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Weaponization of the Bible in the Oppression of Women: A Study of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Devil On The Cross*

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Abstract

This essay discusses the portrayal of the bible as a weapon of oppression against women in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* (1982). Adopting the feminist critical approach, the essay focuses on how women are portrayed as oppressed and marginalized in the patriarchal Kenyan society. In the novel, the author decries a situation where subjective interpretation of the bible is carried out by men to create and sustain inferiority complex in women for the preservation of narrow patriarchal interests. The interest in the topic is informed by the paucity of critical studies on that perspective of the story. The outcome indicates that Ngugi Wa Thiong'o uses the story to draw the attention of the world to the marginalization and oppression of Kenyan women perpetrated through religious brainwashing. The story is also meant to inspire action in women to wake up and struggle for social equality. In this respect, *Devil on the Cross* is an affirmative empowerment of women.

Keywords: *Weaponization, Feminism bible, Christianity, Patriarchal society, Oppression, Liberation*

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Introduction

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* (1982) is a demonstration of the weaponization of the bible by men in the patriarchal society of Kenya in oppressing and limiting the possibilities of women. According to Bressler (1999), literature reflects the society in which it is written and thereby heralds its values and concerns. Feminist critics, says Bressler, believe that the oppression of women began with the biblical narrative that blames the fall of humanity on Eve and not Adam. The ancient Greeks, Bressler emphasizes, abetted such gender marginalization when Aristotle asserted that "the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules and the other is ruled". The biblical narrative relating to the fall of humanity and Aristotle's promotion of it seem to be the basis upon which women are being oppressed and marginalized even in this century.

When African nationalists were agitating for independence so much promises were made to the common man. The masses were made to believe that independence would bring about equal opportunities and greater equality in the standard of living and development of opportunities in education, health and employment for both male and female members of the society (Obiechina, 1990). But far from fulfilling the lofty promises, African leaders who took over from the colonial masters have turned their countries into their own little colonies where exploitation and oppression of the

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masses especially women become the order of the day. One of the oppressive instruments inherited by the new African leaders says Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1981), is Christianity. According to him, Christianity "... had always been used by the colonial system to rationalize inequalities; the colonial state encouraged that brand of Christianity that abstracted heaven from earthly struggles".

Kgalemang (2013) is also of emphatic that Christianity was used by the erstwhile colonial masters to oppress and exploit Africa. Quoting Mofokeng (1988), Kgalemang relates the existence of a popular African anecdote that projects the exploitative nature of Christianity and the bible. According to this anecdote, says Kgalemang, "when the white man came to our country, he had the bible and we had the land. The white man said to us 'let us pray'. After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the bible". The anecdote, according to Mofokeng quoted in Kgalemang (2013), points to three dialectically related realities. First, the anecdote reflects the centrality the bible occupies in the process of colonization, national oppression and exploitation. Second, is the incomprehensible paradox of being colonized by a Christian people whose religious ideological instrument is the bible and yet the west and Africa contact only resulted in oppression and exploitation. The two realities raised the third reality; why does the bible still remain attractive to Africans despite its ugly history? The answer, as subsequent discussion in this paper shows, is that patriarchal African societies have realized the weaponization benefits of the bible for the oppression of their own citizens especially women.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's writings, Kgalemang emphasizes, predominantly explore the issues of "... neocolonialism, land and the category of religion and its ties and link to both imperialism and colonialism". Ngugi has shown in successive novels a growing impatience with the socio-political role of Christianity in Kenyan history (Balogun, 1988). *Devil on the Cross* is one of the novels in which Ngugi Wa Thiong'o illustrates the deployment of the bible in the oppression and exploitation of women; which is the focus of the present study.

