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Kamĩrĩĩthũ and Ngũgĩ's Innovative Aesthetic in Devil on the Cross (1982)

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Abstract
Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's work with the Kamĩrĩĩthũ people on an interactive community theatre project in the Gĩkũyũ language has been acknowledged as an important threshold in his development as a writer. This paper takes recourse in postcolonial theory to show how the author's experimentation with peoples' theatre in his mother tongue awakened him to the potential of Gĩkũyũ as a literary language culminating in his decision to henceforth write in his mother tongue. This was a significant aesthetic shift which turned the author into the foremost advocate of writing in indigenous languages in the postcolonial world. However, the paper argues, it remains relatively unappreciated how Ngũgĩ leveraged on the experience of working with the people on the popular theatre in their own language to craft his first post- Kamĩrĩĩthũ novel, *Caitaani Mũtharaba-inĩ* (1980). Later translated into English as *Devil on the Cross* (1982), the novel is significant because it is the first modern novel in the Gĩkũyũ language. This paper reads the Gĩkũyũ original alongside its English translation with a view to showing how through the use of the linguistic and aesthetic codes of his indigenous language, Ngũgĩ jettisons European literary conventions to create an innovative novel whose inspirations and aspirations might rightly be described as African in both spirit and form.

Keywords: Aesthetic(s), innovation, Kamĩrĩĩthũ, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, postcolonial

Introduction

Postcolonial literary scholars postulate that the dominance of European languages, cultural and literary ethos complicates the writer's attempt to develop an authentic literary tradition. Owing to its historical, aesthetic and ideological links with imperialism, African novelists in particular see the European model of the novel as historically and culturally 'contaminated'. This is because in the view of many postcolonial scholars and writers, the novel is 'distinctively European in its values' and arose to consolidate certain vested interests (Innes, 2007, pp. 42, 119-120). These include class and racial interests which are mostly inimical to postcolonial African interests. Indeed, for Ngũgĩ, the novel especially in English is an alienated and alienating form not only because of its genealogy in Western culture but also because of its inaccessibility to the ordinary people who cannot not read English (1986, p. 72). The problems associated with the novel as received from the West present writers seeking to liberate their literature and cultures from imperial domination with a considerable challenge. The challenge, however, is not insurmountable. As Patrick Williams observes; postcolonial writers have been able to appropriate the dominant languages and forms of the Western novel 'in resistant or oppositional ways' and in so doing to reclaim the novel 'for African ends' (1999, p. 18).

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Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is one of the most experimental and innovative writers in African literature. As far back as 1967 when he published *A Grain of Wheat* the author had expressed doubt about the efficacy of the novel in the English language. He lamented that although he knew who he was writing for, the peasants and the workers whose experiences fed the novel would never read his novel (Marcuson, et al. 2006, pp. 32- 33). Thus, even this early in his career, Ngũgĩ had identified language as the key handicap in his aesthetic praxis. In *Petals of Blood* (1977), the author attempted to appropriate the novel as a form through the codes of his Gĩkũyũ literary tradition, Kenyan history, and popular culture in an attempt to indigenise the novel. By this time as Balogun notes, 'a crusading Marxism had completely taken over' Ngũgĩ's praxis (1997, p. 21), giving a sense of urgency to his critique of post-colonial culture.

Inspired by his reading of works like Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968), Ngũgĩ was disillusioned by the direction in which the ruling elite was steering the newly independent African countries and became an advocate of the writer's participation in political revolution (Ambrose, 1995, p. 193). Ngũgĩ's call on fellow African writers to join the 'revolutionary' struggle of the 'masses' was of 'epochal significance' in the development of a 'radical aesthetic' in African literature. But for the revolution to succeed, Ngũgĩ was convinced that the writer must not just speak for the people but also speak' 'in their idiom' (Lazarus, 1995, p. 19). As a writer who espouses the cause of the oppressed, Ngũgĩ came to see the main weakness of his English-language writings not as a failure of ideology but of language. This culminated in him taking the most decisive step in his career as a writer when in 1976 he decided to move back to his home village of Kamĩrĩĩthũ to directly work with the peasants and workers on a community participatory theatre project in the Gĩkũyũ language.

The shift to theatre was an important threshold in Ngũgĩ's development as an intellectual, a social thinker, and a writer. This is because drama and theatre provided a more interactive form in which, unlike in the novel, political action could freely be represented through performance. Embracing community theatre was therefore a sign of a writer who was seriously rethinking of the epistemology of literary expression.

Kamĩrĩĩthũ, Language, and Aesthetics: Staging Neo-colonialism in Kenya

Ngũgĩ has described himself as 'primarily' a novelist who has reluctantly been 'drawn' to drama and theatre sometimes (Wilkinson, 2006, p. 199). But after his first 'apprentice' plays that were written while he was an undergraduate at Makerere University, *This Time Tomorrow* (1970) and *The Black Hermit* (1968), it was not until the late 1970s that he returned to drama when he teamed up with Mĩcere Mũgo to write *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976). By this time, Ngũgĩ had already established an international reputation as a novelist with his novels, *The River Between* (1965), *Weep Not, Child (1964),* and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967). Ngũgĩ's fourth novel, *Petals of Blood* is arguably one of the most powerful political novels in African literature. This is borne out by the heated debate in literary circles that met the novel when it was published in 1977. Generally, Western critics projecting the Western discomfort with the blatant indulgence of politics in art riled against what they saw as Ngũgĩ's promotion of the Marxist ideology in *Petals of Blood* (Mclaren, 1995, Pp. 73-91). For most African critics, however, the novel was Ngũgĩ's crowing literary achievement. This view was best expressed by Chidi Amuta who argued: 'against the timid imputations of bourgeois critics, the decisive ideological thrust of *Petals of Blood* does not weaken its artistic identity' (1989, p. 148). The Western critics' discomfort with the powerful political message in *Petals of Blood* is important in that even before he went to Kamĩrĩĩthũ, Ngũgĩ was

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already moving in a direction that would bring him into contestation with the edifice that is the Western literary tradition and its aesthetic assumptions.

