



Ngugi wa Thiong'o on Critical Theory of Art and the art of State in Africa: A review of Pen points, Gun points and Dreams.

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Ngugi's book echoes an event which took place in Britain in 1960 following the Roy Jenkins act which adroitly enacted as law that literature was above morality and that no limits could be placed on the artists' freedom to portray whatever they wished no matter how offensive to public taste or harmful to the commonwealth. "Lady Chatterley's Lover," D.H. Lawrence's novel written just before his death in 1929, was arraigned in court on charge of offending the moral precepts of the conservative middle class. The prosecuting attorney charged that "the bugging of the wife of a mutilated war hero and a member of the upper classes by one of Alvin Kernan relates it in his provocative text, "The Death of Literature," the underlying question was the definition of "Literature" and how Literature was differed from other forms of writing. Was "Lady Chatterley" literature?

The question, "What is Literature?" has baffled a number of people as it has eluded any concise and precise definition by literary students and practitioners alike. In fact, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote a voluminous text dedicated to the search for the answer entitles, "What is Literature?" (1948). Perhaps even more baffling since the days of Plato's "Guardians of the State" in ancient Greek civilization has been the question, Why does Literature present itself as autonomous and independent of the society it has existed to attack? Why do the Arts, and particularly, Literature, continue at every opportunity to bite the hand that feeds them?

Although the court session at the "Lady Chatterley's" trial attracted an array of witnesses including such British literary stalwarts as E.M. Forster, Dame Rebecca West, Kenneth Muir and Helen Gardner, establishing what constituted the literary merit of Lawrence's novel remained largely unclear to the prosecution and the trial judge. Mr. Justice Byrne gave his ruling that "not art but morality was fundamental to the well-being of the community and that art was the servant of the society not the privileged visitant from another higher real of being." The novel was expurgated and for the moment the State emerged the sole performer on the territorial stage.

Based on his 1996 Clarendon lectures at Oxford, the main theme of Ngugi's text is the relationship between the art of State and the state of art in Africa, "between rulers and writers, between Plato's guardians of the State and his mindless possessed who sing by the power divine."

Sub-divided into four sections, the first section of the text under review, "Art war with the State: traces the emergence of art in human life and the subsequent appearance of the State as a patriarch wielding coercive instruments and institution for the regulation of society. Ngugi argues that the State and the arts hold society together and have a common objective. Both are rooted in words but while the pen gives visible authority to the words of a writer, the gun gives visible authority to the words of a ruler. In absolutist societies, the holder of the pen is seen as the arch enemy of the holder of the gun which enforces words of the law. Thus pen points and gun points stand in confrontation.

Ngugi analyses four aspects of art which often conflicts with the State. The godlike aspect of art is creativity. Creativity subsists on change and motion. In this aspect of art “lies the clue to the essential conflict between the stage of art and the art of State.” This is due to the fact that the godhood the State identifies with is not that of the creator but keeper of universal order. Whereas stability is the key for the state, art on the other hand is revolutionary by its very nature as art “Lady Chatterley’s Lover” challenges the ethical standards and stability of the wielders of State power by its revolutionary portrayals hence planting the seeds of its own banishment. Years later in 1986, the fate of “Lady Chatterley” befell Ngugi’s own novel, “Matigari” when a warrant of immediate arrest was issued with respect to the main character mistakenly taken to be a living human being by the wielders of State of power. The charge; “Asking questions related to the truth and justice of what was going in the country.” Realizing that, Matigari was a character in a text, the state expurgated the book from further circulation in February 1987.

Ngugi also analyses what he terms, the Andersen an aspect of art (after Hans Christien Andersen) where the literary writer and text innocently peer under the emperor’s clothes “to see what could be hidden there.” In short, the Andersenian child gives words to what everyone has seen but is too blinded by the authority of the state to voice. “Both the state and the arts, argues Ngugi, struggle for the voice of the community, “one to silence it and the other to give it to silence.” Art tries to restore voices while the neo-colonial State on the other hand, tries to impose silence.

The state reacts to these aspects of art sometimes by “appropriating the magic power of the art through co-option of the artists, banning the actual works of the artists, killing the power of art by taming it, reconciling art and “the State by having artists as heads of State like Plato’s celebrated philosopher-kings” and maiming the mind and body of the artist through imprisonment, exile or death. In short, the state seeks to remove “Lady Chatterley’s Lover” from the performance space. It is this space which Ngugi discusses in the second section of his text.

Ngugi’s argument is that the war between art and the State is “really a struggle between the power of performance in the arts and the performance of power by the State. “Drawing upon the history of tribulations he faced while trying to stage “The Trial of Dedan Kimathi” and “Ngaahika Ndeeda” at the Kenya National Theater and Kamirithu open-air theatre respectively in 1976, Ngugi argues that the performance space of the artist stands for openness while that of the State stands for confinement. While “art breaks down barriers between peoples, the State erects them.”

In a subtle comment regarding his freedom as an exile, Ngugi intimates that the exiled artist is forcefully removed from the space that nourishes his/her imagination and “A writer floating in space without anchorage in his/ (her) country is like a condemned person.

The third section, "The allegory of the cave" is largely dedicated to a reading of Armah's "The Beautiful Ones are not yet born" in the light of Ngugi's pet-topic, the language issue of African literary expression. Ngugi identifies three types of the modern African interpreter of European tongues; the interpreter as a foreign agent and messenger, as a double agent of people's scout and guide to the stars of freedom. The high point of Ngugi's argument is that "Euro phone African literature has usurped the name of African literature... and there are hardly any conferences anywhere of those who work in African languages.

The final lecture, "Oral Power and Euro phone glory" laments the usurpation of "Orature"- "the great legacy of African life an languages" by Euro phone rather than African languages. Orature has become a stolen legacy alongside other legacies of Africa.

The mission of art as Ngugi concludes is "dreaming to change the conditions that confine human life." Art has the right to take up pen points o write down our dreams for a world in which at the very least there are no prisons and gun points."

Most of the arguments put forth by Ngugi echo Jean-Paul Sartre's (1988). Sartre has argued that writing is a certain way of wanting freedom. But alas, there is no given freedom, "One must win an inner victory over one's passions, one's race, one's class and one's nation and must conquer other men as long with oneself. " The attainment of the dream world remains perpetually elusive. The writer gives society a "guilty conscience" and is therefore ill-fated to be in a state of unending antagonism towards what Sartre calls, "the conservative forces which are maintaining the balance he tends to upset."

Eventually, it dawns on one that "Lady Chatterley's Lover" could certainly not finally be expected to celebrate the moral pretensions of British conservative high society. That would perhaps be tantamount to being liberated from its mission. As Sartre observes, "Literature, entirely liberated, would represent negatively in, so far as it is a necessary moment in reconstruction. "What Literature means and why it adamantly and often abuses the fountain from which it drinks defines its subliminal textuality and constitutes its ontological nature.

"Pen points, Gunpoint's and Dreams" in its own right, is a welcome addition to the growing library of incisive literary essays by an accomplished African fiction writers who have of late given due sway to the essay as an equally vibrant and relevant mode of stating and re-stating the continent's joys and woes.