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AN EXAMINATION OF POST - INDEPENDENCE DISILLUSIONMENT IN NGUGI wa THIONGO'S *THE BLACK HERMIT*

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Abstract

*Besides the entertainment value of literature, the potency of literature to educate the people, shape the people's minds and raise an informed population that contributes meaningfully to nation building and development cannot be overemphasized. Colonialism was not a good experience for many African countries and that was why Independence from the colonial authorities were greatly anticipated. There was the general feeling that the countries would do better when managed by Africans themselves. It was why soon after Independence was achieved, disillusionment became the order of the day due to the way and manner the leadership class practised disdain for local values, nepotism, tribalism, corruption and many other irresponsible conducts. This study intends to show, through the Post-Independence literary theoretical spectacle, how Ngugi's play, *The Black Hermit*, has been used to depict the sorry state of Africa, how many Africans, as a result of identity crisis, began to reject their cultural values in favour of western alternatives, and what has become of the dreams that greeted the end of colonialism. References will be made to a few other literatures other than the play under review. Our findings are that no nation can move forward if its citizens are disrespectful towards their values such as tradition and culture, or place self-interest or communal interest above national interest, indulge in corrupt practices in the scale witnessed all over post-independent Africa and display such leadership irresponsibility as evident in Ngugi's play. One's deficit in value is usually transferred to political leadership.*

Keywords: Africa, Post-Independence, African Post-Independence, Disillusionment, Post-Independence Theoretical Spectacle

Introduction

Walter Allen's submission on the importance of literature in his 1954 book remains true even today. According to him, coming from the perspectives of different writers:

Novelists have given many reasons for writing novels: Richardson believed he did so to inculcate right conduct, Fielding, to reform the manners of the age, Dickens, to expose social evils and Trollope, to make money by providing acceptable entertainment (14).

Literature is an essential tool for education in every society. From the quotation above, we can see clearly that, in the case of *The Black Hermit*, Ngugi uses literature to address the malaise that became Africa's post independent bane. Some of the challenges include westernization, tribalism, nepotism and favouritism. East African countries, unlike West African countries, had a substantial population of permanent British colonists. By their residence, they imposed upon Kenya and Uganda a British university educational system and an elite society that reflected British social behaviour. Local theatre companies offered only popular British plays for an audience that included few Africans. Ngugi wa Thiong'o decided to challenge the imposition of British values and the fact that in schools, at that time, an annual production of Shakespeare with African boys dressed in the costumes of sixteenth century England had become a ritual. Chinua Achebe was also worried, just like Ngugi, when he commented that:

Because of our largely European education our writers may be pardoned if they begin by thinking that the relationship between European writers and their audience will automatically reproduce itself in Africa (103).

This is not necessarily the truth because as Africa is uniquely different from Europe in terms of culture, language and religion, to mention just these few, so are the responses of the audiences to the literary works produced for both European and African audiences. In fact, it is a disservice to deny African audience an African literature written in African languages.

As a result of the unassailable importance of literature in the development of the society especially in terms of character moulding, in 1961, students at Makerere University established a travelling acting company, which toured Kenya and Uganda and presented plays in village halls, in churches, and even in the open air. This genuine attempt to bring theatre close to the people was hampered because there were no indigenous plays available for them to perform.

In 1962, the year of Uganda's Independence, Ngugi wrote *The Black Hermit* as a contribution to the Uhuru (freedom) celebrations. Given the theme of this play, it can hardly be considered a celebration of that event. Ngugi was an aggressive anti-colonialist, but his optimism concerning independence became pessimism considering the evidence of corruption and other vices in the new government. The betrayal of this expectation forms part of the plot of *The Black Hermit*. It was also a stimulus to Ngugi's subsequent writing, which led to a period in jail for his crime of

exposing the immoral, political and economic hypocrisy of the regime. Ngugi's mission in the play is clear as Tartule Tijah opines thus:

...the task of the writer from Chinua Achebe to Wole Soyinka and to a host of others has been to educate, to record the moves and experiences of the society and to direct the vision and sharpen the awareness of the people (13).