2. Statement of the Problem

Elma (2010), citing Ogude (1999), reports that "There has been some critique directed towards Ngugi concerning how he portrays the oppression of women in the broader perspective of national independence and international influence, which deals mainly with the fact that he reduces the oppression to a matter of class only, not directing any attention to patriarchal issues". Elma, however points out that the scope of her essay does not include a discussion on that perspective. The present study views Ogude's assertions in Elma (2010) as an inadequate representation of Ngugi's position on the oppression of women. The problem, as seen by this author, relates to paucity of critical attentions by critics. That is to say that critics have not paid sufficient attention to the portrayal of oppression of women within the context of patriarchy in Ngugi's novels especially *Devil on the Cross*. In this respect, there is still much to be said about the novel. The present study is therefore an attempt at filling up the gap.

3. Discussion

In *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o demonstrates the nexus between religion, specifically Christianity and the oppression of women. In this novel, Ngugi illustrates that the patriarchal power structure in Kenya utilizes the bible in justifying its marginalization and oppression of women. The author of *Devil on the Cross* is preoccupied with the expose of hypocritical application of religious dogma to limit the social possibilities of women. The novel is meant to draw the attentions of the world to the subjugation of women and to awaken the consciousness of the marginalized women to understand their oppressed status and potentials if only they would struggle for their rights. The theme of oppression is raised mainly through the experiences and tribulations of Jacinta Wariinga the central character of the novel. Wariinga is subjected to dehumanization, deprivation and untold hardship in the hands of unscrupulous and oppressive men most, if not all, of whom are leaders of the church. It is prescribed in the novel that education and social awareness are the vital tools for the emancipation of the oppressed.

The title of the novel and the subsequent description of the devil at the opening chapters of the story underscore the fact that *Devil on the Cross* is mainly concerned with the expose of hypocritical weaponization of the bible in the hands of patriarchal forces obsessed with the oppression and marginalization of women. According to Raja (2019), the title of the novel *Devil on the Cross* is a retelling of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as recorded in the bible. Instead of Jesus Christ however, it is the devil that is being crucified. Raja argues that

... one could read the title in itself as a reversal of the traditional associations with the cross and thus read the novel as a journey into the functioning of the Devil of capital and the possibilities of resistance against it especially within the framework of postcolonial nation-state...

Raja's argument is sustainable in the analysis of the novel when viewed from the perspective of the interconnection between capitalism and patriarchy. Because the erstwhile colonial powers had bequeathed a capitalist

system with its competitiveness to the African countries, patriarchy becomes a logical culmination of that socio-economic tapestry. In this way, women become the victims as they have to be shoved aside to provide unfettered access to the country's wealth by men. Just like the biblical crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the crucified devil in Ngugi's fiction is also resurrected after three days. He is resurrected by his disciples who want to emulate all his qualities. This episode of the story establishes a strong link between the erstwhile colonial masters and the stooges left behind when the former left the country.

The devil, Raja maintains, "... is a personification of international/colonial capital and the disciples [being] the native elite, who, even after the "Devil" has left still rely on the exploitative practices introduced and mastered by the former colonizers". The title of the novel therefore prepares the reader to expect some form of religious hypocrisy and exploitation. The description of the devil being crucified by the oppressed class is a clear indication that Ngugi is calling on the oppressed women to recognize their oppressed status and to fight for emancipation. That Ngugi is principally concerned with the oppression of women by men using the instrumentality of the bible is concretized in the gendering of the devil. The devil is a male. In chapter two of the novel, Ngugi, or the narrator of the story says;

The Devil was clad in a silk suit, and he carried a walking stick shaped like a folded umbrella. On his head there were seven horns; seven trumpets for sounding infernal hymns of praise and glory. The Devil had two mouths, one on his forehead and the other at the back of his head. His belly sagged, as if it were about to give birth to all the evils of the world.

The gendering of the devil as a man with two mouths instead of the normal one and a sagging belly indicates the strength of Ngugi's revulsion of and denunciation of patriarchal oppression.

