

Love and Money: Erotic Materialism In Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Petals Of Blood*

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a reading of *Petals of Blood* (1977) in which Ngũgĩ exposes the practical, utilitarian side of intimate relationships, revealing ambiguities that complicate the romantic love ideal that is the social embodiment of his utopian political vision. It is clear that the term “materialism” in all its connotations is a central concern in Ngũgĩ’s philosophy. As a Marxist materialist, an ideological paradigm that influences the construction of the novels from his middle career, Ngũgĩ writes novels that repeatedly show how the unjust economic base of Kenyan society, and its unequal relationship with the world economy, is the root cause of many of its social ills. This paper examines materialism in the ambience of romantic love as well as investigates the intricacies revolving around love and marriage. From the analysis, this study draws conclusion that the implications of materialist love defeat the notion of romantic love which naturally results in marriage.

INTRODUCTION

Ngũgĩ’s novels expose materialism in the sense of capitalist consumerism where the accumulation of wealth and spending on goods, largely of foreign manufacture, hold individuals and the society at large in thrall. In *Petals of Blood*, through the character of Wanja, Ngũgĩ also shows the complexities of materialism where money, and the things it can buy, are a recognition of the possessions needed for survival, but also a sign of the loss of more abstract, idealistic values. Many of these ideas have been identified for analysis by scholars of Ngũgĩ’s *Petals of Blood*, as will be tracked below. However, this study considers them very specifically in the context of the importance of romantic love in Ngũgĩ’s oeuvre and the ways in which different angles on the love relationship and various conceptions of love are developed in relation to the author’s social vision. The study aims at exploring Ngũgĩ’s idea of materialism from varying perspectives. Although a Marxist, Ngũgĩ identifies with other forms of materialisms in *Petals of Blood* and foregrounds materialistic love with the tensions that arise between love and money exchanges.

The narrative relates the story of Ilmorog village that is neglected by its MP, Nderi wa Riera-aa, in favour of his

own selfish interests. Most notably, the people of Ilmorog contribute towards the installation of a piped water system — money which gets diverted into the coffers of the MP. Later, when Ilmorog village experiences drought, the people decide to embark on a trip to the city in search of their MP. This journey is politicised to the extent that Ilmorog becomes the centre of attention in a parliamentary debate. Ilmorog village, which is underdeveloped by its own political leaders, finally sees development in industry and tourism attracting foreign investors and greedy political leaders, who deprive the locals of their livelihoods. It is in this context that Wanja, the central female character in this novel, should be seen. Wanja drops out of school as a result of her pregnancy with her “sugar daddy”, Kimeria, who abandons her, leaving Wanja with no option than to get rid of the newborn child in a latrine. Having worked as a prostitute to survive in the city, Wanja relocates to her hometown, Ilmorog, to assist her grandmother, Nyakinyua, in daily chores and in the fields. When her nascent business in brewing theng’eta beer is taken over by local and international big business interests, she opens a brothel called the Sunshine Lodge.

A brief overview of studies of *Petals of Blood* reveals that there are two main approaches to the novel: those that

focus on Ngũgĩ's shift to a full Marxist aesthetic, and those that look at the representation of women, where the figure of the prostitute emerges especially strongly. Most of the book length-studies of Ngũgĩ analyse *Petals of Blood* by relating Marxist and Fanonist theory with Ngũgĩ's unique ideology that also draws in the conception of a glorious African past. G. D. Killam shows how Ngũgĩ's employment of Marxist ideology supports his representation of the estrangement of Africans from the land first by imperial-colonialists, and then subsequently by a class of African landlords who, because of their connections with the forces of world capitalism, are able to expedite the process of land acquisition through various forms and degrees of expropriation (102). For Killam, Ngũgĩ juxtaposes "African 'populism' and capitalism" (107) through the representation of capitalist development in Ilmorog village. According to him, Ngũgĩ analyses the class division between the capitalist class and the masses, showing the antagonism between the two factions. Killam highlights Ngũgĩ's departure from Marx in celebrating "Africa's glorious past in numerous passages in the novel" (109). He describes Karega as a "Marxist revolutionary who accepts the odds and who recognizes that the struggle will be long and hard" (114).

In a similar manner, Patrick Williams posits that there is a shift in the focus of Ngũgĩ's narratives from "colonialist domination" to "capitalist modernity: 'urbanisation, industrialisation; commodification of goods, processes and people; exploitation; class formation; relentless pursuit of profit; rural depopulation and immiseration'" (81). He writes that the division of Ilmorog is a direct representation of the class divisions which capitalism constructs, and for the first time in Ngũgĩ's novels, there is "the creation of the urban proletariat so important in Marxist analyses" (84). He provides a good illustration of Marxist argument about the way in which "capitalism turns use value (theng'eta made with care by people for their own use in important community ceremonies) into exchange value (theng'eta commercially produced simply as a commodity to be sold for the greatest possible profit)" (83). Similarly, Simon Gikandi explores the tensions between Ngũgĩ's different influences and commitments. He interprets the highly symbolic descriptions of the drought in Ilmorog as a reminder of this "poor community's radical dislocation" that comes to represent Marx's "primitive mode of production" (136). Gikandi finally describes Ngũgĩ as a Marxist who advocates that the key elements of a just modernity include "the rationalization of culture, the restoration of individual authority, and industrial progress" (142). David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe highlight the ways in which the novel exposes the capitalism of greedy leaders who impose misery and suffering on the unprivileged to gain wealth (87). Oliver Lovesey interprets the novel's narrative as the story of developing historical consciousness (57). In particular, the character Karega comes to see that history begins with present struggles against political, economic, and social oppression, and that the history of resistance works towards the creation of a new world (57). Peter Nazareth describes three different "personalities" for Ngũgĩ that emerge out of his reading of *Petals of Blood*:

