
Book Reviews

Petals of Blood

by Ngugi Wa Thing'o,
Dutton, Heinemann, 1977.

Despite an international furor over his arrest in 1978, the Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thing'o is definitely not a household word in the US. Given the hegemony of the banal and the sensational in the drugstore shelves and bestseller lists, the dominant culture of the marketplace excludes not only Third World progressive writing but also rejects the mixture of art and politics—unless it is the politics of the IMF-World Bank and the transnational corporations. The daily consciousness of the public must be made safe from critical, not to say radical thinking.

But it is precisely this privatization of daily life in capitalism, its ethnocentric confinement to Anglo-Saxon superficialities, its compartmentalized puritanism, that Ngugi's fourth and most powerful novel *Petals of Blood* places on exhibit and interrogates. In form and substance, the novel is a sustained interrogation of the modern dilemma of alienation: Why do individuals feel lost, their lives meaningless, their souls devalued in the great liberal "marketplace of ideas"?

A sketch of the characters in the novel will indicate more concretely what I mean. The novel begins with the four major characters—Munira, Abdulla, Wanja, Karega—arrested for alleged murder of three African directors of the Theng-eta Breweries in Ilmorog, Kenya. The first part focuses on Munira, a withdrawn and introspective schoolteacher, who is later revealed as the arsonist of the brothel where the directors died. He provides the example of the most extreme isolation of the psyche which all the others, in varying degrees, share. His moralizing recollection of the past, his obsessive probing into his family history and the painful traumas of his youth in Siriana (high school), sets the framework for a series of recalls by the three other characters uprooted and drifting from their origins. Haunted and driven by unrevolved personal crises and the upheavals of history, all of them have come to settle temporarily in the village of Ilmorog, temporarily immobilized until their past returns and compels them to act.

We next meet Abdulla, an aging veteran of the Mau-Mau rebellion in the Fifties against British colonialism. Cheated of any honor after independence, the lame Abdulla manages a store to which Munira and Wanja, the central woman figure and grand-daughter of Nyakinyua, a village elder, are drawn. Wanja is Ngugi's paragon of the protean self. She epitomizes the problematic consciousness of Kenyan activists. Rejected by her family and ruined by Kimeria (one of the slain directors), Wanja's plight typifies the ordeals of city women in the Third World who are victimized by feudal authoritarianism, sexism, and competitive "free enterprise."

In such a world where labor-power is bought and sold as a commodity, where every quality of life is reduced to an abstract measure, a quantity scaled by money or private

property, the reality of Wanja is an inexorable fact. Her role as prostitute, and later as manager or proprietor profiting from the sale of other women's bodies, symbolizes the acquisitive and predatory system, which is the main target of Ngugi's uncompromising critique.

All three characters are suspects in the "crime," an assault on the sanctity of the status quo. But only one, Karega, is relentlessly pursued by the law because he is "a trade-union agitator" whose militant organizing of the brewery workers threatens the hitherto unchallenged logic of exploitation. Karega is the youthful hero whose education or apprenticeship informs one underlying pattern of the novel.

Karega shares a common background with Munira: both went through the disillusioning experience in Siriana where Chui (another of the slain directors) represents the deformation of the anti-British intellectual into a native elitist tyrant. But Karega, unlike Munira, does not succumb to cynicism or stoic indifference. On the contrary. He immerses himself in the working masses in the project of uniting theory and practice, ideas and action. Karega falls in love with Mukami, Munira's sister. Her suicide, precipitated by her father's objection to Karega (his brother, a Mau-Mau rebel, cut off the father's ear for his complicity with British oppression), inflicts a psychic wound on Munira, but spurs Karega to action, indicting the whole patriarchal morality of religion and exploitation.

One of the novel's principal contradictions is represented by Munira's metaphysical egotism and Karega's proletarian commitment to anti-imperialist revolutionary change. Their passion for Wanja joins them in a unity of opposites analogous to Wanja's "cohabitation" with the native bourgeoisie personified by the slain directors of the brewery.

