EAST AFRICAN LITERATURE

THE GROWTH OF
EAST AFRICAN LITERATURE
IN ENGLISH

By

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SCOPE AND CONTENT:

Starting with a broad attempt to define the general concerns in African literature, and the cultural esthetics which form the basis of this writing, this thesis tries to place the emerging East African literature in English into the stream of African literature, and of literature at large. It focusses particularly on the works of Okot p'Bitek and James Ngugi and treats broadly the themes emerging from the East African environment and the artistic challenges which these themes pose to the writer. It concludes that meaning and strength in this emerging literature will stem from the writers' awareness and sensibility to their environment and a willingness to make an honest and artistic appraisal of this situation.

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INTRODUCTION

Creative writing in English in East Africa is yet a new and novel phenomenon. Even to this day, there are some who brush off the idea that an East African literature exists. Except perhaps for James Ngugi, most of the African writers well known outside Africa are from West and South Africa. But one need not justify a work on East African literature. There is enough material to justify such a work. In 1964, James Ngugi's *Weep not, Child* was published. It was snatched up and pored over in schools. Many young writers found their inspiration here which was strengthened the following year when his *The River Between* came out. In 1965, David Cook edited an anthology of writings by East African students at Makerere. In the following year, 1966, the *East Africa Journal* brought out a special creative issue which featured almost wholly works by high school students. This was followed by the first novel to be published within East Africa, David Rubadiri's *No Bride Price*. Since then, the East African literary scene has become much more crowded.

But quantity alone, without quality, is not enough. And even a casual look into East African literary journals reveals oftentimes stories and poems of mediocre quality. What interests in the East African literary scene however is the freshness and vigour as East Africans strive to come to terms with their own environment. Most of the short stories and poems coming from East Africa have inevitably an urgent and contemporary message. But a majority of them are written hurriedly with little thought given to the artistic requirements of the medium

used. The creative inspiration therefore lacks direction and it usually ends in frustration or in works of little success.

There is little doubt, however, that with the pathfinding works of James Ngugi, Okot p'Bitek and David Rubadiri, a new area of African literature was opened up. It is also an area which could add something rich and worthwhile to English literature with time. This is all the more reason why East African critics are necessary to work together with the writers in the evolution of writing in this new area of literature. In fact the East African scene demands critics now much more than it demands writers. Its malleable formlessness needs to be given shape and direction. But through a vicious circle, this formlessness and newness of East African creative writing presents problems to the critic who wants to give a consistent and rounded picture of it. It has not come to a stage where one could show what its major preoccupations are; what its differences and similarities are to the rest of African literature and to literature at large. Taken individually, it is easy, for example, to show how Ngugi shows distinctive similarities to Chinua Achebe; and also shows traces of Lawrence and Conrad, while retaining his original African voice and vision. But Okot p'Bitek's Song of Lawino is not so easy to place. It is uniquely African — East African in fact — difficult to place because it hovers somewhere in between Négritude poetry[1] and poetry of an individual consciousness. Its quality warrants a place in English literary tradition. But where? And beside whom?

Naturally, most African writing tends to deal with similar themes, as the colonial experience to nearly all Africans was the same. This is the theme of the second chapter which tries to place African writing

in its social and historical context. The colonial experience and the ensuing social problems, especially the conflict between the traditional ways and the modern, has preoccupied most African writers. But even here, East Africans have shown a growing and subtle difference to the West African writers. West African literature has a rich link with traditional African life, reflected especially in its idiom and symbolism, and it manages to marry this to the modern. In East Africa, this link with the traditional as reflected in more of the later stories and novels seems tenuous and the language used shows strong influences of English literary tradition, and of the current usage of English in the urban areas of East Africa. There is coming to be a literature tending more towards urban experiences while its protagonists claim at least _some_ ill defined link with their past village life. This occurrence is important because it is in this area that East African literature will find its strength. And in this sense, we can see why both Ngugi and p'Bitek were worthy pathfinders but do not fit into what is still a vague pattern of the emerging East African literature. In fact with p'Bitek's _Song of Ocol_[2] and "Song of Malaya"[3] and Ngugi's play _The Hermit_ (works which are not discussed in this thesis), we can see them being drawn into this pattern. These works have at their center protagonists with an urbanized sensibility, but with links to the village too. As a result, one can predict a writing which does not feed the people back with their own idiom, as in West Africa, and one which is not gruesomely and tensely urban and protesting as in South Africa, but one which is concerned with the here and now and which, to paraphrase David Rubadiri in a recent lecture, lives with the world and not the words which decorate the world. There

is, however, one major criticism of East African literature, which apart from p'Bitek's Song of Lawino and Ngugi's A Grain of Wheat, underlines and links together this thesis: East African writers are still too self-conscious about their writing, they lack enough objectivity, and sometimes there is a strong feeling of complacency, of feeling that what they have to say is enough without thinking about how they say it.

The differences between West African and East African writing can be ascribed to the slight differences in the social-historical situation. This could also explain the late awakening of East African creative writing in English. English has been imbedded longer in West Africa but it has managed to co-exist with the peoples' cultures. But there is no doubt that European penetration into East Africa was deeper and more determined than it was in West Africa. To this day in Uganda, Catholics and Protestants engage in bitter polemics which might end in blows. Political parties are organized according to Western religious affiliations. In Kenya there is an extensive white settlement in rural areas. The double mission of the Europeans to colonize and to Chritisnize had the one effect of nipping as close to the tip as possible our cultural root. To the Christian missionaries, our dances and songs were an overt expression of heathenish savagery and sin. This led to the undermining of confidence in the African. We were not free or brave enough to write about ourselves and of our background. Our cultural inspiration was not there. Besides we firmly believed that Africa and Africans were no fit subject for literature.

There is no denying the fact that the West African novel had a great impact on East African writers and readers. Ngugi will be the first

to admit that Cyprian Ekwensi's People of the City was his favourite before Achebe took over the honours. What was exceptional about these new works was that they were about Africa and Africans, past and contemporary. And they did not try to apologize or explain. They brought out the richness of African life, its human pains and joys, its communality and the life of the individual within this community.

This inspired us in East Africa to immediate response and sympathy. Here were people we knew and situations we could identify with. For once, we felt that the white man's shadow, which had always hovered over us lest we 'misunderstood' or misread Shakespeare or lest we missed the barb of the satire on communism, was no longer present. We could now freely indulge our sympathies without the risk of misunderstanding, misreading or missing the point.

Another point worth remembering in all this is that curiously, the African literary renaissance went hand in hand with the rise of nationalism. This nationalism came to East Africa much later than it did to West Africa.

This thesis tries to draw the course which East African literature is following. It recognizes the fact that East Africans cannot hope to write anything meaningful to themselves, and thus to the world at large, if they remain detached from their situation. It is necessary, where most of the area's literature is yet to come, where most of the young East Africans have yet to find their voices, to point this out. For "the struggling involvement and self-discipline of the artist is then needed to give the right kind of force to the issues that are being treated".[5]

My major apology is what it should be: the exclusion from this thesis of any discussion of Swahili literature. This literature dates

back several centuries and has been thriving with little encouragement from scholars. Now fortunately, close attention, especially by the Swahili Institute at Dar-es-Salaam, has revealed its diversity and richness. This work stands incomplete without any discussion of this literature, though little of it exists in translation.

FOOTNOTES (INTRODUCTION)

[1]The Négritude movement was mainly a reaction against the French colonial policy of assimilation. The "assimilated" black man in the former French colonies lived under the illusion that he was a Frenchman until he went to France and found he was unacceptable because of his colour. He had meanwhile become alienated from his people and his cultural background. This is the feeling which led Léopold Séndar Senghor of Senegal to call himself a "cultural Mulatto" in his poem Luxembourg (1939). The movement was therefore a psychic reaction, merging a literary style with racial attitudes and loud affirmations of the black man's values, emotions, and historical background. Significantly, its inspirers were all poets living in Paris, who later became politicians. The best known are Senghor, Léon Damas of the former French Guiana, and Aimé Cesaire whose long poem Cahier d'un Retour au Pays is often quoted as the first significant work in this movement.

[2]Okot p'Bitek, Song of Ocol, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1970.

[3]Okot p'Bitek, "Song of Malaya", East Africa Journal, VI No. 7, (July 1969).

[4]James Ngugi, The Hermit, London: Heinemann, 1968.

[5]Bren Hughes, "Filling the Literary Vacuum: Thoughts", East Africa Journal, V No. 1, (January 1968), p. 8.

CHAPTER ONE

THE GENERAL BACKGROUND

Leonard Kibera recently wrote in a letter:

> I am of the opinion that an East African critic or writer can't afford the luxury of living in an ivory tower and divorcing literature from the social, political and economic development of the people. (At the same time of course, the writer should bring to life African literary forms and traditional tools).[1]

Kibera is voicing the feeling of many African writers. But the task he sets for the critic of African literature is not easy. Going through works of European and American literary criticism, one is struck by the divergent, and sometimes conflicting, approaches to literature. There are neo-classists, psychoanalysts and neo-Christians, Marxists and neo-humanists. These approaches leave the African critic overawed. What approach is he to take if he is to be truthful?

Ultimately, the answer lies in the critic being aware of what the writer is trying to do. A writer's style, as we witness in James Ngugi's A Grain of Wheat is, and should be, determined by what he has to say. It should not be an end in itself. A writer's consciousness is an important factor in this for inevitably, it is shaped by his social environment, his background, and his sensibility towards these. This seems to bear out Kibera's point.

Literature can therefore be approached wholly and satisfactorily from the point of view of cultural aesthetics. Joseph Okpaku in a

convincing article[2] argues that there is no universal aesthetic standard, and from this he asks two questions which are relevant to any discussion of African, or any other literature: is there an absolute artistic standard? And can we judge African literature by Western standards? To understand African literature, Okpaku says, one must consider the audience the writer is addressing consciously or subconsciously. This will determine not only the language the writer uses, but also how he uses it; how he handles his symbolism, subtleties and imagery. It will determine the implications therein, understatements and matters of style. One must therefore understand the writer's culture, its aesthetics and philosophical implications. For "critical standards derive from aesthetics. Aesthetics are culture dependent". His conclusion echoes Kibera in many ways; he calls for a movement in which

> we relate ourselves, our writings, our scholarship, and our academicism first to ourselves, and to our people -- to the social, political and cultural realities and tastes of Africa. It is only this way that we can have any claim to validity as Africans and therefore as people.

Okpaku casts doubt on the validity of one of the major themes in African writing, that of cultural interaction. He says that this only affected the small elite and when writers deal with this theme, they are not therefore talking of the majority of Africans. He fails to realize that elite or not, educated or not, the African today has to contend with new economic and social realities and this in itself is a kind of cultural interaction. For example, Song of Lawino and all its seeming defense of African traditional culture, is really about cultural interactions. It draws its tensions and drama from the conflicts of culture within one

people.

Okpaku does however articulate an idea which is vital to the growth of African literature. It is an idea which also takes into account the nature of the writer in East Africa today, and it derives from his historical background. James Ngugi and Okot p'Bitek derive the strength in their writings from a definite and unified vision. They are unreservedly writing from within their situation about that situation and for the people within that situation. Their styles are given form and originality by this ultimate involvement because they are writing from a definite cultural situation, using the aesthetics of that culture.

But most other East African writers, especially the short story writers who contribute to the literary journals, are uncertain of their cultural standing. They have an ambivalent vision which makes them look at the East African situation almost with detachment. And this detachment makes their works suffer. It lacks a shattering impact on the reader, and the writer cannot, in any case, get involved enough to give his work strength. This is because after the impact of colonialism, the East African has not yet been able to resolve his personality. Most are in the condition which Frantz Fanon called "Black skin, White Masks" which according to W. E. B. duBois in The Souls of Black Folk, is:

> a strange feeling, a double consciousness, an impression of forever watching ourselves through the eyes of others . . . of measuring our soul with that of a world which regards this action with amusement, pity and distrust. One forever feels his duality: being at once both American and Negro, both French and African, English and African, Spanish and African, Portuguese and African. Two souls, two thoughts, two irreconcilable tendencies; ideals conflicting in but one black body whose unconquerable spirit alone prevents it from being torn into two.[3]

While a fuller discussion of this belongs in sociology, it is

nevertheless a pertinent point to make in literary criticism. Taban lo Liyong's failure as a writer and an artist, for example, comes from the fact that he does not know who he is, he does not want to accept himself, his situation and his audience. He does not therefore know what to write about. Grace Ogot's short stories, especially "Night Sister", fail to inspire for these same reasons. One can neither be complacent about the East African situation nor be detached, when as one concerned poet says:

> . . . in the small hours
> between one day and the next
> We have strolled through
> the deserted streets
> and seen strange figures
> Under bougainvillea bushes
> in traffic islands,
> figures hardly human
> snoring away into
> the cold winds of the night;
> desperately dying to live.[4]

There are cultural debates and tensions worth exploring; which are rather too obviously stated by some of the few writers who are coming to grips with the situation:

> We of the bush love man
> And persistently strive to reach people's insides
> Where we dig and sow
> The seeds of feeling.
>
> When I talk like this
> My friend calls me enemy!
> He threatens to tie my hands
> With iron ropes!
>
> I speak for the bush
> You speak for the civilised
> Will you hear me. . . .[5]

All this does not mean a cry for sociological tracts, but for works which are first and foremost works of art. But writers cannot write in the obvious lack of awareness of the social and cultural values which

some East African writers have shown. Any great realist literature from Chaucer, through Fielding, Dickens and the Russian novelists has been to a large extent influenced by the social awareness of the writers.

