



Postmodern spirit in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* based on the concepts of Homi K. Bhabha

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Abstract: Dismantling the structuring of binary opposition of center and margin and deconstructing the authoritarian and logocentric masternarrative are the core seeds of both post-colonialism and postmodernism. Both Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Homi K. Bhabha are well expressed from the postcolonial perspectives. So, this article will primarily focus on the postmodern aspects in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*, and Homi K. Bhabha's major concepts like ambivalence, hybridity and mimicry. Then, this article will try to recount the politics of theoretical muddle to explicate the subject of literary postmodernism in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's novel *Petals of Blood* and Homi K Bhabha's own theoretical structures of resistance. Based on the debate of complex and varied cultural contact and interaction, this essay will concentrate how Bhabha develops a set of challenging concepts and consigns these to counter-narrative the theoretical trap of the western theoretical system by a curious postmodern turn within postcolonial paradigm. And this radical position and free play of postmodern and postcolonial tools of Homi K Bhabha will advantage and lead this article to explore the postmodern spirit in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*.

Key Words: Postcolonialism, hybridity, postmodernism, mimicry, ambivalence.

One of the major themes in Ngugi's novel is the deceptiveness of any notion of an epistemological rupture between colonial and post-colonial society. And the wider significance of the postmodernism condition lies according to Homi K. Bhabha "in the awareness that epistemological 'limits' of those ethnocentric ideas' which is also 'the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices-women, the colonized, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexualities'". (*The Location of Culture* 6) In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi reverses the colonial binarism in order to combat the hegemonic interpellations of the neo-colonial regime by calling for historical and cultural repositioning. Ngugi shifts away from the Eurocentric notion of society that subordinates the ethics and politics of cultural and social meaning of Ilmorog. This play of binary in the colonial system is always very crucial to its exercise of power because as Bhabha said 'colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible'. (*The Other Question* 101) Bhabha reveals this implicit paradox of binary and critiques the imperial politics as ploy to situate the West in a position of binary superiority. The initial necessity for the master was to create a 'reformed' colonial subject who will be an important aid to stabilize the power politics. From this view point, Bhabha's concept of hybridity is very important. "Bhabha's concept of hybridity fits the poststructuralist attack on totalities and essentialisms, and dovetails with some of the postmodernist characteristics: surface instead of depth, the flattening of the sign, the simultaneous doubleness of perspective, and the critical effects of parody." (Woods 45) Doubleness of perspective positions individual to ambivalence and the critical effects of parody might be well explained by mimicry. These concepts of Bhabha initiate to bring out the postmodern aspects in *Petals of Blood*.

In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi shows the anxiety about hybridity's imagined threat to cultural purity and integrity through the transformation of a village, Ilmorog into a proto-capitalist society with the problems of prostitution, social inequalities, misery, uncertainty and inadequate housing. The capitalist social system with its associated class struggles fundamentally influences the social, cultural, philosophical, economical and political ideals of the society. Bhabha contends that a new hybrid identity or subject-position emerges from the interweaving of elements of the coloniser and colonised challenging the validity and authenticity of any essentialist cultural identity which is very obviously seen in the fragmented identity of New Ilmorogs. "There were several Ilmorogs. One was the residential area of the farm managers, County Council officials, public service officers, the managers of Barclays, Standard and African Economic Banks, and other servants of state and money power. This was called Cape Town. The other—called New Jerusalem—was a shanty town of migrant and floating workers, the unemployed, the prostitutes and small traders in tin and scrap metal." (333) With this fragmented and collapsed selfhood, the story of revolution is lost (the resistance against the British imposition and the Mau