Every good writer is visionary, has that prophetic optic sensibility to see beyond the ordinary and chart a course towards development and national consciousness. Ngugi's *The Black Hermit* was not only condemnatory of such social ills but it was also condemned by Dickens in his novels. It was a warning that was never heeded by many African countries. The consequence of refusing to heed such warnings is why many African countries are today languishing in underdevelopment and backwardness.

After *The Black Hermit*, Ngugi became uncertain whether the English language could sustain the kind of drama he wished to write. English addressed the educated elite, while Ngugi wanted to reach the masses. From that time, he preferred to produce plays—including his *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1974) with Micere Githae-Mugo, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (1977) with Ngugi wa Mirii, and *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982)—in African languages and present them in village settings rather than in formal theaters. *The Black Hermit* has since been translated into Swahili.

African Post-Independent Disillusionment in *The Black Hermit*

According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin: “More than three-quarters of the people living in the world have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism” (43). It is a known fact that up till now, the lives of many people in very many countries in the world is still being directed, redirected and manipulated by imperialism. This is, to a very large extent, why African as a continent is grappling with the worst form of poverty despite its rich mineral resources. The resources are being utilized to the advantage of the former colonial masters and their cohorts.

Many Africans in their post-independence countries are experiencing the crisis of loyalty to their new found Christian/Islamic faith and western cultures and their traditional religious practices, culture and customs. In addition to these

fundamental issues, we have the recklessness of political leadership portrayed in their display of tribalism, nepotism and other unpatriotic vices serving as clogs in the wheel of the progress of the countries.

The overt tendency to tilt towards westernization, most often than not, results in a state of confusion, complexity, and to a very large extent, an identity crisis that leaves one in a state of being neither here nor there; a situation whereby one is neither a westerner nor a true African. Commenting on the character of Remi, the character, Elder the play, says the following:

He was a man...
Before the white man stole his heart
And turned him into a Christian (7).

This crisis is what Basil Davidson bemoans in his very important book entitled *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of Nation State*. In this book, Basil Davidson chronicles a series of distorted identities of political and cultural corruption bedeviling Africa.

This picture of confusion, complexity, rancor and helplessness is the type Ngugi has presented in *The Black Hermit*. There are many lessons one can learn from *The Black Hermit*. The society that Ngugi wa Thiong'o portrays in the play is battling a plethora of problems, but the playwright does not want to blame all of them on Africa's former colonizers. Most times, Africans spend all the time blaming their colonial masters and thereby forgetting to address problems that have grown out of their own misbehaviour such as corruption, maladministration, tribalism, nepotism and impunity.

Adigun submits thus: "Significantly, the responses of colonized (particularly those ones colonized by Britain), in forms of narratives, poetics, dramatics, treatises and dialectics on the imperial experiences have largely constituted and culminated into post-colonial theory". Ngugi's play, like many others from Africa, is sensitive to colonialism and its after effect on Africans and their society. From tribalism, religious and cultural conflicts to a leadership crisis, *The Black Hermit* brings real life experiences on stage, and the characters enact the conflicts, tensions and changes in the post-colonial Kenyan society, which is a microcosm of post-colonial Africa.

The Marua tribe sends Remi to school in the city in order to return and become their leader in the affairs of the newly independent nation of Kenya. While this step is laudable, the tribal colouration has sparks of selfish interest which backfires in the comity of communities in the post-independent Kenya. Remi is to become a sort of “local champion” for his people. The picture that has been created is that of every tribe jostling and taking positions in order to attract the spoils of governance to their own communities rather than working hard for the overall wellbeing of the country.

