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**HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION AND THE POSTCOLONIAL  
AFRICAN AND INDIAN NOVEL: THE CASE OF NGUGI'S "PETAL  
OF BLOOD" AND RAJA RAO'S "KANTHAPURA"**

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**ABSTRACT :** Both Rao and Ngugi have grappled with the trajectory of their continent's history Whether in their prose narratives or polemical essays, they offer deep philosophical reflections on "the trouble with Africa and India", then and now. I believe that both novelists did write fiction that reconstructed a historical narrative or has been in dialogue with the past. Given the broad scope of the historical framework and the wide range of historical material that pervades most of their narratives, I will refer briefly to the writers' late novels which exemplify best the ideological moorings that shape their historical vision. This attempt is double-fold because on one side it will show the interrelation between history and fiction as narrative mediations of reality. On the other side, it will maintain the claim that despite their divergent ideological orientations and contrary to many critical assertions, both Ngugi's and Raja Rao's visions do intersect. As much as India and Africa is shaped by independence and neo-colonialism, identity cannot be understood purely as a reaction to Euro-American influences any more than by viewing literature produced in contemporary India and Africa in a vacuum. Rather, much of contemporary Indian and African literature seeks to conceptualize identity as an observation of tradition with a vision to the future. This paper offers a theoretical and historical background associating the conventions of the art of narration with postcolonial texts before providing a close reading of two novels, from two different continents Ngugi Wa Thiango's *Petals Of Blood* (1977) and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938).

**KEY WORDS:** Reconstruction, Post-colonial, Narrative, Contemporary, Interrelation.

**INTRODUCTION:** By the 1970s, the historical study of colonial empires had become one of the deadest of dead fields within the discipline of history. Students interested in pushing the frontiers of historical research looked to Africa, Asia, or Latin America, or they sought to look at Europe and North America "from the bottom up." The revival of interest in the colonial world a

generation later reflects the influence of literature and anthropology, and, more important, wider intellectual currents that threw into question the most basic narratives and the most fundamental ways in which knowledge is configured. Rao's first novel *Kanthapura* presents the crucial historical events of the nineteen-thirties. The novel focuses on the villagers of Kanthapura who participate in India's struggle for independence. In this term paper the features of the novel will be elaborated. It will have a good look at the credibility of the novel *Kanthapura*, at the East-West conflict as well as at Gandhi's influence on the villagers of Kanthapura. On the other hand like all good African writers, Ngugi tries, as faithfully as possible, to present the Kenyan society to us as he has known it. Thus *Petals of Blood*, his fourth novel, is a dramatization and condemnation of the ruthless capitalist exploitation of the masses by those in privileged positions in independent and free Kenya. Ngugi's pre-occupation in his novels revolves around five main issues-politics, economics, culture, land history and the role of the church in the Kenyan struggle for independence. In Ngugi's view the missionary and the colonial administrator are brothers who fight for the same objective. The assertion is so because Ngugi sees that the church plays an important role in enslaving the souls of Kenyans by robbing them of their culture just as colonialism robs them of their land and other material possessions. Ngugi has tried to chronicle the events that took place in his country, Kenya after independence.

**DISCUSSION :**

Indeed, history may well be compared with fiction because both invoke the principles of selection and derive their material from specific cultures and historical experiences. Moreover, both are narratives and products of an individual interpretation. Even if history pretends to relate "real" events, fiction can use its "fictionality" to signify or point at truth. In "The Content of the Form", Hayden White discusses the interplay between history and narrative. His analysis may be

useful in giving this article a theoretical framework. He argues that the historical text is necessarily a literary artifact because the process of creative imagination involves the writer of fiction as much as it does the historian. (The Content of the Form, 3) White addresses this issue by blurring the distinction between truth and fiction. One can produce an imaginary discourse about real events that may not be less 'true' for being imaginary.

Never before the colonial transformation has been depicted so faithfully as in *Kanthapura* linking. *Kanthapura*, The first major Indian novel in English was written in the colonial India in 1930. It deals with the Civil Disobedience Movement of the 1930s. Mahatma Gandhi on the participation of a small village of South India in the national struggle calls for the story's central concern. But this novel of colonial India is post-colonial in spirit for various reasons. To deify Gandhi is a part of the process of decolonizing the Indian mind. As in Jayanta Mahapatra's post colonial poem 'Requiem', Gandhi is deified also in *Kanthapura*. Jayanta Mahapatra wrote: "It is a world in itself/this ahimsa/With its mysterious shadows /Lurking under ancient places /That assumes the classes /Self sustaining light of suns /a redefinition of beauty". This is also very much true of Gandhism in *Kanthapura* embodied through the character of Moorthy, one of the tools of the narrative.

