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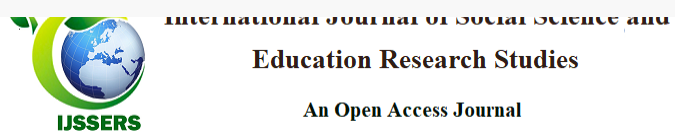
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African Women as the Alpha and Omega of Their Own Promotion as Dealt with in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*

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ABSTRACT

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This paper aims at giving more insights into how African women at large can reverse the traditional trend to be the architects of their own empowerment as dealt with in the selected novels like *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* by the well-known Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o. In these novels, the author raises the thought-provoking issue of the great responsibility befalling African women to achieve their own empowerment today. The results of our findings will lead us to impart to the reader that the responsibility befalling African women to achieve their own empowerment is quite tremendous. With this in view, African women must use the potentials that they are endowed with so as to set the good example to the coming generation. Through the lens of feminism, womanism, and Marxist literary criticism this paper arouses African women's awareness on the place they must carve out for themselves on the social, political, and even economic arena if they really want to stop paying lip service to gender equality.

Keywords:

African; Women; Alpha; Omega; Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

The realm of African literature has burst into bloom with feminist writers who are committed to arousing the awareness of African women to stop resting on their laurels if they really want to achieve their own empowerment through a number of praiseworthy initiatives that they can take. Female African feminists are quite a lot today among whom the most famous ones are the Senegalese Mariama Bâ with *So Long a Letter*, the Nigerian Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie with *Purple Hibiscus*, the Nobel Prize Laureate and South African writer and activist Nadine Gordimer with *July's People* and *The Conservationist* and the Ghanaian Amma Darko with *Beyond the Horizon*. As regards male African feminists, they are not so countless as such and include namely the Senegalese self-taught writer and filmmaker Sembène Ousmane with his *God's Bits of Wood* which brings to the fore the valuable role that women have played in the success of the railwaymen's strike in Dakar-Niger and unquestionably the well-known Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o with *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*.

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The Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o has claimed our attention with his *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* which we set out to go through deeply so as to show how the author has endeavoured to act as a great feminist enlightening African women on the responsibility befalling them about their own empowerment.

As critical framework, this paper mainly employs feminism. In fact, the choice of approaching this work from this angle is underpinned by the fact that feminism seeks to promote gender equality by laying emphasis on the fact that people must stop relegating women to the foreground as was the case in the former days since today, women can positively impact changes in society. By the way, we deem important to observe that Brunell, L. and Burkett, E. defined feminism as being "the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes."¹ Both authors went on to say that "although largely originating in the West, feminism is manifested worldwide and is represented by various institutions committed to activity on behalf of women's rights and interests."² That literary movement saw the light of day with the marginalization of women from the social political sphere. Quoting Rana, Neeraj (2018, p.429) we shall observe that: Feminism is a movement influenced by the ideas postulated, popularized and precipitated by thinkers and authors like Alice Walker, Naomi Little bear, Judith Felterbey, Michele Wallace, Lillian Smith, Elaine Showalter, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet and others. It is a modern movement

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expressing protest against the male domination. The aim of feminist is to understand women's oppression keeping in mind race, gender, class and sexual preferences.

Applying feminism to this research work has enabled us to point out that like many African writers, the well-known Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o thinks that women in Africa can achieve their own empowerment if they become aware of the potentials that they are endowed with.

As regards the second literary theory employed here, that is to say womanism, it is worth saying briefly speaking that it refers to the necessary and useful complementarity that should exist or prevail between man and woman in the fight for or the claim for women's rights; and this for the benefit of both genders.

With regard to the third literary theory which we have deemed important to employ here, that is to say Marxist literary criticism, it is a "theory that evolved from the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels" (Mathias, I. O., and Nathaniel, O. S.; 2018; p. 67). By the way, we should mention that Marxism represents the philosophy of a famous German philosopher of the nineteenth century named Karl Marx. Marxist literary criticism is "the belief that literature reflects class struggle and materialism, and investigates how literature can work as a force for social change or a reaffirmation of existing conditions."³ The major tenets of that theory are encapsulated in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) in which Marx and Engels asserted "that the history of all existing societies is the history of class struggle." (Mathias, I. O., and Nathaniel, O. S.; 2018; p. 67)

Hinting at Marxist literary criticism, Mathias, I. O., and Nathaniel, O. S (2018, p.67) wrote that: Marxism is a theory that attacks capitalism and feudalism by proposing communism/socialism as the ideal state. The theory avers that there are two opposing classes in every human society, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, and that these two classes form the elites/haves and the have not, respectively. Marxist tenet seeks to remove this dichotomy in human society by arguing for a classless society where intellectuals rule, a society birthed by the commonness and equal distribution of wealth, a society where exploitation and oppression are eliminated by means of proletariat revolution, an egalitarian and utopic society.

Marxist literary theory as averred by Eagleton has enabled us to examine the various social classes in Ngugi's selected novels and their interaction in terms of exploitation. In fact, in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, the reader is kept abreast of two diametrically opposed worlds: the world of the haves (the bourgeois) and the world of the have-nots (the proletariat) epitomized respectively by African businessmen who hold position of influence in post-independent Kenya and the white masters from whom they keep receiving orders as well as the poor black peasants and herdsmen of whose expectations the independences have fallen short. The first social class includes the black and white

minority cheating on the down-and-out black Kenyans because the former think that they are the only masters on board under God in post-independent Kenya. As regards the second social class, it includes to a large extent the black majority and especially the peasants, the herdsmen and the petty traders who undergo powerlessly the pressure imposed on them by the minority. These two social classes live in a country called Kenya located in east Africa in which only the minority of the population leads a life of ease and moves about in high-powered cars.

