



## **Social Realism in the African Novel: The South African and East African Cases**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Although the African novel arose from Europe, the African has used it to explore a different world view; a world where gods and men hold a place together in the affairs of men. But more importantly, the African novel has followed the peculiar history of colonization and decolonization. While the earlier novels depicted the genesis of the colonial encounter in Africa, the later ones explored the reality of bad self-rule in the continent. Peter Abraham's *The Wild Conquest* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* which are examined in this paper as representing the South and East African cases respectively, reflect this pattern of the changing African society and politics. While Abraham's *The Wild Conquest* treats the genesis of the colonial encounter in Africa, Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* explores the reality of bad governance and affirm the hope that the dearly won independence of Kenya need not be betrayed. These two novels reflect the realities of their respective societies at their particular times of writing.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The novel is a genre that arose from the 18<sup>th</sup> century industrializing Europe to explore individual man as he exists not in the imagination as in former literary forms like the epic that approximates to aristocratic ideals, but as real man in real social situations, reflecting his actual human predicament. The African novel, therefore, takes its impetus from Europe and is the dominant form in Africa. It arose from the African need to reflect the real African human situation and rescue the African image from European distortions. The novel, because of its realism is thus, the form that has suited the African in exploring the truth of his existence, and because the novelists explore individual lives as part of society, they have also been able to respond

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creatively to the changing politics in Africa. Therefore, to trace the nature of the African novel is to trace the changing pattern of the African society and politics, starting from the quest for independence to post-independence.

In addition, although the differences in the history of the sub-regions – West, North and South – make the pre-occupations of the African novel slightly different, they are united by their concern for the human condition, as well as by their peculiar African world vision that is both spiritual and temporal. More importantly, they are united in terms of the history of colonization and decolonization, for instance, in West Africa, although the heritage of literacy came through foreign rule, foreign rule also brought cultural domination and taught the Africans that their culture was barbaric and at the bottom of the cultural scale. And so, the early novels from West Africa asserted the validity of the African way of life. It affirmed the African cultural values as can be seen in such novels as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964), Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* (1966), etc.

However, the West African novel soon moved away from cultural affirmation to the historical period of independence and explored the reality of bad governance in Africa. Thus, post-independence gave rise to the novels of disillusionment and African novelists became more critical not of the foreigner this time around, but of the native ruler. Eldred Jones (1979) captures the scene succinctly when he says: "The last... years in Africa have seen the settling of the various newly independent countries into the realities of their autonomy. The period of colonial protest and struggle gave way to the establishment of independent regimes, to a stock-taking and a preliminary assessment of the fruits of the new state of life (1). This state of affairs is depicted in such works as Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965), Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and *Fragments* (1970), etc.

In East Africa and South Africa, although the novel developed later because of the later development of nationalism, the novel has also evolved along historical lines as the writers respond to the changing history of their respective sub-regions. East Africa and South Africa were to be settlers' colonies, so decolonization was more violent and more difficult. Indigenous culture was denied as in West Africa. And so, the first major novels from East Africa like *Weep Not Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1966) etc. traced the genesis of the colonial encounter and the deprivation of that phenomenon. Later novels like Meja Nwangi's *Carcass for Hounds* (1974) showed the process of decolonization, African heroism and betrayal in the Mau-Mau movement, while post-independence novels portrayed the betrayal of the ideals of nationalism. However, unlike the West African novels of disillusionment, the East African novels retain a dynamic hope.

Similarly, the South African novel followed the history of colonization and decolonization. While most South African novels depict the social reality of apartheid, presenting symbols of brutalization as seen in such works as Peter Abraham's *Mine boy* (1968), Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night*

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(1970) and *Stone Country* (1972) etc, the earlier novels traced the genesis of the colonial encounter. Peter Abraham's *The Wild Conquest* (1963), one of the earlier novels from South Africa and one of the novels of study in this paper treats the theme of the colonial confrontation between the whites and the blacks. This historic reality as depicted in this novel is therefore, examined in this paper. On the other hand, Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* (1977) exposes the denial of the ideals of nationalism in the newly independent African states. Independence had suggested a reign of democratic socialism of equal sharing, that the poor should not be poor any more. But no sooner had the old masters gone than new elitist African ruling classes sprang up not only to replace their old masters but to also continue to oppress and exploit "their people". This reality of bad governance in the East African novel as depicted in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* is also the subject of this paper.

