

Review Article

Unveiling the Myth of Development in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*: A Postcolonial Critique

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Abstract— Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, as a champion of the dispossessed and an inspiring advocate for freedom, justice, and human rights for all the downtrodden people of the world, illustrated a devastating picture of the continuous economic exploitation, domination, and abuse of the peasants by the state in his *Petals of Blood* (1977). The novel denounced the practice of money as religion and exposed the hypocrisy of modernization that fails to incorporate aspects like economic, social, political, technological, environmental, and cultural development for all. This paper aims to examine the sham of development as depicted in the novel using a postcolonial lens. The paper scrutinizes the self-aggrandizing government, businessmen and intellectuals against the condition of the villagers in Ilmorog. The article also foregrounds the exploitation not only of the peasants but also entire Kenya: its environment, land, and education system under neocolonial government. Finally, this paper delves into Karega and Wanja's disillusionment with Kenya's independence.

Keywords— Neocolonial, development, exploitation, environment, hypocrisy, money, education, disillusionment

1. Introduction

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, one of Africa's most celebrated literary figures, political and social activists, is the spokesperson not just for Africa but for the entire Third World against Capitalism and Neo-colonialism in the contemporary era. His *Petals of Blood*, rooted historically and engaged politically, is a bitter indictment of the poor and the oppressed whose intellectuals, political leaders and government have failed them in their vision of independence (Thiong'o, 1977) [1]. The independence of Kenya is often hailed as a pivotal moment that marked the beginning of an era of "modernization" and "progress", but it merely emanates the power of imperialism, re-establishing the binary of center and periphery in the novel (Chakraborty, 2016, p. 281) [2]. In *Petals of Blood*, his voice is firm against industrialization and globalization as the panacea for all economic problems ensuing development and progress. The novel is a brilliant depiction of the underdevelopment of Kenya and the condition of its people along with the effects of mass development projects on the social, political, and environmental sphere.

In the last century, the westernized idea of development dependent on industrialization and capitalism has been spread all over the world. However, Thiong'o understood that in Kenya, imperialism, "in its neo-colonial clothes", along with their compradors, was succumbing to the concept of Western

development and manipulating the peasant class (Isegawa, 2005) [3]. If development is defined as a state's ability to enhance its human resources to achieve higher production outcomes, thereby satisfying the basic needs of the majority and empowering its citizens, then such concepts were invisible in Thiong'o's post-independent Kenya. Even after the political independence of Kenya, 'Uhuru' in 1963, no significant change occurred in the condition of working-class people who struggled most through the Mau Mau revolution. This paper sought to understand Thiong'o's vision of Kenya and postcolonial development. The paper would further shed light on "political and economic marginalization" of the rural lower-class peasants by the urban upper-class rulers (Amon and Rimamtanung, 2019, p. 09) [4].

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The discourse of development and progress, propagated during the colonial era, has been subject to critical scrutiny by postcolonial scholars and authors such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, among others. Despite the process of decolonization, the tenets of this developmental narrative persist in a reconfigured guise. The neocolonial imposition on newly decolonized nations, ostensibly in the name of development, necessitates analysis to combat lingering colonial oppression. This paper endeavors to elucidate the portrayal of the development discourse as a myth in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*, contributing to the scholarly discourse on postcolonial

critiques of development and the enduring impact of colonial ideologies.

1.2 Significance of the Study

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* delineates the plight of decolonized Kenyan citizens, thrust into a renewed exploitative milieu by their compatriots following a protracted period of colonial subjugation. The narrative interrogates the commitments of ruling elites and politicians who, while propounding promises of imminent prosperity through diverse development initiatives, fail to realize substantive improvements. These underscore prevalent themes of neocolonial economic structures and the disillusionment experienced by the populace. By delving into the notion that development initiatives can inadvertently perpetuate colonial legacies and exacerbate prevailing power differentials, the research endeavors to illuminate the intricate interplay between development paradigms and the persistent specter of neocolonialism. This study is imperative for discerning the ultimate ramifications of development preserved by neocolonial governance structures.

1.3 Research Objectives

- To explore the falsity of postcolonial development portrayed in *Petals of Blood*
- To study the political hypocrisy of powerful ruling elites in the text
- To examine the exploitation of Kenya through various development schemes in the text

2. Literature Review

So far, *Petals of Blood* has inspired postcolonial and postmodern reading of the text. Furthermore, some of the works bring out in-depth analysis regarding gender and class issues, nationalism, and revolutionary zeal that was portrayed in the novel.

