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Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

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NGŪGĪ WA THIONG'O (1938–)

BIOGRAPHY

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was born the fifth child of the third of his father's four wives; he had twenty-seven siblings. The family lived in Kamiriithu Village, twelve miles northeast of Nairobi, Kenya. His father, Thiong'o wa Nducu, was a peasant farmer dispossessed by the British Imperial Land Act of 1915 and therefore forced to become a squatter on property meted out to one of the few native Africans who had profited from the act. His father's condition was similar to that of most of the Kikuyu with whom Ngũgĩ grew up.

In 1947 his parents separated, and in that same year, at the age of nine, Ngũgĩ attended the mission-run school at Kamaandura. After two years he transferred to Maanguu Karinga school. This was part of the Independent Schools Movement run by native Kenyans, and instruction was in Gikuyu. In 1954, however, the government took over control of the school and made English the medium of instruction.

From 1955 till 1959 he attended Alliance High School in Kikuyu, a bit closer to Nairobi. It was run by a consortium of the various Protestant denominations in Kenya and was the first secondary school specifically for Africans. Ngũgĩ was the first from his area of the country to attend.

Early in his adolescence several events took place that had a defining effect on Ngũgĩ's life. In 1953 he underwent the initiation ceremony of circumcision. The following year his stepbrother was shot dead and his older brother joined the Mau Mau. His mother was subsequently tortured. In 1955 his village was destroyed as part of the anti-Mau Mau campaign. Meanwhile, at Alliance High School he was gaining an impressive familiarity with the Bible. The combination of these events strongly affected his novels: while his family was not Christian,

Ngũgĩ himself was devoutly Christian at one time. He published his earliest work as James Ngũgĩ. He later explicitly rejected Christianity, but its implicit message of liberation, coupled with the colonizing impulses of many of its exponents, inspired Ngũgĩ's later employment of biblical themes against the British and neocolonial Kenyans.

In 1959 he entered Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda (then affiliated with London University), and in 1964 he graduated with an Upper Second Degree in Honors English (having written on Joseph Conrad). In 1961 he had married, and over the next seventeen years his wife, Nyambura, gave birth to six children. In 1961 he also wrote the first version of *The River Between*, and between 1961 and 1964 he became a columnist for *Sunday Post*, *Daily Nation*, and *Sunday Nation*. During his school years he participated actively in student publications, as well, including *Penpoint* and *Makererean*. In 1962 his play *The Black Hermit* was produced in Kampala, and he wrote *Weep Not, Child*.

In 1964 Ngũgĩ went to Leeds University on a British Council scholarship and wrote on the theme of alienation in the novels of the West Indian George Lamming; he did not, however, complete his master's thesis. While there he also encountered the writings of Marx, Engels, and Frantz Fanon. Their influence is apparent in *A Grain of Wheat*, which he wrote at Leeds.

In 1967 Ngũgĩ returned to Kenya and became a special lecturer in English at Nairobi University, but after just two years in this position he resigned in protest over the administration's failure to adequately safeguard academic freedom. He had grown disillusioned, in any case, with the syllabus and had proposed a greater emphasis on African literature. He was not the only one who had such ideas, and many of his suggestions in this area were soon implemented. In 1971 he returned to the university, but even then the core of his argument, which had been to establish at the heart of the department the study of the historic continuity of African rather than British literary culture, was not fully accepted. Since 1971, though, the department's thinking has in fact moved more decisively in Ngũgĩ's direction.

From the time that he began at Leeds University Ngũgĩ has traveled extensively, giving papers at conferences throughout the world and becoming well known as a spokesman for African literature and Gikuyu, in particular. He has also been a visiting professor at many universities. In 1970, for example, he taught in the United States at Northwestern University; in 1984, at the University of Bayreuth and the University of Auckland, New Zealand; and at Yale in the spring of 1989, 1990, 1991, and 1992. He has also taught at Smith and at Amherst. He has, in an ironic way, been Kenya's gift to the world.

While away from Nairobi in 1969 and 1970 he was writing *Homecoming*, and in late 1970 he began *Petals of Blood*. He finished the latter in September 1975 while staying at a guesthouse in Yalta provided by the Soviet Writers Union. In 1973 he became the acting head of the newly named Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi. He had been the first African in the

English Department and was now the first African to head a department in the university. But troubles were on their way.