**Social Realism in the South African Novel: Peter Abraham's *The Wild Conquest*.**

As already noted, *The Wild Conquest* (1963) by Peter Abraham treats the historic confrontation between the Boers and the Matabele. It depicts the reality of the colonial encounter between the blacks and the whites as represented by the Matabele and the Boers respectively. However, whereas in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the picture of life stays with the African showing the seriousness of the African philosophy of life and their rich cultural heritage which Achebe celebrates, in Abraham's, the two different worlds are pictured in depth – the Boers and the Matabele. In fact, due to acculturation and the dominance of white power, the life of the Boers seems to be more realistically portrayed, although Abraham goes to history to famous historical figures like Mzilikazi, Loubengula and tries to recreate a meaningful African life.

Book One of the novel traces the life pattern of the Boers and their belief in the Bible. The Boers see themselves as the children of God in the wilderness who are on a divine mission to reclaim the land. Here, Abraham shows the false religion of the imperialist who uses the Bible to justify his aggressive economic mission. He shows the contradiction of a people who believe in the Bible that preaches peace and yet worship the rifle. Since the beliefs of the Boers centre around the Bible and the rifle, this section is adequately titled to reflect the life of a people who do not see the African as a creature of God.

Anna and her husband are used as a microcosm of the entire white race to explore the Boer experience. Kasper starts out a loving husband but as he increasingly antagonizes the Africans in the fight for African lands, his animal instincts take over his humanistic instincts. He becomes more beastly like Kutz who lusts for his sister-in-law and eventually rapes a fellow pilgrim. Abraham argues here that the bitterness in African politics will destroy not only the black man as the white man thinks, but also the humanism of the whites.

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Anna represents the good among the Boers. Like Paul Van As, she treats all men with equal fairness. She has the capacity for love even during the Boer aggression. She fears that the whole world is turning bloody. The estrangement within this family unit demonstrates that their human values are breaking down. Kasper no longer sleeps with his wife. He is filled with a self-destroying hate. Anna, meanwhile retains her essential goodness. Abrahams pictures her at peace with the surrounding rich landscape. She is pregnant, bursting with life. Her new life is accentuated by the bulging frog on the banks of the Orange River and by the rich grass and willows in the river. Since Anna refuses to accept the world of hate of the Boers, she symbolically dies at the onset of the final battle when the Boers take over African lands. Like Paul van As, Anna recognizes that that nature is doomed which has no conscience or soul. The novelist therefore, argues for peaceful co-existence and suggests through the destruction of the Barolong that aggression is not always the answer to conflicts. Also, towards the end of the battle, Paul and Gubuzu die together. During their death, the writer laments that they have not cultivated the soil for so long but have cultivated the art of warfare. War has become a dominant occupation for both the Boers and the Matabele. Meanwhile, the Basuto King shows the happy mien. He has learnt to talk peace and to also talk war. He criticizes the Matabele for learning too much of warfare.

On the other hand, the section on the life of the Matabele is entitled "Bayete", their war cry. In this section, Abrahams demonstrates the blood lust that helped to build the Mzilikazi court. It is a large army full of intrigues and the writer suggests that its own aggression was destroying it although it had some humane and wise leaders like Gubuza and Mzilikazi and brave warriors like Dabula. In this court, Abrahams shows the beauty of African political organizations. Through Dabula's wife, Mtombi, Abrahams dramatizes African beauty. Mtombi is plump, mahogany brown and supple. She reflects the peace and beauty of the African landscape, unlike Anna who lives in a world of antagonism and describes herself as dried meat.