Akter (2014) in her work utilizes Bhabha's "major concepts like ambivalence, hybridity and mimicry" (p. 180) to explore them as postmodern elements in *Petals of Blood* making a shift from its evident postcolonial perspective [5]. Akter argued that Thiong'o deliberately applied hybridity of Ilmorog and its inhabitants to explore the corrupt nature of Imperialism and its desire to take back the decolonized state in a new form. According to Akter, the novel is an overturning of the binary powerplay that postcolonial Kenya emanates which conforms its postmodernity. However, she fails to explore the issues regarding development perpetuated by Black oppressors in white masks which many postmodernists are concerned with.

Chakraborty (2016) emphasized on Ngugi's idea of neo-colonialism describing it as international exploitation orchestrated by the comprador bourgeoisie [2]. Chakraborty argued that the neocolonial Kenyan state abused, exploited and underdeveloped those in the periphery within the country using capitalism and Christianity. *Petals of Blood* explicates Ngũgĩ's disillusionment with independence where "Independence, modernization and development conspire to

satisfy the interest of the dominant class in Kenya" (Chakraborty, 2016, p. 281) [2]. However, he did not expound the underdevelopment of Kenya taken by the ruling elites.

Banik's (2016) demonstrated Thiong'o's struggle in the novel to replicate the glorifying history of Kenya under its constant threat of being subverted by its neo-colonial elite ruling class [6]. According to Banik, for Thiong'o and his protagonists in *Petals of Blood*, the "present is only a consequence of the past" (Banik, 2016, p. 74) and is important to understand the lies and propaganda post-independent Kenya purports for establishing neo-colonialism [6]. To understand the struggle of the peasant class in Ilmorog, to prevent history from repeating itself, Kenyan people must look back to their struggle for independence, their hopes, and desires in post-independent Kenya. But Banik was hardly concerned to show the disparity between the lives of people from past to present that would reveal the dead notion of development related to capitalism.

Amin (2017) had presented Thiong'o's violence as the way of redemption to correct the neo-colonialist society aligning it with the view of Fanon [7]. As neo-colonialism rose in Ilmorog to put the interests of foreigners abandoning the people who had suffered and died for the land, the four protagonists internalize violence as the only mean of freeing Ilmorog from the clutches of capitalism. Amin suggested that the radically violent actions taken by Wanja are constructive violence to attain freedom and cleanse the corrupted, evil nature of capitalism echoing Thiong'o's optimism to shed the dead skin of neo-colonialism. But this article does not focus on the myth of development that capitalism promises to the people along with Wanja's disillusionment in the novel. Alazzawi (2018) examined the feminist dimensions of the novel, asserting that its female characters are victims of the patriarchal structures in post-independence African society [8]. Utilizing Kenya's geographical context and the cultural impact of British colonialism, Alazzawi discussed Thiong'o's depiction of women and their resistance against colonialism, capitalism, and neo-colonialism. These women fervently seek to end the oppression and exploitation inherent in patriarchal Kenyan society. Nonetheless, he failed to indicate the falsity of development that new Kenya, New Ilmorog promises its people and its ineffectiveness in changing the women's situation to that of pre-colonial, Ancient Africa.

3. Methodology

This paper is based on qualitative method of research hence no interview or calculative data collection has been followed. The primary data has been collected from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's acclaimed text *Petals of Blood* while secondary data has been accumulated from relevant books, journals, research articles etc. The secondary data were analysed based on the subject matter, theme and perspectives of the research evaluating them with a comparative approach of study subjected to the prevalent primary literature. Textual analysis has been used as data analysis tool to draw logical inferences from the data.

5. Discussion and Findings

5.1 Discussion

The concept of development formally emerged at the onset of the 19th century, with industrialization quickly becoming the most widely accepted and pursued instrument and goal (Dahl, 2016, p. 1) [9]. Traditionally, development can be defined as a process of long term “structural societal change” (Sumner and Tribe, 2008, p. 12) that transforms socio-economic structure from one to another and radically affect other dimensions [10]. For example, a shift from agricultural to the industrialized economy would create a shift from rural to urban. This sort of grand narrative of societal change led many economists to embrace economic progress as the prerequisite of modern-day development along with industrialization and productivity as outcomes. Furthermore, following this trend, modernization became the end goal of all development endeavors in many Third World decolonized, underdeveloped countries. Civilization is seen as synonymous with Westernization where the Occident represents everything the Orient is not – logical, progressive, advanced.

