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# UNIT 20 NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S LIFE, LITERATURE AND IDEOLOGY

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## 20.0 OBJECTIVES

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The objective of this unit is to familiarize you with the details of Ngugi's life, including his education, teaching and writing career. The unit would also focus on the evolution of Ngugi's world view, especially as it got reflected in his writings at various stages, especially in the writing of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*.

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## 20.1 BIRTH AND EARLY EDUCATION

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Born in 1938, in the family of a landless squatter on the land of a well-to-do farmer in the Kamiithu village in Limuru district of Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiong'o went to the mission-run Kamaandura school in Limuru and later to a school of the Independent Schools Movement. Later, he joined the Alliance High School – Kenya's first full-fledged school for Africans – run by an alliance of the Protestant denominations in Kenya. It is here that Ngugi's religious awareness about Christianity – all his writings including *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* have copious references to Christianity – was formed.

Ngugi was fourteen when a state of Emergency was declared in Kenya in 1952, on October 20, 1952, to be precise. His passion for education seems to have weighed heavily with him in his decision to continue with it and as a result, unlike a large number of young persons of his age, he missed out on actual participation in the movement. This fact seems to have given him a kind of guilt complex and is perhaps one of the major reasons for making the freedom struggle, particularly the 'Mau Mau' phase, the theme of most of his books.

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## 20.2 HIGHER EDUCATION

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### Makarere University College, Uganda

After finishing his school education at Alliance High School, Ngugi joined B.A. (Hons.) in English at the Makarere University College, Kampala, Uganda which was the only university college in the whole of East Africa. It is here that his creative talents developed. Before graduating in 1963, Ngugi had written his first full length play – *The Black Hermit* – which was performed on the occasion of the Independence of Uganda in 1962. He had also written his first two novels – *The River Between and Weep Not, Child*. During this period, he also became the student editor of *Pen Point Africa*, and wrote a number of short stories as well.

During the same period he also contributed a regular column – ‘As I see It’ – to the *Daily Nation*, a prominent newspaper published from Nairobi.

It was a conventional course in English Literature that Ngugi pursued in Makerere, and some critics are of the opinion that the study of D.H. Lawrence and Joseph Conrad exercised an early influence on his writings.

### Leeds University, United Kingdom

Leeds was Ngugi's next halt for education. Here he soon became part of Arnold Kettle's group that provided him with a new perspective on various issues – political, social, cultural and academic. In his own words – “Leeds systematized my thinking”. At Leeds, he started working on Caribbean literature for his dissertation for the M.A. degree – a work that he never submitted and that was later to be published as a part of his first book of essays – ‘Homecoming’ – in 1972.

But what is really significant about his staying in Leeds is that it is here that he published his next novel – *A Grain of Wheat* – in 1967 which many critics believe to be his magnum opus.

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## 20.3 TEACHING CAREER

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### Nairobi University

Returning home the same year, Ngugi became a lecturer at the English department of Nairobi University. Soon, he suggested a number of radical changes in the syllabus, recommending, among others, the incorporation of literatures written in African languages as a part of the Programme of English Studies. These were, however, not accepted. Ngugi resigned from his position in 1969, due to the stiff attitude of the university authorities against students who had been forced to go on a strike for raising various demands. Back to Makerere, where he had accepted a year's fellowship, Ngugi wa Thiong'o helped his new institution reorganize its English department as the African Literature Department with special focus on world literatures rather than on English literature alone. This was very much in keeping with his recommendations at the English department in Nairobi University.

### Teaching in the U.S.A. and After

Ngugi went to the U.S.A. for a year to teach African literature at North Western University, Illinois, where he got an opportunity to observe, as he put it in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, “Neo-imperialism at close quarters”. He was back at the English department in Nairobi University in 1971 where he was able to introduce the desired changes and the department was organized as Department of Literature. The period between 1972 and 1977 proved very fruitful in Ngugi's literary career. He published a number of books, beginning with *Homecoming and Other Essays* (1972), *Secret Lives* (1975), a collection of short stories, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976), which he wrote together with his colleague Micere Mugo. *Petals of Blood* (1977), his next novel, was also published during this period.

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## 20.4 DETENTION AND EXILE

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Ngugi got into trouble with government authorities in Kenya over portions of his *Petals of Blood* in which he dealt with, for the first time in his writings, situations in post-independence Kenya. Also the text of a play – *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I will Marry when I want)* about peasants in independent Kenya which he wrote together with Ngugi wa Miiiri in his mother tongue Gikuyu and which was performed at the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre, Limuru in 1977. The authorities did not find it to their liking and eventually banned its performance on November 17, 1977. On 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1977, Ngugi was taken to a police station near his

residence for “routine questioning” but was detained without trial for almost a year – until December 12, 1978. He was released as inexplicably as he had been detained. However, he was not restored to his position as Professor and Head of the Department of Literature, Nairobi University.

