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NgugiWaThiongo's *In the House of the Interpreter* as a text of resistance.

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Abstract

Resistance literature as an art form responds to oppression and subjugation by using language as the weapon against geographical displacement or appropriation and other oppressive practices. NgugiWaThiongo, the self-proclaimed language warrior and a resistance writer throws much light on his personal experiences during a time when Kenya was still managing to become an independent nation. The shaping of the nation of Kenya by the political events and the transformation of Ngugi from a naive student to a significant writer of Kenya and the spokesperson of African culture and languages, happen simultaneously.

Keywords: responds, oppression, subjugation, oppressive, self-proclaimed

In the House of the Interpreter powerfully traces the impact of education on Ngugi and the development of his anticolonial attitude to raise his voice for the sake of Africans. The memoir begins with the hint of a sheer shock of Thiongo as a school boy who is awestruck by the fact that the entire village has been removed from the place where it belonged. The fact of the displacement of his village could not be justified in his mind and he begins to recollect how he happened to join Alliance High school. Thiongo is one of the very few boys who went for schooling to Alliance High School which happened to be a relatively better option in comparison to the elementary schools and the vocational institutes in the local villages.

The experience which Thiongo had in Alliance school was entirely different from that of the one he had in the local schools. In Alliance school he was made to learn the merits of colonialism and memorise the verses of Bible with the aim of producing Africans who would act in accordance to the colonial rules and regulations. Ngugi who believed, right from his childhood, in the transforming power

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of education, uses this exposure to a very great extent to shape himself as a significant contributor to his nation.

Ngugi throws light on the very fact that the whole system of colonialism operated with a belief that the colonized would serve for the development of the colonizers and the empire. Every resource of the colonized nations indirectly served the colonizer. It includes the land and other material resources of the colonized, their labour and every other aspect that belonged to the colonized. According to Ngugi the civilizing mission of the colonial rulers, though benefited the Africans to a certain extent, essentially masked the hideous intentions of the West that aimed at the optimal utilization of the resources of African nations to empower the former.

The shaping of Ngugi as a student and later a writer is attributed to his experience in the Alliance High School. Similarly, racial prejudices and other discriminative procedures carried out by the British government forces the formation of the fighters of the Mau Mau rebellion. Ngugi's brother who happens to be a Mau Mau fighter is another instance of the transformative process. While Ngugi becomes an advocate of resistance by his literary creations, the Mau Mau fighters demonstrate the very act of resistance. The protest and the rebellion or war actually symbolizes the act of resistance.

The memoir becomes very light in Ngugi's description of his experiences in the Alliance High School. His experience is a melange of friendship, bullying and his realisation that Alliance is the place that is going to ultimately shape his potential talents. Some of the significant moments in his routine of the school and hostel includes gaining an acquaintance with Kenneth Wanjai, a Limurian and LeonaredMbugua with whom he develops close friendship and an occasional escape from the rigid atmosphere of Alliance High School by jumping the walls of the hostels and visiting the marketplace nearby.

Gradually Ngugi begins to get a grasp of all subjects including English Literature, history, geography, physics and chemistry. Ngugi used to wonder whether chemical elements possessed spiritual nature as he could not apprehend the process of transformation of the elements when exposed to heat and light, but he never dared to ask any doubt to the teacher. And in the biological laboratory he used to imagine the dead frogs, mice, millipedes and insects coming back to life and chasing every student out of the lab.

Villagization is the term given by the British Government for the ostensibly innocuous process of forced displacement. This process was implemented during 1955 as a counter measure to arrest the actions of the Mau Mau fighters as well as the supporters. Ngugi is not aware of all such aspects inside Alliance School. At first he could not apprehend what is happening around him. Ngugi asks himself, “My home, from where I set out for Alliance only three months ago, is no more.... How could a whole village, its people, history, everything vanish, just like that?” (Thiongo 5)

In the name of villagization, houses were bulldozed and anyone suspected of involvement in the Mau Mau movement were arrested and the entire village was relocated to a common site (concentration camps and concentration villages) to hamper further help and support of the villagers to the fighters. This process was also accompanied by forced land consolidation. According to this, the people of Kenya who

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owned land in different locations had to give away the land to the British government and in compensation would be given a consolidated land in some other location.

