
UNIT 22 *THE TRIAL OF DEDAN* *KIMATHI – AN EVALUATION*

Structure

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22.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to familiarize you with major critical evaluations of the Play. For this, various aspects of the play, namely, the Preface, the theatrical devices, characters, etc. have been presented as separate sections. But this is only a strategy for focusing on various aspects and the play must be viewed as a whole.

Given below are critical comments on various aspects of the play. While the comments are based on observations made by various Ngugi scholars, illustrations have been drawn from the text to support the arguments contained therein. More illustrations may, however, be found through an intensive study of the play.

22.1 THE OBJECTIVE OF THE PLAY

Commenting on the objective of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo in writing this play, G.D. Killam (*An Introduction to the Writings of Ngugi*, London: Heinemann, 1980) comments that it is " 'a song of praise' for the feats of leadership and resistance of the most brilliant of the generals of the independence struggle who, along with his brothers-in-arms, Koitalel and Me Kitilili, for example, are neglected, often repudiated heroes, their deeds for the most part not known by the present generation of young Kenyans." (p.86) The play, therefore, according to Killam, is "an attempt to restore the character of Kimathi to his legitimate place in the history of Kenya." (p.86)

Again, according to Killam, "the play establishes the connection with the masses in the present struggle by reasserting Kimathi's values. More than this the play is a self-conscious assertion of the part that literature should play in the revolution." Killam goes to reproduce the following quote from the Preface of the play –

"We agreed that the most important thing was for us to reconstruct imaginatively our history, envisioning the world of the Mau Mau and Kimathi in terms of the peasants' and workers' struggle before and after constitutional independence. The play is not a reproduction of the farcical 'trial' at Nyeri. It is rather an imaginative recreation and interpretation of the collective will of the Kenyan peasants and workers in their refusal to break under sixty years of colonial torture and ruthless oppression by the British ruling classes and their continued determination to resist exploitation, oppression and new forms of enslavement." (Italics author's, p.viii)

In fact, Ngugi and Micere Mugo elaborate on the *raison d'être* of their project:

“There was no single historical work written by a Kenyan telling of the grandeur of the heroic resistance of Kenyan people fighting foreign forces of exploitation and domination, a resistance movement whose history goes back to the 15th and 16th centuries when Kenyans and other East African people first took up arms against European colonial power – the Portuguese forces of conquest, murder and plunder. Our historians, our political scientists, and even some of our literary figures were too busy spewing out, elaborating and trying to document the same colonial myths which had it that Kenyan people traditionally wandered aimlessly from place to place engaging in purposeless warfare; that the people readily accommodated themselves to the British forces of occupation! For whose benefit were these intellectuals writing? Unashamedly, some were outright defenders of Imperialism and lauded the pronouncements of colonist governors, basking in the sunshine of their *pax-Anglo-Africana Commonwealth*.” (Preface)

22.2 THEATRICAL TECHNIQUES AND DEVICES EMPLOYED IN THE PLAY

The authors employ a number of techniques and devices which are different from those used in the theatre conventionally. The play is divided into an **Opening**, **Three Movements** and fourteen **scenes** which are different from the usual divisions of plays into Acts and Scenes which are numbered and referred to as Act I Scene 2 etc. G.D. Killam refers to them as ‘characteristics of the non-naturalistic theatre’.

“Note that the peasants singing should also enact the flashback of Black people’s History that follows the song.” (p.4)

Again, in the Second Movement, Court scene, the stage directions state, among others, *“As the Africans enter, it should be a study in contrast with their torn clothes and tattered shoes... In the court, blacks and whites sit on separate sides. It is as if a huge gulf lies between them.”* (p.23)

In the Third Movement, the scene involving the Woman, the Boy and Girl, has the following as stage directions:

“They move a little way off. Both Girl and Boy sit at the feet of the woman. It should be symbolic: the woman now represents all the working mothers talking to their children.” (p.59)

These stage notes show very clearly that the authors want the characters to communicate their ‘message’ most appropriately.