Indeed, the *Petals of Blood* authorises Ngũgĩ's dissatisfaction with what Aizenberg calls 'the quietist-realist work' in the Western mode (1992, p. 90). Re-imagining the novel as an aesthetic agent of radical social change, the author boldly documents the political realities of postcolonial Kenya in the novel as a strategy of combating and even delegitimizing the nation. Ngũgĩ clearly drifts away from the ethos of the modernist novel where the writer is supposed to represent reality in a 'truthful' and 'objective' manner (Balogun, 1995, pp. 350-352). By so doing, the author rejects the universalising tendency of Western aesthetic assumptions and seems to be insisting with Schipper that in different times and cultures, 'reality is experienced and expressed by artists and writers in different ways' (1985, p. 559). In other words, for Ngũgĩ, realism is not an abstract aesthetic concept but is about the concrete realities of life as experienced by the people.

Still, the author was dissatisfied by the realisation that owing to the linguistic medium, his putative audience of peasants and workers would never read his novel in English. It is in this context that Kamĩrĩĩthũ was such a significant shift in Ngũgĩ's quest for an accessible and more inclusive aesthetic when in the late 1970s he decided to turn to theatre in the Gĩkũyũ language. In the living context of community theatre, his audience would now be tangible and immediate. Further, Ngũgĩ's resolve to write in the Gĩkũyũ language enabled him to close the class gap that had existed between him as an intellectual and the ordinary people whose experiences and realities he wrote about. In essence, Ngũgĩ's choice of language was first and foremost a strategic move that embodied his political allegiance to the oppressed. The choice of language was not simply the choice of a linguistic medium. It also authorised alternative literary codes and epistemologies embedded in the indigenous language. This is evident in the Kamĩrĩĩthũ play, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (1980) translated into English as *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982). The play's innovative aesthetic resides in the fact that as Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ aptly notes, it is embedded in the Gĩkũyũ 'notions of art that had both educational and entertainment values' (2007, p. 4). Consequently, popular art forms such as politically charged symbolic stories, oral poetry, drama, songs, dance as well as contemporary music became an indispensable part of the dramaturgy of the play.

By embracing these popular and traditional forms, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* represents Ngũgĩ's most radical break with the neo-colonial culture. The play is replete with the undertones of the works of contemporary popular musicians such as Joseph Kamarũ, Daniel Kamau (simply known as D.K.) and C.D.M. Kĩraatũ who Ngũgĩ acknowledges as cultural icons and sources of inspiration alongside the Gĩkũyũ author, Gakaara wa Wanjaũ. Indeed, the play derives its title from 'Ngarua Ndeenda' (I Will Get Circumcised When I Want), a popular song by Daniel Kamau who was one of the leading lights of Kenya's popular culture in the 1970s. This period is widely regarded as the heyday of Kenya's cultural revival in which artists saw themselves as part of a distinct and active social and cultural movement. Inspired by the revivalist ethos of the time, Ngũgĩ found an innovative code which was centred on 'the use of dramaturgy to engage in aesthetics of resistance as a means for political freedom' in neocolonial Kenya (Waswa, 2021, p.30). This allowed him to indulge his radical politics as he shone a spotlight on the plight of the oppressed in postcolonial Kenya; their lives, history, struggles, songs, experiences, fears and aspirations.

In *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, the central character, Kĩgũũnda, is a farm labourer employed by a rich farmer and former colonial loyalist Aahabu Kĩoi Kanoru. By manipulating Christianity, Kĩoi swindles Kĩgũũnda of his small piece of land. Kĩgũũnda's daughter, Gathoni, who also works as a casual farm labourer is impregnated by Kĩoi's son. The play focuses on the emasculation of Kĩgũũnda who is reduced from a proud land-owning peasant into a degenerate alcoholic at the end

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of the play. Ngũgĩ's venture into popular theatre came with a renewed appreciation of the potential of Gĩkũyũ as a literary language. The peasants who were effectively co-authors with him of the Kamĩrĩĩthũ play were critical in teaching him his mother tongue anew. Organic speakers of the mother tongue, the peasants 'fed him [the author] the right line ... modified Ngũgĩ's clumsy sentences ... and replaced stilted vocabulary with more fluid verbiage' (Peterson, 2004, p. 1). This experience culminated in the author's famous decision to henceforth write all his creative works in Gĩkũyũ (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. xiv). It would therefore be instructive to reflect on how this significant aesthetic shift by a writer who had already established himself as one of the icons of the African novel in English impacted on his subsequent novels in the Gĩkũyũ language.