The gist of this paper consists of three parts. The first part deals with class struggles in the selected novels. As regards the second part, it addresses the depiction of woman as seen in African society at large and in bygone days in particular. With regard to the third part, it arouses African women's awareness on the role that they can play in the development process of Africa as dealt with in the selected novels.

1- Class struggle and women in action in the selected novels

Basing himself on Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's philosophy according to which "the history of all existing societies is the history of class struggle", the well-known Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o has fictionalised the two social classes that generally stand out in all existing societies in *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* and how they interact with each other in the quest of survival in post-independent Kenya. These two diametrically-opposed social classes are respectively "the have" epitomised by the wealthy businessmen in post-independent Kenya who are committed to fattening up to the detriment of the masses who toil away but do not reap at all the fruits of their endeavours. The second social class, as one can easily guess is that of the "have-not" or the destitute black people who account for the great majority of the population. In *Petals of Blood*, for example, the first social class includes to a large extent the wealthy businessmen among whom the most conspicuous ones are the owners of the new breweries, an Anglo-American international combine who is in league with three African Managing Directors namely Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria who are the members of the leading local personalities (Ngugi; 1977; p. 281). To these three people can be added Nderi wa Riera, the Member of Parliament who does nothing to develop his Ilmorog constituency and waits for the eve of the legislative elections to get in with the grassroots. Equally remarkable, another person of relatively great importance also includes Ezechiel Waweru, Munira's father who has deliberately refused in the past to side with the Mau Mau for the conquest of African Land and Freedom. Worse still, after independence, Munira's father pledges to take the oath to divide the Kenyans and to protect the wealths in the hands of only a few (Ngugi; 1977; p. 341).

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As regards the second social class in *Petals of Blood*, they include to a large extent nearly the whole black community and especially the farmers and petty sellers whose lands have been snatched through cunning ways. Importantly enough, it is in this lowest rank of the social ladder that are found such women as Wanja and her grandmother Nyakinyua on whom are focussed the subject matter of this paper and who have experienced the same lot as the majority of the population but who have shown through that novel how African women at large can really fight the scourge and meet the challenges lying ahead of them in recent days instead of resting on their laurels and wait for happiness to fall right into their laps. In fact, in post-independent Kenya, as shown in *Petals of Blood*, the powerless black community is lured to get a loan with a view to helping them set up their petty business and especially to increase the productivity of their crops. However, the pitfall lurking ahead of them is that in case of failure to pay back the loans, the banks from which they have taken a loan will foreclose on their ancestral lands. Having not foreseen that pitfall, the dispossessed black people among whom Old Nyakinyua have launched in taking loans without planning thoroughly how to use these funds efficiently. As can be guessed, most of these black people are not able to pay back their loans at the expected deadline, and without further ado, their lands have been taken and hence they have no other alternative than going to live in shanty towns or drier parts of the country. Pitifully enough, some of them come to work on the same plots of lands not as owners but as squatters or *Ahoi* to make ends meet. Other dispossessed black people also go to work in the Breweries to cater for their families. Faced with such a predicament, women and especially Wanja and her grandmother have not stayed on the sidelines. Instead, they have fought the best they can so as to set the good example to the women folk in Africa at large and in the whole world in particular. The way these women have fought the scourge which will be dealt with deeply in the process of this paper have helped to question the opinion that woman is the weaker sex and cannot impact changes in societies. These struggles are pervasive not only regarding land conflicts but also when the time has really come to walk all the way to the city and meet their Member of Parliament and tell him what the people in his constituency are really going through.

In *Devil on the Cross*, the first social class includes to a large extent the wealthy businessmen consisting mainly of the local businessmen and capitalists as well as the leaders of the foreign delegation who have organised the great feast or competition in Ilmorog to select Seven Experts in Modern Theft and Robbery by way of celebrating corruption in all its acute forms amidst some destitute people who are over-exploited to the marrow of their bones. Among the local businessmen who regard themselves as the only master on board under God in post-independent Kenya as shown in *Devil on the Cross* can be named essentially Boss Kihara, the

Managing Director of *Champion Construction Company* in Tom Mboya Street where Wariinga is laid off for refusing to grease her boss' palm in dens of iniquity referred to as Modern Love Bar and *Lodging*. Another local businessman holding a position of influence stands as Gaturia's father, referred to in the novel as the Old Rich Man, who has impregnated Wariinga and refused to be held responsible for that.

With regard to the second social class in *Devil on the Cross*, it includes as in *Petals of Blood*, to a large extent nearly the whole black community and especially the farmers, the workers, the jobless people, the whores and trade unionists or freedom fighters like Muturi, Wangari and the student leader as well as those whose lands have been snatched through cunning ways. It is within this second social class of the powerless people that are found such female characters as Wariinga and Wangari around whom are woven the thematic thrust of this paper because they have really succeeded in carving out a place for themselves in *Devil on the Cross* by setting the good example to the women folk at large on what should be the duty of women towards their society and their epoch. In fact, in post-independent Kenya, as shown in *Devil on the Cross*, the majority of people and especially women go through the worst forms of injustices ever when they refuse to go out with the bosses of the companies in which they are looking forward to finding a job or the companies in which they are engaged as seen with Wariinga.