In 1974 he began writing the play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. The play was performed in 1976 by the Kenya National Theatre. In that same year Ngũgĩ chaired the cultural committee of the Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre (KCECC), a collective that oversaw a very successful literacy program. From these experiences Ngũgĩ wrote the play *I Will Marry When I Want* at the end of the year. At the same time he began the novel *Caitani Mutharaba-ini*, initially in English; he soon changed his mind and wrote it in Gikuyu.

The following year, 1976, he officially changed his name from James Ngũgĩ to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and worked on the script for the play *Ngaahika Ndeenda*. In 1977 he published *Petals of Blood*. Both works were seen as highly controversial, and the play's license for performance was quickly withdrawn. At the end of December 1977 Daniel arap Moi, then vice-president and minister for home affairs, ordered Ngũgĩ detained in Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. He was released one year later, following protests around the world by various literary groups and by Amnesty International. While in prison Ngũgĩ wrote *Caitani Mutharaba-ini* (later translated as *Devil on the Cross*) on toilet paper and began *Detained*.

After his release he and his family were subjected to frequent harassment. While working on a revision of the written Gikuyu language in a study group in Nairobi, he continued giving speeches abroad, in London, Denmark, Japan, and elsewhere. In 1980 both *Caitani Mutharaba-ini* and *Ngaahika Ndeenda* were published, and *Detained* was published the following year. They increased his international reputation but confirmed the government's hostility toward the writer. In 1981 *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* was presented in Kiswahili (as *Mzalendo Kimathi*) at the University of Nairobi.

In 1982 the government became more vigilant in its opposition, denying permission for the performance of Ngũgĩ's *Maitu Njugira (Mother Sing for Me)* and destroying the public theatre run by the KCECC. Upon hearing of his imminent arrest in June, Ngũgĩ extended the series of lectures he was giving outside the country. He helped form the Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners in Kenya and in 1987 became the chairman of Umoja, a consortium of dissident Kenyans. In 1990 he presented the first Arthur Ravenscroft Lecture at Leeds University. Since the fall of 1992 he has been a professor of comparative literature and performance studies at New York University. In that year he presented one of the Dunning Trust Lectures at Queens University, Kingston, Canada, and the commencement speech at Choate Rosemary Hall. His exile continues.

MAJOR WORKS AND THEMES

Ngũgĩ is a novelist, dramatist, essayist, short-story writer, journalist, and critic. Throughout the development of his career as a writer, his abiding principal

theme has been the struggle of the common people of Kenya to come to terms with the effects on their culture of colonialism and the neocolonialism that followed. In the second half of his career he has signaled to the larger world community his decision to make the Kikuyu his first audience, generally writing first in Gikuyu, then translating the work—often into Kiswahili first, and then into English.

The Mau Mau war took place between 1952 and 1958 and touched Ngũgĩ's family intimately. When he began his first novels, therefore, he became the war's chronicler in fiction. *Weep Not, Child* was his first published novel, but he wrote *The River Between* before this. Each of these early novels is a *Bildungsroman*, and each has a protagonist with hopes for messianic deliverance from the country's problems.

The River Between is told in the third person through the eyes of an omniscient narrator. It is set in the late 1920s and 1930s and portrays an allegorical opposition between Christianity and the earlier Kikuyu culture. The community situated on the ridge of Makuyu comes to represent the Christian believers who reject the earlier ways as evil; the community on the ridge of Kameno, on the other hand, is the home of the protagonist, Waiyaki, and had been the home of his ancestor, the Kikuyu prophet Mugo wa Kibiro.

Waiyaki's father, Chege, sees the advantages of Western knowledge, but sees its dangers as well. He encourages Waiyaki to become a student in the missionaries' schools, but warns him not to be won over to their ways. Another member of Chege's generation, on the other hand, represents those who are sincere converts to Christianity: Joshua, in fact, wishes to transform his society by bringing more Kikuyu to the waters of baptism. Waiyaki and Joshua's two daughters, Muthoni and Nyambura, prefer to avoid such rigid dichotomies. In the course of the novel they seek to combine the two cultures.

For Waiyaki, this synthesis is to take the form of a revelation, in which he learns as a child that he is to assume a messianic role, acquire Western knowledge, and then unite his people (the book was originally entitled *The Black Messiah*). He begins this task by resigning from the Christian school and starting an independent Kikuyu school. Muthoni's attempt to combine the two worlds ends tragically. As a Christian, she has been forbidden to undergo female circumcision, but as a Kikuyu this is a necessary rite of initiation into womanhood. She therefore defies her father and goes ahead with the ceremony. Her consequent death ironically pushes the two factions farther apart. Waiyaki, meanwhile, supports the Kiama, a secret society that wishes to maintain Kikuyu culture and lands. But he himself is symbolically torn apart when he falls in love with the Christian Nyambura (Muthoni's sister), who is rejected by the Kiama because she refuses circumcision. She, in turn, rejects Waiyaki's offer of marriage, though she loves him, and instead supports her father.