The play also makes use of related audio-visual devices like mime, dancing, drumming, singing, music, sudden blackouts and changes in light effects.

In the First Movement, for instance, while ‘*Loud singing by a crowd of peasants*’ is going on, in the background ‘*the Black people’s History*’ is being enacted on the stage:

“Phase I: An exchange between a rich-looking black chief and a white hungry-looking slave trader. Several strong black men and a few women are given away for a long, posh piece of cloth and a heap of trinkets.

Bereaved relations and children weep, throwing themselves onto the ground, while other raise closed fists in a threatening manner.

Phase II: A chain of exhausted slaves, roped onto one another, drag themselves through the auditorium, carrying heavy burdens, ending up on the stage. They row a boat across the stage, under heavy whipping.

Phase III: A labour force of black, toiling on a plantation under the supervision of a cruel, ruthless fellow black overseer. A white master comes around and inspects the work.

Phase IV: An angry procession of defiant blacks, chanting anti-imperialist slogans through songs and thunderous shouts:

LEADER: Away with oppression!

Unchain the people!

CROWD: Away with oppression!

Unchain the people!

...

...

FEW VOICES: Uhuruuuuuuu-uu!" (pp.4-5)

During the Second Trial of Kimathi, When Kimathi recalls the glorious pre-colonial past of various Kenyan ethnic groups, the Mime in the background shows "the Groups of dancers, performing a sequence of dances by different peoples of Kenya take up the arena in turns. Each group dances its part and then walks right across the stage and stands aside." (p.37)

The purpose behind the mime is to show not only a composite cultural identity of Kenyans but, more importantly, co-existence and cultural cooperation among members of various ethnic groups in Kenya.

Again, when during the same trial, the Banker refers to the financing of the building of the railways in Kenya, a Mime shows "*Coolies and Swahilis building the Railway. They are driven away by Nandi warriors led by Koitalel.*" (p.39)

The purpose of showing this Mime is to recall that the resistance to colonial forces is not something new but it goes back to the times when the railways was being built and that the people of Kenya had understood the colonial designs of economic exploitation from the very beginning.

In fact, these devices together with their worldview – expressed through various characters – is what the authors 'believe' 'good theatre' is – "that which is on the side of the people, that which, without masking mistakes and weaknesses gives people courage and urges them to higher resolves in their struggle for total liberation." (Preface)

22.3 'TIME' IN THE PLAY

Ngugi and Mugo have used some of the theatrical devices mentioned above to communicate a continuum in the flow of time – the past and the present merging in order to point to the future. In fact, the authors, keeping in with the objectives they set for themselves – reinterpreting the history of the people's struggle for independence, designated by the colonizers as Mau Mau – have offered a time-sequence of events in such a manner that not only does the present appear to be linked to the past events but also the present throws a new light on the past, offering a fresh interpretation of the past events in the light of present happenings. For instance, in the First Movement, when the 'Loud singing by a crowd of peasants' also shows – simultaneously – the enactment of the history of the Black people in four Phases, the authors' stage directions are –

"The phases recapitulated flow into one another, without break or interruption."
(p.4)

During the Fourth Trial, while “In semi-darkness we watch the miming of black history (earlier enacted) going on, against the torturing behind the scene.” (p.56), the authors’ stage directions are –

“There should be as much harmony as possible between the action on the visible stage and the goings on in the torture chamber.” (p.56)

Finally, an excellent example of this merger of time past and time present occurs in the very last scene of the play when after the judge has pronounced the death sentence on Dedan Kimathi and the Boy and Girl stand up to announce “Not dead!”, the stage directions are –

“...soon, the stage gives way to a mighty crowd of workers and peasants at the centre of which are Boy and Girl, singing a thunderous freedom song.”

