

## THE COLONIAL IMPOSITION AND NATIVE'S DISSOCIATION IN NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S PLAY THE BLACK HERMIT

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### Abstract

*Ngugi wa Thiong'o's play The Black Hermit is the story of a young man named Remi, who is torn between his loyalty to the Christian ideology and the loyalty to the traditional religious doctrine. The present paper purports to highlight how the play The Black Hermit of Ngugi wa Thiong'o reclaims the past of Africa and gradually destroys the colonial ideology by which the past of Africa had been devalued. It is also concerned with the issues like the effect of the 'Cultural Bomb' namely the annihilation of people's belief in their language, environment, heritage of struggle, unity and inherent capacities and the deprivation of their moral right to struggle as enumerated in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's books Decolonising the Mind and Moving the Centre. However, the paper presents the methods, manners or the strategies adopted in the play to achieve the reclamation of the past and erosion of colonial ideology.*

**Keywords:** reclaiming, eroding, cultural bomb, ideology, colonialism, dissociation etc.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o like his great contemporaries Peter Abrahams in South Africa and Chinua Achebe in West Africa, is a writer hailing from East and Central Africa. Ngugi's greatness lies in his handling of diverse social and political subjects. Ngugi's play The Black Hermit celebrates Uganda's independence. It was performed by Makerere students' Drama society at the Uganda National Theatre in 1962. The play depicts several post colonial issues of the African society. It is the story of a young man named Remi, who decides to live in a distant city ignoring his obligations at home and to family. Nyobi, the mother of Remi, complains to Thoni, her daughter-in-law, about her younger son's decision of going away from their native land. It also makes the life of Remi's wife miserable, because she longs to bear a child. The leader of the village is ready to help Nyobi in bringing her son back to his land. But he helps her only for the purpose of acquiring national political advantage. It is believed that Remi's decision is a result of his Christian education. It takes him away from

the traditional native people, values and culture. Ironically, it is the same education that makes him acquaint with his responsibilities towards his community or people.

The play cannot be discussed meaningfully outside the context of those social forces which have made it. The play is concerned with the continuing debate all over the continent about the destiny of Africa and the influence of European civilization on the native culture. It studies the African realities and the Western influences and also projects the view that imperialism is still a cause of many problems in Africa.

The play is set in a typical African country. It opens with an utterance in poetic strain of the peasant mother Nyobi. It depicts the story of Nyobi and her daughter -in -law Thoni who is from a rural outpost. Songs and dance are central to nearly all the rituals of Africa. They are also an important part of the play, its structure and movements of the actors.

Remi is the first person in his small tribe to go to a university. It helps him to receive a lot of respect from the elders of the tribe. They derived pleasure from listening to Remi, who wrote letters to them and virtually ordered them to support the Africanist party and the prime minister. But later he realises that he has been trapped by the tribe. As he feels, "I was caught. When I realised this, it was too late for me to do anything about it" (2.2. 31). Therefore, he runs away and escapes to the city. He wants to protect his selfhood. He does not relish his estrangement from the tribal and the corrupt native men and their traditions.

There are different views about Remi's decision of settling in a distant city. People of the Marua tribe, represented by Elder, believe that some bad medicine administered to him by the Whites might have turned his mind away from home. On the other hand, Paster, who represents Christianity, believes that Remi's involvement in native politics and Satan have spoiled his life. Remi's involvement in the African party, Paster thinks, has caused the estrangement. From Remi's point of view, life in the village is a burden or a trap for him. He also does not love his wife.

Remi reveals to his friend Omenge that he had a brother, who was very close to him. But in many ways he was different from him. There was a girl in his village that he secretly adored. He did not dare to declare his love for her and one day he had a letter from home that the girl whom he loved was to be married to his brother. It was a shock for him. He also thought that she and his brother had betrayed him. But a few days later he regained his calm and thanked god that he had revealed nothing to either. He had accepted that the girl no longer meant anything to him. For him she was his brother's wife. But his brother met with an accident. He died in a motor car accident leaving his wife to her fate. His brother had hardly lived more than six months, with his wife.

