

Ngugi's *In the House of the Interpreter*: Deconstructing Eurocentric Norms of Writing Memoir by Exposing the Hegemonic Colonial Strategy

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Abstract:

*Postcolonial writings constructed its identity by deconstructing the Eurocentric norms of literary creation. Memoir as a literary form is an extension of auto/biography. Auto/biographies were written about the lives of well known men to whom the commons know as heroes. These heroes belong to such societies which are far from the pains of struggle. Therefore the heroes felt an urge to work for either needy or to develop spiritually to guide others and leave behind their contribution for society after their death so that people will remember them at least for a certain period of time. Subverting this eurocentric norm, African memoir writing preserves the history of struggle of the society of which the writer is a part, for the future generation. Ngugi's *In the House of the Interpreter* exposes the true face of European hegemonic and the political rise of not an individual but the whole community for freedom.*

Key words: Eurocentric norms, deconstruction, postcolonial, subvert, hegemony etc.

I. Introduction

Memoir is an offshoot of auto/biography. The boundaries of auto/biography are confined as a literary genre in eighteenth century by John Dryden who defined it as quoted by M.H. Abrams, "the history of particular men's lives". (Abrams 27) With this definition if we look back to trace the origin of the genre, we find that since Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* the subject of auto/biographical writing is 'particular man', it may be a royal blood, a saint or a man of distinction. Secondly, "self revelation" (ibid) is another inherent feature of auto/biography. Later, certain experiments came into being, for instance Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1805) an auto/biographical poem and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1915) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1965) are fictionalized auto/biographies. Even though, these experiments possess autobiographical element, strictly speaking, these experiments are not auto/biographies as a genre. The Eurocentric norms of auto/biography as a genre with "particular man" as its subject and "self revelation" as its content was deconstructed by the *Third World African*

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writers. NgugiwaThiong'o is one of them. He is a novelist, playwright, thinker, social activist and critic from Kenya. The memoir *In the House of the Interpreter(IHI)* is neither deals with the life of a royal blood nor it is about self revelation only. The emphasis in this memoir is the lived experiences and the reaction of Kenyans in general and Ngugi and his family in particular to the British rule. Ngugi,*In the House of the Interpreter(IHI)*narrated his educational development at Alliance High School.

In the House of the Interpreter, begins with announcement of results of the lastclass of primary school of Ngugi and his friend. The deputy headmaster, Stephen Thiro, disclosed the breaking news that Ngugi has been accepted at the prestigious AllianceHigh School as a student. Only the best studentscan get chance to learn in the school. But Ngugi's mother was unable to bear the tuition fees and other expenditure. The government appointed headman,Njairu helped Ngugi's mother to collect money from the villagers and close relatives. Ngugi's widowed half sister helped him to buy a pair of shoes with stockings. Ngugi visited all the relatives including his mothers' houses to seek their blessings. Ngugi still had in mind "the ugly image" (*DTW 248*) of his father when he asked Ngugi and his brother to get out of his house after quarrelling with his mother. He met his father not for gift or money; he wanted to give a gift to himself. Ngugi writes, "I do not want to start a new life with resentment in my heart. My visit is my way of telling him that even though he has not asked for forgiveness, I still forgive him. Like my mother, I believe that anger and hatred corrode heart."(*DTW 249*) Thus the memoir is not the narration of spiritual development of a person but it stresses the contribution of the community which is crucial and obligatory in the development of a man, as human being is a socialanimal.

Inside a Sanctuary

As Ngugi enters the campus of Alliance High School, he hears the voice of his mother inspiring him to do the best. With the "declaration of Emergency in 1952",(*IHI 8*)Ngugi was under "constant fear of falling victim to the gun-toting British forces that were everywhere, hunting down anti-colonial Mau Mau guerrillas everywhere" (*ibid*)in colonial Kenya but education at Alliance acted like sanctuary for Ngugi. The aim behind educational development in colonial states was very practical. As Ngugi observed, "these schools inspired two almost contradictory educational visions: the notion of self-reliance and the aim of producing civic minded blacks who would work within the parameters of the existing racial state." (*IHI 10*)Ngugi was lucky to have Carey Francis,"a British Mathematician and Anglican missionary to Kenya, where he became arguably the most influential educationist in Kenya's modern history", (Carey Francis. Wikipedia.)as the principal of the school. Ngugi quotes one of the letters written by Carey Francis to Reverend H. M. Grace, he states, "Racial feelings in Kenya is bad... among Africans, there is inborn suspicion of the white man.

