

NGUGI'S POSTCOLONIAL BIBLE: *DEVIL ON THE CROSS*

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Abstract

In this article I seek to look critically at how Ngugi's novel "Devil on the Cross" is an intertext of the Bible and of his oral culture. Though it is a piece of creative writing, the novel is in a way a representative of postcolonial theories

Keywords: Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Oral culture, Postcolonial criticism

Introduction

Various authors, critical thinkers and scholars have critically discussed the relationship between the Bible and colonialism and imperialism. In their analysis and readings, they discuss how the interpretation of the Bible justified the colonialism's domination over other countries. These interpretations have led members of the dominated to resist colonialism. One of the prolific writers who has been very critical of the Bible's use is Ngugi Thiong'o, the Kenyan author, who has reflected deeply upon the biblical world and themes in his novels. In this discussion I seek to look critically at how Ngugi's novel *Devil on the Cross* is an intertext of the Bible and of his oral culture. Though it is a piece of creative writing, the novel is in a way a representative of postcolonial theories.

Postcolonial literary theory, according to Trevor James, addresses the margins, it shows how in the act of writing, the marginalized writer begins the task of asserting, re-appropriating and reclaiming power and identity against the established power of the post-colonial system even after the political independence has been achieved. The author bases his narrative on the critique of capitalism by the adoption and subversion of a Eurocentric notion of Christianity. The biblical images, parables and prose play a major role in the narrative. James asserts "the relation of theology to postcolonial literary theory in general evades any general pronouncement. Each writer, each context, and particularly each text construct the relation uniquely."

Postcolonialism and the Bible

Postcolonialism has been defined as "scrutinizing and exposing colonial domination and power as these are embodied in biblical texts and interpretations, and as searching for alternative hermeneutics while thus overturning and dismantling colonial perspectives" (ibid. 16). Musa Dube, however, asserts that the word postcolonial has been coined to describe the modern history of imperialism, beginning with the process of colonialism, through the struggles for political independence, the attainment of independence, and to the contemporary new-colonialist realities (2000:15). It is not about dwelling on the crimes of the past and their continuation, but about seeking transformation and liberation for the present. To study postcolonialism without taking into consideration the use of the Bible in informing

and justifying colonialism and imperialism is no use. The main aim of postcolonialism is not only to celebrate the presence of oppositional voices within the text but also marks out silenced voices and spaces in texts which fly in the face of hierarchical and hegemonic modes of thought. A postcolonial reading and analysis alerts one to the ways the marginalized protest. The encounter between the dominant and the subordinated is laden with duplicity-keeping secrets/lying, hiding goods, sabotage and deception. These are subversive mechanisms employed by the subordinated to resist the system of oppression. Thus the main aim of postcolonialism and biblical interpretation is to “overturn colonial assumptions” (Sug 15).

The biblical text has been used to effect so much power; it has endorsed unequal power distribution along geographical and racial differences. Postcolonialism calls on readers to search and articulate a reading that shows why the past interpretations authorized the imperial colonization of the non-Christian other and to seek liberating ways of reading for interdependence. This implies that the readings of the two groups, the West and the non-west, must take cognizance of each other’s presence and the ethical obligations that imperial history has placed on both sides. If one fails to take a position that has already been taken, then one maintains the imperialist paradigm of the West.

Ferdinand Segovia argues that postcolonialism is a critical enterprise aimed at unmasking the link between idea and power, which lies behind Western theories and learning. It is not simply a physical expulsion of imperial power nor is it simply recounting the evils of the empire and drawing a contrast with the nobility of virtues of natives and their cultures. Rather, it is an active confrontation with the dominant system of thought, its lopsidedness and inadequacies, and underlies its unsuitability for us.

Ngugu: A Critical Reading of his Novel

I begin by posing the following critical questions: How does the author look at the world; a world dominated by the reality of empire, domination, imperialism, capitalism and multinationals? How does the margin regard and treat the centre in the light of its own view of the “world” and life in that world? What conceptions of oppression and justice are to be found in the text? How does the text relate to the Bible and to the theme of decolonisation as argued by Ngugi? Such questions of culture, ideology and power emerge as crucial within the area of postcolonial studies.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o reads against the grain; by this I mean reading beyond the text, reading between the lines and reading against the grain I believe is emancipatory – it is fulfilling and liberating. My justification in reading the text in this manner is to make my study of the postcolonialism itself a mode of resistance within a dominant Eurocentric discourse.

