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Abstract

Uhuru sasa! Freedom now! Thus rang the Swahili battle cry for Independence in colonial Kenya. That cry climaxed in gory clashes between Mau Mau nationalist guerillas and colonial government forces. Two decades after Independence from Britain the crucial questions which bred conflict beg redress again under different political circumstances.

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Uhuru sasa! Freedom now! Thus rang the Swahili battle cry for Independence in colonial Kenya. That cry climaxed in gory clashes between Mau Mau nationalist guerillas and colonial government forces. Two decades after Independence from Britain the crucial questions which bred conflict beg redress again under different political circumstances.

The indigenous leadership has scarcely acquitted themselves better than the colonial master. The dreams which fired the fierce struggles for Independence have proved illusory. A peasantry uprooted by the forces of capitalist industrialization and a widening of the gap between rich and poor have engendered a general sense of unease in Kenya. Government disclaimers notwithstanding the Ngugis' creative antennae have effectively registered what one might characterize as Kenya's palpitations.

Originally written in Gikuyu and co-authored by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii with reportedly peasant participation, *I Will Marry When I Want'* (Ngaahika Ndeenda) broadens new vistas for indigenous African drama. New vistas? Those powerful ingredients of indigenous African drama often blurred by the obscurantist tendencies of Africa's best playwrights come alive in this play. Ritual and lyricism, dance and mime are strategically deployed throughout the play to maintain a strange and tenuous balance between the enacted suffering of the people and our sense of theatre and play. One becomes quickly aware that any lines in levity are deceptive and that the play's innocuous title conveys more.

The habit of marrying when one wants is a break with the tradition of old Africa. Such a break is only part of the metaphoric point advanced by the two Ngugis in this play. Implicit also is a clarion cry for a collective assumption of Kenya's destiny, something frequently underscored by some of the people's songs like this recurrent refrain:

Come my friend
Come my friend
We reason together.
Our hearts are heavy

Over the future of our children.
Let's find ways of driving away darkness
From the land. (p.106)

In the previous works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, particularly *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, key characters make gusty efforts to drive away darkness from the land. Such effort is repeated in *I Will Marry When I Want*. Here again the battle lines are clearly drawn between those who represent that darkness and those who represent light. For the authors, there is no disguise of sympathy and ire. We easily identify the rich and *nouveau riche* as the forces of darkness, and the poor as their just and indignant antagonists. The former are Christian and plastic while the latter are rural and human.

The central victim of this three act drama is a woman. That choice is obviously in keeping with the recent trend in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's works. Such choice, still unusual for a traditional African sensibility, universalizes for both sexes Ngugi's campaign for social justice. It enables the writer to delineate a level vision in which the fate of women in society becomes easily analogous to the fate of the poor. Indeed it is on that unifying basis that dramatic action advances on two simultaneous successful prongs.

On one level, Gathoni, daughter of Kiguunda and Wangeci, whose family represents the poor, is ranged against a visually absent John Muhuuni, son of Kio wa Kanoru, whose family represents the rich. Gathoni eventually becomes victim of the oppression of the poor by the rich because an ill-advised affair with Muhuuni results in pregnancy. Kanoru denies parental consent for marriage. He suggests, first, a Christian wedding for Kiguunda and Wangeci for induction into Christianity, a precondition rejected by Gathoni's family. As in many stories by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in which women are sexually exploited, Gathoni flees from the safety of home to become a barmaid. On the other level, Kio wa Kanoru, Christian hypocrite, lures Kiguunda into deeding away his last piece of land for a bank loan. Kanoru offers to co-sign in anticipation of probable default. When Kiguunda realizes Kanoru's treachery, he arms himself with a sword and visits Kanoru, determined to nullify the agreement by force. Jezebel, Kanoru's wife frustrates Kiguunda with a gun and the agreement remains in force. Kiguunda's default enables Kanoru to purchase and acquire the piece of land in a government auction.

The various actions of the characters in the play are drawn in such a way that the entire drama stands as an update of the treachery of

colonialism in Africa. The only difference this time is the replacement of the alien white masters with indigenous blacks. The switch intensifies pathos.

I Will Marry When I Want is Marxist dialectics applied on the dynamic motion of Kenyan history. Aided by montage, the past is repeatedly exhumed to probe the roots of contemporary socioeconomic ills and force a comparison between a satisfactory cultural past broken by colonialism, and a sterile modern era. The resistance of past heroes like Waiyaki is juxtaposed against the modern struggle in which Kiguunda is involved. Often, the Mau Mau rebellion is glorified as the peak of such struggle. Its ghosts are appropriately awakened in fervent rituals with touching incantations. In typical Marxist disdain, religion is faulted in the past and present as 'The alcohol of the soul ... the poison of the mind' (p.61). Religion is one of the social forces used in preventing people from acting independently, figuratively speaking, marrying when they want! That charge is supported with unstinted efforts in the characterization of the rich and powerful of society. Throughout the play those familiar elements of traditional African drama — song, dance, and mime — cease to be merely aesthetic in their function but refurbished strategies through which the writers' cultural nationalism find assertion.

Many Ngugi readers (watchers) will find many other things in this play. Religious readers, particularly Christians, will find the repeated onslaught against religion offensive. Previous readers of Ngugi may find the message boring because they have heard it before. The new reader may find the play's topicality distracting but intriguing. The play promises to be gravelly for white readers, and, of course, a stirring triumph for the radical African. All in all, after these various eyes have seen or read this play, everyone is likely to guess why the Gikuyu version was banned by the Government of Kenya after a very successful full month outing in 1977.

NOTES

1. Ngugi wa Thiong'o & Ngugi wa Mirii, *I Will Marry When I Want*. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1982. 121 pages, £1.95.