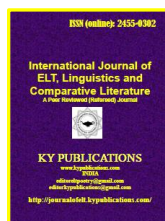




LINEARITY AND CYCLIC CONCEPTION OF TIME IN NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S *PETALS OF BLOOD* AND *WIZARD OF THE CROW*

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ABSTRACT

Any attempt to discuss the African conception of time from a Western perspective is likely to obscure unique African realities since time is conceptualized cyclically by most ethnic groups in Africa. This paper examines how Ngugi wa Thiong'o addresses the concept of time with regard to reconstruction of a people's history. We argue that Ngugi, in *Petals of Blood* and *Wizard of the Crow*, draws heavily from a cyclic conceptualization of time to reimagine and recreate new possibilities for a continent that has to some extent stagnated due to official histories that are entrapped in linearity. The study's discussion of Ngugi's deconstruction of time in the rewriting of history is anchored in the Heideggerian concepts of temporality and historicity. The conclusion of the study is that literary works by critiquing officialdom of histories, through reinterpretation of the place of time in the reimagining of new realities for the Africans, provide a platform for people to redefine themselves.

Key words: Linearity, temporality, historicity, cyclic, reconstruction, Africa.

1.1 Introduction

This paper sets out to explore conceptualization of time in literature with close reference to Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* and *Wizard of the Crow*. The study critically examines the utilization of history in the two novels to reimagine new futures for East Africa. Adeoti (2015) argues that history as a tool of inquiry into the past needs to be accorded greater attention in mapping the future of Africa. Africa's history, according to Adeoti, hitherto narrated from the privileged viewpoint of the colonizers should be retold in decolonizing voices. Adeoti's argument underlines the central role Africa's past plays in defining the continent's trajectory into a future undiluted by influences of former colonial masters. The foregoing scholarly view casts aspersions on the efficacy of an African history emanating from the West to shape Africa's future. To remedy this situation, Adeoti (2015) calls for rewriting of African history to decant it from Western influences. This decolonization of the historical discourse is a key concern in Ngugi's writings. The present study contends that Ngugi reconstructs the histories of the milieus reflected in his novels so as to propose alternative futures for Africa.

The present study's literary investigation of Ngugi's fiction draws heavily from Heidegger's notions of time, temporality and historicity. According to Heidegger (1962), temporality is a unity against which past, present and future stand out as ecstasies while remaining essentially interlocked. Heidegger views ecstasies as horizons, in the sense of what limits, surrounds or encloses and in so doing discloses or makes available. The significance of the foregoing Heideggerian interpretation of temporality lies in the fact that it frees a literary historian from thinking of past, present and future as sequentially ordered groupings of distinct events. The



paper utilizes this concept to unravel Ngugi's portrayal of the efficacy of cyclic conception of time to rewrite African histories.

Linearity presupposes a logical progression of events which define key happenings in the society. It implies a systematic and sequential flow of historical events. This view manifests itself in various development programmes conceived by most African governments. For instance, Kenya's vision 2030 hinges on the assumption that there will be a systematic progression of growth in the social, economic and political spheres to propel the country to a middle level economy. This optimism though appealing to the citizenry, fails to take cognizance of the erratic nature of politics in the East African region. A good example is the post-election violence that rocked Kenya in 2008. We advance the argument that it is this unpredictability of the political environment in Africa that validates Ngugi's deployment of a cyclic conceptualization of time to make sense of the key defining moments of African history.

1.2 Linearity and Cyclic Conception of Time in Ngugi's Fiction

The current study's investigation of conception of time in literature restricts itself to Ngugi's treatment of official histories and his project of reconstructing the same histories to foreground authentic African realities. The novelist demonstrates that history plays a central role in crafting a people's identity in relation to other people in the world. Karega in *Petals of Blood* examines the history written by African scholars so as to expose its inauthenticity. He points out such history was mute on authentic Kenyan history and the role indigenous Kenyans played in the country's liberation. This reveals the writer's attempt to reconstruct the history of the people he mirrors in his texts. According to Ogude (1999), Ngugi wa Thiong'o posits narrative as an agent of history because it provides the space for challenging our notions for national identities, uses of history, and ways in which they are deployed in power contestation in modern Kenya and Africa in general. Ogude's assertion finds application in the author's castigation of the kind history fed to the African mind. Disappointed by the books written by the black professors, Karega in *Petals of Blood* returns the books the Lawyer had lent him with a note: 'Why had he sent him books which did not speak to him about the history and the political struggles of the people of Kenya?' (P.200). Karega is dismayed by the kind of history written by African professors who give African resistance a blackout. It is clear that the books written by African professors sanitize colonialism and obliterate the political struggles that made political independence possible in Kenya. This sanitization which is aimed at cleansing the evils perpetrated by colonialism in Africa is achieved by orchestrating a deliberate blackout of the political struggles of the Kenyan people. The import of the African history's scholars' attempt to sanitize colonialism is that it suppresses Africans' criticism of their colonial history and also discredit the role played by African freedom fighters to realize independence. Heidegger (1962) observes that if the present suffers the forgetfulness of the past, there would be death of *sein* (being). This Heideggerian expression underscores the significance of one's past in shaping one's identity. Through the Lawyer and Karega, the writer seems to suggest that African intellectuals have played a great role in erasing the authentic history of their people. It is worrying that this venerated intelligentsia can agree to sell the birth-right of their people so as to advance their selfish interests. This egocentrism is depicted in the history books of such intellectuals that obfuscate the realities of the African people. Underlying this decision is the desire to avoid jeopardizing their jobs in the event that the quasi intellectuals highlight authentic histories of their people.

