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The figure of the martyr in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's short fiction

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Abstract:

*In many ways, Ngũgĩ's collection *Secret Lives and Other Stories* (1975) foreshadows his latter novels and their thematic preoccupations as it portrays colonial encounters and social and political upheavals in (post)colonial Kenya. The paper focuses primarily on selected stories included in the second section of the collection which revolve around the theme of fighters and martyrs. Ngũgĩ's adoption of Christian imagery, on which he relies quite heavily in his novels as well, enables him to articulate the ambivalent position and conflicts of his characters, both African and European. The motif of martyrdom is associated both with the clashing worlds of Christianity and the Gikuyu religion (addressing primarily the subject of conversion), and the Mau Mau revolt which inevitably required communal sacrifices. The paper ponders on the various modifications of the motif and its potential functions.*

The fiction of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has always been intertwined with the social and political context of his native Kenya, with the author commenting sharply on the ailments of his native country as well as of the postcolonial world in general. Whether talking about the colonial period, the struggle for independence or the much awaited postcolonial development, his novels offer keen observations of social and political life. His early work, focusing on the portrayal of colonial encounters and examinations of various forms of colonial domination, provide a sharp critique of the imperial legacy. For that reason, most of his texts revolve around

the theme of religion, one of the most powerful tools of control in his view, and comment on its role in the construction of both communal and personal identities.

Ngũgĩ's personal development in this matter also warrants a brief commentary. Though his parents did not convert to Christianity, Ngũgĩ, educated in missionary schools, adopted the religion during his schooling and became a devoted Christian. At university, however, his faith "gradually lost its appeal" (Thiong'o quoted in Sander and Lindfors, 2006, p. 28) with the full realization of the implication of the Church in colonialism.

I have always thought of Christianity itself as part and parcel of cultural imperialism. Christianity, in the past, has been used to rationalize imperialist domination and exploitation of peasants and workers. It has been used to blind people to the reality of their exploitation because religion as a whole wants to tell people that their lot as a whole is God-given, as opposed to being man-conditioned. So if you see that you are poor because God has willed it, you are more than likely to continue to pray to God to right your condition. But if you know that your poverty is not God-conditioned, but it is socially conditioned, then you are likely to do something about those social conditions that are assuring that you be poor (ibid., p. 88).

Interestingly, despite Ngũgĩ's critical view of the role Christianity played in the colonial process, his fictional work draws heavily on Christian imagery and symbolism, which is often contrasted with elements and concepts of the traditional Gikuyu religion. His early novels make use of the shared knowledge of Christian symbols, characters and sayings from the Bible, which enable him to synthesize Christianity with the Gikuyu tradition. In fact, Ngũgĩ "draws on both systems as a source for powerful images and symbols which implicitly or explicitly comment on the action in his works" (Williams, 1999, p. 10). By incorporating religion and religious content into his early novels, the writer portrays the involvement of the Church in the process of colonization and points to its vast social consequences. At the same time, however, his novels often appropriate the elements of biblical narratives and use them for their own purposes. For example, the deployment of religious practices and beliefs may also function as a source of inspiration that can reunite the divided communities and inspire social change (see, for example, *The River Between*).

However, a devoted reader of Ngũgĩ's novels does not fail to recognize his shifting attitude towards Christianity which moves from the initial allure of its rich symbolism to a

rather mocking, sarcastic use of Christian references which is probably more in line with his later personal dismissal of Christianity. The former attempts at fusing the Western and African religious elements are supplanted by a more radical, subversive approach in his latter works. In *Devil on the Cross*, for instance, the writer centres the main action around an absurd competition in thievery, which is obviously a parody of the parable of the talents in Matthew 26. The Christian narrative is thus modified and used in a new context to manifest the dire circumstances in postcolonial societies, worshipping the capital of foreign companies. Ngũgĩ thus gradually moves away from the idea of religious/cultural fusion and becomes a passionate advocate for the return to Gikuyu's cultural and religious norms.

While Ngũgĩ is known primarily for his novels, he has also written several collections of short stories. *Secret Lives and Other Stories*, first published in 1975, foreshadows numerous themes that later preoccupied his most famous novels. In the Preface to the collection, Ngũgĩ explains the incentive for writing the stories as follows: "My writing is really in attempt to understand myself and my situation in society and in history" (Thiong'o, 1975, p. xii). The short stories, similarly to his novels, thematize various elements of Gikuyu culture, the influence of Christianization on local communities as well as the post-independent domination of capitalism and its far-reaching consequences. The writer examines the pressing political and social issues that plague postcolonial societies and looks at them critically from his socialist and humanist perspective. In fact, "[p]olitical Africa, in the widest sense, is the background to the stories, and what happens to the characters in the stories can be taken as a metaphor of what is happening in the land" (Killam, 1980, p. 74).