Therefore, I maintain that the narratives of both Ngugi and Raja Rao can be seen as part of African and Indian historiography. They both operate at an interesting standpoint with regard to the relationship between reality and fiction. Each of them is attempting to capture a reality of a past through the use of fiction. Their novels constitute a sweeping historical narrative that tells the story of both Kenya and India from the early days of British colonization to the contemporary post-colonial period. While each of Ngugi's novels, ranging from *The River Between* to *Matigari*, covers a limited period in the history of Kenya, Rao's late novels, *The Serpent And The Rope*, and *Kanthapurando* not focus on a particular moment in the history of Ghana and India respectively, but the scope of these narratives is much broader encompassing the historical experience of slavery, colonialism and then neo-colonialism of both India and Africa. Given the impact of colonialism on African history and the symbolic impact of colonialist historiography on the African imagination, it is obvious that history is a crucial area of contestation for most African writers, Ngugi, who seeks to extort the control of their cultural identities from the metropolitan center of Europe. As Helen Tiffin observes, "the rereading and the rewriting of the European historical and fictional record are vital and inescapable tasks. These subversive

maneuvers, rather than the construction or reconstruction.....are what is characteristic of post-colonial texts, as the subversive is characteristic of post-colonial discourse in general." ("Post-colonial Literatures and Counter-discourse", p.16). Through the very nature of the writing, the African and Indian historical context is selectively created and rhetorically produced.

Raja Rao's first novel becomes interesting for people who want to gain knowledge about the Indian rural life, because the community is displayed as a 'peasant society'. The novel begins with a vivid description of the village *Kanthapura* which is "high on the Ghats" and "in the province of Kara" (Rao, Raja. *Kanthapura*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993: 1). The village is divided in five districts, namely in a "Brahmin quarter", a "Pariah quarter", a "Potter's quarter", a "Weaver's quarter", as well as a "Sudra quarter". From this point of view, it results that every caste group has a particular social environment and an area in the "caste ridden traditional rural society", where its members live and work (Sudhakar Rao, Akkinepally. *Socio-Cultural Aspects of Life in the Selected Novels of Raja Rao*). By portraying the landscape and introducing her acquaintances, the narrator Achakka, an old woman of the village, takes the reader on a walk through the village. Mentioning the vicinity like the Tippur Hill, the river Himavathy and the red Kenchamma Hill, the novel creates a tranquil atmosphere. Unfortunately, the noise caused by labour, when Indian goods are shipped off across the sea, destroys the peaceful tranquillity for a moment (Rao 1993: 1). But as soon as the carts, which contain Indian commodities, have reached the hilltop, calmness returns to *Kanthapura*. This implies that the economical and political British intervention into the Indian daily life heavily disturbs the villagers.

***"The tempo of Indian life must be infused into our English expression ..... we in India, think quickly, we talk quickly and when we move, we move quickly. Our paths are paths interminable".(Kanthapura).***

Raja Rao presents the story of *Kanthapura* as a *Sthalapurana* in English, coloured by the regional idiom of South India. The narrative that he offers recalls as visionary experience. The narrator of the story, Achakka, having her gone through it all, is reliving in memory an unforgettable experience of the heroism and tragedy of the entire village. Since *Kanthapura* is a novel of memory, Raja Rao freely uses reflection, dream, flash back, reminiscence and narration of inter-connected episodes. Rejecting the stream of consciousness technique he employs the local form of narration, which is a kind of non-stop, breathless

style of story-telling. Starting with an account of the village and its surroundings, the narrator passes on to introducing the main characters, and straightway plunges into describing how the Gandhi an Satyagraha Movement came to the village and what repercussions it had on the village community. From the beginning to the end, it is a non-stop emotion-packed narration that is bound to touch the heart of the reader.

Raja Rao's narrative art retains the native Indian flavor inspite of his using the foreign medium of English. The narrator has an easy manner of presentation without being in any way –uneasy, awkward or self conscious. Her, language suffers from no distortion even though it belongs to the Indian situation and absorbs the Indian manner of speech and gesture. The peculiarities of the narrative art are in tune with the complexity of the experience that is presents. The captivating rhythm of narration may be noticed in the following description of the Satyagraha Movement:

*“.....day after day Revenue Notices fell yellow into our hands, and we said, let them do what they will, we shall not pay our revenues. And the new Patel came, and behind the Patel came the policeman and behind the policeman the landlords agent, and we said, “Do what you will, we shall not pay.”*

