

Language, Style and Narrative Mode in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*

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Cet article se concentre sur le langage utilisé par Ngugi dans cette œuvre et essaye d'analyser le style et les techniques narratives de l'auteur. L'argument majeur de cet article est que bien que Ngugi essaye d'imprégner son roman de sa culture traditionnelle, notamment en utilisant la technique narrative du conte, pour mettre en œuvre sa politique de décolonisation culturelle, le style dominant du roman est celui de la tradition littéraire occidentale.

“Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world”

(Ngugi: Decolonising the Mind)

Petals of Blood, one of Ngugi's major works, encompasses his main ideological concerns. In this novel, Ngugi denounces the corruption and opportunism of the Kenyan ruling elite and its neo-colonial bondage in the 1970s. *Petals of Blood* is different from Ngugi's earlier novels in that it has a marked Marxist orientation. It also bears the stamp of its writer's cultural nationalism. Ngugi's concern for cultural rehabilitation shows, for instance, in his extensive use of proverbs, folktales, legends, songs and Gikuyu words.

Before analysing Ngugi's use of language and style, an overview of his policy of language¹ is necessary to shed light

¹See Ngugi's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), for a more detailed definition of his policy of language.

on his linguistic choice. Ngugi considers that the African writers' use of foreign languages is a contribution to their cultural neo-colonialism. In *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), he remarks: 'by our continuing to write in foreign languages, paying homage to them, are we not on the cultural level continuing that neo-colonial slavish and cringing spirit?' (Ngugi 1986: 26). This view is reiterated in *Devil on the Cross* (1982) through the narrator's remark that 'the slavery of language is the slavery of the mind' (Ngugi 1982: 56). In *Writers in Politics* (1981), Ngugi maintains that: 'Kenyan writers should remember that the struggle of the Kenyan national languages against domination by foreign languages is part of the wider historical struggle of the Kenyan national culture against imperialist domination' (Ngugi 1981: 61).

Ngugi's cultural resistance strategy appears, in *Petals of Blood*, in the Gikuyu words that are used and not translated. As Ashcroft *et al* remark: 'the technique of selective lexical fidelity which leaves some words untranslated in the text is a more widely used device for conveying the sense of cultural distinctiveness' (Ashcroft *et al* 1989: 64). Ngugi expects the African writers to work towards the cultural decolonisation of their countrymen. He, besides, deems that the African writers should use their native language to contribute to the masses' revolutionary awakening.

After writing *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi came to realise that his didacticism was undermined by the English language he used. As Gikandi observes: 'beneath Ngugi's faith in the redemptive power of culture and aesthetics [...] was his uncertainty about the efficacy of the English novel' (Gikandi 2000: 143). He was convinced that to make his didacticism more efficient, he had to write in the language that the masses spoke. In his subsequent works, e.g., *Caitani Mutharaba-ini* (1980), published in English as *Devil on the Cross*, and

Matigari (1987),² he used his native language, Gikuyu, to ensure that the revolutionary message of his novels would get through to the Kenyan workers and peasants whom he considered as the potential promoters of revolutionary change. In his essay, 'On Writing in Gikuyu',³ Ngugi maintains that writing in Gikuyu was motivated by 'a compulsion to communicate directly with the Kenyan masses'.⁴ The use of the Gikuyu language was, also, motivated by a desire to challenge the ruling elite, those who jailed him for writing in that language. In his essay, Ngugi remarks: 'I felt I had to write in that very language that was responsible for my imprisonment'.⁵

In the main, in *Petals of Blood*, language is plain and straightforward. It is syntactically and lexically simple as in the sentence: 'The thought suddenly made him stop. He got off his bicycle. He leaned on it' (p. 11).⁶ It is occasionally abstract, when Munira is the reflector: 'I was God's watchman in a twilight gloom somewhere between sleeping and walking, and should I not rest there, and not trouble the twilight stillness with passionate insistence?' (p.243). The language is the same for all the characters, no matter their background. Standard English is put in the mouth of illiterate people such as Njuguna, an elder: "Where will you get the teachers? Which VIP will want to come and bake in the sun" (p. 80) There are, however, occasionally some Gikuyu words in the peasants' speeches: "We know, we know ... the hands of a Msomi are themselves a book" (p.9).