In a patriarchal social setting like Kenya as portrayed in the novel, women are perpetually abused and relegated to the status of commercial or sex objects. Jacinta Wariinga's tribulations in the hands of unscrupulous men begun with the arrests of her parents by the agents of Christianity. They were arrested and detained for six years by the British colonial authorities for participating in the agitation for Kenya's political independence. By then Wariinga was only two years old. Wariinga's aunt who is married in the city takes up the care of the girl. The aunt enrolls Wariinga into the local school where she exhibited exceptional appetite for learning (Haruna, 2020). The narrator of *Devil on the Cross* says that "Wariinga was quick at learning, and she was often top of her class. In fact, it was Wariinga who often coached her cousins at Maths, even those who were a class ahead" (p. 140). The narrator continues that Wariinga's

... dream of dreams was to finish school successfully and win a place at the university. Her ambition was to study electrical, mechanical or civil engineering. The word 'engineer' was what made her heart beat whenever she shuts her eyes and tried to look into the tomorrow of her life. Wariinga could not understand why girls hardly ever opted for such challenging jobs, leaving the whole field open to men (p. 140-141).

Wariinga's subsequent physical developments as she grows up attracts the predatory forces of patriarchy. It is at the stage of her youthful exuberance that the agents of oppression strike. "By that time her breast had developed. Her hair had grown long and brilliantly black". The husband of Wariinga's aunt lives beyond his means and Wariinga becomes, to him, an object to be sold for economic gains. He therefore craftily introduces the young girl to Mr. Hispaniora Greenway Ghitahy, a rich old rogue. Mr. Hispaniora who is consistently referred to in the novel as the Rich Oldman from Ngorika, is a typical predatory product of patriarchy—a man who believes that a woman has no other use than that of sex object. Mr. Hispaniora is "... a pillar of the church" and "... has a special family pew at the front, very near the altar" (p. 134). His position in the church should have ideally set him out as a repository of moral and ethical values. But he is the exact opposite of the ideal. He lures Wariinga into the world of materialism and sexual pleasure (Haruna, 2020). Wariinga's dream of finishing school and enrolling into the university to study engineering is sadistically frustrated when the Rich Old Man impregnate and abandons her. The only option left to her, in her naivety, is to commit suicide as an act of protest to an unjust world. But her suicide bids are thwarted on each occasion and she eventually give birth to a baby girl.

The concept of feminism in literature urges women to be resilient in their daily struggle for self-actualization. Despite the initial setback, Wariinga does not submit to defeat. Her interest in pursuing education is rekindled when her parents who are at this time released from detention take over the care of the fatherless baby. Wariinga therefore proceeds to enroll for a secretarial course at the university. Equipped with the certificate and her skills in secretarial work, she continues the struggle for a better future. She comes to Nairobi, Kenya's capital city to look for work. This time around, she promises herself never to fall a victim to men's sexual exploitation again. But her nightmares are not yet over as every governmental and private organizations she visits are headed by men. They waste no time in telling her that the qualification for eligibility is not her certificate or work skills but her willingness to provide sexual pleasure to the

perverted men at the helms of the firms. “The Modern Love *Bar and Lodging* has become the main employment bureau for girls” (p.19).

Wariinga’s resolve never to submit to sexual predators again keeps her walking from one office to the other. It is after several fruitless searches that she is able to secure a job with the Champion Construction Company. “Mr. Boss Kihara is the managing director of the firm. He is middle-aged. He has a wife and several children. On top of that, he is a member of the committee that runs the Church of Heaven” (p. 19). Boss Kihara is also “... the one who reads the Bible at the altar in the Church of Heaven, and that from time to time he gives talks at weddings, advising newlyweds about the need for parents and children to live together in love and harmony” (p. 23-24). Wariinga, who is brought up as a Catholic, believes that she is safe working under a custodian of moral and ethical values. As soon as she started work however, she realizes that Boss Kihara’s religious inclination is only a façade behind which lurks a deadly rapist who employs the bible to soften the minds of his victims.

