
The Politics of Space: Representation of the Postcolonial Space in Ngugi wa

Thiong'O's *Petals of Blood*

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Abstract

The spatial turn in the field of literary studies in the contemporary period has given rise to a new perspective to the notion of space. Traditionally, space was considered as a homogenous, static entity, confined to its geometrical aspect. It is after the spatial turn that space came to be recognized as being discursive, being socially produced and productive. The new spatial concept brings to light the power relations implicated in the production and operation of space. The process of urbanization creates peripheries and centres and is also responsible for destroying villages and countryside. Urbanism is an ideological, hegemonic space that operates under the myth of modernity. It is a social centrality where many elements and aspects of capitalism intersect in space. The production of urban space operates through the practices of representation of space as well as the appropriation of spaces of representation. Alongside urbanization, ruralisation also takes place. The rural spaces often lose their independence, as centrality accumulates wealth, knowledge and information. They wield power and the periphery becomes insignificant, powerless and dependent. Population and wealth generated by the urban trade gives advantage to the city based governments over the rural areas. From the cities, ideological and governmental control spread out to the rural village space. The relationship between the centre and the periphery is similar to that of the colonizer and the colonised. The city spaces in former colonies reincarnate as spaces of neo-liberalism and capitalism, which in turn exert its agency over the rural space. In this context, Ngugi wa Thiongo's novel *Petals of Blood* becomes very significant as it represents how the village spaces in Kenya are appropriated by these hegemonic forces which result in the transformation of the lives of the native folk. They are forced to adapt to the new ways of life or end up losing their lives trying

to hold on to their traditional ways. Represented through the lives of four main characters in the backdrop of the Mau Mau rebellion, the novel shows how the rapid westernization and urbanisation shake the whole village of Ilmorog. The paper therefore is an attempt to understand how the neoliberal construction of spaces in the wake of globalisation in Kenya (in the third world) produces discursive spaces, which are neo-colonial, hegemonic and exploitative. It postulates that space is a dynamic, discursive domain, that can be used to conquer and manipulate the Other.

Keywords: Spatial practices, Representation of space, Spaces of representation, The Postcolonial City, Corporatism, Neo-colonialism.

Contribution/originality: The paper studies how the multi-national and the transnational corporations in the name of the production of urban and developmental spaces pave the way for neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism. It examines Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel *Petals of Blood* and delineate the dialectics of space and the politics inherent in it

Introduction

In the contemporary era, when space and spatial theory is getting wide recognition and acclamation, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel *Petals of Blood* presents itself as a work of immediate relevance and prominence. It explores the engrossing aspects of space and illustrate its political capability, to work as a hegemonic space. In the present scenario of globalization and corporatism, this work highlights its negative impact upon the people of third world nations or former colonies. It depicts space as a dynamic entity enabling the despotic powers to impose itself on the ignorant masses. This novel provides ample instances and events to depict this aspect; that is space being produced and capable of producing. It particularly focuses on the postcolonial space and spatiality in the Kenyan nation state.

Space and Spatiality

According to Reshmi Varma's concept of the emergence of a postcolonial city in her book 'The Postcolonial City and its Subject', it requires the physical presence of a colonial city which acts as the basis for the process of development of a postcolonial city. So the city constructed and occupied by the colonizers marks the starting point. They encroach the indigenous space

and build a city which functions as a space for exploiting and colonizing the natives which comes to be known as the city of the settlers or the modernist city. It becomes the site of accumulation of the colonial power and it is from this space they extend their control and dominion over the colonized nation: a "... node in the network of global capital" (Varma, p. 8). It functions as the centre of political, economic, social, cultural and spatial appropriation. There arises a demarcation of space between the colonizer and the colonized.