To cap it all, the powerless black community among whom are found women is also summoned to quit their premises so that those places can be used for tourism areas for the foreigners to spend the night or sleep with Kenyan beautiful girls. That is for instance Wariinga's great sorrow at being informed that they have to quit their Mwhitori garage premises for her former boss Mr Boss Kihara to set up his new company referred to as the *Tourists' Paradise Development Company*. As can be seen, land conflicts continue even after the independences since wealthy people like Boss Kihara and his likes who have managed to go up the financial ladder are entitled to buy or trade the large part of the country's land as the fancy takes them to the detriment of poor people who are the hardest hit by colonial and neo-colonial system and among those who are the hardest hit by this situation are women who have eventually realised that to cope on their own and improve their social conditions, the only alternative left to them is to challenge the old stereotypes of bygone days according to which women's contribution to social change is not worth the game at all.

In both selected novels, it can be observed that, after the independences, the masses are over-exploited not only by their own black leaders but also by the foreigners who hit it off well together with the same black leaders in order to exploit or plunder the resources in the latter's country. In *Petals of Blood*, the character who has borne the brunt of land

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exploitation stands as Old Nyakinyua, Wanja's grandmother. In fact, like the old woman,

A whole lot of peasants and herdsmen of Old Ilmorog who had been lured into loans and into fencing off their land and buying imported fertilisers and were unable to pay back were similarly affected. Without much labour, without machinery, without breaking with old habits and outlook, and without much advice they had not been able to make the land yield enough to meet their food needs and pay back the loans. Some had used the money to pay school fees. Now the inexorable law of the metal power was driving them from the land (Ngugi; 1977; p. 275).

However, in spite of her "failing health and flesh", Old Nyakinyua has decided to fight back. She then tramples "from hut to hut calling upon the peasants of Ilmorog to get together and fight it out" (Ngugi; 1977; p. 276). Her main objective is to organise all the dispossessed of Ilmorog into a protest and raise an outcry about what the powerless people are going through in the hands of the black oppressors after the achievement of Kenyan independence. Although her dreams are foiled or thwarted, it is worth observing that the old woman must be a great source of inspiration to the downtrodden people in the world at large and the woman folk in particular about how they can impact social changes.

Another prominent character who has also borne the brunt of land exploitation in post-independent Kenya although he is a male character stands as Abdulla, the local shopkeeper who is reduced to selling fruits by the roadside to make ends meet. The reason underlying our quoting this example here is underpinned by the fact that Abdulla is associated with another female character named Wanja, the granddaughter of Old Nyakinyua, for their business venture and as a result of the foreclosure on their land which has unquestionably led to the bankruptcy of their business, the female character Wanja is quick enough to find the right way out of that predicament by setting up another whoredrom in the shanty towns to make money. For the record, it is worth pointing out that Wanja and Abdulla are driven off the place where they have set up a shop and a bar to shanty areas because that place is expected to undergo great changes and is referred to as New Ilmorog. Some parts of that place are reserved for tourism centres where foreigners and well-off people can enjoy themselves or spend the night. Other parts of New Ilmorog shopping centre are turned into a great farmland of "wheatfields and ranches around the plains" (Ngugi; 1977; p. 280); and the herdsmen living there are simply "driven further afield into the drier parts" (Ngugi; 1977; p. 280) and in the meantime a few of these herdsmen are turned into labourers on these same farms which used to be theirs. The new owners of that place who have chosen to make the powerless people undergo this predicament are the wealthy businessmen who move about in high-powered cars.

On top of what is said earlier, it is worth observing that the great trek to the city by the people of Ilmorog singing

a song based on Jomo Kenyatta's commitment on his circumcision into a man must be engraved in the memory of all African activists like the great march by the women in *God's Bits of Wood* by Ousmane Sembène. During that great trek to the city, the women of Ilmorog have also made themselves conspicuous by backing up the men so as to go and meet their M.P about what they are going through. Our reason for hinting at this situation can be accounted for the fact that it bears out how African women at large and Kenyan women in particular have fought hard like the female warriors in my native country to force back the invaders in the former days.

As in *Petal of Blood*, social classes is also a major thematic thrust in *Devil on the Cross* by Ngugi to show not only how far the exploitation of the masses has reached worrying proportions in post-independent Kenya but also and importantly enough how some female characters have taken the lead as regards the contribution of women to the achievement of social struggles both for the benefit of all and therefore to improve women's social condition and say no to social injustice. For the record, it is worth observing that the powerless people in *Devil on the Cross* go through an unmatched type of exploitation in the hands of those who hold a position of influence. For example, young girls who are really in a dire need of a job must accept to be the mistress of their own boss or the Managing Director of the company in which they work with a view to having a secure job. Those like Wariinga who turn down their bosses' overtures are unquestionably foredoomed to roam the streets in search an employment which they will never find. Interestingly enough, in case the young girls who fall in with their bosses' overtures get pregnant, they are easily discarded by those wealthy people who have made wonderful promises to them; which is the beginning of their descent into hell as Wariinga has experienced when she has been impregnated by the Old Rich Man from Ngorika.