Boss Kihara begins his advances by promising Wariinga a life of luxury if only she would become his mistress. When the subtle maneuvers fail, he throws away every pretense to dignity and pounces on her. In the midst of the wrestle between a desperate predator and an unwilling prey, Wariinga reminds Boss Kihara of his position in the church and refers him to Romans Chapter 13 line 14 of the bible which says; “Make not provisions for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof...” to which Boss Kihara, also quoting the bible, promptly replies;

But in the same book it is also written: ‘Ask, and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For everyone that asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened... (p. 23).

Wariinga escapes from her tormentor only when she threatens to shout for help. The following morning, she is summarily dismissed from work. Meanwhile, John Kimwana, another predator, a university student whose studies is being subsidized by Wariinga with the hope of getting married after his graduation, abandons her. Realizing that she has lost her job and is no more in position of providing the money, he accuses her of being Boss Kihara’s mistress. He is quick to remind her, in apparent reference to wariinga’s childhood experience with the Rich Old Man from Ngorika, that having tasted the pleasures of sex once, she would never stop having it off with her bosses. The following day, Wariinga is ejected from her rented room by her landlord for refusing to pay the increment for the rent.

Education and social awareness are considered in the novel as panacea for the liberation of the oppressed. Having lost her job, fiancé, and accommodation to the demonic influence of patriarchy, Wariinga decides to leave Nairobi city and to go back to her parents in the village of Ilmorog. It is in Robin Mwaura’s bus on her way home that Wariinga meets Wangari; former female Mau Mau fighter, Muturi; a labor union activist, Mwireri Wa Mukiraai; industrialist, and Gatuiria; a university lecturer; all traveling to Ilmorog where a group of international and local businessmen are having a feast in which to showcase their skills in oppression and exploitation. The journey in the bus and her experience at the competition in the cave provide Wariinga the required social awareness necessary for her self-redefinition.

In the bus on their journey to Ilmorog, Wariinga and Wangari tell of their experiences in the city. Wangari, had fought alongside men during the Mau Mau armed struggle for independence and had sacrificed everything to the cause. Like many of her class, she had hoped for equal opportunities with the coming of independence. But at the end only disillusionment reigns as the promises of social equality is redefined to favor only the rich who are mainly men. Like Wariinga, Wangari had gone to Nairobi to look for manual job. She had roamed from office to office looking for work but everywhere the story is the same; the men heading the firms could only give her the job of being their mistress. Wangari is eventually arrested and charged with vagrancy even though she is a Kenyan citizen. She is eventually released after paying a fine and promising to take the police to the den of thieves in Ilmorog.

The forces of patriarchy, as depicted in the novel, are found almost everywhere in the society. After listening to wariinga’s and Wangari’s tales of oppression and injustice, Mwireri Wa Mukiraai handily deploys the biblical hierarchical representation of heaven in order to divorce the minds of the victims of oppression from thinking of any forms of social equality. Such talks about equality, says Mwireri Wa Mukiraai, “... has its roots in communism. It is calculated to sadden our hearts and make us restless. Such words can lead us black people astray, and you know how deeply we believe in God and in Christianity. Kenya is a Christian country and that’s why we are blessed” (p. 78). To further psyche his audience to accept the patriarchal philosophy, he continues;

Human nature has rejected any absurd nonsense about equality. Just look at God’s Heaven. God sits on the throne. On his right side stands his only son. On his left side stands the Holy Spirit. At his feet the angels sit. At the feet of the angels sit the saints. At the feet of the saints sit all the Disciples, and so on, one rank standing below another, until we come to the class of believers here on Earth. Hell is structured in the same way (p. 78).