22.4 CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

The characters in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* are more of type than those endowed with traits that signify individuality. The **Preliminary Notes** make it very clear:

“There is impersonation, merging of characters and reflection of history emphasizing the complexity, duality and interrelationships of people and events. A character like Shaw Henderson, for instance, can be played as a judge-Prosecutor and member of the Special Branch. He is also the enemy-friend of the Africans.” (p.2)

Note the use of compound word-formations like ‘Judge-Prosecutor’ and “enemy-friend”, highlighting the apparent contradictory duality contained in them which in turn is a significant pointer to the audience/readers to distinguish between the mask and the reality of colonial administration.

In no other characters is the type mode more evident than in those of the Boy, the Girl and the Woman. In fact, all three of them have not been given any names which as we know is the first sociological device to differentiate between individuals. Named simply as ‘Boy’, ‘Girl’ or ‘Woman’, they represent all persons in Kenya belonging to their respective categories. This is neither an oversight nor a coincidence but is quite deliberate. It is quite apparent from some of the stage directions given by the authors to those directing it for performance.

In the beginning of the Third Movement, for instance, when the Boy and Girl and the Women move ‘a little way off’ on the stage to confer, the stage directions are

“Both Girl and Boy sit at the feet of the woman. It should be symbolic: the woman now represents all the working mothers talking to their children.” (p.59)

The authors had all this – the woman representing all the working mothers – worked out from the very conception of the character. It is apparent from the description they bestow upon her when she is first introduced:

“She is between thirty and forty years of age, with a mature but youthful face, strongly built. Goodlooking. She wears a peasant woman’s clothes and is barefoot. Though apparently a simple peasant, the woman is obviously world-wise, and perceptive of behaviour and society. Throughout, her actions are under control: her body and mind are fully alert.”

Fearless determination and a spirit of daring is her character. She is versatile and full of energy in her responses to different roles and situations. A mother, a fighter, all in one. She wears a kanga cloth wrapped around her upper body – over her simple frock – and has a small kondo, a sisal basket, hanging over her neck and across the shoulder over her shawl on the side nearest the audience. She walks not exactly stealthily, but with great care – as if she treads on treacherous ground.” (p.8)

The characteristics bestowed on her – She is versatile and full of energy in her responses to different roles and situations – are borne out amply when Johnnie, the soldier notices her kondo – the sisal basket – and is about to discover – among others – a parcel wrapped in paper. The stage directions tell us – ‘the woman is talking, cunningly trying to distract Johnnie’.

Again, after Johnnie has discovered the bread wrapped in paper and is about to break it into two – we come to know later that a gun had been hidden in it – the woman changes her stance suddenly, changing it into one of ‘supplication and feminine submissiveness’. The stage directions tell us – ‘*The woman dramatically kneels on the ground, almost reaching out for his legs... She talks all the time.*’:

“WOMAN: [*simultaneously with the above action*]: Don’t eat it. Bwana. Master. Afande a hundred times. It’s all I have to quieten the enemy who is finishing us.

JOHNNIE: Enemy?

WOMAN: Hunger. If you take it, I’ll die. I spent so many hours kneading the heavy millet paste. Look. You have almost finished all my bananas. You deserve to die. Have mercy on a poor woman.

JOHNNIE: [*Obviously relieved and pleased with her supplication and feminine submissiveness. He does not realize that she is over-reacting*]

You don’t look too poor to me. Stand up. All you need is a brush, water, soap, high heels. A modern lady.” (p.11)

When, in the Third Movement, the Girl and Boy catch up with her disguised as fruitseller and the Boy accuses her of tricking him into carrying a gun, she explains –

“In the struggle, you learn to adapt to changed circumstances. Yesterday was a day of setbacks. First the screening and the Johnnies! I walked into the mouth of a gun! Then, after we parted, I found out that the fruitseller was among the ones picked in yesterday’s morning raid. That was a crucial contact gone. This upset all the plans. What was I to do? I dressed as a fruitseller so that you would easily recognize me. The court adjourned sooner than I had thought: I then followed the crowd. I was

going to speak to the Warder, another contact. I found that he too had been transferred to another place. So only you remained. I kept on looking for you. Between here and Majengo, there is not a place I have not visited. Great risk: but the task once started must be completed.” (p.60)