This paper seeks to close-read selected short stories comprising the second section of the collection, titled *Fighters and Martyrs*, which recount the encounters and value collisions of the Christian and Gikuyu worlds but also problematize one of the most crucial periods in Kenyan history - the Kenya Emergency. Though the figure of the martyr is not tied to Christianity exclusively, Ngũgĩ's background in Christian schooling as well as the characters' affiliation to Christianity, establish the link quite clearly. The motif of martyrdom, presented here in various thematic modifications, is thus associated both with the clashing worlds of Christianity and the Gikuyu religion (addressing primarily the subject of conversion), and the Mau Mau revolt with inevitable communal sacrifices. All of these stories "are deeply colored [...] by a powerful moral consciousness; their heroes are divided men. Facing a terrible dilemma, caught between rival claims, these characters are buffeted by the realities of Kenya's history (Lovesey, 2000, p. 23).

Several stories in this section, such as ‘The Village Priest’, ‘The Black Bird’ or ‘A Meeting in the Dark’, focus on Christianity and the Gikuyu religion coming into conflict because of the zealous endeavours of Christian converts. The narratives portray the confrontation between tradition and modernity, as epitomized by two rivalling religious systems. “Decent values, usually associated with original African values, suffer as a result of coming into contact with imported ones” (Killam, 1980, p. 76). The protagonists experience an internal rift, as a result of drifting away from their cultural heritage, and are forced to bear the consequences of their ideological crisis. The common thread that ties these narratives together resides in the negative portrayal of Christian converts who adopt an unrelenting, even remorseless attitude towards those who stay true to the Gikuyu religion.

The motif of martyrdom is developed especially in the story of Mangara in ‘The Black Bird’. Mangara, whose fate is related to the reader by an observing narrator (Mangara’s school friend), is haunted, or more precisely cursed, by the aftermath of his grandfather’s ruthless act. As an uncompromising Christian zealot, who “came to believe that what was in their people was evil” (Thiong’o, 2018, p. 38), Mangara’s grandfather had once destroyed the possessions of the local medicine man Mundu Mugo, “seeing in them and in his work the embodiments of evil, the way to eternal damnation” (Killam, 1980, p. 77). “But it is the grandfather and his heirs who find damnation and are made martyrs to the grandfather’s strict beliefs” (ibid.). By desecrating the old man’s ritual objects, Mundu Mugo places a curse upon him and returns and haunts the family members as the Black Bird in order to revenge the grandfather’s act. One by one, the family members, upon meeting the avenging spirit, die and nobody is able to lift the curse. Mangara, knowing the backstory, awaits his own fate as he is aware that he is the next in line.

‘The Black Bird’ echoes the theme of uncompromising Christian zealousness that appears in other short stories in the collection, e.g. ‘The Village Priest’ or ‘The meeting in the dark’. Mangara’s grandfather mirrors the character of Joshua in ‘The Village Priest’ or Joshua of *The River Between* - both are passionate converts, adamant in their condemnation of local customs and beliefs. The new converts in ‘The Black Bird’ also came to believe that:

“[e]very custom was a sin. Every belief held by the people was called superstition, the work of the devil. Our God was called the Prince of Darkness. My grandfather and the others like him considered themselves soldiers specially chosen by the Christian God to rescue a lost tribe from eternal damnation. Nothing could harm them. Christ was on their side; so they went through the hills, treading on the

sacred places and throwing away the meat that had been sacrificed to Ngai under the Mugumo. Soldiers of Christ fighting with Satan!” (Thiong’o, 2018, p. 38)

Ngũgĩ portrays the characters’ fervour with which they try to disconnect their community from their pagan customs, rituals and superstition. In ‘The Village Priest’, he also shows the reader how some of these characters struggle with their own doubts and personal dilemmas, especially in times of crises (such as the drought that plagues Makuyu).

In ‘The Black Bird’, however, he does not focus on the Christian zealots but rather on the community as a whole. In that sense, the Christian concept of martyrdom is used rather ironically in the story. It does not seek to glorify those who die in the name of their faith but rather warns others to be cautious in abandoning their own God. The curse that is placed on Mangara’s family members and turns them into martyrs, is meant to function as a potent warning to anyone who decides to stand against the Gikuyu God. The elusive, magical characteristics of the Black Bird keeps the cursed family in a state of permanent suspense. Mangara, a loner, aware of the terrible curse placed upon his family, is constantly vigilant in case the Black Bird might appear. “[H]e would frequently start out of a reverie and stare around as if he had been woken up from a strange dream or nightmare” (Thiong’o, 2018, p. 32). Gradually, he has to sacrifice his personal happiness, a promising study of medicine as well as his relationship with Wamaitha as the curse consumes him completely.