This is even more true in Africa where, despite the Anglophone West African objection to it, Négritude was a necessary social and psychological movement before the African could regain his confidence. This movement, which was essentially for the educated black man living within white civilization and European culture, was not only strange to millions of Africans, but it was also false. As Frantz Fanon observed, this black man, alienated from his people, needed to shout out his identity:

> And it is with rage in his mouth and abandon in his heart that he buries himself in the vast black abyss . . . this attitude so heroically absolute, renounces the present and the future in the name of a mystical past.[6]

But even the writers opposed to Négritude do concede that it was an important movement. Some of the best poetry yet from Africa was written under its dialectical banner. And the objection to it by Anglophone West and South Africans is better told by Ezekiel Mphahlele:

> Who is so stupid as to deny the historical fact of negritude as both a protest and a positive assertion of African cultural values?
> All this is valid. What I do not accept is the way in which too much of the poetry inspired by it romanticizes Africa as a symbol of innocence, purity and artless primitiveness. I feel insulted when some people imply that Africa is not also a violent continent.[7]

Négritude had a cathartic effect on its proponents, mostly from the Caribbean and the then French West Africa. It injected confidence in the African and pointed to the need to stop hanging around the white man's door through which he had been refused entry. From this point of confidence, Africans could start a serious self-examination, self acceptance

and above all, a cultivation of dignity. This was necessary if Africans were to write for Africans and about Africans. Even Wole Soyinka, perhaps the best known opponent of Négritude, does agree that "it is from this totem -- narcissistic phase that a different kind of writer has began to emerge . . ."[8]

While the historical facts of colonialism did not warrant a Négritude movement in West Africa, a need for a similar movement is obvious in East Africa. It is significant that Négritude passed unnoticed in East Africa. Its implications were not absorbed and the pre-independence sensibility in the African remained. There is need for a catharsis, not of the romantic nature of Négritude, but one based on the here and now, and one which tries to question: who are we? This seems to be the serious question implied by the works of Ngugi, but more particularly by p'Bitek's Song of Lawino and more explicitly by Leonard Kibera's tract "Letter to the Haunting Past".[9]

The growth of awareness of the East African writer of himself as an inseparable part of his social situation, writing from that situation for a people within that situation will ultimately not only help in the growth of East African literature, but will also give this literature an authenticity and freshness which today characterizes the works of the best of the West African writers. It will also make them play effectively the almost inescapable role of the contemporary African writer. This is the role defined by James Ngugi in his editorial in the January 1968 issue of the East Africa Journal. Ngugi advised up and coming writers not to escape their primary duty:

> to probe into society, to capture its conflicts and tensions and in doing this with care and diligence, to speak for the voiceless many.

More explicitly, Achebe says that the writer's position is right in the thick of the African "revolution". Staying on the sidelines where it is less rough, as some writers would have it, would only lead to the writing of footnotes and a glossary after the main action is past, and uninvolvement which leads to the "contemporary intellectual of futility":

> I believe it is impossible to write anything in Africa without some kind of commitment, some kind of message, some kind of protest . . . Commitment is nothing new; it runs right through our work. In fact I should say all our writers, whether they know it or not, are committed writers. The whole pattern of life demands that you should protest . . .[10]

What Achebe says is important. Perhaps he should have clarified the word "revolution" further. African countries are in a state of economic mobilization and political excitement. The order of life is changing, and, to use the politician's cliché, poverty, ignorance and disease, are daily being fought. They need to be fought. New ideas and ideologies to combat them are needed and are hotly debated in the streets. There is a strong feeling of urgency. People look up to their leaders and to the few educated for guidance. Every educated man is needed, including writers. This is why writers should feel morally bound to make their writing relevant to this "revolution". It is this which leads to the kind of novel which Africa has produced, where a character is seen within a well defined situation, and his experience is given weight and relevance when seen against the experience of the community around him. This is seen clearly in the novels of Achebe and Ngugi, in Soyinka's _The Interpreters_

and in Mongo Beti's Mission to Kala. What is important in these novels is that the writers' awareness of their protagonists' situations make the novels conform to the tradition of realist literature. And this in turn conforms to the Aristotelian dictum that man is Zoon Politikon, a social animal. Fielding's protagonists, Tolstoy's, and Goethe's Faust, fall into this category. Even Yeats, especially in his later work falls into this category too. His lines from "Under Ben Bulben" in fact state the conflict that is at the heart of this literature:

> Many times man lives and dies
> Between his two extremities
> That of race and that of soul . . .

Yeats could have been speaking of Okonkwo in Achebe's Things Fall Apart or of Mugo in Ngugi's A Grain of Wheat. This literature takes into account individual history and destiny which cannot be separated from the history of the individual's community. The protagonists develop when they come into contact with the world and with those around them. They contribute into the forming of the world, and are in turn formed by it. African life has always been communal and it is still communal. The individual can therefore only be seen wholly against his communal background.

This is all the more reason why the past with all its harsh realities is relevant in showing social growth and development to the present. It is from this past that a people's ethos and sensibility was formed, and it is this which animates a people's literature. This is an idea that Yeats again stated clearly in his criticism of Roman poetry:

> No passing beggar or fiddler or benighted countryman has ever trembled or been awestruck by nymph-haunted or fury-haunted wood described in Roman poetry. Roman poetry is founded upon documents, not upon belief.[11]

What Yeats says is relevant to the discussion of folk-lore, but isn't it from their people's folk-lore and beliefs that African writers are deriving their strength? But there is also an awareness that this past has to reconcile itself to the present and modern —— which we cannot will ourselves out of. This is Ngugi's message in The River Between.

African writers as well as dealing with the past and present, also give important pointers to the future based on their interpretation of the present social conditions. This is recognition that the writers, like the humanity they write about, are in a continuous stream of history —— what Soyinka calls a continuous dome of existence in The Interpreters. There is no doubt that even in the most educated African, it is the alien which attached to the dynamic and changing African in them, serving to enrich what was already there. Through the struggles between Christianity and tradition, white rule versus African freedom, education versus village life, the continuous dome was still there, battered perhaps but not broken.

This is reflected in most African writing whose style and content is a kind of cultural collusion. For even the man in the village who has never been to school, and has had little contact with the new ways, has all the same been changing over the years as his society changed. He is not the static tom-tom throb of the Négritude poet, and his language, though rooted in the past has been tremendously affected by the present. Achebe says:

> While the African intellectual was busily displaying the past culture of Africa, the troubled peoples of Africa were already creating new and revolutionary cultures which took into account their present conditions. As long as people are alive, their culture is alive; as long as people are changing, their culture will be changing.[12]

The position of the artist in African society has always been understood. Unlike in the west, where the arts are the fashionable domain of the few elite and educated, African art, both oral and visual, was traditionally a communal affair just as life generally was. Social experiences, ideals and pleasures, were shared both practically and in art forms. Art too was used to link society to the higher abstract powers which were forever hovering above that society, not always menacingly, but seeking union with man. Works of art therefore corresponded closely to the basic needs of the community and were inextricably woven to the daily life. The artist was therefore a well integrated member of society:

> The artist has always functioned in African society as the record of mores and experiences of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time.[13]

The artist was not in revolt, but was working within his society. He was not working in accordance with his own subjective conception of reality but was trying for a social coherence and intelligibility. On the other hand, literary criticism did not exist as a speciality or genre. Since the works were social, the best critic was the public itself.

It is no empty claim that to a large extent, African writers have inherited their social role from their predecessors. Both the modern African writer and the direct descendants of the traditional oral artists (in which group I would tentatively include Tutuola, the

Onitsha Market literature and contemporary oral artists) are attempting to recapture the hidden inner life, teeming and perpetually in motion, at the heart of the changing African life. They are striving to recapture the people's ethos as seen against the new conditions. Both forms of art are not static. They are conditioned and they correspond to the current ideas, hopes, needs and aspirations of a particular historical situation.

Ultimately, the basic concern at the heart of African literature is the meaning of life. Not a metaphysical meaning, but one simply expressed in humanist terms --- the relationship between man and man and man and his environment. After all the historical processes --- colonialism, Christianity, education, nationalism, independence, new leaders, new economic and political realities --- the individual is hard put to it to understand himself and to relate himself to the now not so simple history of his society. There is difficulty too in relating his actions and the actions of those around him which arise out of present-day necessities, to the moral, ethical judgement ingrained in him from his own background. He has difficulty in understanding how he fits into the social economic changes.

Leonard Kibera's point which is also strengthened by Joseph Okpaku's article therefore embodies many social and moral considerations. It also implies the need for a particularly authentic and effective style to communicate these. It is these "tools" then which should form the basis of writing and criticism of East African literature.

FOOTNOTES (CHAPTER ONE)

[1] Personal communication of 22nd June, 1970.

[2] Joseph Okpaku, 'Tradition, Culture, Criticism', Présence Africaine, No. 70, (second Quarterly), 1969.

[3] Quoted from Herbert Shore, 'Art in a Developing Nation', East Africa Journal, VI No. 1, (January 1969), p. 53.

[4] Leonard Okola, "Their City", East Africa Journal, V No. 7, (July 1968), p. 31.

[5] Everett Standa, "I speak for the Bush", East Africa Journal, VI No. 1, (January 1969), p. 28.

[6] Frantz Fanon, Peau Noire, Masques Blancs, Editions de Seuil, 1952 -- trans., Black Skin, White Masks, by Charles Lam Markmann, New York: Grove Press, 1967, p. 14.

[7] Ezekiel Mphahlele, ed., "Remarks on Negritude", African Writing Today, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1967, p. 249.

[8] Quoted from Eric Sellin, "African Art: Compositional Vs. Modal Esthetics", Yale Review, (Winter 1970), pp. 226-227.

[9] Leonard Kibera, "Letter to the Haunting Past", Potent Ash, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1968, p. 220.

[10] "Achebe on Commitment and African Writers", An Interview with Bernth Lindfors, Africa Report, (March 1970), p. 18.

[11] W. B. Yeats, On the Boiler, Dublin: Cuala Press, 1939, p. 14.

[12] "Achebe on Commitment and African Writers", An Interview with Bernth Lindfors, Africa Report, (March 1970), p. 16.

[13] Wole Soyinka, quoted from A. A. Roscoe, "Okara's Unheeded Voice explication and defense". Busara, I No. 1, 1969, p. 16.

CHAPTER TWO

ORAL LITERATURE

The last chapter has shown that African written literature can not wholly be divorced from its oral origins. Tradition, as T. S. Eliot has observed in Tradition and the Individual Talent, links artists to their predecessors. The same idea is embodied in the West African proverb: "Young palm trees grow on old palm trees", and in Rediscovery, Awoonor Williams tells us: "Reaching for the stars, we stop at the house of the moon and pause to relearn the wisdom of our fathers."[1] Okot p'Bitek's Lawino in Song of Lawino also cries to her husband to "let no one uproot the pumpkin".[2]

Generally, oral forms anywhere in the world can be divided into myths, tales, proverbs and riddles. Mythology grew out of a need for a people to explain their own lives, and it strongly influenced the people's attitudes. Greek mythology, for example, was the basis of Greek art and it also influenced attitudes towards nature and social relationships. The same could be said of Africa, and the differences observed within oral forms of different people's could be explained in terms of differences in the peoples' attitudes towards life, stemming from their mythology.

In Europe, singers of epics accompanying themselves with harps were common. Beowulf makes constant references to such singers or scops. In some parts of Kenya and Uganda, such singers existed too. They

praised people who had pleased them, either by generosity, beauty or valour. They were also sought out to sing poetic elegies at funeral ceremonies, and occasionally they praised the brave deeds of dead heroes in a manner reminiscent of classical heroic tradition. But these singer-poets were rare and they do not seem to have composed long epics. Rather, they had short but emotionally charged songs composed according to the singer's own taste, but with metaphorical references and imagery based on understood social values.