Worse still again, there seems to exist no trade union to campaign for downtrodden people's rights and any attempt of these kinds are nipped in the bud as shown through the arrest of Wangari, Muturi and the student leader and so on just to show that might is right in post-independent Kenya. Equally remarkable, the exploitation of the masses has even reached a pitch where the so-called local businessmen barefacedly organise a competition to crown the best thieves and robbers in post-independent Kenya in front of international delegations. It must not be overlooked by the way, as mentioned earlier, that the powerless people's land can be sold off at any time when the wealthy businessmen feel like carrying out a plan to make money. Most of the time, those powerless people are bribed to sell their plots of land at very affordable price, and the same plots of lands are sold very expensive to whom it may concern. Faced with this situation which keeps on lasting for a lengthy period of time, the female character Wariinga feels that the mission of saving

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her fellow countrymen from the noose of the oppressors has befallen her and she uses the pistol she is entrusted to keep to dismantle and fight that group of wealthy businessmen to their last retrenchments.

2- The image of woman in traditional Africa

Before getting into the heart of the matter, that is to highlight how African women can carve out a place for themselves and achieve their own empowerment today, we set out to lay emphasis on the image that people generally have of women in African traditional societies. Our decision to approach this topic from this angle is to draw the readers' attention on how women were formerly regarded in the past and how that vision has enslaved African women for many decades thus preventing the latter from achieving or fulfilling their own empowerment up to the moment when some feminists have made up their mind to enlighten women on the great responsibility befalling them as regards the achievement of social struggles and therefore the improvement of their social conditions for them to reverse or quash the old vision of the former days which is combated by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in both *Devil on the Cross* and *Petals of Blood*, the two novels on which is based the topic of this paper.

To set the stage, it is worth saying that in our traditional societies, the role of women is restricted to household chores, childbearing, farming, animal husbandry and small or petty trade. Hence, it is throwing money down the drain than to envisage sending one's daughter (s) to school. Similarly, it is equally really pretentious from a woman or a young girl in our traditional societies to claim to hold a position of influence in society. So, for many years or decades, this stereotype has remained embedded in women's mind in Africa, which accounts for the fact that a lot of women are really averse to running for presidency or legislative elections because women themselves are quite sure that they won't go further ahead with these plans.

As can be seen, in women's mindset, there seems to be constructed a certain complex of inferiority which leads women to think that the highest ranks of the social ladder are for men. Even such trainings as mechanics, welding, brick-laying and so forth which require muscular strength are supposed to be reserved to men because as the common saying goes, "woman is the weaker sex". In the same regard, that same complex of inferiority leads women to be totally submissive or subservient, if we may be allowed to speak so, to their husband whatever situation they go through as can be seen through such characters as Maman Téné in *Sous l'orage* by Seydou Badian, Mara in *Beyond the Horizon* by Amma Darko, Wanjiku, Mumbi's mother in *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Old Niakoro Cissé in *God's Bits of Wood* by Sembène Ousmane just to quote these examples.

However, with the advent of modernity which is triggered by the setting up of schools in Africa at large and even in African landlocked areas; and the breakthroughs or

the spillovers of the means of communication impelled by the radio, the television and the internet, the traditional image of woman in Africa is thought to be outworn and more and more women have embarked on working their way up to fame by deciding to reverse the traditional trend of bygone days. Hence, in keeping with the promotion of the value of women at large and African women in particular to fight the scourge and improve their social conditions, more and more feminists have embarked on raising African women's awareness on the efforts they can really put forth so as to carve out a place for themselves on the social, political and even economic arena.

3- African women grasping the nettle

This part essentially deals with the responsibility of African women towards themselves as dealt with in the selected novels. With a view not to dovetailing the issue, we have laid emphasis on the female characters that have carved out a place for themselves in the plots of the selected novels.

To set the stage, we must say that like the male characters in the selected novels, the female characters are depicted facing a real twist of fate because they are in the grip of a predicament which really calls for their resorting to strong means so as to improve their living conditions. In fact, in both *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, the reader is introduced to a post-independent Kenya where the living conditions are really tougher for nearly all the citizens except the minority in position of influence from whom the great majority expect a great change after the departure of the white men. Interestingly enough, the minority rather proves to be hand in glove with the former colonial masters to plunder the resources and the wealths of their own country.

In *Petals of Blood*, the major reasons which have led the people of Ilmorog to organise a great trek to the city to meet their Member of Parliament Nderi wa Riera are their awful living conditions which are still worsened by a drought which has lasted for a lengthy period of time. To this woeful natural disaster, other sources of complaints are unemployment rate which is soaring up as well as the minority's decision to snatch the powerless people's ancestral land through underhanded ways.

Faced with such situations, the people of Ilmorog have resolved to react, and among the ringleaders of the resistance movements can be named two female characters notably Wanja, the professional whore as well as Old Nyakinyua, her grandmother who, in spite of her old age and her failing health, is committed to backing up the masses in their struggles till her last breath. It is worth observing that to cope with the climate hazards, the people of Ilmorog have organised under the initiative of Karega a great trek to the city to inform M.P Nderi wa Riera of their awful living conditions. During that great trek which has lasted many days, the people of Ilmorog are backed up by Wanja and Old Nyakinyua who have accepted to walk all the way back to the city.

