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Ideology in the French translation of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's children's books

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Chapter I

Ngugi as a writer, his literature & its ideological role

For many years, "Kenya's indigenous culture has been passed on from one generation to another through narratives, songs, proverbs and riddles" (Mwanzi, 1982:1). Ngugi gives children in Kenya stories based on Kenya's history of subjugation and exploitation.

It is while reflecting on the sociological importance of literature for children that the role of the writer becomes crucial. The writer deliberately selects words to convey certain images, attitudes or ideologies that create a certain effect in the mind of the reader. These images tell us a great deal about their creator, his society and attitude to the situations and peoples so represented. They also highlight his world view. It is important that we discuss the life of the author in this chapter because the message of his stories and their social importance are not fully grasped until the philosophy behind his writing is understood.

1.1. Historical Overview

Ngugi has written many books, plays and novels ranging from *Weep Not Child* (1964) to *Matigari* (1987) including children's books in the Njamba Nene series. As early as 1964 Ngugi started writing about the history of *Gĩkũyũ* people. He saw fiction not simply as communicative but also as something linked to the history of people. "Ngugi recognises the link between history and fiction. Indeed, for Ngugi, the narrative is a tool for shaping, ordering and re-interpreting history" (Ogude, 1996:27). Ogude is correct when he suggests rereading Ngugi's works looking beyond the current state of criticism, which has failed to locate Ngugi within the contested terrain of Kenya's historiography. He argues that "Ngugi's literature is real not necessarily because of its socialist bearing, but mostly because of his *grand projet* of writing back to colonialist historiography" (1999:2). This literature is linked to the interests of the workers in Kenya including his family (his father was known as a poor worker on a farm).

We are told that in the sixties and early seventies there was an impulse to resist the cultural incorporation in African writing which had continued in projects aimed at the 'decolonisation' of African culture, and in the desire to return to pre-colonial languages and

cultural modes (Ngugi 1981, 1986). Ashcroft (1989) confirms this idea as he notes that Ngugi puts forth arguments according to which 'decolonisation' must involve a much more radical movement away from European values and system, including the English language, which carries these values .

Ngugi's writing does not escape the notion of power. The question of power is central to Ngugi's critical discourse for very specific reasons:

> he [Ngugi] came of age under the domination of the colonial state in Kenya at one of its most violent phases, the state of emergency in the 1950s; he matured as a writer in that unfortunate phase in African history when the liberal postcolonial state adopted the oppressive mechanism of the colonial predecessor (Gikandi, 2000: 202).

It is not hard to find instances of Ngugi's strong criticism of imperialism. His goal in his literature was to show the bad experiences of victims of tyranny under the shadow of imperialism and economic exploitation.

In its dependence on themes of decolonisation, the history of African writers falls into two groups. African writers such as Sembene Ousmane, Alex La Guma, Abiola Irele, Peter Nazareth, Lewis Nkosi and Amilcar Cabral manifested solidarity with the oppressed, but there was a remarkable use of European traditional techniques combined with modernistic modes of writing in their novels (Gugelberger, 1985). Those writers seemed not to be so concerned with what Gugelberger refers to as *Africaneity* (i.e. something purely or radically African in its nature), but this Africaneity does emerge in the works of a few writers such as Lewis Nkosi's *Home and Exile*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Homecoming*, Peter Nazareth's *Literature and Society in Modern Africa*, Amilcar Cabral's *Return to Source* (Gugelberger, 1985:12).

Given this situation, ideology in Ngugi's works is not accidental, he is a writer among many others who "sought to place his people on a specific time scale, to understand the meaning and dimension of history" (Gikandi, 1987:111). In his writing techniques, characters are always presented in situations where they are used as agents for exploring the effects of colonisation, for example, on Kenyan (African) culture and people. Ngugi's literature is a "transmutation of not just a political idea but a political programme into art" (Gikandi, 1987:134). The writer

does so because he seeks to "be both the mirror and lamp of his society: to reflect and illuminate its economic structure, its class power, its political and cultural struggles; its structure of values" (Gikandi, 1987:134).

It is not, therefore, an exaggeration to note that Ngugi's literature cannot be understood outside its political and ideological interpretation. An apolitical reading cannot be suggested for Ngugi's works. There is always incompleteness in any apolitical reading of explicitly political works such as Ngugi's children's books. In considering the question of art as representation, as Lukas and others have noted, "the novelist works with one proposition in mind: "What is the nature of the reality his novels are supposed to recreate in a fictional universe" (Gikandi, 1987:126)? For Ngugi, the realities of Kenya – the reality of people living without bread, exploited by capitalists, forced to speak English, deprived of the right to live according to their values - provide an answer to this question. It is in this context that Ngugi sees the struggle as the struggle for the nation and national consciousness. As such he portrays unashamedly the Mau Mau engaged in a struggle that would lead them to full expression in terms of their history and culture. This is not to say that Ngugi justifies the perpetrators for what they did, but rather that Ngugi's texts cannot be understood outside their socio-historical context.