The major difference between these African singer-poets and the old western poets is clearly one of background and sensibility shaped by their societies. C. L. Wrenn has said:

> The scop or composer and reciter of poetry, was probably originally an aristocratic warrior reciting with an inherited accepted technique to a trained and receptive audience of the same type as himself.[3]

Story telling and singing in Africa was the domain of all, and the audience was not select. As Jomo Kenyatta observes:

> In every stage of life there are various competitions arranged for members of the several age groups, to test their ability to re-call and relate in song and dance the stories and events which have been told to them, and at such functions, parents and the general public form an audience to judge and correct the competitors.[4]

This widespread story telling and singing was part of the peoples' (especially children's) wider education. Behind the apparent simplicity of tales lay society's hidden morals and values. People also learned the art of talking, of being artificers with words, for tales were supposed to impress by their beauty and dramatic appeal. Riddles were held to sharpen children's wits.

This popularity of oral literature might explain why the language used was ordinary and homiletic. It was not, as in much of the western oral tradition, "poetic" and mostly heroic. Its effect did not so much depend on high dignity as on the emotions it evoked, and also on its lyrical excellence. Clarity and elegance were also achieved by the use of proverbs and aphorisms. Proverbs and riddles were intimately related to daily speech and to tale-telling. The moral aspect of a tale was usually appended at the end of the tale in a terse statement, usually a proverb. Proverbs were also the measure of one's ability to talk precisely and richly. By throwing in a number of them, the speaker could paradoxically speak plainly, even rebuke, while at the same time remaining metaphorically complex. He could also, through the use of proverbs show the values of the people and what motivated their behaviour. The hearer, it was assumed, had to know their meaning.

Most western epics talked about how to be good leaders of men. Their protagonists deliberately chose the heroic way of life. They also usually came from great families, as Aristotle's enunciation of tragic principles indicates. Some African peoples also told stories usually with a character of importance. But with the Gikuyu, no person of importance was mentioned, as we shall see later; the tales' protagonists could have been members of the audience. This is perhaps better explained by the political, economic and social structure of the Gikuyu. There was no aristocracy, and most folk-tales taught how to be good men within a homogeneous society. But this is not to say that warriors who had proven themselves in battle were not idolized in songs. It was however

understood that anyone who was brave enough could be like them.

Most African tales were based as closely as possible on day-to-day happenings. If not, they were aimed at stark realism and a close relationship to life. Working together with the people's mythology and taboos, their gnomic moralising and emphasis of social values helped shape the peoples' consciences. Unquestioning acceptance of the social mores in a society whose only police was the people's conscience was of vital necessity. It is from the example of the characters within the tales that the moral was learned. The popular animal-trickster tales, for example, were basically humorous and the animals were used as important vehicles of moral didacticism. Usually these tales featured a small animal which was a bag of wilful childish tricks played on a bigger animal's incredible stupidity. The Gikuyu usually used the hare and the hyena. In West Africa, they had Anansi, the spider, instead of the hare. But these basically allegorical and simple moral tales were not only wide-spread in Africa but they have close similarities with Aesop's tales, such as fables about Reynard the fox, and also with some Asian tales. The animals in these tales ceased to be just animals and became associated with stereotyped traits in man. The stories' moral was simply summarized with a proverb, for example the Gikuyu proverb: Uugi wi mbere ya hinya -- wisdom, prudence, discussion, diplomacy are much more effective and valued than brute physical force.

Animal tales, though better known, were only one of a number of cycles of stories. There were the ogre stories with man as the victim. Ogres had a gross undisciplined appetite and overt greed. The Gikuyu ogre, for example, had two mouths, one at the front and the other at the

back of the head, which swallowed flies by the handful and sought young children as a delicacy. These ogres are no different from Homer's cyclops or from Grendel and his mother in Beowulf. Then there were tales dealing with man and animals, especially birds, and there were still other tales which dealt with man alone, either happy or sad.

These tales with man at their center did not have the farcical humour of the animal genre. They were usually grave and their themes deeply emotional. In most cases, the themes in these tales seemed to be based on actual events and appeared to be quite true. But imagination manipulated these facts, exaggerating and creating incredible situations, such as dying more than one time, so that some of the stark reality of the tales was removed. This was calculated to create some distance between the audience and the tale. If the narrator was skilful enough, he would evoke just the correct emotional response from the audience without sinking into bathos. In this way he would make the tales an affective means for the audience to release its emotions.

The tales were told as events which had happened in a distant past. But by using concrete and visible examples, the tales were also given a firm place in the present. All things visible or invisible were made, through the powers of the narrator, present within the mind's vision of the audience. In this way too, even the simplest story -- and most were quite simple -- would evoke a very deep emotional response. The tales had usually more than one moral in them and these morals had to be brought out clearly through the narrator's skill. The narrator therefore became an artist, re-creating, manipulating words, throwing in proverbs,

dramatizing, trying to bring alive. He built up his plot consistently, alternated suspense with relief, repeated phrases to denote intensity or lengthened time or distance. The length of a given performance depended largely on the audience. A good narrator could go on as long as an audience would listen to him, repeating songs and drawing out incidents. In this way a narrator and his audience enjoyed a tale depending on what characters were being treated. Dialogue enlivened the tales, affording laughter and at the same time making the audience fully enrapt in the drama it evoked.

The narrator achieved dramatic dialogue through his ability to mimic and to identify himself with the characters in the tales. He became an actor, dramatizing by movements of hands and body the antics of the protagonists in the tales. He alternated his voice as each of his protagonists spoke. For example the deep growl of an ogre's voice could alternate with the sweet voice of a girl victim. The use of simple conversational language helped give realism to what might seem unreal. So did the use of real and concrete examples outside the tales. A character in the tales could be likened to a member of the audience in stature, beauty, age and so on. A visible hill, a known distance, were mentioned. And underlying all this was the presumed society's love of exaggeration and of the visual as opposed to the invisible. Tale telling was therefore a deliberate art that required as much realistic detail as possible.

But the most effective parts of these tales dealing with

identifiable men and human situations was not so much the narrative and drama which characterized the animal tales, but rather the description and songs. Songs gave melody and a feeling of completeness to the tales. Usually they came at the point of crisis, at the point of intense sadness, emotional strain, or sometimes at the point of triumph as when a hero had killed an ogre.

Above all, the song revealed the character's state of mind, or some mystery which contributed to the understanding of the whole tale. At times, songs summarized the whole tale in a dramatic way, usually in dialogue form in which the characters dramatized in words their different mental situations and their past and on-going difficulties. Thus the narrator and audience were involved in an emotional tension and usually this depended on the narrator's ability to create the emotion in the tale. Sometimes it was not the meaning of the song that mattered, but the beauty and the sound of the words, and the narrator's voice that sang them. For example, a bird which has been sent by a pregnant wife to call her husband who is a smith, to rescue her from the ogre which tortures her, biding its time before it eats her, sings:

Muturi Ugutura-i
Caangararai-ca,
Turatura narua-i
Caangararai-ca,
Mukaguo niaciarire-i
Caangararai-ca
Aciarithio ni irimu-i
Caangararai-ca
Ucengeraceru-i
Caangararai-ca

The essential meaning is: smith, smithing away, get done quickly. Your wife is giving birth with an ogre for a midwife; but it is hard to

translate this song into English without losing much of its onomatopoeic beauty. The refrain (Caangararai-ca) is meaningless outside the context of the song, but within the song it helps to evoke the sound of a bird's voice.

When the song was beautiful and melodious, the audience joined in, deriving fun and enjoyment from singing aloud, and, much more important, letting out the emotions which the tale had aroused. In this way the audience acted as a chorus. This involvement of the audience as a chorus seems to have been rare in the European oral pattern. But the success of the African folk tale depended on the ability of the narrator to involve his audience, to make it receptive and ready to evaluate his tale. By arousing the audience's feelings and making it ready to identify with characters and situation within a tale, all were able, however momentarily, to live in the world created by the imagination of the narrator, and the audience's own imaginative and creative qualities. In this way, all underwent different experiences in different tales, much as reading of different books does to a sensitive reader. The sad, the comical and the farcical are evoked.

Mrs. Grace Ogot's anthology of short stories, Land Without Thunder[5] has some stories largely taken from Luo sources whose matter is folk-loric. "Tekayo" helps to underline and illustrate the evils of greed; "The Bamboo Hut" teaches young men to conform to custom and to listen to the wisdom and advice of their elders and "The Empty Basket" shows what evil might come through neglect, and also shows that this evil can only be driven away by a unified and concerted action by all those who are capable within

the society. A better story, "Land Without Thunder", shows clearly how a folk-tale dealt sometimes with a whole cosmos, linking in close proximity the dead and the living, the natural and the supernatural. The individual is caught up in these, his action is limited and he is always striving to understand and to come to terms with this cosmos. As in the tales, there is a simple moral to the story. Mrs. Ogot shows how jealousy can plague the living and why it is unwanted for it can bring untold suffering to the individual and in this way to the whole society.

But the most effective story in this anthology is "The Rain Came", the story of a chief whose people are faced with hunger and starvation from drought. After consulting the rainmaker, the chief is told that the only way to get rain is for his only daughter to offer herself as sacrifice to the lake monster. The story focusses immediately on the chief Labong'o who is "getting thinner and thinner as people kept on pestering him". He feels responsible to his people, and is the intermediary between them and the deities. The conflict in the story is therefore one between the claims of society and those of the individual: "refusing to yield to the rain-maker's request would mean sacrificing the whole tribe, putting the interests of the individual above those of society". (p. 161).

The chief is helpless against the claims of society. In anticipation of rain, society is happy. People dance and sing and shower gifts upon his daughter, and congratulate her. They accept her death as a necessity though they are not blind to the individual tragedy involved. But to them, she has become a saviour. This happiness of society contrasts starkly with the sadness of the individual. Labong'o and Minya, the girl's

mother, feel the acute pain of having to lose their only daughter.

More important, the story is about the girl, Oganda. Her simplicity, innocence and youthful charm, her dreams of the future as a happily married mother, add a deep emotion to the story when juxtaposed with her imminent doom. Even when her father is telling the family about her fate, she is sitting alone in her grandmother's hut thinking: "It must be marriage", and "a faint smile played on [her] lips as she thought of the several young men who swallowed saliva at the mere mention of her name". (p. 163). This gives a sense of human and tragic irony to the story. It is this juxtaposition of opposites, especially the necessity of her death and yet the tragedy of it, which gives the story its strength. The plot becomes much more complete and inherently dramatic without a feeling of contrivance.

In Mrs. Ogot's version of the story, the girl is rescued by her young lover just before she drowns. In the Gikuyu version (which incidentally shows how widespread folk-tales were), the girl drowns. But in both versions, the audience in hearing this tale would respond much as the society in Mrs. Ogot's story does. It would be sympathetic but would also derive a general satisfaction because what seems to be a private tragedy is in fact a communal gain. Not only is the girl used as the ultimate example of what a good member of society ought to do -- lay down her life for society -- but she also serves to underline what was in effect at the heart of all folk-tales: that society's claims are paramount and the individual should be totally committed to the well-being of society not to themselves.

Mrs. Ogot's story also serves as a good example of how a writer can make use of oral literature. In East Africa the assimilation of oral tradition into the stream of modern life has been neglected. The educated are happy to make traditional dances in which most of the folk songs are dramatized, a curiosity, performed only during political rallies and for the entertainment of dignitaries. This might explain why there is nothing inspiring and creative based on oral tradition as, for example, the Yoruba Folk Opera in Nigeria. Yet in everyday life, oral poetry still flourishes, and it has evolved to take in the realities of modern life. James Ngugi says:

> Creative art is not new to us. We have always sung our joys and agonies. Let us not forget that our freedom was in part won through the song. And it is on this tradition of songs and poetry embodying a people's collective struggle and consciousness, that modern East Africans must build, indeed are building to judge by the current creative intensity.[6]

Echoing him, Dr. Milton Obote says:

> There are songs bringing home woes and joys, pains and passions, jokes and witticisms of the rural population and there is good poetry in the best of them.[7]

Indeed for the millions of Africans whose only means of communication is verbal, oral literature will be a long time dying. Traditional songs ring out as girls grind millet or maize and as men work out in the fields. Gentle lullabies send babies to sleep. During the days of heady nationalism, political ballads sprang up and spread widely. To-day a different kind of ballad, which diagnoses our social ills and comments on our leaders, still flourishes. Young men sing about the sly materialistic turns love has taken, while women complain of exploitation by men. Old men tell of the evils of the city, of money and of youth they can

no longer understand or communicate with. In short, this oral literature is preoccupied with those same themes which preoccupy writers. Basically these can be summed up as an attempt to understand ourselves.

FOOTNOTES (CHAPTER TWO)

[1]George Awoonor-Williams, Rediscovery, Ibadan: Mbari Writers and Artists' Club, 1964.

