



Research Paper

Class Relation and Struggle in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* and Festus Iyayi's *Heroes*

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ABSTRACT

Class struggle is the economic rivalry and political tension inherent in society as a result of the socio-economic competition among the social classes. Class struggle exists at two different levels in both texts: the capitalists comprising the Asians, the Europeans and the African elites and the African working class in *Petals of Blood*, and between the insensitive government represented by the top military officers and the misinformed common man in *Heroes*. Karl Marx is of the view that class struggle is an agent of social change for the working class. This paper critically looks at the different forms of class relation and struggle in the two texts under study: Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* and Festus Iyayi's *Heroes*.

KEYWORDS: Class struggle, working class, Marxism, socio-economic competition, social change, capitalists,

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I. INTRODUCTION

'The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle', says Marx in the Communist Manifesto (1848). In a Marxist approach to literature, we have the following factors: There are class history and class struggle in a literary text, and there are domination and oppression. Hence, the social, historical, political and cultural conditions behind literary texts need to be discussed when we are looking at a text through the Marxist approach. To Marx, literature belongs to the superstructure, and should reflect the base realities. In *Das Capital* (1867), Marx writes that, 'The mode of production of material life determines altogether the social, political, and intellectual life process. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary their social being that determines their consciousnesses'.

This approach takes the struggle of working class, whether of farming or factory or any other field, into accounts. It describes them as they are when they are working, struggling, and when they are achieving their goals. Socialist realism inspired literature. To Abrams, Marxists view literature 'not as works created in accordance with timeless artistic criteria, but as 'products' of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era' (Abrams 149). According to Terry Eagleton, it is not only concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class, but also, it gives a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings as the product of a particular history. Terry says that a text cannot know itself, so Marxism tries to explore about the hidden necessary conditions which make the text possible.

Leon Trotsky, a Russian Marxist revolutionary theorist, asserts that the form of art is independent, but the artist, the writer and the user or the spectator who is enjoying it, are not empty machines. They are living people, with a crystallised psychology representing a certain unity, even if not entirely harmonious. This psychology is the result of social conditions. He summarises the questions which are to be asked in a Marxist approach to literature as follows:

To which order of feelings does a given artistic work correspond in all its peculiarities? What are the social conditions of these thoughts and feelings? What place do they occupy in the

historic development of a society and of a class? And, further, what literary heritage has entered into the elaboration of the new form? Under the influence of what historic impulse have the new complexes of feelings and thoughts broken through the shell which divides them from the sphere of poetic consciousness.(23)

The Marxian class theory states that an individual's position within a class hierarchy is determined by their role in the production process, and argues that political and ideological consciousness is determined by class position. A class is those who share common economic interests, are conscious of those interests, and engage in collective action which advances those interests. To Marx, a class is a group with intrinsic tendencies and interests that differ from those of other groups within society, the basis of a fundamental antagonism between such groups. For example, it is in the labourer's best interest to maximise wages and benefits, and in the capitalist's best interest to maximise profits at the expense of such, leading to a contradiction within the capitalist system, even if the labourers and capitalists themselves are unaware of the clash of interests. The class structure distinguishes one class from another on the basis of two criteria: ownership of the means of production and control of the labour power of others. The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles... freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another. The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, and new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.

II. CLASS STRUGGLE IN NGUGI WA THIONGO'S *PETALS OF BLOOD*

Ngugi interprets the class struggle in the novel along the Marxist line. The struggle is a result of the conduct of the power elite in their relationship with the lower classes. He regards the Kenyan power elite, the businessmen, intellectuals, and the traditional rulers, among others, as accomplices that have failed the Kenyan masses because they are obsessed with wealth and property and forget the plight of the ordinary people, thereby abandoning them to providence and charity. Therefore, as a work that attempts to redress societal imbalance, the socio-economic and political structures on which the novel rests are spelt out. First, the mutilation of land by both colonial and post-colonial oppressors is done through the aid of religion, cultural and educational institutions which perpetuate mental slavery of the oppressed and buttress the interest of the oppressors. The choice lands were shared only among the bourgeois at the expense of the poor. The farmers were forced to mark out their land and mortgage them with loans linked to the success of their harvests. As the quality of the harvest wavers and unable to march their loan repayment, many were forced to sell their land. In addition, the arable lands were appropriated by the giant multi-national corporations for the purposes of establishing their plantations and factories at the expense of the poor masses. Consequently, the peasants are further impoverished and their ecology and environment further degraded. The conflict of the poor and the rich in Kenya has been transposed to the conflict between the developed and the underdeveloped countries.

