

Gathoni's Aggression in Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi Wa Mirii's Play *Nitaolewa Nkipenda*: A Representation of Africa's Desired Political, Social and Economic Autonomy

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Abstract

This paper was guided by the Post-colonial Theory with a focus on Frantz Fanon's leanings on life aspects of the formerly colonised Africans. It was also guided by African Feminism in its analysis and discussion of the findings. It is based on Frantz Fanon's ideas and arguments contained in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1965). Some of the ideas contained in this book were used as lenses to discuss Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii's Kiswahili translation of their play *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982) translated as *Nitaolewa Nkipenda* (1982). It singles out Gathoni, a female character in the play who, throughout the story line, is projected as potentially aggressive, independent minded and as a character who does not allow others to manipulate her in any way. Together with Fanon's perspectives on Africans' liberation and African Feminism literary lenses, this paper argues that, Gathoni sharply contrasts with a traditional African woman who has been projected in literary works as docile, unassertive and who depends on others especially men for her welfare. This work was a library-based study whose data were collected through close reading of both play versions; that is the Kiswahili and the English version to facilitate easy translation of the quotations. These were the primary data. The review of different documents including journal articles and dissertations both as hard copy and soft copy materials on the internet generated the secondary data. The findings reveal that, Gathoni's aggression and independent mindedness is the writers' representation or projection of social, economic and political freedom that they would aspire the formerly colonised Africans to possess.

1.0 Introduction

The experience of colonialism in Africa, as portrayed in literary works was devastating since it was harsh, exploitative, and inhuman. Some of the African literary gurus such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thing'o and Ayi Kweyi Armah have highlighted such gloomy experience to Africans in their creative works.

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However, on average, in confronting the colonial powers, African men have been revealed to have played a big role but the women being relegated to the second or subordinate role which at best, would be described as auxiliary. For example, in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Okonkwo wrestles with the penetration of colonialism almost single-handedly. The contribution of his wives in making him the man he is, is not categorically revealed in the narrative. Rather, there is this juxtaposition of masculine and feminine attributes where men such as Okonkwo and others on one hand, are revealed as aggressive or militant in their engagements such as in fighting in wars, wrestling and in other pursuits where masculinity is prized. On the other hand, softness, politeness and 'caring' are revealed to be feminine. Despite the fact that when he is exiled for killing Ikemefuna, Okonkwo goes to his motherland in Mbanta, such an act of going to his maternal side, is seen as important yet it has a caring or comforting implication. That, Okonkwo, the warrior who has now been disgraced goes to his maternal side to be comforted, suggests that, he would not be willing to do so if he were strong. When he is weighed down with grief after realising his fault of killing Ikemefuna; Ezinma serves as the right person in uplifting his weighed down soul. Despite the fact that he appreciates what Ezinma does to him; he thinks that it would be better, if she were a boy. To Okonkwo, the attributes that Ezinma possesses, would be much more appreciated if they were possessed by a boy. This has generally been the trend with some of the male-authored literary works that have tended to downplay the potential power of women in different circumstances.

This paper focuses on Gathoni, a female character in Ngugi and Mirii's *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982) and its Kiswahili version *Nitaolewa Nikipenda* (1982). It argues that there is an authoritative voice within the statement given by this young girl that she does not like to be forced into a marriage although she may wish to marry one day. The impact of this voice is enormous as it is suggestive of the need of women to liberate themselves from patriarchy and also metaphorically, the need for Africans to be autonomous in terms of their decisions and exercising of their freedoms as independent humans. Hence, African Feminism and Post-colonial Theory with leanings on Frantz Fanon's ideas as found in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* were used to gauge this study.