Reconfiguring the Novel: Ngũgĩ's Innovative Aesthetic in *Caitaani Mũtharaba-inĩ* (*Devil on the Cross*)

The challenge Ngũgĩ faced post-Kamĩrĩĩthũ was foremost how to turn the novelistic genre into an interactive aesthetic form that his 'unsophisticated' audience of peasants could relate to. While acknowledging that the novel is an important 'invention', he nevertheless rejected the notion that the novel as imported into the postcolonial world is a 'completed form' into which all an author has to do is pour artistic experience. In his view, the origins of such an important invention should not determine the use to which it is put to by its inheritors (Ngũgĩ, 1986, p. 68). As such, Ngũgĩ's innovative intervention seeks not to re-invent but rather to reconfigure the novel from a form that is characteristically European in its values into one that could mediate African realities and values. He strives to retool the genre in such a way that it can freely express his political vision while deflecting attention from the novel's traditional elitist consumers to a different sector of social agents – the non-speakers of English and the oppressed ranged against an avaricious economic and political elite.

Western discourses on African literature assume a fundamental distinction between 'traditional' – oral and verbal arts – and 'modern' literature. The former are generally associated with African languages while modern literature is seen as that written in ex-colonial languages and influenced by Western traditions of writing. This simplifies the complex relationship between the oral and the written, and between tradition and modernity in African literature. But according to Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the most influential scholars of the novelistic discourse, the novel in the Western tradition has its antecedents in folkloric genres. From these beginnings the genre evolved, generating a 'fundamentally new attitude toward language and toward the word' – an attitude characterised by ambivalence, parody and the travesty of old genres and languages (Bakhtin, 2004, p. 21). For Ngũgĩ who seeks to liberate culture and literature from colonial and imperial influences, the question is simple. If the novel in the Western tradition has its antecedents in folklore, why would it be illegitimate for the African novel to seek its inspiration from the dynamic African indigenous traditions of literature?

There seems to be no legitimate reason why the African, and the postcolonial novel, in general cannot tap into the dynamic oral traditions of the indigenous cultures. As noted, postcolonial writers see the novel as historically contaminated owing to its aesthetic and ideological link with imperialism. Also, as Omotoso has argued in relation to the English language, the ex-colonial languages in which the postcolonial novel is expressed are laden pejorative significations that complicate their ability to represent the postcolonial experience fairly and objectively (1988, pp. 58-59). As such, recourse to the indigenous languages and the oral traditions would allow postcolonial authors to inject a new aesthetic timbre to the novel which they see as subservient to Western literary values. Thus, in his contestation with Western assumptions about

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the novel, Ngũgĩ sets out to demolish the false dichotomy between oral and written literature. The mother tongue reconnects him with an alternative literary tradition based on Gĩkũyũ orature. In *Devil on the Cross*, the author's appropriation of the genre becomes a kind of a negotiation between the novel as received from the West and the author's indigenous oral literary tradition. In this negotiation, the author does not transact from a vacuum. Through the aesthetic codes embedded in the author's indigenous language, the form of the Western novel is relativised, resisted, and creatively modified. In other words, Ngũgĩ's recourse to the forms and language of Gĩkũyũ orature and popular culture is not merely nostalgic reversion to 'traditionalism' for its own sake (Desai, 1990, p.66). Rather, in the complex meld of aesthetics and politics in Ngũgĩ's praxis, the recourse to indigenous literary codes is a major political intervention. The author appropriates those elements of the indigenous literary tradition and popular culture that lend themselves to exactly the kind of didactic writing that is frowned upon in the Western novel.

While *Devil on the Cross* features some radical innovations in form, the kind of the remaking of the genre that the author embarks on represent more of a continuation rather than an abrupt innovation in his experimentation with the novel. Whereas Ngũgĩ has always used indigenous myths and other elements of orature in his fictions, *Devil on the Cross* stages a more deliberate and radical re-appropriation of the oral and popular aesthetic codes. For Ngũgĩ, orature and popular culture authorises the epistemologies of the indigenous culture and helps articulate the people's viewpoints in their own idiom. The assumed familiarity of his putative audience with these codes is expected to make communication between the writer and the people easier thus making the novel more accessible to his putative audience.

Written in prison after the abrupt banning of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* and the author's incarceration, *Devil on the Cross* resonates with the Kamĩrĩithũ play in that it tells the story of the rabid exploitation of peasants and workers in postcolonial Kenya by an avaricious and heartless cabal of indigenous capitalists working in cohorts with the Western capitalist class. The novel extends the theme of the proletariazation of the peasantry after being dispossessed of their land which the author first explored in *Petals of Blood*. It shows how the capitalist class deploys the coercive instruments of the state and religion to ruthlessly exploit the peasants and workers. But the novel goes beyond the mere documentation of the social-economic and political problems of the postcolonial state. Through his principal characters – Warĩĩnga, Mũturi, Wangarĩ, and Gatuĩria, Ngũgĩ is also keen to show how such problems may be resolved.

In writing *Devil on the Cross*, Ngũgĩ takes advantage of the formal and aesthetic malleability of the novelistic genre to parody other genres and texts to the extent that 'the conventional languages of strictly canonical genres begin to sound in new ways' (Bakhtin, 2004, p. 5, p. 7). These canonical genres are not just 'Western' but also include the oral genres of his indigenous literary tradition. The author deploys the discursive strategies of Gĩkũyũ orature to reconfigure his novel as oral-aural narrative which beside the reader features a lively listening textual audience who engage the narrator of the story. Canonical conventions of the novel such as realism are dispensed with as the writer mines orature for alternative modes of representation while the indigenous language and the oral genres that frame the story are themselves recreated and upgraded to represent the contemporary realities of the postcolonial state.