first, there is the "village" Ngũgĩ, the Ngũgĩ who rejects hypocritical Christianity; second is Ngũgĩ the pan-Africanist Fanonist and socialist (122); and the third Ngũgĩ is the writer of "Latin American marvellous reality" (124). On the other hand, Grant Kamenju describes the novel as a mirror of Africa and blames Africa's suffering on imperialism in Africa: "imperialist financial capital is the real enemy to Africa today" (131).

Another group of critics foreground slightly different concerns, reading Ngũgĩ's Marxist-Fanonist influence as a background to more literary questions. Clifford Robson foregrounds Ngũgĩ's manipulation of time in the novels where "time shifts" are perceived as the basic pattern of "gradual revelation up to the present" (93). Robson also highlights Ngũgĩ's use of the intertextuality of "radical thinkers, such as Blake, Whitman and Amílcar Cabral to conscientise readers that exploitation and suffering are universal" (102). Edna Aizenberg also examines Ngũgĩ's approach to the interaction of past and present in *Petals of Blood* in recounting the collective struggles of the people (92). She suggests that the novel reveals both "Western linearity, [and] the revolutionary-messianic time of Ngũgĩ's Marxist conviction" (93). Michael Andindilile analyses the text in terms of the shift from a Christian paradigm to the temporality of Marxism. According to him, Ngũgĩ deals with the ills of Christianity, something Andindilile attributes to Ngũgĩ's "emboldening Marxist leanings" (52). In Andindilile's view, Ngũgĩ treats Christianity as what "Karl Marx labels as the opiate of the people, as a conduit for entrenching social injustice" (53). Chidi Amuta describes the novel as "Ngũgĩ's most ambitious novel" (143) and asserts that the novel is a complex exploration of real human experiences, motivations and dilemmas in a historical context where the characters are made to dramatise ideological positions (144). Adopting a poststructuralist approach to the novel, Stewart Crehan explores "the politics of the signifier" as opposed to a "politics of the signified" (2). He discusses the functions of the signifiers both within the text, "interacting with each other to produce its textuality, and through and beyond it as part of a larger web, so that the novel seems less an autonomous entity than a local configuration of strands forever suspended between texts, in other words, an 'intertext', for which no single author can be held responsible" (2-3).

On the representation of the woman figure, critics have discussed extensively. Jennifer Evans explores the significant role that the female character, Wanja plays and compares her to other characters in Ngũgĩ's works. Tom Odhiambo explores the metaphor of the Kenyan nation as a woman in *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*. Florence Stratton examines the woman as an African "tropes" (50). For her, the prostitute figure is embodied in Africa in the figure of the woman. In a counter-argument to Florence Stratton's study, Bonnie Roos posits that Stratton's study lacks commendation in the beauty of Ngũgĩ's style. Roos sees the depiction of Wanja in a positive way. Also Elleke Boehmer's "The Master's Dance" focuses on the distribution of labour force in Kenya. Boehmer asserts that the Kenyan nation is male dominated in terms of labour force to the extent that the women

are marginalised. Brendon Nicholls considers the femininity and sexuality of the “mother Kenya” as a “fallen woman” (122). Considering the scholarship reviewed, what is interesting about the focus on romantic relationships is that they seem to bring these two approaches (Marxist reading and the representation of women) together and reveal some blind-spots in Ngũgĩ’s materialism and in Ngũgĩ’s characterisation of women.

The Harlot’s Curse and the Death of Marriage

Petals of Blood, is the first novel where marriage is not explicitly or implicitly held to be the culmination of love. Marriage is “bracketed” while love is explored as a taunting obsession or an addiction. *Petals of Blood*, Ngũgĩ’s fourth novel, opens with the arrest of four protagonists who have been accused of the murder of three prominent people in the town. In a flashback, Munira, the principal of the village school and an alleged suspect, recounts the circumstances leading to his arrest. His prison notes or diary form the major part of the narrative of the novel. He tells how he left his wife and children and relocated to Ilmorog to establish a school that had been abandoned after independence. Munira revolts against the domineering attitude of his father, a staunch Christian, who hypocritically manipulates his workers for his egoistical interests. He makes friends with Abdulla, a one-legged man, shop owner and one of the suspects in the crime that occurs later. Munira strikes up an acquaintance also with Wanja, another future suspect and a native of Ilmorog. Karega, the last suspect, joins the friendship later after accepting an appointment as a teacher at Munira’s school.

