Interview

Abstract
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Ngugi wa Thiong’o

INTERVIEW

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KHP: Can I ask you a few questions about your own work. You are concerned with failures rather than successes. All your main characters set out to do something and they fail in varying degrees.

I don’t think I present them as failures. What I try to do is to present human beings as capable of altering their environment. In other words, I do not see human beings as being slaves to their environment. I try to evoke or create human beings who are capable of altering their natural and social environment but at the same time I am aware of the historical limitations under which they are working. In other words, I have not meant to present a Utopia in which all solutions have not only been found but have actually been practised.

JM: You are very successful with your male characters but when you come to female characters they either tend to belong to a very traditional society or to an atypical group like prostitutes. One doesn’t find the modern emancipated women that you find in Western literature and in some African literature nowadays, too. Is this something you find difficult to write about or is it a conscious choice on your part?

I like to believe that I am as successful in portraying female characters as I am in portraying male characters. This is what I set out to do. But obviously, whether I have succeeded or not is for the reader to say. But generally in fiction one tries to portray those people who seem to be exceptions to the norm, though in another sense they illustrate the norm.
Let me put it this way. What I try to do in my novels is to show the dialectical relationships between various aspects of society and reality. When I take a prostitute I want to show that she is a product of all the forces impinging on that society. She is not really an exception to that society; she is a direct product of the economic and political forces in it. And in the same way when I treat certain forces like love, etc., I want to show that they are affected by all the social forces working on society. To put it more directly, I want to show that things like love, hatred, etc. are by-products of the class forces at work in Africa today. I was asked the other day if when travelling through the Western world I had met with any personal animosity, and I explained to the students that it was not really a question of personal animosity. One needed to understand the class basis of all these attitudes. We must have a scientific understanding of the processes that create them.

KHP: You started by saying that people are not slaves to an environment, they were capable of changing it. And then you went on to make remarks that I would expect you to make — namely that Wanja, the prostitute in Petals of Blood was a product of the economic forces or class forces. Those two statements are contradictory. There is obviously an area in between where you move.

Yes. Maybe. I think I did correct myself and instead of saying slaves to, I said they were capable of acting upon their natural and social environment or of changing it. I try to show human beings as capable of changing their natural and social environment. With that basis of optimism I do try to look at those forces which prevent human beings from being able to change that natural and social environment. But I should have said that it is not that human beings are not slaves to the natural and social environment but that they need not be so. It is possible to enhance the quality of human life and the quality of human relationships.

BT: I'd like to focus on the difference between A Grain of Wheat and Petals of Blood. A Grain of Wheat is more or less concentrated on a single locality whereas Petals of Blood has a lot of locations and you use the journey metaphor. At the same time there is a shift from Mugo to Karega, and the focus changes from the teacher to the worker. Are these things connected? Does the shift in focus from a single locality mean you are attempting a more international way of looking at social problems?
I would probably not use the word international. I don't feel that the writer is static, I believe that he is developing all the time; at least I would like to believe that in my case I am developing all the time. My own increasing understanding and appreciation of the forces at work in human society has made me look at themes which I treated earlier in a slightly different way. That is why I think there is this shift in *Petals of Blood* from a concentration on the vacillating psychology of the petit bourgeoisie to the position of the worker and the peasant, the one alliance of classes which has changed the history of Africa. It is something I am finding out now to be probably one of the faults, not only of my earlier works, but in the works of most of the African writers. Because we come from a petit bourgeoisie class position we have tended in the past to create peasant and worker characters with all the mentality of the petit bourgeois. You create a peasant and worker character but inject into him or invest him with the particular mentality and outlook of the petit bourgeois class. When we get worker characters who have a firm outlook with a deep philosophy and knowledge of the area around them, then some petit bourgeoisie critics say 'these are not true workers' or 'these are not really peasants', purely because they have been used to a worker/peasant character in African fiction who has been given another class consciousness, in this case the petit bourgeoisie class in Africa. I think that my shift, my change of attitude to my characters from *A Grain of Wheat* to *Petals of Blood* may be related to this.

BT: *There is a formal change from a concentration on a central character, which is the bourgeoisie novel, to a collective centre. Does this reflect the same change in your ideas?*

Yes, it does, although that aspect had started earlier in *A Grain of Wheat*, but it becomes more dominant in *Petals of Blood*. By the time I came to write *Petals of Blood* and, more recently, when I came to write my novel in Kikuyu I had become more and more aware of the classes at work in African society, and I tried as far as I could to get characters representing these different classes. I tried to show them as they act on one another, the dialectical relationship and links between all the characters and of course their relationship with the international and imperialist bourgeoisie.
KHP: I would like to know to what extent Mau Mau is still a social force or a thing talked about in Kenya today. Is it discussed among the younger generation, or is it confined to your generation?