The novelist suggests that the Matabele court collapsed due to two reasons: the superior weapons of the Boers and their own division due to blood lust. However, whereas Achebe argues for the superiority of the African culture over the white's, Abrahams suggests that both sides had their strong points as well as their weak points as both the Boers and the Africans were bloody and aggressive.

And so, as the Africans flee across the Limpopo, Gubuza advises the future generation: "Teach him not to fight white men but to intrigue with them and make treaties with them. Teach him to be cunning in the ways of peace, teach him to watch over our people and to protect them as a father, for that is the duty of kingship" (377). Abrahams, however, also suggests that the new day of the colonizer is not a better day: "They come with new ways and new weapons but no new wisdom" (352). They come speaking the old language of war. Abrahams, like Achebe therefore, advises a return to that old African situation of mutual caring as depicted in such love as Mzilikazi

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had for his people. His son, Lobengula is to carry on in that tradition of African paternal care.

In this historical novel therefore, where Achebe portrays the colonizer through satire, Abrahams gives a dense picture of both the world of the Boers and of the Matabele. Where Achebe is able to recreate a life that still exists, Abrahams's strength is in the poet as a novelist, arguing for the ideal of peaceful co-existence. Consequently, Abrahams evokes a rich landscape of lush vegetation; a rich fertile earth that can nourish many. To Abrahams, it is so rich that there is no need for strife. This is suggested by the romantic opening of the novel which is an echo of Blake, the romantic poet. This is also reinforced by the writer's own poetry where he pictures this world as "poised in space, held between nothing and nothing" (13). It equally recalls Ezeulu's first appearance in *Arrow of God* (1964) and Abrahams invests it with so much beauty, thereby pleading for peace. The poet historian also effectively recreates both the Boer and the Matabele life, showing their strengths and their weaknesses so that we may understand the reason of the collapse of his people which is that the Matabele unity collapsed and the colonizer capitalized on it.

As noted earlier, the novel in Africa has evolved along historical lines, exploring the peculiar history of colonization and decolonization. *The Wild Conquest*, thus, depicts the historic confrontation between the whites and the blacks as represented by the Boers and the Matabele respectively and suggests that aggression is not the answer to resolving conflicts. However, the African novel later moved away from the theme of the colonial encounter to portray the failure of self-rule in Africa. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1977) explores this reality.

### **Social Realism in the East African Novel: Ngugi's *Petals of Blood***

A socialist realistic novel, Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* (1977) analyzes the problem of the failure of democracy in newly independent African states. It exposes in detail the evils perpetuated in independent African states by African imperialists and capitalists. However, Ngugi, unlike his West African counterparts such as Achebe, Soyinka, Armah, Aluko, etc, does not just portray the failure of governance to tell but to also show the way forward. It is his statement that the newly won independence of Kenya would not be betrayed.

This is done through an exploration of many lives that actually intertwine at many points: Munira's, Wanja's, Karega's and Abdulla's. Munira is the idealistic school teacher who is frustrated by a capitalist materialistic father and further harassed by a frigid false evangelistic wife. He is driven to arson to right the unjust balance in the society. Abdulla is a former freedom fighter who is now maimed in the fight for nationalism but who, with the attainment of "Uhuru" is like the other heroes of the independence struggle denied access to the national assets which now go to the politicians. In Eustace Palmer's words, Abdulla's partial paralysis is "the

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most concrete symbol in the novel of man's inhumanity to man and also relates to a spiritual condition, for the people all carry maimed souls" (1979, 192). On the other hand, Karega survives as a trade unionist and socialist to help in the class struggle between the capitalists and the workers. He is the future hope that the working man will use his labour to demand his rights.