In a famous essay titled *The Master’s Tool Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*, Audre Lorde poses a critical question: “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same house? It means that only the narrowest perimeters of change are possible and available.” The author refuses to use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house, which has been Ngugi’s argument. He argues that we ought to use our own tools so as to be able to dismantle the master’s house. Though I agree with what Lorde says, I also differ slightly with her argument. I wish to ask: Whose tools shall the servant use? Only the master’s? Are the servant’s tools not already polluted, impure and tainted by that of the Master’s? Ngugi uses the master’s tools, for example, the use of the Bible, the use of the English language and he simultaneously appropriates his own

cultural tradition in order to reflect critically and liberate. Though he advocates his way of using the tool, he is not privileging the master's tools by "admitting" that the tools Ngugi uses, are already contaminated. He acknowledges and embraces the master's tools, and at the same time, he resists and deconstructs the very same tools that he has embraced. By revisiting the Bible, adopting the English language and his own cultural tradition, he longs to create his new paradigms; of reading his own brand of tools, however caught up in the ambivalence which seems to be a characteristic of postcolonialism. Maybe the best is summed up by Caliban's speech to his master, where he argues that the master has taught him his language that he may curse him.

Ngugi's Postcolonial Bible; *Devil on the Cross*

Devil on the Cross is an intertext or if put differently is a product of "various cultural discourses." This means that intertextuality within texts concerns itself not only with the relationship between a text of verbal signs and other texts of verbal signs. Furthermore it concerns itself with the relationship between a text of signs of any sort and other signs as text, whether verbal or non-verbal in nature. As a "relative of the Bible" which has assumed the narrative tone and language of the Bible, it has employed aspects of Gikuyu oral traditions in order to reach the Kenyan peasants and workers. As an intertext, its basic force is to problematize, even spoil textual boundaries; that is those lines of demarcation which allow a reader to reflect critically on the meaning, subject or origin of writing. *Devil on the Cross* demands to explain and engage the complexities and power of the Biblical texts within culture. This means that Ngugi engages with the complexities and power of the Bible within his novel to serve his own interests and to destabilize Western interpretations that have legitimized oppression and subjugation. He views "the Christianity" brought by the missionaries as a curtain of hypocrisy and a mechanism for encouraging passive acceptance of oppression.

The novel is a text that has borders. And these borders are never solid nor stable; they are always spilling into other texts. The novel spills over into other texts and these texts are either written or oral. It spills into the written text of the Bible and it spills into the oral text of his own culture. If we are to accept that the Bible as an intertext too, are we able to establish that the messages of the book consists of a network of similitude, tensions and transformations; they're more beneficial to the reader than any synthesis. Intertextuality of a text cannot be confined to previous or subsequent texts presenting a similarity in expression or content. The Bible does not allow itself to be confined to the cultural heritage of the West, whose art and literature have been inspired by it; but it allows itself to be "othered" and be worn by different groups of people. Thus once the novel is described as an intertext, we are mainly arguing that it is a critique and also a tool of liberation, which transformed the biblical discourse into a cultural weapon. Ngugi explains thus in *Writers in Politics* as such:

Christianity, for instance, had always been used by the colonial system to rationalize inequalities; the colonial state encouraged that brand of Christianity that abstracted heaven from earthly struggles. So Mau-Mau took the same Christian songs and even the Bible, and interpreted them for themselves, giving these values and meaning in harmony with the aspirations of their struggles. Officially approved Christians sang of a host of angels in heaven. They sang of a spiritual journey, intangible universe where a metaphysical disembodied evil and good were locked in perpetual spiritual warfare for the domination of the human soul.