I think there is a thing which we might call a collective memory. This collective memory is in a sense what we might call history, and I would say that Mau Mau is still part of the collective memory of the Kenyan people. It is not something which people can forget, it is basic and integral to the history of their experience, just as the Danish people's struggle in the past against feudalism is integral to their collective memory.

KHP: There are several ways of remembering. You can glorify, you can try to find the forces behind certain movements, you can tend to focus on certain aspects. I once read that there was a tendency to ignore the Mau Mau movement because it presented difficulties for those in power. Is the glorifying aspect the one people tend to focus on?

Obviously different classes interpret their history in different ways; in other words, a historical event will later be interpreted by different classes to meet their different class needs. Let me give you a good example. The other day I was talking about Karen Blixen. Somebody said that she was even given the Hans Christian Andersen prize. So I said to myself, 'Oh, yes, this is a way in which a ruling class tries to appropriate the past healthy traditions of a people by giving Karen Blixen an Andersen prize, when the two ideologies are totally in conflict. It is an attempt to make Karen Blixen look as if she is the inheritor of the Andersen tradition in Danish culture and to make it look as if she is part of the linear development of that tradition.' So two totally different writers assume two totally different world outlooks. So in the same way, different classes in Africa will interpret history differently according to their different class needs. I am quite sure there are some people in Africa who are totally opposed to the whole notion of Mau Mau and the remembrance of it, but on the other hand the masses of the people want to be reminded. I will give you an example. The other day I saw a Swahili version of a play called The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, written by myself and Micere Mugo. It was performed for the first time, and the house was almost completely packed. Even when we went to some rural areas people would flock from miles around to see the play, and you could tell that they were identifying with the issues in the play. One of the most
moving commentaries was by a politician who during the Mau Mau had been sentenced to death. It was probably his age which helped him to escape the rope. When he saw the play he burst out weeping. I would say that there are some people who are proud of that heroic tradition, and there are others who obviously feel uncomfortable about it, and in Kenya this has found its way into literature. There are in fact in Kenya two literary versions of Kimathi. There is The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, written by Mugo and myself, and there is another play called Dedan Kimathi, written by a Kenyan who shows a different Kimathi. Kimathi has been interpreted in literature in very different ways, and I am sure there are some people who like the Kimathi in my version and some who like the Kimathi of the other version.

KHP: If you look at the Mau Mau movement from the very beginning, it looks as if it was more or less a cry of a suppressed people who at the beginning had no programme except to fight the colonists. Do you think that this sort of thing could happen in Kenya today?

I don't really know that. In terms of the Mau Mau not having a clear programme I think that this is slightly erroneous in the sense that it has been based on inadequate research. Now a number of things are coming to light, and I would like to recommend to you a book of Mau Mau songs called Thunder from the Mountain. It is a collection of Mau Mau songs; pre-Mau Mau and songs developed during the actual guerrilla warfare. I think that the book gives a clear picture of the ideological development in the Mau Mau movement which runs counter to the previous interpretation of Mau Mau. The book is even more important because the ideology arises from the songs themselves and not from what the writer says. One must remember that Mau Mau was the first modern anti-colonial guerrilla movement in Africa. The Algerian war came after Mau Mau, as did all the other liberation movements. It was even more important because the Mau Mau guerrillas were completely surrounded by enemies. Unlike Mozambique, which had Tanzania as a base, or Vietnam, which had North Vietnam or China, Mau Mau had to depend entirely on its own resources, on the ammunition which they could snatch from the British enemy forces.

KHP: You said that workers and peasants could change history. Why then did Mau Mau not change history?
They did change history. History does not move in a straight line. People take three steps forward, then maybe a step backward. Mau Mau has changed the history of Kenya, possibly the history of Africa.

KHP: *Is it perhaps not a problem that the movement was a one-purpose movement whose aim was to throw out the English?*

If you say that the most important aspect in 20th-century history is, broadly speaking, the struggle between imperialism and anti-imperialist forces, then Mau Mau becomes a very important aspect of this struggle. Imperialism has two stages; the colonial and the neo-colonial. The colonial stage has to be fought before the neo-colonial stage can be fought.

KHP: *I have always thought that the Mau Mau movement must have been the touchstone of Fanon's theory.*

Fanon, of course, had his own experiences in the Algerian war against the French, but no doubt other movements like Mau Mau were behind his theories. All we can say is that in Africa the struggle continues, and therefore the dreams of the likes of Fanon, Kimathi or Nkrumah, Cabral and all the others have not really died, because they are ideals to be achieved.