*Petals of Blood*, the African Epic, reconstruct a nation's history with all its woes and wounds from the pre-colonial faithfulness to the post-colonial betrayals. Here, Ngugi constructs a chronicle of exploitation and of struggles for liberation, notably the resistance against imposition of British rule and the Mau Mau rebellion in the 1950's. Kenya of *Petals of Blood* is a land of greed and corruption with a handful turncoat who ruthlessly impose their will on the many to exploit them. *Petals* appear as the symbol of purity, of inspiration, and of purification; the man {comprador bourgeoisie} who deflowers a virgin by force flowers himself in blood. *Petals of Blood* deals in the main with neo-colonialism in all its manifestations: oppression, exploitation, social abuse and injustice and thus “...it probes the history of the heroic struggles of the people of Kenya, from pre colonial times to the present day, within a comprehensive cultural perspective which embraces the political, religious, economic and social life of Kenya”.(Pandurang, 132) Ilmorog, the locale of the novel is transformed into a proto-capitalist society with all the attendant problems of prostitution, social inequalities, misery, uncertainty and inadequate housing. Ngugi hopes that out of *Petals of Blood*, Kenyans (Africans) might gather ‘petals of revolutionary love’. In the world of

*Petals of Blood* nothing is free and the slogan ‘eat or be eaten’ is commonplace.

The protagonists of the novel are the losers under the new order: Munira, dismissed in colonial days from an elite boarding school for his involvement in a strike against the authoritarian British Headmaster; Karega, dismissed from the very school for the same reason; Wanja, whose brilliant studies were aborted when she became pregnant by the industrialist who had seduced her; Abdullah, who lost a leg in the Mau Mau revolt only to find others reaping the fruits of Independence. *Petals* represents Ngugi's anti-imperialist consciousness, which is a part of his dialectical design. New order brings only hunger, pauperization and violence disguised as capitalist development. 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)*

Any account that neglects the detail and texture of *Petals of Blood* risks missing crucial features of what makes his work important. What, to a Kenyan reader, may be close to a roman à clef and be scathingly direct (or, inversely, seem specifically wrong or simplistic) may appear quite differently to the foreign reader. When a writer has been gaoled, presumably because of his writing (though this was not the official reason given) it may seem perverse and even ungenerous to insist precisely on trying to establish the nature of the commitment in his work and the form it takes, to indicate the extent to which a novel uses literary and formal devices to shape (which of course is the same thing as distorting) history and our sense of it. But if the literary critic is not able to elucidate the difficulties and possibilities of the mode of discourse with which he is dealing – and thus its interest – he can only abandon the novel to the social historian as so much picturesque but unreliable data the latter needs somehow to verify.

Here my attention will go to an analysis of the role and portrayal of the central characters Karega and Munira, their relation to the problematic heroes (to invoke Lukacs) of the earlier novels; my argument will be that Ngugi through these heroes is indicating and trying to solve the dilemmas of the group to which he belongs, the African intellectual elite in Kenya. This novel comes after a gap of some ten years in Ngugi's novel-writing, and though in some ways a highly schematic and symbolic rather than realistic novel, it deals with a fuller range of economic and historic analysis than the earlier works. Whether it is in naming the foreign countries and interests influencing Kenyan

politics, analyzing the changing class position of the Kenyan bourgeoisie (a dependent comprador group becoming a national bourgeoisie through the use of state-controlled and financed economic agencies), revealing the political motives behind renewed oath-taking ceremonies (presumably based on what happened after the Mboya and Kariuki murders), subjecting the official versions of Kenyan progress and prosperity to a scathing satire, or presenting the forgotten victims of the drought, there is a density and specificity that shows that Ngugi has done his home-work. These realistic and even naturalistic aspects of the novel do not, however, make it a realist or naturalist novel. The influence of Ousmane, suggested in the novel itself, is shown by incidents rather than a similar inwardness with union work or the growth of group consciousness. As in his earlier novels, the centre of Ngugi's thematic concern and his schematic structure is the role of the educated elite, here represented especially by Chui, Munira, Karega, and Joseph, all of whom go (at various times) to Siriana Secondary School. This old-boy tie (statistically or 'realistically' improbable, but structurally indispensable) allows Ngugi to make a series of comparisons between the characters as individuals, and also between them as representative members of the intellectual elite making significantly different political choices.

What Ngugi does, especially in his portrayal of Munira and Karega, is to rework his previous concerns with the role and function of the educated minority into a set of divisions. Karega, like Njoroge in *Weep Not, Child*, is the poor bright boy attracted to the daughter of the wealthy prominent pro-British Christian farmer, whose family intervenes fatally. Once again he has a brother in the Mau-Mau. Munira, the son of the prominent farmer, is the victim, as Njoroge and Waiyaki in *The River Between* were, of the education he has received and his sense of his own potential and duty. His reason for going to Ilmorog, the desolated, drought-stricken village is part duty, part escape. He is referred to as being in a twilight state – the similarity to Mugo, the central figure of *A Grain of Wheat*, who escapes from political reality and engagement into a twilight world of religious reverie is clear. His religious concern is to be developed much more fully than Mugo's till, finally, prey to revivalist religious fantasy, he tries to murder Karega by burning the hut in which, in fact, the directors of the brewery are meeting (I use the word fantasy with some hesitation, but there seems to be nothing more than simple irony in the fact that Munira becomes an instrument of justice and vengeance. The symbolic significance, in other words, underlies the text, rather than being made manifest in it). As befits the would-be Marxist analysis, even religious belief is not autonomous

