

## A Subaltern Study Of Ngugi's *Petals Of Blood*

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### Abstract:

*Subaltern Studies* rejected Indian history as it was written so far as it had focused exclusively on the point of view of the elite groups within Indian society. According to Gayatri Spivak, the subaltern cannot speak because (s)he is not heard, she expects that it is the task of the postcolonial intellectuals to speak for subaltern groups. Ngugi waThiong'o is a Kenyan novelist. He is considered as a major voice speaking on the behalf of the African people. Ngugi, *Petals of Blood* (1977) offers a scathing critique of capitalism and accuses wealthy landowners and bureaucrats who exploit the poor and working classes. The real heroes like Abdulla are forgotten and are reduced to marginal state in post-colonial Kenya. Ngugi's women characters like Wanja and Karega's mother also show the social as well as capitalistic aspects. They are mere a commodity or a thing of sexual satisfaction.

**Key Words:** Subalterns, marginalization, exploitation, capitalism, post-colonialism

**S**ubaltern Studies started out with the groundbreaking work of Ranajit Guha at the end of the 1970s. Guha, together with a group of young Indian historians based in Britain, published a series of essays that rejected Indian history as it was written so far. According to them it had focused exclusively on the point of view of the elite groups within Indian society. The project reflected on the role of the peasant, or "subaltern," in Indian history. It urged for a rewriting of Indian history in which the subaltern could come to its own.

Gayatri Spivak is another representative of postcolonial critics. She is known for her deconstructive method and Althusserian Marxism. She has never particularly subscribed herself to the Subaltern Studies group but her work continuously interacted with this project that she has encouraged and criticized. Spivak's association with Subaltern Studies is evident in her essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988). It focuses on the position of the subaltern woman through a discussion of the practice of widow sacrifice (Sati) in India. She argued that the subaltern (woman) does not have the possibility to represent herself; as a result, she cannot speak. This argumentation was received and interpreted in various ways.

Some critics accuse Spivak of not recognizing the voice of the subaltern. However, this accusation is unjust. Spivak only claimed that the

subaltern cannot speak because (s)he is not heard. So, she expects that it is the task of the postcolonial intellectuals to speak for subaltern groups. In 1988, she published *In Other Worlds*, a powerful book on cultural theory. It investigates the relationship between language, woman and culture in both Western and non-Western contexts. Her use of the post-structuralist approach to analyse representations is perhaps best illustrated in the concept of "strategic essentialism". It is a critique of essentialism. It is a way of deploying essentialist terms in an interrogating way for the purpose of dismantling the structures of suffering that these terms create. She has used the deconstructionist approach in her more recent work, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), as a means to expose the tendency of institutional and cultural discourses to exclude and marginalize the subaltern, especially subaltern women.

Ngugi waThiong'o is a Kenyan novelist. He is considered as a major voice speaking on the behalf of the African people. His work basically deals with what colonialism has done to African soul and body. He has tried to portray the impact colonialism in his novels. His fourth novel and the last novel written under his Christian name James Ngugi, *Petals of Blood* (1977) deals with the investigation of the murder of three representatives of the new society, who have profited from neo-colonialism. The novel offers a scathing critique of capitalism and

accuses wealthy landowners and bureaucrats who exploit the poor and working classes. The novel is concerned with four principal characters Karega, a teacher and labour organizer; Munira, headmaster of a public school in the town of Ilmorog; Abdulla, a half-Indian shopkeeper who was once a guerrilla fighter during the war of independence; and Wanja, a barmaid and former prostitute. They are held by police on suspicion of the murder of the three directors of Theng'eta Breweries and Enterprises-Chui, Kimeria, and Mzigo. In this novel Ngugi has tried to show that those who fought against British during colonial period, go through the suffering and humiliation in post-independence phase. As the fruits of Uhuru are enjoyed by selfish bourgeoisie like Nderi and Kimeria, the real heroes like Abdulla are forgotten. They are reduced to marginal state in post-colonial Kenya. They are the subalterns.

