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Petals of Blood: The destiny of man is the destiny of a whole nation

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Abstract

“Petals of Blood” one of the later novels by Ngugi deals with the destiny of man and the destiny of a whole nation as it expresses itself in terms of politics. Though the private lives of the protagonists have been duly incorporated and their interaction upon each other extensively explored, the novels remains primarily a political tract. Each individual act has been restored to its social matrix. The novel encompasses both the past and the present of the Kenyan society and also just out into the future.

Keywords: destiny, nation, politics, social matrix, past, present, future, protagonist

Introduction

A compelling novel about the tragedy of corrupting power, set in post-independence Kenya...Ngugi writes with passion about every form, shape and color which power can take. After decades of British rule Kenya has declared its independence, but drought and poor harvests still govern the village of Llmorog. Undeterred, Munira, Karega, Wanja and Abdulla each move to Llmorog in search of a more provincial life, only to find themselves suspects in a crime that signals a dark turning of the times. A classic of modern African literature, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s damning satire of politics and corruption in Kenya would prove the catalyst for his imprisonment by the Kenyan government.

Objectives of the Study

About the unshakable faith in future demonstrated in the last scene of the novel, “Petals of Blood” Ngugi wa Thiong’o presents in a new perspective: ‘You’ll come back, she said again!.....Tomorrow.....Tomorrow’, This agonizing concern for the future of the nation has all along been there in Ngugi. “Devil on the Cross” and almost all the preceding works convey a deep commitment on the social and political issues. But the political issues are not mere surface things; what is at stake is the person’s whole existence as a human being, the person’s dignity and basic identity. “A Grain of Wheat” he tries to evaluate the complex social, personal and political developments which occurred during and after the emergency. The third section of “Secret Lives” makes this more explicit, and “Petal of Blood” takes it a stage further. Ngugi is no longer simply evaluating. He is clearly censuring certain developments in modern Kenya that have the average Kenya wretched the external, with what one calls crass political.

Literature Review

In his previous novels, Ngugi shows considerable skill in interweaving the threads of social and personal events. “Petals of Blood” develops this aspect of his work. In this novel the social tension is created by lighting growth of Llmorog; but alongside is a development of a more varied social spectrum than which Ngugi created I “A Grain of Wheat”, where characters seem to exist for independence. In “Petals of Blood”, characters are a by-product of Llmorog, but also have an existence of their own.

There are two basic groups of characters present in the novel: those who are exploited and those who exploit-over three generations. Ngugi’s sympathies are with the first group, represented by Nyakinyua, Abdulla, Karega and Joseph. Nakinyua is grand-mother to Wanja and wife of a freedom fighter who falls victim to the land –grab of Llmorog; Abdulla, son of

an Indian father and African mother, is a freedom fighter who gave a leg to the cause of freedom and thus claims kinship with Kimathi.

Abdulla's reward for his affair is repudiation by his society. Representing a younger generation, Karega, the brother of Ndinguri who fought with Abdulla and gave his life in the independence struggle, stands on the side of the oppressed and becomes the rallying point of the peasants and workers in the factories and farms of new Llmorog, in Joseph, saved from a rubbish heap by Abdulla, the future of Kenya resides, depending on the direction he chooses to travel.

Ranged against this group are those who have sold their birth rights to the imperial-colonists and who have become their legitimate heirs, the comprador bourgeoisie. Munira's is perhaps the most repugnant of this group for through his abnegation a potentially irreversible process has been set in motion. A zealous convert to Christianity in his youth, he denies his father and clan for monetary reward and political power. He repudiates the independence struggle and then in post-independent Kenya side with new imperialists.

Chui, schoolboy hero, school-master turned capitalist, Mazigo, -inspector turned exploiter; Kimeria, businessman and seducer turned entrepreneur-industrialists are also in the second group, to whom may be added Naderi, who provide, the political-governmental sanctions and back-up required, and inspector Godfrey, the support of the law.

In the middle-though by no means a neutral ground are Muira and Wanja. The former, conscious of his mediocrity and the failure of his various endeavours, establishes a successful school in drought-stricken Llmorog. But he does not have the moral stamina to withstand the pressures dependent on the growth of new Llmorog and he succumbs first to drink and then to charismatic Christianity, each equally unserviceable as legitimate responses to of all these characters. Wanja is the most intriguing. Ngugi presents her without ever varnishing the rougher parts. G.D. Killam writes in the "The Writings of East and Central Africa":

'For Ngugi, Wanja represents- as all his women characters do something larger than life; she stands for modern Kenyan Womanhood'.