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It can be said that like her maternal aunt who has shown bravery during Mau Mau revolt, an uprising during which the aunt has carried "guns and bullets to the forest hidden in baskets full of unga." (Ngugi; 1977; p. 65) with a view to helping her husband who is a hard-core Mau Mau, Wanja is paving the way for the women's folk not to rest on their laurels and wait for happiness to fall right into their laps. As can be seen, Wanja, the prostitute, has backed up the men by walking on their sides and she is paying great heed to what is going on during the trek. She is the one who has informed nearly everybody about Joseph's illness so that Abdulla and Old Njuguna go quickly into the bush to look for some roots and green leaves to treat him (Ngugi; 1977; p. 145).

Even Wanja's grandmother Nyakinyua is also a great example to follow since during the trek, the old woman has refused a ride in the cart and has walked all the way across the plain and the bush challenging thorns, the venomous snakes, thirst and hunger. This is a strong signal of the contribution of all and sundry to social struggles and especially the woman folk which rightly or wrongly has been relegated to the foreground for many decades.

Once back home from the city, the people of Ilmorog also have to cope with their land's expropriation by the City Council's through the banks' decision to foreclose on the peasants and herdsmen's land so that the area can be used by the businessmen and the people holding a position of influence for tourism. This decision has been taken at a moment when Wanja and Abdulla have just embarked on their business partnership with a view to working their way through the social ladder. Wanja Kahii and Abdulla can be seen as one of the great architects of the change which has seen the light of day in Ilmorog. In fact, they have agreed to merge their efforts so as to conduct their business ventures together. As a result, Wanja has recruited three other barmaids and the business is doing well since travellers and many people come there to have a drink and also for a flee with the gorgeous barmaids. Their business ventures have reached a pitch where they are the only local people to successfully bid for a building plot in the New Ilmorog and start working on it (Ngugi; 1977; p. 270).

After their land's foreclosure, Wanja is clever enough to use the money she has got from her previous business with Abdulla to build a huge wooden bungalow some distance from the shanty town which she turned into what is known as the *Sunshine Lodge* to make more money. As can be seen, Wanja has reached a point where she cannot break ties with the new job of whoredom as she tries to explain to Abdulla when the latter goes to tell her to stop that infamous activity:

She stood up, turned away and walked into an inner room. Then she came back. She was calm. 'My heart is tearless about what I have committed myself to. You know I have tried. Where was I to throw these girls that were part of the old Theng'eta premises? To others who too

would profit from their bodies? No, I am not doing this for their sakes. From now onwards it will always be: Wanja First. I have valued your friendship. And I hope we can remain friends. But this is my cup. I must drink it.' (Ngugi; 1977; pp.311-12).

Even if right from the onset, Abdulla does not go much for the new activity in which Wanja has indulged, he eventually seems to find her right since Munira and him have ultimately taken to drinking and singing in praise of Wanja for want of any better activity and above all to drown all their worries (Ngugi; 1977; p. 314). Abdulla as for him has become more pitiful since with the arrival of Karega to Ilmorog, Munira feels closer to Karega. Abdulla even once admits cursing himself for taking part in the Mau Mau revolt which has won him to lose one leg. Through Wanja, Ngugi wants to impart to his readers how women at large and African women in particular can break ties with the old image that people used to have of them in the former days by fighting the scourge and not let themselves be crushed by the social conditions that they go through.

From the above, it can be said in all fairness to Old Nyakinyua that she is the true female protagonist of *Petals of Blood* in so much as contrary to her grandchild Wanja, she has remained her old self again by being faithful to her convictions till her last breath. As regards Wanja, she has ultimately fallen prey to the new trend imposed on them by the new leaders by demanding that nothing will be free as before. A convincing example illustrating this is that in spite of her "failing health and flesh", Old Nyakinyua has decided to fight back when her ancestral land is taken thus trampling "from hut to hut calling upon the peasants of Ilmorog to get together and fight it out" (Ngugi; 1977; p. 276). Her main objective is to organise all the dispossessed of Ilmorog into a protest and raise an outcry about what the powerless are going through in the hands of black oppressors after the achievement of Kenyan independence. Even if her dreams are foiled or thwarted, it is worth observing that the old woman must be a great source of inspiration to the downtrodden people in the world at large and the woman folk in particular about how they can impact social changes.

Nonetheless, it must be said in all fairness to Wanja that even if she has taken to going whoring in order to face the potential challenges lying ahead of her, this is the only alternative left to her since in post-independent Kenya, as shown in *Petals of Blood*, the only way out of the plights inflicted on the powerless people lies in the latter's decision either to go with the tide or to let themselves be carried away with it and the women who have decided to refrain from indulging in that activity get a raw deal and are left stranded. So, what matters for the time being is to find one's way out of a predicament since as the common say goes "what cannot be prevented must be endured". And this is unquestionably the main reason underlying Wanja's indulging in prostitution

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to achieve success all the more since she has not even gone further ahead at school to yearn for holding a position of influence in the society so as to combat those who make things hard for the great majority of people among whom women are the hardest hit.