Also, Ilmorog is the symbolic Kenyan village which like most villages is a deserted homeland stricken by draught and neglected by its politicians. The physical aridity of Ilmorog is the equivalent of the moral aridity of the nation. It is thus, Ngugi's statement that the old spirituality of the Kihika and the dynamism of the Karegas of the present and future world will remedy the aggressive capitalism of Europe exploiting Africa. It is the hope that through class struggle, the African worker will stop the exploitation of the capitalists, be they Africans or Europeans. African capitalists in this novel like the Reverend Jarrod and Munira's father, the M.P for Ilmorog are middle men to imperialism, just as they function in *Weep Not Child* (1964) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1968).

*Petals of Blood* (1977), is therefore, a modern socialist novel based on the elite exploitation of the rural areas. Ngugi shows a marked division between the affluence of the residential areas of the politicians and the economic advantages they enjoy in loans, just as Armah does in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not yet Born* (1968). Like in Armah's novel, the residential areas of the populace is that of squalor and dirt. They lack basic amenities such as water, light and even food. The children of Ilmorog are tired from hunger and can hardly benefit from organized education, while the politicians are busy acquiring chains of houses. The M. P. for Ilmorog, when confronted with his failure to his electorate takes refuge in the bombast, just like the Nigerian politicians. As in Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966), the Kenyan politicians are a paradigm of the greedy politicians in post-independence Africa. Typical of the hypocritical religious leaders who feed the people with words, the M. P. feeds the people with empty speeches. However, the people respond in a realistic but symbolic gesture: they throw rotten foods and vegetables at him.

To drive home his point, Ngugi uses a lot of symbols in the novel, one of which is the theng'eta plant which is actually the plant with the petals of blood. According to Ngugi, this plant has been transformed into a debased modern spirit by the capitalists. This imagery suggests the distortion of things in the Kenyan society from the normal and natural, to the abnormal and evil and the introduction of chaos and destruction where there should be beauty and order. As Palmer points out, the blood suggests suffering and becomes a symbol of the entire Kenyan society (1979, 290).

Another symbol employed in the novel is that of draught. Here, Ngugi uses an actual historical and economical reality: the recent disastrous draught in most Africa. The draught symbolizes the arid condition of the lives of the people – their general deprivation of all those things which should make life meaningful, such as health, opportunities for the education of their children, gainful rewarding employment and freedom from exploitation.

However, as earlier noted, Ngugi, the omniscient narrator does not just lament the betrayal of the African politicians but also slants the argument towards positive action so that people do not despair but respond creatively to it. Wunira who is disenchanted with his capitalist father comes to the isolated Ilmorog with Karega. He teaches the children of Ilmorog the need to return to the purity of their traditional values as symbolized by the theng'eta plant. This is a significant statement by the writer on the need for the re-emergence of the spirit of revolution; that the mau-mau revolution can still inspire the present generation and very importantly that, the failure of the politicians will only lead to a harvest of bloodshed, not only of the colonizer but of the native exploiter as well.

It is interesting to note that although this novel was written with a Marxist sponsorship, it retains the integrity of the arts, exploring the various intertwining lives in depth so that we understand their motivations. Thus, although some critics have labelled Ngugi an ideologue, the integrity of the arts is borne evidence to in the novel. For instance, characterization is realistically portrayed so that Munira and the other characters emerge as credible individuals. Also, although the story starts as a detective, the plot is not a detective plot. It tries to understand Munira's background and motivations. In addition, the writer not only explores these different lives but intertwines their destinies as in real life. Munira and Karega were both expelled from Siriana for protest, one against colonialism, the other against neo-colonialism of the African. Munira comes from a family of capitalists and we can appreciate his disenchantment with his hypocritical father and frigid wife. Karega, on the other hand, comes from a long line of workers. His mother worked for Munira's father for very little pay but refused sexual exploitation of Munira's father. And so, Karega comes from a tradition of workers who fight for their rights. These two – Karega and Munira – now teach in isolated Ilmorog and are caught in a love triangle with Wanja. Wanja herself, like Abdulla is a victim of social injustice. Abdulla fought as a freedom fighter with Karega's brother, thus, again uniting his destiny with Karega's, although Karega's brother, like Abdulla is not benefiting from "Uhuru".