Ngũgĩ complicates the narrative with the epic story of the people of Ilmorog who journey to the city in search of their MP. The village of Ilmorog does not benefit after Uhuru (independence) because of the ways in which the countryside is underdeveloped. The political business elites who control the national government and the national income like the Member of Parliament of the area, Nderi wa Riera-aa, exploit the people through bribery and mismanagement, as the text shows: “He had even collected two shillings from each household in his constituency for a Harambee water project, and a ranching scheme. But they had hardly seen him since” (18). He uses the money as collateral to secure loans and invests in other personal projects such as housing and land acquisition. Nderi collaborates with foreigners who lure him to partner with them in business. It is clear that the impact of colonialism and capitalism have contributed to influencing the elites becoming greedy and materialistic. We read that the nation is flooded with leaders who have been influenced by international capitalism and exploitation: “every corner of the continent is now within the easy reach of international capitalist robbery and exploitation” (262). Ngũgĩ outlines the effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism on Africa’s economy in *Writers in Politics*:

For the last four hundred years, Africa has been part and parcel of the growth and development of world capitalism, no matter the degree of penetration of European capitalism in the interior. Europe has thrived, in the words of C.L.R. James, on the devastation of a continent

and the brutal exploitation of millions, with great consequences on the economic political, cultural and literary spheres. (11)

Ngũgĩ chronicles the negative effects of neo-colonialism in two forms of materialism in the narrative: good materialism and bad materialism. Generally, materialism connotes bad or selfish means of amassing wealth or obsession for money; however, good materialism is a selfless means of acquiring wealth or possessions for the benefit and survival of oneself and, importantly, others. On the other hand, bad materialism is a means of making wealth through manipulation of the nation and subjugation of the masses. There are many definitions of materialism, but the definition in Raymond Williams’s *Keywords* is the most detailed and most nuanced. Williams suggests that there are three main senses of the word materialism that are interconnected in complex ways. Firstly, “materialism” refers to set of arguments that propose that matter is the primary substance of all living and non-living things, secondly “materialism” refers to a set of “explanations and judgments of mental, moral and social activities, and thirdly, it refers to a set of attitudes with no philosophical or scientific connection” (199). Williams tracks philosophical understandings of materialism back to the fifth century BC in Greece, with “materialism” being contrasted with spirituality and religion in eighteenth-century Europe. From this point on, the term “materialism” is often negatively viewed as an attitude rather than as a description of observable forces. Karl Marx’s historical materialism, for Williams, highlights human subjects in the scientific approach of mechanical materialism. Marx’s understanding of materialism is known as historical materialism. Friedrich Engels, on the other hand, highlighted the universal laws of materialism, known as dialectical materialism. However, in popular understanding, these different forms of materialism become lumped together and are moralistically seen as a “selfish preoccupation with goods and money” (200). Drawing then from Williams’s discussion, Ngũgĩ is a historical materialist in the sense that he believes economics, rather than spirituality/God/gods, explains individual human beings in history and society. He criticises materialism in the sense of selfishness and greed. But his Marxist materialism is rather narrow in that it cannot encompass concerns with material needs in romantic love, which he completely idealises. Material concerns cannot be a part of love is what *Petals of Blood* tells us. However, Ngũgĩ does not recognise that the idealistic view of pure love is a paradoxical product of capitalist modernity. Love alone becomes a prerequisite for marriage or a committed relationship at the same time as the development of capitalism. In most other systems, the intimate relationship is tied up with material concerns — bridewealth or dowry — which can be seen as bad materialism, but may be part of the definition of love. The exchange of property as a form of love is more clearly identified in the exchanges of gifts among lovers in most cultures.

In *Petals of Blood*, we witness the full range of materialisms. Among those who engage in bad materialism include Chui, the headmaster of Siriana School, who capitalises on his position as the headmaster to align with foreign