Devil on the Cross contains a montage of diverse aesthetic forms and languages. The novel displays the complex union of writing and orality where new genres like the novel which were introduced through writing interact with the vigorous oral literary traditions of the African popular culture. One of the most innovative features in the novel is the way in which its form is shaped by the oratorical framework of the *gĩcaandĩ* oral poetic genre. An ancient and unique genre in Gĩkũyũ

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verbal arts, the now almost extinct *gĩcaandĩ* is a dialogic art form. It is characterised by a highly poetic recitation in which two singers duel in what is 'essentially a competitive, yet cooperative, riddle-like poem and poetic exchange' (Njogu, 1997, p. 47). The deployment of the *gĩcaandĩ* structure and the mimicking of its aesthetic in the novel allows the author to employ traditional metaphors so that the text "speaks" in the organic idiom of the ordinary people.

As one of those oral genres that were banned by the British in the 1930s because they were seen as subversive of the colonial project, Ngũgĩ's novelisation of the *gĩcaandĩ* demonstrates his determination to restore the connection between contemporary African experience and the traditional gnosis that was almost severed by the colonial experience. In view of his aesthetic and political commitment to the liberation of both culture and literature from Western dominance, Ngũgĩ's recuperation of the *gĩcaandĩ* demonstrates the capacity of such traditional domains of knowledge, language, and aesthetics to construct a counter-discourse that challenges dominant colonial and neo-colonial discourses (Njogu, 1999, p. 56). The recuperation of *gĩcaandĩ* poetics whose nuances are most audible in the original Gĩkũyũ text make the novel a strikingly innovative work of art.

Reading the English text against the Gĩkũyũ original, one major difference stands out. The Gĩkũyũ text features a prefatory statement, more like a literary manifesto, in which it is patently clear that Ngũgĩ is seeking to distance his novel from the European tradition and the readerly assumptions that underlie the novel in the West. In the preface which interestingly has been erased from the English translation, the author directly links *Caitaani Mũtharaba-inĩ* to the Gĩkũyũ indigenous oral tradition. This being the first modern novel in Gĩkũyũ, the author uses the preface to familiarise the text to his new Gĩkũyũ readership by pointing out its nexus with the familiar oral narrative tradition. He insists that just like orature; the modern African novel is or should be both entertaining and instructive.

Ngũgĩ's utilitarian views on literature as expressed in the preface justify the didacticism underlined in the novel. However, the author also comes up with innovative strategies to soften the didactic content and aesthetise his novel. In doing this, the interactive framework of the traditional storytelling session provides an imitable model. Mimicking the oral storytelling moment, the author uses the opening formulas conventionally used in the Gĩkũyũ oral storytelling tradition. The formulaic expression 'Uga ĩĩtha!' (Say yes to the story) in Gĩkũyũ text signals the author's intention to link his novel to the indigenous oral story telling tradition. It implies that this is a story that the audience is also supposed to be listening to.

As the author-translator of the novel, Ngũgĩ's decision not to translate the preface and the storytelling formulas suggests something about his imagination of publics for the original text and the translation. Graphologically, *Devil on the Cross* is presented as any other conventional novel. With the preface and the storytelling formulas elided, the novel leaves the presumably more sophisticated English reader to figure out its oral and performative context from the structure and style of the novel. In contradistinction, the preface and the formula emphasise the orality of the Gĩkũyũ text. These elements also serve to familiarise the novel to a Gĩkũyũ audience supposedly still steeped in orality and which may be unfamiliar with the modern novel. Both texts, however, do evoke the orality of the story to various degrees. The *gĩcaandĩ* narrator for instance is engaged in discourse with a participatory and lively listening textual audience. Some of his interlocutors plead with him to tell Warĩĩnga's story while others caution against exposing communal dirty linen in public.

That Warĩĩnga's story should be the centre of so much public interest signifies the Ngũgĩ's shift from the individualistic ethos of the European novel in favour of the egalitarian and

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communal ethos of the African/Gĩkũyũ traditional society. As a member of the IImorog community, the narrator feels obliged to protect the dignity of the community. Also, as he weighs the consequences of telling the story, proverbial wisdom cautions reticence. The narrator is wary of becoming what the Gĩkũyũ text calls 'Kanua werĩire' (the mouth that ate itself). This proverb warns that what one says can come back to haunt him in future. The narrator remembers another proverb that counsels that the 'antelope' hates not he who sees where it is hiding but the one who alerts others to its presence. These proverbs hint at the possibility of unwelcome reprisals from those who might not like the story. Through this kind of organic language which stems directly from the indigenous language and cultural ethos, the author nuances the English language in a manner that distances it from its colonial and imperial ethos.

Tymoczko asserts that the author's culture and tradition serve as a metatext that is explicitly or implicitly re-written as both background and foreground to the text (1999, p. 21). In this respect, one of the effects of Ngũgĩ's decision to write in Gĩkũyũ was that it brought the metatext of his indigenous culture to the fore of his aesthetic practice. This is evident in *Caitaani Mũtharaba-inĩ* where it is evident that the author is privileging the literary nomenclature, conventions, and the worldview of the Gĩkũyũ culture whose perspectives have been muffled by a transcendent modernity and its Englishness. But while the author in the Gĩkũyũ text seems determined to recuperate the minute details of the indigenous language and culture, the author-translator seems disinterested in conveying the flair and impress of the original language in *Devil on the Cross*. Ngũgĩ has admitted as much arguing: 'I don't need to prove anymore that the character is really speaking an African language, that the character is really an African peasant' (Wilkinson, 1992, p. 207). This is not surprising from the perspective of an author who is also a promoter of African languages. It just shows that Ngũgĩ is not too keen to mute the indigenous in his text. In any case, translation has often been a one-way traffic with African and other postcolonial languages being translated into the dominant European languages. By refusing to translate certain elements, Ngũgĩ is contesting the West's expectation of the full translatability of African languages. The result of this is that *Caitaani Mũtharaba-inĩ* is linguistically and stylistically richer than the translation.

