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‘The master’s dance to the master’s voice’: revolutionary nationalism and women’s representation in Ngugi wa Thiong’o

A writer needs people around him. . . . For me, in writing a novel, I love to hear the voices of the people . . . I need the vibrant voices of beautiful women: their touch, their sighs, their tears, their laughter. (Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Detained)¹

With these affirmative words, the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o points to the strong position that women characters have held in his work over the years. It is a position virtually unique in Anglophone African literature. Not only is it the case that the internationally renowned African writers concentrating on themes of national self-assertion have by and large been male, but that in their work the emancipation of women has generally been rated as of secondary importance relative to the liberation of nations or of peoples. For this reason Ngugi’s exertions to include women in his vision of a Kenya liberated from neocolonial domination merit recognition. Yet, at the same time, precisely because of the prominence of his achievement, the enduring masculinist cast of his ideas cannot be ignored. For it is by singling out female voices, by fixing women beneath the evaluative epithets ‘vibrant’ and ‘beautiful’, that Ngugi gives way to that tendency to objectify women which, even in the 1989 Matigari, qualifies his attempt to grant them a leading role in the revolutionary struggle for Kenyan liberation.²

The ambivalence in Ngugi’s attitude towards women forms a significant, if not metonymic, part of a wider contradiction undercutting his populist nationalist programme for a new Kenya. Beginning with the writing of the epic-length Petals of Blood (1977), a project that extended across the early and mid-1970s, the time of his incarceration by the Kenyan state for alleged subversive practices, Ngugi came unequivocally to identify with the plight of the neocolonially betrayed Kenyan peasantry. His nationalism of the 1960s thus turned increasingly revolutionary and openly Marxist – an ideological trajectory to which Matigari still provides the high point. (A novel in Gikuyu, Murogi wa Kigoogo, slated for publication in 1999, has at the time of writing not yet
appeared.) Whereas in the early novels the concept of the nation was identified with a leader figure, a Kenyatta-type patriarch, it is in the more recent work somewhat rigidly defined in terms of ‘the people’, led by ‘patriots’ and bound together by a shared history and cultural traditions. Liberation, however, is still seen to take place within the edifice of a Kenyan nation-state. For Ngugi it is through the formation of a truly national culture, through the reconstitution of the people’s history language and identity, that oppressed groups are restored to themselves. If anything, it would seem, his revolutionary ideas have worked to consolidate and more precisely define his Kenyan nationalism.

To Ngugi, however – and here lies the contradiction – a revolutionary future is envisaged as involving participation in an ostensibly homogeneous culture centred in explicitly Gikuyu (as opposed to say Luo or Masai) myths and history. Moreover, the nation is defined in unitary terms as an overarching people’s nation in which other peoples as well as other sectors of society within Kenya would appear to occupy a secondary position. It is self-evident that this adherence to monolithic national definitions and concepts of national authority carries the negative potential of undermining Ngugi’s proclaimed ideals for joyous populist expression and the people’s (or peoples’) self-realisation. The ‘harmony in polyphony’ of Kenyan cultures that he celebrates, in effect becomes a national unisonance that has worrying implications for some of his fondest aspirations. On the nationalist level these would entail his project to champion the indigenous cultures and languages of Kenya and, as far as his commitment to social emancipation is concerned, his endeavour to give pre-eminence to the role of women in the national struggle. His compelling rhetoric to the contrary, Ngugi in certain important areas gives his backing to the authoritarian and also patriarchal supports of the neocolonial regime he seeks to overthrow.

This tendency ironically becomes especially clear in his diligent efforts to include women in ‘the people’s’ struggle. Investing his leading women characters with the dignity of ages or with an almost bionic power, Ngugi has erected heroines of immense, if not impossible, stature: either great mothers of a future Kenya, or aggressive, gun-toting (effectively masculinised) revolutionaries. As he does at the start of Detained: A Writer’s Prison Diary (1981), where he hails Wariinga, a central character in Devil on the Cross (1982), as his inspiration, his ‘heroine of toil’, he tends, in his more recent work in particular, to set up his women characters as icons. They are allegorical figures representing all that is resilient and strong in the Kenyan, implicitly Gikuyu, people. He thus seeks to identify the liberation of African women with his resistance to all forms of oppression. Yet, by maintaining relations of dominance in his portrayal of revolutionary forces, he is pressed either to enlist his women characters into the ranks of a male-ordered struggle, or to elevate women to the status of mascot at the head of the (male?) peasant and workers’ march. Ngugi’s
neglect, both of the gendered and the structural nature of power, whether that
power is held by national or by proletarian forces, ultimately works to inhibit
his rousing call for a new dispensation in Kenya.