investors in order to enrich himself. We read that initially Chui opposes the leadership of Siriana School before independence, but he is presented as an autocratic leader even more so than the Englishman Fraudsham, in his attempt to become “a black replica of Fraudsham” (171). He seeks to promote foreign values to the detriment of African culture. Also, Ngũgĩ presents Kimeria as both an oppressor and a capitalist exploiter whose affluence begins during the Emergency when he transports the dead bodies of Mau Mau victims killed by the Europeans. Kimeria baits Wanja with gifts; impregnates her and abandons her. He also manipulates and betrays Nding’uri, Karega’s deceased brother, and Abdulla to his advantage. Patrick Williams describes Chui, Kimeria, Nderi, and the likes, as persons involved in “the active exploitation of their fellow countrymen” (85). The culture of materialism, rather than a commitment to social or spiritual values, drives characters like these to the open abuse and oppression of their countrymen, and in particular, women. There seems to be rampant materialism in the display of opulence among the leaders who collaborate with foreign investors. For example, there is an exposé of incredible capitalist materialism during the epic journey of the delegation of Ilmorog to the city in search of their MP. On their way, Joseph, the adopted son of Abdulla, becomes ill and the group decides to seek for help from the “big” men. They first enter the house of Rev. Jerrod Brown, a staunch Christian who receives them awkwardly. His hypocritical attitude is revealed in the way he interacts with them, preaching and praying for all classes of people but refusing to grant their request, insinuating that they are beggars. He relies on Christianity to justify his lack of interest in the poor and suffering: “The Bible is then clearly against a life of idleness and begging. This is what is wrong with this country” (148). The next house they visit happens to be the residence of Chui, the headmaster of Siriana School. Here Munira offers to go alone, confident that the personal meeting with his old friend will create success. To Munira’s dismay, he is nearly lynched by Chui and his friends. Kimeria, taking the neglect and abuse of the group of journeymen from Ilmorog even further, attempts to capitalise on their hopeless situation by trying to rape Wanja. He reveals his relationship with Nderi, the MP: “We have one or two businesses together... We are all members of KCO [Kamwene Cultural Organization]. Some of us have been able to borrow a little — shall we say thousands — from the money collected from this tea party [an event used to fleece the people]. I am a life member of KCO. So is Nderi” (153). Nderi also admits to receiving millions from the Mass Tea Party (186) organised with the intention of exploiting the masses. Thus we see a degraded and exploitative society where the peasants and workers are at the receiving end of the avarice of the corrupt postcolonial elite.

Eventually, the group meets the MP, Nderi, who interprets their trip as a conspiracy by his enemies to overthrow him, and finally settles on the lawyer, Wanja’s friend, as his political enemy: “He was the Enemy of KCO and Progress” (187). His philosophy is “the need for the people to grow up and face reality. Africa needed capital and investment for

real growth — not socialist slogans” (174). Nderi’s judgments are dominated by his greed, by bad materialism. This is evident in the way he sarcastically addresses his people:

Now, I want you to go back to Ilmorog. Get yourselves together. Subscribe money. You can even sell some of the cows and goats instead of letting them die. Dive deep into your pockets. Your businessmen, your shopkeepers, instead of telling stories, should contribute generously. Get also a group of singers and dancers — ... Our culture, our African culture and spiritual values, should form the true foundation for the nation. (182)

Nderi speaks as a capitalist where the love of money is paramount. He disregards the predicament of the people and seeks to further his own interests to such an extent that he perverts the cooperative spirit of “African culture and spiritual values.” Ngũgĩ satirises the irresponsible MP who fails to champion the cause of his constituency as a consequence of his bad materialism. There is clarion call for African leaders to go back to their roots and adopt our cultural values as “the true foundation for the nation” (182).

The callousness of neo-colonial capitalism, to which the reader is exposed in the journey of the inhabitants of Ilmorog to the city of Nairobi, eventually extends its tentacles into Ilmorog itself. Ilmorog develops as “a high potential area for tourism” (258) attracting both local and foreign investors. The New Ilmorog becomes a centre of attraction for capitalist businessmen such as Mzigo, Nderi wa Riero, [and] Rev. Jerrod, who acquire lands for development in Ilmorog (274). Large modern buildings are put up that symbolise the power of the new capitalist class that moves into Ilmorog. The capitalists entrap the natives into making loans which eventually result in the sale of properties of the peasants and the herdsmen “by public auction” (275) when they cannot pay back the loans. Nyakiyua, Wanja’s grandmother, attempts to fight the “black oppressors” (276); however, she dies without succeeding. Wanja and Abdulla are forced to sell their business premises to Mzigo. Wanja’s right to brew alcoholic beverages is taken away, bankrupting her, as she reveals: “The County Council says our licence was sold away with the New Building. They also say our present premises are in any case unhygienic! There’s going to be a tourist centre and such places might drive visitors away” (279). The trade in alcohol is now monopolised by the new directors of the Theng’eta brewery, namely Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria. It is clear that Wanja no longer has an income, Wanja is forced into the only trade that she herself may own, namely the trade in herself, in her own body. She establishes the brothel, the Sunshine Lodge, where she is sole proprietor, and employs the other women who have similarly been left destitute. In an ironic twist, the fates of Chui, Mzigo and Kimeria are determined by the same helpless people they exploit. They end up dying in separate rooms in the warehouse that develops as a consequence of their capitalist greed.