Another member of Chege's generation, Kabonyi, is the leader of the Kiama faction, and he turns the group against Waiyaki. He usurps Waiyaki's role as prophet and charges the younger man with betrayal of Kikuyu customs. He further plans to lead an attack on the Christians, forcibly circumcising them and

burning their huts. Waiyaki warns Joshua, and the Kiama completely abandon him. At this point Nyambura consents to the marriage proposal and is consequently rejected by her father, as her sister had been.

As the Christians prepare for Christmas and the traditional Kikuyus prepare for the circumcision ritual, Waiyaki addresses both groups. He speaks near the Honia, the river between these two communities; its name, ironically, means "regeneration." He has recognized (but too late), he tells the people, that education will not be enough: some political activity to regain Kikuyu lands will be needed. But Kabonyi interrupts by demanding that Waiyaki denounce the "unclean" Nyambura. When he refuses, the Kiama faction arrests the couple.

Among the typical themes announced by this novel and appearing in much that followed were, first, the need for action rather than well-meaning ideals, and, second, the persistence of self-defeating infighting among the Kikuyu and, by extension, among many colonized peoples. By a variation in the point of view in the novel, Ngũgĩ also begins his exploration of the different sorts of psychological damage that colonialism has left behind.

Weep Not, Child, though published before *The River Between*, is a chronological extension of the history of the Kikuyu begun in the book we have just discussed. *Weep Not, Child* focuses on the period about fifteen years after the close of *The River Between*, the events at the end of World War II. It looks at the causes of the Mau Mau war and is the most autobiographical of the novels.

The protagonist, Njoroge, is a young man much like Waiyaki. His family and his father, Ngotho, make sacrifices so that he can get an education, and the village itself sees him as its representative in the educational enterprise that will initiate it into the knowledge of the Western world. Naturally enough, Njoroge internalizes this deputation and begins to envision himself as something of a potential messiah for his people, a combination of the Kikuyu myths and the biblical hopes he is imbibing at school.

Howlands, an English settler, has expropriated Ngotho's lands, though, and the reality of the home situation becomes increasingly desperate and demeaning for Njoroge's family. His father is eventually castrated and tortured to death; his brothers meet similar fates. Howlands's own son is subsequently killed. Meanwhile, as in *The River Between*, there are various views taken of the English by the Kikuyu. Ngotho's contemporary, Jacobo, cooperates with them and is subsequently rewarded with wealth. Again, as in *The River Between*, there is a generational conflict with Romeo-and-Juliet overtones: Njoroge falls in love with Mwhaki, Jacobo's daughter.

But the real story in the novel is the decay of Njoroge's sense of self and his respect for his role in society. He remains, basically, a passive observer of the disintegration around him and takes a defensive stance toward his responsibilities as a member of a collapsing community. To be a messiah in such a world would be too painful, and he finds no adequate outlet for the idealistic dreams that had shaped his childhood. He unsuccessfully attempts suicide. The book suggests that this is one option for the Kikuyu people; the Mau Mau war is another. Neither is without ambiguity.

There is a marked advance in sophistication after these two novels, both in technique and in theme. In subsequent work Ngũgĩ shows a clearer understanding of the complexities of the postcolonial situation and the politics and economics of exploitation. The thinking of Frantz Fanon and others gives his next novel a sharper bite.

Kenya became independent in 1963. *A Grain of Wheat* is set in the last five days before the enactment of this independence. As in *Weep Not, Child*, it rehearses the events of the Mau Mau war, principally through retrospective narration, and demonstrates the ambivalence with which the people look forward to the future. The earlier books had portrayed the personal anguish of anticolonial action or inaction, but had implicitly held out hope for some sort of messianic figure leading the people to independence. Now the emphasis shifts to the community itself and to the interchange among its members. It is difficult to speak, therefore, of any individual as the book's protagonist: the people themselves are the protagonist, and they are a complex blend of qualities. The personal ambiguities of *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child* are now distributed among five principal characters: Mumbi, Gikonyo, Karanja, Mugo, and Kihika. Each progresses or regresses in the course of the novel, or resists change and demonstrates the dangers of inactivity. An affirmation of community is valorized; complicity with neocolonialism is condemned.