Earlier, on not finding the fruitseller to whom he had been instructed by the Woman to hand over the bread, the Boy – representing the stereotypical thinking about women and their lack of courage – soliloquizes:

“She told me that he would be around here. But I have not seen an orange seller or any fruitseller. What a woman! Why would she not take the bread herself? Afraid. That’s it. Afraid. Why should she expect me to risk my life taking bread, just a loaf of bread to Kimathi? In any case, they say that Kimathi does not eat

bread. And suppose it's not Kimathi, and it is his double, his shadow whom they have arrested? [makes as if to move]: But where shall I find her? Where can I get her? I know. She did not want me to take the loaf to anybody. She wanted to test me. To see if I would eat the bread. [breaks a piece]: But she said she would be watching me all the time." (pp.30-31)

Still earlier, when the boy after telling his life story had observed that he did not understand the reason behind the exploitation of 'millions of labouring men and women of Kenya', the Woman – true to her role as the mother of all children – had explained to him:

"The day you understand why your father died: the day you ask yourself whether it was right for him to die so; the day you ask yourself: "What can I do so that another shall not be made to die under such grisly circumstance?" that day, my son, you'll become a man." (p.19)

It is because of this understanding of and dedication to the cause of the freedom struggle that Kimathi pays a handsome tribute to her:

"Do you see this woman?
How many tasks has she performed
Without complaint
Between here and the villages?
How many people has she
snatched from jails, from colonial
Jaws of death!
How many brave warriors has she
recruited at great risks!
Walking for miles
Hardly getting sleep
for days." (pp.72-73)

In fact, Dedan Kimathi recognizes – through the Woman – the contribution made by women in Kenyan freedom struggle. He goes on to declare –

"When this struggle is over
we shall erect at all the city corners
Monuments
To our women
Their courage and dedication
To our struggle..." (p.73)

Like in the case of the Woman, so in that of the Boy and Girl also, the authors have created characters that would represent the Kenyan youth in general rather than individual persons. Once again, it is for this reason that they too have been identified simply as Boy and Girl rather than with individual names.

When the Woman first finds the Boy chasing the girl, catching her and handling her roughly and shouting to kill her, she berates him for behaving like an animal. The Boy protests and explains his reasons for being harsh with the girl. Then, he goes on to narrate to her how his mother had died during childbirth and his "father was driven away from Mbari land in Nyeri by one of his relatives who worked as a court interpreter. Now that man is a big government chief and a big landowner... The man was clever at court cases and bribed the magistrates." (p.18) The boy then tells her how his father and he went to Nairobi:

“He found a job with a firm of timber merchants. A tiny room: a tiny salary. Then I did not understand and I would steal from him, even the little that he earned for both of us. His ambition was to earn enough to come back to Nyeri and buy a piece of land. But he never made it. The machine cut off his right hand...and... he died of bleeding. No medical care from his employers. I was thrown out of the room he had rented.” (pp.18-19) Since then, he tells her, he and the Girl and other boys have been roaming the streets at Pumwani, Shauri Moyo, Bahati, Makadara:

“we scrounged into every dustbin from Kariobangi to Grogan Road. But mostly we’d hang around big hotels: New Stanley, Norfolk, Grosvenor. There were a lot of settlers and tourists and we would carry their bags. Sometimes we would act crippled or blind and deaf. They would give us money – some of them as much as ten shillings! The police would often come chasing us away, but we managed. Somehow.” (p.16)

The Woman’s reaction only confirms that the Boy represents not only himself but most Kenyan youth:

“It is the same old story. Everywhere. Mombasa. Nakuru. Kisumu. Eldoret. The same old story. Our people...tearing one another...and all because of the crumbs thrown at them by the exploiting foreigners. Our own food eaten and leftovers thrown to us – in our own land, where we should have the whole share. We buy wood from our own forests; sweat on our own soil for the profit of our oppressors. Kimathi’s teaching is: unite, drive out the enemy and control your own riches, enjoy the fruit of your sweat.” (p.18)

The Boy is confused and does not understand when the Woman tells him that she too used to be like him – ‘Fighting...Drinking...Fighting...Drinking...’ until the day she heard ‘The call of our people. The humiliated, the injured, the insulted, the exploited, the submerged millions of labouring men and women of Kenya.’ The Woman then goes on to educate him:

“...the day you ask yourself: What can I do so that another shall not be made to die under such grisly circumstances? That day, my son, you’ll become a man.”