However, Ngũgĩ’s approach to materialism is complex since he recognises that some materialisms are forced materialisms. In other words, his novels show how characters may be forced for reasons of survival to put money first, or may be socially conditioned to regarding money as the most

important thing. This idea is explored mainly through the character Wanja. The society in which she grows into adulthood is a society that teaches her the value mainly of money, and how she can use her sexuality to acquire money — and through money, independence from the gender-specific forms of exploitation to which she is subjected as a woman. In one of Wanja's retrospective reflections, she recalls her first love affair, a schoolgirl romance. A boy, Ritho, had sent her love letters that with the cruel insensitivity of the young, she read to her schoolmates. But she did not divulge to her girlfriends knowledge of his gifts of “pencils and sweets” (37), material gifts which entrenched her affection for him. After a school soccer match, she walked home with him, impressed by his commitment to further himself through education, which would see him build “a bridge over a road or over a river” (37). But finally the “road” on which they walked lead “to the bedroom” (37). When she returned home late and was impatient with her mother, her parents beat her mercilessly since she had associated with a “pagan” boy (38), but more especially since she “was with a boy [who] came from a family even poorer than [theirs]” (38). From the outset thus, love is linked with material concerns in both positive and negative ways. Wanja holds the young man and his poverty responsible for her treatment at the hands of her parents. As a form of “vengeance” (38), she becomes involved with a wealthy man in the village whom her father obsequiously befriends. (We later discover that this man is Kimeria.) Her maths teacher takes advantage of his knowledge of her secret relationship with Kimeria to force her into a sexual relationship with him. As a consequence of the corner into which she is trapped, she divulges all to her parents, and subsequently also discovers she is pregnant. The wealthy older man is, however, unwilling to marry her, after which she runs away from home. Forced to fend for herself, she discovers that work as a barmaid-cum-prostitute is the only way girls in her position can get by. Gone is the focus in this novel on circumcision as the rite of passage into adulthood that was foregrounded in *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child*. Here the girl becomes a woman in the new “tribe” of neo-colonial Kenya by learning that material needs must be met and are a part of intimacy, but also that the only way to survive gender injustices in postcolonial Kenya is to sell sex for money.

Having learnt this lesson at an early age, Wanja applies it again in adulthood in the new Ilmorog that finds itself transformed by indigenous capitalism in cahoots with foreign investors. In the bar where Wanja works with Abdulla, she is appreciated for creating employment for the people, especially for women. When the incursion of wealthy businessmen into the area and the monopolisation of the brewing of the Theng'eta drink force the bar to close, Wanja establishes the Sunshine Lodge house of prostitution with the same passion to save the unemployed women from starving. Wanja pours out her heart: “My heart is tearless about what I have committed myself to. You know I have tried. Where was I to throw these girls that were part of the old Theng'eta premises? To others who too would profit from their bodies? No, I am not doing this for their sakes. From now onwards it will always be: Wanja First” (311–12). Ironically, Wanja

learns the lessons of capitalist materialism well. If women are forced to prostitute themselves, then she will prostitute them herself — with the empathy that her own life experience has brought. She therefore employs capitalist tactics to create employment for the girls and herself. Wanja thus is a good materialist since she furthers the cause of women to support themselves in the only way independently possible in postcolonial Kenya, with care and consideration, and not for her own selfish ends as the local businessmen do.

Wanja is an heir of Mumbi in *A Grain of Wheat*, but she is also a precursor portrait of Warĩinga in *Devil on the Cross* because they suffer the same fate. In Warĩinga's case, she is lured by her uncle into falling in love with a rich old man who abandons her after she falls pregnant. Kimeria also abandons Wanja, who out of desperation drowns her new-born baby in a latrine. While Warĩinga finally succeeds through education, Wanja succeeds through using capitalist materialism against itself. According to James Ogude:

All the relationships above have similar features. In each case we have a situation in which the rich and propertied elite attempts to take advantage of poor women. We have relationships characterized by exploitation and hypocrisy. The rich men turn the poor women into sexual objects for male pleasure and the elite men cannot commit themselves to genuine relationships with the poor women. (113)

Both women take revenge on their sexual exploiters by killing them: Warĩinga guns the rich old man down and Wanja strikes Kimeria down “with the panga she was holding” (330). However, while Warĩinga walks into an unknown future, Wanja is caught in the narrative's double bind on the question of the significance of materialism, especially in the context of the romantic love relationship, as we shall see below. To this end, Wanja metamorphoses into a whorehouse mistress and a capitalist as she tells Munira: “No free things in Kenya. A hundred shillings on the table if you want high-class treatment” (279). She resolves to spend her life whoring after the manner of the exploiters.

Apart from *Weep Not, Child* where the obstruction to the love between Njoroge and Mwihaki took the form of differences in class, religion and political partisanship, in most of the other novels, the obstruction, in part, takes the form of a rival in love. The love triangle in *A Grain of Wheat* is the most obvious of the rivalries. In *Petals of Blood*, rivalry is explored in its fullest elaboration. The central female character, Wanja, is the love interest of three friends, Munira, Karega and Abdulla, of whom Munira is the novel's “hero” in terms of the major attention paid to him in the narrative. But then, Karega and Abdulla emerge as heroes for what they represent in Ngũgĩ's social vision. Each of these men loves Wanja unconditionally and love seems to be a part of the fulfillment of the self in *Petals of Blood* more than it is in any of the other novels. Wanja's three lovers are all lonely, alienated, troubled figures for one reason or another. However, Munira is the most complex and contradictory because he turns out to be an ambivalent anti-hero, while Karega finally commits to the people rather than Wanja, and Abdulla emerges as the affirmed hero of the romantic plot.