To demonstrate the marginalization associated with the patriarchal power structure, there is no single female participant even among the foreign delegation in the competition. The women are only brought in to serve as either barmaids or as decorative objects and spectators. The narrator of *Devil on the Cross* says:

Barmaids moved from table to table, taking orders for drinks. They were all dressed in catsuits of black wool. The suits were form-fitting: they clung to the contours of the girls' bodies so closely that a distant onlooker might have thought that the girls were naked. On the girls' bottoms were fixed small white patches shaped like rabbit's tails. On their breasts were pinned two plastic fruits. Each girl also wore a band around her head on which was written in English: I love you. The girls looked like apparitions from another world (p. 92).

The contestants also boast of their sexual exploits and the number of girls involved. For instance, Gitutu Wa Gataanguru informs the gathering that he and his wife were married in the church but he keeps "... two young things..." in reserve. Kihaahu Wa Gatheeca, another contestant, has two wives. He married the first one when he was poor. When he became rich, he acquires the second one because he needs a woman who understands English language to be able to communicate at parties. The second wife "has no job other than decking herself out in expensive clothes and jewelry for cocktail parties" (p. 109). As for his extra marital affairs, he says, "I like other people's wives. One gets such a glorious feeling of victory" (p. 110). Before going for lunch break, the master of ceremonies makes an announcement to the women: "I would like to remind the women here, whether they are wives, mistresses or girlfriends, that after the competition there will be a fashion parade..." (p. 125). Ironically, the feast takes place on a Sunday—a day reserved for church service.

Elma (2010) has a point when she says that Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's purpose in writing *Devil on the Cross* is to urge the oppressed towards a revolution by developing an awareness of the inequalities under which they suffer and to restructure their society. The lunch break provides the opportunity for Wariinga to isolate herself from the crowd and to meditate over what she has seen in the cave and the structure of her society generally. While meditating, she falls asleep and, in a trance/dream state, she encounters a mystical voice. The mystical voice, according to Balogun (1988), could be "... nothing but the voice of her inner mind offering advice and suggesting solutions to the problems raised by her troubled emotions." The voice refers Wariinga to what it describes as the catechism of slavery in the bible:

I say unto you
That ye resist not evil,
But whoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek,
Turn to him the other also,
And if any man will sue thee at the law,
And take away thy coat,
Let him have thy cloak also (p. 191).

Addressing Wariinga specifically, the voice draws her attention to the nexus between her troubled condition and the catechism of slavery:

Take, yourself, for instance. When the Rich Old Man from Ngorika snatched your body, what did you do? You decided that you wouldn't put up a fight. You said to yourself that since he had taken away your body, he might as well take your life too (p. 191).

The voice continues to inspire Wariinga on the imperatives of self-emancipation. When Wariinga replies that being a woman without any man to help her actualize her dreams, there is nothing she could do, the voice reprimands her that men deliberately design the oppressive social structure for their own interests. It would therefore be absurd to look up to the same men for liberation.

The conversations in the bus and her subsequent experience at the cave spurs Wariinga into a critical reevaluation of her position in the society. She therefore decides "... to plunge into the middle of the arena of life's struggles in order to discover her real strength and to realize her true humanity" (p. 216). Gatuiria succinctly captures the change in Wariinga when he jokingly observes; "Since the Devil's feast, it's as if you have been transfigured, body and soul" (p. 225). Wariinga takes the decision to go back to Nairobi and enroll in the polytechnic to study engineering—the course of her childhood dreams. It is after her graduation and she has started work as an engineer that she accepts to marry Gatuiria.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o asserts his revolutionary message at the end of the novel. Wariinga's determination to liberate herself completely from the oppressive socio-religious traps in which Kenyan women find themselves is concretized in

her final and dramatic encounter with the Rich Old Man from Ngorika. When the old man realizes that his son's prospective bride for whom elaborate wedding preparation is made is in fact the same girl he had impregnated and abandoned, he becomes desperate to save his honor. He asks Gaturia and the invited guests to excuse him while he talks with his prospective daughter in law. The first effective defense mechanism that comes to his mind is to apply the usual weapon of oppression; hypocritical use of religion:

The rich old man stood up again and said to Wariinga: 'Let's kneel down and pray together.'