Soon after this incident, his father fell ill. It was a shock to him. One day he called Remi to his bed and told that as a part of their custom he ought to marry his brother's wife. But Remi did not like that idea. His father and elders of the tribe came to him and prayed to him to fulfill his father's wish and obey a sacred custom. They forced him to obey the custom.

Finally, he agreed to marry his brother's wife. According to Remi, Thoni does not have true love for him. She has turned to him only to fill the emptiness in her heart and to soothe her grief for her departed true husband. She is ready to marry Remi only for the reason that she could not have the man she really wanted.

Moreover, the play depicts the religious and cultural confusion. It is a reaction against the imposition of European culture on native African culture. The play shows how the monopolistic capital has affected the lives of the peasants in the remotest corners of the country. This cultural and religious confusion can be noticed in Remi's decision of settling in another place. All the people of his tribe too locate the reason for Remi's change in his university education. Elder blames Christian education but Paster holds African politics responsible for Remi's change. Both of them try to keep Remi within their community. For them Remi is the only hope for tomorrow. Remi's mother has a confused mind. She supports both of them. To her Remi is more important than any ideology.

The play shows the struggle of characters such as Remi, Nyobi, Elder, Paster etc. They are in a confused state of mind. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o has rightly pointed out in his book *Decolonising the Mind the Politics of Language in African Literature* that it is the impact of the 'cultural bomb', which dismantles the African faith in self and native culture. It annihilates people's belief in their past, culture, heritage and their abilities. It distances natives from their past and makes them think of their past as a wasteland. It also raises serious doubts about the rightness of the struggle.

In the play, Remi could not make up his mind, about whether he should settle away from his tribe or return home. He is torn between his loyalty to his tribe and the inclination of his heart. Though, he has settled in a city, he has serious concerns about corruption, racial tension, and poverty in the village. He believes that the government instead of paying lip service should act and deal firmly with the racial, tribal and religious problems. He is also aware of the glaring limitations of the native government. Remi tries to convince Omenge that a government in a newly independent country cannot be too firm. It cannot implement its decisions strongly. He is also aware of the change in the condition after political independence of the country. He knows that the problems posed by Independence are different from those of colonial days.

Remi loves his soil, his people, and his family. But the contradiction is that despite the boredom of his present job and city life, he is not willing to return to his village. Both Omenge and Jane suggest to him that he give up a mere clerk's job in an oil company and return to the village. But he is not in a mood to accept it. He reminds them that the village i.e. his own native village, is not a suitable place for him, because several ministers and their permanent secretaries are corrupt. They might love to squeeze money from him. Contrary to it, he is also not happy with his life in city that is away from his native land. He is always in a

confused state of mind. He does not know whether he should live in the city or go back to the village people. He expresses his mind:

Has our nationalist fervour that gave us faith and hope in days of suffering and colonial slavery been torn to shreds by such tribal loyalties? All my life I believed in the creation of a nation. Where are we now? Perhaps I did wrong to come to the city following the inclination of my heart. Yet how can I go home? Surely a man's public life is given meaning only by the stability of his private life (2.2. 41).

Religious and communal confusion is also created among the people. There are people, who belong to the Marua tribe, trying to bring Remi back to their community. On the other hand, Paster tries to bring Remi back to Christianity. There is a competition between them to bring Remi back to them by using different strategies.

Leader and Elder appeal to Remi to return to their village and serve the tribe. They complain to Remi that even after the political independence and their native new government they wilt under the new autocratic dispensation. They complain that there is none of their kith and kin in the present government. Therefore, they plead with Remi to lead them, because they have lost faith in the present government. They are oppressed by taxation, ungainful community project, drought etc. Earlier, they fought against the white colonial government. Now they are fighting against their own native government. After freedom, instead of unity, there is disunity and division among people. They want to form their own tribal political party and run the government with Remi as their Prime Minister. The people see him as a messiah. The representatives of his people, symbolically, leave a small bundle, well wrapped with banana leaves in his house to neutralise the influence of bad medicine on him, before leaving the room.

When Elder and Leader go out Paster enters his room. He reminds him of the service and care of his mother for him and requests him to become a saviour of the people. He also reminds him of his responsibilities towards people, family and Christianity. As he departs, he leaves a Bible behind.