Mau rebellion of 1950s). They became “abstracted from the vision of oneness, of a collective struggle of the African peoples, the road brought only the unity of earth’s surface: every corner of the continent was now within easy reach of international capitalist robbery and exploitation. That was practical unity.”(311-312) Even the protagonists of the novel were in a fragmented and ambivalent state of pre-colonial faithfulness and the postcolonial betrayals under the new, hybrid reality of Ilmorog. Both Munira and Karega who were united in raising their voice against the authoritarian British Headmaster became jealous to each other. A promising student, Wanja who became pregnant by the industrialist and had a strong passion towards the road of liberation changed with the commercial society. She lost the values of human relationship. She claims hundred shillings from Munira for the bed and the light and time and drink. Even the human relationship turns into commodity. “It was New Kenya. It was New Ilmorog. Nothing was free.” (332) And another protagonist Abdullah, a Mau Mau fighter, copes by reinventing himself as circumstances demand, shifting his principles within a narrow range. This hybrid culture or the new fragmented reality is nothing but a threat to take back their colonized state with a new form. And for this reason Ngugi remarks: “*Imperialism can never develop a country or a people. This was what I was trying to show in Petals of Blood; that imperialism can never develop us, Kenyans.*” (Writers in Politics, 37)

This New, fragmented Ilmorog, allows hybridity of their cultural identity, the colonizer’s identity. But Ngugi placed all his protagonists to seek an answer for their transformation and also in collective struggle. This duality creates according to Bhabha an ambivalent state as he mentioned in *Location of Culture* that after the “traumatic scenario of colonial difference, cultural or racial, returns the eye of power to some prior archaic image or identity. Paradoxically, however, such an image can neither be ‘original’—by virtue of the act of repetition that constructs it—nor identical—by virtue of the difference that define it.” In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi demonstrates ambivalence by placing Ilmorog’s older residents, Wanja’s grandmother Nyankinyua, who puts forward the remaining memories of the village’s former glory against the thriving capitalism. Ngugi also portrays Mwathi wa Mugo, the unseen and mysterious occult priest “With a rare double-edged irony, ambivalence and scepticism which call into question the validity of the fundamental metaphysical beliefs of the Ilmorog villagers, perhaps of Africa at large.” (93) The foundation of national identity and the cultural past of Kenya now are in question. With these two characters from the past, Ngugi renovates the tradition and redefines their roles in the development of revolutionary consciousness. As Nyankinyua, a heroic old woman, exclaimed ‘Our soil seems tired’ (65) and Njuguna argued ‘Mwathi wa Mugo seems to be losing his power over the rains’ (95)

The manipulation and diplomacy of neo-colonialism lead the ambivalent people feel frustrated, dispossessed of their identity, disillusioned and destroyed. In that case, to mimic the colonizer, oppressor became the ultimate destiny of all the socially, racially, politically and economically distinguished people. Bhabha says that “... the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence” (*The Location of Culture*, 86) that repeats rather than re-presents. Bhabha says the process of imitation is never complete; there is always something that he lacks. Cultural, historical and racial background always hinder to the transformation to the new. In *Petals of Blood*, the country’s workers and peasants become the mimic men. “The peasants of Ilmorog had also changed... Most of the others had joined the army of workers who had added to the growing population of the New Ilmorog.”(333) They are converting themselves into Christianity. They involve themselves in schooling, business, banks, highways. They were totally engulfed by all the city vices. Not only that but they are also baffled by the power of bank. The imitation of whatever the powerful offers leads them to a critical stage. They were lured into loans and buy the imported fertilizer to be a reformed and recognizable Other but as Bhabha says “... as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (ibid) For that reason, “Without much labour, without machinery, without breaking with old habits and outlook, and without much advice they had not been able to make the land yield enough to meet their food needs and pay back the loans. Some had used the money to pay school fees. Now the inexorable law of the metal power was driving them from the land.” (327) This ambivalent state of them is both threatening and reassuring. The mimicry of men is similar but ‘not quite’ ensures the colonial power to locate the other as ‘a difference’. And this difference, as this article tries to demonstrate, revitalizes the binary power-play and helps the tropes of power. The subject position of this mimic man places him in the ambivalent position of the hybrid subject who is neither colonizer nor colonized, but something in between. But this in-betweenness foreshadows the up-coming counter-attack that effectively displaces the social control of the power centre which is very postmodern. Wanja was back to her beginnings. “Her land would never be settled by strangers—she with her failing health and flesh trying to organize the dispossessed of Ilmorog into a protest.” If she does not get the helps from the others, if the big city restrains her, she says, “I’ll go alone...my man fought the white man. He paid for it with his blood... I’ll struggle against these black oppressors...alone...alone...”(328)