Having discovered that the content of history books written by Kenyan professors conceals the truth, the Lawyer advises Karega to look about him and choose his side: serve the people who struggle or serve those who rob the people. Karega opts to choose the truth, authenticity, which of course leads him to serve the people who struggle, the have-nots in the society. Karega's turning away in despair from the history written by African professors is illustrative of the writer's repudiation of colonial histories which distorts African realities. This explains why Karega turns to Abdulla and Nyakinyua to learn the authentic history of the liberation



struggle. From Abdulla, he learns about Dedan Kimathi and the role played by racial hybrids like Ole Masai in the struggle for Kenyan independence. Nyakinyua sheds light on the sacrifice her husband made to resist white people's domination of the blacks. She tells Karega that her husband was among the batch that carried food and guns for the white people during the First World War. However, Nyakinyua's husband did not choose to be a slave like Munoru, an African colonial chief who collaborated with the whites. In fact, he eventually gets killed for standing up against a white man. Nyakinyua's husband symbolizes many freedom fighters who lost their lives to free the natives from the yoke of colonialism. The foregoing reconstruction of history reveals the efficacy of African people's past in making sense of their present. This view is contrary to the Western linear conception of time which presupposes a logical progression without looking backwards.

It is also noteworthy to point out that through Theng'eta drinking moments the Mau Mau freedom heroes such as Nding'uri, Abdulla, Kimathi, and Mathenge are revealed to Karega, Wanja, Munira and the entire Ilmorog village. This revelation is significant because it serves to foreground the history touching on Kenya's liberation struggle that is muted by African professors aligned to powers that be in post-colonial Kenya. Abdulla's reliving of the history of the struggle for Kenyan independence also reveals the narrative of self-sacrifice in Kenyan struggle emblemized by compatriots such as Kimuchu wa Nding'uri who was shot dead for being a worthy supporter of Mau Mau. Consequently, it could be argued that the author advances the argument that the Africans should reconstruct their histories as a basis of reclaiming their identity. This rewriting of indigenous histories, as evident in Ngugi's perspective, entails involving authentic players in the communities' historicity without relying entirely on the elite who distort the truth. It is Nyakinyua and Abdulla who help Karega to understand the authentic history of liberation in Kenya, a history that had been obfuscated by African professors of history. The repudiation of African professors' historical narratives that embodies official histories is Ngugi's way of calling upon Africans to ignore such histories that purport to reflect realities of the East African region while omitting key happenings like the struggle for Kenya's independence in order to stifle the citizens' consciousness. As Ngugi demonstrates through rewriting of history using Nyakinyua and Abdulla, there is need to return to the past in order to make sense of the present and reimagine new futures.

Karega's contribution that reveals the writer's take on authenticity of the historical discourse is also manifested in his attempt to redefine a worker in a post-colonial era. It is unfortunate that workers in post-independence Kenya still identify themselves along ethnic, regional and gender lines. The use of these discriminatory categories at work stations stems from a colonial history that privileged fragmentation of the Africans. This obviously stifles unity of purpose among workers. To achieve workers' unity, Karega preaches against disunity and says:

Workers were all children of the machine and the New Road. Those who owned the machine did not care where a worker came from in the game of exploitation. But the machine and the New Road were the children of the workers, for it was their sweat that built the road, the factory, and it was they who sustained the whole complex by their energy and consumption. (P.304)

