

## **Metatheatricalizing Communal Exploitation in Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Miriis' *I Will Marry When I want***

Niyi Akingbe\*

### **Abstract**

Metatheatres often refers to the capability of a stage text and performance to ostensibly establish a gamut of commentaries needed to repudiate a pervading social and political quagmire, tellingly obtainable in societies under siege. Metatheatres is a long established theatre tradition which has been sufficiently calibrated in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, put into a utilitarian proclivity in Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*, and fully aestheticized in Jean Genet's *The Balcony* and *The Blacks*. It is also a tradition which has been successfully exploited in Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*; Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*; Femi Osofisan's *The Chattering and the Song* and Segun Oyekunle's *Katakata for Sofahead*. Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Miriis steeped a metatheatres into the interface of politics and religion in *I Will Marry When I Want*, in order to foreground the hypocrisy of Christianity as underscored by the exploitation of the downtrodden masses, by the land grabbing Christian elite of the Kenyan society. This paper will be examining how Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Miriis' *I Will Marry When I Want* builds on the harvest of the oral, mimetic and metaphoric signification of myth, history and song, to launch a barrage of criticism against a backdrop of land theft. This appropriation is poignantly accentuated by a language of equivocation, usually associated with the Christian elite in Kenya. The paper will among other things emphasize that, the rapacious gluttony for land grabbing is indubitably faith driven, as clearly demonstrated by the Kenyan Christian elite in the play.

**Keywords:** Sloganeering Christianity, Metatheatres, Hypocrisy, Communal Exploitation, Song, Commentary, *I Will Marry When I Want*.

---

\* Corresponding author: Niyi Akingbe; Assist. Prof. Department of English, Ondo State University of Science & Technology, Ondo State, Nigeria; e-mail: [deniakingbe@yahoo.com](mailto:deniakingbe@yahoo.com)

## Introduction

Song-text tradition has become an important aspect of post-colonial African literature in the recent time, and its practice has been heightened to the point of obsession. This has ineluctably makes the tradition an indispensable motif in the literary engagement of contemporary African writers across the continent. The significance of song as inexorably grounded in oral literature, has been acknowledged by Helen Nabasuta Mugambi, “song constitutes a critical component of that ‘matrix of the African imagination’ and deserves to take its rightful place beside other more frequently explored oral forms. Its central power lies in its potential to engender a distinct literary genre-“song- text”- that cuts across the conventional (i.e., colonial). Genres of fiction, verse, and drama. Song-texts exhibit an intricate or systematic incorporation of songs to establish meaning. In other words, “song-texts” exist not necessarily because they can be musically scored and sung, but because they share marked characteristics that traverse conventional genres. Authors creating song-texts strategically and systematically employ song in their content, structure, themes, and style, leading to an ideological/decolonizing statement” (423). The signification of song in African literature has also been corroborated by Daniel Avorgbedor, when he observes that “man is ontologically an expressive being, and both actions and reactions consequently permeate our modes of life and living. Artistic diversity, which is a distinctive and distinguishing mark of all cultures, provides indisputable evidence of our basic human need for expression. The song-mode is just one of the innumerable artistic avenues through which our latent response energies are released” (208). Avorgbedor further contends the indubitable power of song to elicit a reaction, “a response is basically either an action or a reaction. While “reaction” will imply some confrontation and overtness, “action” is of no less status, and differences between the two should be sought from the emphatic qualities of the stimulus involved” (208). The use of song in *I Will Marry When I want* not only accentuates its Brechtian influenced dramaturgy, but it also ostensibly delineates the controversies generated by land tenureship in Kenya. Ambitiously embedded in these songs are, the repertoire of Kenyan pasts, which provide the audience the necessary insights for deconstructing the complexity of Kenyan nationhood. A cursory look at the harvest of song-text tradition in African literature, startlingly parades successful literary titles like, John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo’s *Song of a Goat* (1961), Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* (1972), Byron Kawadwa’s *Oluyimba Liva Wankoko {Song of the Cock}* (1972), Ngugi wa

Thiong'o's *Mother Sing for Me* (1982), Niyi Osundare's song-texts: *Songs of the Market Place* (1983), *Moon Songs* (1988), Tanure Ojaide's *The Endless Song* (1989), Sekai Nzenza-Shand's *Songs to an African Sunset* (1997), Kofi Anyidoho's *Song in Praise Song for The Land* (2000), Marjorie Macgoye's *Make It Sing and Other Poems* (2001), Okello Oculi's *Song for the Sun in Us* (2001) and Micere Mugo's *My Mother's Song and Other Poems* (2001).