The concentration camps comprised men and the concentration villages comprised of women and children. Both the concentration camps and concentration villages were kept under surveillance by the Union Jack. A watch tower is usually built on the highest ground near such camps and villages to enable a thorough process of scrutiny.

Thus, the demarcation between the prison, the concentration camp and the village has been blurred to keep the activities of the Mau Mau fighters and supporters under check. Ngugi recalls the tough times in the concentration village when his mother would feed him and his siblings with mere semblance of meals and how his sister Njoki and his sister in law Charity managed to work in the European owned tea estates to earn a meagre amount of money.

The second term passes in no time and Ngugi had come home for a break. The repercussions of the doomsday are too overwhelming for Ngugi’s family to bear with. His mother has been detained by the guard for not revealing the whereabouts of his son. Here is an instance from the text,

She talked very little about the ordeal she had undergone, and I felt sure that there were many things my family hid from me, to save me from the burden of knowing what they knew. They treated me as an outsider who could not bear too much reality. In protecting me, they made my estrangement much harder to overcome. (Thiongo 48)

During the second term holidays, though there are no droppings of threatening leaflets, Ngugi hears about the recurrent raids, mass arrests and public hangings conducted by the British government. After the holidays he returns to Alliance. During his third term in Alliance, Ngugi shares the experience of participating in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. Here is an instance from the text that demonstrates Ngugi’s conflicted state of mind.

I could not help comparing the pairs of exiles in Arden to my brother, Good Wallace, wandering in the forests of Nyandarwa and Mount Kenya or wherever in the mountains he now lived. I could imagine the guerrillas carving coded messages for each other or reading the pamphlets dropped from the sky. But my mental meanderings did not take away from my overall enjoyment of this first experience of staged Shakespeare. (Thiongo 53)

After the third term Ngugi comes back to the village for Christmas holidays only to be flustered by the fact that his sister in law has been arrested for providing the Mau Mau fighters with food and clothing.

A few days later Ngugi comes to know that Kiambu Native African Location Council has awarded him a full scholarship and that there is no need for him to pay the tuition fees for the rest of the years in Alliance school. Even before feeling happy for having got the scholarship Ngugi comes to know that the British forces have captured his brother. Though there wasn’t any official announcement, the news reaches Ngugi’s family. There were different versions of his brother’s experience with the British

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forces. While some told that he was shot by the officials, some said that he was caught alive and somehow he managed to escape through the tea bushes.

Ngugi's family felt some relief when they heard that Good Wallace is alive somewhere near the Banana Hills. It was during such a time when the British forces captured Dedan Kimathi, the leader of Mau Mau guerrillas. The image of the wounded warrior chained to the hospital bed was circulated among the villagers to let them know the plight of the Mau Mau guerrillas. For days Ngugi could not forget the image and often felt haunted at the very thought of his brother meeting with a similar plight.

The final year at Alliance was more serious in academics and the students witnessed a lot of political transformation that was going on in Kenya. Ngugi's acquaintance of the many books is the one aspect that shapes his attitudes towards the colonizers. He owes this knowledge to the library of Alliance school where he had the chance of familiarising himself with books that include G. A. Henty's *With Clive in India, or The Beginnings of an Empire* and *With Wolfe in Canada, or The Winning of a Continent*, Captain W.E. John's series, *King Solomon's Mines*, *Treasure Island*, Edgar Wallace's crime thrillers and detective mysteries, Sherlock Holmes, Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*, Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, Leo Tolstoy's *Childhood, Youth, and Boyhood*.

