

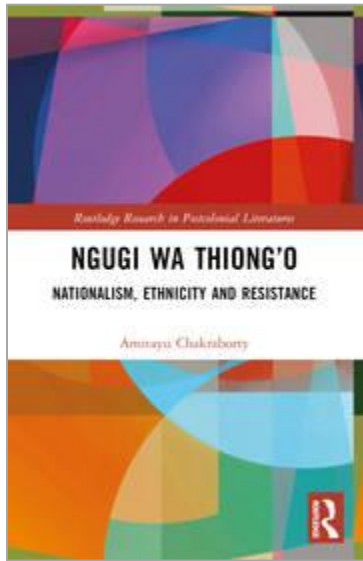


Book Review

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o: Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Resistance by

Amitayu Chakraborty

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Review by

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An Anglophone African writer and polemical ideologue whose work has become a model for neocolonial contexts, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is revisited by Amitayu Chakraborty in the context of his homeland's shifting political landscape. This book highlights Ngũgĩ's fictional work as a key contribution to postcolonial studies. According to the author, Ngũgĩ's work employs ethnosymbolic elements to challenge the institutionalized histories by highlighting the politics of ethnicity, nationalism, and elitist discourses. The book focuses on key works by Ngũgĩ that bridge historical, anthropological, and literary studies in the context of Kenyan nationhood.

This book problematizes the concept of ethnicity through its association with minoritization, cultural authenticity, and patriotism as a social construct used to gain political/economic hegemony. The author asserts that cultural distinctiveness involves complex factors concerning the politics of inclusion/ exclusion, postcolonial binaries combined with institutional involvement. These influences result in the evolution of ethnicity through sociohistorical processes of production, consumption, and perpetuation. This process turns a nation into an amalgamation of a primordial ethnic group and a nation-state. The 1990s ethnic clashes in Kenya are discussed primarily with reference to the Gikuyu as the largest ethnic group. The author observes that the scarcity of land, along with local grievances over its distribution and exploitation, is shaped by colonial legacies as well as political, economic, urban, and rural divisions. This engaging discussion reflects on ethnicity, nation, nationalism, and the process of nation-building, which problematizes the relationship between nations and ethnic states. The author critically reflects on Ngũgĩ's stance as a cultural nationalist who creates literature of resistance in his homeland (Kenya), which is a postcolonial, multiethnic, Gikuyu nation-state, connecting the local with the global. This discussion suggests that ethnicity is identified as a major tool of exploitation that is strongly resisted by the Gikuyus.

Chapter One focuses on the first phase of Ngũgĩ's career as a "Phase of Anxiety (1950-1960)" and uncertainties within the national discourse and political tribalism. Three key fictional works discussed in this section are *The Black Hermit* (1962), *The River Between* (1965), and *Weep Not, Child* (1964). Feminine cultural nationalism is observed as a rarely researched subject. A close textual analysis of *The Black Hermit* examines ethnicity, nation, tradition, and modernity through the lives of Remi and his brother's wife. This chapter foregrounds gender politics, the female body and mind as sites of ethnic nationalism. The subjugation of women is observed in the wake of Gikuyu nationalism. Chakraborty observes Kenyan theatre groups as a means of spreading political awareness about the negative impacts of tribalism, religious dogma, and racism. Secondly, the critical analysis of *The River Between* is focused on ethnic customs and the missionary hold on Gikuyu. This chapter primarily focuses on the theme of female circumcision, genital mutilation,

Gikuyu factionalism and the cultural dichotomy between Gikuyu and Christian ethos. Chakraborty critiques Ngũgĩ's protagonist as a true Gikuyu despite his scholastic education. Thirdly, the future of the impoverished Gikuyu in police camps is discussed as a sign of state-sponsored brutality in the discussion on *Weep Not, Child*. The local identities are observed as being enmeshed with ethnicity and nationalism. The discussion engages with the themes of colonialism impacting the policies of education, land occupation, and widening class and agricultural gap in the late colonial era. This context deepens the tension between the colonials and the natives.