### **Land as a Sphere of Contestation in Kenya**

Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii have exegetically utilized the interplay of history, songs and literary consciousness in their three-act play, *I Will Marry When I Want*, to dramatize the postcolonial narratives of the Kenya, and to interrogate the shameless appropriation by the Kenyan Christian elite, of the land owned by the masses. This interrogation is effectively done to challenge the excesses of the Kenyan elites' unquenchable desire to employ all the means of chicaneries endorsed by the Bible passages, to cunningly steal the land which belongs to the poor people in Kenya. Land in Kenya has portentously generated malignant rounds of crisis from the colonial period to the post independence era, with debilitating consequences. The "ordering of land and its inhabitants becomes a form of epistemic violence to the extent that it involves immeasurable disruption and erasure of local systems of meaning that guide the ownership and use of land" (Simatei, 2005:86). The play's primary focus on the importance of land in Kenyan cultural worldview has been pointedly raised by Eustace Palmer, when he asserts that "political freedom in Kenya became synonymous with repossession of the land, and this struggle is central to *Ngugi wa Thiong'o's literary works*, (emphasis mine). In Kenya land is not only held to be of much greater importance than money or cattle, it clearly has spiritual associations" (Palmer, 1981:1). This spiritual significance of the land is correspondingly illustrated by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his novel, *Weep Not, Child* (1964):

In studying the Gikuyu tribal organisation, it is necessary to take into consideration land tenure as the most important factor in the social, political, religious and economic life of the tribe. as agriculturalists, the Gikuyu people depend entirely on the land.

It supplies them with the material needs of life, through  
 which spiritual  
 and mental contentment is achieved. Communion with the  
 ancestral  
 spirits is perpetuated through contact with the soil in  
 which the  
 ancestors of the tribe lie buried. The Gikuyu consider the  
 earth  
 as the ‘mother’ of the tribe...it is the soil that feeds the  
 child through  
 lifetime; and again after death it is the soil that nurses the  
 spirits of the  
 dead for eternity. Thus the earth is the most sacred thing  
 above all  
 that dwell in or on it. Among the Gikuyu the soil is  
 especially honoured  
 and an everlasting oath is to swear by the earth (32).

Ngugi’s commitment to the tension generated by the issue of land dispossession in the post-independent Kenya as grounded in *I Will Marry When I Want*, is reinforced by the Gikuyu’s anthropological ethos, which is poignantly rendered in myth, history and songs. This incisively reflects the influences that the oral tradition exerts on the significance of land in the Gikuyu’s orature. The signification of myth in Ngugi’s literary oeuvre is underscored by the observation of Tirop Simatei, who argues that “...although the Gikuyu myth of creation is central of Ngugi’s textual strategies of destabilization, he does not use exclusively Gikuyu myths in his probing of the colonial hegemonic formation. In his decolonization novels, he often resorts to both indigenous and Judeo-Christian myths and legends, in order to evolve a grammar of contestation with which to construct not only a counter discourse to colonial ideologies of conquest and domination, but also a liberation aesthetics that justifies anti-colonial violence” (Simatei, 2005:88-89). The exploitative propensity of the elite class, as underlined by its Christian posturing, is tellingly criticised by Gicaamba, a member of the oppressed, landless peasant class of Kenya:

Gicaamba: why didn’t Kioi come  
 To tell you that he has increased your wages?  
 Or to give you a piece of his own lands?  
 Yes, for the earthly treasures are not that important!

Or is it a sin to increase a worker's wages?  
 Religion... religion...!  
 Religion is the alcohol of the soul!  
 Religion is the poison of the mind!  
 It's not God who has brought about our poverty!  
 All of us were born equally naked.  
 Wa Gathoni,  
 It's not that we don't work hard:  
 I drive a machine all the day,  
 You pick tea-leaves all the day,  
 Our wives cultivate the fields all the day,  
 And someone says you don't work hard?  
 The fact is  
 That the wealth of our land  
 Has been grabbed by a tiny group  
 Of the Kiois and Ndugires  
 In partnership with foreigners!  
 Accompany them to church, if you like!  
 No one regrets the going as the returning,  
 Take care you don't lose four  
 While running after eight.