As suits the name he has made for himself as a revolutionary Kenyan writer,
Ngugi has stimulated positive critical ratings by coming out in favour of the
liberation of women in his non-fictional statements also.6 As women are ‘the
most exploited and oppressed section of the entire working class’, he will, he
maintains, seek to create in his fiction ‘a picture of a strong determined woman
with a will to resist and to struggle’ as an example for his audience.7 He also
makes frequent reference to the parts played by women like Mary Nyanjiru and
Me Kitilili in resistance to Kenyan colonial oppression,8 and to how women
participated on equal terms with men in the dramatic experiments that he
helped to organise at Kamiirithu in Kenya in 1977.9

It cannot escape notice, however, that Ngugi’s gaze remains fixed on the
‘most remarkable’ historical figures (of men as well as women, it should be
added).10 His own protestations notwithstanding, he has increasingly sidelined
the colourful crowds of *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) with their songs and ribald
badinage in favour of single dominant personalities who stand as points of
moral focus in his texts. Significant in this respect is his report ‘Women in cul-
tural work: the fate of Kamiirithu people’s theatre in Kenya’ (1983), in which
the ostensible pro-woman stance is rather obviously grafted onto a fairly
straightforward factual account of the experience.11 Related inconsistencies
fracture Ngugi’s many indictments of the repressions and exclusions of colo-
rial education. In *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), his study of colonial and
national cultural practice, he chooses to overlook the ways in which women
have been silenced by colonial and traditional power structures. Despite his
professed delight at hearing women’s voices (as entertainment on the side
perhaps), he never mentions a woman writer, neither in his numerous inven-
tories of canonical literary names nor in the lists of respected
figures which he
himself suggests for university curricula.12

It would seem that in Ngugi’s view, as has been conventional across many
postcolonial liberation movements, women’s emancipation takes a second
place to the national struggle against neocolonialism. The two struggles cannot
be seen as mutually reinforcing. In accordance with a too-familiar formula, in
order to ensure the liberation of Kenya from the grip of neocolonial powers,
women are asked supportively to wait in the sidelines for the new social order
as structured by men to emerge. Alternatively, they may usefully contribute to
the struggle by fighting alongside ‘their’ men, but without distracting them-
selves or derailing the cause by manoeuvring for their own advantage after
arms have been laid down. Yet, as histories of national liberation movements
have shown, the establishment of a new order rarely if ever brings extended
opportunities for women.13 Traditional attitudes and roles prove resistant to
change: patriarchal laws may be relaxed, or, in a crisis situation, adapted, but once the desired social transformation has been secured, political leadership tends to reimpose gendered structures with more or less the same severity as their former capitalist and/or colonial foes. Gender is in this respect the last redoubt of the radical activist. Considering his fervent commitment to liberation for all Kenya, Ngugi might have been expected to have in some way countered the sobering evidence of history. Yet apart from a glib didactic statement in *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982) regarding sex equality, an equality simply taken as understood by its spokesman Gicaamba,14 Ngugi’s most direct reference to social arrangements after the revolution is his 1981 blueprint for ‘an education for a national patriotic culture’. ‘Patriotic education’ will produce individuals who are ‘masters of their natural and social environment’, ‘fully prepared in their twin struggle with nature and with other men’ (emphasis added).15 As the nation must be an association of producers who are also fighters, military training forms an important part of the programme. No provision is made for those who are the reproducers or nurturers of the nation.