Karega's reasoning is significant because it redefines the essence of a worker, which helps to bring about unity. He deconstructs employers' conception of workers as coming from certain linguistic enclaves, gender or regions and argues that the essence of the workers is to be found in their labour. Karega also asserts that workers occupy a critical position in ensuring that the complex economic system works through their consumption of the finished products from the factories. Having united the workers, Karega helps them to form the Breweries Workers Union. It is Karega's search for authenticity that galvanizes the workers to form Trade Unions to agitate for their rights. Once the Breweries Workers Union is formed in which he assumes the Secretary of the Union post, the consciousness of the workers is raised countrywide:

The victory of the Breweries Workers' Union had a very traumatic effect on the hitherto docile workers of Ilmorog. Suddenly, even barmaids wanted their own Union. The women dancers



formed themselves into a Tourists Dancers' Union and demanded more money for their art. The agricultural workers followed suit. Something big was happening in Ilmorog and the employers were shaken and worried. (P.305)

The critical consciousness infused by Karega in the workers' psyche is a product of his attempt to reject a linear conception of time according to which workers had been fragmented by the colonial history. Linearity would have entailed accepting the discriminative categories to maintain the status quo but this would have perpetuated exploitation of the workers in post-independence Kenya. The new consciousness that collapses the aforementioned categories is made possible because Karega draws from an African past that valued egalitarianism, a system which upheld the brotherhood of Africans regardless of their ethnic compositions. This utilization of the African past to deconstruct colonial histories that subjugated African workers reveals Ngugi's cyclic conception of time with regard to economic challenges facing Africa. Most economies in African countries have not made substantial progress due to inequalities that can partly be attributed to negative ethnicity and gender inequalities which the novelist traces to colonialism. Ngugi's recourse to the past, therefore, helps to create a just economic system that is not shackled by ethnicity or gender considerations.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's project of remaking people's histories echoes Sartre's (1943) argument that man is 'made' by history but at the same time, he is making that very history (P.83). Due to the centrality of history in understanding one's authentic self, Ngugi's experiment that seeks to rewrite indigenous histories of the communities that he reflects in his creative works acquires existential legitimacy. It calls upon the people to revise the official histories designed to define them as reflected in the foregoing reconstruction of history in *Petals of Blood*, especially if such histories distort their realities. Therefore, Ngugi's writings represent the existential view that history (re)making is a continuous process in the society.

The writer's introspection on the historical discourse in *Wizard of the Crow* not only complements his earlier novels, but also suggests new possibilities for conceptualizing African histories. Like in *Petals of Blood* in which the African professors are engaged by the State to blur historical realities, the Ruler in *Wizard of the Crow* seeks to have a tight grip on the historical narratives created in Aburiria. Luminous Karamu-Mbu, the Ruler's official biographer, is assassinated for giving a truthful account of what transpires at State House on the day of National Self Renewal. His authentic rendition of goings on at State House makes the Ruler to order his elimination after realizing that his loyal biographer knew too much. The grave mistake of the Ruler's official biographer is giving an account that contradicted the official version of the Ruler's and the generals' heroics as they struggled with bombs exploding at State House. The Ruler also accuses his biographer of failing to sugarcoat reality. The import of this incident in relation to Ngugi's portrayal of history in *Wizard of the Crow* lies in the fact that leaders in developing countries will always devise ways to manipulate historical narratives. A history sanctioned by the state distorts facts. This is brought to the fore in the Ruler's decision to engage the services of a one Morton Stanley, a white royalist from London, to write an unexpurgated, independent, and objective biography of the Ruler through the Ruler's eyes, with materials generously provided by the Ruler and his handlers (P.709). Ngugi's depiction of the active role African tyrants play in making of their countries' histories, is indicative of the need for African citizens to interrogate such histories so as to unearth their lies. In this regard, the writer suggests that citizens should recreate true narratives of key happenings in their history without relying on the so called official histories.

The white man's perspective on the defining epochs of African past is another critical aspect of figuring history in *Wizard of the Crow*. Gemstone, an American ambassador to Aburiria, is an embodiment of the American version of the turbulent moments of history in Africa. Gemstone points out the positive aspects of slavery, colonialism, cold war and post-cold war. According to him, slavery was good because it created capital; colonialism spread industrial culture of shared resources and markets; cold war defined domestic and international relations; and post-cold war gave birth to search for freedom in the political arena. The American