Devil on the Cross enjoys an expansive, even contradictory, range of meanings – in some instances it is used to designate an allusion or interconnectedness between texts. On other

occasions it engages and converses with the Bible and culture thus making the Eurocentric interpretations unstable and uncertain, since the interpretations were perceived as absolute. In fact, Eurocentric interpretations fail to “pin down” the Bible, for the same text that was used as a tool of oppression and domination is still used as a tool of liberation, emancipation and fulfilling for the reader. Despite Ngugi’s critical understanding of Christianity, he also perceives it as positive; he acknowledges that it advocates for reconciliation and unity which are two of the significant concerns in the novel. Nevertheless, in addition, he observes it as negative, because it champions attempts to wipe out aspects of *Gikuyu* cultural traditions which he cherished as a cultural nationalist. Accordingly, the novel is a host of many voices.

Donna Nolan Fewell claims in the introduction of *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* that texts “talk to one another; they punch one another, they make war with one another. They are voices in chorus, in conflict and in competition” (1993:20). Therefore the discourse of intertextuality insists that a text cannot exist as a hermetic or a self-sufficient whole, and therefore does not function as a closed text. This is so because the writer is a reader of texts before s/he is a creator of texts. The novel therefore becomes part of the Book of Culture. In his opinion for blending the Biblical prose and culture, Ngugi argues that:

I also borrowed heavily from forms of oral narrative, particularly the Conversational tone, the fable, the proverbs, song and a whole tradition of poetic self-praise or praise of others. I also incorporated a Biblical element – the parable – because many literates would have read the Bible. People would be familiar with these features and I hope that these would help the novel within a known tradition (1986:68).

Thus in the borrowing forms of traditional oral narrative and Biblical language and imagery, the novel ceases to become neither a neutral text nor a closed text. It has become at its roots a means of ideological and cultural expression and of a social transformation of which liberation and emancipation are his main goal and vision.

Though the novel is open and neutral, it is at the same time very productive. Its relationship to language is re-distributive, destructive and constructive. It becomes constructive in the sense that the new interpretations will liberate and give a completely new meaning and interpretation that is different from that which has been advocated for. This in a way opens up to new reading strategies, on how we as readers are subjects constructed in relation to texts, it urges us to assume responsibility to read critically and become writers of a certain sort; to become aware and to beware.

Ngugi lamented that “I am not a man of the church, I am not even a Christian” (1994:67); he went as to incorporate a biblical element namely the parable. This is, he was conscious of the fact that his readers were “Christian” who were influenced by their capitalist lifestyle. He uses it to criticize capitalism, subverts the Christian tradition of the cross. There is always that ambivalence that runs through the novel; his use of the biblical text and typology reveals a curious and baffling ambivalence in his attitudes towards Christianity. It is ambivalent in the sense that he adopts, appropriates and critiques it. In colonial and postcolonial discourse, Bill Ashcroft and his co-writers define ambivalence as the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the colonized and the colonizer. The relationship is ambivalent because the colonized subject is never simply and completely opposed to the colonizer. In Ngugi’s novel, he is never completely the Bible. He creatively and imaginatively uses the Christian “myth” to convey his own interpretation of Christianity.

The Cultural Voice

The narrative voice of the novel is identified as *gicaanda*. The *gicaanda*, according to Gitahi Gitahi, is an instrument made from a gourd; this grows from a ground vine, *ruungu*, an annual plant. It is multi-functioned instrument, which usually was played at an event that took place in the public square. The instrument functioned as a coded utterance which comes virtually at the beginning of the *gicaanda* festival:

Gicaandi lo ugo kana ciira
 Kana uthamaki wa riika
 Ti kuragura matua kuragura
 Na ti ciira

Gicaanda is not only magical divination
 Nor is it just diagnosing the case of illness and
 Prescribing a remedial ceremony
 Gicaandi is not a law suit.

Thus the instrument, as a discourse tool, has been blended with the voice of a prophet who becomes the omniscient narrator of the story and calls himself the "prophet of justice." He begins with a fervent, intimate testimony of the first person. He claims that the story he is about to relate is no ordinary story but a divine revelation granted to him after seven days of fasting, suffering and penance. The language of narration shows affinity to the language of the biblical prophets and the apocrypha.