In a 1982 interview for *Marxism Today* Ngugi makes his hierarchical ordering of values clear: though ‘factors’ of caste and race may contribute to social divisions he stresses that these must not be allowed to blur the ‘basic’ reality of class struggle (the ‘gender factor’ is completely omitted).16 Ngugi could, it is true, justify his accentuating class in this way by contending that the imposition of colonial structures has aggravated existing patriarchal attitudes and, consequently, that the more immediate evil of (neo)colonialism must first be eradicated. Indeed, although he tends to see the coloniser as the chief oppressor, Ngugi has acknowledged the broadly ‘reactionary’ nature of traditional social norms.17 And yet, confidently setting class above gender distinctions while still putting in a rhetorical claim for women’s liberation, he does not pause to examine the overtly masculine premises of his economic arguments. He ceaselessly refers to the workers of Kenya, but he does not define precisely what he means by a worker. From his portrayal of those who work, however, it is clear that he views ‘productive’ labour as male-dominated: even in his utopian fiction, the workers, as opposed to the peasants, are male. Waringa of *Devil on the Cross*, in becoming an engineer, is immediately a special case, a unique ‘professional’. In her previous job as a secretary she was presumably not a ‘worker’. These divisions can, perhaps, be defended on account of their correspondence to East African reality. In general terms, too, women’s work spaces traditionally lie outside the field of so-called ‘real’ labour. Yet it is in his refusal to valorise in any way the activity of the marginal economic sector that Ngugi’s disregard for the work of women becomes significant. In so far as most of Ngugi’s women characters can be slotted into either one of two categories: of mothers, assumed to be non-workers, and of prostitutes, like Wanja of *Petals of Blood*, part of a lumpen-proletariat – both groups are automatically, and
conveniently, sidelined. They are available either for over-valuation as the mascot heroines of national troops, as are reformed and conscientised prostitutes like Guthera in *Matigari*, or they are enlisted as the literal reproducers of those troops – support roles in an essentially male struggle.

Despite this, even in the face of such gender polarisation, we should pause to acknowledge that Ngugi’s women characters do remain pioneers in the field of Anglophone African fiction written by men. In their strength of character, their spirit and self-reliance, they are undoubtedly unique. More often than not they demonstrate a firmer resolve and a deeper understanding than their male counterparts. Wanja is motivated by an energy and a conviction in the execution of her plans that even the revolutionary leader Karega in *Petals of Blood* cannot match. Wariinga blazing a trail of defiance through the final pages of *Devil on the Cross* must leave her vacillating beloved Gatuiria behind her. In *A Grain of Wheat*, *Petals of Blood* and *Matigari* the redemptive group of central characters is dominated by a single woman – linking them together, as in Mumbi’s case in *A Grain of Wheat*, or forcing them apart, as does Wanja in her affairs with Munira and Karega.

Even so, it is clear that Mumbi and Wanja and perhaps even the daughterly figure of Guthera stand at the position of epicentre primarily on the strength of their *essentialised being* – in that they are women or, more precisely, biological females. Moreover, whether as lover, prostitute or potential childbearer, it is basically as sexual partner (or in Guthera’s case, formerly sexualised body) that the male characters are drawn to them. Ngugi in effect fits his women characters into the thoroughly well-worn stereotypes of mother and of whore. In view of the prevalent biblical imagery in his work, we see woman defined either as Mother Mary, the long-suffering Mumbi, named for the mother of the Gikuyu, or as the prostitute Mary Magdalene, Wanja, who leads men, both the capitalists (Kimeria) and their opponents (Munira), into perdition. That remarkable magnetic power of Ngugi’s women to which the critics David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe, among others, refer in glowing terms is simply another manifestation of the potent, nameless forces with which women as ‘nature’ or as ‘wild’ have traditionally been associated.18

It is interesting that with respect to his determination in the later novels to develop powerful women characters as counterparts to the strong hero figures he favours, in Ngugi’s early work similar tendencies emerge in embryonic form. In particular, as the focus in the early novels is more on the remote past and the pristine origins of Gikuyu people, mother figures signify prominently. In the *Secret Lives* (1975) stories the mothers suffer and find fulfilment in so far as they can give expression to their maternal instincts and thus satisfy their husband’s demands. Mwihaki of *Weep Not, Child* (1964), and Muthoni and the younger Nyambura of *The River Between* (1965), in their courage and endurance figure as Mumbis-in-the-making, and, like Mumbi, are consistently
viewed only in their connection with men. Mwihaki, for example, gives Njoroge strength and support when he is wavering, yet the ideals she upholds are based on what he has taught her. Nyambura and Muthoni for their part passively represent the two sides of a conflict over female genital mutilation or ‘circumcision’ directed solely by men. At this stage of the writer’s career, admittedly, these stereotypes were predictable: the younger Ngugi had not yet come out in support of sexual equality, let alone of class conflict. Yet it is for this very reason that the characterisation of women in the early novels provides a useful point of reference. Here Ngugi upholds a male-dominated order by establishing archetypal roles and patterns of relationships that will continue, albeit in transmuted form, into the later novels.