In the words of Egya Sule, “I am optimistic that literary writing...should provide a critical insight to...rehabilitating the ideas of the nation-state” (24). This is why in the play, after Remi's education, he returns to his tribe, leads them into joining the Africanist Party whose manifesto fits into their tribal agendum, then later loses his patience in the entire system as what he expects from those in power is dashed due to wanton corruption, tribal jingoism and leadership irresponsibility. The leaders in the newly independent Kenya have turned into the man-child scenario that Ayi Kwei Armah paints in his *The Beautiful Once are not yet Born*. The natural feelings of the generality of the Kenyan public are that the leaders would work hard to better the lot of their country from where the colonial masters left off, but this was never the case. This disappointment pushes the likes of Remi away from politics because he felt that he has misled his people and disappointed his country.

The disappointment from the new leadership notwithstanding, Remi finds himself caught between his personal self and the communal self, and by extension, the new country. He loses his elder brother in an accident and tradition demands that he marries the widow, Thoni, who happens to be a woman he secretly loved before his brother married her. Fearing that Thoni never loved him *ab initio*, he runs away from her. This action, by implication, means that Remi also runs away from his customs and tradition to become a black hermit in the city where he falls in love with Jane—his white South African girlfriend.

Remi is symbolic of the very many Africans who, at the slightest provocation or without any provocation at all, run into the ever-waiting hands of the white man. Many Africans abandon their roots only to embrace foreign religion, culture and only to return most times when it may be too late just like Remi did after much persuasion. This has become a norm in post-independent Africa.

The tension caused by the disappearance of Remi is another point to look at keenly. Both the church and the elders are locked in a race to win back a lost faithful. Nyobi, Remi's mother cooperates with both parties in a desperate desire to have her

son back, no matter the situation. Even as a devoted Christian, she gives the elders her blessings to go to town in search of her son. Even when the elders indicate that they will be going with traditional concoction to help turn his heart from the city to the tribe, Nyobi gives her consent, though reluctantly, because at this point it is her son or nothing else. The tension and confusion continue as Nyobi rushes to the pastor of their local church to beg him to also go and search for Remi's in the city. The pastor stands for the church while the elders stand for tradition. Their only interest is to win Remi to their respective side. This is symbolic of the friction, collision, clash, confusion and constant war of attrition between that which is African and the West.

Commenting on post-independent westernization by African writers, Obi Wali referred to their efforts as “a minor appendage in the mainstream of European Literature [and culture]”, (qtd. in Ngugi wa Thiongo, 54). Obi Wali advocated for a less attraction to foreign languages by African writers. Ngugi reports how the likes of Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and Ezekiel Mphahlele, the leading lights of African literature, opined that Obi Wali's submission was a disservice to Africa. They opined, as their responses, that the European languages were helping to create more conscious Africans.

In the play, *The Black Hermit*, the abandonment of Thoni by Remi is symbolic of how African culture and tradition are abandoned by Africans who embrace western alternatives to their own detriment. In the play, Remi symbolically represents many Africans. As a result of the abandonment, Thoni remains helpless, sad and in pains. All attempts by her mother-in-law, Nyobi, to make her to go in search of better opportunities with a new husband failed as she prefers to wait for Remi to return from the city. Thoni's eventual death symbolizes the strangling of African values to death. A look around will simply show that many African cultural heritages have been trampled on to oblivion.

Conclusion

All the expectations Africans hoped the Independence from colonial rule would bring became a mirage. Disillusionment set in as a result of the wanton corruption, tribalism, nepotism, ethnicity, regionalism, overt westernization and irresponsible leadership. *The Black Hermit* addresses African problems that have continued to beserious problems even today. Using the theory of post-colonialism, we were able to show that the unfaithfulness of Africans to African issues has remained real today as it was many years ago after our contact with the colonialists and eventual Independence. We also deduced that, to a very great extent, colonialism has a hand in

the rot in the African society because our communities were quite organized before the coming of the West. The mess Africa has been found in has resulted in confusion, conflict, tension, uncertainty and wanton disruptions occasioned by the consequences of colonial rule. Ngugi has painted a true picture of a fractured Africa that benefits no African. Unlike Remi who returns too late for Thoni, the play urges Africans to change their ways now or lose their identity forever. The likes of Nyobi who do not really know where they stand are also urged to avoid sitting on the fence when it comes to serious matters concerning the soul of Africa.

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