Abdulla in the novel symbolises the betrayal of the people who had fought for Kenya's independence with the hope that things would be better afterwards. Maimed, imprisoned and later released on independence, he expresses hope in the new Kenya where jobs and land will be freely available. According to him, 'No longer would I see the face of the Whiteman laughing at our effort... And the Indian trader with his obscenities... kumanyokomwivi... he too would go. Factories, tea and coffee estates would belong to us, Kenya people' (253). However, all these hopes are eventually dashed as he laments: 'I waited for land reforms and redistribution, I waited for a job' (254).

Capitalism took over when colonisation bowed out of the scene. It was only a change of drivers and not a change of direction. Unfortunately, this ugly scene still permeates most contemporary African nations where the comprador bourgeoisies in collaboration with international organisations, business organisations, retired army generals and police chiefs own large expanses of land, thus depriving the peasants of their means of livelihood.

David Rubadiri describes the colonial education as a 'pot plant able to grow in its own confined boundary, but failing to take root and nourishment from mother earth itself' (20). That is, colonial education was only for the sake of carrying out duties designated by colonial masters and not to enable Africans to come to terms with the realities of their own immediate environment.

Though the novel is set in Kenya, Ngugi, through the benevolent lawyer, tells us of life in America. Addressing the delegation of Ilmorog indigenes in Nairobi, the lawyer explains to them his experiences in America: that he saw in the cities of America white people also begging and white women selling their bodies for few dollars. That he saw a lot of unemployment in Chicago and other cities... (165-6). This speech establishes the global nature of capitalist exploitation and reveals too that capitalism is an intercontinental monster that is not only restricted to colonised Africa, Asia and other Third World nations, but the rest of the world. In another dimension, even though the journey of the Ilmorog citizens to the city to meet their

representative is presented as arduous, it has brought forth some revelations. First, apart from portraying the organic nature of African society, the action privileges collective experience over individual subjectivity, and shows that the people under intense pressure can unite and organise themselves and seek the betterment of their conditions. Secondly, it has opened up Ilmorog to vicious effects of capitalist machination, which in turn has led to the foundation for the re-organisation of society along socialist line by the formation of trade union activities. This is a necessary stage toward the attainment of socialism because socialism cannot emerge directly from capitalism. For it to emerge, there must be an intense period of capitalist exploitation and oppression marked by an equally intense maximisation of profits, misery and gross impoverishment. Thirdly, the journey reveals the betrayal of government officials of the people they purport to represent as portrayed by NderiWaRiera and Waweru. Through them, Ngugicriticises the baseness, the moral and social ineptitude, the depravity and the insensitive nature of leaders in a capitalist society.

Ngugi seems to suggest that women, together with the male working class, should fight for freedom of all by working together towards the dismantling of the oppressed capitalist structures. The revolutionary role of women in this text can be seen firstly from Wanja, one of the major characters. She is presented as a liberated, urbanised, oppressed and exploited woman. Her role in the entire novel is that of a facilitator. Her life as a prostitute allows her greater mobility in and out of the major events in the novel. She symbolises ruthless exploitation experienced by women of post-colonial Kenya: unemployed, sexually harassed, uneducated, landless, and cut off from the family. The dominant image of Wanja that emerges in the text is that of a victim of economic deprivation and male bourgeois domination and capitalist exploitation by the rich engendered by colonialism. We have seen that her exploitation by a wealthy MrKimeria drives her to prostitution in the first instance. She tells Munira of how she had no choice but to become a bar-attendant—a job description which is synonymous with prostitution in Kenya. She is forced to sell her house to Mzigo and she cannot continue with her mother's business because the licence had been cancelled and subsequently awarded to the multinationals. Through his depiction of Wanjas's trial, Ngugi attempts to make us appreciate the forces that send Wanja to prostitution, and how the acquisitive spirit of capitalism twists the relationship between man and woman into relationship of ownership and domination. Although, prostitution is portrayed as a degrading occupation, "a career of always being upon, a career of endless shame and degeneration" (329), it is the main source of capital accumulation available in post-colonial Kenya. Prostitution is thus presented at another level as an indicator of the state of the nation in Kenya. Kenya's position of dependence in the world economy is, therefore, likened to prostitution as a social institution.

Ngugi portrays Nyakinyua, a courageous and exploited woman whose husband was killed in the period of Emergency; her children are landless and therefore disappear from the scene, leaving her alone to eke out a living from their impoverished and denuded land. In advanced economies, the aged are usually granted social security scheme, but in Kenya where this is not done, Nyakinyua rather has her land confiscated from her. This shows the lack of concern of the leaders to the people's plight. Her stories of the past, especially of her husband, who resisted colonialism provide an authentic history of modern Kenya and encourage the Kenyan people to emulate the people who earlier resisted all forms of oppression. Her courageous attempt to reclaim her land proves that protest and struggle against oppression and dispossession are not exclusive to the young, educated or the male. Her failure to get back her land through her struggles and protests further illustrates the futility of a lone or an individual struggle and therefore confirms the potency of collective action which she had been denied by the inaction of the other peasants. Her clear understanding of the unified role of the bank, KCO, government and Nderi as agents of exploitation with a common goal puts her above other equally dispossessed peasants.