" (*IHI 11*) He had a wish to mould the students by keeping in mind the requirement of colonial subject, as a result, as Ngugi comments, "contrary to the conscious intentions of its founders, Alliance had ... birthed a radical anticolonial nationalist fever... Alliance actually subverted the colonial system ... the presence of Africans on the staff as equals with the white teachers undermined, in our eyes at least, colonial apartheid and the depiction of the African as inferior." (*IHI 13*) But the fact is that spread of Christianity was the primary aim of the missionary schools in the British colonies. Alliance High School cannot be an exception to it. The students in the school were

brought up under Christian culture. The Bible and Writers like Shakespeare and John Bunyan played vital role. At Alliance, Macebth's heart touching words, "Had I but died an hour before this chance, I had lived a blessed time; for, from this instant, there's nothing serious in morality," (*IHI 13*) had been uttered loudly by one of the students to wake up others. The Biblical proverb, "Cleanliness is next only to Godliness" (*IHI 14*) is not just orally repeated but implemented as the students would clean their toilets in the morning. The assembly song was an indirect order to the brain of the students to accept solemnly the rule of the Britishers:

"God save our Gracious Queen,
Long live our noble Queen,
... Long to reign over us;
God save the Queen." (*IHI 17*)

Ngugi now and then shifts the attention of readers from his secured life at Alliance to the life of his family in the village. He argues that the statesman behind declaration of emergency in Kenya was Winston Churchill. It is that Churchill who "had changed the aims of the war from just a victory over Hitler to one for human freedom, reaffirming people's right to choose the government under which they lived." (*IHI 47*) Contrary to this aspect of his personality, he is also "a fighter for the preservation of the empire." (*ibid*) He is responsible for "allowing Governor Baring to declare a state of emergency in Kenya." (*IHI 48*) The British troops "crushed the very Kenyans who had helped him fight Hitler and now wanted freedom." (*ibid*) Hitler created concentration camps for Jews and in Kenya Churchill admitted freedom fighters to concentration camps. Not just concentration camps were created; even concentration villages were also formed. The old villages from nearby hills were clubbed into one concentration village. People were displaced and forced to take shelter in the concentration village. The natives were forced to dig trench around the concentration village. It was done to disrupt the help the anticolonial guerrillas used to get from the villages. While Ngugi was at Alliance, the much discussed dooms day passed when his mother was arrested and after long interrogation was released from the prison. Later his sister in law was arrested on the suspicion of "organizing food and clothes for the guerrillas in the mountains." (*IHI 54*)

A Clean Bill of Political Health

Whenever Alliance was visited by government officials, it caused mental harassment to Ngugi, as his elder brother Good Wallace was a Mau Mau freedom fighter and sister in law was imprisoned in notorious Kamiti Security Prison. Initially, Ngugi came to know that "every member of the Gikuyu, Embu, and Meru communities had to have a written permit to travel by train or any public transport." (*IHI 57*) The written permit was replaced by identity cards and finally, the colonial administration settled on a passbook, "an internal passport like those in apartheid South Africa." (*IHI 58*) It was decided by the government officials that Ngugi would submit a letter of screening from Limuru, his native place. The letter need to be signed by the chief of the locality and stamped by district officer. (*ibid*) Ngugi calls it "a clean bill of political health." (*IHI 59*) As his brother is a Mau Mau freedom fighter, Ngugi will not get the letter of screening; as a result the doors of Alliance will be closed for him. In the mean time Ngugi tried to concentrate on studies but he was hunted by the "clean bill of political health". (*ibid*) During the