The Boy still does not understand it all and after the woman has given him money to go eat something since he had been hungry for a full day, he offers to work for her:

“...if I can do something, anything, you know... like cleaning up your house, your compound, weeding your shamba, even washing you clothes..” (p.20) The Woman continues explaining things to him, commenting –

“You want to change masters? A black master for a white master! Have you no other horizon? Except to be a slave! If I didn’t have better things to do, why, I would properly thrash you.” (20)

It is from this point onwards that the transformation of the Boy begins and when the woman assigns to him the task of carrying a loaf of bread to a fruitseller he readily accepts. However, doubts continue to haunt him from time to time – when, for instance, the Boy and Girl discover – accidentally – that the bread had a gun hidden in it and again when they are not able to find the fruitseller. But then each time, the words of the woman – ‘the day you’ll understand... that day, my son, you’ll become a man’ – come back to her in the form of a voice he hears and his resolve returns:

“No, no, not now, Mama.

But how can I turn

Against her call

And

Live?” (p.4)

The culmination in the Boy's evolution is reached when after Dedan Kimathi has been sentenced to death by Judge in the last scene of the play, the Boy and Girl suddenly enter the court, break the bread, pull out the gun and shout in unison – 'Not dead'.

Suddenly it is all dark on the stage during which 'A loud shot is heard' and when the light returns, 'the stage gives way to a mighty crowd of workers and peasants at the centre of which are Boy and Girl, singing a thunderous freedom song.' (p.84)

The story of the Girl is never told in such details as that of the Boy but from the way she is found initially to be 'scrounging' dustbins and roaming the hotels and tourist places and from the manner in which the Boy refers to her as 'a thief' and 'a slut' only shows the kind of rough life she too has had in the city. After the Woman has restored peace between them and after she has explained the real reasons behind their life and after she has assigned to them the task of carrying a loaf of bread to a certain fruit seller, the girl shows signs of more maturity and better understanding of things. As stated above, while the Boy has, at times, doubts about the intention of the Woman, the Girl is more rigid in her resolve. It is she who acts as his inspiration in the absence of the Woman. The end of the play shows them together – this time not 'scrounging' the dustbins but acting in unison in a mission to rescue Dedan Kimathi.

Not only the characters of the Woman, the Boy and Girl but also the characters of soldiers, the Priest, the Banker, the Indian and the Politician are all drawn in the type mode, representing their class and the authors make their intentions clear by making them speak on behalf of their community or class. Even Shaw Henderson has been assigned multiple identities to show how, under colonialism, various sections of the colonizing community acted in collusion. Similarly, the character of Dedan Kimathi himself has been drawn more in terms of general characteristics of leaders of freedom fighters rather than specific individuals. This is also evident from the observations that the authors make in the Preface to the play:

We agreed that the most important thing was for us to reconstruct imaginatively our history, envisioning the world of Mau Mau and Kimathi in terms of the peasants' and

workers' struggle before and after constitutional independence. The play is *not* a reproduction of the farcical 'trial' at Nyeri. It is rather an imaginative recreation and interpretation of the collective will of the Kenyan peasants and workers in their refusal to break under sixty years of colonial torture and ruthless oppression by the British ruling classes and their continued determination to resist exploitation, oppression and new forms of enslavement." (Preface)

But having said that, the authors let us know the efforts they put in to discover the 'real' Dedan Kimathi as he existed in the minds and memories of the people among whom he lived and grew up and those with whose help he organized the struggle rather than in the official records, documents and history books written by armchair academics:

"The writing of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* has been both challenging and exciting. It has put us through a lot of education in connection with the continuing struggle against economic and other forms of oppression. We also discovered that Kimathi was still a hero of the Kenyan masses. One day, for instance, we visited Kimathi's birthplace (thanks to Mr. Mundia who organized the trip) with the aim of eliciting a first hand assessment of Kimathi from the people who had known him as a child, a villager and guerrilla hero. It was a Sunday. The drive to Karunaini took us through beautiful valleys, ridges, hills and forests that helped the imagination recapture the countryside where the Mau Mau War was hottest and had often been fought out in pitched battles. Standing powerful and dominant to the north was Kirinyaga,

the mountain at the foot of which the undulating Nyeri plains spread, rising to the Nyandarua mountains. Karunaini was right next to Nyandarua Forest and, standing very near the school where Kimathi once taught, we could see the spot where he was finally shot down. The huge trench that the people were once forced to dig by the British forces so as to cut off the villages from the Forest was still visible.” (Preface)

The authors then go on to share with the readers the responses of some of Kimathi’s contemporaries:

“Among the group that stopped by the roadside to talk to us was a woman who had once been Kimathi’s pupil at Karunaini Independent School, and some four or five older men, who had known Kimathi since childhood. Had we too come all the way to see where Kimathi was born? From them, we learned a few factual stories as well as one or two conflicting legends about this great fighter. For instance, it is generally assumed that Kimathi fought in the Second ‘World’ War and people have tended to assume that that was where he learnt his military skills as well as his skills in making guns. Kimathi *never* fought in that war. He evolved his brilliant guerrilla tactics and his enormous organizing capacity from the needs of the struggle.” (Preface)

Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Micere Mugo wanted to counter the colonial construction of Dedan Kimathi as a gun-totting terrorist who was always thirsty for the blood of the innocent – be they Africans or Europeans. They recall for us, in the Preface, how people remembered the multifaceted personality of Dedan Kimathi:

“Karunaini people were proud of their son; they talked of him as a dedicated teacher, the committed organizer of a theatre group he named Gichamu, as a man with tremendous sense of humour who could keep a whole house roaring with laughter. They talked of his warm personality and his love of people. He was clearly their beloved son, their respected leader...” (Preface)

The authors also show how Kimathi had become a legend among the people of Kenya:

“...and they talked of him as still being alive. ‘Kimathi will never die’, the woman said. ‘But of course if your people have killed him, go and show us his grave!’ She said this in a strange tone of voice, between defiance and bitterness, and for a moment we all kept quiet.” (Preface)

At this point, it is relevant to recall how the Boy, in the play, recalls Kimathi when the Woman mentions him for the first time –

“Boy: [*becoming really excited*]: They say...they say he used to talk with God.

...

Boy: They say...they say that he could crawl on his belly for ten miles or more...

...

Boy: They say...they say that he could change himself into a bird, an aeroplane, wind, anything?

...

Boy: They say...they say that the tree under which he used to pray fell to the ground?

...

Boy: May be they only captured his shadow, his outer form...don’t you think?...and let his spirit abroad, in arms.” (pp.20-21)

However, the authors are not out to eulogize Kimathi. They do not hesitate to point out his weaknesses, too. For instance, in the Third Movement, the Woman while speaking to the Girl and Boy makes the following remarks about Kimathi:

“...He so hated the sight of Africans killing one another that he sometimes became a little soft with our enemies. [*softly*]: He, Great commander that he was, Great organizer that he was, Great fearless fighter that he was, he was human! [*almost savagely, bitterly*]: Too human at times!” (p.62)