As the rain-maker in ‘The Village Priest’ remarks, those who have brought division into this land in their service to the white strangers, can only be cleansed by the power of their people” (Thiong’o, 2018, p. 29). Yet while Joshua is paralyzed by shame, “the feeling of utter hollowness and hopelessness” (ibid.), Mangara decides to take matters into his own hands. In the end, to appease the avenging spirit, Mangara sacrifices himself under the sacred tree by committing suicide to end the curse placed upon his family. “His eyes wore a strange look of peace, you know, as if he had accomplished a difficult task. The look you sometimes see in the revivalists” (Thiong’o, 2018, p. 42). Similarly to Joshua in ‘The Village Priest’, who was also seeking redemption under the sacred tree, Mangara understands that the only way to placate the angry spirit is to show respect and return to one’s God. He offers himself to God as the ultimate sacrifice that should finally bring peace not only to his family, but to the whole community. In that way, he also succeeds in reversing the martyr narrative to its original meaning.

In the later short stories, which echo Ngũgĩ’s most famous novels *The Grain of Wheat* or *Petals of Blood*, the figure of the martyr is associated primarily with the Emergency, or Mau Mau Revolt. ‘The Martyr’ is probably the most potent as well as the most ambivalent short

story in this section. The story “exposes the inconsistencies and disparities in the settlers’ construction of self and other” (Nicholls, 2016, p. 77) as it centres on the misrepresentation of the natives in the eyes of white settlers. The story opens with the news of a violent death of a European settler couple, which acquaints the reader with “the increased wave of violence that had spread all over the country” (Thiong’o, 2018, p. 43). As the murder of Mr and Mrs Garstone is discussed by Mrs Hill and her two companions, Mrs Hardy and Mrs Smiles, two opposing line of thought are revealed to the reader. While the friends of Mrs Hill are evident proponents of the imperialist discourse viewing the natives as savage people characterized by depravity and ingratitude, Mrs Hill, one of the earliest settlers “owning a lot of land with big tea plantations sprawling right across the country” (ibid.), favours a more liberal approach. Though she is “an apologist for the imperialist narrative of civilization”, her “construction of colonized Kenyans is premised on flagstone liberal values such as tolerance and co-option” (Nicholls, 2016, p. 77). Priding herself on her charitable approach towards her houseboy Njoroge as well as her other employees, Mrs Hill believes she represents the modern line of thought, devoid of stereotypical perceptions of “the uncivilized savages”. She believes that: “She and her husband and others had tamed the wilderness of this country and had developed a whole mass of unoccupied land. People like Njoroge now lived contented without a single worry about tribal wards. They had a lot to thank the Europeans for” (Thiong’o, 2018, p. 51).

But as the story unfolds and the narrative perspective shifts to Njoroge, Mrs Hill’s progressive ideas are revealed as mistaken impressions and the irony of her convictions is not lost on the reader. Njoroge despises Mrs Hill wholeheartedly, he resents her hypocrisy and complacency and above all her liberalism and paternalism. She does not know that “for Njoroge she is the embodiment of those forces which have driven him from the land and forced on him the humiliation of working as a servant” (Killam, 1980, p. 78). What Mrs Hill understands as a taming of the wilderness, as its civilizing, is, in Njoroge’s eyes, the appropriation of Gikuyu land that has been temporarily abandoned by his family because of a famine. The injustice of the expropriation as well as the deepening resentment towards the condescending Europeans leads Njoroge to the idea of revenge. He joins the Freedom Boys and plans to kill Mrs Hill as an act of rebellion against the settlers. Yet as he waits for the rebels, he visualizes Mrs Hill as a mother and thus humanizes her. Unable to proceed with his original plan, he sets out to warn her about the rebels and save her. However, Mrs Hill, who has experienced a similar epiphany and understood that Njoroge is a man with a family and not just her servant succumbs to her instinctive fear and kills Njogore, her saviour, in alleged self-defence. Clearly, Ngũgĩ “presents the tension of the Mau Mau period and its historical antecedents as a tragic muddle of mixed

perceptions, limited points of view, and missed opportunities for mutual cultural understanding” (Lovesey, 2000, p. 25).