Characteristically, woman in the early novels is, if not silent super-heroine, then doomed to be equally silent victim. In The River Between Muthoni’s excision wound (sign of her submission to a restrictive tradition) proves fatal, yet she dies in a beatific state. She believes she has been ‘made beautiful in the tribe’, that is to say, she has been glorified as a woman by submitting to the ancient laws of the elders, the fathers of the village. In A Grain of Wheat, it is not merely the case that Njeri and Wambuku lay down their lives for the hero Kihika. As though to drive home the image of woman as victim, Ngugi also introduces the one account of a rape (of a white woman) in all the fiction about the 1950s Mau Mau conflict. In the 1992 revised edition of the novel this incident is revealingly rewritten as the killing of the woman Dr Lynd’s dog.

Moving to the later novels, in Petals of Blood, once again, a woman is used as victim. As a thriving madam, obviously equipped with an extremely long-suffering body and durable vagina, Wanja becomes a ready symbol for the ravaged state of Kenya. Yet her courage and resourcefulness in turning her exploitation as a woman and as a member of the oppressed classes to her advantage is finally discredited. As Karega self-righteously makes explicit, thereby laying down male law, her struggle means very little because her method of resistance is simply to exploit in return. His final word is one of condemnation; no possibility of negotiation and certainly no expression of tenderness is permitted. And yet at times the only way in which Wanja was able to survive was ‘to sell [herself] over and over again’. Indeed, Ngugi allows her this; her immense resilience is recognised: but, in the last pages of the novel, the priority is given to the workers’ struggle. The representative of the a-political lumpen-proletariat is discarded. Such a ranking of social values evidently rests on unquestioned assumptions regarding the submission of women to male demand. Here, as elsewhere, it would seem that female power is recognised only in those areas where it is ultimately subdued to male control. In the field of sexual relations, certainly, the willing submission of women is the order of the day. The texts are unabashedly frank: from The River Between to Petals of Blood, all descriptions of sexual encounters invariably and emphatically cast the man
in the dominant position. The woman, whether she is the adoring Nyokabi, or the self-sufficient Wanja, is passive, openly subordinate, ‘exhilaratingly weak’ and, apart from the raped Dr Lynd, consistently transported by phallic power.23

As if to make amends, Ngugi in his more recent work introduces heroines who have made a decisive break with a former life of mothering and/or whoring in their commitment to a revolutionary cause. The figure of the old seer or ‘Mother of men’, Wambui of A Grain of Wheat, Nyakinyua of Petals of Blood, reappears as the ancient and noble Wangari of Devil on the Cross. Like her predecessors Wangari was involved in Mau Mau as a messenger and carrier of arms, but, unlike them, plays a more prominent role in the present-day action of the novel, finally being proclaimed as ‘heroine of our nation’.24 As for the younger women, the Woman and the woman fighter in the play The Trial of Dedan Kimathi (1976), Wariinga in Devil on the Cross, and Guthera in Matigari, if Ngugi’s early heroines were forceful, then these women characters with their fortitude, resolve and resourcefulness are larger than life. As in the earlier novels, this stature is highlighted by their position as the lone representatives of their sex in a field of male characters. In contrast to those like Muturi the noble worker or Matigari the guerrilla, who, importantly, interact with one another as equals in carrying out specific tasks, the women, elevated on the basis of their being desirable or once-desirable objects, react upon rather than with their male associates.