Revolutionary writers also recognise the central role that violence plays in reshaping capitalist societies. They look at violence as a defence mechanism used by the oppressed. In other words, violence is a structural necessity. Ngugi effectively employs violence in *Petals of Blood*. For one, Wanja's edifice, an embodiment of moral decadence, prostitution and exploitation is destroyed to its foundation. Secondly, Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria, who throughout the novel, stand as pillars of capitalist exploitation and complicity with foreign capital, are destroyed in one fell swoop. Their destruction is a setback to capitalist exploitation as the foreigners will find nobody to co-operate with and the remaining WaRiera will think again before embarking on a systematic re-exploitation of the peasants and workers. In addition, the novel records the presence of a violent group of persons referred to as the Wakombozi or the society of one world Liberation who gunned down a very important person who had profited on the misery of the poor. Violence then has been effectively used in the novel in accordance with revolutionary aesthetics of Marxism.

In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi traces the various known historical epochs of Kenya: the earliest or pre-colonial period—the period nomads and crop raisers tended their animals and plants and had a few feudal lords who interfered minimally in the people's daily lives; the period of legitimate trade in which Lord Freeze Kilby and his wife established a farm outpost in Ilmorog and experimented with few crops. With his house and belongings destroyed, the lonely Lord fled. This marked the period of conquest and resistance in Kenya. This period also witnessed the presence of Indians represented by RamlagoonDharamash who opened a trading store

in Ilmorog a few years later. Dharamash was sent packing by threats of Ole Masai, the anti-colonial warlord. The mission of Ole Masai was to turn back the forces of imperialism and emancipate the African people. The post-colonial period witnessed the emergence of African elite, with major characters being DedanKimathi, Ndingiuiiri, Abdullah and several other freedom fighters. This era differs from the colonial one only in so far as the major actors were no longer whites but blacks. The period is represented by WaReira, Chui, Mzigo, Kimeria and Revered Jerrod Brown, the religious accomplice.

III. CLASS STRUGGLE IN FESTUS IYAYI'S HEROES

Written in the early eighties but set in the Nigerian civil war, Iyayi's *Heroes* chronicles the experience and events of the civil war in the defunct Midwest region, formerly Bendel state, and now divided into the current Edo and Delta states. Through the use of flashback and symbolism, Iyayi x-rays the Nigerian society along its fragmented class structure. It is a society which is based on violence, injustice, brutality and immorality. A place where greed and corruption of the privileged few and ruling class create a big gap between the few wealthy and the majority of the poor masses. OsimeIyere, a journalist and political correspondent of the *Daily* news, witnesses the horrors of the civil war on the two fronts. The story revolves around him and through his lens Iyayi sees and comments about the war. The class structure is sharply divided in this novel, not only along socio-economic lines, but also in the civil service. The military typifies this example as evident in the activities of the officers as against the loyalty of the rank and file. The society is delineated between the 'haves' and 'have not's' where the bourgeoisie employs bags of money and power through the barrel of the gun to enslave the proletariat. He laments thus: 'Power grows out of the barrel of a gun and out of bags of money. Have gun and you have the power to kick a man in his stomach and below the belt...' (41).

Even among the Federal troops, the division and the insensitivity of the officers to the rank and file is quite noticeable. The rank and file do the jobs while the officers collect the glory. Corporal Kolawole is a big example of this travesty of justice. He disagrees with his superior officer, a Major, on matters of procedure in front of his men. He got punished and was demoted in rank. Following the Major's erroneous procedure, however, more than three hundred men were lost in that battle and many more soldiers were wounded. Few months afterwards, the Major was promoted to the rank of a Lieutenant Colonel.

Corruption and exploitation of the masses is evident in *Heroes*. Iyayi laments that even before the war, corruption was in the very breath of the minister, presidents and businessmen, politicians, traditional rulers, church leaders and army generals. These 'senior citizens' who are in the minority employ foul and disingenuous means to control the nation's resources. They steal the people blind and employ the wealth of the masses to further impoverish them. Brigadier Otunshi who represents a microcosm of senior military officers who enjoy comfort at the battle front and does not bat an eyelid when sacrificing his troops is seen in the company of the army paymaster Major Dantari, an ally who he needs in his stead to deny his people their rights. He sends them to the battle front few days before pay day and does not mind sacrificing them all in as much as he smiles to the banks: 'I know that the Brigadier Otunshi sells our arms to the Biafra's and sends out troops into battle a few days to their pay day. He sells our arms and kills our men and collect money from both sides. Corruption everywhere' (148).