During his detention, Ngugi wrote down on pieces of toilet paper – literally – the details of his routine as a detainee as also the strategies through which he was to keep his sanity in the face of humiliations and torture – both physical and mental. The writing was later published as ‘Detained: A Writer’s Prison Diary’ in 1981. During this period, he also wrote the manuscript of his next novel – *Cathiani Mutharaba Ini (Devil on the Cross)* – in Gikuyu. Ngugi had made his first attempt at writing in his mother tongue Gikuyu as a conscious decision when he had collaborated with Ngugi wa Miiri in writing a play which was published *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I will Marry when I want)* in 1980.

After his request to restore him to his position as Professor in Nairobi University was turned down, Ngugi wa Thiong’o went away to England, settling down as a full time writer. It is from here that a number of his books – *Writers in Politics*, *Barrel of a Pen*, *Decolonizing the Mind*, *Mother Sing to Me*, *Moving the Centre* and his latest novel *Matigari* – were published. He also made common cause with all those who were fighting for the restoration of democracy in Kenya. Ngugi wa Thiong’o has since shifted to the USA where he teaches literature. Ngugi went back to Kenya in 2005 but unfortunately he and his wife were assaulted brutally and his wife was also raped.

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## 20.5 NGUGI’S IDEOLOGY AND WORLD VIEW

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Ngugi wa Thiong’o believes that literature and politics are inextricably linked with each other because both are about “living men, actual men and women and children breathing, eating, crying, laughing, creating, dying, flowering men in history of which they are the products and the maker.”

Therefore, he chose as the subject of his writings single events in the history of Kenya that has affected its people the most, namely, Mau Mau. Ngugi believes, together with many other African writers, that the primary aim of literature is not merely to entertain but also to persuade. Ngugi, therefore, does not confine himself to mere chronicling of factual details of historical events, but he also adopts a position on them. In his own words:

What is important... is the attitude and the world view

Embodied in (the Writer’s) work and with which he has persuaded us

To identify vis-à-vis the historical drama his

Community is undergoing.

(*Writers in Politics*, p. 75)

It is because of this historic responsibility of a writer through which Ngugi makes known his own partisanship; while portraying the basic opposition between the forces of imperialism and capitalism on one hand and the forces of national liberation and socialism on the other, between a small class of ‘haves’ backed by transnational monopoly capital and the ‘have nots’ representing the masses of Kenyan people. Ngugi, therefore, has refused to confine his portrayal of the national struggle – as has been the case with many other African writers portraying similar struggles in other respective countries – as a struggle of the black against the white. Once again, unlike his other fellow African counterparts Ngugi is very forthright – particularly in his later novels and plays – in advocating socialism not only as a viable but an extremely desirable political system of governance for solving the problems of newly – liberated African nations reeling under the covert attack of neo-colonialism.

Ngugi is also critical of those writers who seek a solution to all their present, post-colonial ills by suggesting to go back to the past, by making an appeal for adopting the African past completely and uncritically. He suggests – quite candidly – a class approach to those problems and their solutions:

...for as long as there are classes – classes defined by where or how the various people stand in relation to the means of production – a truly human contact in love, joy, laughter, creative fulfillment in labour will never be possible. We can talk meaningfully of class love, class joy, class marriage, class family and class culture.

(*Writers in Politics*, p. 79)

Ngugi is therefore quite wary of those writers who talk of humanism, universalism, justice and peace in abstract terms. In this respect he reserves his worst criticism for a section of the bourgeoisie that may be characterized as comprador bourgeoisie – the class of people that collaborated with the ruling colonial forces during the phase of colonialism, particularly during the crucial phase of the national freedom struggle. According to Ngugi, such a class worked itself into positions of political power during the post-independence phase in order to subserve the interests of neo-colonialism and imperialism via the transnationals. Ngugi has stressed that the colonial administration-appointed home guards and village chiefs were the most prominent representatives of the class of comprador bourgeoisie.