1.2. Ngugi's literature in Africa and East Africa

Clifford Robson observes that "his [Ngugi's] writings gave him a certain distinction making him something of a leader" (Robson, 1979:137). He further argues that Ngugi has been compared to Achebe both because of similarity between *The River Between* and *Things Fall Apart* and his national status. This comparison indicates his contribution in establishing East African literature and allowing the writer to be seen not just as an African writer, but as a *writer.*

That Ngugi's novels are radical and have roots in Gĩkũyũ culture is clear. As Robson (1979) points out, Ngugi's achievement in his novels lies in being able to absorb historical events into the framework of the narrative and yet still create a fiction. People and events have a historical truth as well as significance within the books. The appropriation of land, the growth of Gĩkũyũ schools, the events of the *State of Emergency* are all examples of historical issues, which are assimilated into the novels. The use of real events provides a

good foundation of credibility on which he was able to build. His novels give a different handle on reality; they help people understand things from a different point of view. This can be referred to as an act of reconstructing a new African image out of one ruined by colonialism, and allowing people to discover things that were destroyed by colonialism and those which resisted. Ogude (2003) also confirms this idea saying that white settlers' literature distorted the African image and that is what pushed African writers such as Ngugi and Achebe to write back and displace European lies and revise and reject these stereotypes.

In most of his books Ngugi set out to redefine African literature in terms of its ideology and language. He wanted African literature to draw upon local languages (as opposed to foreign languages) and the history and cultures carried by those languages: Gĩkũyũ, Kiswahili, Kimasai, etc. Ngugi's development culminated in his decision to write in Gĩkũyũ or Ki-swahili rather than English in order to address an audience other than foreign and the foreign-educated new elite (Ashcroft, 1989:131). In 1980, for example, Ngugi published the first modern novel written in Gĩkũyũ, *Caitaani Mutharaba-ini* (*Devil on the Cross*). He argued that literature written by Africans in a colonial language is not African literature, but 'Afro-European literature.' Writers must use their native languages to give the African literature its own genealogy and grammar (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1999a:1). Ngugi reflects that vision of writing in native languages. He provides a sound intellectual grounding for that vision, stimulates writing, and publishes in marginalised languages and by so doing he translates or gives visibility to values (genius) hidden in those marginalised languages and cultures.

For Ngugi, when children from Gĩkũyũ peasant families attend the colonial school, the sense of harmony between them and their environment is lost; language and literature become instruments of alienation, "taking us further and further from ourselves, from our own world to other worlds" (Ngugi quoted in Gikandi, 1992:140). The children's books under analysis are a true reflection of this language philosophy. They were originally written in Gĩkũyũ then translated into English by the Kenyan translator Wangui wa Goro who is a critic, writer, lecturer and translator. She has successfully translated the Njamba Nene series from Gĩkuyu into English. However, it important to note that after several years of writing in local languages, Ngugi returned to English: "Ngugi's efforts to use Gĩkũyũ as

the language of both his fiction and critical discourse had been defeated by the reality of exile" (Gikandi, 2000:194). Ngugi could not produce works in Gĩkũyũ as he was separated from his immediate readers, the Gĩkũyũ people.

Ngugi's literature is also significant for Africans in the sense that it fights for the protection of African tradition. Ngugi is quoted as saying that "the African tradition, a tradition as active and alive as ever, constitutes the third and most significant influence. This is the stuff on which we grew up, and it is the base from which we make our cultural take-off into the world." (Robson, 1979:135). For Ngugi this fight to protect his culture was significant. He wanted to show to the colonial whites, who thought that blacks had no culture, that blacks as human beings had their own memory, history and ways of life.

It cannot be too strongly argued that Ngugi is entirely justified in his radical fight against colonialism to protect his culture. However, Ngugi did exactly what the English proverb warns not to do: '*Never throw the baby out with the bath water*'. He rejected colonialism with both its vices and virtues. Maybe the lesson he needed to learn quickly was that colonialism was not entirely bad. As Ogude (2003) remarks, colonialism did not destroy you, it destroyed something but not everything. This is true today; the elements of our cultures, which refused to be deleted by colonialism, cope well with modernism. These resistant elements even make survival very strong.

However, we could equally argue that, at the time Ngugi was writing, the dialogue between foreign and local culture was not possible in the way that it is today. Tradition and modernism have survived long enough for mediation between them to be possible. Ngugi's recent political novels show how he is now able to correct some of these imprecisions in his political novels. The political novel, as Gikandi (1987) remarks

> strives to represent a reality beyond the merely representational. It is a genre, which goes beyond present reification; unlike the modernist novel, the literature of praxis is informed by belief that 'structure', or 'history', or 'mechanics of society' provide man with referents which can enable him to know himself and the world. (Gikandi, 1987:113)

In our understanding of Gikandi's criticism, Ngugi's early works were more concerned with specific social modes, or concerned with the symptoms rather than the socio-historical dynamics of people's experience, thus known as "a fiction of crisis. However, his recent works such as *Petals of blood* and *Matigari* deal with a contemporary reality. They are political in the sense that ideas and ideology in these works are not merely aspects of local colour, but are, to repeat Irving Howe's words "in a state of internal warfare, always on the verge of becoming something other than themselves" (Howe in Gikandi, 1987:114). They enable the reader to cope with the reality instead of getting lost in endless criticism.

If our reasoning about Ngugi's works and his contribution is correct, then his role in East Africa is significant whatever the limitations of his artistic talents. Thus, "any assessment of Ngugi's value and skill as a writer must take into account the social, political and historical base from which he is working. His avowed intention is to write in a way which will connect with the people and their struggle" (Robson, 1979:123). We should not fail to realise that the understanding of the relevance of this literature in East Africa, Africa and the world, depends on this base, through which all his works are bound up as one organic whole and controlled by an iron-bound theme: 'The interpretation of the contemporary reality.' It goes, therefore, without saying that the political situation in Kenya is an indictor. It is this situation which offered to this writer the opportunity to speak for the innocents, who became sufferers while the guilty ones were venerated, for those who were condemned to apologise for their clean existence, and for those overwhelmed by the situation and whose anger seemed not to be there until it was finally activated.