In his writings, both novels and plays, Ngugi has portrayed the roles played by women in the liberation struggles which have been highlighted by scholars. For instance, Jha (2020) writing on the portrayal of women in Ngugi's early writings (*The River Between and Weep Not Child*), argues that, for the case of the *River Between*, young girls were exposed to constant anti-circumcision propaganda and at the same time, were under pressure in their African community to complete the ritual of circumcision. This suggests some affinities with the liberation of African women from patriarchy, and by extension, the freedom of all Africans from the social, political and economic claws which have been reminiscent of the post-independence African states. With *Weep Not Child*, she notes that Njeri and

Nyokabi, the wives of Ngotho suffer passively under the economic exploitation by the White settler called Howlands. Generally, she reveals that, in these novels, women characters suffer passively under the yoke of exploitative colonialism which in the context of this study is linked to patriarchy and by extension, the suffering of all Africans under colonial exploitation and later on under neo-colonialism in independent African states. Jha's perception is echoed by Semwal (2015) who reveals that women in the African continent have generally been subjected to double victimhood that is, they were and have been and are victimised by patriarchy, the colonial as well as the post-colonial powers in both the colonial and the post-colonial African states.

Waita (2013), with a focus on Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* argues that, within the novel's narrative, the woman is presented in the post colony as a person who is trapped in many ways. For instance, she is trapped in the patriarchal and the colonial past as well as by the emerging male elite in Independent Aburiria (an imaginary post-colonial nation depicted in the narrative). He states that, the novel highlights the position of African woman as complicated by a combination of oppressive forces thus making her condition unique from that of women from the Western world a situation that may suggest the post-colonial situation that African nations have found themselves subjected to in their relationship with the former colonial powers who, they rely on as constant reference in terms of political, social and economic orientations. However, as Waita reveals, Nyawira, the female character in the novel is an articulate woman who is ready to confront the social, cultural and political challenges of post-colonial Africa in the 21st Century. The aggressiveness of Nyawira reveals some similarities with that of Gathoni in *I Will Marry When I Want*, although she has not been highlighted much broader as Nyawira has in *The Wizard of the Crow*.

In another perspective, Cloete (1998) is of the view that despite the fact that Ngugi represents women in his writings, she believes that such representation has been in many ways traditional and patriarchally stereotypical. However, she reveals that female characters such as Mumbi in *a Grain of Wheat* (1967) reveal self-assurance whereas some of the male characters like Gikonyo have an inferiority complex. Again, she reveals Wangari, a female character in *a Grain of Wheat* who refuses to accept defeat when her husband Waruhiu beats and rejects her accusing her of sexual coldness. She instead, shows unwavering courage when she settles in Thabai with her baby son for whom she also later secures some knowledge of carpentry a much more suitable representation of an ideal post-colonial subject who despite being swayed by neo-colonial inroads and a need to conform, should show one's resolve. Cloete (1998) mentions other female characters in the novel such as Wambui who introduces the active role of women in the Mau Mau struggle while Karanja's mother, Wairimu echoes Nyokabi's defiance of the traditional submissive female role because she questions the

actions of men much in keeping with the African feminism which purports to save African women from patriarchy.

Again, Cloete (1998) cites other female characters such as Wanja and Waringa in Ngugi's other two novels that is, *Petals of Blood* (1977) and *Devil on the Cross* (1982) respectively. She argues that these female characters may be regarded as even stronger than those other female characters portrayed in Ngugi's earlier writings. This is because, both characters succeed in taking a strong stand in combating general social problems by acting for the good of their people. They courageously try to eradicate what they see as the cause of their own and societal ills a suitable example that may be used to situate post-colonial Africans in their fight against social political and economic enslavement.

Nwanko (1985) focuses on Ngugi's plays such as *This Time Tomorrow* (1970), *The Black Hermit* (1968) and *Dedan Kimathi* (1976) as follows:

In *The Black Hermit* (1968) Nwanko reveals that the major female characters in the play are victims of the social circumstances. For example, Nyobi, a widow and Remi's mother accept the burden of family management. Again, Thoni, a widow of Remi's older brother, is also revealed as actively involved in the political affairs of her village that include the immediate plan of the community to compel Remi to return from the city thus conquering his alienation. Her other acts include helping the people of her community to fulfil their needs. Nwanko (1985.) argues that despite the fact that Thoni's action is far from being the best in the circumstance that she finds herself, it is some kind of action which induces others to act more positively towards change.