However, as Tymoczko points out, there is always more than one language or culture that 'stands behind a writer's work' (1999, p. 20). This is particularly so in the polyglot world of postcolonial Africa. This is a dynamic space where indigenous languages, narrative traditions and such traditional genres such the *gĩcaandĩ* exist side by side in a relation of mutual inter-illumination with the languages, literary traditions, genres, and texts introduced into Africa through colonialism. In *Caitaani Mũtharaba-inĩ*, the *gĩcaandĩ* narrator captures a bit of this multi-voicedness of postcolonial cultures in his self-profiling as a composite figure of both the traditional *gĩcaandĩ* artist and the Old Testament prophets. Thus, faced with the contesting demands made on him by the public and wary of the story he must decide whether to tell or not, the *gĩcaandĩ* narrator seeks divine guidance. He fasts for seven days during which, like the Biblical Daniel, he goes through a moment of atonement and charismatic revelation. He then receives a kind of divine commissioning when he hears a loud voice – presumably the voice of God – demanding of him: 'Who has told you that prophecy is yours alone, to keep? Why are you furnishing yourself with empty excuses? If you do that, you will never be free of tears and pleading cries' (*DOC*, 2). The use of Christian and Biblical idioms, tropes, and allegories is one of the most abiding features of style in Ngũgĩ's oeuvre. The additive style in which the *gĩcaandĩ* narrator's divine commissioning as a 'Prophet of Justice' is couched hearkens to the oral genealogy of the Old Testament. It is reminiscent of the traditional *gĩcaandĩ*'s arcane language and elegiac mode of delivery. More significantly, the additive style of the narrator's commissioning is characteristic of the formulaic

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expression of thought in oral traditions (Lord, 1987, p. 54). This shows how much the author has been influenced by orality.

Ngũgĩ theorises the use of indigenous languages as a step towards a liberatory aesthetic for African literature. *Caitaani Mũtharaba-inĩ*, however, shows that writing in the indigenous language does not mean that there is a pre-existing cultural and linguistic space to which the author may return for a 'pure', uncontaminated idiom of representation. In reality, the indigenous language is inflected by the languages, cultures and texts it comes into contact with just as it inflects the 'foreign' European language. Apart from the idiom of Biblical and Christian discourse which is the most pervasive of the multiple languages in the text, the novel also features a lot of ostensibly Gĩkũyũ lexical items like Caitaani (Satan) and *Mũtharaba-inĩ* (Msalabani) which are in reality English or Kiswahili terms that have been phonologically 'translated' to sound like Gĩkũyũ. These terms blur the line between the indigenous and the 'foreign' language.

That the narrator is able to speak in the organic idiom of what might pass for 'pure' Gĩkũyũ and in the idiom of the Old Testament alongside all these other languages is a pointer to the polyglot nature of postcolonial culture. As Bakhtin postulates, one can take any language but one can make it his own 'only when' he 'populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention' (2004, pp. 293-294). In a similar manner, Ngũgĩ appropriates the supposedly 'foreign' languages, discourses, and texts. By inflecting them with his own aesthetic or even ideological intention, he retools them into a counter-discourse of contestation with postcolonial public culture. An example of this kind of retooling which is a hallmark of the author's innovative aesthetic in *Devil on the Cross* is his radical reversal of Christian discourse. From an Other-Worldly religion mostly concerned with sacral matters, Ngũgĩ turns Christianity on its head and forces it to mediate temporal concerns. In the process, he reconfigures religion as a discourse that can prophetically intervene in the public sphere of the postcolony.

When the *gĩcaandĩ* narrator decides to tell his story, he begins by summoning all to 'come and reason together' before passing judgement on our children. The plural 'children' reinforces the symbolic nature of the story and Warĩĩnga's role as an exemplar of the plight of a much larger public. The narrator's language echoes the Bible where the Lord calls on the Israelites to reason with Him with the promise of forgiveness for their 'sins', which though they are 'like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow' (Isaiah, 1: 18). In the novel, the notion of 'sin' is transposed from a sacral to a secular reference to oppression. The devil and his followers who are accused of being responsible for the suffering of 'our children' are to be excluded from the public 'reasoning' because one of the issues to be discussed is how to punish them.

Finally, the story which the narrator describes in the decidedly mantic idiom of an Old Testament Prophet as an account of 'what I, Prophet of Justice, saw with these eyes and heard with these ears' (*DOC*, 2), dramatically commences with an account of how one Sunday morning, 'the devil appeared to Jacinta Warĩĩnga on a golf course in Iciciri, IImorog town and told her … ' (DOC, 4). As an oral storyteller, the narrator in a gesture that mimics spoken narration realises this is a false start and immediately corrects himself. Acknowledging that Warĩĩnga's troubles did not start in IImorog, he addresses the audience directly: 'Reke tũrutie mbaara nginyo…' (Let us start from the beginning) (*CM*, 4). The use of the pronoun 'us' implies that the telling of the story is an interactive moment which involves both the narrator and the listeners as direct participants in the story. This, as Lovesey notes, indicates that the novel anticipates a reception that is 'collective and communal' (2000, p. 61). This is a significant departure from the readerly assumption conventionally associated with the novel where reception is private and individual.