The writings of Ngugi are a contribution that Africans, as Achebe puts it, "require for recovery from colonialism, after which they will have outlived their usefulness" (Overvold, et *al*., 2003:114). This literature is what in general terms can be called "*The Empire Writes Back*" (Ashcroft, B., 1989). It has a transitory value as Africa and Asia are starting to emerge from imperialism. Getting to know this transitory value of Ngugi's literature is important in the understanding not only of his literature, but also of colonial/postcolonial literature in general.

In the next few sections we will speak of children's literature in East Africa ad Ngugi's influence. But before that it is important to give a global overview of children's literature and the concept of childhood.

1.3. What is Children's literature?

Children's literature, though sharing many similarities with adult literature, remains a separate genre. Many critics have assumed that aesthetics is an important function of literature in both adult and children's literature. This concept is understood by Oittinen as referring to a technique or material aesthetics (2000:63). She argues that this technique is used as texts have some kind of mystery or puzzle for the reader to solve. Klaus Doderer, as Oittinen notes, places the highest value on the aesthetic function of literature. He asserts that pedagogy decreases the aestheticity of literature and denatures it. Looking at children's literature from this perspective limits the definition of children's literature only to pleasure i.e. something to enjoy. Other critics argue that "central to theories of the origins of children's fiction is this linking of childhood with *leisure* and *amusement*" (Hunt, 1994:50). Our argument is that if children read their books just to enjoy or for pleasure, then such reading is not critical. It cannot help the child learn the values hidden in the text. The reading is apolitical. In other words, it is based only on an individual's feelings of satisfaction. And in this respect aesthetics is more subjective as a technique of interpretation.

For Hunt "children's literature cannot be defined by textual characteristics either in style or content but by its primary audience; the child reader "(Oittinen, 2000: 61). Klingberg also describes children's literature as literature produced specifically for children (Oittinen, 2000:61). This definition excludes anything else the child may read as literature. In contrast, the Swedish children's author Lennart Hellsing defines children's literature from a sociological or psychological angle. For him "children's literature is anything the child reads or hears, anything from newspapers, series, TV shows and radio presentations to what we call books" (Lennart Hellsing in Oittinen, 2000:62). This view includes not just literature produced for children, but also literature produced by children themselves and the oral tradition. Seen from this wide perspective, Oittinen argues that children's literature could be anything that a child finds interesting. She says that for a baby of a few months, a leaf, a piece of lint, or a newspaper may be 'literature'.

For the purpose of this work, it is more convenient to link our definition of children's literature to literary books. So children's literature is literature produced and published for children only. This leads us to ask the question "what is a **children's book?"**

Oittinen (2000) describes a children's book as that which is directed or intended by the original author to be read by children. But in all this, the truth of the matter is that "we cannot say clearly what makes a book a children's book or not, or why children like it or not, or even if children like a book or not" (Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994:4). Oberstein argues that "the definition of a children's book is still variously based on the publishers and editors' decisions, general trends of style and illustration, supposed or claimed readership, and theories of the creative process which produce a book" (Oberstein, 1994:4-6). In our context, we believe that the *Njamba Nene series* are children's books based on the decision of East Africa's publishing house to publish them for children in schools.

1.3.1. Implied reader

Iser describes an 'implied reader' as "a reader derived from a text's own structures and situated in such a position that he can assemble the meaning toward which the perspectives of the text have guided him" (Iser, 1978:38). Such a definition indicates that the reading of a text takes him to a presupposed or specific knowledge of the story, which we may call here 'ideology.' Lesnik-Oberstein is right when he says that "children's literature critics prove the power of the good book as the one that represents a conveniently packaged and carefully controllable portion of reality for teaching" (Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994:106).

Peter Hunt asserts that until we discover how to take account of the **implied reader**, we shall call fruitlessly for serious attention to be paid to books for children and children as readers. This suggests that an author is supposed to create a relationship with a reader in order to discover the meaning of a text. Wayne Booth would also say that "a successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement" (Hunt, 1990:92) i.e. it is a reading where one shares dialogical cultural assumptions.

The author's second self is created by his use of various techniques, the way he puts himself into the narrator (i. e. his use of the third-person as a godlike all-seer, the way he comments on the events in the story). The reader's second self can be created depending on

how the author gives certain attributes, a certain persona to the reader. In other words, in reading the story, the beliefs and practices of the author and those of the reader coincide and the reader enjoys the work.

It has been observed, however, that children's books written by Westerners about African stories often fail to operate in this way. This failure means that their texts do not achieve the communicative goal intended. It is within this context that Ngugi, in his *Writers In Politics,* addresses some of these issues. Central to his critique is the point that literature brought to Kenyan schools by Westerners did not reflect African reality but helped destroy it. He writes:

> Literature reflects the life of a people. It reflects in word images, a people's creative consciousness of their struggles to mould nature through to co-operative labour in word images a people's consciousness of the tensions and conflicts arising out of their struggles to mould a meaningful social environment founded on their combined actions on nature to wrest the means of life: clothing, food and shelter. (Ngugi, 1981:35)

This literature contains people's images of themselves in history and of their place in the universe. Ngugi argues that the images that were represented to a Kenyan child through the literature read in schools were not appropriate images. The children were made to look and analyse and evaluate the world as made and seen by Europeans. Worse, African children were confronted with a distorted image of themselves and their history as represented in European imperialist literature. In literature and movies, Ngugi found audiences were confronted with the ways in which the imperialist bourgeoisie saw the world. Africans never saw themselves represented or reflected on the screen and never reacted to or responded to themselves and their environment on the screen. They often applauded the superhuman feats of racist heroes of imperialism. Ngugi calls all this cultural imperialism. This is what led him to make an appeal for reading and rethinking literature as he says: "it is time that we realised that the imperialist bourgeois experience of history as reflected in their art and literature is NOT the universal experience of history"(Ngugi,1981:38).