Wariinga shrugged her shoulders. She remained on her feet.

'Please, I beg you, let's pray together so that the Lord can show us the way.'

Wariinga did not move. The rich old man from Ngorika knelt on the carpet in front of Wariinga.

Wariinga looked at him like a judge at an unrepentant prisoner who is pleading for mercy (p. 249).

When the subtle appeal to religious sentiment fails to achieve its desired objective, Gaturia's father adopts a threatening biblical story. He says:

Let me talk to you in parables. A long time ago Satan (or the Devil) was an angel dearly loved by God. He was then called Lucifer. But one day Satan was seized by an evil spirit and he yearned for the seat on the right hand of God. As you know, that seat had been reserved for God's only son. What did God do to Lucifer? Even we, the followers of God on Earth, have ways of fulfilling his wishes. You are not a baby, so I don't need to explain to you what that means ... (p. 252).

The rich old man proceeds to tell Wariinga how Mwireri Wa Mukiraii was killed after the feast in the cave "Because he refused to abide by God's laws on Earth." Since Wariinga is conversant with biblical stories as well as the murder of Mwireri Wa Mukiraii, she clearly understands the thinly veiled threat. She draws out the pistol which Muturi had seized from one of the robbers at the feast and had given Wariinga for safe keeping and discharges some shots into the old man.

4. Summary and Conclusion

The essay adopts the feminist critical approach to discuss how men in the patriarchal society of Kenya weaponize the bible to oppress and limit the social possibilities of women. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, being a male writer with feminist sensitivity, uses the story to draw the attention of the world to the oppression of women in Kenya and to spur action aimed at mitigating the problem. Through the experiences and tribulations of Jacinta Wariinga, the central character of the novel, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o demonstrates how women in Kenya are made to accept their oppressed status through the use of biblical interpretations that promote docility by their male counterparts. Ngugi illustrates in the novel that education and social awareness are the crucial tools for the liberation of the oppressed.

Jacinta Wariinga becomes a victim of oppression at the age of two when her parents are arrested and detained by the British colonial powers for participating in the agitation for independence. Her education is ruthlessly frustrated when the husband of her aunt sells her out to a rich old crook who impregnate and abandons her. When she later studies for secretarial work and goes to Nairobi to look for work, she meets the same exploitative patriarchal forces at work as every firm has a man at the helm who demands sex as precondition for employment. As she has made up her mind against sexual predators, she keeps searching until she eventually finds one with the Champion Construction Company. But Boss Kihara, the chairman of the firm, despite being a church leader attempts to rape her. When he fails in his bid, Boss Kihara dismisses her the following day. The same day, John Kimwana who has been living on her earnings abandons her. She is equally sent packing when she couldn't pay additional money for rent.

On her way back to her village of Ilmorog, Wariinga meets Wangari; a former female freedom fighter, Muturi; a trade union activist, Mwireri Wa Mukiraii; a local industrialist, and Gaturia; a university lecturer. They are all traveling in a bus to Ilmorog where a competition in theft and robbery is taking place. In the bus, Wariinga and Wangari share their experiences in the hands of men in the city.

The journey in the bus and watching the subsequent competition in the cave provide Wariinga the required exposure to the workings of her society in concrete terms. Spurred by a mystical voice she encounters in her dream/trance, Wariinga realizes that the biblical narratives that women are fed to are only designed by men to limit the social possibilities of women and to perpetually enslave them. She decides to go back to Nairobi to study engineering in the university in order to redefine herself and take up her rightful place in the society.

Ngugi's revolutionary statement is delivered at the end of the story when Wariinga and Gaturia come to Gaturia's father for formal introduction. After a long time, she comes face to face with the man who had used and abandoned her. She shoots and kill the old man. The dramatic end of the rich old man could be the crux of Ngugi's message in the novel; when dialogue and protests fail to mitigate the oppression of women, violent means becomes necessary.

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