With *This Time Tomorrow* (1970), Nwanko (1985) explains that Njango the female character in the play, is one of the squatters in the shanties at Uhuru Market which the government has ordered for removal as part of the cleaning up exercise. He argues that Njango selflessly assumes collective responsibility for the problems in Kenyan society. Despite her old age, as Nwanko claims, she is alert and sensitive.

In the play *Dedan Kimathi* (1976), which Ngugi co-authored with Micere Mugo, Nwanko (1985) reveals that this play is intense and comprehensive in summing up the capabilities of women in the society. He argues that in almost all the circumstances in the play, women are portrayed as the equals of men, and they function in the same way men do. Besides Kimathi, as it is revealed in the play, the other character of prominence is referred to as simply 'the woman' who is at the hub of the play directing and actuating the major events in the play. Nwanko (1985.) further argues that this woman represents in many situations a moral conscience. That is, in the evolutionary context of the play, she is the other part of the creative or societal procedure principle which should unite successfully with Kimathi.

This paper was prompted by scholarly gap revealed through the reviewed literatures about some of Ngugi's writings where women's role such

as Waringa in *Devil on the Cross* (1982) Mumbi in *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), Njango in *This Time Tomorrow* (1970) Thoni in *Black Hermit* (1968) and the 'woman' in the *Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) have been much highlighted but Gathoni, in *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982) despite the firmness and gravity of her statement, scholarly engagement on her statement and its implication for the African women's freedom and by extension the freedom of independent states in terms of political, social and economic spheres has been scanty. Again, despite the fact that the title of the play metaphorically echoes her statement, Gathoni's full import of her statement has largely remained in the background in the literary discourses. Hence, this paper set to analyse the gravity of such statement with connection to the main thrust of the play which is about exploitation, land alienation, poverty, corruption and neo-colonialism. It also, (by using Gathoni's firmness not to be led into a marriage for which she is not yet ready) highlighted the need for Africans as once victims of colonialism and now of neo-colonialism, to re-assert their freedoms such that they do not continue being mentally and culturally enslaved. Rather, they should be characterised like Gathoni, in *I will Marry When I Want*, who does not wish to rush into a marriage of which she does not like; by expressing full autonomy in their decisions, and freedom from want and exploitation.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by the Post-colonial Theory with a focus on Frantz Fanon's ideas contained in his seminal book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1965) as well as African Feminism Theory. These two theories were used because they complemented each other in the discussion of the findings. African Feminism which sees women as the victims of patriarchy was used to analyse and discuss Gathoni's actions in the play in their immediate context as suggesting African women's need to extricate themselves from patriarchy. However, in the wider context, the radical stance of her actions or simply her aggression would metaphorically suggest the need for liberation of the Africans as suggested in Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, which, when situated within the Post-colonial Theory, would be suitable to analyse and discuss issues such as freedom of choice for Africans in terms of suitable projects they would want, the kind of democracy they would like to follow instead of these things being imposed on them by the departed colonial masters who do so in what is known as neo-colonialism. Again, Frantz Fanon's ideas were chosen and used to guide the study because they capture well the issues regarding the mental enslavement and liberation of the formerly colonised Africans.

3.0 Methodology

This study was library-based. It relied on close reading and textual analysis of the primary texts (plays). This method was used to collect the primary data. It was

supplemented by secondary data which were collected through documentary reviews, mostly from critical works, such as books, journal articles, internet resources, dissertations, theses and essays. The collected primary data which were availed through thorough reading of both *I Will Marry When I Want* as the original text and *Nitaolewa Nikipenda* as the target text, were analysed and presented as themes and quotations. Both versions of the play that is *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Nitaolewa Nikipenda* were purposively selected. For the secondary data, these were used to complement or support the findings emanating from the primary data which were extracted from the plays through close reading with a view to exploring the matter at hand.