²This novel was published in Gikuyu in 1987. It was translated from Gikuyu by Wanguiwa Goro and published in its English version in 1987.

³Ngugi, 'On Writing in Gikuyu', *Research in African Literature*, Vol. 16, No. 2, (1985), 151-156.

⁴Ibid., 154.

⁵Ibid., 153.

⁶All page references in the text are to this edition: Ngugiwa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood*. London: Heinemann, 1977.

Language is often satirical. Satire works at two levels. Satirical remarks either come directly from the writer, or indirectly from his characters. An instance of Ngugi's satirical remarks is the following one: 'Waweru who could get the coins through bringing more souls to Christ'(p. 90). An example of the characters' satire is Munira's remark: 'Nothing changed from the content of prayers except for the "King" they now put "president" (p. 297). Ngugi's satire is, at times, overdone as in the passage: 'No he was not a dog. He was Mobutu being embraced by Nixon, and looking so happy on his mission of seeking aid, while Nixon made faces at American businessmen and paratroopers to hurry up and clear oil and gold and copper and uranium from Zaire'(p. 315).

Ngugi's satire is the most acute when he portrays the characters who represent the Kenyan corrupt politicians, e.g., Nderi, the religious dignitaries, e.g., Rev. Jerrod, and the unscrupulous intellectuals, e.g., Chui. His satirical onslaught on them first appears in the names he gives them. Ngugi's satirical remarks on the capitalist class of his country, his denunciation of their greed, and the portrayal of the ordeal of the 'grassroots', bring the novel close to the literature of Naturalism, whose influence it bears. This influence shows both in style and character delineation. *Petals of Blood* shares common thematic concerns and protagonists' traits with Zola's *Germinal* (1885) and Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914).⁷

The naturalist style features in the episodes where Ngugi gives a minute detailed description of the setting and the actions: 'They walked on, along Muhoho Road, through Gandhi Avenue, to Langata road, toward Langata Barracks. She stopped by the fence and looked at the Ngon Hills in the

⁷For a more detailed study of the common formal and thematic concerns of these writers, see my unpublished Magister thesis, Oran University, 1998.

distance silhouetted against a misty sky'(p. 161). This style, further, appears in the use of an obscene language, on pages 122 and 124. This language has been used to shock the audience and make it realize the seriousness of the situation. As George J. Becker observes, Naturalism 'deliberately sets out to present and emphasize those details which are unpleasant, obscene, shocking, or horrible'(Becker1980: 112).The use of the naturalist style and subject-matter shows that Ngugi is still influenced by Western naturalist literature and particularly by Zola's novels. This influence is also apparent in Ngugi's use of the socialist realist mode. Like the socialist realists, e.g., Tressell, Ngugi portrays the struggle of the proletariat and upholds socialist ethics. Like them, he is overtly didactic. His protagonist, like theirs, attempts to educate the masses in the socialist tradition. The reader is, by the same token, exposed to this education. In the main, the Western literary influence on Ngugi is striking in *Petals of Blood*.

Besides the Socialist Realist mode, Ngugi makes use of allegory. As Angus Fletcher observes allegory: 'says one thing and means another'(Fletcher 1964: 2). It is often used by the writers who want to denounce the ruling authorities of their country, and avoid censorship. In the main, allegory is a means of indirect didacticism. Ngugi uses it to denounce the Kenyan authorities. His use of political allegory appears in his portrayal of the characters that stand for the Kenyan ruling elite and bourgeoisie, Chui, Nderi, Kimeria, as demonic agents. The use of allegorical writing shows in the naming of the characters.

In *Petals of Blood*, the style is, at times, symbolist. It shows in the repetitions of phrases and images. There are repetitions of phrases such as: 'Millet power of God' (pp. 215, 211, 224), and 'happy New Year' (pp. 230, 240). Among the images that recur, there is that of the flower with 'petals of

blood', and the image of fire, 'A burning pool in my stomach. Fire-tongues of stinging nettles' (p. 165). Among the lexical repetitions, there is the word 'blood' which recurs like a leitmotif. It is especially associated with floral symbolism, as in the title, or in: 'Blood around the leaves' (p. 165).