and independent, but comes as part of the schematic opposition – it is organized by Americans who make money from the collections while providing the workers with an alternative to trade-union and political activity. Karega, by contrast, after an intellectual Odyssey that takes him from idealisation of a previous generation, through Black Consciousness and Negritude, and liberal legally-based reformism, ends with a Marxist understanding of history and class struggle, and a commitment to trade-union organization. At the end of the novel he is gaoled, unjustly accused of the murder, and imprisoned because of his political activity even when his innocence is clear, but the general strike he has been trying to organize springs up miraculously (even the unemployed are going to take part).

In spite of the systematic differences between Munira and Karega, they end as sacrifices and victims. Only Joseph, the totally-committed younger generation militant, seems to escape this sacrificial pattern. The moment of positive communion Munira and Karega share while drinking the Theng'eta after the first harvest is degraded, like the drink itself, in the new commercial Ilmorog. Both stay out of the songs separated from the society around them, in spite of certain group efforts such as the march on the city. Ngugi's recourse, in the case of Karega, is to take this detachment to be the necessary quality of the revolutionary leader – the militant must be able to analyze piercingly, to reconcile different workers' interests by making them aware of themselves as a dispossessed proletariat with a common fate rather than as members of ethnic groups. We may seem far removed from the idealistic young figures of reconciling sacrifice in the earlier novels, or from the sacrifice of a Mugo that saves him and those round him from the past, but there are important structural links between these earlier figures, isolated, yet sacrifices for unity, and the isolated revolutionary sacrificing himself for class unity, as there are between the earlier figures and the isolated deranged mystic who believes he is saving the community. *Petals of Blood* and the problems it poses for an understanding of Ngugi's development. The various possible paths for the elite are clear in the comparison of Chui with Karega, Munira, and Joseph, and this marks the fragmentation of the ideal of the intellectual's clear-cut, central role. Yet, in spite of this, and of the analysis of the country in class and not nationalist or ethnic terms (an important change in the content of Ngugi's thought), the central structural role of the elite persists. Karega continues to be a mediating figure and to draw his power and unhappiness from that; he acts individually, idealistically, and representatively. The socialist or communist alternative to capitalism



here offers the intellectual a way back to importance. Even Munira, though presented as having failed totally in his emotional and political commitments, parodies the same structure in his final actions.

#### CONCLUSION:

Because the political rupture which independence created did not, according to many writers, necessarily mean an ideological epistemological rupture, the narrative, in Gikandi's words, "can indeed propose an alternative world beyond the realities imprisoned within colonial and postcolonial relations of power". By resorting to the mythical to give space to the production of imagination, Achebe for instance, maintained that it was not enough to evoke "geographical, political, economic and other rational explanations. . . (for) there will always remain an area of shadows where some (at least) of the truth will seek to hide." in terms of form, this rediscovery of history marks a rupture with the older ahistorical, if not antihistorical, bias of literature and criticism, in which 'formalisms' of various kinds dominated the literary scene. Therefore, one might argue that history is the stuff of which African and Indian literature and more particularly the postcolonial novel is made. The essential force of African and Indian literature is their reference to the historical and experiential, and the main task of criticism is to bring that force into focus. This emphasis again relates to the traumas of colonialism and the resulting conflictive identity; the Modern literature of both India and Africa has grown out of the rupture created within our indigenous history and way of life by the colonial experience. For both Ngugi and Rao, the desire to come to terms with a fractured history and a disrupted cultural identity induced the enduring importance of the historical reconstruction. Given the impact of colonialism on history and the symbolic impact of colonialist

historiography on the imagination, it is obvious that history is a crucial area of contestation for most African and Indian writers, including both Ngugi and Rao, who seek to extort the control of their cultural identities from the metropolitan center of Europe. These writers, in dealing with history, are faced with the double task of challenging European colonialist historiography and proposing positive African and Indian alternatives through the recovery "of an Indo-African past that is usable in the construction of a better future."

Through the above discussion we can say that *Petals Of Blood* and *Kanthapura* fits into the mode of postcolonial historical fantasy. Both the novels are experiential, interrogative and subjective as well. However, the text in both the novels is hybridized and must fall between the extremes of postmodern polarity on one hand and the desire to root narrative between national specifics on other. The individual voice is creeping progression of time and history. Nevertheless, the text conclusion is open ended.

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