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Ngugi wa Thiong’o Revisited:
A Postcolonial Study of Three Selected Novels

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Dedication

To my country Algeria

My Father and my Mother

Djillali and Badiaa

To my beloved brothers and sister:

Khaled, Fatima, Mohamed and Ahmed

To my dear nephews and nieces:

Amine, Yanis, Mohamed Iyed, Lila, Imene and Sara

Whose encouragement gives me strength and determination.

To my second home Jordan

To the soul of Mr. Karim Mekrouz...brother, friend and colleague
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List of Abbreviations

Ngugi’s Novels

* A Grain of Wheat  
* Petals of Blood  
* Devil on the Cross

Abbreviations

* AGOW  
* POB  
* DOC
Abstract

Ngugi wa Thiong’o Revisited: A Postcolonial Study of Three Selected Novels

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This thesis sheds light on the theme of marginalization and the betrayal of Kenyans in three selected novels of Ngugi wa Thiong’o. The texts under study are *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Petals of Blood* (1977), and *Devil on the Cross* (1980). The study utilizes the postcolonial theory that stresses the effects of colonialism on the post-independence phase. The research postulates that the marginalization and the betrayal of the masses affect the country’s independence. This thesis argues that regardless of the plight of the masses in the colonial past and the neo-colonial phase, independence does not change people’s lives. This means that Kenya’s independence appears to be superficial.

This thesis shows the reaction of the author and his role in awakening the people. The recognition of the problems that define Kenya’s independence as a failure is an opportunity for the author to place himself as a revolutionary writer. The author’s revolution is understood through his call of the masses to rebel against the élites and reject capitalism to end up neo-colonialism and the reign of the few over the many.

**Keywords**: History, colonialism, neo-colonialism, disillusionment, marginality, failure of independence.
Introduction

In the 1960’s a strong shift had been marked in Africa’s history. Many African countries were about to declare their total independence. This change could be realized due to the several military revolutions that took place in different African countries such as Algeria, Angola and Kenya. The struggle for freedom in Africa was primarily based on violence as a revolutionary strategy to restore what had been taken by force. A.S Abubakar (2002) writes:

Revolutions, especially politically influenced ones, predate colonial domination in Africa. Africans have not been known to accept oppression and domination lying down. The agitation for changes in leadership and political systems gave rise to numerous uprisings which became popular in the region prior and during the colonial conquest. (19)

The declaration of independence is regarded as a turning point in Africa’s history. It marked the beginning of Africa’s post-colonial era. Nevertheless, independence did not yield to the end of the problems of Africa. People of different African regions found themselves obliged to re-start from zero point due to the difficulty of the situation. They found themselves experiencing several and multi-dimensional troubles. Most of those problems date back to the age of colonialism. Consequently, Africa has been considered as the mother land of corruption, disaster, economic and political crises, violence, murders, betrayals, social differences, insecurity, hunger, and death. The Ghanian poet Kofi Anyindohho maintains that:

Africa is a homeland that history has often denied and contemporary reality is constantly transforming into a quicksand; a land reputed to be among the best endowed in both human and material resources and yet much better known
worldwide for its proverbial conditions of poverty, Africa the birth place of humanity and of human civilization now strangely transformed into expanding graveyards and battlefields for the enactment of some of the contemporary world’s worst human tragedies. (76)

Critics perceive these problems as aftermaths of Africa’s colonial past and its downgraded position in the world. The Kenyan academic political writer Ali Al’amin Marzui argues that:

These problems are brought about as a result of Africa being at the bottom of the global heap, with the Western world at the top. Africa has the largest percentage of poor people, the largest number of low-income countries, the least developed economies, the lowest life expectancy, the most fragile political systems. (3)

Post-colonialism or “post-colonial studies” is an interdisciplinary field fusing a set of other theories found among the texts and sub-texts of literature, philosophy and political science. It is acknowledged that it appeared as a reaction to the cultural legacy of colonialism. Essentially, it works as a search for solutions to cure the pains of Third-World countries that were ex-colonies. Scholars usually relate the birth of postcolonial studies to the publication of Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* in 1978. It is argued that the field “emerged both as a meeting point and battleground for a variety of disciplines and theories” (Gandhi 3). Post-colonialism is also known as “Colonialist Discourse Theory” (Sawant 120). In “Postcolonial Theory: Meaning and Significance”, Shrikant B. Sawant argues that “Postcolonial discourse was the outcome of the work of several writers such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Edward Said, Bill Ashcroft and his collaborators, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Aijaz Ahmad and others” (120).

Charles E. Bressler defines postcolonialism “as an approach to literary analysis that concerns itself particularly with literature written in English in formerly colonized countries” (265). Postcolonialism is identified by its vigorous concentration on the texts from South America, Australia, New Zealand, Africa and other countries that experienced the turmoil and curse of colonialism. The extensiveness and the expansiveness of the field
is marked by its fusion with other philosophical theories such as deconstruction, Marxism, feminism and other postmodern schools. In this respect, Sawant maintains that “postcolonialism is a heterogeneous field of study where even its spelling provides several alternatives” (120).