They place themselves in a geographically accessible space and build a spacious and luxurious modern city which is characterized by its characteristic spatiality; social practices and representation of spaces according to Lefebvre's concept of the production of space. He asserts that any socially produced space is constituted by a dialectical relationship between the triad of "spatial practices", "representation of space" and "spaces of representation" each attributed with a specific cognitive method through which they are understood as the "... perceived, the conceived, and the lived" (Lefebvre, p. 39). It is a well-planned city with distinct architecture and planning. It represents a space of excesses which stand in stark contrast to the native village space occupied by the indigenous people. As he states

as urbanization extends into the countryside, it creates peripheries of towns and old villages. The urban becomes a centre where different elements of capitalism converge in space. This is an urbanization that is degrading. Nature is challenged by its domination, which is not a mere appropriation. (Elden, p. 133)

Usually these two spaces are separated by a huge area between them. And as Fanon suggests that a dichotomy always exists between the centre and the periphery, the settlers' city and the native city. This distinction between the two cities are evidently visible between Ilmorog, a native village and Nairobi the developed city in the novel. These spaces can be seen in contrast to each other and also the desire for the periphery to take the place of the centre. So the periphery is always controlled by the centre, it is the centre that dictates the way the periphery functions. It can be observed how the developed city of Nairobi represents modernity and civilization and how all the other villages and towns tries to assimilate the city like Ruwa-ini which has become a town and is undertaking development to be like the big city. And Ilmorog can be initially seen

a village that is resistant to modernity and holds close its tradition and culture and does not want to change their old ways. But it is this village that later transforms into a postcolonial city through its appropriation by the hegemonic forces. So the gradual changes that unfolded and the different agents and events that contributed to the transformation of the village of Ilmorog into a postcolonial city is of key importance and requires closer attention.

Invasion of the Postcolonial space

The past of Ilmorog, before the advent of colonization also requires close attention. Ilmorog was not always a small group of old men and women and children living in mud houses occasionally visited by wandering herdsmen. It had a glorious past of traditional and native practices. After Kenya got independence, they were continually threatened by the presence of the big city which presented the idea of growth and modernity which they gracefully turned away from. And as a result of this they had to face the dark side of development. They were like the neglected village left to fend for itself and lead to its own ruin. The novel begins with this dilapidated sight, and in order to find a way to sustain life the younger generation had left for the city with the hopes of having a better life and are yet again faced with a life of hardship and suffering. “The glittering metal has called them. They go, and the young women only return now and then to deposit the newborn with their grandmothers already aged with scratching this earth for a morsel of life” (Thiong’o, p. 9). Some never returns, and this fact greatly troubled the people of the village.

Even their MP has abandoned them. Even teacher who came to their schools never stayed, all of them fled to the cities. Once, two engineers came to inspect their land to construct a road across Africa, a transnational road. But nothing happens, and even the people have no hopes for having development, as they are deserted by the authorities. The transnational road does not come until it benefits the Corporates, this makes it evident that development is for the benefit of the native elites who permit and support the Corporates in establishing control over their land.

And another important component of their city is Abdulla’s shop, a dilapidated building which sold a few necessary items like tea leaves, salt, sugar, curry power packets and

it was also a bar where the herdsmen and the people used to go to relax and gossip. This is the result of the influence from the colonial city, it was an outsider who came there and built that shop and sold similar goods, until then there was nothing of those sorts, people just lived by exchanging their produce in their local market 'Ndunya' which was more like a social gathering for the village folk.

The big city of Nairobi is the most developed city, it was the colonial capital city, which functioned as the centre and played an important role in influencing all other native villages and towns around it. This city is in contrast with the other native places: "skyscrapers versus mud walls and green thatch; tarmac highways, international airports and gambling casinos versus cattle-paths and gossip before sunset" (Thiong'o, p. 58). The big city comprised of big streets, huge buildings, heavy traffic, and modern way of dressing. The city is portrayed as "... that which takes and never gives back" (Thiong'o, p. 139). The villagers believed that the "... authority, power, everything, was outside Ilmorog...out there...in the city" (Thiong'o, p. 139). Uneven development can be seen even in the city's peripheries: they contain slums, narrow streets, rundown buildings, cardboard and tin roofs and streets filled with naked children running around. This makes one wonder if who is better off, "... the peasants in a forgotten village or the city dweller thrown onto these rubbish heaps they called locations" (Thiong'o, p. 191).

