ngugi does not hesitate even to bring out the evil relationships of the women who are leading a reputed married life. He openly reveals the futility of married life, hollowness of the relationships of husband and wife, man and woman. Thompson's wife in *A Grain of Wheat* had an extra marital affair, in *Matigari*, the wife of Minister of Truth and Justice had an affair with her car driver. In the annual general meeting of the Women's Development Association she urged the women:

Adultery and drunkenness were the principal evils behind the destruction of many homes in the country .... Women should take refuge in the safety of the church and stop competing with their husbands in drinking and adultery. (*Matigari*, 27)

Ngugi sarcastically remarks upon the depressing and degenerated moral of women as the wife of the Minister of Truth and Justice herself was caught committing

adultery with her driver in backseat of the car outside the city. Guthera also speaks of man's double standard and the sorrowful condition of women at both the ends:

What problems do we women have to go through wherever we are! When that woman goes home, her husband will beat her, demanding to know what she was doing in the wilderness with a man. When her lover goes home, he will beat his wife for demanding to know what he was doing in the wilderness with a woman. (157)

Thus women have been marginalised through cultural institutions and religious rituals. Woman is kept out of the mainstream and denies her personhood. But Ngugi presents some strong women characters that proved their individuality and status struggling hard against all the hurdles of life presented by men and society, culture and custom. They affirm their 'self' in the man dominated society, emancipate themselves from the traditional image and come out with vital force to make a new Kenya. She challenges the man who has been the central figure governing and controlling her life and identity.

Ngugi presents the direct and indirect exploitation of women in the colonial and post colonial Kenya. He exhibits the causes behind this exploitation but he also presents the considerable values that women consist and her resistance against all odds. He wants to empower the woman with substantial power and dignity. She should regain her individuality and self-respect which has been masticated in the colonial and the post colonial Kenya.

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