Postcolonialism is a fertile area of debate and discussion. Critics usually debate on whether the term must be used with or without the hyphen. The hyphenated term “post-colonial” is used as a temporal marker referring to the period after official decolonization. However, critics who usually focus on the colonial and the postcolonial phases in their works prefer to use the unhyphenated “postcolonial” in the sense that it is more expansive. Ashcroft et al maintain that the “semantic basis of the term ‘post-colonialism’ might seem to suggest a concern only with the national culture after the departure of the imperial power” (The Empire Writes Back 1). However, the richness of the theory is suggested by Meenakshi Mukherjee who claims that:

Post-colonialism is not merely a chronological label referring to the period after the demise of empires. It is ideologically an emancipatory concept particularly for the students of literature outside the Western world, because it makes us interrogate many concepts of the study of literature that we were made to take for granted, enabling us not only to read our own texts in our own terms, but also to re-interpret some of the old canonical texts from Europe from the perspective of our specific historical and geographical location. (3-4)

In essence, Post-colonialism marked the end of the colonial authority. Post-colonial intellectuals are mainly interested in addressing the aftermath of colonialism that is “marked by the range of ambivalent cultural moods and formations which accompany periods of transition and translations” (Gandhi 3). The heart of post-colonial studies is formed by important concepts such as colonialism, capitalism and imperialism. The three concepts, however, are sometimes used interchangeably and therefore it is really difficult to separate each from the other.
In her book *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, Elleke Boehmer defines colonialism as the “settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands” (2). However, others assert that colonialism has taken various forms and has engendered strong effects all over the world that can be measured in terms of its relation to “capitalism” and “imperialism”. Sawant believes that colonialism was “the means through which capitalism achieved its global expansion” (121). Accordingly, Dennis Judd assumes that “no one can doubt that the desire for profitable trade, plunder and enrichment was the primary force that led to the establishment of the imperial structure” (3). Therefore, it can be said that both colonialism and capitalism share mutually supportive relationships. Words such as profits and riches can be said to be the common points between the two terms.

One of the common mistakes that intellectuals of the field try to point out is the interchangeable use of “colonialism” and “imperialism”. As a matter of fact, the two terms have things in common, but they mean different things. Colonialism is the military conquest and control of other people’s lands and goods. According to Childs and Williams, imperialism is “the extension and expansion of trade and commerce under the protection of political, legal and military control” (227). This means that colonialism is a manifestation of imperialism. In Ngugi’s view the economic manipulation of the state from the outside is another form of colonialism. Essentially, the term “Neo-colonialism” has been coined by the Ghanaian politician Kwame Nkrumah to describe the existing of ruins of colonialism in Third-World societies in terms of foreign manipulation in the economic affairs of the new independent countries. In *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, he declares that the essence of neo-colonialism is “that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside” (ix).
The richness of Postcolonial studies is explained in terms of the several themes and topics that form the core of its intellectuals’ writings. Postcolonialism translates a deep concern for the perspective of people from regions and groups outside the hegemonic power structure. Postcolonial studies have come to be identified with subaltern\(^1\) studies due to its interest in the oppressed groups. Further, Postcolonial intellectuals are mainly preoccupied with issues like creolisation, hybridity, in-betweeness (Mazzaterra in Ahdaf Souif’s view), diasporas and other issues. In this respect, Sawant writes:

To sum up, the postcolonial theory deals with cultural contradictions, ambiguities and perhaps, ambivalences. It repudiates anti-colonial nationalist theory and implies a movement beyond a specific point in history (i.e colonialism). Hence, postcolonial theory is transnational in dimension, multicultural in approach and a movement beyond the binary opposition of the power relations between ‘the colonizer / colonized’, and ‘centre / periphery’. (126)

African literature mainly deals with African problems that emerged during and after colonialism. The reputation of African writers is resulted from the thematic concerns of their writings and the medium of communication. Si Abderahmane Arab perceives African literature as “the literature, written in European languages, by native Africans (of whatever race) whose cultural matrix is exclusively African” (1). However, the growth of the field and African literature would be marked by debates on the use of foreign languages in African literary works. Some critics like Ngugi wa Thiong’o rejected the colonizer’s language condemning it for being part of Western culture. Others, however, like Chinua Achebe still welcome the foreign tongue for spreading Africa’s ordeals across the world.

Critics are usually interested in tracing the emergence and the development of African literature. No one denies that the literary boom of African studies is usually related to the colonial era. In this respect, Arab regards the birth of African literature as:

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\(^1\) Subaltern, meaning ‘of inferior rank’, is a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups in society who are subjects to the hegemony of the ruling classes. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers and other groups denied access to ‘hegemonic’ power. (Ashcroft et al 215)