So thus it becomes evident that there always exists a duality between the centre and the periphery. As centre is the site of control, it requires the rest to desire to be at the centre or be the centre, this requires a psychological subjugation and control. Therefore, the psychological space of the native people is also invaded by the hegemonic powers and becomes a case of neo-colonialism. Just like how the western invaders appropriated the physical and mental space of the colony to establish its dominion, likewise the native elites who occupies the before colonial city in turn take up the role of the colonizers. Osborne's heroes explore how the world they are placed in is entirely wrong and how their exclusive philosophy of well-being is right. Amazingly, their success or failure in this protest is secondary, but their voice is seemingly important (Mane, 2021). Before, the western forces had direct and visible control over the native people, but in

the postcolonial scenario, they exert their control through these urban spaces which becomes a kind of inconspicuous domination. So these urban spaces play a vital role in enabling the western forces to still remain superior to them and control them. Another notion that gets highlighted while analysing this spatial domination is how in the earlier times the colonizing forces were developed nations, but now in the present time in the age of globalization the colonizing forces are the western corporates who imposes an invisible form of colonization over different nations and people which becomes a practice of neo-colonialism.

So as Lefebvre states these western corporate powers colonize the native people through the representation of space thereby regulating the production of a hegemonic space for the process of colonization. So the psychological invasion contributes to the production of more urban spaces and vice versa, this shows how the western powers expand their power and acquire dominion over the nation. So since the dualities always exist, the native people are forced to succumb to the capitalistic modern development whereby they have no other option than to permit the corporate power to enter their space. They are also captive to the thoughts of them being inferior and it is only by accepting the western ways and the letting in the corporate can they can prosper and be like the west and occupy the centre. This applies to the national as well as local scenarios. So these are the two ways by which the natives get susceptible to the corporate control.

In the novel it can be observed how the urban space creates different factors which facilitate the psychological invasion of the native Kenian people. Education was one of the major means. Siriana, one of the prominent Anglican school that was an agent in embedding the notion of servitude towards the west in the minds of the young Kenyans. And when these youngsters who questions this and revolt against it, they are thrown out. The major characters like Munira, Karega, the lawyer, Chui were expelled for going against the authority and organizing and participating in strikes at various points of time. The difference in the effect of the experience on the characters varied. Chui was considered as one of the legends because of his revolutionary zeal, but later it can be seen how his character took an opposite turn, when he returned back to Siriana after the students' insistence, he came back a completely different man,

a changed man. He had aligned himself with the ideologies and notions of the western invaders. He took the role of the native bourgeois who followed the imposed imperialist ideologies and also turned out to become an agent in disseminating those ideologies on the natives to create docile masse for the western forces to impose their control. Whereas from what the lawyer experienced, it can be seen how he had realized their pathetic condition. He is critical of how the natives readily let themselves be controlled and be puppets at the disposal of the western corporate forces. He also questions about the laws that are imposed on them and goes about describing about what education in Kenya does: it obscures racism and other forms of oppression. It was meant to make them accept their inferiority so as to accept the superiority of the west that enables them to rule them. He also speaks how his nation too is blindly following the west and how it hurts him to realize that his people still continue to sweat so that a few benefit from it. Karega explains how Chui, “far from destroying the perfect system, he would inject it with new blood”. “Racism had been the ruin of many a school, many a state, many a nation: Siriana believed in peace and the brotherhood of man. He would never have a school run by rebels and gangsters and the European foreigners should have nothing to fear” (205-206). And Siriana had rigid hierarchy of power, this was to teach the Africans that the society is hierarchized and wanted them to accept and follow those.

So it can be reiterated that the urban space provides an arena for the corporate forces to appropriate that space and control the people. The space contributes to a psychological space getting invaded as well. It is through the native elites the corporates control people. So through the production of urban space or the city, the corporate forces establish the supremacy of their empire. They invade the psychological, virtual and social spaces and colonize the native people. If the earlier colonization was focussed mainly on exploiting the natural resources, this neo-colonization by this invisible corporate empire exploits human labour and cultural resources by the appropriation of space: the village space getting transformed into a postcolonial city.

