

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Feminist Perspective of Ngugi Wa Thiongo's 'Devil On The Cross'**

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Abstract

The paper throws the light on the novel Devil on the cross. Moreover, a lot of work is done on this novel. Literary critics have deployed literary theories and concepts like Marxism, Social Realism and Structuralism to examine the thematic preoccupations of the work. Little or no attention however is given to the feminist perspective of the story. This is what informs the present study. Towards this end, the concept of feminism and its tenets are discussed and applied to the interpretation of the novel.

Keywords: feminism, novel, devil on the cross, social emancipation, gender equality, patriarchal society, education, revolutionary approach.

Introduction

In his *Writers in Politics* (1981), Ngugi Wa Thiongo stresses the belief that literature is a reflection of society. This belief holds that writers depict in their literary works problems facing their societies with a view to mitigating the problems. Wright,(1973) is emphatic that there exists a symbiotic relationship between a literary piece and the critical comments on it. Wright holds a strong view that a literary work requires criticism for its growth and criticism requires a literary work upon which to validate its usefulness. The novel especially, according to Palmer (1986), is meant to enlarge our understanding of life and deepen our knowledge of the social, political and historical issues of our societies. Palmer (1986) describes a realistic novel as one that deals with issues and modes of conduct applicable to human beings.

Little or no attention however is given to the feminist perspective of the story. It is the belief of this study that the concept of Feminism could equally be deployed in the interpretation of the novel; hence the focus of this study.

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If this assumption is upheld there could be no better literary theories that could explain it better than Marxism and Social Realism. A closer reading of the story however accords the novel the status of a work espousing the tenets of Feminism in its preoccupation with the problems of women in a patriarchal society. This study therefore adopts the feminist perspective in analyzing the subject matter of the story.

Viorst however in her revised version of the story in the fairy tale reconstructs a new Cinderella who does not accept the roles assigned to her by society. According to feminist criticism, as highlighted in Bressler (1999).

The question of gender equality which is encapsulated in the concept of feminism has been a recurring issue in global social discourse. Nnolim (2010) cites the National Organization of Women and The National American Woman's Association both in the United States of America as organizations which aim, among others, is to ensure equality between men and women, in the socioeconomic and political activities of America. There is also The Movement for Muslim Women, Association of University Women, Women in Nigeria, and the National Council for Women's Societies. The objective of these groups in Africa, like their American and Chinese counterparts, is to change the future of and create an atmosphere of self-definition for all women.

Literature Review

As noted in the introduction of this study, Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Devil on the Cross* has received numerous critical comments from scholars who have deployed various literary theories to interpret the novel. However little or no attention has been focused on using the concept of feminism in interrogating the novel. This section of the present paper reviews a few such critical comments on the novel to contextualize its discussions.

Killam, (1984) utilizes the concept of Social Realism to appraise the novel and considers *Devil on the Cross* a satirical commentary on the exploitation of the Kenyan people and their natural resources by foreign interest groups in collaboration with local acolytes.

Following his analysis of the structure of the novel, Honore concludes that "The novel reveals many elements related to Marxism or the class struggle between the rich and capitalist upper class and the proletarian working low class".

Like Killam (1984) before him, Malembanie, (2012) also deploys the concept of Social Realism and considers Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* a satirical commentary on the

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Kenyan society. According to Malembanie, the novel traces the root cause of Africa's underdevelopment and the disillusionments following the independence of its countries. Another study on Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* using the concept of Social Realism is that of Birungi, (2011) where Birungi's attention is focused on the exploitation of the Kenyan society as depicted in the novel. Birungi, (2011) maintains that

...Written entirely in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's Gikuyu language after he declared he would no longer write in English, the book is a critical examination of Kenyan society.