On one level the plot is a detective story, a search for the individual who has betrayed a Mau Mau leader, Kihika. But on a deeper level Ngũgĩ is orchestrating an interior search for the various motives of those who participated in the war. In gradually revealing to the reader the history of the participation of his characters, Ngũgĩ demonstrates that all of them are important to the larger group's resuscitation: qualities that are ignored in an individual at one stage of the community's development, or are demeaned, may at a later stage be called to the fore as precisely what is needed. His is an organic view of group interchange.

The title suggests one of Ngũgĩ's continuing themes: the people's tie to the soil. Its biblical allusion also suggests the self-sacrificial nature that must be part of the community's efforts to rebuild ("unless a grain of wheat die"). Mugo seems to embody the older notion of personal messiahship espoused by Njoroge and Waiyaki, but Kihika speaks of Ngũgĩ's newer sense of shared sacrifice and leadership. While intolerant of the misuse of power, Ngũgĩ shows compassion even for those who have betrayed the community if they move forward toward honesty and generosity. He encourages the move from isolation to communality.

The story takes place in the village of Thabai, which has been destroyed in the war. Among the advances in Ngũgĩ's style is his use of irony in this book: Thabai has chosen Mugo to be its new mayor, not knowing that he had earlier betrayed the patriot Kihika. But Mugo grows in the office. His mirror image, Karanja, moved in the opposite direction, however, and supported the colonial police force. There is irony here, as well: he takes this reactionary step to be near the woman he loves, Mumbi, who had been imprisoned. This is an essentially selfish and self-deluded act, especially since Mumbi loves Gikonyo, and the community rejects Karanja.

The complex web of relationships in this novel is a thematic demonstration of the newer politics of responsibility that Ngũgĩ brought to the writing of the book. Kihika became a patriot, a fighter, by leaving his pregnant lover behind; Gikonyo, on the other hand, does everything he can to return to the relationships the war had forced him to abandon. When he does return, however, he discovers that Mumbi is soon to have not his child, but Karanja's. Ngũgĩ is not interested in blame, but in providing a symbol for the community as a family of mutually dependent relationships. The novel's closing also offers the hope of a burgeoning harvest for the new nation.

Petals of Blood takes the next chronological step, focusing on the neocolonial culture that succeeded independence. The harvest forecast in *A Grain of Wheat* is here characterized as bitter indeed. Again, the plot centers around a cast of characters, each of whom responds variously to the challenges of national independence. The principal focus, however, seems to be Munira, another of Ngũgĩ's characters who prefers to sit on the fence, to remain isolated rather than commit himself to the struggle on one side or the other. His progress toward a markedly neocolonial rejection of native aspirations serves to highlight the nobility of many of the other characters around him, flawed though they also are. He seems to embody the same subjective preoccupations that crippled Karanja in *A Grain of Wheat*.

The novel is set up as an investigation into the murder of three Kenyans who have profited from neocolonialism: Kimeria, Chui, and Mzigo. They represented the institutions of the new society, the businessmen, school administrators, clerics, and legislators. They are, perhaps, too insistently venal to be fully believable characters, but they provide plenty of opportunity for Ngũgĩ to demonstrate the hollow nature of capitalism and the insensitivity of its processes.

Their counterparts are Karega, Wanja, and Abdullah. We see Karega find a voice for his progressively radicalized political Marxist views and become insistent upon the role the community must play in its own regeneration. We observe the forces that lead Wanja to prostitution, forces that offer her few alternatives to the self-defensive posture that shapes her life under the new system. We further recognize the degradation of Abdullah from his former glory as a Mau Mau warrior to his present life as a near beggar.

The story is told in the most interesting way, through a series of flashbacks occasioned by the police investigation. Ngũgĩ is careful in the slow drip of plot details, and it is not until the closing pages that the murder mystery is solved. But the real investigation, one that has been forecast in his earlier novels, is into the complex characters and their motivations. The plot details and relationships among characters have been compared to Dickens; the exploration of motivation may remind the reader of Dostoyevsky.

The community itself plays a major role in the development of the plot, and the characters serve principally as stereotypical members of the larger group. Most significant are the villagers of Ilmorog and their decision to march on parliament to present their grievances. Ngũgĩ suggests that their inevitable dis-

illusionment does not defeat them: the murder, in fact, demonstrates the self-consuming nature of those dedicated to positions of neocolonial power. Instead, the novel ends on a hopeful note similar to that in *A Grain of Wheat*. Wanja is about to have Abdullah's child, and the community that truly signifies hope for Kenya is to continue. But this is a tempered hope, at best, since the powers of neocolonialism continue to usurp the rightful powers of the people themselves. The result is a diminishment of the nation and the aggrandizement of the few.