The MP of Ilmorog, Nderi wa Reira acts as an agent who brings the capitalistic corporate forces into the social economic and political framework of their developing nation. Usually what happens is people are made to believe that it is by adopting the western ways and accepting

their help in developing the economy. This is part of the psychological invasion, where everything western is viewed as a developed and sophisticated and everything native is viewed as primitive and backward and hence the natives emulate the west. So the MP supports the corporates and believes in cultural unity between the people, for which he organizes a tea party and introduces the Kiama- kamwene Cultural Organization (KCO). This act makes it evident that this is a combined initiative of the native elites who had accumulated land and wealth by supporting the western corporates during and after colonization. Hence he oriented himself with the Corporates and help them encroach and dominate the private and public spaces and thereby imposing their power over the natives.

Theng'eta, a native cultural drink made by the Ilmorog people on special occasions is something very close to their native Ilmorog tradition. It was prohibited to be brewed during the time of the colonialist, because they believed that it was the drink that gave the native people courage to speak against the colonialists and why they would not work as slaves under them. This is one of the most significant elements which highlights how the corporate forces spatially dominate the villages or developing places and have total control over those people. Even their ethnic culture is commodified and appropriated by them for their profit. The native elite group along with an international liquor manufacturing company takes patentship for this native brew. Hence the native people are exploited and left powerless.

The colonizers build a colonial city which makes it easier for them to access different location and resources. And this colonial city after being evacuated when the nation gets independence, the city gets inhabited by the native elites, the usurpers. They are not bothered by the negative effects of their partnership with the capitalistic corporate forces. They help the corporate and in turn benefits from it. They are responsible for bringing in changes that contribute to the development of Ilmorog from a traditional village to a completely transformed modern city.

So it can be observed how the hegemonic powers by the appropriation the village space turns it into a postcolonial city. They do this by the appropriation of 'representation of space', that is by bringing development through urban planning: making plans for new and improved

buildings with modern structures, a museum and a game park for promoting tourism, shopping complexes, wheat ranches, huge factories, hotels, bars et cetera. The two major examples of this representation of space are the construction of the transnational road and the African economic bank that turned the lives of native upside down. And by doing this they are able to manipulate the 'spatial practice': by bringing about these societal transformation plans and implementing it completely changed the lives of the people of Ilmorog. Before they were farmers and herdsman but after the influence of development, they were reduced to labourers who only had their manual labour to offer for survival. This is because when those plans for the development project were made for Ilmorog, they were made to fence their land and portions of their land was taken for the public project, which reduced these people to mere labourers because they owned very small area of land and so they started working for land owners or as factory workers. And the herders had to drift to drier lands because huge portions of lands were enclosed for building game parks for the tourists. Many of the native folk were fighting for their sustenance as it can be seen how robbery and prostitution were rampant. And now there existed several Ilmorogs: one was the residential area for the state servants and people in power like the farm managers, public service officers, Country Council officials, managers of the banks et cetera called Cape Town. Another called New Jerusalem, the shanty town occupied by the migrant and floating workers, prostitutes, unemployed and small traders. And all these changes contribute to the dominating space of the people that is the "spaces of representation". So this explains how "the opening of the New Ilmorog was the ruin of the Old Ilmorog..." (Thiong'o 370).

Conclusion

Through the development of Ilmorog into an urban space it falls into the trap of turning itself into a postcolonial city whereby the global corporate forces establish its dominance through the appropriation of space. And this again influences other undeveloped regions and this vicious cycle keeps continuing until the whole nation gets enslaved to this invisible empire of the global corporate forces and the nation being colonized by them. Hence various developing nations and former colonies are chained and still remain slaves to this new empire

which continues to exploit them. And it is through the appropriation of space these nations are conquered by the despotic capitalist globalizing corporate forces which keeps growing and expanding its control and power over people across the globe.

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