In this way, Ngugi developed a critical mentality in people setting himself an example by writing a literature that makes him "regarded today by the younger generation as probably

the most important contemporary writer from the African continent" (Ngugi, 1986:1). The child image represented through his literature is an African image: firstly by its link to African notions of childhood, and secondly by its link to African realities of life. Ngugi places the African child at the centre of his story. He provides for him or her images of his environment, of the things he knows. In this way, the narrative (novel) which used to be the private property of the elite and the white child and those who spoke English, was now read by different people ranging from the child to the layman on the street. They could read it and their beliefs and practices could agree with those of the writer – Ngugi. C.S Lewis was right when he said that no book is really worth reading at the age of ten, which is not equally (and far more) worth reading at the age of 50" (Lewis in Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994: 132). In short, many people enjoy reading these books in Kenya even today and continue to identify with them.

1.3.2. Childhood

The concept of '**childhood',** as opposed to 'adulthood', is increasingly discussed in children's literature. Hunt, for example, acknowledges that "the Greeks sought to educate the child into becoming the citizen, partaker of the liberty of democracy while Comenius and Luther seek [intended] to educate the child into becoming a citizen of heaven, partaker of the liberty of Christianity" (Hunt in Lesnik-Oberstein,1994:3). Perceived from this angle, we see that a line of values is sketched to produce out of a child an adult according to the society's preferred values.

The Gĩkũyũ community from which Ngugi writes values childhood. If critics fail to take cognisance of the fact that Njamba Nene, the child hero, is perceived as a Gĩkũyũ boy who grew up in Gĩkũyũ culture or community structure, they will not understand why he does or speaks and interprets things the way he does.

To start let us say that male children in the Gĩkũyũ community address one another with *moro wa maito*, i.e. son of our mother while females address one another as *mware wa maito* (i.e. daughter of my or our mother). As regards to the seniority in age, the elder child is addressed as *mokoro wakwa* (my senior) and the parents refer to such as child as *irigithatthi* (first child). He is the centre of affection and the precious possession of the parents. The younger child is *moruna wakwa* (one who followed me). The last child

however is known as *kehinganda* (one who closed the womb), and such a child is held dear, particularly by the mother. It goes without saying that if a man dies without a male child his family group comes to an end. That is why having children is the main motive for every Gĩkũyũ marriage. So, when a man has many wives and many children or heirs, his soul rests in peace with the feeling that after death he will not lose contact with the earth because there will always be someone to hold communion with (Kenyatta, 1938:12-14).

The Gĩkũyũ also give priority to the education of children, even if this is not done in a formal way as in Europe. The parents take the responsibility of educating their children until they reach the stage of tribal education or clan tradition. Though formal school was introduced, the Gĩkũyũ believed that the *homestead was the school for children.* Very small children take their education from the mother and the nurse. The child is taught good manners of speech and important names of people in the family, both past and present. This is given through songs to amuse the child and he is never told that he is being taught. That is why our child hero, *Njamba Nene* in *Njamba Nene and the flying Bus* is able to sing different songs at school and in the forest when they got lost, songs that Mother Wacũ taught him in the family.

After passing the stage of infancy, the education of the child takes a different shape. The child is taught how to sit and walk properly. This age is considered the best to teach the child how to use his hands in various spheres of tribal activities. However, when the child has grown beyond this phase of babyhood, the father takes charge of the boy's education, while the mother takes full responsibility for the girl's education and a part of the boy's education. The father has to teach his son various things. He has to take him to the garden, for example, for practical training. Special attention is paid to acquainting the child with the names of various plants and roots and their uses. Through moving in the jungles and forests with his father, the boy learns about numerous wild fruits and flowers and comes to know which are poisonous and which are edible. It not surprising when we hear from the story how Njamba Nene has been boasting saying that "there isn't a single tree that I can't name for you" (Ngugi, 1986b: 25). This is part of the training he received from his father though he remains unnamed in this story.

In addition, the boy is taught about family, clan and tribal lands, and their boundaries are carefully pointed out to them. They are taught, for example, to know that the selfish or self-regarding man has no name or reputation in the Gĩkũyũ community. Njamba Nene's advice to his friends in one of these books is a reflection and application of this tribal education.

> Why should I profit from your suffering? Why should someone else's unhappiness be the source of my happiness? No, let us all sit down and share what little I have. Let us share it to the last grain and keep hunger at bay. My Mother Wacũ says: An empty stomach does not say no even to an appetiser...(Ngugi, 1986b:20).

In the Gĩkũyũ community growing boys and girls learn that they have one thing to learn which sums up all the others aspects of education, and that is manners. It is with personal relations, rather than with natural phenomena, that Gikuyu education is concerned right from the very beginning (Kenyatta, 1938:108).

From the above, we see that the concept of childhood in the Gĩkũyũ community differs from the European example. As soon as we start to understand that childhood is perceived differently from one society to another, this knowledge will help us to seek and explore experience in children and their lives as conditioned by their environments. This cultural-based knowledge is essential for the translation of children's books.