However, the futility of the previous concepts regarding development has been exposed by Postmodern critics and Marxist critics. They criticized “the imposition of Western ethnocentric notions of development upon the Third World” (Sumner and Tribe, 2008, p. 14) from a postmodern, post-structural perspective [10]. This postmodern approach towards development delineates the hypocrisy of the Western world since the 15th century where the West exploited the East for controlling and creating the Third World and poverty to establish their authority and modernity. According to Escobar, the discourse and strategy of the West perpetuated the development of “massive underdevelopment and impoverishment, untold exploitation and oppression” (1995, p. 4) for those in the periphery [11]. The result of which was simple: Europe became developed, and the Orient (Non-European Countries) became underdeveloped. This is an ongoing process in Third World countries. Thus, the political independence of a former colony only means changing the ruler with no benefit for the peasant class, no change in their position.

With the independence of Kenya from colonial British rulers, the pre-colonial agricultural society transforms into an industrialized, capitalist society and Thiong'o was capable enough to bring out the hypocrisy of this change in *Petals of Blood* through the gradual emergence of New Ilmorog from Ilmorog. According to Zeleza even “[a]fter independence, the seeds of democracy sown by the nationalist struggles wilted before the stubborn legacies of the despotic colonial state which its authoritarian postcolonial heir inherited virtually unchanged” (Zeleza, 2010, p. 9) [12]. Capitalism brought underdevelopment of Kenya and intended to aggrandize Imperialism along with its wonderful pupils of neo-colonial rulers. Andre Gunder Frank concluded, “Economic development and underdevelopment are the opposite faces of the same coin” (1967, p. 9) [13]. Thus, the ruling elites and bourgeois are the ones enjoying the fruits of labor by the peasant class of a Third World country. In *Petals of Blood*

Thiong'o harshly criticizes these categories of people. The hypocrisy of the government and the demagogues towards its peasants, self-serving businessmen and intellectuals are all brought against the rural villagers of Ilmorog.

In Thiong'o's post-independent Kenya a free government was established, elections occurred, political leaders visited remote places like Ilmorog, but all these led to no concrete and substantial change in the lives of the working-class people of Ilmorog. Nderi wa Rieraa, the name of the local MP of Ilmorog is just as forgotten as his money collection “for a Harambee water project” (Thiong'o, 1977, p. 22) [1]. Capital in the name of development is being collected from the people but the people are the most removed section of these projects. Thus, the new African ruling class is just as exploitative as the former British colonial rulers, draining the lifeblood from the working-class people (Chakraborty, 2016, p. 278) [2]. Furthermore, such capitalist government with its tax-gatherers and policemen would terrorize and squeeze out the last penny of the peasants into paying taxes “for organizations the villages knew nothing about” (Thiong'o, 1977, p. 138) [1]. They come in expensive cars while the peasants are travelling on foot just to deliver their voice to their local MP. The disparity between the urban and the rural is so stark: with buildings touching the sky, cars like Mercedes Benzs, Diamlers, Jaguars, Mazdas, Volkswagens, Land Rovers capital city Nairobi portrayed the extravagance of wealth. But in the village, the people lived in small, poor huts. They suffered greatly just from the lack of a few roads, a reliable water system, and a dispensary. They were marginalized and exploited at the hands of their government rulers. This situation is very much reflective of almost all postcolonial African nation. A study on Nigeria showed that, the way “religion and ethnicity are manipulated by the Nigerian political class for their own personnel gain” (Ali and Yahaya, 2019, p. 70) [14]

People like Ezekiel and Kimeria – the ruthless businessmen – were profited by the labors of peasants. According to Kapoor, the “national bourgeoisie playing a progressive role even after political independence, is nothing more than a collaborator in imperialism or in this case neo-colonialism (Kapoor, 2008, p. 5) [15]. The landlord Ezekiel with his many tea estates drove the laborer into a kind of indentured slavery leaving them in an impoverished state. The level of exploitation at the hands of these wealthy bourgeois extended to the point when they would even monopolize the small business of the peasants much like the colonial period. Prosperity had “multiplied several times since independence” (Thiong'o, 1977, p. 113) for such people [1]. The Theng'eta Breweries & Enterprises Ltd is an example of exploiting the marginals in *Petals of Blood*. Originally brewed by Nyakinyua and made into a business by Wanja with the help of Abdulla, the business was acclaimed by Mzigo and his partners Chui and Kimeria. These bourgeois with active support and ploys of the government and multinational companies took over the small business of the peasants.