In *Devil on the Cross*, the major reasons which have led the characters to organise a great strike is the disastrous or squalid living conditions of the masses who rub shoulders with a minority group that leads a life of ease in the main cities. To cap it all, the minority group invites the down-and-out majority at Ilmorog not to show that they sympathise with their plights or sufferings but they want to vie among themselves to select the best thieves and robbers who exploit the masses by reaping where they have not even sown. Two female characters stand out in *Devil on the Cross*, and each one of them bears the indelible scars of the sufferings inflicted on the majority group. These are respectively Wariinga and Wangari. The former is introduced to the reader as a young student hailing from a poor family and unfortunately, she is impregnated by a very well-off man known as the Old Rich Man after having made wonderful promises to that young student of a callow mind. Once she breaks the news of her pregnancy to the Old Rich Man, the latter refuses to accept the responsibility of his misdemeanour thus leaving the young girl deal with it in her parents' custody.

Not discouraged by her earlier experience, Wariinga is then determined to cope on her own. Self-reliant in her capacities to face the challenges of life, she has another image of her own personality ranging from the way she gets dressed and the way she does her hair. With this in view, she "has her dresses made for her or she buys them ready-made" (Ngugi; 1982; p. 218) and resolves to enrol at *Polytechnic* to improve her skills in engineering. She is then "filled with the joy of someone who matches the power of her mind and body struggling against nature, turning molten iron, for instance into products designed to enhance human lives" (Ngugi; 1982; p. 218). Although the first year at the *Polytechnic* proves to be a challenging one since she has to pay all her fees and costs contrary to the other students who have sponsors, Wariinga is determined to go ahead. She does not even "want to bind herself to Gaturia or to anyone else with strings of gratitude for charity" (Ngugi 1980, p. 219). She then carries on "odd jobs like hairdressing in a *Beauty Saloon*, or typing research papers and dissertations" to make money (Ngugi; 1982; p. 219).

The second year is less demanding since by a stroke of luck Wariinga finds a job as a self-employed mechanic at *Mwihotori Kiwanja Garage*, near Muniyua Road by challenging some men at work with a lorry which has an unpleasant noise. "From that day on, a deep friendship developed between Wariinga and the other workers. The more they saw Wariinga at work and observed that she did not avoid any type of work, the more they respected her" (Ngugi; 1982; p. 221). What has equally spread Wariinga's

fame to every corner of the city is the fact that she has knocked down a man who has come with his car for a check. Bewitched by Wariinga's beauty, the man "started teasing her light-heartedly, and then he touched her breasts" (Ngugi; 1982; p. 221). In spite of Wariinga's warning him firmly, "the man took this to be the usual woman's come-hither pretence at offence, intended to lure him on" and goes to the length of fondling her buttocks when she bends over her work again. In a fit of anger, Wariinga, "assaulted him with so many judo kicks and karate chops that for a time he saw stars." (Ngugi; 1982; p. 221). From that moment onwards, "the respect of the other workers for her increased, and they sang of their diligence, perseverance and courage" (Ngugi; 1982; pp. 221-2).

At long last, Wariinga gets "her EACE, a certificate to indicate that she passes English, Swahili and Religion." (Ngugi; 1982; p. 18). Her enrolment at the Nairobi Secretarial College enables her to get her Pitman's certificate and eligible for applying for a job; which she does at *Mr Boss'* company as secretary and shorthand. But, her sojourn at that company is short-lived since Wariinga is dismissed for refusing to go out with her boss Mr Kihara.

From that moment onward, Wariinga undergoes her descent into the hell since after her dismissal by Mr Boss Kihara, the Managing Director of a well-known firm, the *Champion Construction Company* in Tom Mboya Street, the door of troubles is widely open to her. In fact, thinking to find solace with the new fiancé whom she has found and to whom she has pledged to be faithful, that same self-day, and more specifically in the evening, Wariinga is abandoned by her sweetheart John Kimwana knee-deep in the mire of her troubles because the latter blames her of being Boss Kihara's mistress. As misfortunes never comes alone, that is the beginning of an endless trap for Wariinga who like Ahouna, the protagonist of *Un piège sans fin* by the Beninese Olympe Bhély-Quenum, comes into contact with a real predicament. As one trouble seems to spawn another one, the next day morning, that is on Saturday, Wariinga is visited by her landlord, the owner of the house in Olafa Jericho, Nairobi, who summons her to vacate or quit the premises without further delay as she is increasing the rent of a house that looks like a bird's nest of which floor is "pitted with holes, the walls gaped with cracks," and "the ceiling leaked" (Ngugi; 1982; p. 10). As Wariinga objects to that order on the ground "that the matter should be referred to the *Rent Tribunal* for settlement," the landlord climbs into his Mercedes Benz and comes back in a twinkling of an eye with "three thugs wearing sunglasses" who humiliate Wariinga by throwing her things out of the room and locking "the door with a new padlock." (Ngugi; 1982; p. 10). To bid her farewell and by way of deterring her, one the thugs tosses a piece of paper at her, a paper on which is written:

We are the Devil's Angels: Private Business.

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Make the slightest move to take this matter to the authorities, and we shall issue you with a single ticket to God's kingdom or Satan's – a one-day ticket to Heaven or Hell (Ngugi; 1982; p. 10).

This violence on Wariinga is not exerted on her alone but on all women in Kenya and all over the world. This is an expression of patriarchy that should always prevail according to some of its advocates such as this landlord, his thugs as well as Mr Kihara. Unfortunately, women have woken up and will defeat them.