The argument here is that the military officers on both the Biafra and Federal sides are actually an elite group who are selfish and cannot respond or associate with the war time travails of the ordinary civilians. They are corrupt and do not care about the safety of their troops and are ready to sacrifice them for their own well-being. The officers at the front live a life of peace and ease. They enjoy choice wives, attend parties and have an abundance of expensive meals. They also have access to beautiful women. The war became a profitable business for many as the elites demonstrated an unquenchable thirst for money. They take blankets meant for the displaced and injured in the war, to sell. The dry milk meant for the starving children are seen in supermarkets in Lagos. Osime paints the picture thus: 'Corruption is everywhere, sell your arms to your enemy and collect the money and put it in your pocket...capture a town and the first place you make for are the banks...this war is part of the whole business enterprise and that means it must yield fruits' (148).

The unemotional trait of the Nigerian military leadership is evident in the elaborate marriage of the head of state during a bloody civil war and at a time when men and women in villages are being slaughtered and soldiers are dying in thousands on the battlefield. He sends the children of other people, the husbands of other women and wives of other men to battle so that he can get married. Brigadier Otunshi trivialises the purpose of the war when he announces that they intend to capture Onitsha as a wedding gift for the Head of State (149).

Heroes depicts class struggles between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Aside the civilian contractors in Agbada who are always seen in the company of military officers lobbying for contracts, senior military officers are presented in such a way that one is able to observe that the society Iyayi depicts encompasses classes of groups which are antagonistic to one another. While the senior military officers are united in their pilfering and happy with the looting aided and abetted by the civilian contractors, the poor are united in their misery and patriotism. In their ignorance, the Federal troops joyfully proclaim 'to keep Nigeria one is task that

must be done'. They view the war as a call to national service and take excessive pride in killing and maiming people who few months earlier they regard as their brothers and sisters.

So the war that the rank and file soldiers fight is not theirs. The killings they undertake in the name of patriotism are unnecessary as they eventually get nothing from it than misery, despoliation and agony. The two protagonists, Ojukwu and Gowon, have much in common than what they have with the ordinary soldier who erroneously believes he fights for the unity of his fatherland. All is however not lost as Iyayi believes that the chain must be broken. He calls for a rebirth, a new order, a revolution that the society may become anew. For the Marxist, this is one final antidote which can only revamp the society and make the inevitable change. Marxism as a doctrine believes that the birth of an egalitarian society must first be heralded by a revolution. Iyayi believes that only the emergence of a third force can liberate the masses from this oppression. The masses cannot afford to trust any of the two forces and as such, the need for the third army.

This is a call for a people's revolution since the institutions have failed us. There is however no clear-cut direction as to how this can be achieved. Ade, Osime's friend and colleague who despises the Federal troops after their murder of his Ibo landlord, believes 'if you can beat them, you join them', and on this premise, joins the Federal troops. We are alarmed at the direction he takes and tends to ask questions. Why? For what purpose? Is it to fight from within and make positive changes or to simply join in the looting and killing? Osime takes another cause, like a true revolutionary; he doesn't want to be tainted by any of the classes. He feels the recruitment of a neutral army is the key. He exclaims,

And that is why I am the first recruit of the third army. I am not going to sleep anymore. It is time the soldier understands that this is not their war, that they are fighting the wrong enemy. The generals and the politicians and the businessmen are their enemies in life as in death, in war as in peace. These are the people they should be fighting... (113)

Osime confesses that the battle is not for a sector of the society but for all who have been deprived of a better life through greed, corruption, war, bad leadership, nepotism and rabid materialism. He states: "What I am involved in is not a matter for individuals. What I am involved in is a matter for a large group of people, for the people as a whole. Most probably then I will get shot. But then, you only live once. I have only one life and one death to claim it" (113).

For Iyere Osime, the Ibos, Hausas, Yorubas and others have lived together for years before the pogroms. The coup d'états which led to the civil war were attempts at revolution but were hastily executed. It did not eventually solve the problem. He laments that 'the motives behind the coups and counter-coups are less than patriotic' (131).

He chronicles the birth of the coups and blames people in positions of powers who abuse them because of greed. He opines thus: "You get rid of the greed by getting rid of the ruling class, the generals and politicians and businessmen and traditional rulers and church leaders and professors" (131).

For the Marxist, the decimation of this group of leaders will eliminate all social vices and herald an egalitarian society in which labour will be rewarded and life made more abundant for all.

CONCLUSIONS

Looking critically at the two texts under study, it is obvious that the class relation was that of servant and master, of inferiority and superiority, and this, readily gives the working class, a disadvantaged position in the class strata in society. The economic struggle evident in the texts, becomes a true reflection of the societal ill and imbalance and the end, as is always with Marxism, there is a call for the 'third force' to come into existence, and make things right. The question of the effectiveness of this 'third force' however, remains largely unanswered and becomes the basis for further research.

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