

# **The Picture of the Fallen Woman in Ngugi's Novels *Petals of Blood* and *Matigari***

**Mais Sbeih**

Ph.D. Scholar in English at Osmania University

Hyderabad

---

## **ABSTRACT**

African in general have gone through innumerable and intolerable kinds of exploitation and oppression starting from the colonial rule and ending with the neo-colonial era. Women in particular are subjugated to much more oppression either from the African men or from the colonizers and their agents. Since the term subaltern is related to post-colonialism. In post-colonial theory, the colonizers are viewed as masculine power and the colonized are inferior. Men of the colonized nation were suppressed and ruled over by the colonizers, this made them practice oppression on their women. The idea that men are superior and women are inferior and subordinate to men has become a conventional myth in the patriarchal society. Men have the lust of power. In men-women relationship men are the conqueror and women are conquered and prostituted. Ngugi wa Thiong'o as a Marxist and Socialist committed writer finds that it is his duty to denounce all the evil practices that are widely spread in his society, in this paper, an endeavor is made to show how Ngugi uses the Marxist ideology to expose the injustice that has been made upon African women in neo-colonial Kenya. Ngugi employs the female characters and gives them voices to speak and denounce the mal practices.

## **1- Introduction :**

As an African and committed writer Ngugi plays an important role in the messianic mission of awakening the lethargic masses and denouncing all the social, economic, religious and political evils that pervade the African society. In most of his literary fiction, Ngugi employs the Marxist approach to literature in which the latter embodies and reflects class struggle in any society and that literature and art can affect the society even lead to revolution. Building on Antonio Gramsci's idea " that the dominant class controls the views of people by many means, one of which is the art"(115).

This paper is encapsulated in the subaltern theoretical framework as it is concerned with the marginalized women category. It also examines how the African women are sexually abused, oppressed and dominated by men and how they have been deprived of their voices due to the colonial and neo-colonial strategies and the hegemonic patriarchal dominance. Ngugi in his novels *Petals of Blood* and *Matigari* has equipped his female characters with a voice to speak about the reasons behind being fallen or prostitutes, moreover, their voices prove their disapproval with the situation and how they have contributed in changing their status from being passive and oppressed in the beginning into participating in the process of change and redeem themselves from the fallen picture of being mere prostitutes. In the end, Wanja and Guthera refute to be “subordinated groups accept the ideas, values and leadership of the dominant intellectuals neither because they are physically or mentally induced to do so, nor because they are ideologically indoctrinated, but because they have reasons of their own.” (168)

Homi K.Bhabha emphasized the importance of social power relations in defining subaltern social groups as “oppressed racial minorities whose social presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority group”. (53).

Spivak proposes a theory of subalternity in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In this essay, she vindicated the limitations of the subalterns, asking “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (283). By “subaltern” Spivak means the oppressed subjects or more generally those “of inferior rank” (283). She goes on to add that “In the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (287).

From Spivak’s perspective, women are subalterns as they are oppressed by men. There is not any type of logic that biological difference between men-women put women in subordinate position but it is the fact of women’s position in society. Women’s body is the first and foremost reason of their exploitation. The selected novels reflect the same situation of African women.

## **2- The Impact of the British Colonization on the African Women:**

It is crystal clear that the British invade any country for their own benefit not for the wellbeing or uplifting or even bringing democracy and freedom to this

country. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft uses the term post-colonial to refer to “all the culture affected by imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (2). The definition given by Ashcroft has triggered diverse responses from every nook and cranny of the world. The authors of *The Empire Writes Back* hold the opinion that “no society can ever be entirely free of such effects and that contemporary forces such as globalization are evidence of continuing control of the West over the Rest” (194). The term “post-colonialism” has been purposely hyphenated in *The Empire Writes Back* in order to add a stress on the “discursive and material effects of the historical “fact” of colonialism, resisting an increasingly indiscriminate attention of cultural difference and marginality of all kinds” (198).

The process of colonization employs many strategies in order to facilitate the colonizer’s grip over the colonized country. Here are some of these strategies: The first method is the Christian Missionaries : who adopted the motto of uplifting the weaker and oppressed races of the world. This method proves to be skeptical and untrue in reality as the missionaries’ true aim of annihilating the cultural and religious fabric of the colonized community is revealed and exposed.