The four years of education at Alliance comes to an end and Ngugi has temporarily got the job of a primary teacher in Kahuguini Primary School in Gatundu. In the final chapter of the memoir *A Tale of the Hounds at the Gate*, he describes about the abominable experience he faces while travelling from Nairobi to Limuru by bus. He was so excited and thrilled about his visit to home as he anticipated mother's reaction on hearing about his admission to Makerere University and about his temporary job as a primary school teacher that has fetched him a handsome salary. Also he has passed the Overseas Cambridge School Certificate with distinction that is going to assure him a handsome stipend and scholarship.

Ngugi was so elated that he could not wait for the moment of meeting his mother and family. He was completely engrossed by his contemplation that he didn't even realise the stopping of bus near a roadblock at Banana Hills. It was irritating and inconvenient for Ngugi who has thoroughly envisioned the happenings of the day in his mind. But the outcome was not as he had imagined. The officers hound those without authentic identity card and tax papers. When Ngugi's turn comes he tells about the purpose of his travel from Kahuguini to Limuru and that he was a former student of Alliance who has also got his admission in Makerere University. Here is the exchange between Ngugi and those in charge.

Are you drunk or what? Show me your tax papers. I am a student, I say. I have just left school. Alliance High School, I add, to make an impression. Is this the route to Alliance? No, I am going home. Limuru. Where are you coming from? School? Kahuguini. Gatundu... Are you a Kenyatta follower? I am a student. I answer vaguely....Kahuguini! I say to clarify the distinction. I explain that I have secured a temporary position pending exam results—Mr. Rifleman interrupts me. Oh, so you are a teacher. And I take it that you don't teach free, do you? No, but—Don't play games with me. Show me your tax receipts. I don't have any. Look at these papers. I am going to Makerere. Uganda. In July! First-year university student. (Thiongo 192)

Ngugi's responses fails to convince them and he was asked to get down from the bus under the label of suspect. Ngugi believes that there must have been some misunderstanding regarding his identity and that when higher officials come for inspection he would explain and clarify everything so that he is free to go home. As he is feeding his mind with optimism, he watches the bus leaving and disappearing from his sight. After some time, another bus arrives and Ngugi happens to see Kenneth and Patrick among the passengers. To his relief to a certain extent, he hands over the money to Kenneth and asks him to give it to his mother.

The next day Good Wallace comes along with Joseph Kabae for the rescue of his younger brother. Kabae was one of the members of the King's African Rifles during the Second World War II serving military. Their effort gives Ngugi a hope that he would soon be released, but that didn't happen. He was held by the officials on Friday and he was kept in remand prison for the next five days during when he happens to see the other side of colonial rule in contrast to that of his experiences in Alliance High School.

The remand prison was a large room with only half the lighting that was only sufficient for the inmates to see and recognise each other. There was no facility for defecation and everyone had to rely on a toilet hole in the corner the room. The stench was unbearable, from which Ngugi tries to escape by his visualisations of what is going to happen in the future. However, those visualisations didn't help much as Ngugi starts to remember the stories of those arrested under suspicion.

The officials would announce the release of the suspects and randomly shoot them at their back. He could not sleep as he was disturbed by such mental images of fear and death. Four days pass by and nothing happens, besides the tasteless porridge provided and the eternal stench of bowels and urine in the remand prison. The day comes when the prisoner can speak on his behalf before the judge. Here is what happened in the court room,

And then, out of nowhere, I recall my days with the Alliance debating society, the parliamentary format, in which you asked questions and, in the process, brought out inconsistencies in the opponent's position. I decide that Mr. Rifleman is the mover of the government motion, and I am the opposition. I am back in my Alliance element. (Thiongo 238)