So when the novel begins in the manner of a detective/whodunit tale, we are confronted with the end, the climax of our characters' dramas. Confined in jail, Munira doubles back twelve years to the time when all four gravitated to Ilmorog, a remote rural village which, for Karega, still preserved the pristine virtues of a communal Africa long gone. Everything then seemed harmonious on the surface—until drought overtook the village.

Led by Nyakinyua, the villagers make a journey or pilgrimage to the city to appeal to the Member of Parliament. Salvation comes after a few years—in the form of capital investment: Ilmorog becomes the entrepreneur's happy-hunting ground. This is vividly illustrated when theng-eta, once a vision-inducing herb for poets and soothsayers, is commodified or transformed into the main ingredient for beer.

Ilmorog then is "saved" by business and profitmaking. With a cash-economy come robberies, lockouts, "prowling prostitutes in cheap night clubs," police raids, police cells, etc. Wanja sets up her establishment which becomes the stage or trap for the three African bourgeoisie. It serves as the site where Munira, in trying to save Karega from the diabolic temptress Wanja, sets fire to the house—an act evoking an adolescent exorcism of guilt that has never quite vanished from his memory. It is also the site where Abdulla, deliberately planning to kill Kimeria—"the time, the day, and the place was not of his making, but to act was his freedom"—comes to rescue Wanja from the fire, an ironic fulfillment of his quest.

The novel, as I anticipated above, concludes with Munira confessing to his responsibility for burning Wanja's house.

In the trial he condemns his father's hypocrisy and infidel ways. Our attention is shifted to Wanja who, pregnant with Abdulla's child (which compensates for her killing her child by Kimeria in the past), emerges less as the character who discovers the need to choose the time and mode of her revenge than the catalyst who, in Karega's judgment, reveals the diverse possibilities in everyone. Read allegorically, Wanja thus personifies an Africa (or Kenya) going through the ordeals of rectifying its mistakes and seizing the opportunity for self-renewal.

The ending of the novel thematically foregrounds Karega's consciousness agitated by Wanja's voice:

Imperialism: capitalism: landlords: earthworms. A system that bred hords of round-bellied jiggers and bedbugs with parasitism and cannibalism as the highest goal in society The system and its god and its angels had to be fought consciously, consistently and resolutely by all the working people! . . . Tomorrow it would be the workers and the peasants leading the struggle and seizing power to overrun the system of all its preying bloodthirsty gods and gnomish angels, bringing to an end the reign of the few over the many and the era of drinking blood and feasting on human flesh. Then, only then, would the kingdom of man and woman really begin, they joying and loving in creative labour For a minute he was so carried on the waves of this vision and of the possibilities it opened up for all the Kenyan working and peasant masses that he forgot the woman beside him.

The last sentence of that tremendously prophetic passage is symptomatic of the novel's major theme: the recovery of individuality through a detour in collective, liberating action.

The passage also conveys to us what I think is the most significant argument or principle of the novel's action: Ngugi's demonstration that the quest for identity, and with it one's personal destiny, cannot be successfully conducted in the usual solipsistic, privatized mode exemplified by the dominant culture (its models, let me remind the readers, are the "innocent" narrator of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Camus' alienated outsider in *The Stranger*) the logic of which Munira's fanatical casuistry and impotence are the practical realizations.

Through his novel, Ngugi is telling us (if I may translate fictive into expository discourse) that this search for personal validation can only proceed in the context of the most tortuous and constrained milieu where we find ourselves today, in a realm of necessity where ultimately the level and mode of material production (and reproduction), with all its implications via institutions, class-relations, etc.—determine the parameters of choice and action. Within this realm occurs class struggle, the combat between ideologies, the tension of will and nerves and bodies.