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Remapping Gender: Recuperating Female Agency in *Devil on the Cross*

Even as he strives to recuperate the communitarian ethos of an inclusive traditional culture now under pressure from capitalistic individualism, Ngũgĩ is acutely aware that such genres as the *gĩcaandĩ* which was conventionally a male art form runs the risk of authorising the patriarchal ideologies of the traditional society. His aesthetics therefore involves not just the travesty of 'foreign' texts such as the Bible but also, and equally important, the upgrading of indigenous oral genres to reflect contemporary realities. Thus, in a strategy of extrapolation and feminisation of the *gĩcaandĩ* narrator, the author co-opts Warĩĩnga as one of the co-narrators in part two of the novel. In a story within-a-story which mimics her real life story but is ostensibly not her story, Warĩĩnga tells the story of the deflowering of a young woman by the name Mahũa Kareendi (*CM*, 11-23). The way she begins the story lacks the subjectivity and authority of one telling a personal story: 'Take a girl like me …. Or any other girl in Nairobi … Let's assume she was born in the countryside …' (*CM*, 11). The name of Warĩĩnga's fictive persona masquerades as a proper Gĩkũyũ name. However, 'mahũa' means 'flowers' while 'kareendi' is an affectionate and diminutive form of the English term 'lady'. This suggests that the story Warĩĩnga narrates has a wider significance as an as an allegory of the predicament of the poor and oppressed women in Kenya.

As a co-narrator, Warĩĩnga proves to be quite well versed in her mother tongue. She therefore becomes a useful agent in Ngũgĩ's literary project of recuperating the indigenous language, its literary codes, and genres. As her story unfolds, Mahũa Kareendi finds herself a new lover, a progressive university student who accepts Kareendi despite her having a child with another man. In the story, Warĩĩnga describes the young man as 'kamoongonye ka mwanake' (handsome young man) (*CM*, 14). The description alludes to a Gĩkũyũ oral ballad about a girl who rebels against her father who wants her to marry 'Waigoko' (elderly man) with a hairy chest. Warĩĩnga's narrative illustrates how Ngũgĩ seeks to aesthetise his novel through codes of the oral literary tradition. It also shows how the author upgrades traditional genres in his remapping of gender in the novel. These genres lie just beneath the surface of the text. They are so subtly recovered that it would be easy for a reader who is not conversant with Gĩkũyũ orature to miss them. Similarly, the reader of the English translation would need some kind of cultural indexing to be able to access these genres.

Like that of the fictional Mahũa Kareendi, Warĩĩnga's story is also full of pathos. Her ambitions are dashed when as a school girl, she is impregnated by the Rich Old Man from Ngorika. Forced to drop out of school she becomes a secretary in Nairobi. She soon loses the job when she turns down the sexual advances of her employer, Boss Kihara. Abandoned by her university-student boyfriend and unable to pay for her room in the city which is small as a bird's nest, Warĩĩnga is evicted by the landlord's agents – a thuggish gang who call themselves the 'Devil's advocates: Private Businessmen'. The name of the gang provides the first hint of the identity of the devil referred to in the title of the novel. As a signifying text, the cover illustration on the Gĩkũyũ text which is targeted at the 'unsophisticated' Gĩkũyũ reading/listening audience graphically represents the devil. It depicts an ageing, rich man hanging on the Cross which is adorned with the imprints of the currencies of the major Western capitalist countries. This symbolises the alliance between Western capitalists and their local lackeys whose corruption and moral depravity is held responsible for Warĩĩnga's predicament and for the persistence of oppression in Kenya's post-colonial public culture. More revelations of the devil's identity come

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in the narrator's account of a recurrent nightmare that has plagued Warĩĩnga since she was a young girl.

In the nightmare, the devil who wears a silk suit is a grotesque personage with seven horns and seven trumpets for sounding his self-praises. Tellingly described as 'hymns', the devil's songs of self-glorification show the nuanced ways in which the author is retooling Christian discourse. But the devil also has affinity with the ogre in Gĩkũyũ folktales. Like the ogre, he has two mouths, one on the forehead and the other at the back of his neck. A crowd of peasants dressed in rags crucify him despite his promises never again to build 'hell' for the people on Earth. Here, hell is transposed into a temporal entity. However, after three days, the devil's followers come and lift him from the Cross. They pray him to give them some of his robes of cunning upon which their bellies also begin to swell with all the evils of the world (*DOC*, 7-8). Psychologically, the fantastical world of Warĩĩnga's nightmare can be read as an expression of the suppressed anxieties that has haunted her life since her youth. One cannot fail to see the link between Warĩĩnga's oppression and the occurrence of the nightmares.

In the *matatu* to Ilmorog, Warĩĩnga learns more about the devil when she is told about the Devil's Feast in her hometown. She is invited to attend is about a feast in which Kenyan capitalists are gathering for a 'Devil-Sponsored Competition' to choose seven experts in theft. *Devil on the Cross* presents an uncomplicated moral world in which, like in the traditional folktale, the divide between 'good' (the oppressed peasants and workers) and 'bad' (the oppressor class of local capitalists and their foreign allies) is clearly delineated. The folktale provides an imitable model that is supposed to be more accessible to Ngũgĩ's ideal reader of the simple, unsophisticated individual who may not be familiar with the complexities of conventional novel. Ngũgĩ's utopia is equally simple. He imagines a situation where through conscious political action, the oppressed can engineer a radical transformation of society in their favour. However, in order for them to be able to readjust the social, economic and political realities of Postcoloniality in their favour, the oppressed must raise their political awareness.