Careworn and being at loss, Wariinga quickly makes up her mind to go back to her parents after stacking her things in the next-door room belonging to a Mkamba woman so as to make the preparations for the journey. As can be seen, although Wariinga is endowed with a great natural beauty that bewitches men, she has not made up her mind to go whoring and grease men's palms. Instead, she has resolved to continue the struggle so that the woman folk can really achieve their empowerment in a society where women at large are trampled underfoot. As though to side with the poets of Negritude and especially Léopold Sédar Senghor who has deified African woman's beauty in one of his poems entitled *Femme noire*, Wariinga is showing that her beauty needs to be valued and treasured contrary to what the businessmen in post-independent Kenyan think.

Waiting for a bus to give her a lift home, Wariinga loses consciousness and as she is about to fall, she feels someone grabbing her by her right arm to support her and she lets herself be led out of the sun to the steps of the *Kaka Heavenly Massage and Hairdressing Salon*. More importantly still, in her daydream, Wariinga sees a crowd of people dressed in rags who are getting ready to crucify the devil who leads the masses or the common run of people "into the blindness of the heart and into the deafness of the mind" (Ngugi; 1982; p. 7) through his mischievous attitude which consists in shedding crocodile's tears after building "Hell for the people on Earth" (Ngugi; 1982; p. 13). Surprisingly enough, that devil turns out to be the thieves or local businessmen and capitalists who are corrupt to the marrow of the bones. In spite of all his entreaties, the devil is anathematized and finally finished off with by the masses who are pitifully dressed in rags whereas the devil himself is smartly dressed "in a silk suit and carries a walking stick shaped like a folded umbrella." (Ngugi; 1982; p. 13).

As Wariinga wakes up from her daydream, she sees the man who has helped her standing not far from her. Through their discussion, Wariinga explains to the man that she is weary of Nairobi. It is only then that the man tells her that corruption has reached worrying proportions in all the countries that have experienced colonialism because such countries "have been taught the principle and system of self-interest and have been told to forget the ancient songs that glorify the notion of collective good. They have been taught new songs, new hymns that celebrate the acquisition of

money." (Idem, (Ngugi; 1982; p. 15). These countries are finding it difficult to stave off poverty for the simple reason that they have taken it upon themselves to learn how to run their economies from American experts; which accounts for the fact that:

Today Nairobi teaches:
Crookedness to the upright,
Meanness to the kind,
Hatred to the loving,
Evil to the good. (Ngugi; 1982; p. 16)

Before parting, the man gives Wariinga a card inviting her to a "feast of thieves organized by the devil." which turns out to be "a competition for thieves and robbers at Ilmorog" (Ngugi; 1982; p. 29). These thieves are usually "local businessmen and capitalists" who "vie with one another to boast about how they"⁴ have become rich. Dumbfound or flabbergasted, Wariinga realizes that she is living in a world of utter corruption and rotteness.

Once at Nyaakîma bus station, Wariinga waits for a long time before finding a very old car that looks like being taken from a rubbish dump or that belongs to the days of Noah. But the driver has endeavoured to disguise its old age by paining many eye-and mind-catching ads on it and even calls people's "attention to it with words and songs that were intended to distract" their "eyes from its decrepit condition" (Ngugi; 1982; pp. 30-31). Much to her surprise, the car which she has found happens to take other people going to the same celebration to which she is invited. While trying to intoxicate the passengers with the car's excellent qualities, Robin Mwaura, the car driver does not disclose his lust for money saying that: "there was no universe he would not visit, no river that he would not cross, no mountain that he would not climb, no crime that he would not commit in loyal obedience to the molten god of money" (Ngugi; 1982; p. 32). Among the passengers on board the car can be named Wariinga, Gatuiria who is a University teacher at Nairobi off to Ilmorog with a suitcase; Muturi who is a plumber, a carpenter and mason and the only person to speak on behalf of the downtrodden at the celebration. To those people can also be added a woman named Wangari carrying a sisal basket and another passenger in a grey suit and a tie with a pattern of red flowers holding in his right hand, a small black, leather suitcase with a shiny aluminium lining and his eyes shielded with black glasses named Mwireri wa Mukiraai.

We are then introduced to the second female character named Wangari who, halfway through their travel, lets it know that she cannot afford to pay the fare. Taken aback, the driver puts on the brakes abruptly to ask her either to pay the fare or to get down in the wilderness. But the other passengers set out to pay her fare. It is only then that Wangari says that she has fought for her native country Kenya with her own hands, thus availing herself of the same opportunity to confess to the other passengers that as a small girl, she has

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carried "many bullets and many guns to" the freedom fighters in the forest with her legs during Mau Mau revolt even if this requires from her to slip "through the lines of the enemy and their home guard allies" hence regretting that once the independence are achieved, the new generation people only think of the power of money (Ngugi; 1982; p. 40). She even goes on to say that:

When we fought for independence, it was not money that did the fighting: it was love. Love for Kenya, our country, was what gave our young men courage to face the prospect of being mowed down by enemy bullets – and they would not let go of the soil. When we fought for independence, we did not look at the way a person dressed and say: 'This one is dressed in rags. Let him be thrown into jail.' In fact, the man in rags was the one in the front line, and he did not know the word retreat. But the man in the tie would run to pick up the hat of the imperialist felled by the bullets from our front line and reserve forces! And when you hear me talk like this, our people, don't think that I've been drinking alcohol or smoking bhang. No. I'm speaking in this way because of what I have gone through in the Nairobi we have left behind. Modern Haraambe ... I don't know where it is leading us, the Kenyan people....' (Ngugi; 1982; pp. 40-41).