This content of Ngugi's vision may be glimpsed in the formal construction of the narrative. Ngugi established in Part One a sequence of involved exercises of memory (chiefly engaged in by Munira in his prison cell, an appropriate metaphor). This is disrupted by a social fact: the drought, also a spiritual analogue for the impasse suffered by the protagonists. Ngugi then stages a recovery of the popular, collective tradition of protest in describing the journey. It is the pivotal conduct of the journey which crystallizes the dispersed sentiments of the villagers, unifies the disintegrating sensibilities of Munira, Wanja and

Abdulla; and finally reveals the heroic potential of the cripple Abdulla (the Mau-Mau past) and Nyakinyua (the village ethos nourished by the land).

In effect, the journey shatters the paralyzing hold of the past on the present and unleashes energies that converge in the destruction of Wanja's brothel (the shameful humiliations and defeats of the struggle) and the directors (the present oppressors).

After the journey, Karega realizes that the duty of the revolutionary is not to reinstate an antiquarian, idealized past but rather to question it, learn from it, and use it to build a more humane future. his vision is thoroughly and genuinely dialectical—like the novel's action.

Although Part Three's title, "To Be Born," continues the Biblical motif announced in Part Two, "Toward Bethlehem," the rubric for Part Four, "Again . . . La Luta Continua!" with epigraphs from Whitman and Cabral, the leader of the revolution in Guinea-Bissau, underlines Ngugi's affirmation of a Utopian or visionary orientation. For it is in the last part, the description of how profit and commodity production envelops Ilmorog, dispossesses the inhabitants of their ancestral lands, and reduces passion into cash, that we perceive how ideology—the world-outlook shaped by class position—interpellates each character, prodding them to action along determinate paths.

Thus, in contrast to Wanja's and Munira's fragmented and atomized view of experience which pinpoints or accuses individuals as sole, independent agents and causes of events, Karega's relational or structural perception is seen to derive from his practice, in particular his grasp of contradictions while working with people. He replies to the Inspector, the bureaucratic specimen of a predatory society: "I don't believe in the elimination of individuals. There are many Kimerias and Chuis in the country. They are the products of a system, just as workers are products of a system. It's the system that needs to be changed . . . and only the workers of Kenya and the peasants can do that." Here, the religious allegory vanishes, to be replaced by the insistent language and imagery of revolutionary praxis.

Ngugi's novel is of course a dynamic, intensely searching exploration of the problems of contemporary Kenya (population: 10 million), an East African nation independent since 1963, but still dominated by British and US transnational corporations. Monopoly capitalism services, and is served by, local agents, the formerly anti-colonial group of the late Jomo Kenyatta, now the only legal party, the African National Union. Kenya is a classic neocolony today saddled with multi-leveled contradictions.

Given its dependency status, the monopoly of land and other resources by a few settlers and a privileged native minority, the control of the State apparatus by a reactionary ensemble of bureaucrat-capitalists, landlords and compradors, Kenya—except for the complicated tensions among its 40 ethnic groups—typifies the situation of most Third World countries today. For this reason, Ngugi's novel can be conceived as a revealing microcosm of the "Free World," including the US to whose racist and decadent tendencies Ngugi repeatedly alludes.

Petals of Blood not only dramatizes the agonies of isolated and tormented individuals—their blood must be shed before their spirits can blossom, as the imagery suggests—striving, in vain, for escape or for ambiguous contact with others. It also registers the impact of large

historical forces on individual consciousness. It delineates how actions result from the clash of subjective motives and objective situations. It projects the recognition of the Other in the process. Finally, it provokes you, the reader, to participate and choose sides in the ongoing life-and-death struggle before you; it incites you to produce the meaning of the text by a profound involvement with those very same implacable forces that Ngugi invokes, forces that you wrestle with, blindly or purposefully, in solitude or with others, in every moment of your life.

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The Promise of Eurocommunism by Carl Marzani, Lawrence Hill & Co. 1980. \$16.95 (paper \$8.95)

Carl Marzani has produced a lively, well written and informative book on how the Italian Communist Party (PCI) understands Eurocommunism and the transition to socialism in Italy. Marzani's enthusiasm for the Italian Communists and their strategy is unmistakable and infectious, but it can not rescue the book from the grave theoretical and political weaknesses which underlie its perspective.

