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Interview

Ngugi wa Thiong'o

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Interview

Abstract

Raoul Granqvist interviewed Ngugi wa Thiong'o in Umea 22 September 1982.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o

INTERVIEW

Raoul Granqvist interviewed Ngugi wa Thiong'o in Umeå 22 September 1982.

You have said: 'In writing a novel, I love to hear the voices of the people working on the land, forging metal in a factory, telling anecdotes in crowded matatus and buses, gyrating their hips in a crowded bar before a jukebox or a live band... I need life to write about life' (Detained: A Writer's Prison Notes, London: Heinemann, 1981, pp. 8-9). Yet Devil on the Cross was written in prison. How was that possible? Surely the prison did not provide you with that kind of life.

The conditions in prison, especially for a writer are meant to cut away that writer, or intellectual, or political worker, from contact with active life which is the root or the basis of one's inspiration. So I was really

pointing out the difficulties of writing in prison, especially for me — and I suppose for most other writers — who need actual involvement in the daily laughter of the people, in their daily cries of sorrow or joy, or in any of their problems, to be able to sustain themselves as writers. In prison it is important to understand the intentions of your gaolers. What they mostly want to achieve is some kind of break-down where the political prisoner denies his previous political stance or denies his previous involvement with people. Once you understand their intentions you can consciously start working against them. In my case I had been put in political detention in a maximum security prison because of my involvement with peasants and workers in Kenya in the building of a culture that reflected their lives and their political and economic struggles. I thought that I'd fight the gaolers by writing a novel in an African language and talking about peasants and workers and their history of struggle against both foreign domination and also internal exploitation and oppression.

How did you look upon your own detention? Did you feel that you were detained as an individual, 'in your own right', or as a representative, a scapegoat?

You must understand that what characterizes the neo-colonial ruling minorities in most African countries is their total isolation from the people. They see the people as their enemy, because they, the ruling minority, serve foreign interests which are obviously hostile to the people of the country. So if they could jail the whole population and get away with it, they would. But then to gaol the whole population would in fact defeat the very basis of their existence as mediators between foreign economic interests and the material sources of the country. They therefore pick certain individuals whom they see as representatives of certain ways of thinking; not because of that particular individual but because they want his incarceration to be a symbolic act.

You thought of your own detention as an exemplary symbolic ritual, a rite?

Yes, I think that is correct. Our work at Kamiriithu Community and Cultural Centre was collective: it involved factory workers, poor peasants, a few intellectuals from university, petit bourgeois elements like school teachers and secretaries, and so on. I was picked, not because I was the centre, but rather because they wanted to set an example and

instil a climate of fear in all the others and by implication in every other collective effort in Kenya.

Your fight against the gaolers, or the 'demons' as you sometimes call them, was then another 'symbolic' fight?

Writing *Devil on the Cross* and *Detained* I took up deliberately and very sincerely a defiant position against the social classes that had been responsible for killing democracy in Kenya. The events that have occurred since my detention are proving me right.

You mention in your book Detained that a psychological warfare was going on all the time in prison. What was your part in this, and how could you collect the strength to wage it?

You are in prison because you sincerely believe in certain principles and beliefs. In my case, I sincerely searched my own mind to find out whether, in what I had stood for, or in what I had been striving to stand for, that is in my writings and in my involvement both in my teaching in Nairobi making literature relevant to the Kenyan people and in the kind of theatre that we started in my village, there was something wrong. And I could not find in any corner of my whole being anything that was wrong. So the very fact that I was totally convinced that Kenyan people were right in struggling against colonial oppression and exploitation and the neo-colonialism which was aided by a few Kenyans who had imbibed the culture of imperialism, gave me the strength to stand up to the very oppressive psychological conditions in prison. What characterizes such a prison is that your gaolers try to use every way possible to break you, like promises, use of a family attachment, and whatever they think you hold dear.

Is a slave-master relationship a condition that easily develops in prison?

An oppressing class or nation or group does not only want to enslave the people, but they want to see those people believing that it was really in their interest to be so enslaved. They want you to think that you are really happy being oppressed; the slave is really happy about his slavery. They even try to suggest that the slave really loves his master.

Your prison became for you an education centre. How?

In Kenyan political detention prisons, detainees are not allowed to read books, they have no access to newspapers, to radios, to any type of information, not even censored information. At Kamiti Maximum Security Prison the guards were very careful not to bring in any printed matter, even advertisements or other like matter. Conditions in these prisons are extremely oppressive. So when I say that prison became my teacher I do not mean that books were allowed and that I made use of the time there to study more, and that newspapers were available, or that I was allowed to correspond with the outside world, or that I was entitled to enter an extra-mural university course abroad. What I mean is that I tried to learn from the very severe conditions in that prison. For instance, I discovered that the warders did not realize that I had been put in because of my involvement with the collective work in my village. They had been given the impression that I was in for something more sinister than that, so if I asked them about the weather outside the prison walls they acted dumb. If I asked anything even about trees, they would not say anything. But when it came to the question of language they believed this to be harmless, and far from being silent, they suddenly became very outspoken. For me they became very helpful, so I was quite willing not to ask them anything about what was happening on the outside, but learn more and more about their understanding of language. Most of them happened to know Kikuyu very well and were excited about discussing concepts of words and meanings. For me this was like a gift; every day they were giving me a gift, a precious gift. Another source of knowledge were the other detainees who had other experiences that I did not have. For instance, some of the prisoners had been there for eight or ten years. I was a novice in prison, so I was very keen to know how they had coped with being there for such a long time. And I was keen to know about their history.

To what extent would Devil on the Cross have been a different book if written outside prison, or would it ever have been written?

In a sense I do not think it could have been written, at least not in its present form. Or let me put it in another way: it would have been a different kind of *Devil*. First the very strength to embark on a novel in a language that had no previous history of any modern novel written in it could only have come from the grim conditions of prison. In other words, maybe, if I had been outside prison I might have been tempted to delay this more formidable task, which it is to break away from certain tradi-

tions and from my own private history of writing in English. To break away from these obviously needed a psychological pressure and I felt this pressure in prison. The grimness of conditions in prison created its own opposite, a fierce determination to achieve something in a Kenyan language. Another aspect of the book is its tone; it is a little more light-hearted in tone, if not in concern. The satiric element is more dominating. If you are living in gruesome conditions, you have to develop a certain sense of humour, sometimes a satiric humour, to be able to look at reality. If you live in grim conditions, this grimness can destroy you. But if you put on a mask through which you are able to apparently laugh, then this can be another psychological prop.

How do you assess the role of Amnesty International and other organizations who worked for your release?

Somehow in prison I did learn about a committee founded in London asking for my release and that of the other political detainees. This was a tremendous source of encouragement. Oppressive regimes like to oppress, but they also like to adopt a mask for the outside. So it is a bit frightening to them when they find that nobody believes in their sort of liberalism, democracy and common sense. This kind of solidarity in support of political prisoners is so vital and necessary. A letter to the oppressive regime or to one's own government to ask them to express concern may seem a small thing, but it may make the oppressive regime uneasy although it does not appear so on the surface.

What is the current situation in Kenya vis-à-vis human rights?

Several people have been detained. They are defence lawyers, journalists and university lecturers. The repression is more organized, more ruthless than at any time in the post-independence history of Kenya. One hopes that international opinion is roused against these arrests.

How do you look upon your own situation?

As a writer from the Third World I am condemned to continue to voice the cries of protests.