### **Metatheatricalizing Land Theft through Song in Post-Independent Kenya**

Metatheatre is surreptitiously grounded in *I Will Marry When I Want*, to highlight and parody the Kenyan Christian elite's hypocrisy in their attempt to proselytize the Kenyan peasants. Song and chorus are basically appropriated as the dialogic for explicating the dialectical relationship between the peasants and the elite class in the play. Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii foreground metatheatre in the tension generated by the power relation between the protagonist, Kiguunda wa Gathoni, an impoverished farm labourer and Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru, a dubious Christian elite and businessman. While the former is a traditionalist, a cynic of Christianity and a farm hand in Ahab wa Kioi's farm, the latter is a self-styled fire brand Christian, who doggedly believes in manipulating the Bible verses to arm-twist the peasant Kenyans, as to make them part with their inherited landed properties. The hypocrisy of

the Christian elite reached its crescendo in the play, when Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru deftly equivocates a sermon which deftly range from overt bullying to subtle emotional blackmail against Kiguunda wa Gathoni to become a Christian:

Kioi:

We have brought you the tidings  
 So that when our Lord comes back  
 To separate goats from cows  
 You'll not claim  
 That you had not been warned...

Becoming a Christian implies that Kiguunda wa Gathoni, would have to be re-married to his wife in the church. Kiguunda wa Gathoni sought a loan from Ahab wa Kioi, to facilitate his church wedding, as to authenticate his new-found Christian fate. But Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru refused Kiguunda wa Gathoni, and asked him to obtain a loan from the bank by using his ancestral (land)inheritance as a collateral. Shortly after the church wedding, a brief but embarrassing crisis ensued between Kiguunda wa Gathoni and Ahab wa Kioi when it was discovered that Kioi's son had impregnated Gathoni, the daughter of Kiguunda wa Gathoni. This development led to a serious altercation between the two, which consequently led to the sacking of Kiguunda wa Gathoni from the farm by Ahab wa Kioi. The inability of Kiguunda wa Gathoni to pay back his bank loan made him lost the ownership of his piece of land, which was bought at auction by Ahab wa Kioi. The play remarkably tasks Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Marxist, dialectical-materialistic, artistic consciousness in his representation of Kenya's socio-historical context. Characteristic of wa Thiong'o's literary forte which usually foregrounds the application of a clinical class approach to the analysis and evaluation of the production and reception of works of literature, the playwrights did not hesitate to bring the past onto the stage through songs in *I Will Marry When I Want*:

Soloist:

*Great our patriots for me...  
 Where did the whites come from?*

Chorus:

*Where did the whites come from?  
 Where did the whites come from?  
 They came through Murang'a,*

*And they spent a night at Waiyaki's home,  
If you want to know that these foreigners were no  
good,*

*Ask yourself:  
Where is waiyaki's grave today?  
We must protect our patriots  
So they don't meet Waiyaki's fate.*

Soloist:

*Kimaathi's patriots are brave  
Where did the whites come from?  
Kiguunda: How the times run!  
How many years have gone  
Since we got independence?  
Ten and over,  
Quite a good number of years!  
And now look at me!  
...One and a half acres of land in dry plains.  
Our family land was given to home guards.  
Today I am just a labourer  
On farms owned by Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru  
My trousers are pure tatters...(28-29)*

The infusion of song in the dramaturgy of *I Will Marry When I Want* is designed to invoke an introspection into the Kenyan past, in ways that emphasize the dialogic of the oppressor/oppressed. Rather than using song as a latent motif in the play, the playwrights essentially employ it as a major dramatic technique for linking Kenya's present with its past. The employment of song as a technique in the play, underscores Richard Wagner's analysis of the complimentary roles of the art in his seminal work, *The Art-Work of the Future*, where he states that "true Drama is only conceivable as proceeding from a common urgency of every art...In this Drama, each separate art can only bare its utmost secret to their common public through a mutual parleying with other arts..." (184). The historical tropes embedded in the songs are aptly employed in the play, to critique the socio-political tensions, whose foundations were laid by the British colonial authorities and which are nurtured and sustained by the Kenyan political elite. But Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii in following Bertolt Brecht's dramatic strategy, decided to render in song, the radical reinterpretations of the trauma experienced by the downtrodden Kenyans, who suffered a huge casualty of land loss. The