A thorough picture of progress and development was drawn by Thiong'o in *Petals of Blood*. With Nderi wa Reiraaa's

effort long term rural development schemes were implemented in Ilmorog. The Shopping center was built, African Economic Bank established a new branch for the farmers to get loans with long term payment in small interest, crossbred cows for better production was introduced along Farmers' Marketing Co-operatives – Ilmorog had turned into a tourist spot. But all these lavish plans and projects “to build a new Ilmorog hatched by Nderi provides a blueprint for the uneven development” (Chakraborty, 2016, p. 280) [2]. The quick means of developing the area was actually a scheme to make money out of people – through loans and monopoly. It would benefit only the wealthy locals and their foreign partners, leaving the peasants' interests unaddressed. Similarly, the Trans Africa road linking Nairobi and Ilmorog created a “practical unity” for “international capitalist robbery and exploitation” (Thiong'o, 1977, p. 312) [1]. Unlike Korea and Taiwan that “had enacted thoroughgoing land reforms in the 1950s... greatly diminish[ing] landlessness and rural poverty, eliminat[ing] landlordism, and expand[ing] the domestic market beyond urban enclaves”, Thiong'o's Kenya adopted the clothes of imperialism creating mass underdevelopment of the peasants (Krishna, 2009, p. 41) [16]. Instead of resisting Western hegemony, Kenya was reinforcing and re-establishing Imperialism.

As a result of the development schemes, Ilmorog transformed drastically “into a proto-capitalist society” – neon lights, bars and nightclubs, lodgings, groceries, bottled Theng'eta brought along with them robberies, strikes, murders, prostitutes indicating the nature of cultural hybridity (Akter, 2014, p. 180) [5]. Other problems also arose. For one thing, nature was never the same for Ilmorog. Land and forests were already destroyed by the hands of the colonizers and ‘Uhuru’ did not change the situation. The virgin soil had become spoilt. Railway roads had cleared out vast forests and uprooted trees from all around Kenya. The ecological balance was destroyed, and the effect was visible all over the country. This barrenness of the land forced villagers to seek refuge in the cities like Nairobi that had no place for peasants except for in the dirty slums. Even with the Trans Africa Road, the land was taken away from its people, robbing them of their identity.

The peasants were lured into taking loans from the bank with dreams of yielding the land to their power with the magical help of imported fertilizers. But the environment that had already been exploited so much refused to give them the harvest they needed to repay the loans. As a result, their lands were taken from them, leaving them as penniless and landless. The evil scheme of capitalism made those in the periphery the poorest of the poor. In the economically disadvantaged nation-states of Africa, where other industries struggle to grow, the thriving tourism sector serves as “an indicator of economic underdevelopment” (Chakraborty, 2016, p. 277) [2]. The development of tourism in Kenya burdens the country and its women. The episode where Wanja was saved from a foreigner by a fellow African is reflective of the women's problem in Kenya where tourism is “a national religion” (Thiong'o, 1977, p. 161) [1]. Furthermore, this capitalized development excluded the

education of the poor working class. Following independence, the impoverished rural schools of Kenya, formerly run by the best of Kenyan teachers, were abandoned and the peasants were left with no education.

Amid all this madness of development, the disillusionment of Karega and Wanja are the most stunning. Karega from a very Marxist perspective understood the indentured slavery of the proletariat by the international community of bourgeois. In the neo-colonial society “a black few, allied to other interests from Europe, would continue the colonial game of robbing others of their sweat, denying them the right to grow” in the name of multinational or international companies (Thiong'o, 1977, p. 349) [1]. Karega recognized the reality of Kenya: the economic exploitation experienced by a poor urban dweller and that endured by a peasant in a rural village of post-Independence Kenya are indistinguishably identical. The narrative of revolution dissipates amidst unrealized dreams, shattered hopes, betrayal, and the disintegration of indigenous African society.

Wanja, on the other hand, experienced first-hand the colonial oppressors in black skins. In her struggle against the “black oppressors” at the very end of the novel she killed Kimeria in a Fanonist search of “individual freedom” through “constructive violence” to rejuvenate herself (Amin, 2017, p. 831) [7]. She strikes against those poised to profit from Ilmorog's new economic advancements while hardworking peasants like her grandmother are crushed on the threshold of the capitalist system. But she also understood the capitalist economy of Kenya that exercised cannibalism of the poor by the rich. The new economic progress of individuals depended on the rule of the jungle, “You eat or you are eaten” (Thiong'o, 1977, p. 348) [1]. Wanja thus started exploiting the poor female peasants in her brothel. She enjoyed their sweat and labor for her own comfort and allied herself with the same black oppressors she denounced.