The character of Wanja is very postmodern that effectively subverts the potential for female agency. Wanja is being instrumentalized. All of the men want her, and many of their actions are motivated by their desire for her. She is intelligent and very desirable. She is not only desired by all of the main characters but also was seduced by Hawkins Kimeria, a wealthy man, and became pregnant. She abandoned the baby in a drain, carrying this guilt with her always. She moves to Ilmorog to be with her grandmother and starts a successful business as a

distiller, but she's not allowed to keep it. She then becomes a high-paid prostitute. Wanja tries to find her place in the new society of Kenya after its independence from the British. And she is the main female character in the novel, one of the four protagonists accused of murder. The way Ngugi presents Wanja is very central for the objection to masculine logic and seeks to subvert the homogeneity of representation. "Her reproductive functions are being pressed into the service of a narrative that equates political resistance and revolutionary heroism with masculine virility." (Nicholls 147) And this radical political effectiveness of Wanja subverts the hegemonic male power. And Ngugi, with a curious turn to postmodernism subordinates reason to uncertainty. He finished his novel with *Woman and Tomorrow*. Wanja is placed in hybrid society; she also mimics the power and the ambivalence take back again to her own way of struggle. She parallels Kenya, who has to fight to stay alive and destruction is never too far away.

Redrawing and rewriting how individual and collective experience might be struggles is an essential element of postmodernism which is very prominent in *Petals of Blood*. It rewrites the story of the originally isolated rural community of Ilmorog and of four individuals who come to it from outside: "Munira, the new school teacher who is shown as passive and at ambivalent state of mind; Abdullah, the former Mau Mau fighter, disabled in the war and now a shopkeeper who carries the very important the of denial and dispossession; Karega (rebel), displaced social idealist, later political activist; and Wanja, former barmaid and prostitute and a victim of social exploitation"(Williams 74). Their unresolved problems from the past bring them in Ilmorog. Their presence changes the community and even with the hybrid cultural collage and liminality they are being shattered, fragmented and also being changed. With the misuse and commodification of Theng'eta flower epitomizes the growing invasion of capitalism. Then the real struggle begins. The situation becomes "you eat or you are eaten". Karega visions about their society which they were building since Independence, "a society in which a black few, allied to other interests from Europe, would continue the colonial game of robbing others of their sweat, denying them the right to grow to full flowers in air and sunlight". (348-349) But Munira was in doubt about the "another world, a new world. Could it really be true?" (350) The images of past, present and future in this novel repeats the several changes the characters denied to experience. And the novel ends with the theme that struggle continues by denying one unified meaning or narrative or centre categorizes the novel as postmodern.

In the context of changing social, political, and linguistic relations, Ngugi problematizes concepts of authority and submission, individual and community, dependence and freedom. This continuous slippage from the pattern of the colonizer-colonized binary is something that Bhabha discovers from his postmodern location. Postmodern arguments stress the importance of micro-narratives, concerning the assimilation of minorities and marginalized groups into an organic wholeness which is undoubtedly present in Ngugi Wa Thiong' O's novel *Petals of Blood*. Bhabha with his unique idea of mimicry, ambivalence and hybridity has attempted to reconfigure the postmodern from the perspective of the postcolonial. Bhabha attempts to do so "by deconstructing the old dichotomies of East/West, Self/Other, and Centre/Margin, and explores the increasing *hybridity* and *liminality* of cultural experience." (Woods, 44). By consistently disrupting these binary opposition in his narrative, Ngugi allows us to see relations that are unstable and not firmly attached to an ideology of unique self and the unified narrative. This deconstruction is the very notion of postmodernism. In the chapter named 'The Commitment to Theory', Homi K. Bhabha shows his doubts about the ideological politics regarding the formation of 'Theory'. Bhabha says, "There is a damaging and self-defeating assumption that theory is necessarily the elite language of the society and culturally privileged". (*The Location of Culture* 28) From this very notion of theory, Bhabha takes a curious turn towards the postmodern challenges that questions "Are we trapped in politics of struggle?" and "Can the aim of freedom of knowledge be the simple inversion of the relation of oppressor and oppressed, centre and periphery, negative image and positive image?" (ibid) Such questions and his concepts of mimicry, ambivalence and hybridity expound postmodernism from newer ground.

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