Consequently, one of the most uplifting narratives in *Devil on the Cross* is the story of Warĩĩnga's transformation from a teenage victim of oppression to an agent of revolutionary change. Her story brings to the fore the innovative ways in which Ngũgĩ forges a liberatory aesthetic out the spectrum of the life of an oppressed woman and the diversity of languages and texts that articulate culture in Kenya's postcolonial public sphere. In narrating Warĩĩnga's conversion from a victim to a change agent, Ngũgĩ takes recourse in the journey motif. In the company of characters that she meets in the *matatu* – Robin Mwaũra who is the driver, Wangarĩ, Mũturi wa Kahonia Maithori, Mwĩreri wa Mũkiraĩ, who is one of the contestants in the devil's feast and Gatuĩria who later becomes her fiancée, Warĩĩnga attends the devil's contest in IImorog.

The deployment of the *matatu* as the mode of transportation though seemingly innocuous is ideologically and aesthetically significant. An icon of Kenya's popular culture, the *matatu* is a common form of transportation for the poor. The *matatu* can therefore be read as a non-bourgeois public sphere. Unlike in the bourgeois, neo-liberal public sphere where 'private' people come together to discuss matters of mutual concern (Habermas, 1989, p. 27), the *matatu* functions as an alternative space where ordinary people meet as a 'community' to share ideas on matters of public interest. Here, discourses suppressed in the postcolonial public sphere are ventilated. Adorned with an inscription that lures travellers with the promise of 'true' gossip and rumours, the *matatu* functions as a site of contestation in which the discourses of the people are poised against those of the power elite. The promised rumours and gossip are however nuanced and turn out to be a reflection of the truths of a nation reeling under the weight of injustice, inequality and blatant abuse

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of human rights (*DOC,* 26). They provide an overarching glimpse of the oppressive environment in which the people live.

The journey motif dominates *Devil on the Cross* and controls the life of Warĩĩnga who ultimately emerges as the heroine of the story. As always in Ngũgĩ's fictions, the urban space is presented as a dystopic site of alienation while the village is the 'home' that provides an antidote to the disorientation of the city. After her traumatising experiences in the city, Warĩĩnga's journey by *matatu* to IImorog unfolds on two planes. The physical journey gives the reader an insight into the spatial and temporal geographies of the postcolonial state. From Nyamakĩma, the hub of 'workers and peasants' in downtown Nairobi, we get glimpses of the countryside golf clubs (*DOC,* 31), as the *matatu* proceeds to IImorog where the great confrontation between the two classes of oppressed and the oppressors which are vying for the supremacy in the state is set to take place. At a more nuanced level, the journey is allegorical and stages Warĩĩnga's political transition as she evolves into a revolutionary and an agent of change.

One of the outstanding features of Ngũgĩ's aesthetic in *Devil on the Cross* is the creative way in which he appropriates 'Western' canonical texts. As stated above, Ngũgĩ does not negotiate with Western culture from a vacuum but comes armed with his indigenous language and the arsenal of aesthetic codes embedded in it. Further, besides the novel as a genre, he is heir to Western cultural forms and iconic texts such as the Bible which are part of his formation as a postcolonial subject. The ways in which Ngũgĩ transacts with and makes use of these texts is another hallmark of his innovative aesthetic in *Devil on the Cross*. According to Devey, the authorised translation of the Bible into English, the King James Version, was one of the most 'revolutionary events in the history of English style'. It was the chief means by which protestant England 'sought the recovery of the original spirit of Christianity' (Devey, 1999, pp. 82, 182).

Another key text in this respect was John Bunyan's, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Written in the homely and dignified prose of the Bible, *The Pilgrim's Progress* became a key evangelical text in the nineteenth-Century protestant mission movement. The missionaries found its portability and simple linear style less theologically problematic than the multiple narratives of Christ in the gospels and widely used it to spread the 'spirit' of Christianity in the postcolonial world. Ultimately, the text was appropriated into the discipline of English literature where Bunyan was canonized as 'the father of the English novel' (Hofmeyr, 2004, p. 1). Postcolonial writers like Ngũgĩ encountered Bunyan's text both as a theological text and also as part of the canon of English literature in mission schools and colonial universities.

An allegory of the Christian life, *The Pilgrim's Progress* narrates the symbolic vision of the good man's pilgrimage through life. The story is presented as the author's vision of the trials and adventures of Christian (an everyman figure) as he travels from his home, the City of Destruction, to the Celestial City of salvation. Christian seeks to rid himself of the weight of his sins that he feels after apparently reading the Bible. Along the way, he meets characters such as Christiana, Hopeful, Mr Worldly, Wiseman, Mercy and the Giant Despair, all of whom either aid or try to hinder Christian on his journey. He also meets evangelists who constantly point him to the narrow, rugged path which is the only way to salvation. A Puritan conversion narrative, the text which has been existent in Kenyan in both Kiswahili and Gĩkũyũ languages since 1888 and 1931 respectively has some of the qualities of a folktale. This made it easy for it to be 'naturalised' as part of the Kenyan popular oral tradition.