The second approach is to open schools with English headmasters and teachers and a totally anti-national curriculum which aim is to demolish the native African language together with its history and teach the colonial language and history instead. Moreover, the colonial power infused the patriarchal ideologies into the educational system and encouraged the boys more than the girls to join the schools. In this way, they encourage men to suppress women. As a result male domination makes the African women submissive, powerless and disabled socially, economically and politically. This method has caused gender conflict, which diluted the stability of the African society. In the opinion of Barry:

All the colonialized nations of the world have a subaltern identity. It is only in the post-colonial context that they do realize their past-subordination. It is a Herculean task for the people of the subaltern nations to reclaim their own past. To

their great chagrin, the subalterns recognize the fact that their minds are colonized and it is very difficult to erode the colonialist ideology. The subaltern identity is the identity of difference and the subaltern “celebrates hybridity, and cultural polyvalency (Barry 198).

The third strategy is the establishment of the system of local administration which is commonly known as indirect rule. This system operates in alliance with pre-existing leaderships and British institutions.

The fourth method is the establishment of private companies that were granted large territories in Africa to administer. These companies were found by local businessmen who were interested in exploiting the national resources of their countries. There are many methods to mention. In common, we can say that the influence of colonization and neo-colonization of Africa was quite evident in the social, political, economic and educational fields. This led African writers in general and Ngugi in particular to commit their art for the common purpose of their communities and for finding solutions to the prevailing evils. Ngugi in his two novels *Petals of Blood* and *Matigari*, employs the young prostitutes Wanjia and Guthera to translate the prostituted economy of Kenya in neo-colonial period. Ngugi employs the picture of the fallen woman in these two novels in order to condemn the socio-economic practices of the neo-colonial leaders.

### **3- The Picture of the Fallen Wanjia in *Petals of Blood*:**

Despite the variety of its themes, *Petals of Blood* also sheds light on the treatment of the African women in the corrupt patriarchal society of neo-colonial Kenya, it shows how these women are either muted or prostituted in this period. Women were colonized by their men before the colonizers colonize them. They were passive, ignorant, treated only as sex gratifying objects. They were completely possessed by men as any other object they own. According to Marxist feminists, women should be treated equal to men. (Delaney 206). Ngugi compares the African woman to the land which is a very critical issue in his novels in the political and social domain. Land which was once owned by the African man before it has been robbed by the colonizer before independence and by the neo-colonizer in post-independence era. It is

for the sake of land the natives offer their heavy sacrifices to redeem this land. The importance of land comes in parallel with the importance of African women. The real situation in neo-colonial Africa is illustrated clearly in Karega's statement:

We are all prostitutes, for in a world of grab and take, in a world built on a structure of inequality and justice, in a world where some can eat while others can only toil, some can send their children to schools and others cannot...in such a world we are all prostituted. (Thiong'o 286).

Ngugi's fiction shows how the land emerges a docile female figure. The possession of a land is like the possession of a woman, so as figuratively the land was once raped by the settlers, the woman is also raped, prostituted and possessed. In his novels, Ngugi shows how African women are made commodities for the colonizers and the tourists. Wanjia is a very good instance for such a trade in which she as a prostitute participated when she opens a whorehouse and hired young girls to work in. in this way Wanjia plays the role of the victimizer over the victimized and an oppressor and an exploiter. Ngugi intends his women protagonists to profess in prostitution not to condemn them and judge them publically rather to condemn the corrupt situation which forced these women into prostitution. A woman is a human being she was granted a voice by God, but in the patriarchal and corrupt society she is not allowed to speak. She is mute just like the land. She is oppressed, exploited and harassed. Gayatri Spivak in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* explains why the subaltern woman's speech is not heard. It is due to the factor of noise or most probably their speech does not make any difference in changing their situation. It is power that makes any speech heard as long as the women are submissive to the men their voice will not be heard. In *Can the Subaltern speak?* Spivak says: "As object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow". (287). The woman is owned by a man as the land is owned by the same man. But in Ngugi's fiction the female is given a voice to speak, to revolt, to assert herself

just like Wanjia who was once a victim in neo-colonial Kenya, searching for a job like any other African woman, but due to the corruption and specifically the moral one that devastates Kenya it is impossible for a woman to find a job without being asked to offer her body to the boss. This is exactly what happened to Wanjia during the journey to the city to meet their representative where Kimeria asked Wanjia to share him his bed in order to help her and her friends. This evil is widespread in Africa and Ngugi sheds light on it in almost all his novels, he feels that it is his duty to speak about the evils that pervade his country and to commit his art to the plight of his people and moreover to find solutions to these evils.