term break Ngugi went home. The next day he visited the chief's house. The chiefs were commonly cruel and worked honestly for the Britishers. The Chief of Limuru was killed by the Mau Mau revolutionaries. Ngugi heard that the existing "Chief, Hinga, did not exhibit the same level of cruelty as his brother." (IHI 68) Ngugi thought "the chief was sure to be prejudiced against the brother of a Mau Mau guerrilla fighter." (IHI 69) As Ngugi confronted the Chief, he gasped in astonishment because the Chief was "Fred Mbugua, Kenneth's father, my old teacher at Manguo Elementary who had once noticed and praised my composition." (ibid) The next hurdle was the Tigoni police station. The young white officer initially didn't understand, after explanation by Ngugi, he applied the stamp on the document and handed it over to Ngugi. The next moment he asked Ngugi to wait for screening. Ngugi had the document in his hand slowly walked back and left the campus. (IHI 72) As a result, Ngugi's education continued at Alliance uninterrupted. Before the commencement of last term of second year, Ngugi first came to know that British Forces captured his brother. Later Ngugi's family was informed that "Good Wallace had been taken to Manyani concentration camp." (IHI 83) The news was relief for the family as "he would live at least." (ibid) The British forces captured Dedan Kimathi, the leader of the Mau Mau guerrillas, which "left a sense of defeat" (IHI 84) among Kenyans. But Dedan Kimathi was a symbol of freedom for the young Kenyans. His "vow to fight to the end, proclaiming that it was better to die fighting for freedom than to live on bended knees" (ibid) will be inspiration for the natives to fight against the colonial suppression.

Soul, Body and Mind

The political events taking place in Kenya was of great interest for the students of Alliance. The African Elected Members Organisation called as AEMO outright rejected "Lennox-Boyd Plan that provided for twelve specially elected members, ... proportionate to the racial populations represented, a single European was assumed to be equal to hundreds of Africans."

(IHI 131) The AEMO initially agreed to the beneficial portions of the agreement and then they rejected the sections which were harmful for the Africans. Later Oginga Odinga, one of the leaders of AEMO "declared that Kenyatta and the others imprisoned with him were still the political leaders of the Kenyan people. As a result, "the rallying cry in the streets became *Uhuruna Kenyatta*." (IHI 133) Ngugi was also introduced to the leaders of Pan-African movement such as Kwame Nkrumah, Marcus Garvey, George Padmore and W. E. B. DuBois Their life was a very fascinating study for Ngugi.

Besides the political event, Ngugi was developing spiritually. The preaching at the Alliance chapel appealed heart as well as mind. He remembers Reverend Handy Hoopers sermon:

Behind the pulpit, he stood tall, calm, and collected, nothing dramatic about him. Then, taking a plate to illustrate something, it slipped from his clumsy fingers and fell to the floor, breaking into pieces... Slowly, deliberately, he bent down and picked up the pieces, one by one. A heart that was ready for Jesus, he said, had to break to pieces, one by one... the Holy Ghost would put the piece together to create something whole. (IHI 135)

At Alliance Ngugi took interest in sports as well. It is expected that every student should “participate in real sports like soccer, hockey, gymnastics and volleyball and take them as serious as the chapel and the classroom.” (IHI 139) But Ngugi found himself weak in outdoor games. He confined himself to Chess and Table Tennis. Ngugi also liked long running race. He admits, “Years later running would become an important symbol in my books, especially in *A Grain of Wheat*.” (IHI 141) One of the features of colonial societies is multiculturalism and multiracialism. “Multiracialism volunteer work and youth camps” (ibid) were also organized by the school administration of Alliance. In one of the camps Ngugi met Andrew Brockett, a white student. In the interaction with the student, Ngugi came to know that Andrew Brockett joined the camp “to avoid taking a job in the colonial administration, enforcing unjust laws.” (IHI 145) Both of them also discussed the psychological effect of “social apartheid” (ibid) and came to a conclusion that it results in “vicious circle of endless mutual suspicion and animosity.” (ibid) Ngugi here brings out to the notice of the reader through Andrew Brockett that every white doesn’t possess exploitative mentality.

