

NGUGIWA THIONG 'O'S MEMORIRS : A PAINFUL RECALLING OF HIS EARLY LIFE

Dr. J.D. Hirpara
Associate Professor
Department of English
Y.S. Arts & K.S. Shah Commerce College
Devgadh Baria, Gujarat

"(T)he life and work of Ngugi (wa Thiong'o) provide an excellent starting point for people who wish to achieve some awareness of the many inter-related dilemmas -- cultural, political, linguistic, developmental -- that beset an entire continent of people and yet remain obscure even for the vast majority of educated Americans. In fact, Ngugi -- the author of 19 books of fiction, nonfiction, drama, and children's literature -- is as important today as any other single literary figure in understanding the problems of post-colonial Africa."

- Theodore Pelton, The Humanist (3/4/1993)

It is always true that the childhood memory is sweet, especially spent in the pastoral world as it is the world full of natural blessings with the least touch of modernity and artificiality where minimum are wants and aspirations as well as desires or longings. Indeed, one would be free from pains and miseries with simple recalling of the happy days of such childhood. But sometimes it is also the fact that the wounds and shocks of the childhood create long lasting impact on one's entire life. It emerges as a kind of haunting which moulds one's personality and the self. Such memoirs are very interesting and appealing. Recently we seem to be experiencing a boom in the genre of the African literary memoir. In the past five years, we have had memoirs from luminaries like Wole Soyinka (*You Must Set Forth at Dawn*, 2007), J.M. Coetzee (*Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*, 1997, and *Youth: Scenes from Provincial Life II*, 2002), Zakes Mda (*Sometimes There Is A Void: Memoirs of an Outsider*, 2013), Chinua Achebe (the long-awaited *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, 2012). In November 2012, the great Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o — who had already written one memoir of his childhood, *Dreams in a Time of War*, in 2010 — published a second volume, *In the House of the Interpreter* (2012). Part of the power of the memoir genre is the way it personalizes history, giving us the general past as a single individual's life story. But in the context of this explosion of "personal histories" from all the old lions of African literature, a book like Ngugi's feels like something more, like a moment of summing up, both for him, for his generation, and for his relationship to his generation. Of this generation of writers, Ngugi has always been the most given to pastoral nostalgia, and the most prone to heightening the contradictions between authentic culture and corrupting modernity.

The first instalment of Ngugi's two memoirs was the elegiac *Dreams in a Time of War*. Published in 2010, "Dreams" covered Ngugi's childhood in rural Kenya as the son of Thiong'o wa Nducu. It is Ngugi's memoir of his childhood, until, at the age of 16, he left home to begin secondary education at a highly selective high school. His father had four wives and 24 children. During Ngugi's youth, his father and mother became estranged, and she left the homestead to live with her father, taking Ngugi and a younger brother with her. His mother clearly was an unusual woman of

considerable fortitude and character. She helped fan within Ngugi a burning desire for education and then sacrificed herself in various ways to enable him to pursue that education. But their dreams of education had to be pursued during parlous times of unrest and violence, and hence the title of Ngugi's memoir is quite apt.

The main feature of the memoir is the picture it gives of native Kenyan life in a rapidly changing world - of such matters as family customs within an extended, polygamous family, traditional rites like circumcision, and communal story-telling. It also contains much anecdotal evidence of the cruelty and thickheadedness of the waning years of British rule and the divisive consequences among the Kenyans themselves. (Ngugi's older brother Wallace joined the Mau Mau guerillas; half-brothers of his served the British colonial interests as members of the Home Guard.)

The British tried to tighten the screws on the Kenyans in many ways in the years immediately after World War II. One of their efforts to check the ever-spreading, gradually intensifying impulse for independence was to attempt taking iron-fisted control of African education, including outlawing independent African-run schools and mandating a revisionist curriculum in history. Ngugi's memoir is both informative and touching. Despite the highly charged conditions of Ngugi's life, the book never takes on the character of a political or revolutionary tract. Ngugi appears to have been graced with unusual intelligence, atypical earnestness, and inherent goodness. Throughout his boyhood, Ngugi is witness to a slowly changing Kenya. New railroads and highways link his village to a vast, English-speaking empire. But the forces of modernity haven't yet changed life much for the Gikuyu people. The book ends with Ngugi's passage into manhood — after a ritual circumcision — and his acceptance into an elite school set aside for top black students in the British colony's segregated education system.

His second memoir *In the House of the Interpreter* tells the story of Ngugi's four transformative years in that school, Alliance High School. Inside Alliance's spic-and-span classrooms and under the tutelage of its excellent British and African teachers, young Ngugi undergoes an exhilarating intellectual awakening — just as Kenya's simmering struggle for independence begins to heat up. He learns to recite Shakespeare's sonnets and Christian prayers. But he lives with a secret that's eating away at his soul: His older brother, Good Wallace, is living somewhere in Kenya's mountains, a soldier in the Mau Mau guerrilla movement. The country is in an official state of emergency, and Ngugi worries that he'll be expelled from school if his secret is revealed. When he sees a school production of "As You Like It," it triggers a daydream about Good Wallace, with Shakespeare's lovers in a forest and Kenya's idealistic rebels merged into a single mental image. "I could not help comparing the exiles in Arden to my brother...wandering in the forests of Nyandarwa and Mount Kenya," Ngugi writes. (Ngugi, *In the House of the Interpreter*:52)

In the House of the Interpreter is a book about the creation of modern Africa from the collision of a series of powerful opposing forces — nationalism and colonialism, rural tradition and capitalist modernity. We see these changes through the eyes of a group of bright, ambitious teenagers.