songs in the play are essentially self-revealing and they serve as a convenient platform to mock, and to expose the high handedness of the British colonial authorities in colonial Kenya. The songs are used in lampooning the inequity in land distribution system of the postcolonial Kenya and caricature the overt posturing of the Christian elite class. Helen Nabasuta Mugambi commenting on the foregrounding of song in the structure of the play, opines that ‘‘Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Ngugi wa Mirii’s *I Will Marry When I Want* signals the song motif in the opening scene of the play, with the drunk’s song, from which the text takes its title. From then on, nearly all the clashes between the people and the colonial and neo-colonial impositions are invoked in song. The play is enveloped in song, and it culminates in the sharp revolutionary choral challenge: ‘‘on whose side are you?’’ (424). Song in the play serves as a medium of dialectical dialogue between the elite class and the downtrodden masses, and its potency for resisting the Kenya’s post-independent inanities is unambiguously reiterated from the beginning to the end of the play. Songs in the play are quite thematic, they evince symbolic and witty rhetoric which constantly shift from colonial subjugation, land theft by the elite class to the hypocrisy of the Christian faith which endorses the despicable dispossession of the peasants. The playwrights are able to render the burden of the Kenyan nationhood, precariously borne by Kiguunda, Wangeci, Gathoni, Gicaamba and Njooki in songs, whose politicization is succinctly rooted in the chorus. Since written words would have made the playwrights susceptible to a libel, the songs provide a convenient platform for hurling innuendoes and invective at the anti-peasant forces. The use of song in the play, obviously takes off moral responsibilities from the playwrights. The chorus ubiquitously looms large and serves as a propagandistic conduit for running socio-political commentaries on the difficulties, complexities and frustration suffered by these characters. The visibility of the chorus as a constant character burgeons throughout the play, and retains its legitimacy through its skilful use of repetition. Its dexterity at gauging and articulating the social quagmire of the downtrodden masses, in their relationship with the Kenya’s oppressive social system is vivaciously underlined by the play’s dramaturgy. The chorus’ determination to forge a cohesion among the peasants in order to assert their stand against a virulent exploitation, is concerted in the vituperation hurled at the Kenya’s kleptomaniac elite class. This wake-up call for unity is vociferously amplified towards the end of the play:

Soloist:

*The trumpet-*

All:

*Of the workers has been blown*

*To wake all the slaves*

*To wake all the peasants*

*To wake all the poor.*

*To wake the masses*

Soloist:

*The trumpet-*

All:

*Of the poor has been blown.*

Soloist:

*The trumpet!*

All:

*The trumpet of the masses has been blown.*

*Let's preach to all our friends.*

*The trumpet of the masses has been blown.*

*We change to new songs*

*For the revolution is near.*

Soloist:

*The trumpet!*

All:

*The trumpet of the masses has been blown.*

Soloist:

*The trumpet!*

All:

*The trumpet of the masses has been blown.*

*We are tired of being robbed*

*We are tired of exploitation*

*We are tired of land grabbing*

*We are tired of slavery*

*We are tired of charity and abuses.*

Soloist:

*The trumpet!*

All:

*The trumpet of the poor has been blown.*

*Let's unite and organize*

*Organization is our club... (115-116)*

The peasants are perceived as the victims of the conspiracy of Christianity and the British neo-imperialism which is vibrantly coordinated by the Kenya's political authorities and their lackeys: the Kenyan repressive police, Ahab Kio wa Kanoru, Jezebel, Ikuua wa Nditika, Samuel and Helen Ndugire. The peasant's physical and metaphysical exploitation by the Kenyan Christian elite class, is sufficiently reverberated in the oratory and lyricism of Gicaamba's subversive speech and song:

Gicaamba:

And how does religion come into it?  
 Religion is not the same thing as God.  
 All the religions that now sit on us  
 Were brought here by the whites...  
 When the British imperialists came here in 1895  
 All the missionaries of all the churches  
 Held the Bible in the left hand  
 And the gun in the right hand.  
 The white man wanted us  
 To be drunk with religion  
 While in the meantime,  
 Was mapping and grabbing our land  
 And starting factories and businesses  
 On our sweat.  
 He drove us from our best lands,  
 Forcing us to eke a living from plots on road sides  
 Like beggars in our own land,  
 Some of us dying in his tea and coffee plantations  
 Others dying in his factories.