Abdulla has fought as Mau Mau against British. He becomes a cripple as he loses his one leg. Before it, he happens to be a normal human being. He works at a shoe-factory near his home where strike after strike for higher wages and better housing has always been broken by helmeted policemen. The mechanism of capitalism annoys him. He wonders the luxury of businessmen and He had asked himself several times: how was it that a boss who never once lifted a load, who never once dirtied his hands in the smelly water and air in the tannery or in any other part of the complex, could still live in a big house and own a car and employ a driver and more than four people only to cut grass in the compound? (Ngugi136).

He then visualizes his mission for his people. He isn't ready to see the exploitation. He is ready to die for this noble cause. So, he desires

To redeem the land: o fight so that the industries like the shoe factory which had swallowed his sweat could belong to people: so that his children could one day have enough to eat and to wear under adequate shelter from rain: so that would say in pride, my father died that I might live: this had transformed him from a slave before a boss into a man (136).

Abdulla's spirit of resistance is in his blood right from his school days. He runs away from school and start to work for Mau Mau fighters. He carries the parcels for them. One day, he finds a revolver in his parcel. When he is about to deliver

that parcel, white policemen catch him. He immediately points the revolver towards these policemen and then disappears into the crowd. This incident gives him the sense of being a compete man. He also asks his Indian father to leave Kenya as it is the land of Black people. Like Kihika, he also tries to rescue Mau Mau prisoners from Nakura Town. The garrison is about to surrender but his gun gets jammed. There he gets fatal wound to make him a cripple.

Abdulla then settles in Ilmorog with his brother Joseph and his donkey. He runs a bar cum-shop. He introduces the traditional drink thenge'ta into his bar. Soon, he runs a small scale Thenge'ta Brewery. But he is compelled to sell it to save Wanja's grandmother land. As a result, he was now selling oranges and sheepskins to tourists and drinking Theng'eta to forget the forced demolition of his shop. Yes. Nothing made sense. Education. Work. My life. Accidents. I was an accident. I was a mistake, doomed to a spectator's role outside a window from a high building (297).

Abdulla regrets being part of national movement. He bursts out as, "I too was foolish enough to lose a leg for a national cause. I say: what right had mothers to send their children to the battlefield when it would have been wiser to make them run putrid errands for the European butchers? Fools all" (313).

Beside the freedom fighters like Abdulla, Ngugi's present novel deals with marginal state of women. They are twice marginalized during colonial and post-colonial period, first as a colonial subject, and second as a victim of social system where husband plays the role of the colonizer. Wanja suffer from the unfair mechanism of capitalism. She has been exploited when she was a schoolgirl by Hawkins Kimeria. Then she tries to reconcile with life by having several relationships with several people. Munira, Karega and also Abdulla come in her life. But she at the end remains alone. At the end, she becomes a prostitute to high class customers and runs a brothel.

Karega's mother represents the colonial marginalization of women. She has to work with her husband and has to do the house-hold duties. Her value of sweat is determined by her husband. Her double marginalization is described as follow:

She complained about her triple duties: to her child Ndinguri; to her husband, and to her European landlord. She was expected to work on European farms; to work on her own piece of land; and to home in unity, health and peace. At the same time, she never saw a cent from her produce. Usually her husband would take it and sell it to same European farmer, their landlord, who fixed his own buying price: and her husband in turn gave her only enough to buy salt (58).

Her husband is also used to beat her out of frustration. She then rebels and runs away along with her child from him.

Ngugi has criticised capitalism in this novel. He has exposed the ugly side of it. He has aptly shown that the fruits of freedom are not for the freedom fighters as the parasite class has taken the place of the colonial masters. Freedom fighters like Abdulla who had an idealistic mission for their country regret for being a part of freedom movement as they lost everything they have in post-colonial capitalistic Kenya. Ngugi's women characters show the social as well as capitalistic aspects. They are mere a commodity or a thing of sexual satisfaction. So, Ngugi's this novel offers a scathing criticism of post-colonial capitalistic Kenya. Ngugi is speaking on behalf of freedom fighters like Abdulla, girls like Wanja who are sexually exploited and women like Karega's mother who are double victims of social condition in Kenya.

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