As spokesperson for the worldview of the authors, Dedan Kimathi, while fighting the colonial oppression, has also the choicest invectives for their guile and guise of being friends of Kenyans. When, during the Second Movement, Shaw Henderson visits Kimathi in the prison for the First Trial, he remarks – ‘All your people know me I’m a friend’. (p.32) Kimathi’s response is forthright – ‘Friend and killer of Africans, ugh!’ In fact, when Shaw Henderson asks Kimathi to ‘plead guilty’ in the court the next day, Kimathi mocks him by telling him – ‘I must say you looked rather splendid in your prosecuting judge’s robes. Even handed justice.’ (p.33) When even after all this, Henderson goes on to tempt him with an offer of decorations for him if he confessed and cooperated, Kimathi’s reply is stinging:

“Luring voices of poisonous serpents. Do you take me for a fool?” (p.34)

However, acting as the persona carrying the burden of speaking for the authors, Kimathi comes down most heavily on the class of collaborators – those Kenyans who joined hands with the colonizers in order to hoodwink and put down innocent Kenyans. Thus, his harshest criticism is reserved for Gati, Gatotia, Hungu, Gaceru, Mwendanda and his own brother Wambararia:

“...
To sabotage our cause
It is treason to the people
It is like having homeguards In our midst!
These traitors must die!” (p.71)

Earlier, Kimathi had similarly chastised the Banker and the Indian – comparing them with the betrayer of Jesus Christ – when they visited him in the prison with tempting offers only if cooperated and let peace return to Kenya:

“The religion of enslavement! Like colonialism which makes the colonized sweat and bleed while master comes to harvest.
...
Money...for a sell-out of our people...NEVER.
...
Judas!” (p.40)

Finally, before he is sentenced to death by the judge in the last scene of the play, Kimathi pronounces his own judgement:

“In the court of Imperialism!
There has never and will never be
Justice for the people
Under imperialism
Justice is created
through a revolutionary struggle
Against all the forces of imperialism
Our struggle must therefore continue.” (p.82)

Recalling his struggle, he observes:

“In the forest. I was sometimes plagued
by doubts.

If I died today
Would our people continue
the struggle?

I would look at the braves
killed

I would say:
If I died to-day
Will this blood ever be
betrayed?

That was my Trial.
But now I know that
for every traitor
there are a thousand patriots. (p.82)

His final message to them is –

“So, go!
Organize in your homes
Organize in the mountains
Know that your only
Kindred blood is he
who is in the struggle
Denounce those who weaken
Our struggle
by creating ethnic divisions
Uproot from you those
Who are selling out to imperialism
Kenyan masses shall be free! (pp.83-84)

Thus we know that the main objective of the authors in “not a reproduction of the farcical ‘trial’ at Nyeri. It is rather an imaginative recreation and interpretation of the collective will of the peasants and workers in their refusal to break under sixty years of colonial torture and ruthless oppression by the British ruling classes and their continued determination to resist exploitation, oppression and new forms of enslavement.” (Preface)

There is, however, a second objective too:

“In this, we believe that Kenyan Literature – indeed all African Literature, and its writers is on trial. We cannot stand on the fence. We are either on the side of the people or on the side of imperialism. African Literature and African Writers are either fighting with the people or aiding imperialism and the class enemies of the people. We believe that good theatre is that which is on the side of the people, that which, without masking mistakes and weaknesses gives people courage and urges them to higher resolves in their struggle for total liberation.” (Preface)

Finally, a third and an equally significant objective in writing the play that the authors tell us in the closing words of the Preface is:

“So the challenge was to truly depict the masses (symbolized by Kimathi) in the only historically correct perspective, heroically and as the true makers of history.”

Thus, to end our evaluation, the play is not only what the authors call, ‘good theatre’ but ‘good history’.

22.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have discussed in detail :

- the objective of the Play.
- Theatrical Techniques and Devices employed in the play by the authors.
- the significance of time in the play.
- the importance of characters in the play.

22.6 EXERCISE

1. Comment on characterization in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*.
2. How does the Mau Mau struggle (a part of Kenya’s recent history) get reflected in the play?
3. Comment on the concept of time in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*.
4. Write a character sketch of Dedan Kimathi.

22.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

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