The anger derisively demonstrated in Gicaamba's vitriolic speech against the Kenyan Christian elite's exploitative proclivity, as well as the church's corresponding connivance is further given an eloquent condemnation in his sarcastic song:

(Song):

*Goats and cows and money  
 Are not important.  
 What is important  
 Is the splendid face of Jesus.*

*I glance here  
 I glance there  
 And I see a huge bonfire  
 In Devil's Hell  
 And I ask myself:  
 What can I do  
 To avoid the Hell fire?*

But they, on this earth, this very earth,  
 They are busy carousing on earthly things, our  
 wealth,

And you the poor are told:  
 Hold fast unto the rosary,  
 Enter the church,  
 Lift up your eyes unto the heavens. (56-58)

### **Conclusion**

Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii have demonstrated in their play, *I Will Marry When I Want* that song as a vibrant tool of metatheatre, is a fundamental dramatic technique in linking the Kenyan's past to its present. The paper has essentially examined how songs have been inherently appropriated by the playwrights to illustrate the dialectical tension between the Kenyan Christian elite class and the peasants in the post-independent Kenya. The relationship between the two is underscored by suspicion and mutual distrust. While the peasants in the play are hopelessly trapped in the throes of misery and abject poverty, the Christian elite class is comfortable and exploitative. It is constantly preoccupied with how it could maintain the colonial legacy of subjugating and pauperising the peasants, in order to steal their inherited portions of land. The peasants believed that their misfortune is dialectically caused by the greed and gluttony of the Christian elite in collaboration with the neo-imperialistic forces. But the Christian elite erroneously believes that its domination over the peasants is biblically endorsed by God.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii have ostensibly manipulated in the dramaturgy of *I Will Marry When I Want*, a Brechtian inspired revolutionary aesthetics, to deconstruct the biblical assertion that the peasants are poverty stricken because they have not accepted Jesus Christ as their lord and saviour. The playwrights have through the

appurtenances of history, mythology and song anchored in metatheatre, unequivocally asserted that the poverty and misery of the poor Kenyans, was orchestrated by the elite class. The debilitating poverty experienced by the peasants in the play was caused by the socio-economic dislocation they suffered in the hands of the colonial authorities, and the Kenyan Christian elite class as significantly foregrounded in the play.

## References

- Avorgbedor, Daniel. 1990. "The Preservation, Transmission and Realization of Song Texts: A Psycho-Musical Approach." Okpewho, Isidore. (Ed.). *The Oral Performance in Africa*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 208-227.
- Chekhov, Anton. 1977. *The Seagull in Five Plays*. Trans. Ronald Hingley. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fugard, Athol, John Kani and Winston Ntshona. 1974. *Sizwe Bansi is Dead. Statements: Three Plays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Genet, Jean. 1966. *The Balcony*. London: Faber and Faber.
- . 1960. *The Blacks: A Clown Show*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Mugambi, Helen, Nabasuta. 2005. "Speaking in Song: Power, Subversion and the Postcolonial Text." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*.
- Osofisan, Femi. 1977. *The Chattering and the Song*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Oyekunle, Segun. 1983. *Katakata for Sofahead*. London: Macmillan Education.
- Palmer, Eustace. 1981. *An Introduction to the African Novel*. London: Heinemann.
- Shakespeare, William. 1995. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Soyinka, Wole. 1984. *Madmen and Specialists. Six Plays*. London: Methuen.
- Simatei, Tirop. 2005. "Colonial Violence, Postcolonial Violations: Violence, Landscape, and Memory in Kenyan Fiction." *Research in African Literatures*, 36, 2, 85-94.
- Wagner, Richard. 1993. *The Art-work of the Future*, PW 1, 184. *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*. Trans. from the German by William Ashton Ellis. 8 Vols. Lincoln: Nebraska UP.
- Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. 1965. *Weep Not Child*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi and Wa Mirii, Ngugi. 1982. *I Will Marry When I Want*. Oxford: Heinemann.