The prose style of the novel is, at times, documentary, at others journalistic or essayistic. It is documentary when the narrator recounts episodes of Kenyan history: 'The river is now only a stream. But there was a time when it was probably much bigger and geological speculation has it that its subterranean streams, buried long ago, feed Ondirri marshes at Kikuyu and Manguo in Limuru' (p. 67). Journalistic style is used in the episodes where a dramatic event is reported: 'They came for him that Sunday. He had just returned from a night's vigil on the mountain. He was resting on his bed, Bible open at the Book of Revelation, when two police constables, one tall, the other short, knocked at the door'. (p. 2). The style is, at times, essayistic, as in the passages where there are lectures on the Marxist ideology (p. 288). On the whole, the style of the narrator and that of the characters is similar, and so is the language they use.

The narrative mode in *Petals of Blood*, is mixed, since there is a blend of techniques borrowed from the Western literary tradition and from the Gikuyu oral tradition. The narrative structure of the novel is complex, since Ngugi relies on the Conradian technique of 'multiple voices' and on the modernist technique of 'stream-of-consciousness'.⁸ In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi refers to the narrative techniques he used in his novel stating:

Petals of Blood has taken a stage further the technique of flashbacks, multiple narrative voices, movement in time and

⁸ It is, however, less complex than the narrative structure of Ngugi's earlier novel *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), which bears a greater influence of Conrad's works.

space and parallel biographies and stories. The technique allowed me to move in time and space through the centuries and through all the important landmarks in Kenya's history' (Ngugi 1986: 77).

Ngugi's attempt at Africanizing the narrative shows, for instance, the use of 'orature', i.e., oral literature, which serve the 'return to the source' motif of the novel, and in the use of the techniques of African traditional story-telling. These techniques have been identified by Ruth Finnegan as: 'the integration in the plot of 'subsidiary details, pieces of vivid description and songs'(Finnegan 1967: 70-71) the 'use of dramatic repetition and characterization, the variations in speed and tone'(Finnegan 1967: 71) and the use of 'abrupt breaks' (Finnegan 1970: 384). 'The sessions of story-telling are usually started off by the children asking riddles and stories [and] are often presided over by a witty woman' (Finnegan 1970: 384). The stories are told 'sometimes according to a rotation round each participant in turn'(Finnegan 1970: 384).

Like the story-telling session, the story of *Petals of Blood* is told by different narrators, the anonymous narrator and Munira, in a rotative sequence. The narrative most specifically takes the form of African traditional story-telling in the episode where the protagonists, Nyakinyua, Karega and Abdulla tell, in turn, the stories of their past experiences, after consuming the Theng'eta potion (p. 212-226). As in traditional story-telling, a witty woman, Nyakinyua, presides over the session, and she starts her story-telling after having been asked a question. Her listeners ask her to tell them about her husband (p. 124). Traditional story-telling narrative shows in the passage where Abdulla tells the children the story of 'moon and sun': 'Moon and sun are enemies. That is why one appears in the day and the other at night' (p. 135). The technique of 'dramatic repetition' appears in the fire incidents, repeated four

times. There is the dramatic incident when Wanja's aunt burns alive (p. 65), the incident when the curtains catch fire in Wanja's hut (p. 62), the burning down of Wanja's rented room in Nairobi (p. 98) and that of her whorehouse (p. 333). This latter incident is a repetition of that in which Munira burns down an imitation of the hut of the prostitute Amina (p. 14).

The traditional story-telling technique of integrating songs in the narrative may be seen in the following passage:

Njuguna: And show me the bride!

And show me the bride!

Chorus: I'll pass through Ilmorog (p. 207).

Likewise, the technique of involving the audience in the narrative (Finnegan 1970: 381) appears in the use of the first person plural, which refers to both the narrator and the reader. Thus the narrator says: 'His father was an early convert to the Christian faith. We can imagine the fatal meeting between the native and the alien' (p. 88). Another instance is when the narrator says to the reader: 'You should anyway hear Abdulla sing of it' (p. 264).