Ngugi asks the Rifleman a series of question for which he had to come up with a yes or no response. The former was so tactful in his approach that the later gets baffled and contradicts his own statement that points to the guilt of the suspect. When Ngugi finishes his fellow prisoners and the others present in the court applauds for his novel approach of proving his innocence. The judicial officers ask for relevant documents and Ngugi shows them the acceptance papers stating his admission to Mackerere University and the Certificate of Overseas Cambridge School stating his merit. The judge pronounces the following in response to Ngugi's defence of himself,

The hour of judgement has come. It is simple: the court will not stand in the way of a young man who has just graduated from Alliance with such grades. Police officers must not let jealousy cloud their judgment in the execution of their duties. This court will not

stand between you and Makerere, the judge says. You are free to go. For a few seconds, I am not able to take it in. I feel tears, and I don't know if they are of joy or horror at how closely I came to damning my soul forever by lying out of fear. (Thiongo 239)

Ngugi feels much elated at his triumphant victory in proving his innocence. He leaves the court and goes to his village where he is seen a hero by his family members. His success should be mainly attributed to his power of endurance even during the most difficult of times. He feels that such hardships can never hamper the enriching experience he had in Alliance High School. In his own words, “I will not let this ordeal mar my memories of my four-year sojourn in the House of the Interpreter or my expectations of the future.” (Thiongo 240)

The memoir ends with the departure of the train from Limuru Railway station in which Ngugi has set forth his journey to Makerere University where he rose to become a writer and ultimately a language warrior and a propagandist of resistance to colonial values.

There are many strategies which are employed by colonial writers to establish a dignified space for themselves in the arena of writing. Ngugi's strategy in resisting the colonial values and attitudes is his refusal to write in the language of the colonial ruler. He also refuses to appreciate the colonial values and tendencies. He doesn't stop by merely advocating the tenets of nativism.

But Ngugi chooses to resist the colonial attitudes and language by writing in his own native language. He faced severe criticism and derision when he first propounded such an idea. He was even criticised by many African writers for discrediting the language of English. But Ngugi at no point tries to discredit English as a language, he is just trying to address the lacuna that is being created in the linguistic arena. Here is an instance of his views in an interview,

If I meet an English person, and he says, ‘I write in English,’ I don't ask him ‘Why are you writing in English?’ If I meet a French writer, I don't ask him, ‘Why don't you write in Vietnamese?’ But I am asked over and over again, ‘Why do you write in Gikuyu?’ For Africans, the view is there is something wrong about writing in an African language. (Marshall)

Ngugi also draws attention to the tactic used by the colonisers in forcing the native African speakers to use transatlantic slave trade. In his own words, “the forced loss of language” aimed to erase the history of African languages and cultures, as both are intertwined with each other. Language is indispensable for the survival of culture and culture becomes the value determinant of any language, for that matter. When Ngugi wrote the seminal text, *Decolonizing the Mind* in 1986, he faced hostility and disgust from the readers as well as writers, but his exceptional effort resulted in a conference that addressed seminal issues pertaining to the endangering of African languages and cultures.

The conference also marked the release of a manifesto on African languages titled Asmara Declaration. According to Ngugi an African writer should never feel compelled to write in English. He is refuting the stance of those who are of the opinion that writing in African languages hinders access to the people of other nationalities, by pointing out that literary and creative pieces written in English and other European languages never faced such crisis as that of African languages.

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The problem is that African languages are never discussed in the forefront of literary arena. They are always discarded and written off according to the writer. There are many factors that contribute to this crisis, including less number of publishing venues and a marked absence of reviewing and translations. Here Ngugi might seem to contradict his own statement of writing in the native languages of Africa. But it is not so.

As mentioned before he is not against the use of English language or tries to discredit it, but he is instigating a transformation in the literary world that had always privileged European languages and discredited African languages. Ngugi's wit is awe inspiring in the minds of the readers as he puts forth his experience in a nut shell. “Resistance is the best way of keeping alive. It can take even the smallest form of saying no to injustice. If you really think you're right, you stick to your beliefs, and they help you to survive.” (Marshall)

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