[2]Okot p'Bitek, Song of Lawino, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1966, p. 216.

[3]C. L. Wrenn, A Study of Old English Literature, New York: Norton, 1967, p. 39.

[4]Jomo Kenyatta, Facing Mount Kenya, London: Mercury Books, 1961, p. xvi.

[5]Grace Ogot, Land Without Thunder, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1968.

[6]James Ngugi, Editorial, East Africa Journal, V No. 1, (January 1968), p. 3.

[7]Milton Obote, 'The Soul of a Nation', East Africa Journal, VI No. 1, (January 1969), p. 6.

CHAPTER THREE

LANGUAGE AND POETRY

Oral literature managed to retain its high artistic quality while at the same time being popular and comprehensible to both young and old. African writers have felt the need to draw on its vitality; to be inspired and guided by it in the handling of form and expression, thus giving an African identity to their work. But the transition from oral to written literature has been a real and testing challenge. To most of the writers, writing in either French or English comes much more easily than writing in their mother-tongues. A recent survey conducted by the University of Nairobi showed a high tendency among educated Africans to correspond in English and to use their own languages only when communicating with their parents, the uneducated and those of a different age. Swahili is used mainly as a language of business, and to bridge the gap between people of different languages who cannot use English. Swahili's role is, however, rapidly rising and undoubtedly, it will soon replace English in importance. The survey concluded that this tri-lingualism, rather than making the individual mastery of the languages suffer, helped to make the languages complement each other.

However true this might be, the number of the educated still remains very low, and the use of English, even in urban areas, is far lower than in West Africa where there is a more widespread and deeply-rooted use of English, and where a local pidgin English flourishes. This

helps to account for the widespread popularity of the Onitsha Market literature, which has no equivalent in East Africa unless one is willing to consider the current crop of songs dealing with social and political themes as fulfilling the same ends.

Generally, West African writers can much more easily not only command a sizable audience, but also slip into pidgin whenever they want to give the feel of character. We must not, however, under-rate the problems of transliteration and verisimilitude which they too have had to face. Gabriel Okara in The Voice and Amos Tutuola in The Palm Wine Drinkard, are groping towards a resolution of these problems. The real problem still remains that of transposing the richness and vitality of the cultural background into writing in a language alien to the writers' protagonists and their cultural situation. We, as the readers, are interested in how what they say strikes the ear. Is it original and therefore African in so far as the writers and their protagonists are African? Most of the writers are educated. Some have become westernized and must have been alienated from their traditional roots, especially in East Africa. But all the same, in terms of feeling and language, the writers have to try being at one level with their protagonists, however simple they might be, without trying to patronize them and without giving an impression of forcing the situation.

East African writers have yet to face up to this problem. Mrs. Grace Ogot's novel The Promised Land[1] has been crippled by it. Its plot is simple and its contents authentic. But this simplicity and authenticity is marred by a language which essentially remains Mrs. Ogot's. The

language attempts to give the simple plot lofty heights while yet remaining riddled with sophisticated slangy phrases and clumsy sentences which obviously could not have been uttered by the characters in Mrs. Ogot's novel. It is obvious that Mrs. Ogot the educated writer does not understand her characters, neither is she capable of seeing the world through their eyes. She remains divorced from her story and her story fails to come alive. She suffers from what most East African poets also suffer from: her manner of telling the story begins to dominate the matter.

There is something in the development of East African poetry akin to that of its development in West Africa. Oloudah Equiano's eighteenth-century poetry is the earliest known by an African in English. But there is nothing African in his poetry. It is indistinguishable from other verse written in the English eighteenth-century poetic conventions. After Equiano's verse, Olumbe Bassir's An Anthology of West African Verse published in 1957 was the next important thing. But between Equiano and Bassir, there was little development. Some verses in Bassir anticipate the days of liberation, but on the whole, its pages tell of imitation of the West and uncertainty of cultural standing. This is what Claude Wauthier has called the literature of tutelage and in Canada and Australia, for example, it is called colonial romanticism. It gratefully accepts its attitudes of subordination and looks elsewhere, rather than to its country of origin, for standards of excellence, being too ready to imitate the parent tradition.

East Africa's first anthology of verse, Drum Beat, was published in 1967 by the East African Publishing House. One would have expected

that the East African poets would have learned from West Africa where, by 1967, poets like Okigbo, Soyinka, Okara, and Clark had found their own vigorously original voices. But, not only do the poems in Drum Beat tell of tutelage, but most of them are poor imitations of English poetry. Y. S. Chemba personifies Uhuru with obvious adjectives whose originality does not strike:

> She was beautiful beyond compare
> Her sparkling eyes,
> Her firm warm breasts,
> Her beautiful smile and merry laughter,
> Spelt beauty and joy for ever. (p. 27).

In another poem, his confused heaping up of adjectives becomes undecipherable:

> The lush fecund green of
> gently-swaying banana trees
> and of sheltering friendly mangoes
> the provocative beauty of nature's
> spoiled children -- (p. 31).

Willy David Kamera's attempt to be funny becomes pitiful:

> "My wick ran out, I don't know how."
> "You went for a wick today's a week
> And I am tired and weak." (p. 45).

Sometimes, too obviously, the poets give vent to sentimentality:

> Oh burning fertility
> And mirror of immorality! (p. 78)

Agatha Wangeci's poem "for Zanzibar" is sentimental rather than nostalgic.

What an East African, or any other reader, wants to know from an anthology of this kind, is what it says about the condition of being East African, the problems facing the poets, if not uniquely as East African, then as part of the world's humanity. This concern is lacking in the anthology. K. A. Kassam's poetry is good, but it is rooted in a meta-

physical concern with an unexplained melancholy and his voice and sensibility tends to be romantic. Except John Roberts who, ironically, is non-East African, and Joe Mutiga who warns that "It is a time of opportunity, / When one line makes a poet" (p. 95), none of the others seem to be concerned, or to have enough vigour and personal commitment to give character and life to their poetry.

The Anthology therefore leaves the reader uninspired. It leaves a feeling of flatness and of detachment of the authors from their work. Yet in most cases, their use of English is "correct" and their command of it admirable. In fact their failure, ironically, is not from an inadequate command of English but from a fascination with the language which is not deeply rooted, but is only acquired from books. They have failed to realize that a language does not work in a vacuum. It works within a culture, which they have failed to retain. It is this which makes their poetry rather cold and impersonal. This is true of Edwin Waiyaki's poetry which has been praised for its precision and originality, but which lacks animation and a life of its own.

One question that kept haunting me as I read the anthology is the place of these poets writing so confidently in English in East African life. How do they fit in as a group of the very few educated? And how do they feel about their relationships with other men, and what they see around them, and how do they reconcile their obvious westernization to their own background? This is not to ask for poetry which is obviously socially oriented, but to point to the inherent questions and tensions which I think inform the poets' lives and which should have helped to give

a coherent wholeness to the anthology.

It is not enough for the editor, Leonard Okola, to say that there is no protest in the poetry. If the poets were writing poetry for its own sake, then the reader is interested in the art within the poetry which eventually appears to the reader's eye as an artless smoothness. Occasionally the poets disregard the need to communicate and are engrossed in what Professor George Wing calls "a linguistic esotery"[2] which is incomprehensible to the reader.

Okola is aware of the problems inherent in this anthology though he dismisses them casually. In his introduction, he tells us:

> By the time an African has assimilated sufficient English to be able to convey his inner-most feelings in that language, he has made it more or less his own and he can no longer describe the language as 'foreign' except in the very broad sense that it is non-vernacular.

This statement presumes many things one of which Okola realizes when he hopes that this English:

> Will eventually be an East African English, fully reflective of the cultural peculiarities and natural speech habits of the indigenous people, rather than just a poor imitation of Anglo-Saxon English.

The hope is not realized in this anthology.

There are two ways one can approach the use of a foreign language. The first is to embrace it profoundly. This would mean having a native command of it, and knowing and understanding all the principles of its vernacular usage. It would also mean knowing all the hidden currents beneath its surface which move towards its future usage. In short, to master it in such a way that its usage would be indistinguishable from that of a native speaker. This presupposes thinking and feeling within

the language and its culture. The second is to have enough command of it so that one can transpose one's mother language into the foreign easily, enriching it with one's peculiar idiom and cultural ethos.

Most African writers have taken the latter choice. In this way those writing in English have enriched it too. This is the contribution Africans writing in English can make to the language, while at the same time moulding what could eventually come to be termed as African English. But most of the poets featured in Drum Beat have chosen the former approach, which is a formidable task, but which they think easy. Even Joseph Conrad and Vladmir Nabokov do not sound, let alone feel quite English, which is what these poets want.

Okello Oculi's Orphan, also published by the East African Publishing House only one year after Drum Beat, does show great improvement. It echoes Song of Lawino in some parts and its theme of isolation, arising from cultural rootlessness, and the consequent moral corruption (more obviously seen in sexual and political behaviour), could have been lifted from Okot p'Bitek. The ending of hope also echoes Song of Lawino. Okello's father advises that there should be no revenge, but rather the injured manness in Okello should be given a chance. Okello should not take "The corrosive pills of self-pity" (p. 99) but should rather strive to:

> Enthrone the spirit of your mother
> In the new homestead,
> And let the world feel
> The arrogant boast of her milk
> Stubborn woman in her,
> Singing the fertility of her womb through you. (p. 101).

Even Okello's agemate realizes that "The date of outburst and assertion will come" (p. 60) and his sister that "The fires in our insides / shall

never be trampled out". (p. 96). For youth therefore, there is hope, though their cultural past is now, in the words of the village elder, only a "mutilated taproot". It is from this mutilation that youth needs to struggle, to

> Wake, and wade through the mist
> Over your eyes. Be a man.
> Walk to a spear
> And learn the message of facing, alone,
> The twang of its stem, and the silent power
> In its blade;
> Rise to face isolation's challenge. (p. 35).

The poem is one of loneliness and disintegration. Okello, the protagonist, is sitting at the crossing of the village paths. Ten people going about their different businesses, people from different walks of life, pass by him and talk to him. This gives the poem its loose structure. It is a collection of voices all united and underlined by the picture of the orphan boy sitting pensively, lonely and unhappy, drawing pictures in the sand. Each of the voices either tells of loss and alienation or helps to bring them out. Okello himself is dislocated. He is isolated and weaned from his past. In fact he is not just an orphan. He is on the one hand Africa personified, but cut off from her own tradition by the impact of colonization; but on the other hand, Okello is also the son of this Africa which no longer has any roots in the past. He is dispossessed. He is left without the protective mother image of country and culture:

> She rushed to the false hopes of romance with
> The wild cat in the western glow,
> Unheeding the secret in the talk
> Of the drums. (p. 14).

As Okello's uncle observes, home is now cold and deadly:

> The silence in the home
> And the dead bone's stories
> And the yawn in the granaries
> Silence the rumble beat of the drums. (p. 20).

When Okello rises from the footpath without the warmth and protectiveness of his past, his clansmen and friends, what is he going to become? The village elder as well as warning on the need for courage and strength in facing the future, also points to the nature of the present life. He points to its fragmentation and isolation:

> The disposed-of bones in the old homestead,
> Scattered in a jumble, question the fate of
> The flesh that once walled their unity
> And sing the credo of the final isolation. (p. 29).

This isolation does not only result in moral corruption but also in a pain and dehumanization which Okello will have to bear:

> Young man, you have brought new
> Nerves to be hit, tossed, tested,
> Taught and surprized to a deadening;
> To drain out its passions
> Till even generating sympathy is a problem
> And nothing is tragic anymore. (p. 40).

The woman whose husband is of Okello's clan on the other hand is embittered. She is sure that when Okello becomes educated, he will be as much of an exploiter as all the others in the "car clan", with their "Made in Italy" shoes and prostitute secretaries and false disdain of the villagers and their simple village life. She complains that Okello will bring tourists to take notes at

> My funeral and capture our shadows
> In Machines for Money. (p. 47).

She could have belonged to Lawino's clan too. She is used, much like

Lawino, to reveal the new age's cosmetic hypocrisy, its interests with "fur-coats and limousines and dejuiced accents", (p. 52), which are used to mask an inner corrosion and decay.

Unlike _Song of Lawino_ however, _Orphan_ is more meditative and therefore more somber. Because we are only listening to voices, _Orphan_ lacks the drama of direct confrontation which we have in _Song of Lawino_. Oculi therefore needed to write a poem which would carry over to us the feeling of Okello's deep alienation, and his groping for identity. His language abounds in rich and vivid imagery especially of birth and alienation, some of which is strikingly original:

> My herb of youth is the after-noon
> Sun of the gentle _yao_ oil on my smooth blackness,
> The gentle _yao_ oil
> Shining on the entrance to my thigh. (p. 70).