From the quotation above, one can guess that Wangari is straightforward in what she is saying. As a matter of fact, what matters during the Mau Mau revolt is loyalty to one's country although there are still traitors who are hand in glove with the white men to plunder the resources in their own country.

The way that second female character speaks reminds us of two female characters in Sembène Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood*. The former character who is Penda stands as the ringleader of women through the long march from Dakar to Thiès to back up the strikers. As regards the second female character in *God's Bits of Wood*, she turns out to be Ramatoulaye, the woman who, out of sheer bravery, has killed the ram of the Iman who is hand in glove with the white men.

Pitiful enough, women like Wangari in *Devil on the Cross* do not care the type of job they will find in the big cities: "So, alone in my hut, I told myself this: I can't fail to find a job in Nairobi. At least I could sweep out offices or wipe children's bottoms. I don't mind what job I do, for he who is given a piece of meat does not expect fat as well." (Ngugi; 1982; p. 42).

Even in a shop owned by a black man, Wangari is told that the only job she can be offered is that of spreading her legs since women with mature bodies are experts in that job (Ngugi 1982, p. 42). Not discouraged to find an employment one day, Wangari has had a mishap while roaming the streets or shops for jobs. In fact, for the record, Wangari unfortunately comes back to an Indian shop where she has already gone, and the black man there calls the police

to take her suspecting her of being ill-intentioned or being a spy employed robbers on shops (Ngugi; 1982; p. 43). She is then imprisoned in a cell which turns out to be "a lair for mosquitoes, lice, fleas and bedbugs" for three nights before being taken to court for trial (Ngugi; 1982; p. 43). What one must keep in mind here is the fact that women, through the example of Wangari, are fighting hard to get trained, to find a job. They do not wait for other people mainly men to do these things for them. They fight for self-empowerment for their own benefit first and then for their society and last their country.

The fact that those characters happen to take the same bus to Ilmorog is not gratuitous and can be accounted for Ngugi's desire to confront both sections of the society concerned by the situation prevailing in the country for a radical change of behaviour; a situation which has as name wretchedness or utter poverty (Ngugi; 1982; p. 41), unemployment and the exploitation of peasants: "*When peasants grow food, it goes to Nairobi and to the other big towns. As far as we peasants are concerned, all our labour goes to fatten Nairobi and the big towns*" (Ngugi; 1982; p. 42).

All these details aim at showing that, as the female characters of *Devil on the Cross* have realised, Wanja, one of the female character of *Petals of Blood* has also come to the conclusion that the exploitation of the downtrodden masses in post independent Kenya has reached a pitch where the only alternative left to them is either to go with the tide or to accept being carried away by it: "*You eat or you are eaten. [...] I have had to be hard ... It is the only way ... the only way ... Look at Abdulla ... reduced to a fruit seller ... oranges ... sheepskins ... No, I will never return to the herd of victims ... Never ... Never.*" (Ngugi; 1977; pp. 293-94).

CONCLUSION

In the light of the above, it can be concluded that through the selected novels, Ngugi has endeavoured to redress the distorted image that people generally have of women in African traditional societies by showing how women can really impact positive changes in the society today. As can be noticed, to achieve their own empowerment in the society and challenge the dated stereotypes of bygone days, women in Africa really need to muster their courage to break all the ties that have kept them in bondage for many decades. Gender equality, as shown through the selected novels implies a radical change of mindset by women to value their potentials. In *Devil on the Cross*, Wariinga's "training in mechanical engineering, fitting and turning and moulding, is a very important step" forward and better still "a kind of signal to indicate to other girls their abilities and potential" (Ngugi; 1982; p. 244).

However, the question that crops up our mind is how far this revolution of mindset can go? In fact, can women really take up that bet without the help of men? In other

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words, does feminism mindset really imply that in a household or within a community, a woman is equal to men as people assume in developed countries? To provide an answer to these thought-provoking questions, it is worth giving the devil its due by confessing that, admittedly women really need to fight hard so as to come to the fore in the society, but as Ngugi has shown in the elected novels, women's empowerment will be an idle word if men's are left out since as Seydou Badian has pointedly observed in his well-known novel *Sous l'orage*, a man has no importance without those around him. We come in this world in other people's hands and also finish the last stage of our earthly sojourn in their hands. As though to side with Seydou Badian, the famous philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau observed in *Du contrat social* that we must not overstep the bounds when enjoying our freedom.

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¹See: Brunell, Laura. Burket, Elinor, 2019, "Feminism sociology", Available at: britannica.com/topic/feminism. Accessed on 19 January 2020.

² Idem

³ Availablbe at:

[//www.google.com/search?q=marxist+criticism&tbm=isch&source=iu&ictx=1&fir=PPb3CCM1stpbEM%253A%252Cj7bomO2zFMqfVM%252C%252Fm%252F0dgnc](http://www.google.com/search?q=marxist+criticism&tbm=isch&source=iu&ictx=1&fir=PPb3CCM1stpbEM%253A%252Cj7bomO2zFMqfVM%252C%252Fm%252F0dgnc). Accessed on 8 September 2019

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