

Book Review

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Losing innocence, gaining awareness: The second volume of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's memoirs

Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o

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A sequel to *Dreams in a Time of War* (2010), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's second volume of memoirs *In the House of the Interpreter* recalls his student days at Alliance High School between 1955 and 1959. Besides being a milestone in his academic journey, the mission school becomes a foundation for Ngũgĩ's literary career.

Alluding to John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *In the House of the Interpreter* is an evocation of Ngũgĩ's intellectual and spiritual growth. His aspiration for education can be likened to the pilgrimage of Christian, the protagonist in Bunyan's allegory.

The Christian faith and discipline inculcated at Alliance leave indelible marks upon the young Ngũgĩ. He converts to a born-again Christian, joins the Christian Union where he preaches to other students. However, doubts begin to cloud his faith, especially when his efforts to convert others into the way of the cross fail to bear fruits. He is utterly disappointed when Elijah Kahonoki, leader of the Christian fellowship "put a sister-in-Christ in the family way" [1 p94] but refuses to take responsibility. This scandal leads to the disintegration of the fellowship. Nonetheless, Ngũgĩ continues to teach Sunday school at the neighbouring Kĩnoo Presbyterian Church.

Ironically, it is an encounter with a woman that ultimately liberates Ngũgĩ from the conflict in his soul. Unlike Adam in the Old Testament, who feels remorse after eating the forbidden fruit, Ngũgĩ's first encounter with a woman possesses therapeutic power. Subverting the role of Eve in the 'Adamic Fall', Ngũgĩ depicts the woman with redemptive agency. The incident occurs in Gatũndũ, where he worked as a lay teacher.

He is invited to a party in a colleague's one-room apartment. After refreshments, a female teacher, whose beauty and intellect has been the talk of the village, enters the house. Instantly, Ngũgĩ is charmed by her gait. He has previously heard about her from his male colleagues, who constantly tempt him with women and alcohol. Nevertheless, he resists these temptations by preaching to them, his knowledge of the Bible placing him on a higher moral pedestal. But the ultimate test comes when the "Lady Teacher" engages him in a contest of wit asking, what is the gender, race, and colour of God; what

language does God use to talk to people; if God is good why does he allow calamity upon humanity? As Ngũgĩ tries to address these questions, it dawns upon him that the Lady Teacher shares similar religious doubts like himself. Engrossed in their duo debate they do not realise others have deserted the room.

Meanwhile, light from the paraffin lamp grows dimmer and dimmer. Then the room is totally covered in darkness. Imperceptibly, she moves from her chair to where Ngũgĩ was sitting on the bed. And then, "as if reaching out for holiness, her fingers brushed against my hand, I felt the eloquence subsumed in flames" [1 p223], writes Ngũgĩ. Propelled by flames of passion as well as compassion to deliver the Lady Teacher from her religious uncertainty, Ngũgĩ succumbs to a temptation he has persistently resisted since his schooling days at Alliance. "The fact that my will to resist had melted away at the first serious challenge bothered me more than a sense of sin" [p223], he admits. As if parodying Saint Augustine's *Confessions* wherein Augustine is overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and depravity, Ngũgĩ portrays his loss of innocence as a cathartic moment.

This polarity prevalent in the memoir is evident Ngũgĩ's novels like *The River Between*, where he demonstrates internal turmoil in the characters. To give one example, Mũthoni - the youngest daughter of the zealous Christian convert Joshua - rebels against her father when she goes through circumcision, a rite of passage she believes will usher her into full womanhood. Expressing her yearning for spiritual freedom Mũthoni says, "the white man's God does not quite satisfy me. I want, I need something more" [2 p30]. Unfortunately, her wound gets a serious infection, leading to her death. Lying upon her death bed, she poignantly utters her last words addressed to her elder sister, "tell Nyambura I see Jesus. And I am a woman, beautiful in the tribe ..." [2 p61], almost suggesting that she has succeeded in marrying two polarising belief systems - the Christian religion, representing a new order and the Gĩkũyũ traditional religion, signifying the old order. In that sense, her body becomes a site where the two clashing cultures - foreign and indigenous - are reconciled. Ironically, however, it is

through an act of rebellion against her religious father that Mũthoni gains spiritual and eternal redemption. Through such polarity in portrayal of characters and events, clearly evident in *In the House of the Interpreter* that Ngũgĩ reveals pertinent themes like socio-cultural and religious conflict in his memoir.

Illustrating this polarity further is an episode towards the end of the memoir. As Ngũgĩ awaits judgement in a colonial prison cell, he receives a letter from the female teacher, where she confesses; "I had lived with doubts. You answered my doubts. You helped me to see the Lord. Jesus will help you. Say a prayer. I am doing the same for you. Signed. Lady Teacher, your Sister-in-Christ" [1 p235], echoing Mũthoni's last words in *The River Between*.

Depicting Alliance as synonymous to the school master Carey Francis, Ngũgĩ says; "The fact is that the Alliance of my time was Carey Francis, and Carey Francis was Alliance" [1 p181]. Revered by both students and teachers, Francis is a stickler to rules, a disciplinarian whose vision is to inculcate wholesome values into those who went through Alliance. His key endeavour is to produce graduates perfect in body, spirit and intellect. He therefore plays a significant role not just as the school principal, but as a mentor and father figure to Ngũgĩ and the other students.

Certainly, Alliance leaves indelible marks upon Ngũgĩ. That is why his departure from the school is likened to "divorce from the House of the Interpreter" [1 p181], a sanctuary that shelters him from "the hounds (that) remained outside the gates, crouching, panting, waiting, biding their time" [p8]. For sure, the hounds catch up with him soon, when he is arrested and detained by the colonial police for lack of papers as evidence of tax payment. The police are not ready to listen to his pleas that he is an alumnus of the prestigious Alliance school, waiting to join Makerere University in Uganda.

When Ngũgĩ returns home for his first holiday, he is shocked to find the old village has been destroyed, and its inhabitants relocated. Recurring in other fictional works, like *Petals of Blood*, the fire imagery resonates with redemptive and promethean force. Whereas in *Petals of Blood* it symbolises extinction of evil and neo-colonial forces, the inferno signifies destruction of communal memory in *In the House of the Interpreter*. Capturing his sense of loss, Ngũgĩ compares ruins of his former village to a crematorium. "Slowly I work my way up the ridge, past more piles of rubble, charred funeral pyres of a rural community" [1 p6].

In the House of the Interpreter ends dramatically when colonial injustice almost jeopardises Ngũgĩ's chance of attaining university education, similar to *Dreams in a Time of War*, where he did not have the necessary identification documents to allow him to travel, forcing him to take a ride in a goods train. Acting as his own advocate Ngũgĩ, fortunately, emerges victorious when

the judge declares, "this court will not stand between you and Makerere; You are free to go" [1 p239].

Unlike in *Dreams in a Time of War*, where the boy narrator views the world through the mediating voice of the elderly Mzee Ngandi, Ngũgĩ in *In the House of the Interpreter* portrays the young protagonist with a remarkable level of awareness.

Although this captivating memoir specifically dwells on his schooling days at Alliance, readers following Ngũgĩ's writing career may be left yearning to read more from his memoirs, especially his experience in exile.

References

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