1.4. Children's literature in East Africa and Ngugi's influence

According to Odaga (1974) the role played by children's literature in Kenya can be marked clearly through three different periods:

(a) pre-colonial period which was oral in form
(b) colonial period both written and oral, and
(c) the emergent post-colonial written literature which is geared towards projecting an African image.

As already stated, Kenyan African literature before the colonial period was oral in nature This pre-colonial literature played a major role in the pre-colonial society with regard to the education and socialising of children. Developing from colonial literature are books written

by non-African writers for African children. “But like colonial literature, most of these books fail to evoke and to bring out an authentic genuine local spirit’“(Odaga, 1974:53). These books have a Western background and are based on Western values. Children in the colony in this period, as Mwanzi (1982) also acknowledges, were given literature written for and about children of the colonial masters. Mwanzi argues that this was done deliberately so that the newly introduced literature could facilitate the negation of the indigenous literature and culture. This foreign literature was also important for speeding up the internalisation of the coloniser’s values while, at the same time, undermining the colonised people’s confidence in their cultural heritage. What this literature did was to make African children rebellious to their indigenous culture and communities. The writers of this type of children’s books failed to adjust their writings to African background and continued to take make use of European images. As a result, this literature gave way to a new trend that of postcolonial children’s literature

Post-independence children’s books written by Africans have sought to make the “African aware of what he lost during the colonial period. The books are an attempt to give the children clear scope and ideas about their world by depicting modes of behaviour familiar to their communities that form their society” (Odaga, 1974:8). These books were about situations which are local and familiar to them. They evoked conflicts created by a friction between Western culture (e.g. Christian values) and African traditional values. This literature promoted a positive African world image and was set in surroundings familiar to African children. In other words, this particular trend denied the image of the Africa presented to African children by Western writers. It is in this category that Ngugi’s *Njamba Nene* series falls. And it is this literature that is referred to by many as ‘African children’s literature’ that Osaki defines as "literature written for African children by African authors either in the vernacular or in a foreign language" (Osaki, 2004:1). This literature is available to children in many African schools and around the world.

From the publishers' point of view, Ngugi's books are among the classics available and suitable not only for children in African schools[2], but also globally though having an African background. And if a classic is, as Luckens regards it:

> (…) a book that lasts - not because it is continually enshrined on lists and because people talk about it, but because it continues to be read. Despite changes in society, it finds new readers in each generation and gives repeated pleasure and understanding upon reading. Not all that we remember of our reading deserves long life. Some stories justifiably endure.(Luckens in Ross, 1991:4)

we, therefore, agree with Luckens that these books have endured long enough in both the Gikuyu and English languages, and there is no doubt that they can do the same in French.

The two children's books under analysis are: ***Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus*** and ***Njamba Nene's Pistol*** (Ngugi, 1986a, 1986b).

Ngugi's *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus* is strategically set in the Kenya of the 1950s, a time of turbulence. The storybook pulls us into the world of Kenya prior to its independence. This is the time when the colonial regime was finding it increasingly difficult to control a resistant population, which was demanding *self-rule*. Armed resistance was at its peak and so was colonial determination to crush it. The book opens with a description of a school life situation.

In this story Ngugi describes the trials that a Kenyan boy faced under colonialism. Njamba Nene, the son of Mother Wacu, is presented as a pupil in *Tie and Tie African Primary School* (TAPS) - TAPS was founded by a white settler, Mr. Pious Brainwash, for "the purpose of developing Africans who would think like Europeans and hold the same views about the world as they held. His aim was to cultivate a small group of Africans who had mouths legs, arms, hearts, everything like those of white people, so that if freedom fighters

[2] Apart from Kenya, these books are also used in other East African countries, notably: Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya from 1986 to date. Perhaps this is due to the scarcity of new children's books by African writers. Consequently the same books are reprinted in East Africa.

ever won the war, this group would act as the eyes, the ears, and the feet of those white people"(Ngugi, 1986b: 5). It is in this school that the child hero starts his adventures.

The second story, *Njamba Nene's Pistol,* is a compelling account of the turbulence that inflamed Kenya in the 1950s and its impact on people's lives. Njamba Nene is a young boy looking for a job in *Limuru* during the *state of emergency*. Jobless, tired and hungry, he accepts a mission from an unknown man to deliver a loaf of bread to the forest hideout of a Mau Mau general. During the adventures that follow, he escapes a trap by British and other government troops, and eventually he deliberately joins the freedom fighters. The story is imbued with political overtones and is illustrated with black and white drawings.

It is important to note that these books can be regarded as children's books given that the writer places the child at the centre of his stories. Though the stories are partly based on adults and partly on children,-the writer succeeds in maintaining a child's attention. His readers needed such realism in the portrayal of characters, with an expression of conflict and pain that reflected their contemporary reality. Providing children with voicing and heroic characters is what gives his stories the greatest value.

1.5. Reflection of Ngugi's own childhood in his literature

Robson observes:

> Certain factors in Ngugi's own life help to explain the preoccupations of his writing. His radical and socialist ideas are deeply rooted in his own childhood experiences during some of Kenya's most turbulent days (Robson, 1979:132).

As far as his background is concerned:

> Ngugi was born in Kamiriithu, near Limuru, Kiambu District. At that time Kenya was under British rule, which ended in 1963. His father, Thiong'o wa Nducu, was a peasant farmer, who was forced to become a squatter after the British Imperial Act of 1915. Ngugi attended the mission-run school at Kamaandura in Limuru, Karinga School in Maanguu, and Alliance High School in Kikuyu during the Mau Mau insurgency. During these years Ngugi became a devout Christian. Later he rejected Christianity, and changed his original name in 1976

> from James Ngugi, which he saw as a sign of colonialism, to Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1999b:1).