The use of the traditional story-telling technique of 'abrupt breaks' appears in those passages where the writer abruptly stops the narration of a sequence to embark on that of a new sequence, as in Chapter 7, for instance, where the Theng'eta drinking party is recounted. One passage ends with Niyakinyua's advice to her guests to sleep (p. 226), and the next passage unexpectedly starts with Munira's reflections: 'I kept on asking myself, now that it has happened, what it was she was trying to tell us that night' (p. 226). Yet the abrupt opening of some paragraphs is not due to Ngugi's use of the traditional story-telling, but to his exploitation of modernist narrative techniques.

The modernist narrative techniques Ngugi uses are: stream-of-consciousness, interior monologue, juxtaposition, the

indirect provision of information, and montage. The stream-of-consciousness technique, the spontaneous and unconditioned reflection of a character's thoughts, is used in the passage where Abdulla reminisces about his Mau Mau experience: 'But images on images crowded in his mind....Ole Masai... strange that it should be happening again in Ilmorog...happening again...an illusion?' (p. 136).

The stream-of-consciousness technique is particularly used in the episodes where the narrator fixes his 'camera' on Munira:

He now put the question to himself: what did the children really think of him? Then he dismissed it with another: what did it matter one way or another? ... and one did all right as long as one was careful not to be dragged into...into...an area of darkness...Yes ...darkness unknown, unknowable. (pp. 23-24)

The modernist narrative technique of interior monologue is used in the passages where Munira conveys spontaneously his thoughts and feelings, as in the passages where he is writing his report to the police (pp. 44, 99). Such passages are recognizable through the use of the first-person-narration. Chapter 3, section 2 offers a good example, when Munira wonders: 'How does one tell of murder in a new town? ... But how can I, a mortal, help my heart fluttering' (p. 45). Another example is Munira's inner remark: 'To say the truth, I did not know, I was not quite sure, whom I wanted to avenge' (p. 227). The modernist narrative technique of juxtaposition, i.e., the weaving of literary quotations and pieces of journalism into the narrative, appears in Ngugi's integration of excerpts from Shakespeare's works (pp. 172, 165) and of fictitious Newspaper headlines and announcements: 'DEATH IN

DESERT : HUNGER IN ILMOROG: DONKEY ON RESCUE MISSION' (p. 184).

The technique of the indirect provision of information, the technique of retrogressive narration, figures in the passages where the reader is informed of the occurrence of an event before he gets clues about how it actually occurred and the causes that led to its occurrence. An instance of this technique is the episode of Karega's arrest. The reader learns about it first (p. 300), and then through Karega's reminiscences, he is informed about how, when and why he was arrested. The use of the technique of retrogressive narration accounts for the absence of a logical sequence to the narration.

This absence is, again, due to the use of the modernist device of montage, the consecutive presentation of episodes that have no logical sequence. This device is most noticeable in Chapter 6, Section 3 which ends with Munira's question to Wanja and Karega: 'But what can we do?' (p. 111). Section 4 starts with Karega's thoughts about Kenya's history of natural disasters: 'Haunting memories from the past ... These thoughts mocked at Karega' (p. 111). But then, there is a shift from Karega's reflections to the recounting of an episode in his classroom, when a pupil faints because of hunger pangs. The use of montage results too in the temporal and spatial shifts in the novel. In Chapter 3, for example, there is a shift from section 3, closing on Munira's decision to call Karega back, to section 4, which begins with Wanja's reminiscences of the events that preceded her admission to hospital. The span of time between the two sections is twelve years. The spatial shift is from Munira's house in Ilmorog to the hospital where Wanja was recovering. The use of montage accounts for the discontinuity of narration.

This discontinuity is also due to the use of 'Selective Omniscience', which consists in the recounting of the story

through a character's mind. As Norman Friedman notes, 'the abrupt beginnings and much of the distortion of modern stories and novels are due to the use of Multiple and Selective Omniscience' (Friedman in Stevick (ed.) 1967: 129) The 'Selective Omniscience', in *Petals of Blood*, appears in those passages where the story is recounted to the reader through Munira's mind. Munira recounts the story in the process of writing a statement to the police. He recounts the story and takes part in it. He is, thus, a 'narrator agent' (Booth in Stevick (ed.) 1967: 94). This point of view is not the outstanding one though Munira is a major protagonist.