As the title of the story indicates, the author makes use of the concept of martyrdom to explore the problematic dynamics between the colonizers and the native Kenyans in the turbulent period of the Emergence. Since the story discloses the news of the murder of the Garstones right at the beginning, one might immediately associate the martyr of the title with the murdered Europeans (or similar cases, for that matter). At the beginning, the story is focalized through the character of Mrs Hill, however, later it shifts to Njoroge’s perspective, which provides a counter-narrative to his employer’s viewpoint. Once Njoroge decides to save Mrs Hill, he clearly assumes the role of the saviour and is thus symbolically portrayed as a Christ figure. Dying at her hands, he becomes the martyr of the Emergency cause.

While Njoroge’s senseless death might symbolize the irreconcilable division between the natives and the settlers and might, in fact, deepen the resolve of the natives to fight against the Europeans, Ngũgĩ adopts an uncharacteristically liberal approach to the theme in this story. Njoroge’s martyrdom also hints at a potential reconciliation which could have been made possible by Mrs Hill’s and Njoroge’s epiphanies. Both characters experience a moment of illumination, which enables them to view the other person in a more humane way and strip him/her of the stereotypical representation:

Had he many wives? Had he a large family? It was surprising even to her to find that she had lived with him so long, yet had never thought of these things. This reflection shocked her a little. It was the first time she had ever thought of him as a man with a family. She had always seen him as a servant [...] This was an omission, something to be righted in the future (Thiong’o, 2018, p. 52)

He thought of her. He remembered her [...] He knew that she had loved her husband. Of that he was sure. She almost died of grief when she had learnt of his death. In that moment her settlerism had been shorn off. In that naked moment, Njoroge had been able to pity her. Then the children! [...] Almost like his own. [...] And then he realized, too suddenly, that he could not do it. He could not tell how, but Mrs. Hill had suddenly crystallized into a woman, a wife, somebody like Njeri or Wambui, and above all, a mother. He could not kill a woman. He could not kill a mother (ibid., p. 49).

Obviously, throughout the story “[e]ach character views the other across the ‘rift’ of racial and cultural difference, seeing no more than a stereotypical embodiment of the settler or the houseboy. The coming conflagration is merely the result of a tragic failure of communication, that the story implies might have been patched over” (Lovesey, 2000, p. 25). Nevertheless, by granting both characters their own narrative perspective and attempting to achieve a more balanced portrayal of the problematic circumstances, the writer seeks to communicate the complicated nature of the colonizer - colonized coexistence. Though the epiphanies of both central characters, which finally strip the other of the prejudicial characteristics, could facilitate a more genuine interaction, the oppressive nature of current social and political conditions does not make reconciliation possible. Njoroge’s death, which will be interpreted by both sides from their own perspective, will thus only confirm the validity of the rival stances and deepen the lingering conflict.

In conclusion, *Secret Lives and Other Stories* helped to establish Ngũgĩ as a writer who “is not satisfied with the surface appearance of society and individuals” but is “constantly probing deeper in order to give meaning to what is visible; and to seek answers to questions about the whole spectre of human life” (Siundu, Wesega, 2010, p. 293). The short stories in the collection speak of various pressing social and political issues in Kenyan history and provide a chance to remember them, to reflect on their significance and, first and foremost, to make sense of them. Indeed, “[s]torytelling is for Ngugi a strategy of re-memembering what has been dis-membered, building alliances and keeping hope alive through active engagement” (Njogu, 1995, p. 335). Whether it is the influence of Christian missionaries in the colonized countries or the State of Emergency, Ngũgĩ is always interested in the ways the community can move forward. He ponders on the role of individuals, both as perpetrators and potential saviours, who could be able to undo the wrongdoings of the past and direct the community towards a brighter future.

Although the use of Christian symbolism differs in intensity and function in his work, the short stories in *Secret Lives and Other Stories* document his variable approach to its literary usage. Since the paper has focused on the concept of martyrdom in the selected short stories, one might make a few concluding remarks on its function. The stories talking about the State of Emergency and the struggle for independence, for example, portray the martyrs as the conscience of the society, potentially inspiring reconciliation and social transformation. The death of these characters often haunts those who killed them (whether intentionally or impulsively) and forces them to reconceptualise their views on settler - native dynamics and their own role in aggravating social rifts. On the other hand, the stories recapitulating the

process of conversion to the Christian faith and its impact on local communities, use the figure of the martyr in a rather negative way, as a sign warning against the rejection of one's roots. In both cases, however, Ngũgĩ tries to make sense of urgent social and political matters and contemplate the possibilities for progress.

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