Remi's mother Nyobi also does not know what to do. She is undecided whether she should depend on her tribal roots and people of her own community or trust Paster. Earlier she readily believed that Remi might have been influenced by black magic. When Elder comes to her and tells her his plan of bringing Remi back with the help of native medicine, she becomes very happy and supports his plan. She also goes to Paster and requests him to help in bringing Remi back to the village. She pleads with him to 'Save our child'. Though, she has accepted Christianity, she still continues to be influenced by her native culture such as that after the death of her elder son, she allows Thoni –wife of her elder son to marry her younger son, Remi. It is a custom of the Marua tribe. She is also torn between tribal culture and Christianity.

Ngugi in his book *Decolonising the Mind* observes that Imperialism in its colonial and neo-colonial phase has continuously influenced the life, culture, politics and economy of Africa. It has turned reality upside down. It has undermined the native culture. It has spread hatred among the native people who have been economically backward and tribal. Imperialism is an endless process of destruction and deliberate undervaluing of people's native culture, history and religion.

There has been a ceaseless struggle of the African people for liberation from different ways of domination and to retain their native culture and values. Africans are torn between the western idealism and the native tradition. The play presents the reality of the Africans affected by the struggle between the two ideologically opposed forces, namely the imperialistic tradition on the one hand and the native resistance, on the other. As Elder tells Nyobi:

Do you still believe in what the white man said?

He said our medicine was bad!

Some people were easily deceived,

And even now four fall years after independence,

They have not discovered the lie.

You still call yourself a Christian? (1.1. 10).

Nyobi thinks that the white Christo is averse to their native medicine, which is why; she has been punished by God by keeping her son away from her. She also looks to Paster for help in bringing her son back to the village and Paster assures her in this regard. But he fears that if Elder brings him back to the village, he will lose the blessing of Christ.

Along with the economic and political control colonialism is believed to have exercised mental control on the natives. All People including Remi's mother, his wife, Elder, Paster, Jane and Omenge believe that Remi has changed. Elder blames Christian education for the change in Remi and Paster holds African politics and his education responsible for the change. He says to Nyobi: "He was once a good son, long before he went to this university. He was then a good follower of Christ" (1.3. 18). Jane, his white girlfriend in the city, also confirms the change in Remi. All locate the reason for Remi's change in his university education.

As Ngugi in his book *Decolonising the Mind* states that in the neocolonial phase the physical violence of battlefield is followed by the psychological violence of the classroom. It was achieved through culture and the imposition of the colonizer's language and literature. It denied to the colonised race their tools of self definition and relationship with others. The former seems brutal and the latter seems gentle. Both ways the impact is deadly. It is a means of spiritual subjugation. A process of it is best described in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's novel *Ambiguous Adventure*, where he talks of the methods of imperialism as consisting of knowing how to kill with efficiency and to heal with the same art. The novel is about the

interactions of western and African culture. Its hero is a Fulani boy, who goes to study in France. There he loses touch with the Islamic faith and his Senegalese roots. He regrets that: On the Black continent one began to understand that their real power resided not at all in the cannons of the first morning but in what followed the cannons. Therefore, behind the cannons was the new school. The new school had the nature of both the cannon and the magnet. From the cannon it took the efficiency of a fighting weapon. But better than the cannon it made the conquest permanent. The cannon forces the body and the school fascinates the soul (Ngugi 9).

The imposition of colonial education drew the Africans away from their native roots and weakened the harmony existing among the people. As Ngugi says “language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds” (Ngugi 12).

Language and literature are considered to be a means of communication and also a carrier of culture and history. Culture and history are inseparable from language. Ngugi believes that “language as a culture is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history” (Ngugi 15). But in Africa, English is not the mother tongue of the African people. Therefore, it does not direct or shape their culture and history. This happened in Remi’s case. He finds a gap between traditional ideals and alien culture. There is a difference between the language of education and the language at home. Therefore, it does not reflect the real life of the community. Hence, he does not understand native feelings and expectations from him and settles away from his family and community. This creates a complexity. In Ngugi’s words:

This resulted in the dissociation of the sensibility of that child from his natural and social environment, what we might call colonial alienation; the alienation became reinforced in the teaching of history, geography, music, where bourgeois European was always the centre of the universe (Ngugi 17).