4.0 Results and Discussion

The findings of the study are presented and discussed exhaustively in terms of the selected play, that is the translated Kiswahili version which goes together with the English version from which the former was translated from.

4.1 *I will Marry When I Want* – Gathoni’s Defiance, a Sign of Freedom and Autonomy

Gathoni, the young female character in the play *Nitaolewa Nikipenda* lives with her parents, Wangeci, her mother, and Kiguunda, her father. They are a poor family that in one way or another finds it hard to go on taking care of Gathoni, who, in their perception, is a fully grown girl who now should be having a family and a husband of her own. When they press her into considering of marrying something which she is not ready for now, Gathoni says:

Gathoni: Samahan! Nitaolewa nikipenda, Sitaamrisha na mtu!
When Wangeci, her mother, asks her by saying nini? (what)
Gathoni replies Nitaolewa nipendapo! (*Nitaolewa Nikipenda*, p. 28)

The English version of the play renders the verbal exchange between Gathoni and her mother in this way:

Gathoni: Sorry! I shall marry when I want,
Nobody will force me into it.
Wangeci: What? What did you say?
Gathoni: I shall marry when I want (*I Will Marry When I Want*, p. 16).

Gathoni’s firm statement which also carries the titles of both the Kiswahili and the English version of the play opens the play for interpretation. In its immediate or narrower context, with connection to African Feminism, it echoes the need for women to liberate themselves from patriarchy which has been dictating terms for their welfare including the way some cultures within Africa that force young girls to enter into marriages while they are not ready or when they are forced to marry men who are not their choice. In its wider context, by using the Post-

colonial Theory with leanings on Frantz Fanon who advocates for true freedom of Africans that they should never be pushed by anybody into doing things that are not beneficial to them, the play as a whole, echoes the quest for freedom of the Kenyans (Africans) in different aspects. These are such as freedom from poverty, freedom of expression, freedom from diseases and freedom from being ruled arbitrarily whether by the colonialists or the by fellow Africans (Solomon, 2015).

The quest for freedom of Kenyans and in the wider context, the freedom of all the Africans, represented in Gathoni's statement, suggests that desirable as marriage is (in this context, freedom in different aspects), it should not be imposed by others probably for less than the required conditions to realise it. In the context of the play, due to their poverty, Gathoni's parents find that they cannot manage to meet her demands as a growing girl whether they be emotional and economic. Again, her firmness in actions, makes them think that she has become unmanageable and that she does not respect them. Therefore, they think of marrying her off.

Apart from suggesting the importance of African women fighting against patriarchy which denies them of their true freedom as human beings such as choosing their marriage partners at their own convenient time, within the post-colonial context, with reliance on Frantz Fanon's ideas, in conceding to get their freedoms, which in some instances they were not ready to, many African nations rushed into freedom suggestive of 'a marriage' which they were not prepared to enter. The picture would have been different had they been independent minded like Gathoni who does not wish to rush into a marriage which she is not yet ready for. As it has been highlighted above, due to the poverty of her family, Gathoni's parents would wish to rush her into the marriage which she is not prepared for but because they think they will get rid of her and she; in a way, would be self-autonomous. However, if she does not stand her own way, this would cost her because she would lack the necessary adjustment mechanisms and the sacrifice, she would need to make to be a good wife. By advancing this argument, it is not the intention of this paper to say that freedoms of the former colonised African nations would have been delayed. No way! The argument that this paper is making is the readiness of assuming responsibilities and autonomy that would go in tandem with the expectations of an independent nation. On this particular aspect, Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1965:39) observes that when the decolonisation process has not taken place completely (like a premature marriage of which Gathoni is against) it results into problems to the formerly decolonised. He notes:

But it so happens sometimes that decolonisation occurs in areas which have not sufficiently shaken off the struggle for liberation, and there may be found those same know-all, smart, wily intellectuals. We find intact in them the manners and forms of thought picked up during their association with the colonialist bourgeoisie. Spoilt children of yesterday's

colonialism and of today's national governments, they organise the loot of whatever national resources exist. Without pity, they use today's national distress as a means of getting on through scheming and legal robbery, by import export combines, limited liability companies, gambling on the stock-exchange or unfair promotion...