While tracing the origin of the colonial process in capturing the economic resources of Kenya, particularly the illegal misappropriation of its fertile land – white highlands, as these came to be called – Ngugi does not overlook another important fact: 'cultural bomb'. Culture for Ngugi includes the sum total of all the intellectual, moral, ideological forces that give the social relations of production – what we call society – a unique character, a distinctive mark, a certain identity in a particular historical phase. Culture, therefore, includes for Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the education system, the legal system, the religious system, language, literature, forms of dances and songs. Of these the two most significant instruments of cultural imperialism were the church and western system of education, both of which subserved the interests of colonialism. It is because of this that these two underlie the themes of almost all his creative writing including *A Grain of Wheat* wherein he exposed the collaborative role of Christianity most forcefully through the character of Kihika, a revolutionary in the struggle for national freedom.

The other major component of the British colonial cultural bomb in Kenya has been education – the western system of education. Once again, the western system of education which, like Christianity, had been first introduced by the missionaries as a part of the church activities to lure and beguile the gullible, had the same twin objectives of disrupting the traditional way of life in Kenya and to create a class of obedient Kenyans who, mouthing clichés and phrases from English language, expressed their allegiance openly to the power of colonialism. No wonder that this class received a big patronage from the colonial administration through nominations as village chiefs and employment in the home guards system, both of which played the negative rôle of collaborating with saboteurs during the height of Emergency between 1952 and 1957. Karanja in *A Grain of Wheat* is Ngugi's most powerful portrayal of such collaborators.

In fact, this class of comprador bourgeoisie became the subject of Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross* and *Matigari* wherein he has shown this class to be essentially a parasitic class with a wish for permanent identification with the cultures of imperialist bourgeoisie. The members of this parasitic class are the ones

who promote prostitution, alcoholism and gambling by setting up massage parlours, beer-bars and casinos in the name of encouraging tourism and effecting 'development' of Kenya, particularly the rural areas.

Ngugi, however, is not satisfied by mere portrayal of the socio-political situation in Kenya during and after the national struggle for independence. He suggests this in a book titled 'Decolonizing the Mind'. By this he means a kind of 'dialectal negation of the colonial process', dismantling, as it were, the various psychological structures that had been in the minds of men as a result of sustained colonial propaganda, covert as well as overt, during the period of colonization. In his book 'Writers in Politics', he suggests to the writers and intellectuals the task of 'going back to the roots' with the aim of restoring the African personality to its true creative potentials in history, so as to enhance the quality of life. He exhorts teachers and educational institutions to emphasize African languages and literatures while pleading with African writers to write in their own languages rather than in European languages.

Ngugi then goes on to define the function of literature in society:

Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is  
Given impetus, shape, direction and even area of  
Concern by social, political and economic forces in a  
society. The relationship between creative literature  
and these other forces cannot be ignored, especially  
in Africa, where modern literature has grown against  
the gory background of European imperialism and its  
changing manifestation: slavery, colonialism and neo-  
colonialism.

(*Home Coming*, p.xv)

Based on this, Ngugi differentiates the social role of a contemporary artist in Africa from that of one in Europe:

There was never, in any African society, the cult of the artist with its bohemian priests along with the banks of Seine and Thames. Today, the artist in Europe sees himself as an outsider, living in a kind of individual culture and obeying only the laws of his imagination.

(*Home Coming*, p. 6)

It is for similar reasons that Ngugi advocated the use of African languages as the vehicle for the writings by Africans. For many years, he observed, members of the petty bourgeois class comprising students, teachers, journalists and bureaucrats have continued to compose what Ngugi calls 'Afro-European literature' in the languages of Europe, for a readership that also came from the same class. It meant that the moment of truth for Ngugi had arrived. He had to link up his struggle through creative literature with the struggle of the Kenyan masses – now pitted against the comprador bourgeoisie that had usurped power in Kenya and was clinging to it. Thus in a statement prefixed to *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi declared that –

This book, *Decolonizing the Mind*, is my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili as the way. (Preface, p. xiv)

It is, therefore, not at all surprising that Ngugi assigned a very radical role to a writer in a society, particularly in a society based on sharp class distinctions:

...literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he can choose is one or the other side in the battle field: the side of the people, or the side of those social forces and classes that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics...

*(Writers in Politics. Preface)*

It is on this very powerful note about the ideological obligations of a writer that we would like to end this discussion about Ngugi's world view.

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## **20.6 LET US SUM UP**

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In this unit we have discussed –

- the details of Ngugi Wa Thiongo'o's life, education and career.
- the evolution of Ngugi's Ideology and world view.

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## **20.7 EXERCISE**

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1. Give in brief some of the important events in Ngugi's life and career.
2. Comment on Ngugi's ideology and world view with special reference to the relationship between politics and literature.