Devil on the Cross is another stylistic step forward for Ngũgĩ, though it is a step some do not welcome. This is his first novel written in Gikuyu and then translated into English. This process reflects his recognition that his first audience of choice is the people of Kenya, especially those who do not read English. The book is, some say, more clearly didactic than its predecessors. If that is true, it can also be said that it is daring in other ways. It attempts to maintain two styles of narration, one quite realistic, and the other a form of magical realism.

The target of the novel is, again, unbridled capitalism, but Ngũgĩ has also underscored the problems of sexism in a neocolonial society. The setting is Ilmorog, as in *Petals of Blood*, and in the most memorable section the story pits the lowly citizens against an assemblage of thieves of various sorts, representatives of powerful international interests. This latter group has gathered in a cave for a feast in which they vie for the title of greatest thief. The ordinary people, who have not been invited, have run afoul of the law by protesting this imposition from outside. The violence of earlier novels is here somewhat stylized, but presented as inherent in this form of industrialization.

The tale is told as if by a balladeer and centers on Wariinga, a woman who kills her former lover (whose son she had hoped to marry). The echoes of the story of Wanja are obvious. As in earlier novels, there is also a contrast between this character, who grows away from bourgeois notions of class and privilege and assumes an active role in changing society, and a character like Gatuiria, who shrinks before the dangerous possibilities of choice.

This is the first of Ngũgĩ's novels in which laughter is used as a forceful weapon against his intended targets. But the revolutionary rhetoric that accompanies it is, if anything, even fiercer. Since the book is first addressed to the suffering poor, its incitement to rise up and overthrow unjust masters demonstrates his apparent conviction that a simple reform of the colonizer's institutions will not suffice to empower the people and bring lasting reform to the operations of the country. Far from urging the poor to a greater idealism, Ngũgĩ now places the emphasis on finding pragmatic routes to change, such as the organization of trade unions. This is the lesson he has his characters learn. As he has demonstrated in several novels, the middle class tends to follow its own interests; their opportunism plays into the hands of the elite overseers. Thus the poor must assume the responsibility for change.

The stark dichotomy is partially explained by the circumstances in which *Devil on the Cross* was composed. Ngũgĩ began it just before his arrest in 1977

and continued the writing in prison. He tried to conceal it by writing on toilet paper, but it was soon confiscated. It was returned to him in three weeks' time, and he continued the novel and began his prison memoir, *Detained*. The consequent novel strips away much of the trimmings of traditional novels and presents the drama in bold, surreal figures.

Ngũgĩ has one collection of short stories, *Secret Lives and Other Stories*, and a good number of plays: *The Black Hermit*; *This Time Tomorrow: Three Plays* (including, as well, *The Rebels* and *The Wound in My Heart*); *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*; *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)*; *Maitu Njugira (Mother Sing For Me)*; and *Matigari ma Njiruungi*. The first of the plays, *The Black Hermit*, was written at the time that Ngũgĩ was changing his mind regarding the greatest besetting problem in Kenya, and it shows his ambivalence. He had thought that tribalism was the greatest threat, but soon came to regard capitalism and its neocolonial minions to be more significant. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, which Micere Mugo coauthored, is of greater significance and demonstrates Ngũgĩ's commitment to theatre as a form of politics rather than high art. It tells the story of the great Mau Mau hero and the temptations he undergoes from neocolonial forces to give up the struggle for the liberation of the people. The play and those that follow it embody Ngũgĩ's decision to bring his vision to the large mass of people in Kenya who might not read his novels. He endorses a theatre that is not restricted to performance within buildings. This became more insistent in *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, presented in Gikuyu and loudly proclaiming the injustices of neocolonialism. Its production resulted in his imprisonment.

Ngũgĩ's concern that he reach a local audience, and his lifelong concern with education, resulted in his stories for children: *Njamba Nene na Mbaathi i Mathagu*, *Bathitoora ya Njamba Nene*, and *Njamba Nene na Chibu King'ang'i*. His nonfiction collections include *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture, and Politics*; *Writers in Politics*; *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*; *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neocolonial Kenya*; *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*; *Writing against Neocolonialism*; and *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*.