Occasionally he lets the sound merge into the sense of what he wants to say:

> The darkness hidden below the glare of
> The mid-day sunshine;
> To grimace and coil in cold pain
> Under the pools of shadows of foul breaths
> Of brats. (p. 15).

But the poem's originality and richness of language is marred by the same weaknesses shown by other East African poets. Oculi often shows a fascination with words and phrases for what they are, not for what they say. Sometimes his adjectives are heavy and his syntax tortured and pretentious. The very first page of the poem evidences this:

> Cushion soothe fill of soft bellies,
> Balm of unspoken yearn in screaming lips.
> Born to earliness's helplessness. (p. 11).

We hear from the grandmother of Okello's father clan:

> Real in the reality of unreality
> And lasting in unlastingness. (p. 18).

And the woman whose husband is of Okello's clan says:

> We shall be Gentiles of their
> Religion of the looting of the Blacks,
> By the Black Bastards, for Becoming
> Black-Purples! (p. 47).

This clumsiness does not happen always but often enough to give the flow of the verse a heaviness. This spoils the overall tone and mood of the poem. The diction becomes at places brashly inauthentic. Oculi is then too obviously present in his poem, trying to impress, to be clever.

A long poem which does overcome these weaknesses evidenced in Okello Oculi and other East African poets is Okot p'Bitek's Song of Lawino. p'Bitek manages quite successfully, as his publishers tell us, almost to evolve "a new African form of English literature and language". The song which is really a series of thirteen related songs each dealing with a particular aspect of life, was published in 1966 by the East African Publishing House. It is a transposition of an original Acoli work into English. Though p'Bitek admits to having "clipped a bit of the eagle's wings and rendered the sharp edges of the warrior's sword rusty and blunt; and has also murdered rhythm and rhyme" (p. 6), he has managed to retain the richness of the original African song and to recapture its mood and ethos. Its diction and imagery strike the ear as peculiarly African. (For example: "words cut more painfully than sticks"). p'Bitek has transposed into the English language a freshness and vigour of language and imagery which sustains the reader's interest to the end.

FOOTNOTES (CHAPTER THREE)

[1]Grace Ogot, The Promised Land, Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1966.

[2]George Wing, Book Review, East Africa Journal, V No. 1, (January 1968), p. 58.

CHAPTER FOUR

SONG OF LAWINO

The initial irony in Song of Lawino is Lawino's use of the language which she is so much opposed to. The irony of Lawino protesting in English against her husband who insults her in English and who has fallen in love with a girl who speaks English is comparable to that of the Négritude poets protesting in their master's language. Language has always been the African's weapon of protest against the white man. This situation is again comparable to Caliban protesting against Prospero.

The first part lays down the quarrel between Ocol and Lawino. Ocol attacks Lawino because she is unlettered, she is primitive, foolish, she does "not know the ways of God" (p. 16) and she is superstitious. This is the basis on which the rest of the poem works. In each of the following parts, Lawino does not only defend and justify her ways, but she also exposes and attacks the claims of modernity and civilization in the African of Ocol's caliber. In a tone that is at once satiric and an affirmation of life, Lawino laughs at her husband Ocol[1] and Tina, the educated woman who has become her husband's mistress. These two have become alienated from their own African background and are striving, sometimes grotesquely (and to Lawino, stupidly), to cut off and dissociate themselves from their past. Yet Lawino never loses her appreciation of these two as fellow human beings. She is compassionate. She realizes

the sad consequences of the loss of the traditional village life, and the lack of a new cultural basis. She wants to win back her husband. She lovingly cajoles him, pointing to the richness of life he has let himself be wooed away from. Then she defiantly, intimately talks to the clansmen and villagers (and in this way to the whole of Africa), pin-pointing with humorous accuracy the incongruity of the European conventions, assumptions and attitudes being adopted by the educated African.

Lawino recaptures situations and brings them alive in a vigorous way, retaining the spontaneity and energy of the natural voice. There are quick shifts and breaks in thought; there are ejaculations and rhetorical questions: "Do you think that the young man sleeps? / Do you know what fire eats his inside"? (p. 35). The tone of the poem changes with her changing audience so that it does not cloy on the ear. There are also witty phrases and imagery. By her constant and direct addresses to somebody; brother, friend, clansman, husband, we are kept involved and the poem remains dramatic. Lawino's manner of talking demands some response. She appeals to us. She touches vibrant cords of our Africanness and our African values. For example, in the second part where Tina is ruthlessly attacked and caricatured, Lawino tells us that she is not doing so purely out of jealousy, though she cannot help being a little jealous: "It [jealousy] catches you unawares / Like the ghosts that bring fevers". (p. 24). She is struck with pity and sympathy:

> I am not unfair to my husband,
> I do not complain
> Because he wants another woman
> Whether she is young or aged!
> Who has ever prevented men
> From wanting women? (p. 27).

She then goes on to tell us in striking lines that a woman should try winning her husband by good cooking, a cheerful disposition, good manners and hard work. She is restating the traditional African values --- which she accepts simply. Hers is humane and natural advice.

The language used in the poem is simple and straightforward. p'Bitek is deliberately exploiting the folkloric spontaneity, simplicity, directness and lyrical quality found in songs and ballads. The language therefore strikes one on first reading as unpoetic, unflowery. But behind this apparent artlessness, there is very deliberate art. It is evident that p'Bitek has painstakingly worked on it to achieve this deceptive simplicity and racy, terse, diction. Usually there are short sharp lines whose words leap out to the eye:

> Listen
> My husband,
> In the wisdom of the Acoli
> Time is not stupidly split up
> Into seconds and minutes,
>
> It does not flow
> Like beer in a pot
> That is sucked
> Until it is finished. (p. 97).

The comparison of time's infinity to the limited quality of beer is not only African, but striking in its fresh originality while at the same time embodying a simple and universal truth.

There are passages which echo the Bible, especially the Old Testament which was itself influenced by oral tradition. Biblical language has the same formality and folkloric tone which appeals to the writer who wants to recapture the beauty and dignity of oral literature:

> But only recently
> We would sit together, touching each other!
> Only recently I would play
> On my bow-harp
> Singing praises to my beloved.
> Only recently he promised
> That he trusted me completely
> I used to admire him speaking in English. (pp. 21-22).

Here we have also a good example of how the poem works. There is the repetition of certain words and ideas ("only recently") which not only occurs in one stanza but in a whole part.

Then there is the use of contrast. The fifth part for example works almost exclusively by contrasting various concepts of beauty. Natural and healthy hair is contrasted to the lifeless, straightened hair of Tina. Old methods of adornment and perfuming are contrasted to the new. The cleanliness of tap-water is contrasted to Tina's dirt and her rotting unwashed head is contrasted to the "beautiful headkerchiefs of many colours" (p. 61) covering it. The stanza quoted above evokes the lyrical beauty of traditional village life. But just before this lyrically beautiful verse, we have been given an intimation of the value judgements which Ocol is now making. He is now in love with a "modern" woman, a "beautiful girl / Who speaks English" (p. 21). These unfounded values are immediately undermined by the words used to describe them, which have not only become colloquial but also cliché. Just after this, Lawino shows us what this modern and beautiful woman is like. In lines which evoke a clear visual image which disgusts, we are told:

Her lips are red-hot
Like glowing charcoal,
She resembles the wild cat
That has dipped its mouth in blood,
Her mouth is like raw yaws
It looks like an open ulcer,
Like the mouth of a fiend! (p. 22).

Tina and all those misusing the modern values are deliberately associated with imagery of sickness, lifelessness and dirt while the most lyrically beautiful stanzas in the poem are those which describe the beauty of the natural village life. This can also be seen in the sound of the last two stanzas quoted above. The first one flows easily with relatively soft sounding words. But the second one has short, sharp sounds which are harsh and jarring. p'Bitek lets the sound merge into the sense of what he wants to say. This is seen even more clearly in Lawino's tongue-twisting attempts to pronounce Biblical names in Acoli -- names which p'Bitek is saying are alien and meaningless.

The swift, direct and, at times, incisive style and sound pattern of some parts of the poem helps -- its purpose of jolting us from complacency into a re-assessment of our cultural situation. p'Bitek uses language which not only involve us by its sheer energy, but which also appeals to our feeling and thought. The visual imagery in the poem is clear. Abstract concepts are usually compared to something concretely apprehensible: "the strong gum of the joke / Will reconnect the snapped string / Of brotherhood" (p. 183). By the use of such imagery p'Bitek evokes a rich wealth of associations. In a spate of unselfconscious praise, Lawino says that her "breasts shook / And beckoned the cattle" (p. 44). Here not only is her beauty and physical attraction evoked,

but also the marriage custom of the Acoli is stated with economy. p'Bitek needs to bring out shades of meaning through association, especially where the language is so simple and familiar. The verbal pattern of the poem is also well thought out. For example, the beauty of village life comes through to the reader through a careful and deliberate choice of words and syntax:

> We crossed the stream
> And climbed the gentle rise
> Straight into the arena.
> We joined the line of friends
> And danced among our age-mates
> And sang songs we understood,
> Relevant and meaningful songs,
> Songs about ourselves. (p. 122).

But even more important is the deep symbolism of love and rootedness; of the natural humane goodness which is at the heart of the poem. It is also a symbolism which evokes a continuity out of which it is difficult to will ourselves. Thus Lawino tells Ocol that he was "hewed . . . out of the rock" by his parents and he is "but a climber plant" (pp. 166-167). When she talks of her mother's house where the

> Three mounds of clay
> Shaped like youthful breasts full of milk
> Stand together like
> Three loving sisters. (p. 76).

We realize that she is not only talking of a fireplace which was convenient to sit an earthen vegetable pot on. She is comparing the apparent rootedness of the fireplace with the transitory impersonality of the flicking on and off of the electric stove, the fear of which she expresses so clearly. The fireplace symbolizes love and warmth in a home. James Ngugi brings out this idea clearly in his play The Hermit in lines which echo Lawino:

> My son, don't be dazzled by the blaze
> Which will burn for a night and tomorrow it is out,
> All ashes and blackness,
> Look at your House:
> And there you will see the fire that glows all night
> and day, between three hearthstones.
> There is food and warmth of life waiting for you.[2]

The pumpkin which Lawino urges Ocol not to uproot is perhaps a more obvious symbol of this cultural rootedness. It was planted and nurtured in the backyard as an insurance against a shortage of food, and was never uprooted. Like the fire in the hearth which was never allowed to go out, it stood for life, warmth, vitality. In _Song of Lawino_ it signifies the rooted and insured nature of the people's ways, which are ever growing into fullness and fruition and satisfying the people.

Ocol's rootlessness is central in the poem. His values and those of all he represents become corrupted and distorted because they lack a firm social and moral base. Their roots do not "reach deep into the soil". (p. 29). Ocol is in fact the uprooted pumpkin. It is this rootlessness which is examined in the twelfth part. Much earlier in the poem, we have been told that when Ocol is reading a new book or the newspaper, he cannot stand the noise of children. He repudiates life. He is "Like a corpse" and "He is so silent! / His mouth begins / To decay"! (p. 93).

The twelfth part brings out this lifelessness clearly. Ocol is living in a "forest of books" with "ghosts" (pp. 202, 204). His senses and voice have been stifled and numbed. He can no longer appreciate life fully. In more sophisticated terms, Lawino is asking Ocol not to live in an ivory tower. As she says, his head has been captured by books.

He has lost contact with reality, and what is worse, he has become emasculated; so that he cannot apply his education practically.

This part is important for the understanding of the whole poem. For basically what Lawino has been telling Ocol is to have integrity, to be honest with himself: "You are a man / You are you"! (p. 205). The underlying question is how to reconcile the African in Ocol to the foreign. Lawino sees the false attempts at aping and rejecting wholly his past as suicidal. His past is still lurking within him and trying to stifle it is killing an essential part in him. p'Bitek is therefore making a point that is of great importance to Africans generally, and more particularly necessary to East Africans. We cannot continue being in-between men without firm roots anywhere. p'Bitek is not asking us to go back to the passing village life, but rather to stop for a moment's self-examination before we go anywhere; before we wholly lose our manhood. We need to replant the pumpkin in a new homestead. The questions which Lawino raises are not simple, and the last two parts show deep sympathy and understanding. Her final point is that it is from an appreciation and involvement with the life around us that we shall get a new vigour and creativity.

Throughout the song, we realize that though Lawino stands staunchly for the traditional, she does so not because she is opposed to the new, but because she cannot understand it. The poem, though it has echoes of the Négritude movement does not belong there. Not only does it recognize the value of the modern and foreign, but it also implies that change might be inevitable and that the new might have its place, alongside the old. Lawino in her simplicity is left speechless

by the many "wonders of the white men". (p. 68). She has a clock in her house which to her "Is a great source of pride / It is beautiful to see / And when visitors come / They are highly impressed"! (p. 87). She agrees to let Ocol eat white men's food if he enjoys it. But she would like the freedom to eat what she likes because she does not enjoy white men's food and how they eat. She asks defiantly: "How could I know? / And why should I know it"? (p. 78).