The child hero of his books reflects Ngugi himself. As Lesnik-Oberstein points out, "children's literature attracts people who often have an interest in children's books based on a conviction of personal knowledge and experience of children, childhood, or reading" (1994:1). Ngugi is admired for his vision of childhood, which opened again before him when he wrote his books. Commenting on the main character of his *Weep Not Child*, Robson makes the following comment:

> The creation of Njoroge's world is an essential feature in the juxtaposition of innocence and experience and rests both on the skilful narration of the events of childhood and on Ngugi's ability to view some of them through the eyes of the child (Robson, 1979:34).

Maybe the best way to describe Ngugi is to repeat Astrid Lindgren's words: "I don't write books for children …I write for the child I am myself. I write for things that are dear to me – trees and houses and nature – just to please myself" (Lindgren in Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994:75). Travers also says that "if you [we] are honest, you have, in fact, no idea where childhood ends and maturity begins. It is all endless and all one" (Travers in Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994:75). Travers further argues that "it's a gift of some writers to remain in a sense children all their lives to continue to see the world as boys and girls see it and take their side instinctively" (Travers in Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994:76). Ransome's view can as well be applied to Ngugi when he says that "You write not FOR children but for yourself, and if, by good fortune, children enjoy what you enjoy, why then you are a writer of children's books" (Ransome in Hunt, 1990:97 emphasis in the original). All these statements explain better the assumption that Ngugi is a not only a writer of children's book, but *a writer*.

Having discussed the definition of children's literature and the notions of childhood, we now have to analyse how this literature worked within Kenya and the contribution Ngugi made to this literature.

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1.6. Similarities between Ngugi's and Marxist aesthetics

Inggs's *The role and development of Soviet children's literature during perestroika* (1997) explains socialist realism in a way that enables us to relate its principles to Ngugi's children's literature. The link between ideology and education dominates Ngugi's children's literature, in the same way as it does in Soviet children's literature.

According to Inggs (1997) four primary features were required of socialist realist works:

(a) works must appeal to and be comprehensible to people, reflecting everyday lives; in children's literature this meant that protagonists were mostly poor peasant or city children with whom readers could easily identify.
(b) works must reflect a "correct" ideology on the part of the author, in order to be able to play an educative role.
(c) works must be imbued with the ideals of the Party, and work with the party.
(d) works had to contain an awareness of class conflict and class struggle and sympathise specifically with the working classes (1997:51)

Accordingly O'Dell lists six of the chief virtues that often appeared in Soviet or social realist children's literature: "collectivism, discipline, love of work, patriotism, proletarianism, internationalism and atheism" (O'Dell quoted in Inggs, 1997:53).

Our study reveals that almost all of these features and virtues are reflected in Ngugi's children's books. If we consider the first feature, for example, we will see that Ngugi's stories are a truthful representation of what was going on in Kenya. The stories are set in a time of political problems between the colonial masters and the indigenous people. The protagonist is a child from a poor family described as one who had "skinny legs, mosquito legs" (Ngugi, 1986b:1) maybe as a result of malnutrition. Nazareth observes that "Ngugi's characters always have roots in the village. The village is the hinterland, not only physically but also psychologically" (Nazareth, 1985:120).

Unlike socialist realist literature, which is anti-metaphysic, atheist and promotes only material salvation rather than spiritual salvation, Ngugi's children's literature speaks constantly of God, '*Ngai*'. There are, in our view, two strong reasons for the conviction that the writer does not develop the theme of atheism in his works. The first is that Ngugi is

from a society where people have or maintain a close relationship with spiritual beings. The Gikuyu, unlike socialists, believe in one God, *Ngai,* the creator and giver of all things. Kenyatta (1938) describes him as the one who is believed to have no father, mother, or companion of any kind. This creator lives in the sky and has temporary homes on earth where he rests during his visits. He cannot be perceived by ordinary mortal eyes. The Gikuyu community is a religious community.

It therefore clear from this short description that Ngugi grew up with a clear idea and understanding of God and other supernatural beings. His reference to God in his children's books is a clear indication that no other 'belief' helped him to depart from these deep convictions in his *Ngai*. In this regard, Ngugi differs from socialists who are known as atheists. However, his position against the missionary church in his texts does not mean that he gave up his belief in a single High God, the Land-Giver and His other beneficent works.

The second reason showing that the writer does not develop the theme of atheism in his writing is that, for him, every physical problem must have a moral and spiritual basis because, as many critics have noted, "Ngugi is the most Christian writer Africa has produced" (Gugelburger, 1985:120). Even if, as many say, he deserted the Christian faith, he was familiar with the Bible from where he drew his metaphors. He writes in a biblical style. The lines below illustrates this point. In *Njamba Nene's flying Bus*, we are told, for instance, that Brainwash sent the boy away from school as he said

> "Go! Your sins have driven you out of the school"
>
> (Ngugi, 1986b: 41)

Looking at these lines, we find that Ngugi translated or mimicked the Bible. He uses a well-known biblical model to play with words. He has succeeded reproducing even the rhythm underlying Jesus' words. If we consider these few verses from the Bible:

Luke 5: 24 "I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house"

John 5: 8 "Jesus said to him, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'"

Mark 5: 34 "And He said to her, 'Daughter your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your afflictions.'"