Fanon's quotation above, echoes a marriage that Gathoni is so careful to enter because she thinks it will entail some responsibilities which she is not yet ready to discharge; or because she has not yet found a partner of her choice. In contrast, and by drawing congruencies with Gathoni's refusal to be dragged into a marriage which she is not prepared; it can be argued that many African nations entered the marriage (independence), which they were not ready to shoulder its responsibilities and demands. Although it might appear to be paternalistic, Bron (2017) says that it has been argued that independence in many African countries came too soon. That is, when these countries were not yet ready to stand on their own, for example economically. She argues that, since independence, many African countries have remained net borrowers and receivers of aids from the developed nations something that would have never happened if they were ready to assume responsibilities which came with their freedoms.

According to Fanon, because the liberation process was not yet complete, these nations ended up producing pseudo-intellectuals who were not truly patriotic to their nations. Because of rushing into this marriage (independence), they lacked preparedness. This resulted into many African nations for example, entering into contracts with multi-national companies which were blood sucking who thus ended up siphoning off their natural resources such as minerals and oil reserves. These pseudo-intellectuals many of whom were part of the government bureaucratic machineries ended up engaging themselves in corrupt practices, forming and suggesting national constitutions that did not truly reflect the requirements of their people.

It should be noted that Gathoni does not hate getting married, she would be happy to marry one day. She reveals this in the play:

Gathoni...Mnanitukana asubuhi na jioni?

Kwani unadhani siwezi kuolewa?

Hakika, nitatoka huku nikifurahi! (*Nitaolewa Nikipenda*, p. 28)

The English version of the play says:

Gathoni: You abuse me night and day.

Do you think I cannot get a husband?

I'll be happy the day I leave this home (*I Will Marry When I Want*, p. 16).

Based on the quotations from both versions of the play, it is revealed that Gathoni is not against getting married, rather, she will one day be very happy to get a husband and leave the home of her parents which is too full of nagging and fault-finding. However, she is very careful. She thinks that she should not be pushed into finding just any husband to qualify as a married woman but instead, she

should have a husband who she is comfortable with. With regard to African Feminism which champions for African women's need to liberate themselves from patriarchy, it has been argued that it came as a result of the specific needs of African women whose agenda contrasted sharply with women in other places in the world such as Europe. On this regard Chidammodzi (1994) observes that African Feminism which is sometimes called Womanism emphasises female solidarity without antagonising the males. It enlists the support of males by considering the indispensability of each to the other. The writer notes that this brand of feminism is not apprehensive of womanhood, wifehood or motherhood. It appreciates the natural design of femininity as a given fact and aims at promoting and preserving the pride of being a female human being. It avoids the excesses and vulgarities of the Western style of feminism. In picking the African Feminism as a theoretical lens with which to tailor their demands, African women are being selective and circumspect like Gathoni in the play under discussion who does not just pick any husband because she needs marrying.

In line with the foregoing, independence or freedom for African nations was a very desirable aspect much as Gathoni thinks of getting married one day. However, according to Post-colonial Theory specifically on Fanon's ideas in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1965) some of the necessary preparations for freedom such as mass mobilisation for collective nationalism were not done properly in many African nations when fighting for their lost independence. On this particular aspect, he argues:

The mobilisation of the masses, when it arises out of the war of liberation, introduces into each man's consciousness the ideas of a common cause, of a national destiny and of a collective history. In the same way, the second phase that of the building up of the nation, is helped on the existence of the cement which has been mixed with blood and anger. Thus, we come to the fuller appreciation of the originality of the words used in these underdeveloped countries. During the colonial period, the people are called upon to fight against poverty, illiteracy and under-development. The struggle they say goes on. The people realise that life is an unending contest.