Munira hoped to find love and fulfillment in his wife, who represented the very opposite of everything his father was. Munira is the weak son of an authoritarian and highly socially and financially effective father, who is also an enthusiastic Christian. Munira marries a poor woman from a pagan family as an ultimately ineffective resistance against his father. His wife Julia is so impressed with marrying into a well-to-do, Christian family that she becomes the perfect daughter-in-law, to Munira's chagrin: "he had married a girl from a pagan home, maybe as promptings from the heart against what his father stood for. But the girl turns out a replica of his more obedient sisters ... she tried to be the ideal daughter-in-law" (91). Munira falls decidedly out of love with Julia since "she could have been beautiful [to him] but too much righteous living and Bible-reading and daily prayers had drained her to all sensuality and what remained now was the cold incandescence of the spirit" (16). He feels lonely in his own house. Munira therefore abandons his wife since he needs someone's passionate love to complete his troubled sense of self, being the failure in the family.

When he first comes to Ilmorog, Munira achieves heights he has not known before in his life. As the headmaster of the village school, he enjoys the adulation of the villagers, occupying a position similar to that of Waiyaki in *The River Between*. Munira is struck by Wanja from the first time he meets her. Romantic love is usually defined as love in which some element of the erotic plays a role. Munira's attraction to Wanja is highly eroticised, since sexuality seems to be part of the definition of his "self" as a response to his father's strict Christianity. Munira's first intimate relationship is a relationship that foreshadows his later relationship with Wanja. He loses his virginity to a prostitute called Amina and then, revealing his conflicted personality, tries to "purify" himself of the deed: "He stole a matchbox, collected a bit of grass and dry cowdung and built an imitation of Amina's house at Kamiritho where he had sinned against the Lord, and burnt it. He watched the flames and felt truly purified by fire" (14). When Munira comes to Ilmorog, Wanja appears to him as an erotic saviour, allowing him for the first time in his life to feel fulfilled; or, as Gikandi puts it, Munira's relocation to Ilmorog is a "quest for a lost romantic ideal" (Gikandi 156) that is symbolically represented by Wanja. Wanja, who is generous in her love, initially welcomes Munira in her arms and in her bed. She allows Munira to make love to her without qualms: "She cried out in ecstasy: The moon... the orange moon. Please, Mwalimu... stay here tonight... Break the moon over me. Her pleading voice had startled Munira out of his thoughts. He too wanted to stay the night. He would stay the night. A joyous trembling coursed through his body. Aah, my harvest" (66). Eustace Palmer suggests that, "[t]he sexual prowess [Munira] demonstrates in his love-making helps give him that sense of mastery and masculinity that he has completely failed to manifest in the world of adult affairs" (277). Their love-making is focalised in the narrative through Munira, giving the reader a sense of what it means to him: "Her scream, calling out to her mother or sister for help, would give him an even greater sense of power and strength until he sank into a void, dark-

ness, awesome shadow where choosing or not choosing was no longer a question" (72). Wanja thus becomes Munira's obsession and final downfall as Palmer underscores: "But it his association with Wanja which [also] reveals the cracks in his personality and eventually leads to his disintegration" (277). The relationship between Munira and Wanja in some ways is symbolised by Munira's relationship with the mystical drink *theng'eta*, brewed from the plant that produces the flowers with "petals of blood". *Theng'eta* for Munira is as ambivalent in its effect as Wanja is: "Deadly lotus. An only friend. Constant companion ..." (271). The *Theng'eta* drink also symbolises Munira's love for Wanja: "*Theng'eta*. The spirit. Dreams of love returned" (271). Munira's lyrical expressions of appreciation for *theng'eta* eventually become the official advert for *Theng'eta* Breweries:

Do you have what it takes? Drink *Theng'eta*. Increase your potency: Drink *Theng'eta*. Beautiful people, beautiful thoughts, beautiful love: Drink *Theng'eta*. Join the Space Age: Drink *Theng'eta*. On your way to the moon with Armstrong: Drink *Theng'eta*. Three T's: *Theng'a* with *Theng'eta*. (273)

For Munira, *Theng'eta* serves as a means to unify with the "Other" through eros, in this case, through Wanja, who is the only person who fulfils him. When Wanja takes an interest in Karega, an idealistic young teacher who also comes to Ilmorog, Munira's pathological jealousy leads him to get Karega fired from his post, leading Wanja to despise him. This tearing asunder of Munira's oneness, which reminds us of the myth told by Diotima in Plato's *Symposium* and the vengeance it fires, is what causes his final downfall.