As a product of the mission school and the colonial university where he was educated in the so-called 'Great Tradition' of English literature, Ngũgĩ has a more than cursory familiarity with *The Pilgrim's Progress.* In his first novel *Weep Not Child,* he resorts to Bunyanesque allegory to

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present Kenya's predicament under colonialism imagining the struggle for independence as a journey from the darkness of colonial bondage to the Celestial city of freedom. *Devil on the Cross*, however, is the apogee of the author's literary appropriation of Bunyan's text. Ngũgĩ depicts Warĩĩnga's as a journey from the City of Desolation to the Celestial City: from the 'darkness' of political ignorance to the 'light' of political awareness and revolutionary consciousness. In remapping gender in the novel, Ngũgĩ depicts Warĩĩnga as a female Christian. She is assisted in her 'journey' by her co-travellers in the *matatu* who like the Evangelist in *The Pilgrim's Progress* guide her towards gender and political consciousness. Her political conscientisation reaches a peak when Mũturi, the worker, gives her a small gun which he describes as her invitation to the 'workers' feast' to be held sometime in the future (*DOC*, 211). The gun fosters Warĩĩnga's self-confidence hastening her transformation from a political neophyte to a revolutionary. By the time the *matatu* arrives in IImorog, the reader has imbibed the central message of the novel. In the idiom of *The Pilgrim's Progress,* the message is that to enter the 'heaven' of a workers' state, the oppressed will have to travel the narrow way of revolutionary armed struggle.

The fantastical spectacle at the cave in IImorog unfolds as an allegory of the confrontation between the oppressor and the oppressed classes in Kenya. Ngũgĩ melds Christian discourse with elements of Gĩkũyũ popular culture to inflect the language of his novel. He transposes Biblical tropes such as the Parable of Talents and the Christian testimonial into secular tropes. In a language that evokes the famous parable, the wiles of the capitalist class are presented as 'talents' (*DOC*, 78-79). In a similar vein, *Caitaani Mũtharaba-inĩ* describes the capitalists' bragging about their skills in thievery is in a distinctly Christian idiom as 'ũira' (testimony). The oppressors who bear epithets for names symbolising the parasitic nature of the capitalist class are depicted as ogre-like characters. Ngũgĩ satirises the workings of international capitalism as he reveals the links between capitalism and the persistence of oppression in the postcolony. In a nutshell, the Devil's feast turns into a performance in which the audience is instructed on the moral bankruptcy of the capitalist ideology. The audience – both readerly and textual – is expected to see through the charade and take action to end the kind of corruption and moral debauchery depicted here. This explains the attempt by Warĩĩnga, Wangarĩ, Mũturi, and Gatuĩri who represent the oppressed to disrupt the devil's feast.

In nationalist narratives, women were generally relegated to the role of a supporting cast in nationalist struggles. In *Devil on the Cross*, the author makes a deliberate attempt to combat patriarchal notions of culture. In narrating Warĩĩnga's political transformation, he interrogates and critiques the gendered discourses of the colonial and post-colonial public spheres. His inversion of the evangelical aspect in *Pilgrim's Progress* is intertwined with the inversion of the text's gendered discourse. In place of Christian, Ngũgĩ writes Warĩĩnga as Christian's female equivalent. This enables the author to subvert the protestant masculinities of the mission – and colonial enterprises – as well as those of African culture in which the female is either demonised or idealised as the repository of value in patriarchal societies, (Boehmer, 1992, p. 233). Thus, although the novel seems to repeat certain circumstances from *Petals of Blood*, his last novel in English, the two works depict women quite differently. Unlike Wanja in the earlier novel who turns to prostitution and becomes an oppressor of women as a brothel owner, Warĩĩnga accepts her feminist agency. This culminates in her shooting to death the Rich Old Man who ruined her life.

Warĩĩnga's shooting of her tormentor has attributes germane to both the moral fable in Gĩkũyũ orature and the trickster narrative. That she finally avenges the injustices meted to her affirms the viability of the simple moral world of the folktale in which the forces of good often overcome the forces of evil. The killing also has resonance with the trickster narrative in which a

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little character (in this case Warĩĩnga) outwits a stronger foe (The Rich Old Man). In this rather understated and subtle manner, *Devil on the Cross* suggests that the solution to the problems of oppression in the post colony lies in armed resistance.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to illustrate the ways in which Ngũgĩ leveraged on the experience of working with the Kamĩrĩĩthũ people on popular theatre in their own language. It shows how the author forged an aesthetic out of his newfound appreciation of the potentiality of Gĩkũyũ as a literary language. Whereas the author had previously used orature in his work, writing in Gĩkũyũ led him into a more fundamental appropriation of the literary codes of his indigenous language making orature the centrepiece of his aesthetic in *Devil on the Cross*. But as is evident in the paper, writing in mother tongue does not mean recourse to a site of 'pure' linguistic or cultural identity. On the contrary, the linguistic and cultural codes of the indigenous culture exist in mutual interrelationship with the literary codes of other cultures that in various ways nuance the indigenous culture. The ingenious ways in which Ngũgĩ appropriates and domesticates the apparently 'foreign' is one of the hallmarks of his innovative aesthetic in the novel. The result, this paper shows, is a novel that might rightly be described as truly African in its spirit and form.

Abbreviations

CM Caitaani Mũtharaba-inĩ
DOC Devil on the Cross

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