With Wariinga certainly, perhaps even more so than with Matigari’s Guthera, Ngugi turns the heat up high. After her experience at the Devil’s Feast, a satirical competition to choose the most successful capitalist thieves and robbers in the world, Wariinga finds a new purpose in life, the struggle for a more equitable social system, and changes accordingly. The reader is not allowed to miss a detail. Wariinga, we are told, new ‘heroine of toil’, simultaneously ‘black beauty’ and ‘our engineering hero’, has said ‘goodbye to being secretary’, the flower in Boss Kihara’s life, and has ‘[stormed] a man’s citadel’ (emphasis in text to denote use of an English word). She is not only a qualified engineer, a modest fourth in an all-male class, but a formidable practitioner of judo and karate who airily knocks down her opponents and, if they still offer resistance, produces a gun.25 Yet, although she is said to engage enthusiastically in the struggle with nature that Ngugi has previously cast in terms of the male generic pronoun, she is reclaimed for womanhood; despite her hard labour in the workshop, she remains sexually attractive. The point is repeatedly emphasised: Wariinga’s clothes are said to fit her like a skin; her beauty floors both her boyfriend and the Rich Old Man.26 She is thus confirmed in her hyper-symbolic status. She is the exemplary female revolutionary, a fighter and ‘still a woman’, as perfect and untouchable as a holy image and made to order like her clothes.

Wariinga, it is fair to say, is put into the service of a basically didactic text. Just as the Woman’s voice in The Trial of Dedan Kimathi sounds out, disembodied,
enjoining the boy to 'become a man', so Wariinga appears as an inspiration in a struggle that is still defined and operated by men. She is aggressive, fearless and single-minded; she will contribute her energies to changing society; but, though she gives up all else, she does not sacrifice her femaleness, her soft hair and comely shape: in her bag she carries both a phase-tester and a hand mirror. And further, in order that there may be no mistake as to their crusading roles, both Wariinga and the Woman are granted the possession of a gun. Women, we realise, are not to be left out of any military-preparedness programme.

Yet, in bestowing upon his revolutionary heroines the quintessential emblem of phallic power in this way, Ngugi clearly betrays his masculine affiliations. Instead of preparing the way towards liberation by dismantling those structures and traditions that marginalise and oppress women, he disguises the rigid distinctions that such structures enforce when his women come dressed as men. Instead of questioning processes of objectification, he places a male weapon in the hands of his women characters and sets them on pedestals as glorified revolutionaries, inspiring symbols for a male struggle. Women, that is, are made acceptable as national figures by becoming more like men. Male values come encased in female shape just as, in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, guns come disguised as loaves of bread.

Ngugi's most recent novel *Matigari* confirms these signifiers of normative patriotic identity. In this set-piece allegory, as Abdulrazak Gurnah has described it, the generic figure of the true Kenyan is the central character Matigari, the fighter, comrade and brother. In other words, the margin of liberatory potential that Wariinga as a woman revolutionary earlier represented, is here overlooked. Where she flung off the final pages of *Devil on the Cross* brandishing her gun, Matigari walks into his eponymous tale carrying his AK 47 rifle, declaring his presence as at once an archetypal guerrilla fighter and popular patriotic leader.

Matigari's full name, meaning 'the patriots who survived the bullets', designates his symbolic status as the people's collective hero. He has fought for the nation and has now come again to his homeland to guide and to save them. He is the people in ideal form: a 'little man' and yet a prophet. He speaks of the nation as his family, and the land as his house. Predictably, his mission is to lead his followers to become more like him – to become matigari. His characterisation thus confirms on every side the tenacity of time-honoured nationalist tropes: most obviously, those of the loyal nationalist as soldier, the patriot as patriarch, and of national fighters as a band of brothers; more generally, that of the national movement as a male-dominated family drama. It is under the persuasive influence of Matigari's paternal voice of authority that the woman Guthera is transformed from a life of prostitution into his helper, a fighter for the national cause. He saves her from her sin in the manner of a Christ, bidding her to 'Get up . . . Come, stand up, mother'.