All she is asking then is that Ocol stop pouring blame and contempt on her because of her following the customs of her people which her mother taught her:

> I do not understand
> The ways of foreigners
> But I do not despise their customs.
> Why should you despise yours?
> Listen, my husband,
> You are the son of a chief.
> The pumpkin in the old homestead
> Must not be uprooted! (pp. 29-30).

Eventually it is Ocol who is under attack. He has great need to justify himself as Lawino does. She tells very clearly and with many repetitions and much detail the reasons for the traditional way of life. She describes, brings to life and justifies the dances, the adornments, the religion and the whole creativity of the traditional way of life. Nothing is passed over hurriedly. She has a curiosity and an eye which registers everything. Even the unspoken is evoked by association, as in the example she gives of the ten girls going to split firewood, one of whom is struck by a black mamba:

Then she drops
Dead!
She lies there
As if feigning death;
Her ripe breasts lift up their hands
And wail aloud,
Saying,
    No mouths will such us!
    Our tips will not be tickled
    Our milk will rot in the earth! (p. 163).

She would like someone to give her reasons for the new ways. She can explain the old but no one is willing to explain the new to her. The most refreshing thing about her is her faith in the vanishing village life, and the way she sees it as whole and healthy. This establishes a discord between what Ocol thinks he is, and what Lawino shows him to be. As Lawino tells us:

Ocol says he is a modern man,
A progressive and civilized man,
He says he has read extensively and widely
And he can no longer live with a thing like me
Who cannot distinguish between good and bad. (p. 17).

But on further reading, we realize that Lawino is throwing back at Ocol his own epithets with biting sarcasm, just as she calls Tina "beautiful" and yet goes on to show us her pitiful ugliness. At the end of the poem, Lawino lets us see what she really thinks of Ocol. He is an emasculated stump of a man who behaves "like / A dog of the white man"! (p. 204) and who deserves Lawino's pity instead of contempt, but this pity is also tinged with knowing patronization:

Ocol troubles my head,
He talks too much. . . .
But most of his words are senseless,
They are like the songs
Of children's plays.
And he treats his clansmen
As if they are enemies.
Ocol behaves
As if he is a witch! (pp. 171-172).

Song of Lawino does not therefore wholly justify the subtitle of "A Lament". Lawino is spirited, she is confident, almost arrogant in her rejection of foreign culture. Her stance is a brave one, and she is far from being cowed by Ocol's insults and by the padre who shakes his beard at her when she asks questions. She says: "I will not be frightened / By those who say / Asking questions is mortal sin" and when these questions are not answered her "eyes redden / With frustration / And I tremble / With anger". (p. 143). She is not a passive lamenting woman. In fact p'Bitek claims that the publishers put the subtitle in without his permission.

A more justified claim perhaps is the one they make on their commendation of *Song of Lawino* that it is "a biting though profoundly compassionate satire on modern Africa". Satire as a poetic genre is a vague term. It is not the 'kind' that matters ultimately for there is no particular style for satire. It is the *temper* therein that matters. The purpose, in a way, is to correct through laughter, ridicule, contemptuous dismissal, which bears out Johnson's definition of satire as "poems in which wickedness and folly are censured". Lawino's laughter at and ridicule of the values of Ocol and Tina serves this end of correcting.

But even though it is concerned with the debasement of human values as most satires are, *Song of Lawino* is not a satire of the same variety as Defoe's *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters*, Swift's *A Modest Proposal* and *Gulliver's Travels* and Pope's *The Dunciad*. p'Bitek is writing of an inevitably changing society from within this society. Not many people in it are like Lawino. He cannot therefore be

satirizing a whole society including himself. Besides, the unspoken social norms which always lie behind a work of satire and which help to give the reader some basis and perspective do not exist. We understand Ocol's predicament though we might not condone it. And even in her most biting comments, Lawino retains her humanity and compassion. She is not providing answers, she is posing questions.

Though it is hard to determine the satirist's values, we have to look closely at his language which reflects not only his characters' social position, but also their virtues, vices, values; which are in turn an agreed or understood social norm. Thus the poet in choosing his persona or mask has to do it in such a way that we get a feeling that the voice is rational, average, not eccentric (though perhaps simple, even naive). Such characters simplify issues and makes them seem ridiculous through simple reasoning. They pose as innocent, as if they did not know, thus exposing the real.

Lawino could have well fitted this role if p'Bitek's sole purpose was to write a satire. But given the purpose of the peom her choice as the poet's persona seems dubious. Her extreme advocacy of the traditional puts her on the opposite side of Ocol's extreme aping. Readers who feel the inevitability of change, and who might themselves be changed, resent her. She is too knowledgeable and yet too simple to be their judge. The song reflects Lawino's simple vision which leaves out a sensible discussion of the basic cultural questions she raises. The complex nature of Ocol's character, whose predicament is much more complex than Lawino can appreciate, is left out. In fact _Song of Lawino_ is concerned more with the situation than with the characters. It is because of this

simplicity that p'Bitek cannot use Lawino wholly. At times, as in parts eight and eleven, he can barely hide behind her. It is for this reason that the poem runs a high risk of being considered an out-dated Négritudist work. But on the other hand, it is precisely this questioning which the poem either raises or inspires which gives the work meaningful value. If we can be neither Lawino nor Ocol, then who are we?

FOOTNOTES (CHAPTER FOUR)

[1]Ocol's name is significant. In his glib way, Lo Liyong gives its meaning as: "-- Son of Ocol or Col: Son of Black, Blackman, African". Taban Lo Liyong, The Last Word (Nairobi 1969), p. 142.

CHAPTER FIVE

JAMES NGUGI

Song of Lawino incisively dissects modern East African life and asks us to make something of the pieces. Taken as a whole, Ngugi's three novels also attempt to explore this life in depth. Ngugi begins with an examination of the old village life such as Lawino talks about, before the European influence asserted itself. Then Ngugi traces the fragmentation arising from conflicts between Christians and traditionalists, the bitterness and frustrations of the struggle for independence and the suffering during the Mau Mau uprising, down to the post-independence days and the possibility of a new wholeness. Ngugi is therefore complementing and adding to what *Song of Lawino* tells us. He has a placid and graceful style, which like p'Bitek's, makes use of African idioms and speech rhythms, but which unlike p'Bitek's, does not fall into the tough ruggedness we find at times in some parts of *Song of Lawino*.

The theme of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya which Ngugi deals with is one which has caught hold of the imagination of people far outside Kenya and has been the subject of many sociological and political works, including two novels by Robert Ruark. Its ramifications within Kenya have been deep and lasting. It changed the people's way of life absolutely. It is also an important event in terms of the African novel dealing with the theme of colonialism, in that it provides a different and complex set of events in what is coming to be a simple pattern of colonial experience in the African novel. In fact the Mau Mau uprising is a historical event

which cries for creative exploitation --- though some East Africans already claim they are tired of reading about it. People outside East Africa have been anxiously waiting to read some creative works based on it. Nadine Gordimer is a typical example, but she goes further and shows why the Mau Mau war is an important, in fact integral, part of our whole being:

> But what of a country such as Kenya, whose battle was a protracted, bitter, and ugly one? Its one novelist of any real ability, James Ngugi, does better with the subtleties of the psychological consequences of Mau-Mau in the post-independence period than with the theme of people living and acting within the Mau-Mau period itself. In my reading I have not come across more than one English language African novel of the political struggle of which one could say that the treatment was equal to the potential of the theme. And yet, without such imaginative works about political struggle, there is a gap in African literature. A people examines itself, calls itself to account, gains the liberation of self-knowledge through its imaginative literature; that is a purpose which goes beyond explaining oneself to others, beyond the demands and assertions of négritude. African writers must deal with this theme of political struggle for independence because it is part of the modern African ethos.[1]

Ngugi's first two novels, The River Between and Weep Not, Child are disappointing, as Nadine Gordimer implies, if read as novels about the Mau Mau. In fact, even though to an East African the historic events which Ngugi talks about fall into place, Ngugi's intention seems to be vague to outside readers. Two of Ngugi's reviewers in Black Orpheus completely missed the political-historical significance of both novels. The reviewer of The River Between found it "a symbolic telling of the coming of Christianity and Europeans to an indigenous pagan people and of the conflicts and sufferings that resulted". This reviewer goes on to conclude patronizingly that: "On the whole this is a pleasant book which old ladies and sentimentalists will enjoy but which does not

match the theme it is concerned with".[2] The other reviewer found Weep Not, Child, "a young man's book. Its insight into character and human motivation is not very convincing". He concludes that Weep Not, Child is worth reading for its picture of African family life in Kenya".[3]

These reviewers are harsh but Ngugi's novels do show a weakness which comes mainly from a lack of objectivity. They are both juvenile works. Ngugi very easily falls into the danger of an easy and intimate identification with his protagonists, Waiyaki and Njoroge, who are both young like Ngugi and whose growth into awareness we witness in these novels. In this way, both novels tend to be autobiographical, and this is much more true of Weep Not, Child, whose major weakness springs from a need to make it a book about the Mau Mau, while at the same time telling of immediate and personal experiences. It is the growth of Njoroge which captures Ngugi's imagination, his love of Mwihaki, his growth of disillusionment and despair. The background against which we are supposed to see Njoroge remains hazy and yet Ngugi asks us to believe that hatred and death are surrounding and threatening Njoroge's and Mwihaki's relationship.

Except for the consistency in tracing the relationship between Njoroge and Mwihaki, most of the other incidents are short and sketchy and too disjointed to allow any intimate development of character. Boro, Njoroge's half-brother, could have been developed into an exciting character. But Ngugi leaves us with an impression of a brooding man with a thirst for killing:

> Unless you kill, you'll be killed. So you go on killing and destroying. It's a law of nature. The white man too fights and kills with gas, bombs, and everything. (p. 116).

One is not sure whether to take Boro as only one of the freedom fighters fighting for the land and for freedom (which is more convincing) or as a psychotic case, which Ngugi hints at but does not exploit fully.

Ngugi shows an inability to depict the older characters -- Howlands, Jacobo and Ngotho, who influence the action of his novel. It is by looking forward to their rough counterparts in A Grain of Wheat that we realize just how inadequately these important characters are treated in Weep Not, Child. Howlands, whose equivalent in A Grain of Wheat is John Thompson, remains a stock figure of the European settler in Africa. He has no redeeming qualities as a man and his later presentation as a diabolical figure who passionately seeks the elimination of Ngotho and his family is an obvious artistic flaw. Jacobo, like Karanja in A Grain of Wheat, brutalizes his own people on behalf of the white man, so much so that his killing by Boro is fully justified, or so Ngugi would have us believe. Yet the few times we see him, he is either cringing in front of Howlands or lecturing Njoroge paternally on the values of education. The reader is not allowed to justify this death in his own mind. Neither is he allowed the benefit of its dramatic, if grisly, interest. Ngugi merely reports it. And one suspects that Ngugi is not equal to the task of showing convincingly such an incident judging from the way he presents the shooting of Howlands by Boro. This potentially highly tense and dramatic situation is nevertheless presented with a casual emotionlessness and flatness as striking to the reader as the act of Howlands looking at his watch, which is the last thing he does, other than trying "to cling to life with all his might" before Boro's "gun went off". (p. 145).

Such an incident as that when Stephen, Howland's son, talks to Njoroge at a football match seems to have been contrived to show that all men, whether white or black, are the same: "They felt close together, united by a common experience of insecurity and fear no one could escape". (p. 125). This scene comes very near to artistic banality. Ngugi is trying to sum up the whole broad situation which could have been done more easily if Ngugi had developed and dramatized Howland's character. Finally Ngugi fumbles in his conclusion. Njoroge's decision at the end of the novel to hang himself comes as a surprizing one indeed even in the circumstances of the novel. His mother's timely appearance to save him merely adds to the touch of melodrama.

Ngugi's central weakness, then, is a lack of an objective but intimate awareness of the moral implications of his characters' actions. This leads to his inability to bring these actions fully to life which would also create the necessary drama and emphasize the moral conflicts in his work. As it stands now, Weep Not, Child, far from echoing the violence which forms the background of half of the story, remains the relatively placid story of the growth of Njoroge.

It is the total emotion in the novel which carries weight not the individual incidents. It leaves nothing standing vividly out. This is true too of The River Between. In fact most of the criticism of Weep Not, Child could also apply to The River Between. But the haziness here is even more pronounced for this is much more truly a historical novel. It is about contemporary society (or nearly so) but it goes back as far as that society's mythical past: "Demi na Mathathi were giants of the tribe. They had lived a long way back, at the beginning of time". (p. 12). And

it explores features of that society by showing this origin and the society's development.

