

Forms of Resistance Shown by Female Characters in the Selected Novels of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o

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Abstract: *The present research paper attempts to bring the perspective of 'portrayal of resistance' by female characters in the two novels - Petals of Blood and A Grain of Wheat of the famous novelist Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. It studies the different modes of resistance portrayed by the African women in the common background of African struggle for independence from British Colonialism and its aftermath in the African Society. Despite the inequality between men and women, the Gikuyu tribe remembers the time when women were not marginalized but were the ruling forces hosting a matriarchal society, proving that there is nothing inherently weaker about their women than their men. This research paper aims to bring into light the instances through which the female characters showed resistance against patriarchal society to claim what had always belonged to them.*

Keywords: Petals of Blood, A Grain of Wheat, Female Characters, Modes of Resistance, African Society

1. Introduction

Whenever we read any African literature or novels, primarily women are depicted as submissive, loyal and dutiful mothers, wives and daughters through this paper, the resistance shown by women in three novels of African writer - Ngugi wa Thiong'o's - A Grain of Wheat and Petals of Blood has been shown. Literature is said to be a mirror to the society and through this research paper, it may be suggestive to the society that women characters in these two novels can be non-conformist and they can raise their voice against the oppressions and oppressive conditionings of the society. The double marginalization of women has been portrayed through many novels, but this research paper aims to highlight how and what are the forms of resistance being portrayed to come back again to the centre of the society and to what extent are they successful. These two novels Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood* make us familiar with different types of women and their struggle in fighting with the dual powers - patriarchy and colonialism. The questions that this paper tries to answer are:

- What are the different forms of resistances shown by the female characters in the two novels?
- Is there any similarity or difference between the forms of resistance shown in the two novels?

Historical and societal background of the two stories:

The main events in *A Grain of Wheat* are centered around the four days that led up to the independence of Kenya in December 1963, with major flashbacks to the characters' lives before and during the Emergency in the 1950s, which had been called out by the British to repress the armed rebellion of the Mau Mau who were trying to force the colonizer to leave (Gurnah, 2002, in Ngugi, 2002).

Female characters in the novel are depicted as efficient, confident and having self-worth. In the time in which the novel is set, women did not have any kind of power, or position in the society but the way Ngugi's portrays his

female characters, breaks the conventional mindset and shows that they are just as strong as men and often stronger, succeeding when men fail or are tormented with indecision

In *A Grain of Wheat*, Gikuyu women occupy a lower social status than men, as depicted by the characters of Gikonyo's mother and his wife, Mumbi. Gikuyu society is polygamous, meaning that a single man can have many wives, which can lead to oppression and mistreatment of women with no recompense.

Petals of Blood deal with socio-economic problems in east Africa after independence and also shows exploitation and oppression at different levels.

Through Ngugi's novel *Petals of Blood*, the reader comes across the fact that women, rather than playing the conventional role of 'the other' of man, can play multiple roles in the society from being a nurturing mother to being a politician, socialist and idealist at the same time. Women like Nyakinyua and Wanja show stern resistance against colonialism. They strongly paved the path to eliminate oppression and exploitation of Kenyan society.

Women Characters portraying resistance in the novel Petals of Blood:

Wanja:

For resistance to be shown, there first needs to be an oppressive force. Capitalism is that force for the character Wanja. As a capitalist, Kimeria raped the young girl, Wanja, to be thrown out from school and forced into a lowly life of prostitution. He was treating her just as sex object. Karega regrets that: "Men too seemed to think they were better off than women workers because they got a little bit more pay and preference in certain jobs. They seemed to think that women deserved low pay and heavy work: women's real job, they argued amidst noise and laughter was to lie on their backs and open their legs to man's passage to the kingdoms of pleasure" (Ngugi, 304).

Despite the fact that Wanja was forced into prostitution and had to sell her body for sex, she resisted capitalism and male dominance by becoming economically self-sufficient. She says "What is the difference whether you are sweating it out on plantation, in a factory or lying on your back, anyway?" (Ngugi 1977, 293)

Nyakinyua:

Nyakinyua is the elderly guiding woman in Ngugi's novel *Petals of Blood*. Ngugi portrays her as Africa's past glory. (Gitanjali Multani, 04). The elderly folk said: "... may the Lord bless Nyakinyua, the old woman" (Ngugi, 07) As the novel portrays, she is the grandmother of Wanja. She brings into light the pitiful state of women in the society. She is reminiscent of a time where the African society was matriarchal and women instead of being marginalised, were the stakeholders in power and politics of the society. She is the wise and guiding spirit of the community who through her folklores and tales kindles the fire of women empowerment in the society.

Mariamamu

Mariamamu is a bold representation of women who portray resistance against capitalism and patriarchy both. At a time when African women were expected to be docile and submissive, she rebelled against her own husband. She took a stand for her own rights and took decision not to be submissive to her husband anymore; she wouldn't work for nothing on the settler's farm and voiced her rights. Her husband thrashed her every time when she did not follow his orders and she handed him the complete wage for which she toiled hard to gain. Mariamamu's declaration of autonomy appeared when she took a decision that she has to escape with her child Ndinguri to Limuru. Her resistance finally results in running away from the shackles of conformist patriarchal society.

Female characters in the novel – *A Grain of Wheat*

Mumbi

Men in Gikuyu society have been represented as having polygamous marriages and they can cast off their wives as and when they please, their wives do not have the same liberty. After Gikonyo strikes his wife, Mumbi, Mumbi shows resistance by leaving him. This was a bold step considering the status of women at the given time. Though she isn't forced to go back to her abusive husband but Mumbi's own father strongly discourages her for this act. According to him it's completely normal to face domestic violence for a woman in her own house. Mumbi has a child with Karanja but refuses to be in relationship with him, which is clearly a bold statement of the character's decision to live life on her own terms.

Wambui

Wambui is an old Gikuyu woman who secretly transfers messages and weapons underneath her dress to support the Mau Mau. During a political meeting, Wambui ascends the stage, snatches the microphone from a male speaker, and

proclaims that their success thus far has been due to the work of Gikuyu women, not men, and that the men ought to "come forward, wear the women's skirts and aprons and give up their trousers to the women." Wambui and the other female characters' strength depicts a legacy of powerful Gikuyu women who, though socially disadvantaged, nevertheless demonstrate incredible strength and capacity.

2. Conclusion

In *Petals of Blood*, we can find the issues of raping, violence, poverty and economic corruption and it showed the economic and political exploitation plans adopted by the government and we can see the resistance showed by various characters towards all these forms of oppression. If we compare the two novels, we can find that the female characters have been the victim of domestic abuse as well as patriarchal system of society. Female characters of these novels show their resistance and try to break the existing norms of the society. In both the novels, we can find the reminiscence and echo of matriarchal society through characters like Wanja and Nyakinyua. Resistance against capitalism and male dominance is also seen in the novels where women like Wanja become economically independent, even at the cost of selling her flesh. *A Grain of Wheat* shows Wambui taking active participation in the freedom struggle and even declaring her contribution openly on the stage towards the political movement of Mau. Hence we can say although both the novels depict strong female characters, the characters in *A Grain of Wheat* are more vocal and straightforward in voicing their resistance.

References

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