As we shall see, the love between Karega and Wanja is seen as a celebration of victory for Ilmorog and a celebration of life itself. Ngũgĩ refers to the expression of love as life characterised by the enjoyment of "inner peace and inner lightness: (230), in the case of the union of Karega and Wanja, life for each of them as individuals and life for the Ilmorog community. The consummation of love between Karega and Wanja bestows a second life for all. Their love is largely focalised through Munira in his prison meditations articulating the love and happiness between Karega and Wanja. But Munira's meditations also suggests envy of their compatibility and their organic connectedness to both the Ilmorog landscape and the Ilmorog people:

Of an evening I saw them together running across the fields, stumbling over mikengeria creepers, over yellow merry-golden flowers ... Often, they would walk across Ilmorog ridge ... Their love seemed to grow with the new crops of the year... They were still a-wandering across Ilmorog country, always together in the fields, on the mountain-top, in the plains, their love blossoming in the wind, as if both were re-enacting broken possibilities in their pasts. (244-45)

Both Karega and Wanja come from backgrounds of poverty and were forced to drop out of school because of circumstances beyond their control. Their love, as the extract suggests, allows them to overcome the obstacles of the past and projects hopefulness for the future. It is clear from the descriptions of their relationship that the love between

Karega and Wanja is a love which sees each of them fulfilled in the other, as the following assertion by Wanja further shows: "I have searched for love, too ... it has escaped me ... except ... except ... I will say it ... except with you. That time I felt my womanhood come back... I felt accepted as I was ... For the first time I could make love without the burden of guilt or a burden of a search... Then you went away... I kept myself to myself ..." (292). Wanja's life's journey potentially ends in Karega, again affirming the Platonic idea of romantic love as the union of soul mates. Both Karega and Wanja are linked in the narrative with natural imagery. Their love is compared with natural objects such as fields, mountains, plains and wind. This indicates their connection with the earth and community as a whole. Their union is described by Killam as "a harmonious conjunction between nature and humanity" (115). Karega, a social and political activist who selflessly throws himself into defending the rights of the poor, emerges as a hero in the novel who, some might say not completely successfully, unites socialism and a vision of a just and prosperous African past. The consummation of their love expresses allegorically the power of their combined energies in the creation of a new world to come:

He felt the tip of his blood-warmth touch her moistness and for a second he was suspended in physical inertia. Then she cried once, oh, as he descended, sinking into her who now received him in tender readiness. Then they started slowly, almost uncertainly, groping towards one another, gradually working together in rhythmic search for a kingdom. And she clung to him, she too desiring the memories washed away in the deluge of a new beginning, and he now felt this power in him, power to heal, power over death, power, power ... and suddenly it was she who carried him high on ocean waves of new horizons ... oh the power of united flesh, before exploding and swooning into darkness and sleep without words. (230)

Significantly, after their union, they wake "in the morning, dew on their hair, dew on their clothes, dew on the grass, dew on the hills and the plains, with the earth aglow with a mellowing amber light before sunrise" (230). Clearly, Ngũgĩ achieves a stylistic effect of parallelism by setting up a relationship of equivalence between the linguistic items that are repeated in the extract. The repetition according to Geoffrey Leech presents "a simple emotion with force, it may further suggest a suppressed intensity of feeling — an imprisoned feeling" (3). So Ngũgĩ emphasises the intensity of the romance between Karega and Wanja as refreshing and self-fulfilling. The relationship between Karega and Wanja also allows Karega to overcome the trauma of his first romantic attachment with Mukami, Munira's sister. That relationship was a "Romeo and Juliet" love affair between the poor young man whose family was involved in anticolonial resistance and a young woman from the comprador class. Munira's father's recalcitrance finally causes the suicide of Munira's sister, which adds to the resentment Munira feels towards the young man who, in other respects, is exemplary and is the male mirror image of Wanja. Karega leaves Ilmorog

when Munira fires him from his post as teacher at the village school because of his jealousy at their relationship. The relationship between Karega and Wanja is presented as pure and fully reciprocated, unlike Munira's own, which is selfish and directed at overcoming his own cowardice and personal insecurities. Love for Munira is also linked with mastery over Wanja.

Wanja's love for Karega is resurrected when he returns to Ilmorog after five years. She invites Karega to her old hut and expresses her unhappiness without his love: "I have been so lonely ... so lonely. This wealth feels so heavy on my head. Please stay tonight ... just tonight, like in the old times... I have loved life! life! life! Karega, give me life ... I am dying ... and no child ... No child!" (327). Wanja's incompleteness without Karega's love is revealed as loneliness. She begs Karega to "give [her] life", implying that she desires to have a child with Karega. Karega, however, idealist that he is, rejects Wanja when he discovers that she killed her new-born child, conceived from her relationship with Kimeria, and drowned the baby in a latrine. He also objects to the establishment of a brothel, seeing it as Wanja's "trading on the bodies of other girls" (323), becoming a female version of the exploiters Kimeria, Mzigo, Chui and Nderi. For Wanja, by contrast, her establishment of the Sunshine Lodge is both the consequence of being forced into prostitution by the predatory nature of capitalist ventures in Ilmorog, which see the destruction of the local theng'eta trade in favour of monopoly control, and, in excess of need, her action is one of Fanonian vengeance against (patriarchal) capitalism. Wanja also, as noted above, in this way provides employment for the now unemployed barmaids of the establishment run by herself and Abdulla. But Karega cannot see the double exploitation to which Wanja is subjected, and interprets her past act of desperation and her present strategic move as a betrayal of the social and political cause symbolised by the triumph of their love. The two finally realise that "[t]he magic string between them was finally broken" (326). This marks the end of this relationship and the forging of the ultimately exultant relationship of Abdulla and Wanja.