Obviously then, Ngugi needs to show his characters against a vividly realized social background. A historical novel's plot turns on an individual's conflict with the social and political organization of that individual's society. This is true of Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart and of Ezeulu in Arrow of God.

Ngugi rightly gives us this too. Waiyaki, his protagonist, acts out his destiny under the pressure of his society. The Christian Makuyu ridge led by the fanatic Joshua, and the traditionalist ridge, Kameno, led by Kabonyi, glare at each other in bitter rivalry. Between them flows the symbolic river Honia --- the name means cure. And like this river, Waiyaki tries to bring reconciliation to the two ridges whose rivalry is brought to a head over the issue of the circumcision of women. Besides this, there is the land issue mentioned almost in passing more explicitly dealt with in Weep Not, Child. The River Between therefore tries to bring into dramatic and real human terms all the political and social upheavals that were taking place in the central province of Kenya before 1952. This wide scope needs some feeling for social detail. Why is circumcision so repugnant to the Christians and so necessary to the traditionalists? What is the significance of the oath mentioned suddenly near the end of the novel? And what are the undercurrents leading to the need for political freedom?

The characters' actions and nature remain vague, simply because the reader has not the backcloth of the social and political organization

against which to see the characters. Kabonyi's sudden conversion from Christianity to a militant traditionalist and his subsequent hatred of Waiyaki, are not explained. Joshua is no more than a type which was prevalent just before and during the emergency.

As in Weep Not, Child, Ngugi's real powers come out when he is dealing with the young people. Muthoni's decision to be circumcised against her father's will is told impressively; so is her relationship with her sister and of course Waiyaki's love for Nyambura stands above anything else. On this obviously familiar ground, Ngugi is sure and sensitive towards character reaction. But the relationships of these emotional points in the novel are not linked to the whole. And outside them there is little character interaction. Hence the characters are seen in relationships which are only sketchily defined except in terms of emotion, and their ends, within the context of their social and political situation, remain vague.

The eruption of violence at the end of the novel is not wholly justified in the reader's eyes. If we are supposed to read these as the beginnings of the Mau Mau war (and Kabonyi's Kiama has all the trappings of a latter-day Mau Mau council), then The River Between does something less than scratch the surface of the issues involved. Even Kabonyi's Kiama is not fully explained. What are its aims and beliefs and course of action? Who are its members? Lack of this all-round and vivid picture of the historical, social and political situation of Ngugi's society weakens the epic qualities at which he is aiming.

Looking ahead for a moment to a Grain of Wheat, a work of far

superior quality than Ngugi's first two novels, it is easy to see the kind of character which Ngugi is aiming for and which he does not realize till _A Grain of Wheat_. Generally, in the best of his settings, his characters hover between the old and the new. They are all simple country folk, seen against a vast and (to them) barely comprehensible panorama. The past, the present, and the implied future are all there. No one is seen in isolation, for the spirit of the ancestors, of his relatives and society are all there. His people have that quiet endurance which makes them, simple as they are, heroic nevertheless. They are plucked still warm and breathing from the dusty village lanes.

Ngugi's characters are "types" in a particular way, better explained by Georg Lukacs. The novel for Lukacs, whatever its form and content, should have one primary aim: to present the total context of life in the narrative form. It should present "the kind of individual destiny that can _directly_ and at the same time typically show the problems of an age".[4] It should therefore show a richness and a variety of popular life, and a rich response to this life, taking in the entire range of society from top to bottom. A truly epic writer tries to "portray the struggles and antagonisms of history by means of characters who, in their psychology and destiny, always represent social trends and historical forces".[5] They are conceived as social figures, not isolated individuals, and their destiny is invariably connected with the popular life of the people. In this way, they are "types" in the same way as one would see Chaucer's characters as "types", for their main quality is that they are individuals embodying a certain aspect of social life. For

> The Central category and criterion of realist literature is the type, a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in characters and situations.[6]

One of the reviewers mentioned above said that Ngugi's characters in The River Between are "almost stereotypes". They are types. Each one embodies a social-historical aspect. Chege embodies the wisdom of his society --- its history and continuity --- he is the descendant of the great seer, Mugo wa Kibiru. Joshua and Kabonyi are embodiments and reincarnations of the opposed social-historical-political forces which came to clash together in Kenya in the late forties. We can therefore see how Ngugi is aiming to be the kind of writer that Lukacs talks about. He fails however in bringing out the particulars in each character so that their individuality is not expressed side by side with their generality. But he has great potential, as he shows in A Grain of Wheat.

The characters in the first two novels are just not large enough to carry the huge social themes which Ngugi wants to deal with. In these two works, Ngugi's talent is not equal to his intentions; or the experience he would like to portray in both novels. He would like to write a history and tell a story at the same time, as in War and Peace. He wants his work to be much more forceful, more effective than it is now. But his talent stands between his will and achievement. Both works fail to convey a comprehensive feeling of social history, and on the level of individual destiny, The River Between succeeds rather less than Weep Not, Child. Another barely visible risk which Ngugi runs in these two works is that of falling into the pattern of the simple moral tales of the wicked conqueror and his wretched victim. His language is simple, terse and

straightforward. It is capable of evoking deep emotions if only there were enough drama to carry over these emotions to the reader.

John Reed draws a fair and valid comparison between Ngugi's novels and Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God:

> And the reason why [this comparison] is unfavourable to Ngugi is that the impressionistic and personal approach used in Weep Not, Child is insufficient in a novel attempting to explore the roots of a particular problem. Such a novel must show the characters acting in a social context and under social pressures and therefore must demonstrate to us convincingly that nature of their society. Achebe's novels do this. The tribal societies he shows us are completely articulated and comprehensible and his characters act out their destinies under social pressures that are made clear to us.[7]

FOOTNOTES (CHAPTER FIVE)

[1]Nadine Gordimer. "The Interpreters: Some themes and directions in African Literature", Kenyon Review, 32 No. 128, 1970, pp. 20-21.

[2]Margaret Amosu, Review of The River Between, Black Orpheus No. 20 (August 1966), pp. 62-63.

[3]D. E. S. Maxwell, Review of Weep Not, Child, Black Orpheus No. 16 (October 1964), p. 59.

[4]Georg Lukacs, The Historical Novel, (Harmondsworth 1969), p. 342.

[5]Ibid., p. 33.

[6]Georg Lukacs, Studies in European Realism, (New York 1964), p. 6.

[7]John Reed, "James Ngugi and the African Novel", The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, No. 1 (September 1965), p. 119.

CHAPTER SIX

A GRAIN OF WHEAT

This novel covers the same scope in time as The River Between and Weep Not, Child combined. But Ngugi also moves closer to the present. The immediate present of the novel is the four days before independence, but Ngugi skilfully lets the story range backwards and forwards with an occasional glance into the future. The style of telling the story is much more mature, the form is more thought out, than in the first two novels. Ngugi has now resolved his difficulties, especially those of drawing out his characters convincingly against a well realized social setting, and of showing the necessary character interaction in this setting; how they affect each other and are in turn affected. Above all he gives a feeling of confidence in the handling of matter and form.

A Grain of Wheat is a moral novel with a political setting. The story shows us how the characters went through the emergency and examines their moral fibre during and after the emergency. But what happens to them cannot be wholly ascribed to the war, which remains purely an outside force and influence. The emergency is only the catastrophe which tests the initially happy world and proves it human. Under its extreme stress, the individual's inner self, his hidden secrets, his guilt, is revealed. His weaknesses, which the emergency does not create, are revealed and the tenacity of his moral fibre brought to question.

Ngugi is therefore searching and questioning the human situation

in East Africa. But it is this which gives the novel universal significance, for by treating a very particular set of circumstances, Ngugi ultimately reveals universal traits in man. His role is to draw this situation naturally and intimately and to present the individuals within it sympathetically and compassionately as men. He makes us aware that the resulting betrayal of society by the individual is only natural to men. Indeed his strength in this novel is to show that human weaknesses can be shown sympathetically from all sides, both good and bad. The strength of the novel therefore lies in its probing inside the characters and presenting a rounded picture of these characters within a well articulated society.

The social is focussed and given meaning through the individual. Ngugi's ranging back to the past does not only trace individual history but through this, he gives meaning to the political drama of the novel. The social does not therefore remain a shadowy picture as in the first two novels but one in which personal and individual anguish are involved.

Kihika, the ridge's hero, is a strong and positive uniting force for the people. He is the only one free from guilt in the novel, though he is not free from wanting to draw attention to himself. He suffers from an "immense arrogance". (p. 100). Ngugi does recognize the traits of a young revolutionary in him. And yet isn't this why the others look up to him in admiration, envy or jealousy? He is the one who articulates the main test for the others. Though he draws inspiration from Moses and Mahatma Gandhi, he calls for a social apocalypse, where all will bear equal responsibility and none will be afraid before the sword.

This is where the test for the individual lies:

> All oppressed people have a cross to bear. The Jews refused to carry it and were scattered like dust all over the earth. Had Christ's death a meaning for the children of Israel? In Kenya we want a death which will change things, that is to say we want a true sacrifice. But first we have to be ready to carry the cross. I die for you, you die for me, we become a sacrifice for one another. So I can say that you, Karanja, are Christ. I am Christ. Everybody who takes the Oath of Unity to change things in Kenya is a Christ. (p. 110).

But after the emergency, where the novel begins, the characters are caught in a state of nausea and disgust. Kihika's messianic hopes have failed, and the characters gather around Mugo, the emotional center of the novel, with their dislocations and anxieties which are disconcertingly summed up by Githua: "The Emergency destroyed us". (p. 6).

It is from this point that we go to the past to retrace our way to the present. Ngugi takes us back to the days of simple communal feeling and idyllic sweetness where young men rushed to the trains "to meet one another, to talk, to gossip, to laugh". (p. 83), and later to dance and fight for the honour of their different ridges in the forest. It is a world whose fullness and creativity is underlined by Gikonyo's guitar playing and carpentry, his love for his mother and his lyrical love of Mumbi. It arouses nostalgia when seen against the corrupted world of the present. Ngugi then lets us move through the emergency, and this is accompanied by some chilling episodes, like the death of Gitogo, which helps to underline the picture of death and atrocity which has shaped the men into what they are.

A novel is, of course; not just a story. It is also a work of art; a technical achievement. Ngugi confidently realizes that an artist's

role is to give form and some meaning to the apparent formlessness and flux of human experience. And this inevitably involves the exploration and connection of the different events involving man. Thus in trying for a wholeness of vision ranging from the past to the present, the form of Ngugi's novel becomes inseparable from what he has to say. We are interested in the links he creates across time. The two races in the novel, one at the beginning, and the other at the end, are both parallel and contrasting. The last one calls to mind the first one which ended with exhilarating pleasure leading to Gikonyo's and Mumbi's idyllic love. The second one ends with pain which is an indication of how much the situation has changed. And yet from this last race and the resulting pain comes reconciliation. In the second race, Karanja thinks he is going to make amends for the first race, and as in the first, he fails. Mugo's wandering into the now derelict trench calls to mind the moment of his brave moral commitment when his fight on behalf of the pregnant Wambuku led to his arrest. Then there are the recurring incidents when Mugo stops outside the old woman's house, compassionate and yet unwilling to establish connection with her, a contradiction which is central to his character. The first time he sees this woman, she evokes a whole lot of past incidents: the shooting of her son, Gitogo; Mugo's agitation on seeing her on his return from detention; his taking food to her and her hut reminding him of his boyhood with his aunt. And we come to the present again with Mugo feeling "another desire to enter the hut and talk to her. There was a bond between her and him, perhaps because she, like him, lived alone". (p. 8). But he falters and goes away. This bond of loneliness and reluctant compassion runs through Mugo's life. He is

the only one who visits the old woman on Uhuru day and she dies mistaking him for her dead son. This is of symbolic significance. It unites Mugo to the fates and fortunes, the emergency brought to the people.

Ngugi also lets us look at some incidents from different points of view. By letting both Mumbi and Gikonyo confide in Mugo, both can re-live and reassess their past experiences. We are allowed to see Mumbi's betrayal of her love for Gikonyo through her eyes and through Gikonyo's eyes too. Gikonyo is also haunted by the guilt of his betrayal of the oath. They both reveal each other's weaknesses and guilts so that we see these through different and contrasting eyes. We hear details of a rape from both Dr. Lynd, the victim, and Lt. Koinandu, the raper. Thompson's glib memorandum of having spat on an informer's face contrasts to Mugo's traumatic picture of it. Then there is the crucial meeting between Kihika and Mugo and the contrast between what it was thought to be like and how it really was. There is also the irony of the villagers dancing around Mugo's hut, singing his heroism, which contrasts to Mugo's abject fear and remorse. At the end of the novel, the imminent realization of Gikonyo's dream of carving a stool for Mumbi, a desire born long before while he was in detention, ties the whole past of the novel to a hopeful future.