The predominant point of view is that of the 'third-person reflector', who reflects the characters' minds and tells the story in the third person. This narrator is, at times, a 'witness narrator', a narrator who is 'more or less involved in the action, more or less acquainted with its chief personages, and who speaks to the reader in the first person' (Friedman in Stevick (ed.) 1967: 125). In Ngugi's novel, the 'witness-narrator' is the anonymous narrator who speaks in the first person plural. The reader realizes that the narrator is not the author only after reaching page 6, when the narrator uses the first person plural to identify himself with the protagonists, the Ilmorogans: 'and after a month we were all whispering - was he a little crazed - and he not so old?' (p. 6). This sentence gives the reader a clue to the peasant background of the narrator, who occasionally uses a peasant speech pattern: 'he [Mwathi] had been sitting on a knowledge of many seasons gone' (p. 266). But the style and the language of his narration, when he becomes a third-person reflector, are those of a highly literate person:

It is symbolic tribute, although an unintended one, to those who, witnessing the dread ravages of crime and treachery and greed which passed for civilisation, witnessing too the

resistance waged and carried out with cracked hands and broken nails and bleeding hearts, voiced visionary dreams amidst sneers and suspicions and accusations of madness or of seeking pathways to immortality and the eternal self-glory of tyrants. (p. 262)

The style and rhetoric of this passage, and of many others, are easily identifiable as Ngugi's, for they echo those used in his collection of essays, *Writers in Politics* and *Homecoming* (1972). At such moments, there is no intellectual distance between the author and the narrator. This appears in the passages where the tone of the narrator is ironic. This is the case when he makes remarks about the physical appearance of a member of the elite and the way he plays golf saying: 'a big bellied ... who kept swinging the stick without hitting the ball' (p. 12).

The narrator is more acutely ironic about the people Ngugi attempts to denounce in his novel, the native bourgeois elite and its foreign allies, as well as the native Christian dignitaries. He is satirical about Munira's father, a church leader: 'At first Brother Ezekiel had refused. But looking at her eyes, he had felt a sudden weakness in the flesh and he had allowed her to build a hut, but he made sure she built it where he could visit her without being seen' (p. 58). Here, the reader becomes aware of Ngugi's intrusion to denounce the hypocrisy of the Kenyan Christian priests. The reader associates him with the narrator in the passages where he intrudes to express his ideological views. In these cases, Ngugi uses the point of view of 'editorial omniscience'.

This point of view, as Wayne Booth notes, consists in 'the presence of authorial intrusions and generalizations about life, manners, and morals, which may or may not be explicitly related to the story at hand' (Booth 1961: 95). Ngugi intrudes to

comment on the topics that form the major themes of the novel, Kenyan history and the Christian religion. He intrudes, for instance, through Karega saying: 'The oppression of the black people is a fact. The scattering of Africans into the four corners of the earth is a fact. That Africa is one of the richest continents with infinite possibilities for renewal and growth is a fact' (p. 247).

Ngugi intrudes through Karega mostly to voice his radical credentials, as in the following passage:

The machine was no less their father than they were its father, and the struggle in future would be fought on who should own and control the machine and the products: those whose sweat made it move or those whose power was the bank, and who came to reap and harvest where they had not ploughed or planted. (p. 304)

These intrusions increase the reader's 'aesthetic distance'. In other words, they contribute to the loss of his illusion of reality. Wayne Booth defines 'aesthetic distance' as: 'the degree to which the reader or spectator is asked to forget the artificiality of the work and "lose himself" in it; whatever makes him aware that he is dealing with an aesthetic object and not real life increases "aesthetic distance"' (Booth 1961: 97).

The reader's 'aesthetic distance' is increased by Ngugi's intrusions with literary remarks on the novel, through the 'narrator-reflector'. An instance of this is the remark about Munira's written statement to the police: 'his was a mixture of an autobiographical confessional and some kind of prison notes' (p. 190). The jargon of literary criticism shows in the sentences: 'Imorog the scene of the unfolding of this drama' (p. 120), 'that night was to be the peak of the epic journey across the plains' (p. 143), and 'Abdulla became the hero of the

journey. He seemed to continue revealing newer and richer aspects of his personality' (p. 134).