The imposition of colonial culture dissociates and alienates natives from their past and culture. Culture is a product of the history of the people. In the play Remi is exposed to a culture that is external to him. For instance, nightclub, cafe etc. He is forced to stand in a position where he judges culture, past, present and many other things which are different from his native roots and the environment in which he was born and brought up. His decision of leaving his native village and settling in a distant city is the resultant of this idea. He fails to identify what is good and what are bad for him and is his going away from his people, himself and also his tribal roots is the right decision. As a result of this state of indecision he loses his ‘selfhood’ and allows his thought and action to be led by the western ideologies.

The implantation of colonial images or ideas is so strong and powerful that it takes a long period of time to be eradicated. It forces Remi to see the world in a certain way. He has to see or define the world according to the norms set by the process of colonial imposition. So, Remi does not see the world as dictated by his consciousness. He sees it from the imposed



colonial point of view. In this process he feels isolated and sees himself from outside. The natives convince him and bring him back home to lead them and weed out the filth and decay brought through corruption, brutality, illiteracy and so on. Finally, Remi realizes that he cannot escape from his past and people. He is not happy with his job and city life. In the city, he is a hermit. He cannot escape from his culture and history. The Bible left by Paster and the small bundle left by Elder represent the mentality of different African communities. They are part of his culture and country. He decides to go to the village and serve his people and save them from irrational tradition, bad customs and free them from tribal manacles. He says

I have been too long a hermit in the city

I'd thought I'd escape

From things that were me-

That was part of my life.

I must now rise and go to the country.

For I must serve our people,

Save them from traditions and bad customs,

Free them from tribal manacles (2.2. 45).

Remi believes that his past has followed him. He cannot escape from his past. He also tells his white girlfriend Jane that his people and family are calling him back. He no longer wants to be a hermit in the city. According to him a hermit means escaping from what is around him. He feels that his tribe is around him. So, he needs to go to help them. He also reveals to Jane the secret of his marriage and tells her that because of her love he forgets his past. It makes Jane very upset. She calls Remi a liar and compares him with the so-called precious politicians in Africa, who do not keep their promise. She also raises the issue of faithfulness to one's own community, family, and religion. She calls him a coward, who runs away from truth and is scared to utter or accept the truth. But Remi tells her the difference between him and her and decides to go alone. Remi leaves his white girlfriend Jane and returns to his people to help them with communal revamping.

When the natives meet Remi, they start a celebration with dance and singing songs of freedom. For them it is second independence after political independence. They sing old songs of war when Marua, used to be a tribe, before the white men came to Africa. They sing of a new man, who has come to restore the tribe to its land, to its old ways.

Remi makes up his mind to fight against the social evils. He is angry with the leaders and others for preaching tribalism and for misleading people. He reminds them that their salvation lay in the national party. They should live together despite disparity. He suggests to them that they help each other and build more schools. They should harness their heart and minds to create a nation. Then only man will be free of all restraints. He also blames his own mother for harping on his weaknesses and forcing him to marry a woman whose love and loyalty lay with the man in the grave. He also blames Paster for creating differences among people. He

complains: “Paster you and your religion never did anything for our people. It only divided them and made them weak before the White men” (3.3. 74).

Remi is determined to fight against all bad things in the village, which impeded the unity of the nation. He makes up his mind to settle among the natives and lead them as an independent nation. He realises that his role lies in rearranging the system of the village. He accepts the reality and his role in retaining the native identity and culture. He says, “I will no longer be led by women, Priest or tribe. I’ll crush tribalism beneath my feet and all the shackles of customs” (3.1. 65).

Thus, Remi realises his mistake of going away from his wife, family and people. He blames himself for his wife’s death and not giving her a chance to express her love towards him. He did not understand her feelings and love. He realises that he is responsible for her death and also for the pitiable condition of his mother and of himself. He accepts his error: “I came back to break Tribe and customs, Instead, I’ve broken you and me” (3.3. 76).

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