Women's representation in Ngugi wa Thiong'o
Although it is obviously heartfelt, Ngugi’s interest in new images of women and women’s power – I would submit – does not alter what is for him a more fundamental configuration of power, that involving national agency and authority. Guthera’s role relative to Matigari is primarily one of support: she accompanies him courageously into his final moments, but it is he who leads. Like Wariinga, Guthera doubles up as a strong woman and a desirable object: her clothes fit her ‘as though she was created in them’. In the familial triad she forms with Matigari and Muriuki, the boy-supporter who survives the novel’s final disaster, Guthera acting as both prostitute and surrogate mother can thus be seen as representative of all Kenyan womanhood. In relation to a character like Wanja she signifies an interesting new development in so far as she also appears to operate within the family triad as a postsexual daughter rather than as a mate to Matigari. Even so, the logic of family inheritance suggests that, unlike in Devil on the Cross, the child Muriuki (Wanja’s baby grown-up?), and not the reformed woman, prefigures the free Kenyan citizen of the future. The true successor of Matigari can be neither a vulnerable mother nor a former prostitute. As Matigari, the people’s hero, is a man and a fighter, and as he returns to his people so that his people in turn will become matigari, then the conclusion which seems inevitable is that Matigari can bequeath his AK 47 to no one other than a son.

To Ngugi, therefore, other interests give way before the ‘higher social system of democracy and socialism’ in a free Kenya. Yet, even within his framework of values, the shells of the older systems, the skeletons of inherited structures and values, are not so easily discarded. A different statue may be erected in the town square, perhaps even a ‘(monument) / To our women’, but it remains a monolith. Ngugi of course acts alongside many others when he attacks the colossus of white western maledom, yet hesitates to dislodge the ramparts of its patriarchy. The difficulty lies not in his construct of the nation in itself but in the identification of national freedom with male freedom. The continent-wide adoption from earlier regimes of an unchanged patriarchal state has brought about, also in his writing, a continuing adherence to the concept of a centrally-based authority, an extensive apparatus of control administered from above (and by men). Within such structures the people’s culture, whose vitality Ngugi so often proclaims, evidently cannot flourish on its own. Culture, he stresses, ‘must prepare (its) recipients to change the world’. Yet, as Mikhail Bakhtin, that famously ardent proponent of multivoicedness, once wrote, the ‘consolidation’ of any one dominant ideological system requires that: ‘All . . . creative acts are conceived and perceived as possible expressions of a single consciousness, a single spirit . . . the spirit of a nation, the spirit of a people, the spirit of history.’

In the name of national liberation, the people, the broad masses of Kenya and also the ‘liberated’ women, are expected to march in the forces and swell
the one national chorus. The policies of the future remain official and bureaucratic, dominated by the interests of the patriarchal state before all else. The recuperation of the woman figure in cultural iconography becomes in effect a remaking of icons. Dissenting voices, decentring languages, are against the rules, and this despite the fact that in the 1998 *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams* Ngugi defines art as that which resists state ‘containment’. In his analysis of the failure of national liberation struggles, Benedict Anderson neatly encapsulates this resilience of the univocal order (and implicitly of the masculine presence securely lodged with it): ‘Like the complex electrical-system in any large mansion when the owner has fled, the state awaits the new owner’s hand at the switch to be very much its own brilliant self again’.38 The overlord of old remains in charge; it is, in Ngugi’s own words, still ‘the master’s dance to the master’s voice’.39

**Notes**

5 See Ngugi, *Detained*, p. 3. Ngugi began to write *Devil on the Cross*, his first novel in Gikuyu, during his period of detention in the 1970s.
equates with an overdetermined othering: ‘rather than rewriting nationalism, he rewrites [and masculinises] women’.

7 Ngugi, Detained, p. 10.
10 Ngugi, Detained, p. 46.
12 Ngugi, Decolonising the Mind, pp. 12, 18, 29, 70, 91, 99, 105.
15 Ngugi, Barrel of a Pen, pp. 98–9.
16 Interview with Ngugi, Marxism Today (September 1982), 34.
17 Ngugi, Detained, p. 106.
21 As, too, does the younger Wariinga. For an explicit analogy, see Ngugi, Detained, p. 59.
24 Ngugi, A Grain of Wheat, p. 70; and Devil on the Cross, p. 198, respectively.
25 All references are to Ngugi, Devil on the Cross, pp. 216–21.
26 Ngugi, Devil on the Cross, p. 217.
29 Ngugi, The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, p. 43.
31 Ngugi, Matigari, p. 20.
32 Ngugi, Matigari, p. 32.
33 Ngugi, Matigari, p. 28.
34 Ngugi, Barrel of a Pen, p. 99.
35 Ngugi, The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, p. 73.
36 Ngugi, Barrel of a Pen, p. 99.
39 Ngugi, Petals of Blood, p. 163.