To study Wanjia from the subaltern perspective is to sympathize with her and with every woman like her not to condemn her for what she has committed. As a subaltern woman, Wanjia tries to retaliate against the black hegemony for the suffering she has undergone. She acts very natural in an unnatural situation where women are being treated as commodities and sex tools for the fellow black and the white tourists. Wanjia accepts the job as a barmaid in Abdulla's shop not because she is so interested in such kind of a job rather she is unable to find any other suitable job. When the neo-colonial agents destroyed the traditional and the social fabric of Ilmorog and nothing is left for Wanjia, she was forced to play the role of the victimizer and she turns from innocence into depravity by using young African girls as prostitutes and opening a whorehouse. This act marks Wanjia's fall from innocence into depravity, from being a victim of the system into being a victimizer where she employs the motto of "eat or be eaten". (345).

Wanjia at the end understands the power of education as she tries to compensate her failure in her life by taking care of Joseph and insisting that he should learn because learning is the best way to assert one's self.

The act of burning that Ngugi employs and which Wanjia was exposed to, acts as a penance for Wanjia's adulterous deeds and it purifies her soul from the sins which she has committed. Ngugi's aim behind this scene is to assert that his female protagonist though is a fallen woman, yet she bears the core of goodness inside her and that is why Wanjia is associated with fire for three times in the novel. This fire is her earthly salvation and punishment.

Ngugi moreover, justifies Wanjia's adultery with Karega as free from sins and it was free "from the burden of guilt". (346).

#### **4- The Image of the Fallen Guthera in *Matigari***

Guthera is a beautiful lady with a great sex appeal as she was first introduced in the novel where she offers her body to Matigari. The exploitation of Guthera as a sexual object shows a sign of sufferings during the time the novel *Matigari* was written. Guthera while was still too young, sticks to her virtue as a Christian and decent woman. She comes from a family where their father has the view that all the children are equal because they are all God's creatures. As a woman who believes in God, Guthera serves only two masters; her heavenly father who grants her the blessing of life and the earthly father who brought her up with so much love. Her earthly father was arrested and the prison superintendent asked her to give him her purity in exchange with her father freedom (p.35). This indicates that women were used as sex objects by those who represent the law in neo-colonial Africa. Guthera's refusal to sacrifice her virginity stresses that women can also stand up on their two feet to stuck on what is right. As a result of her disapproval to share the detective her bed, her father is sentenced to death and this accumulates in her a deep sense of regret and marks Guthera' first step into the wrong path, but she swears never to sleep with police men since that day. The roaming in the streets was not sufficient for Guthera to feed her siblings and afford sending them to school. Abrams says that "providing education to all means the future generation will have control of their own future". According to Marx:

There would be equality for all to education. Enough childcare facilities would mean that women would no longer have to be financially dependent on men. Caring for children and bringing women into the work place is the first step to equality. This also means that they involved in planning the economy and so changing the society. This would abolish prostitution which he sees as a by-product of capitalist system that viewed everything in financial terms (Raphael, 1993).

This indicates that women have no choice but to turn to prostitution for financial support. This is exactly the fate of Guthera who was left penniless and hungry together with her siblings. Guthera is forced to sell her body in order to feed the empty stomachs of her siblings at this point, the fallen hood of Guthera begins. Like Wanja and Wariinga, Guthera was a victim of the harsh reality of life and an easy prey for the debauched men. On page 37 of the novel *Matigari*, there is a good example on how the sexual exploitation of women is practiced upon Guthera when the police officers set a dog on her as a punishment because she refuses to go to bed with a policeman.

Guthera broke her eleventh commandment for the sake of her siblings on the first hand and then for the sake of Matigari who saves her from the ferocious dogs of the police men. She sacrificed herself once again but this time with breaking her oath not to share police officers her bed. This reminds us of Wanja who also acts as a savior for her friends during their journey to Nairobi where she broke her oath six months after swearing never to be a whore again, but Kimeria who is her defiler and oppressor and the symbol of exploitation of Kenya's resources forces her once again to sleep with him. Both women are not sinners by nature, but it was the corrupt people and the shackles of reality which obliged these women into prostitution. These two women are able to teach lessons of sacrifice and unselfish hood to all the world which condemn them and those who are fallen like them. Unlike Guthera, the wife of the minister of Truth and Justice who used to lecture women about their places at homes and that women have to keep their modesty. She also calls publicly for severe punishment for the prostitutes, while she herself commits adultery in the wilderness with her driver. This woman and her alike are targets for Ngugi's critique as he regards them the true fallen and prostitutes of his community. Guthera quotes the minister's wife own words:

"Women are the corner-stones of the home" " all barmaids and all prostitutes should be locked up in prison because they are the ones who were causing a lot of homes to break up" (150)

According to the Christian religion, a sinner can seek salvation through penance and confession. As Guthera is a Christian woman and knows exactly the eleventh commandment and the punishment of adultery, she has to confess

her sins and repent to reach her eternal salvation and God's forgiveness. This is reminiscent of Hester Prynne in the *Scarlet Letter* who was publicly punished for committing adultery by wearing the letter A on her apron all the time, but her embroidery needle works which she denoted to help the poor act as a penance for her sins and give her another chance for forgiveness. The same way Guthera wants to correct herself, and stand up for what is right when she decides that she will follow and support Matigari in whatever he is going to do. Guthera realizes that paying back what Matigari has done to her is the only way which will help her in her sins' atonement. Matigari's messianic mission helps Guthera who some critics called her "Mary the Magdalene" to give up her stigma of whoredom to accompany Matigari in his Christ-like mission of regaining his peoples' lands and properties from the agents of colonialism represented by John Boy, Robert Williams and the corrupt government authoritarians. Now Guthera has the chance to give up the animal-like life and assert herself as a good woman. She wants to be one of the leaders of movement in the society. (Schmitt 186) says that when "women are standing up like this, they are following a path to a change that will lead to equality". Ngugi has created this woman character intending to show that women cannot only be viewed as sex-gratifying objects or second-class citizens who are waiting for the change to be accomplished by men, but they can also advocate and lead to societal changes and prove that they are equal to men. Females play a vital role in the reproduction process and still they are labeled as "the second sex or the weaker sex." There are many instances in the novel where women are referred to as corner stones of their homes. They set example for the children and are expected to look after them. Ngugi displays awareness that "Kenyan women are subject to double oppression as women and as workers he tends to suggest that what is urgent is the liberation of women as workers rather than women" (J.Ogude 124)

In the context of equality between man and woman, De Beauvoir holds the view:

Thus, humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him: she is not regarded as an autonomous being...The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems waiting in significance

by itself ... Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees: thus she is called "the sex", by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex, absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute, she is the Other. (Beauvoir 16).

### **5- Conclusion:**

In spite of the fact that women obey the whims and fancies of the men, yet they have a voice granted to them by God, this voice should be used for dissent and approval. All women who became victims of patriarchal violence and atrocities had something to say or they wanted to make their position clear whether they were fallen or not. This paper does not intend to justify all the fallen women in the world, but the few who are forced into prostitution due to the harsh circumstances of life and a major part falls on the patriarchal society which is up to day still practice discrimination and treat women as lower to men. The voice of dissent and especially that of the subaltern women in the selected novels is asserted in the end. The fallen women did only a partial role in Ngugi's novels in order to demonstrate the horrible picture of the neo-colonial Kenya, but Ngugi's socialist vision at the end of each novel serves to rescue his female protagonists from being totally fallen.

### Works Cited

- Abrams, M.H. *Marxist Criticism. A glossary of Literary Terms.* . Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Publishers, 1999. Print.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory.* Chennai: T.R. Publications, 1999. Print.
- Beauvoir, De Simone. *Introduction: the Secon Sex.* Ed. H.M Parshey. London: Picador, 1988. Print.
- Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* . London and Newyork: Routledge, 1989. Print.
- Delaney, Tim. *Contemporary Social Theory Investigation and Application.* Delhi: Pearson Education, 2005. Print.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks.* Ed. Trans.Quentin. Trans. Quentin Hoare and Nowell Smith Geoffrey. London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd, 1971. Print.
- J.Ogude. *Ngugi's Novel and African History: Narrating the Nation.* London : Pluto Press, 1999. Print.
- Raphael, M. *Essays iN Marxist Aesthetics.* London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd., 1993. Print.
- Schmitt, R. *Introduction to Marx and Engels: A Critical Construction.* London : Westview Press, 1997. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture.* Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberge. London: Macmillan, 1988. Print.
- Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. *Petals of Blood.* Kenya: Heinemann- African Writers Series, 1977. Print.
- . *Matigari.* Kenya: Heinemann, 1989. Print.