(*The New Testamentt*, 1982)

it becomes clearer that his mimic really conveys the spirit of the Bible. But he does it in a reversed way. He falsifies the Bible. Maybe the message behind this falsification is that Missionaries, unlike Jesus, send people away from their schools instead of restoring them and sending them home glorifying God as Jesus did. In other words, they did not live the life they preached. A close look at this story shows that not only did Ngugi distort the message of the Bible, but also songs which refer to England. We are told that John Bull proposed a song, which was chanted in praise of London, the capital of England:

London's burner
London's burner
Firewood in the belly
Firewood in the belly
Fire is fire
Fire is fire
Boro, warm yourself
Boro, warm yourself

In her translation of this song (*Njamba Nene and the flying Bus*) Wangũi wa Goro annotates that what children are singing here is "London's burning". They sing the English words as if they are Gikuyu words and reduce the song to utter nonsense. Ngugi falsified this song trying to show how the coloniser is burning. According to Ngugi, the coloniser had a power of destruction.

Class conflict is the most apparent feature in almost all the works by the writer. His children's books it is shown how this social conflict has reached the point where people were exploiting children. This is illustrated through child labour as portrayed in one of his stories where Nene works and is denied his pay by the Indian businessman (representing the colonial system) he was working for. In other words, Ngugi shows in his books that these peasants and labourers are those who demanded their freedom.

Ngugi creates *patriotism* in children's brains. Patriotism plays an important role in his stories. Njamba Nene uses words like "our country", which means that the child is mature enough to think of his country in terms of 'us' and not 'me'. Njamba Nene, we are told, stole bread which he returned again saying: "why have I done what nobody else is willing to do? Why have I disobeyed the will of people?" (Ngugi, 1986:7) This is once more a sign of self-criticism, which proves his patriotism.

What impresses us the most in this story is how the narrator puts across the historical situation. This is symptomatic of Ngugi's politics. He tries to explain the Mau Mau mode of revolution as he shows how the boy decided to join the freedom army. The boy is sent with a pistol hidden inside the bread by a disguised Mau Mau general. The invisibility of children in society contributes to revolution. Children became warriors out of necessity; their patriotic role becomes an important response to the need of the society. The message that Ngugi puts across is that we should have respect for children in society; they play a role in politics as much as adults do. Thus, all the virtues mentioned above, except atheism, are present in Ngugi's children books.

Ngugi's ideological sympathies in these books are clearly with the socialist movement. His language, as we have seen, invokes familiar images of a class struggle between poor and rich. This means that the materialistic aspect of Marxist theory is useful for the interpretation of Ngugi's children's books**.** It seems to us that the history of Ngugi's children's literature, though rooted in Gikuyu culture, bears some similarity to Soviet children's literature or social realist literature.

Ngugi has been a powerful figure in African literature due to his continued emphasis, in his works, on the political function of the writer in postcolonial societies. Marxist critical theory seems to have developed in indigenous African criticism through Ngugi. He shares with Marx common concerns such as class conflict, material production, decolonisation, historiography, etc., stressing the importance of the material conditions of the production and consumption of the text. Marxism was acceptable in his works so long as they were involved in a struggle against the bourgeoisie. Even though Ngugi's literature does that, it is still a fact that his *radical theory* and *Marxism* have different emphases.

1.7. Ideology in Ngugi's children's books

Some people have been misled to think that children's literature is neutral, powerless i.e. deprived of ideological influence. Those who hold this view believe that it is a widespread belief that children's literature is free of ideological and political content and of value judgments regarding gender, race, class and other social divisions.

Others, on the other hand, believe that ideology in children's literature is based on *didacticism*. "Literature", as Dixon puts it, "can help people be aware of the way society works" (Dixon, 1997: 32). Literature, thus, can help them meet the challenges they face in life and give them a true picture of the world they need to identify with. This applies both to adult and children's literature. Apart from being merely focused on entertainment, children's literature is an important conveyor of world knowledge, ideas, values, and accepted behaviour. It plays an educational, social and ideological role as well.

Sabeur Mdallell argues that "children's literature has from the very beginning been related to pedagogics" and that children's literature has always been considered as "a powerful means for educating children" (Mdallell, 2004:6). In his *About Books and Children: Historical Survey of Children's Literature,* Adams also claims that "the best of the literature for young readers provides a potent weapon in the struggle for increased moral strength" (Adams, 1953:237). From this point of view, we see that ideology in children's literature is particularly attached to values related to educating and child-raising. These values demonstrate what children like and how they speak and think about things. Lesnik-Oberstein corroborates this idea further as she adds that "religion rests its case on revelation, science on method, ideology on morality" (Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994:8). We may, thus, assume that central to the ideology of children's books is this linking of childhood with morality.

Apart from its didactic function, the language of children's literary texts is also a very powerful socialising instrument. Halliday (1978) emphasises this when he says that through language a child learns about customs, hierarchies and attitudes; therefore the language of literature can promote and reinforce the adoption of these customs. Stephens (1992: 8-9)

maintains that every book has an implicit ideology, usually in the form of beliefs and values taken for granted in society.

Though children's literature is linked to ideology, it is important to signal that some writers intend to speak to children openly/overtly in a more didactic way while others quite consciously veil their message. In this respect, it can be argued that ideologies in such children's books are not generally easy to find. They require a method for their extraction. This is made clear by Tiina Puurtinen who states that

> Ideology can appear in children's fiction in the form of explicit statements of ethical or moral principles, but as children's literature becomes less conspicuously didactic [in many countries], ideology is most often now realised as implicit assumptions and values underlying the writer's linguistic choices (Puurtinen, 1998: 3).