As in the plays, so in the prose essays Ngũgĩ persistently applies the political test to art, demanding in the *Homecoming* essays that literature be judged in terms of its effect on the society from which it springs. *Writers in Politics* documents the development of Ngũgĩ's thinking during the 1970s, when he says he stopped being a teacher and became a student at the feet of Kenyan peasants and workers. *Decolonising the Mind* offers a vigorous and sustained explanation of the importance of national languages and the production of national literatures in that language. To do otherwise, argues Ngũgĩ, is to remain complicit in the colonizer's view of the world. *Moving the Centre* argues for the freeing of Kenyan culture from Eurocentrism, colonial legacies, and racism.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is seen today as the most important writer from East Africa and one of the three best-known Anglophone African authors; his novels have been translated into more than fourteen languages. A consistent antagonist to neocolonial interests, he is considered by many to be the most significant contemporary writer from the African continent. As we have noted, he would no longer consider himself an Anglophone author: English has become his third language, after Gikuyu and Kiswahili. This commitment to the principle of national culture helps explain both his importance for the African continent and the entire Third World and the ongoing controversy that surrounds him.

That Ngũgĩ has taken such a public stand for literature in native languages is doubly significant, since his *Weep Not, Child* was the first novel written in English to be published by an East African. In 1966 the book went on to win first place for Anglophone novel at the first World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, which was awarded by a jury headed by Langston Hughes. This was not his first award, nor was it by any means his last. *The Black Messiah*, which he later revised as *The River Between*, had won first place in the English-language section of the novel-writing competition sponsored by the East African Literature Bureau in 1961.

In 1973 he received the Lotus Prize in Literature at the fifth Afro-Asian Writers Conference in Khazakhstan. In 1981 his novel *Caitani Mutharaba-ini* (*Devil on the Cross*) received Special Commendation in the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa. His children's story *Njamba Nene na Mbaathi i Mathagu* received the same commendation two years later. He has won the East African Novel Prize and in 1991 received the Paul Robeson Award for Artistic Excellence, Political Conscience, and Integrity.

In his own view, perhaps, his greatest award might be his exile, a clear demonstration that his writing is having an immediate impact. His use of literature for clearly political purposes is the aspect of his writing that meets with negative criticism from some quarters of the academy. Ngũgĩ remains unrepentant and unconvinced by the argument that this is all well and good as long as the rhetoric does not overwhelm the art. As with any "committed" writer, he attempts "to harness the 'laws' of art to the dictates of his own conscience" (Cook and Okenimkpe, 243).

Ngũgĩ's prose is praised because "at its best [it] is never far removed from poetry" (Larson, 122). Others attribute this to the influence of biblical rhythms, beyond the many direct quotations. But some have spoken of his "apparent stylistic ineptitude," suggesting that "quite a number of his sentences seem not only clumsy, but grammatically wrong" (Palmer, 9). Such critics complain that "the real problem with Ngũgĩ's language is that one is constantly irritated by its naïvety and extreme simplicity" (Palmer, 10). Others counter that as the

neocolonial reality has deepened, "Ngũgĩ's style has evolved away from Biblical simplicity" (Nazareth, 252).

Ngũgĩ's characteristic themes have met with various responses, most of them positive. Regarding *A Grain of Wheat*, Nadine Gordimer remarks that it is extremely interesting because it brings a "new" theme to African literature: "the effects on a people of the changes brought about in themselves by the demands of a bloody and bitter struggle for independence" (Gordimer, 226). His religious concerns prompt some to describe Ngũgĩ's work as "the best account yet of how Christianity not only gnawed away at tribal values (the standard charge against it), but how it actually resonated with deep elements in the hearts of the people" (Roscoe, 171).

His powers of characterization are praised as "second to none in Africa" (Roscoe, 190). Larson speaks of his use of the "lyrical collective consciousness" (138) and impressionism, which he describes as "the internal rendering of his character's emotional reactions to the external world" (155). But he comes under attack when didacticism prompts him to present stereotypical mouthpieces for philosophical positions (Nkosi, 334-45).

As others have recognized, however, Ngũgĩ is fully aware that his plays and novels at times become openly rhetorical. He insists, in fact, that they must be; as his own political thinking has clarified and he has increasingly put his talents in the service of change for the common man and woman, his narrative voice has become more urgent. Thus in *Devil on the Cross* "the artistry lies first in laying bare social evils which normally lie snugly concealed by rationalizations and apologia . . . and secondly, in lending to revolutionary idealism a new plausibility and human warmth" (Cook and Okenimkpe, 242).

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