Analysis

According to G.D. Killam, Wanja is a pragmatist. She has been repudiated by her family after being seduced and made pregnant by Kimeria. She flushes her new-born bastard child down the sewer and takes up the life of a bar girl. Eventually her travels lead to Llmorog, her ancestral home, to live with and support her ageing grand- mother, Nykinyua. Ultimately she chooses to exploit rather than be exploited and takes up the career of a whore-mistress frankly and without regret. Wanja is a sharp contrast to Warringa of Devil on the Cross who undergoes almost the same kind of sufferings but instead of falling, stands erect and takes her revenge in a radical manner.

But in the end, Wanja is returned to the position of harmonious connection with the invisible law, a connection made manifest in the drawing she makes in the hospital, a drawing that is as it were forced from her by a will beyond herself, a will deriving from forces still alive in the country.

Another commentator G.B. Robson, however, does not approve of Ngugi's art of characterization in "Petals of Blood". According to him, much of the fault lies in the character of Munira, who as the central figure of the book is

a failure. Robson maintains that characterization has also been spoilt by names which are obviously meant to have a satirical edge, such as Cambridge Frudshaw, Sir Swallow Blood all, Rever send Hallows Ironmonger. The ridicule is a little too obvious that the total satirical impact of the novel is undermined. He writes:

'Wanja is not merely a vehicle for Ngugi's ideas, but also possesses a genuine human dimension. She contains the complex of motives and passions that male characters in the novel lack. The tragedy of her existence is that of many who are exploited and unfulfilled'.

Interpretation

"Petals of Blood" has a rather unusual structure. The borderline between fact and fiction appears to have blurred. The new life intrudes upon world of fiction. The novelist wishes to convey a great deal of information. That is not to say, there is quite a lot in the novel that has been left unturned into art. They are just facts and details. Every aspect of the modern life in today's Kenya as well as its past and independence struggles all have been thrown together in a rather unwieldy sort of state. Ngugi is giving polemic. Ngugi breaks into writing a political, theoretical tract as it were. This has been made all the more necessary, because of Ngugi's concern with the total situation of life. He has undertaken a clinical study of the modern socio-economic and cultural establishment. He does so deliberately, with a definite purpose behind it.

Findings of the Study

"Petals of Blood" gives us a new version of life. What has been essentially Kenyan or African becomes global and universal. The novel sees for Africans only in a continuing struggle of the masses against the alliance of foreigners and the class of newly-propertied Africans to overcome the devastating droughts caused by the drainage of people's wealth from the rural areas to the cities, and from the whole nation to foreign countries. The rains and may flowers grow with petals of blood.

Conclusion

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's "Petals of Blood" examines the betrayal by the post-colonial regime of the ideals of this anti-colonial struggle that helped Kenya achieve its independence. The novel revolves around three men and a woman. The four friends reveal different aspects of their history to each other piecemeal, just as their families had guardedly explained the past to them. The lingering effects of the Mau Mau revolt have affected all their lives and by the end of the novel, each character is wrapped up in his or her own exclusive epiphany about life in Kenya. This is the last work in English by Ngugi. All his later works were to be written in his native language Gikunyu, a major Kenyan language. This was a drastic step Ngugi took towards effecting a clean break with the colonial past. He changed a part of his name, dropping the European part; took on a new name; and bade farewell to English as the vehicle of expression. He was now free from all the colonial hangover. It was a sort of rebirth, sloughing off the old colonial skin and acquiring a new body and soul together. Relinquishing English as the medium was bound to have a far-reaching impact on the creative, the way a novel is conceived in the first place, the manner of talking as well as the very

authorial gait underwent a revolutionary change. Until now, Ngugi was handling a language that was not his own, the language he was forced to adopt by his erstwhile rulers and which he always, to use a Joycean phrase, held at bay. Though he was a master of the English language, manipulating it at his own sweet will, he never felt intimate with it. Moreover, he felt that he could never give full rein to his creative people in an alien language.

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