Ngugi took lessons in creative writing at Alliance. “The school library was one of the best and richest ... sources of knowledge.” (IHI 159) He began his reading with G. A. Henty’s historical empire-building heroics. Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* reflected social reality of Africa, (IHI 163) left permanent impression on Ngugi.

The educational thirst expressed by T. Washington in *Up from Slavery* reflected Ngugi and his mother’s endeavour to fight against social and political adversities. Ngugi on one hand agrees with T. Washington’s “idea of hard work and self reliance... but felt uneasy about his asking black people not to agitate for social equality.

Don’t give up hope! Truth never dies!

After graduation from Alliance, Ngugi was waiting for admission in Makarrare University. In the meantime he has joined a school as a teacher at Gatundu, the native of Jomo Kenyatta. While returning from school to his home at Limuru, he was arrested by the police on the pretext of not possessing the tax papers. Ngugi showed the police the admission papers to Makarrare University and even informed them that he was a student of Alliance School. The police took it as arrogance and jailed him. Somehow the news reaches to his native. His Brother Good Wallace, meets him and tells him the message of his mother, “Don’t give up hope! Truth never dies.” (IHI 225) Ngugi had to spend two nights in a dark room of a jail. The room was over loaded and the stench of smell made his stay in the room unbearable. The next day the arrested people were shifted to unknown place. Ngugi heard many times during emergency that many people “detained on whatever suspicions, released in a forest and told they were free to go home, and then shot in the back as terrorists in a running battle.” (IHI 204) When the other people with Ngugi came to know that he is from Alliance, one of them opined, “It’s the evil character of the colonial police. This state of emergency has given them the license to do whatever they want. They don’t want to see us black people educated.” (IHI 206) The prisoners shared their life experiences in the colonial Kenya. There were several reasons behind their dropout - “tuition, failed tests, cruel teachers, or simply the lure of a more exciting life, which they now admit was an illusion, one or two have never been inside a classroom: there were no schools in their area, the independent ones having been banned.” (IHI 206) They were arrested for different crimes- “One was arrested after

snatching a wallet from an Indian woman; another trying to break into a drapery to steal. Others tried to rob a bank with a gun rented from a police officer for a share of the loot.” (*ibid*) They were habitual of arrests; even they shared their experiences at different prisons. Ngugi observes, “they are not judgmental about the social conditions that have shaped their lives; they take society the way they take the reality of physical nature and its vagaries.” (*IHI 207*) After two nights Ngugi was produced in the court. When the charge was read in the court, Ngugi was flabbergasted. There wasn’t any mention of the taxes, “instead he was charged with “resisting arrest and assaulting a police officer on duty.” (*IHI 232*) Ngugi was forced to admit the charges by the two policemen. But the charge was very serious. “It will mean a long prison term” (*IHI 233*) which will result into end of education. Ngugi was given chance to prove his innocence. The debating skills, Ngugi developed at Alliance helped him. Ngugi asked question after question to the police officer, the police officer couldn’t get time to plan his answers. Ngugi writes: “Question after question, I go through the entire story, how he asked me for tax papers, and what I told him.” (*IHI 238*) As a result the judge said, “The court will not stand between you and Makerere... You are free to go.” (*IHI 239*) In the month of “July 1959” (*IHI 240*), Ngugi was at Limuru railway station, boarding a passenger train to Kampala, Uganda to continue his education at Makerere university.

Through this memoir Ngugi has recorded colonial history of Kenya through the eyes of a child. In the postcolonial times history plays very important role. The politicians may misrepresent history for their personal gain. It is obvious that the aim of writing this memoir is to impart an authentic version of colonial history to the young natives. Secondly, the memoir presents the conflict in the life of Kenyans realistically and effectively. The reader can resist the effect, of a fiction created on mind by considering it as fictitious but the impression of memoirs as realistic representation of life experiences is everlasting.

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