Tenets of Feminism

Flora Nwapa, a Nigerian feminist novelist of note, in an essay entitled "Women and Creative Writing in Africa" (2010), provides ideological insights into the tenets of feminism in African literature. Nwapa, in her essay, is emphatic that the subject matter of African feminist literature should be the projection of the image of the female in the society. While illustrating the tenets of feminism, she accuses some Nigerian male novelists of failure to conform to the tenets of feminism by downplaying the roles of women in their literary works. Nwapa names Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark and Elechi Amadi as some of the African writers who have downplayed the roles of women in their earlier works. These writers, according to Nwapa, have in many instances portrayed women negatively or in their subordination to men.

There are male African writers however whose works uphold the tenets of feminism says Nwapa (2010). It could be summed up that feminism in literary works emphasizes the depiction of the social roles of both male and female members of society on the basis of equality. Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Devil on the Cross*, (1982), is an African novel that has as its focus the thrust of feminism.

Feminism in Devil on the Cross

As an African male author with feminist sensitivity, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is concerned with .The story in *Devil on the Cross* is therefore an attempt at dismantling the patriarchal organization and to build for a supplementary classless society. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in this novel forms the characters of Wariinga and Wangari to draw attention to the social problems faced by women in patriarchal societies and to demonstrate that given the opportunity and support, women could positively contribute to nation building just like their male counterparts.

The narrator of the story says, "By that time her breast had developed. Her hair had grown long and brilliantly black" (P. 141). He craftily introduces and link up Wariinga to a rich old rogue who is always on the look for young innocent girls to corrupt. The rich old man lures

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the young Wariinga into the world of materialism and sexual pleasure. Wariinga's dream of educational and social accomplishments is therefore frustrated when she is impregnated and spurned by the Rich Old Man from Ngorika, to whom her uncle had sold her out.

Having been betrayed by the old man responsible for her pregnancy and feeling ashamed and neglected, Wariinga feels that the last option left to her is to kill her as a final protest to an unjust world. Her attempt at drowning herself in a school swimming pool is aborted by the school watchman.

As a young girl, Wangari had carried bullets and guns to help the supply line of the Mau Mau fighters for independence. At the end of the Mau Mau armed struggle culminating in the independence of Kenya, Wangari who has now advanced in age, could not secure any work with the government or nongovernmental organizations. She has gone to the city to look for a manual job she could do to cater for her needs. She had rejected the offers outright on each occasion and had continued with the search until she is arrested and detained on the charge of vagrancy. Wangari is released that afternoon after promising to assist the police to arrest the thieves troubling Ilmorog. Wangari proceeds to invite the police to the cave where the international thieves and robbers are having a competition to select the most expert robbers and thieves.

The end of the story in Devil on the Cross appears to suggest an inevitable revolutionary approach to the emancipation process of the female members of the society from their oppressors. Significantly, some of the other oppressive individuals that have oppressed and exploited women are also there at the anticipated wedding venue.

After leading the police to the cave where the international thieves and robbers are having a competition, Wangari is arrested by the same policemen she had led to the cave. The arrest and humiliation of Wangari however precipitates a mass protest culminating in the disruption of the competition. The message is that social change is necessary; if however peaceful protests like the one following Wangari's arrest could not suffice, then violent means becomes necessary. This assumption accords with the concept of revolutionary feminism.

Summary and Conclusion

Little or no attention however is given to the concept of feminism in the interpretation of the novel. The feminist critical approach is adopted in this study to discuss the major thematic concerns of the novel. The author of Devil on the Cross creates the characters of Wariinga and Wangari in the novel to illustrate the difficulties women face in their quest to pursue decent means of livelihood and contribute to nation building. The story in Devil on the Cross is meant to draw the attention of the world generally to the plights of women in Africa in general and Kenya in particular. It is also aimed at galvanizing women

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into realizing their potentials and to struggle for equality with men in all fields of human endeavour. Stories are told to elicit belief and to inspire action. It is depicted that when peaceful means like the demonstration that follows the arrest of Wangari does not solve the problems of women, violent means becomes necessary.

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