Chapter Two offers a discussion on "Ngũgĩ's Second Phase of Polemics (1960-1970)" through a focused discussion on three texts: *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Petals of Blood* (1977), and *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* (1996). Moral ethnicity, Gikuyu ethnicity, and Kenyan nationhood are the focus of discussion on *A Grain of Wheat*. The protagonists negotiate their political consciousnesses and identities, which are impacted by the psychosocial wounds of colonialism. Chakraborty offers a close character analysis of the key figures to reflect on how Gikuyu men uphold their motherland as a symbol of their identity. This reflects in their personal relationships, Christian myopic beliefs, and economic and political experiences. *Petals of Blood* is approached as a Marxist novel with Ngũgĩ's emphasis on the pathologies of decolonization. His characters are torn, on the one hand, between a traumatic past and an uncertain future. On the other hand, the class tensions are shaped by Christian influence and the pressures of indigenous and multinational capitalism. According to the author, Ngũgĩ is disillusioned with *Uhuru* and with a government that fails to challenge the native bourgeoisie. Whereas, the Mau Mau movement, despite its limitations, is discussed as an ally of the peasantry. Finally, the discussion based on the play, *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi*, engages with the instrumentalization of the Mau Mau movement while defying the Eurocentric representations of Africa. Chakraborty observes this play as a critique of the nationalist elites who disregard the complexities of resistance in Africa; they assume that Africa is a homogenous category rather than considering its class, gender, and ethnic divisions as reflected through the symbolism in this play.

Finally, Chapter Three critically reviews Ngugi's "Phase of Defiance (Post 1970s)". This discussion is based on the play *I Will Marry When I Want* (1970), *Devils on the Cross* (1980), *Matigari* (1986), and *Wizard of the Crow* (2006). The play *I Will Marry When I Want* was collaborated with the villagers of Kamirithu and reflects on the protest of subalterns and radicalisation in Ngũgĩ's work. It fuses oral and written traditions with ethnosymbolic elements as a form of resistance. Chakraborty discusses the themes of money, matrimony, and class hierarchy in this play. His primary focus is on female sexuality and financial autonomy as experienced by the protagonist Gathoni, who embodies the socio-economic realities of prostitution, illegitimate

children, and promiscuity of African women. This discussion considers Ngũgĩ's primary focus on aesthetic expressions such as songs, rituals, and performances as revolutionary cultural practices complementing the Mau Mau anticolonial movement. The analysis indicates that the protagonist (Gicamba) associates with male and female youth as they resist *Uhuru*, promoting workers' unity and organization as a means of self-mastery. Chakraborty acknowledges Ngũgĩ's approach towards theatre as a means of resistance against the elites, government, and multinational allies. This chapter highlights the aesthetic language of the play, its emphasis on nationalism, ethnicity, ethnosymbolism, and explorations of myth, memory, values, and traditions. This chapter also presents a succinct critique of the novel *Devil on the Cross* as a *bildungsroman* of a female protagonist named Wangari. The novel is identified as a satire against the neocolonial regime. The use of grotesque and obscene (in the Bakhtinian sense) is identified as a means of defying the state authority. This play is focused on the life of a Giccandi performer, who involves the audience in the expression of orality and resistance. Another satire discussed in this chapter is *Wizard of the Crow*. This text sheds light on the repressive regimes in Africa, where the local/ethnic clashes and neocolonial repression collectively marginalize the community. The protagonists (Kamiti and Nyawira) resist these pressures by shifting personas in their performances. In this discussion, Chakraborty considers Ngũgĩ's approach towards art as a means of resisting elitism, subjugation, and neocolonialism. This chapter also discusses Ngũgĩ's non-fiction *Globalectics* (2012), which challenges writing as a colonial practice and restriction on understanding orature by emphasizing the oral culture in African tradition. Chakraborty emphasizes that Ngũgĩ's idea of *Globalectics* reflects the global and local, which liberates his work and vision from the boundaries of a nation and region. In the author's view, this is Ngũgĩ's "quest for new space" (183) and an effort to bridge the indigenous cultural constructs with global literary discourses as an act of defiance.

In summary, this book offers a critical perspective on the intersection of issues of ethnicity and cultural negotiations. It presents an in-depth analysis based on the evolving expression of resistance in Ngũgĩ's work. The oral, performative aspects of African culture in general and Kenyan culture in particular are identified as challenging the ideas of dominant nationalism through precolonial, colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial phases of history. Broadly, the book invites researchers to probe deeper into Ngũgĩ's work as a model for comprehending resistance movements, literary resistance, or discourses and strategies adopted to assert ethnonationalism. The intricacy and depth with which Chakraborty has defined the nuances of African culture represented by Ngũgĩ set a model for examining various ethnic identities experiencing similar marginalization in diverse cultural contexts, as I have also discussed through my previous deliberations focused on Siraiki identity in Pakistan (Langah 2025).

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