This technique of introducing into the narrative remarks about the aesthetic components of the novel bears resemblance to Brecht's technique of 'alienating effect'. Brecht alienates the audience by making it lose the illusion of reality it has attained when following the performance of the play. In Brecht's plays, the stage performance is often disrupted by a 'stage director' who addresses the audience and brings its attention to the technical aspects of the play. Oscar Budel explains this process: 'But suddenly the "stage manager" rushes down the aisle of the theatre, perhaps brushing our arm as he charges by, to object to something within the play' (Budel in Demetz (ed.) 1962: 66-67) .

Structurally, the 'alienating effect' is used through the presentation of random episodes, so that the audience becomes aware of the technical changes to be able to piece up the plot. This technique of abrupt breaks of the actors' performance is meant to keep the audience aware that it is watching a theatrical representation of reality, and to make it concentrate on the message of the play, rather than on its story. As Wayne Booth remarks, what Brecht 'really wants is to increase the emotional distance in order to involve the reader's social judgement more deeply' (Booth 1961: 128). Thus, Brecht used this technique for a didactic purpose.

The 'alienating effect' may achieve the didactic purpose for which it has been designed, in drama. But it hardly does so in fiction. Instead of having a didactic function (to teach the reader about the problems raised by the author), it results in an increase of the reader's 'aesthetic distance' and contributes to his loss of interest in the message of the novel, since it breaks his interest in the story and the ideas it vehicles. In the main, the different points of views Ngugi uses serve the different

purposes of the novel: the 'witness-narrator' serves the cultural regeneration motif, since he adopts the function of the traditional story-teller, and the 'editorial omniscience' serves the revolutionary didacticism of the novel.

This bears witness to the fact that Ngugi is didactic both through content and form. Yet the different formal devices of the novel betray a greater concern for didacticism than for aestheticism. This concern is reflected in Ngugi's greater use of summary rather than scene. Ngugi often describes the characters' actions rather than makes them perform the actions there and then in front of the reader's eyes. Summary, i.e., 'telling', is used when the author attempts 'to convey rapidly a stretch of past life' (Bentley in Stevick (ed.) 1967: 47). Scene, i.e., 'showing', is used when 'we are being told of a specific action at a specific time in a specific place' (Bentley in Stevick (ed.) 1967: 55). Bentley remarks that 'scene gives the reader a feeling of participating in the action very intensely, for he is hearing about it contemporaneously, exactly as it occurs and the moment it has occurred' (Bentley in Stevick (ed.) 1967: 53). It therefore contributes to the aesthetic appeal of the novel far more than summary does, since it provides a vivid representation of life. As Wayne Booth notes, 'showing' is artistic, whereas 'telling' is inartistic (Booth 1961: 8).

In *Petals of Blood*, summary is used when the narrator informs us about the protagonists' background, for instance: 'He [Munira] had until now practically lived all his life at Limuru' (p. 13). Scene is used in the first three chapters. The novel opens on a scene, the reader witnesses the process of arresting the major protagonists, Munira, Abdulla and Karega: 'Karega was fast asleep ... He heard a knock at the door. He leapt out of bed in his pyjamas. He found a heavily armed police contingent at the door' (p. 3). There are shifts from scene to summary and back to scene from page 4 to page 7.

Ngugi uses scene 'hen there is a quick action, such as when Njuguna, Karega and Wanja are arrested by Kimeria's guards (p. 152), and when Nderi is stoned by the Ilmorogans (p. 183). Bentley remarks that the 'crisis, the climax, of a sequence of actions is always (by the novelists who know their craft) narrated in scene' (Bentley in Stevick (ed.) 1967: 53). But Ngugi uses scene sparingly. Accordingly, the aesthetic dimension of his novel is impaired.

In the main, the use of the Western modernist narrative techniques and the use of naturalist and socialist realist literary models bear witness to Ngugi's use of Eurocentric art forms, despite his expressed will that the African writers should 'break away' from the European literary mainstream' (Ngugi *Homecoming*: 16).

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