5.2 Findings

Based on the discussion and its analysis, the study reflected the evolution of development paradigms from Eurocentric notions of progress to postmodern and Marxist perspectives in Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*. While traditional development ideologies equated progress with Westernization and industrialization, the novel exposed the inherent exploitation and oppression perpetuated by these narratives. It is evident that postcolonial Kenya experienced a continuation of exploitation under new guises, despite achieving political independence. Native elites collaborate with external forces to maintain systems of socioeconomic inequality, ultimately echoing colonial dynamics and perpetuating marginalization.

Furthermore, Thiong'o's depiction of rural communities like Ilmorog underscored the adverse effects of capitalist development. Development initiatives, often advertised as pathways to progress, exacerbated socioeconomic disparities and environmental degradation, benefiting privileged elites at the expense of marginalized groups. Through characters like Karega and Wanja, the novel explored the complex responses of individuals to this systemic exploitation. Karega adopted a

Marxist perspective to unveil systemic exploitation, while Wanja's trajectory reflected the moral compromises and internal conflicts engendered by survival within a predatory capitalist system.

Moreover, Thiong'o highlighted the intricate interplay between power dynamics and identity formation in postcolonial societies. The construction of identity, whether as oppressor or oppressed, is shaped by colonial legacies and capitalist exploitation, influencing one's position within the social hierarchy. In conclusion, the current study explored *Petals of Blood* as a potent critique of development discourse, urging a reimagining of development that prioritized equity, justice, and sustainability in postcolonial contexts.

6. Conclusion and Future Scope

In *Petals of Blood*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o exposed the facade of progress in postcolonial Kenya, highlighting the exploitation and disillusionment following independence. Through meticulous analysis and sharp social commentary, the novel revealed how native rulers, like Ezekiel and Kimeria, perpetuated exploitation under new guises, leaving the marginalized further marginalized. Thiong'o's narrative underscored the destructive impact of development schemes on Kenya's environment, economy, and society, as seen through the disillusionment of characters like Karega and Wanja. True development, he argued, cannot be measured by GDP alone but requires inclusive policies prioritizing education, healthcare, and rural infrastructure.

In essence, Thiong'o challenged the notion that political independence equates to genuine freedom and development. Until power shifts to the disenfranchised, the nation will persist as a colony under a domestic power structure, plagued by issues like corruption and the exploitation of the environment, land, peasants, and women, governing Kenya. No true enlightenment and progress are possible in a society where money "can buy holiness and kindness and charity" (Thiong'o, 1977, p. 277) [1]. For ensuring progress, the state "must invest heavily in areas of general concern to the population, such as primary education, health care, rural infrastructure, and women's development" (Krishna, 2009, p. 41) instead of thinking it as means of exploiting money from the peasant [16]. For this change to happen, no metanarrative of capitalism or socialism is enough. Development must be all inclusive regardless of class, gender, and race.

This paper hoped to entail a multifaceted exploration of various dimensions beyond the current analysis for further research. The future research can delve into comparative examinations of Thiong'o's depiction of development with other postcolonial literary works, discerning the intricate intersections of gender, class, and race within the context of development as portrayed in the novel. Additionally, the current research necessitates a deeper investigation into the historical and political milieu surrounding Kenya's independence and subsequent era, shedding light on specific events and policies shaping the trajectory of development. Furthermore, the future inquiry can aim to probe reader

reception of *Petals of Blood*, elucidating diverse interpretations of its critique of development among different audiences. Moreover, this work can help to forge connections between the novel's themes and contemporary issues and debates in Africa and the global South, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of development complexities in postcolonial settings. These future research efforts will advance a path to enhance the discourse on development narratives in postcolonial literature, further building on the foundational insights established in the current study.

Data Availability

The primary data for this research has been sourced directly from the text *Petals of Blood*, which readers and researchers can access by reviewing the book itself. In addition, secondary data, utilized to support the study, has been cited and can be found by consulting the referenced journal articles and book chapters.

Although the research addresses the concept of development as a sham in the text, time constraints imposed several limitations. Specifically, the study was unable to explore other valuable avenues. These include a comparative study with other literary works addressing similar themes, a critical analysis of development across Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's entire body of work, and a deeper examination of related socio-political contexts. Consequently, these unexplored aspects represent potential areas for future research to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the themes in *Petals of Blood*.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to this work.

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Authors' Contributions

Sahria Islam Trisha is the sole author of this research. She independently collected all the data, applied relevant theories to interpret the textual data, and contributed her own analysis to the study.

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