



Africa In Exile

The following article is the first in a series about African writers in exile. We will look both backwards and forwards, as the state of exile is hardly a new event in the lives of writers of African descent. But that, dear reader, is jumping the gun. We begin:



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Ngugi Wa Thiong'o: Exile And Resistance

Bronwyn Mills



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Since 1982, Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o has lived in exile in the United States. Probably best known for his novels about Kenya's struggle to throw off British colonial rule and to disgorge the bitter pill of neocolonialism his countrymen have subsequently had to swallow, he has had his own struggle with these forces. Beginning with his first novel, *Weep Not Child* (1964), through his fourth, *Petals of Blood* (1977) — which very clearly challenges "independent" Kenya's neocolonial regime — Ngugi wrote in English. However, in December of 1977, following the publication of *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi was arrested on vague, Kafkaesque charges^[1] and held without trial in Kenya's Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. At that point he began to write in his native Gikuyu, the language of the Mau Mau resistance movement. As he has said many times, this is one way to resist the cultural dominion of the West.



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Site 1

Ngugi's fabulist — one might say, fantastical — novel *The Devil on the Cross* was the first of his novels to be written in Gikuyu. He first wrote it in prison on toilet paper. The original manuscript is shocking to see — the sheets are brownish, rough, almost waxy, and folded side to side like napkins pulled from a diner's chrome dispenser.

What *The Devil on the Cross* baldly serves up to the reader is a fantasy Devil's Feast in which various extortionists and profiteers vie for a seat among the top seven Experts in Thievery and Robbery. Contestants clearly resemble those sinking their teeth into newly 'independent' Kenya for all it is worth. Nor is it difficult to see in this scathing satire the "neoliberalismo" of Latin America, the lip-smacking lords of privatization and the "new economy."

Eventually Ngugi smuggled out the manuscript of *The Devil on the Cross*, helped by a sympathetic guard. An international outcry against President Daniel Arap Moi for keeping Ngugi in prison had arisen, although some fellow writers (such as Ali Mazrui) speculated that his incarceration was somehow partly his own fault, due to his leftist views, etc., etc. Released in December 1979, subsequently banned from work and still in danger, Ngugi left home three years later.

In my mind's eye, I carry an indelible picture of Ngugi a few years ago, sitting in his New York University office, where two academic departments, Performance Studies and Comparative Literature, claim him. I have just asked about the present situation in Africa—

Ngugi puts his head in his hands. "— aagh! Things are so bad I think the only way to write about it is utter fantasy, fable-it is so awful!"

Earlier this month, I email him about that statement. He replies,

What I meant was the critical realism of 19th century fiction and then, say, socialist realism, which means a readily recognizable similitude between the reflection and the object of reflection becomes inadequate where truth is starker than fiction. How does one write about massacres, for instance, in a way that would shock the reader when in reality thousands and thousands of people have been slaughtered in our lifetime? An almost annual 20th century occurrence? A novelist has to find ways of addressing the issues, but how? The fantastical, the fable, is just one possibility.

— 9/21/00

In Ngugi's sixth novel, named *Matigari* for his main protagonist, a former freedom fighter returns to his farm. Fine, but the farm is *owned*, "purchased" some time before by a white settler whom the man Matigari only worked the land *for*.

No, argues M., it *is* mine: it was my labor that made the place flourish. Ironically this fictional character was later distinguished by having a warrant issued for his arrest by President Moi, for the book was widely read (in Gikuyu) and discussed. Ultimately, all the bookstores were raided, and all the books seized, by the police.

Ngugi's exile, in short, was never one of a privileged Western artist going to Paris to be 'free' (never mind from what), to genuflect before the gods of European ancestors. It is quite different to be among those disenfranchised by these gods, for centuries at risk of life and limb. Nor is such exile played out exactly like Caribbean novelist George Lamming's. Like many from the English Empire, Lamming went to the Metropole believing himself as solidly "English" as Britain's original citizens.

Ngugi does refer to one of Lamming's "pleasures of exile"^[2] when reflecting upon his own situation, the relief of not belonging. Away now for eighteen years, Ngugi regards the time lapse with astonishment, "You never have a sense of belonging. You are always on the outside. And then you begin to create an imaginary home — you think about it all the time.... In a way, one does not face up to the reality of one's new surroundings." Indeed, in order to feel connected, "I try to reach home by writing, by having a dialogue with home.... Home is still part of the imagination and writing helps to make it more real."

English speakers ignorant of Gikuyu must wait for Ngugi's current work to be translated— it is, Ngugi says, already 1600 pages long and due to be published in Gikuyu and one other African language. While they wait, however, English-only readers can peruse the recent collection of his Clarendon Lectures in English Literature, *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams*, delivered at Oxford University in 1996. The first of the essays, "Art at War with the State" counterposes the creative power of art against the absolutist state. The situation is similar, as Ngugi points out, to Plato's nightmarish exclusion of artists in *The Republic*: the state, fearing for its stability, will even go so far as to persecute and imprison its artists.

Indeed, when speaking further on about Nawal el Sa'adawi, the Egyptian writer imprisoned for her feminist views during the Anwar Sadat regime, he likens exile to prison: "exile is a way of moving the writer from the territorial confinement[,] where his acts of resistance might ignite other fields[,] into a global 'exclusion'." The hope is that his actions from this exclusion, whatever they are, will not directly affect those confined within the vast territorial enclosure." (p. 61) Once more, the state feels threatened by change which, after all, is life. Conversely, stasis is death, and exile or no, Ngugi tells us, art is a matter of life and death.

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WORKS DRAWN ON FOR THIS ESSAY

Novels:

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Weep Not Child*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1964.

_____, *The River Between*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1965.

_____, *A Grain of Wheat*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1967.

_____, *Petals of Blood*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1977.

_____, *Devil on the Cross*. Trans. from the Gikuyu by the author. Oxford: Heinemann, 1982. (Heinemann published this in Gikuyu in 1980.)

_____, *Matigari*. Trans. from the Gikuyu by Wangui wa Goro. Oxford: Heinemann, 1989. (Published in Gikuyu in 1987.)

Non-fiction:

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1981.

_____, *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams; Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1998.

Lamming, George. *The Pleasures of Exile*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1960.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o has also written a number of plays, short stories, stories for children, and several essays.

Ngugi's play, *I Will Marry When I Want*, was written in collaboration with Ngugi wa Miri and produced with a group of workers and peasants. Some credit this production — closed by the authorities — as part of the cause of Ngugi's detention. It has met with official opposition whenever anyone attempts to put it on.

1. "...for the preservation of public security...." See the introduction to Ngugi's prison diary, *Detained*. From the frontispiece, which is a copy of his detention order.

2. Lamming, George. *The Pleasures of Exile* . (1960) Lamming refers to this pleasure as both belonging wherever you are and not having to participate in the affairs of the place *because* you do not belong.

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