appraisal is flawed for overlooking the harmful effect of slavery, colonialism, cold war and post-cold war. For instance, one of the devastating effects of the cold war that Ngugi portrays in his novel is senseless killings perpetrated by the Ruler to endear himself to the West. This distortion of history is, however, countered by the writer through Kamiti who is bitter at Africa for having allowed many of her citizens to be carted away to different parts of the world. Kamiti also castigates European domination of Africa. The history of colonialism, neo-colonialism and globalization are equally condemned for having made Africa to be subservient to the West. Amidst this history of subjugation, Ngugi suggests a reconstruction of a new historical narrative to redefine the place of Africa in the matrix of world affairs. Existential temporality is not a sequence of instants but instead a unified structure in which the 'future' recollects the past so as to give meaning to the present. To act, therefore, is in Heidegger's terms to 'historicize', to constitute something like a narrative unity with beginning, middle and end that does not take place in time as provides the condition for linear time (Heidegger, 1962: 431). This Heideggerian reconstitution of history is revealed in Kamiti's message to the masses during the day he gives his confession: 'But Africa impregnated its own breed, which made our people sing, Even if you kill our heroes, we women are pregnant with hope of a new lot (P.681). The new breed is a symbol of a future African generation that will transcend a dependency narrative engendered by slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism and globalization. Ngugi's message is that Africans should never be discouraged by those who sold African heritage to the West, but rather draw inspiration from the achievements of those that struggle to rescue Africans' authentic past from the hegemonic control of the West. We opine that Ngugi in *Wizard of the Crow* deconstructs Mbiti's (1969) assertion that time is a two dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present and virtually no future. In his novel, Ngugi reveals a cyclic conception of time by reconstructing a people's future with close reference to their past and present.

In *Wizard of the Crow*, Ngugi also suggests a reconstruction of an African historical discourse that leans towards the East. This supposition is buttressed by Kamiti's assertion that some Indians are of African descent. Kamiti gives the examples of Indian tribes such as Siddis and the Dravidians who are said to have originated from Ethiopia and Egypt. He also alludes to an African general, Malik Ambar, who is rumoured to have ruled some parts of India. Tracing of an African ancestry to some Indian tribes establishes a kinship between Africa and Asia. The close ties between African and Asian histories are further depicted by Kamiti's assertion that India and Indians played a critical role in the struggle for African independence. Mahatma Gandhi spent fifteen years of anticolonial struggles in South Africa before going back to India to organize non-violent resistance against British rule. Ngugi's exploration of the nexus between the Far East and Africa reveals his view that Africa should look to the East in her attempt to recreate her authentic history. This shift of approach to Asian countries is indicative of the writer's philosophy that people of shared roots have a lot to learn from each other. Moreover, the shared experiences between Asia and Africa are likely to midwife epistemological systems founded on mutual respect and equal partnership.

1.3 Conclusion

In *Petals of Blood*, the author moves the reconstruction of history from ethnic to national, and finally to continental level. The writer scrutinizes various pasts defining African history with the view of reconstituting an authentic Kenyan and African history. In *Wizard of the Crow*, the historical project becomes transcontinental. In this text, the novelist explores the possibility of drawing experiences from Asia and Africa in the process of rewriting African history. Underpinning this transcontinental approach to the historical discourse is the implied supposition that both continents share commonalties and experiences that are reflected in their symbiotic relationship during their struggle for independence and a common ancestry.

With regard to interrogating temporalities and trajectories in Africa, the study concludes that Ngugi wa Thiong'o makes three important proposals. First, through the rejection of official histories created by those in power; the author suggests that the citizens must scrutinize such histories to expose their lies. It is only by



through this critical assessment that they will guard themselves against being used to engender moribund policies that cause their oppression and exploitation. Secondly, the writer calls upon the African citizens to play an active role in charting their futures- this is achieved in the reconstruction of their histories to reflect their realities. Finally, Ngugi's suggestive proposal on the need for Asia and Africa to foster close ties implies that the future of the East African region and Africa as a whole lies in having a close collaboration between Asian and African countries. In a sense, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's proposal is prophetic. Already, China and India are beginning to eclipse Europe and America in economic partnerships with Africa. A case in point is the construction of Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya by the Chinese between 2013 and 2017. However, it is important to note that Africa should not embrace the economic partnership being fronted by East blindly without regard for human rights that do not feature in such collaborations since such undertakings pose a danger of hatching and emboldening repressive regimes in Africa.

The study further concludes that the reconstruction of ethnic, regional and continental history emanates from Ngugi's return to people's indigenous histories as medium of reimagining new futures for the African continent. Ngugi's contestation of Western historical narratives reflects his rejection of a linear view of history that suppresses authentic pasts of the people mirrored in the literary texts we have analyzed. Consequently, we aver that by returning to a people's past as a basis of conceptualizing Africans' futures, Ngugi advances a cyclic conception of time which destabilizes the Western linear view of time.

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