Then for seven days I fasted, neither eating nor drinking, for my heart was sorely plagued by those pleading voices. Still I asked myself this: Could it be that I am seeing phantoms without substance, or that I am hearing the echoes of silence? Who am I – the mouth that ate itself? It is not that the antelope conceives more hatred for him who betrays its presence with a shout?

After seven days had passed the Earth trembled, and lightning scored the sky with its brightness, and I was borne up to the rooftop of the house, and I was shown many things, and I heard a voice like a great clap of thunder, admonishing me: Who has told you that the prophecy is yours alone, to keep to yourself with empty excuses? If you do that, you will never be silent. I was seized up and then cast into the ashes of the fireplace. And I took the ashes and I smeared my face and legs with them, and I cried out (1990:8).

The voice of the prophet, *gicaanda*, makes allusions to the biblical prophet. However, his role is no different from the biblical prophetic role. The *gicaanda* diagnosed the ills; he provided remedies and solutions to the troubles of the society similar to the role played by Moses, Samuel and the prophets in the Hebrew Bible. The *gicaanda* asserts that:

I, even I, prophet of Justice, felt this burden weight heavily
 Upon me at first

Gicaandi Player, Prophet of Justice, reveal what now lies concealed by darkness (1990:7, 8).

The prophetic voice in the novel is very postcolonial in the sense that it reflects on the past, and is bound up with a longing that the world will become better – in other words that things will improve with time; but there is an urgent call for a revolution.

Thus the merging of a traditional instrument and the prophet provides acculturation. The role of the prophet is an important aspect in African traditional religion. In making the prophetic office very important in his creative writing, Ngugi acknowledges the role of the

prophet in his cultural religion. He blends the biblical images and themes with the African traditional religion. Inculturation is a hermeneutical tool that takes its own context and culture as a point of reference and interpretation. In the hermeneutical process that Ngugi narrates and advocates for, he advocates for a moral interpretation of his society and for Africa at large. In instilling in his audience an enthusiasm for the "truth and justice" of his socialism, it is, of course, Ngugi himself, "the body behind the voice", who is fulfilling the prophetic role.

Conclusion

Ngugi has somehow reflected that the Bible does not speak with many voices and argues that it is the interpreters who bring voice to it. One might emphasize that, as stressed by Gerald West, the anecdote of the Bible also reflects the paradox of the oppressor and the oppressed sharing the same Bible and the same faith. Do the paradox, ambiguity, the perceived gaps and cracks that seem to be perceived by the colonized and the colonizer's interpretations provoke and maintain the drive to interpret? Does it mean that a gap has been lost in the desire and passion to pin down meaning? The author, therefore, disrupts the interpretation of the Bible from the centre's perspective. In such instances, discomfort is increased: Ambiguity, instability and uncertainty appear to characterize the often privileged readings. In revisiting the Bible, Ngugi does what Jeanrod says that interpretation presupposes: That one is to derive truth from the text of what the text conveys to the reader. The reader or writer "creates" a text and new meanings. He continues to argue that the text somehow is a weaker partner because it is unable to defend itself against violations of its integrity by ideological readers. What one text locks out, the other discloses and exegesis, as argued by Gerald Bruns, presupposes that one starts out from the alternative readings, and anticipates, and indeed, encourages and provokes, in turn. The beauty of the paradox is that Ngugi leaves Christianity itself as a religion unscathed but emphasizes it only to serve as a satirical tool against religious hypocrisy and ignorance. Indeed the humanist view of the Christian narration is a strong affirmation that people should treat others no worse than they would like to be treated. Thus he allows the gaps and silences echoed by colonialism and imperialism to be addressed in the context of the present time and in the particular culture.

Thus Ngugi redefines concepts of difference and otherness, and stems to what Kathy Kessler says, "Beyond the modernist celebration of the unified self", totalizing notions of history, and universalistic models of reason. He shifts away from the "Eurocentric" notion of society that subordinated the discourse of ethic and politics to an unproblematic acceptance of European culture as the basis of civilization, and a notion of the individual subject as a unified, rational self which is the source of all cultural and social meaning.

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