On the other hand, Wanja suffers the woman's fate in a country of aggressive capitalism. Her father venerates money and Wanja is therefore, naturally seduced by money. Her father's friend seduced her and she threw her infant child into the toilet. She has therefore, come to Ilmorog for spiritual re-union: to get a child from any of her two lovers. But she cannot recreate in the aridity of Ilmorog. With its aggressive capitalism, she therefore, joins in exploiting other women as she builds a house of prostitution for women. This makes Munira feel a moral imperative to destroy this house of infamy and the infamous capitalist representatives of Europe such as Shell, Essom, etc. in their exploitation of Africa. However, although the novel is intensely serious, the story retains areas of humour like where Munira, the eccentric is riding his iron horse to Ilmorog. With Wanja, the writer however, recreates the beauty of the community of

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Ilmorog as they brew the theng'eta beer. Also, although the omniscient narrator tells us about these different lives and the plot seems linear, there is a constant backward and forward shift in time so that we appreciate the characters' lives; both past and present. For instance, Ngugi refers to the past when Kenyan masses were involved in a great fight against British imperialism. Although they won this fight, the freedom they gained was not commensurate with the kind of total liberation from economic, social and political exploitation for which they fought and died as colonialism became replaced by neo-colonialism. Therefore, Ngugi uses references to Kenyan history to accentuate the present as they portray what the peasants fought for and their present situation. As Stella Mbachu (1989, 316) points out, central to Ngugi's use of history is the view that the vision of society can only be realized through an understanding and appropriating of society's history. On the relevance of history to literature, Ngugi has this to say:

History is very important in determining how we look at and how we evaluate the present. A distorted view of the people's past can very easily distort our views and evaluations of the present potentials and the future possibilities as a people.... Now I feel that Kenyan writers, intellectuals, historians, political scientists must be able to show us Kenya's past which correctly evaluates Kenya's people's achievement (sic) in the past, in the present and at the same time, pointing out their creative potential in the future. (1972, xv).

The novelist therefore, ends the work on a note of hope; not however, in the arson of Munira but in the Marxist sense that the worker or labourer, through trade unionism will effect an equitable distribution of the nation's wealth. The symbolic march from Ilmorog to the city is a statement to African politicians that corruption will not last forever. It also allows the reader to see the variety of Kenya's life from the poverty and hunger of Ilmorog to the affluence of elite residential areas as in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. The African political elite suffer from colonial neurosis. They are so imitative of Europe that they lose sight of national heritage. Their so-called tribute to indigenous culture is a maginal gesture in their central quest for national embezzlement.

And so, Ngugi decodes Kenya's problems and like the true Marxist that he is, suggests a remedy. The density of the portrayal of individual psychology complements his ideological purpose so that ideology does not make art suffer but strengthens the realization of life. The heroic march from Ilmorog to the capital city is a fully realized human predicament. It is a statement that people will not live with injustice forever and that the national wealth be equitably distributed. It is a statement that the dearly won independence of Kenya need not be betrayed. This therefore, makes Ngugi join the ranks of major novelists, humanists and committed writers all over the world.



## CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it is clear that the African novel has evolved along historical lines. It has followed the history of colonization and decolonization. While the early novels such as Peter Abraham's *The Wild Conquest* trace the genesis of the colonial encounter, others like Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* explore the reality of bad self-rule in Africa and make the statement that the dearly won independence of Kenya should not be betrayed and that the national wealth be equitably distributed. The novel's essential realism thus, makes it possible for the writers to respond creatively and convincingly to the changing pattern of politics in Africa. This seems in line with Eustace Palmer's observation that "literature generally evolves out of people's historical and cultural experience" (1979, 2).

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