Marzani extolls the positive features of Eurocommunism: its break with the sterile Soviet model of socialism and the mechanical application of the Soviet revolutionary model to advanced capitalist countries, and emphasizes the necessity of a socialist practice and strategy appropriate to the specific conditions of advanced capitalist countries. So far so good. But Marzani immediately gets into trouble when he tries to explain what exactly this new practice and strategy entails. The discussion of Gramsci and the Gramscian legacy is particularly weak. Marzani, following the trend among Italian Eurocommunists, tries to portray Gramsci as the first eurocommunist, and present PCI strategy as the neutral outcome of his work.

In fact, however, Eurocommunism has only partially grasped the revolutionary character of Gramsci's thought. Gramsci's strategy, the construction of proletarian hegemony, involved two inter-related aspects, the first which the PCI has grasped, while at the same time liquidating the second. For Gramsci, communist strategy required the construction of a broad bloc of oppressed classes and strata to counter bourgeois hegemony. Eurocommunism, by implementing this approach, has broken with the narrow class reductionism which has characterized much of the Comintern's strategic thinking. At the same time, however, Gramsci never neglected the other aspect: the central need for proletarian leadership within the bloc, that is, the need for a bloc organized around proletarian rather than bourgeois interests, practices and styles of work.

This is Eurocommunism's central flaw: it has constructed a national-popular bloc not around proletarian interests, but through the subordination of workingclass interests to

its petty-bourgeois and bourgeois "allies"; not through the construction of proletarian power and hegemony, but through an endless and debilitating series of behind-the-scenes parliamentary and governmental maneuvers; not by constructing a new workingclass consciousness and culture (so important to Gramsci), but by attempting to prove itself the most loyal defender of bourgeois order and stability. Marzani is not unaware of these serious criticisms leveled at the PCI both in Italy and abroad. Unfortunately, his polemic against these criticisms is relegated almost entirely to a response to an orthodox Trotskyist critique, (that of Ernest Mandel), rather than responding to what would have been more interesting and difficult—the criticism of the Italian extra-parliamentary left.

Finally, perhaps in frustration for the obvious theoretical advantages which Eurocommunism's critics have over its defenders, Marzani makes the astonishing comment: "Lenin's maxim, 'There can be no revolutionary movement without a revolutionary theory', has done considerable harm to human progress." (p. 81). The idea that a serious revolutionary movement can dispense with revolutionary theory is unworthy both of Marzani, whose own theoretical gifts are obvious from this book, and of Gramsci, whom he so admires.

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²⁰Ernest Mandel, *Long Waves of Capitalist Development*. (Cambridge, 1980).

²¹Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation*. (NLB, 1979), pp. 111-12.

²²Aglietta, p. 172.

²³Baron, pp. 26-27.

²⁴Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Politics of Upheaval*. (Houghton-Mifflin, 1960), pp. 431-32.

²⁵James A. Geschwender, *Class, Race and Worker Insurgency*. (Cambridge, 1970), p. 24.

²⁶On blacks and the labor movement generally see: Julius Jacobson, ed. *The Negro and the American Labor Movement*. (Anchor, 1968).

²⁷Geschwender, p. 29.

²⁸William J. Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race*. (University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 69.

²⁹Baron, p. 29.

³⁰William A. Nolan, *Communism versus the Negro*. (Regnery, 1951), pp. 160-61.

³¹Doxey Wilkerson in *Political Affairs* (July 1945), p. 620, quoted in Nolan, p. 164.

³²Geschwender, p. 39.

³³Baron, p. 32.

³⁴Marable, p. 116.

³⁵Mandle, p. 41.

³⁶Wilson, p. 93.

³⁷Robert Hill, "The Illusion of Black Progress," *The Black Scholar* Vol. 10, No. 2 (Oct. 1978), p. 21.

³⁸Mandel, *Long Waves*, p. 27.

³⁹Hill, p. 49.

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