The love between Abdulla and Wanja is a pragmatic love that arises out of need, understanding and trust for each other. Abdulla and Wanja had been business partners before they became partners in intimacy. Wanja's role in Abdulla's shop, where she works, goes beyond the role of an employee since she has invested in Abdulla's success. They later again join forces to brew and sell Theng'eta to the villagers of Ilmorog on a plot of ground they acquire together: "she and Abdulla were really the only local people who had successfully bid for a building plot in the New Ilmorog and started work on it" (270). Wanja also comes to play a maternal role in the life of Joseph, Abdulla's adopted son, whose education she strongly encourages. Wanja becomes for Abdulla his "source of joy in the wilderness of his bitterness, of his consciousness of his broken promises, of wider betrayal of the collective blood of Kenyan fighters for land and freedom" (310). Abdulla refers here to the political betrayal of Mau Mau freedom fighters, of whom he is one, after independence, when hypocrites and opportunists gain control

of resources and power. Abdulla seems proud of Wanja's endeavours and attributes the positive changes in Ilmorog to "Wanja's magic. What a woman! One in a thousand!" (310). Munira envies Abdulla's relationship with Wanja also, even though, for the most part of the narrative, it is not a sexual relationship. He jealously remarks: "How close to Abdulla she seemed!" (270). Although Wanja and Abdulla's business collapses because it is sold to Anglo-American International Breweries in which Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria have shares, their happiness is restored when their friendship is transformed into an intimate relationship at the end. Abdulla finally becomes the "real hero of the book" (Killam 105), confirmed through his union with Wanja.

Wanja's romantic relationship with Abdulla is rather different from her relationship with the other two main characters. Abdulla, unlike Munira and Karega, proposes marriage to Wanja: "Listen. Please. Stop this business. I have little money. I still have my share of what we got from the recent sale. Marry me. I may not be much to look at [he lost his leg in the Mau Mau resistance]: but it was fate" (311). Ngũgĩ presents Abdulla as loving and compassionate. Where the relationship with Munira was sudden and cataclysmic, his affection for Wanja develops gradually with time. He expresses sincere love for Wanja despite her promiscuous lifestyle. Thus for the first time, alluding to the lines from Blake's "London" used by Ngũgĩ as an epigraph to one of the sections of the novel, the "harlot's curse" does not strike with "plagues" the marriage, which this time does not bring death but life. Abdulla is willing to marry Wanja although Karega and Munira reject her. The couple consummate their love in the moment of excitement when they discover Joseph's success in examinations key to his future. Abdulla expresses his elation on their union as "his turn to feel the old world roll away" (314). For him, "Wanja has given him back his life and he did not see why he should now waste it in Theng'eta. And to crown it, she wanted him back tonight" (315). Ironically, Abdulla regains his manhood in the course of their love-making, and Wanja accepts him as "her rightful man" (328), despite his physical handicap, his leg amputated, leg lost in the anticolonial resistance, which is a mark of his commitment to the people's struggle. Through this relationship, Wanja also achieves full womanhood in the novel's terms since she becomes pregnant, presumably with Abdulla's child.

The novel's ending, which sees Munira burn down Wanja's bordello with the three exploiters, Kimeria, Chui and Mzigo in separate rooms inside, has been criticised as a weakness of the novel. Palmer, for example, suggests that:

Munira's transformation into a religious fanatic at the end is one of this novel's major weaknesses. A violent death seems to be a logical and well-deserved conclusion to the fortunes of the three African directors of the Theng'eta brewery, but that it should be brought about by a fire started in a moment of inspiration by a religious fanatic seems a melodramatic contrivance which takes a remarkably serious work back to the level of the detective thriller. Munira's plunge into religious fanaticism at the moment when he sees his evangelistic one-time sweetheart [Lillian] is much too sudden to carry convic-

tion.... His decision to set fire to Wanja's brothel "which mocked God's work on earth" and save Karega from the clutches of the woman whom he now sees as Jezebel is no more convincing ... Munira's decision can only be accepted as a sign of mental derangement: but the process of derangement is not demonstrated. (278)

The weakness of the ending, I would contend, is connected with the ambivalence with which the novel treats questions of materialism in romantic love.

CONCLUSION

Ngũgĩ wrote about materialism in diverse forms and highlighted the complexities surrounding love and the consideration of money. For him, romantic love should be untainted with material benefits. However, the concern for material benefit is seemingly indispensable from love relationship although marriage is perceived as a mirage. In spite of the weakness of the ending of the novel, Ngũgĩ ends the narrative on a very hopeful and triumphant note with Wanja's romantic relationship with Abdulla and their expectation of an unborn child which symbolises an optimistic future.

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