Based on the quotation above, the argument can be made that when independence was won, but because some of the African nations had not done the necessary preparations as highlighted above, they found themselves torn by ethnicity, regionalism and civil wars. Again, according to Fanon, the masses were not sensitised enough to know what they actually needed to do with their hard-won independence especially in the fight against poverty, illiteracy and under-development. Fanon reveals that when independence came, it did not mean that it had become an end in itself. Rather, he reveals that people were to be told that 'life is unending contest.' That translates into working hard, intelligently and

patriotically to build their nations which were mercilessly looted by the colonialists.

4.2 Responsible ‘Marriages’ or Freedoms-the Unfinished Business of African Nations

Based on Gathoni’s decision never to be rushed into a marriage which she is not prepared for, in the same way, in order to realise our true ‘marriages or freedoms as Africans in our respective nations, we should not rush into making decisions that might come to be costly later on in our lives. Again, we should be proud of what we have although it might be humble but that should serve as a way of struggling to find something better in the future. In the play, Gathoni has rags as beddings, however she is comfortable with them because she is able to sleep comfortably on. However, this should not be translated as being content with something less than desirable, rather, it should be viewed as a transitional stage where African nations should temporarily settle at while thinking of better options in the future but without being rushed to because they are poor or desperate for some projects which might later on turn out to be unprofitable thus detrimental for the welfare of the nations because they were not thought of carefully before the decisions were reached to implement them.

It should be noted that Africa is blessed with so many natural resources that are potentially able to pull it out of its present dire poverty. However, since it lacks the scientific and technological sophistication with which to extract them, it will definitely need investors. However, in doing so, it should be careful not to rush into a ‘marriage’ or joint ventures that might have unpleasant outcomes at the end. On the need to have investors and the proper way the African nations should conduct themselves, with a post-colonial perspective, Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1965: 81) cautions:

Private companies when asked to invest in independent countries lay down conditions which are shown in practice to be unacceptable or unrealisable. Faithful to the principle of immediate returns which is theirs as soon as they go overseas, the capitalists are chary concerning all long-term investments. They are unamenable and often openly hostile to the prospective programmes of planning laid down by the young teams who form the new government. At the pinch they agree to lend money to the young states, but only on condition that this money is used to buy manufactured products and machines: in other words, that it serves to keep the factories in the mother country going.

Based on the quotation above, the argument of this paper is that it is high time for Africa to get rid of this conditionality which forces it to enter a kind of ‘marriage’ or contracts simply because it is hard-pressed to address some key issues such as education, health and infrastructures. Instead, like Gathoni in the play *Nitaolewa*

Nikipenda who desires to have a family of her own but does not like to be forced into the bargain because of her desperation and vulnerability, African nations should not rush into entering contracts, business ventures or projects that do not carry the national interests. They should instead echo Gathoni's firmness that they 'marry' or enter those contracts when they are ready and only when it is expedient to do so.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has discussed the metaphorical implication of Gathoni's response to her mother's pressure to get married before she has prepared herself for the act and which in its wider context, reflects the need for African nations to be truly free from poverty, underdevelopment and other social, political and economic dimensions. By Gathoni's example which echoes African Feminism in its immediate context and post-colonial theory with focus on Frantz Fanon in its wider context as reflected in *The Wretched of the Earth*, they should enjoy their freedom of choice in whatever they are doing without being pressured but they should do so responsibly. The paper has also argued that, basing on African Feminism and Post-colonial Theory with leanings on Fanon's ideas which guided this study, it appears that there was some kind of rushing to get independence for many of the African countries without due preparations of the masses for collective nationalism and for assuming their responsibilities as free individuals in a free nation. Due to this unpreparedness, many African nations found themselves in political stalemate which was charged by ethnicity, regionalism and civil wars. They also found themselves inextricably linked with their ex-colonial masters in terms of economic support and expertise in different fields. Based on its findings which might be used to further explore the topic raised, the paper recommends reading and analysing other literary works by African literary authors to see how women characters in those works, like Gathoni in Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi Wa Mirii's play, *I Will Marry When I Want*, feature metaphorically in the contemporary African literary scenarios in relation to independence and nation building in Africa.

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