Alliance High is an African Hogwarts, without the magic. All the students join happily in competitions between school houses. They know they're at Alliance to become members of Kenya's small African intelligentsia; for the British, this new black educated class will be a force of moderation and assimilation. But the students, and especially Ngugi, can't help but develop other ideas. They're inspired by the leaders of newly independent former colonies, including India

and Ghana. Kenya's own nationalist leader, Jomo Kenyatta, has been arrested, but others continue to push for African liberation in the colonial legislature.

Against the revolution going on outside the school grounds, there is the aesthetically pleasing order of the Alliance school itself. The teachers and the curriculum offer the students the possibility of personal redemption through study and godliness. The school's message is summarized, for Ngugi, in a passage he reads in the novel "The Pilgrim's Progress." The novel's hero reaches the "Interpreter's House," a place "where the dust we had brought from the outside could be swept away by the law of good behaviour and watered by the gospel of Christian service." (Ngugi, *In the House of the Interpreter*:43)

But when he leaves the Alliance campus, Ngugi enters a world of checkpoints and armed British soldiers. Returning home, he finds his family and his old village neighbors relocated into a concentration camp similar to the "strategic hamlets" of the Vietnam War. From these painful personal experiences, a writer is born. East Africa — ethnically and culturally diverse, filled with natural and human beauty — will eventually feed Ngugi's writing and populate his many novels. Tolstoy and Shakespeare stir his love of writing, but it's his family and his mother who give him the stories he needs to write.

On one visit home, his mother takes him out to the fields, cooking potatoes for him under an ancient Mugumo tree.

"She believed it was sacred and healing," Ngugi writes of the tree. "For some reason, she made us look at its roots... They were strong and deep, and that's why a Mugumo never succumbed to prevailing winds and changing weather..." (*In the House of the Interpreter*99:)

"Do you know that this [tree] has been here since before the coming of the colonizer," his mother says, "even before your great-great-great-grandparents?" (*In the House of the Interpreter*:99)

Like that tree, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Kenya endures. And it comes alive in the pages of his brilliant and essential memoir.

At Alliance High School, the student who would eventually become a Marxist-Leninist, a proponent of Mao and Fanon, and an advocate of cultural and political revolution by whatever means necessary was still an aspiring member of a black colonial meritocracy, a privileged group of students who anticipated joining the elite class and becoming a part of the future leadership of a multiracial Kenyan nation when they graduated. This was the vision of Alliance's head-master, in any case — a white liberal named Carey Francis — and the young James Ngugi shared his beliefs wholeheartedly, along with a deep investment in the stories that the British empire told itself about itself, and about the three C's it was supposedly bringing to Africa: Civilization, Christianity, and Commerce.

This vision was a lie, of course: a light that was destined to fail. Kenya's white settler government never intended Kenya to be anything but an apartheid-style settler republic, and if a few colonial functionaries and administrators spoke grand platitudes about the white man's burden — and even if some also believed it — the colonial enterprise in Kenya was always, in practice, a white supremacist engine of capital accumulation and repression. The British built prisons and army barracks much faster than they ever built schools or roads, and mostly they didn't build anything at all. And if a very few students like Ngugi managed to go to schools like Alliance, the meritocracy they hoped to climb was defined by the fact that there were actually very few of them: the overwhelming vast majority of Afro-Kenyans were destined to work as tenant labor on

plantations owned by white settlers, part of a labor system which was explicitly modeled on the Jim Crow American South.

In the House of the Interpreter shows us Ngugi's growing disillusionment with this system; as the young James Ngugi struggles to embrace Carey Francis's vision of gradualist Christian uplift, he cannot help but be confronted by the harsh reality from which the school walls only imperfectly shelter and isolate him. Outside Alliance, in 1954, a war was raging, the Mau Mau revolt that would shake the foundations of the British colonial rule in Kenya to its core. And while James read Shakespeare, studied the Bible, and went camping with his fellow Boy Scouts, his own brother was taking Gikuyu oaths and fighting in the forest, eventually to be captured and imprisoned in a concentration camp that formed part of what Caroline Elkins famously named "Britain's Gulag."

From the first pages of *In the House of the Interpreter*, strong and memorable themes emerge: the power of education, the rootedness of kin, the need to transform the colonialist narrative. "How could a whole village, its people, history, everything, vanish, just like that?" (Ngugi, *In the House of the Interpreter*:5). Ngugi wa Thiong'o asks as he returns in April 1955 from his first term at boarding school, wearing his proud uniform, to discover that his former homestead has vanished and been relocated to a "concentration village" further away, close to a guard checkpoint.

Really, "It's a work of understated and heartfelt prose that relates one man's intimate view of the epic cultural and political shifts that created modern Africa. . . . Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Kenya endures. And it comes alive in the pages of his brilliant and essential memoir." –LA Times (2nd December, 2012). Both the memoirs of Ngugi are the evidence of his being what he is today in the realm of literature. They prove 'Child is the Father of Man' as both the memoirs reflect the main thematic concerns of Ngugi's fictional as well as non-fictional works. The suffering of his family, loss of his father's land, his mother's miseries, his family's active participation in Mau Mau freedom movement etc are reflected in the memoirs. Ngugi's creative genius is also found in them.

REFERENCE

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- (2) Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *In the House of the Interpreter*. Harvill Secker: London, 2012.