Hence, according to Puurtinen, the child can encounter difficulty in reading and unravelling ideologies in a book written for him/her. Of course some children may not easily unravel ideologies in a book if these are not unveiled to them. We believe that sometimes to find meaning in a text a child reader needs either to read the story critically himself or to be helped by an intermediate person (a critic, a teacher or parent) to unfold it.

Both functions of didacticism and socialisation are found in Ngugi's children's books through themes such as 'culture' and 'land'. To illustrate these points it will help to give concrete examples. The theme of 'culture', for example, is given by Ngugi to teach Kenyan children the importance of returning to their ancestral values first and accommodating modernism afterwards. In one of his children's books, the child hero warns his classmates:

> We are in Africa, and we must know Africa. We are in Kenya, and it is our country Kenya that we must know/ Now we are here in the forest, all on our own. We have nobody nor anything to turn to to take us home. It is also growing dark. We must therefore, find out where we are, in order to decide where we will go next. We cannot know where we are, without first finding out where we came from (Ngugi, 1986b:24).

This quote is a very strong metaphor showing what was lost between tradition and modernism. Ngugi seems to be suggesting that it is only in the rediscovery of one's identity (who s/he is and who s/he is not), his/her roots or origins that one can easily add to

himself/herself the values from other cultures and reject that which does not cope with his/her culture. In fact, denying one's own culture is denying oneself: a lesson that African children still need to learn today.

In the same way, 'land' functions in Ngugi's books as a site of opposition to political power. Ngugi is sensitive to the ways in which power engages with the open space in which he grew up. Ngugi himself asserts that:

> Writing has always been my way of reconnecting myself to the landscape of my birth and upbringing.
>
> Not surprisingly the natural landscape dominates the East African literary imagination. This awareness of the land as the central actor in our lives distinguishes East African literature from others in the continent and it certainly looms large in my own writing from *The River Between to Matigari*. (Ngugi wa Thiong'o in Gikandi, 2000:194).

These powerful statements dominate Ngugi's fiction. In most of his novels he is determined to show how the Mau Mau, known as a rebel movement, for example, fought for land restitution. Land is an institution by itself in Ngugi's literature. It was interpreted differently by whites and indigenous black people in Kenya. It is perhaps because of these differing views around land that Ngugi brings this issue into his children's books.

Writing about the Mau Mau, Odhiambo also elaborates on this issue of land, asserting that:

> The history of Mau Mau is the history of power, how it is attained, or lost, manipulated, controlled. It is a confession that society is still engaged in struggle about power and struggle for accountability as well. The narration of the story of Mau Mau is an accounting process with its profits and losses, and scores to be settled (Odhiambo 1991:303).

It is important to stress at this point that Ngugi uses *Land* as a metaphor to address his audience (i.e. Kenyan children). Of course, this metaphor of *land* is common among most Kenyan writers. In his T*aste of Death* Mwangi, for instance, makes this issue significant for children. He wants them to know what the Mau Mau were fighting for:

> We are fighting for our *land*, and because we want our *land* we must bear the consequences. The *land* is ours, and nobody can take it away from us. The *land* is for our ancestors, our children, our livestock and our hearts. Must a man whose grand father owned acres of *land* die without a place to be buried in? …we have to first die fighting for the liberation of our *land*. Then our children must also die, then their Children and the children of their children, until they achieve liberty (Maughan-Brown, 1985:220 *emphasis ours*).

The same claim or theme is visible in Ngugi's stories analysed here. Somewhat later in the book (*Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus*), this most surprising song occurs:

> "God gave us this *land*
> We black people
> And said that it was ours forever"
> (Ngugi, 1986b: 46 emphasis ours)

The end of the other story (*Njamba Nene's Pistol*) portrays again this theme. After the child's costly involvement in the fight for freedom, the writer states, for instance, that:

> Njamba Nene went outside and paused for a while. He turned and faced Mount Kenya (Ngugi, 1986a: 36)[3]

From the above quotes, one can easily assume that the issue of the *lost land* is at the centre of Mau Mau history. This suggests again that Ngugi's aim was to educate Kenyan children. His literature helped to inculcate in them the idea of citizenship. In his reconstruction of Kenyan history for Kenyan children, land, language and culture issues are fundamental issues, just as Lennart Hellsing recognises that "children's literature can teach the child language, orientation to time and place, and social orientation" (Hellsing in Oittinen, 2000:65). In this respect his literature can be said to have contributed enormously to the education of children as far as time and place orientations are concerned.

From the above, it is clear that children's literature plays a major role in society because of its strong ideological emphasis. For Inggs, focusing on the same aspect, "Children's literature texts can be seen as mirror of the values and assumptions of a society in which

[3] This quote reminds us of the title of the well-known book *Facing Mount Kenya* by Kenyatta, 1938.

they are produced, and as such, provide a reliable indication of the virtues and behaviour held in esteem by that society" (Inggs,1997:1). In other words, values in children's literature are a reflection of a society's ideological outlook. The fact that ideology is central to children's literature cannot be denied because reading books form part of children's ideological development. The impression held by some scholars, that children's literature is neutral, is corrected by the above arguments.

Thus, in Ngugi we found a literature that accords African children their true image. Such literature tries to promote African culture and its traditional heritage without forgetting to present true and honest facts. Due to the fact that some critics of African children's books are "western-oriented and undermine what is local and African in tone" (Odaga, 1974:8), through his literature, Ngugi corrects the situation by applying to literature a criticism that can teach the world about African customs and beliefs and put right the record which has been distorted by foreign critics and scholars.