This sequence of events not only reveals the necessary complexity of the characters' nature but also leads to a thorough understanding of them. Ngugi's technique is to follow a character through different incidents and backgrounds much as a cine-camera does. In going back to the past, he eases out his characters and tells the story himself but from his characters' viewpoints. This helps to make the past more immediate.

He lays emphasis on incidents which bring out the nature of his characters' destinies. He reveals these in the right order, with bits of the story floating in, as Soyinka does in The Interpreters, Conrad in Nostromo. The main focus is always kept in the foreground. This way too, the story gains an emotional structure which enhances the drama of the novel as we watch the growth of the relevant emotions and crises. Each past action we witness adds to to our knowledge and this does not become whole till near the end of the novel. We are only allowed to move along with the characters, to connect the action so that it gradually builds up to the climax of Thursday, December twelfth, 1963, the day of Uhuru. David Cook has said:

> The interlocking of different phases of time is essential to all that A Grain of Wheat has to say to us. To see someone as hero or villain is always an oversimplification: it is to see him at one time in one set of circumstances only; but a man is more than one thing. In counterpointing various aspects of his characters' lives in A Grain of Wheat, Ngugi allows us to moderate callow judgements of the individual with a more human compassion; not least because in a true summary, we ourselves are in a desperate need of this same compassion.[1]

This design of the novel that Ngugi is trying to shape, therefore helps in the thematic intentions. Central in the novel is the examination of betrayal and the consequent fragmentation of society. A new earth and a new heaven needs to be moulded out of the ashes of the old one. And yet when we are first introduced to the characters we notice an unwillingness in them to acknowledge the existence of a discernible sequence of events, of cause and effect. This would eventually lead to the acceptance of the responsibility for their own past actions, a responsibility which the characters do not want to assume. Even Warui, the old man, whose clear

memory is of the brave but futile communal struggle during the days of Harry Thuku, resents the old woman's claim of the resurrection of her son: "Those buried in the earth should remain in the earth. Things of yesterday should remain with yesterday". (p. 198). Ngugi does not want his characters to do this. The whole mode of telling the story, underlined especially by Gikonyo, Mumbi and Mugo, demands that the people reassess themselves and resolve the muddles of their lives as the only possibility of rebirth. This would entail taking into account the responsibility of the consequences of their own actions. Karanja, the man who betrays his own people through an impulsive belief in the moment and in the invincibility of the white man's rule, does not, at the end of the novel, want to face up to his past actions of brutalizing his own people. His life is one of waste and failure:

> Thompson has gone, I have lost Mumbi. His mind hopped from image to image, following no coherent order. Incidents in his life would pop up and then disappear. (p. 261).

Mugo, the central character, is a betrayer. He is weighed down by a wracking sense of guilt. The first time we see him, he is nervous. The image of his worn out blanket, which pricks his body, is one of a flat, bald existence as well as poverty. His life is one long dull monotony, nothing fits in, nothing is meaningful:

> He liked porridge in the morning. But whenever he took it, he remembered the half-cooked porridge he ate in detention. How time drags, everything repeats itself, Mugo thought; the day ahead would be just like yesterday and the day before. (p. 4).

Much later when he is unnerved by the stories of both Gikonyo and Mumbi, he shudders and shies away from accepting that events are linked, could

be linked:

> Previously he liked to see events in his life as isolated. Things had been fated to happen at different moments. One had no choice in anything as surely as one had no choice on one's birth. He did not, then, tire his mind by trying to connect what went before with what followed after. Numbed, he ran without thinking of the road, its origin or its end. (p. 195).

The novel to a large extent hangs on the subjective consciousness and psychological history of Mugo. It focusses on his consciousness; his inner stress. But we realize that this is only the central image of a broader political and social framework. The essential art of the novel is to present Mugo's disturbed experience as a mystery at first. This, together with the long unanswered mystery of Kihika's betrayal, gives the novel a necessary detective story element. It creates suspense which, as E. M. Forster noted in Aspects of the Novel,[2] is a very important element in a novel, and it is lacking in the first two novels. Slowly we are allowed to look back at Mugo's past history to see what has made him into what he is. His life as a discarded, orphaned child, hiding his anger and resentment within him, coalesces into one of interior disgust, hatred and fear, symbolized especially by his aunt's vomit, her filth and malice. His fragmented, meaningless life is, like that of T. S. Eliot's Prufrock and Phlebas, one of languishing in limbo. He is at the bottom of a pool. Mugo, we are told, "was scurrying with hands and feet at the bottom of the silent pool. It was terrible for him, this struggle: he did not want to drown". (p. 195). He does not want to drown into consciousness and an awareness of his humanity. He does not want rebirth.

But Mugo's suppressed humanity is indicated occasionally. His

feelings about the old woman, his fighting for Wambuku at the trench, are good indications of it. He is irrevocably drawn and bound to the people around him. At one point, we are allowed to see the ironic and sad vision of himself as a saviour, atoning for his guilt by speaking to, and leading, the people:

> It was he, Mugo, spared to save people like Githua, the old woman, and any who had suffered. Why not take the task? Yes. He would speak at the Uhuru celebrations. He would lead the people and bury his past in their gratitude. Nobody need ever know about Kihika. (p. 146).

Thoughts like these reveal the man buried within Mugo.

It is this which leads to the final climax of the novel. Mugo's most heroic moment comes when he is impelled by his own sense of guilt, and upon learning that Karanja is going to be accused for the crime he committed, to stand in front of the crowd which worships him and declare to it his treachery.[3] From the first page, we have seen the pressing need for him to do this, and as in Gikonyo, the movement in the novel is from this painfully tense situation, to relief if not redemption. As soon as he has absolved himself by speaking out, he "felt light. A load of many years was lifted from his shoulders. He was free, sure, confident". (p. 267). Though this is only a momentary feeling, it is long enough for all the scattered images of his life to fall into place and for him to evolve as a new personality. What gives him force and stature at the end is his calm acceptance of the consequences of his actions. All our faltering sympathy for him comes out as admiration.

The three important characters -- Mugo, Mumbi, and Gikonyo -- play upon each other and the emergency explodes their "separate delusions" which include Mugo's illusion of aloneness in a world where this is

impossible. For Gikonyo, the emergency brings a grief that his moment of enrichment, of love and fulness which felt "like being born again" (p. 114) has been shattered. Even after the emergency he "talked of a world where love and joy were possible". (p. 80). He casts his mind back wistfully to the past because he does not want to face the present and his haunting guilt at having confessed the oath. This failure to grapple with the present is reflected in his lack of understanding of Mumbi's predicament which led her to betray herself and their marriage. Understanding would lead to sympathy. Sympathy demands forgiveness and Gikonyo cannot forgive Mumbi before he has learnt to forgive himself. He therefore lives with his conscience only by magnifying Mumbi's guilt. She is not pure, but he condemns her as being absolutely impure.

Mumbi is the most tenderly handled character in the novel. Her beauty and tenacity win us, just as they affect Gikonyo, Karanja and Mugo. During the emergency, she lives in the fear of inadvertently giving away her hopes of being noble. The emergency tests her capacity for fidelity --- and she almost wins. That is why her surrender comes as a rude shock to us. The betrayal of her principles comes as the climax of an agonized life and it happens incomprehensibly. But much more than in the other characters, Ngugi had the challenge of showing us that Mumbi did really betray. He should have made her betrayal shockingly credible. But he only passes over it casually --- perhaps because he lets Mumbi tell about it herself --- and the effect on the reader is that of shocked incredibility.

The emotional struggle is the basis on which the novel's drama eventually comes to lie. The emotional crux occurs when Mumbi stirs in

Mugo the need to redeem himself. As he comes to feel her effect on him, the drama in the novel becomes the intensity of his alarm and the need to keep his heart sealed in the face of Mumbi's attempts to open it:

> She looked at him in the eyes, now reacting out to him, desiring to open his heart, for a minute, at least, unlock the secrets of his power over men and fate. And she held him balanced at her fingertips, and suddenly knew her power over him. (pp. 208-209).

Her story especially makes him painfully aware of his own predicament and the burden of his guilt, which is inseparable from the suffering of others:

> Something heaved forth; he trembled; he was at the bottom of the pool, but up there, above the pool, ran the earth; life, struggle, even amidst pain and blood and poverty, seemed beautiful; only for a moment; how dared he believe in such a vision, an illusion? (p. 171).

Ultimately, she shakes him out of limbo. Her voice becomes "a knife which had butchered and laid naked his heart to himself". (p. 199). He cannot go back to the bottom of the pool after this. Mumbi has opened up his awareness. She also becomes, for him, a symbol of hope, inspiration and life:

> He lay on the bed, aware that he had just lost something. Many times, the scorn in Mumbi's face flashed through the dark, and a shuddering he could not control thrilled into him. Why was it important to him now, tonight, what Mumbi thought of him? She had been so near. He could see her face and feel her warm breath. She had sat there, and talked to him and given him a glimpse of a new earth. She had trusted him, and confided in him. This simple trust had forced him to tell her the truth. She had recoiled from him. He had lost her trust, for ever. To her now, so he reasoned, saw and felt, he was vile and dirty. (p. 266).

The immediate longing to win back her respect and trust gives him courage to confess to the huge crowd of his betrayal of Kihika: "How else could he ever look Mumbi in the face"? (p. 267). It is this final act

which draws approbation from Gikonyo and inspires him to try mending his life with Mumbi. Character interaction therefore plays an important and necessary part, which was lacking in the first two novels. Gikonyo and Mumbi especially help to bring out and underline the untold emotions and distress in Mugo and his human stature at the end.

On a more public level, A Grain of Wheat shows how the ramifications of individuals' weaknesses and guilts rend the fabric of society. Ngugi deals with a host of guilty characters. General R. had tried beating his father, Lt. Koinandu had raped Dr. Lynd; Gikonyo, Mumbi and Mugo are betrayers. Thompson also betrays humanity at Rira. Mrs. Thompson betrays her husband. The list could be lengthened to include all the unnamed -- in fact the whole of society. In presenting this guilty humanity, Ngugi does not let us stand aside condemning them in holy anger but rather arouses our compassion and involvement with their fate.

When General R. learns that Githua has, for all those years, been lying about his leg having been shot by security forces while in fact it was broken in a lorry accident, he has no blame for him:

> It makes his life more interesting to himself. He invents a meaning for his life, you see. Don't we all do that? And to die fighting for freedom sounds more heroic than to die by accident. (p. 172).

"Don't we all do that"? -- this is the underlying question behind each of the characters' actions. Ultimately, except for Kihika, we see characteristics of ourselves in the others. We come to share in their weaknesses and guilt. We come to realize too that in spite of the individual guilt, the characters are not uniquely or unbelievably evil. Even Karanja, though he does not win our respect wins our pity.

It is this which makes Mugo important as a central character.

We finally come to feel that we cannot, that we should not, judge him for he is one of us. This too is how the other characters feel about him. Karanja admits: "he seems to be a courageous man", and Mumbi agrees "Yees"! (p. 258). Wambui, who is very steadfast to the cause, had doubts as to the validity of Mugo's death: "perhaps we should not have tried him, she muttered". (pp. 275-276).

Mugo's last act of courage has important social implications. He is an anti-hero. His defiant act of bravery at the trench takes him by surprize, and his resistance to the tortures in detention stems from a deep feelinglessness. In fact the irony that runs through the structure of the novel is that of the people making him a legend of courage. His last act of heroism is opposite to that of a war hero. He is led to admit his guilt and weaknesses. Yet this is the positive point the novel is making. The story prepares us, especially through its characters, to reasses Uhuru, after all the suffering in the struggle for it. It pays tribute to war heroes like Kihika, but underlying it all is a warning that the time of heroes and of taking up arms in clear cut issues is past. The coming of Uhuru is not an altogether deliriously happy and Utopian affair: "It was not exactly a happy feeling it was more a disturbing sense of an inevitable doom". (p. 246).

Uhuru celebrations should have become an occasion for heart-searching, the beginning of reassessment and reconstruction as we stepped into the new era after a protracted struggle and suffering, as Gikonyo and Mumbi are willing to do. Mugo's character, and his last act of accepting his responsibility, fit the role of pointing the way for the others. There is something insipid and negative about the Uhuru celebrations. General

R. becomes almost tongue-tied in the course of unrolling his political rhetoric at the memory of their hacking to pieces the Rev. Jackson Kigondu. Before General R.'s speech, the Rev. Morris Kingori gives a rhetorical, mechanical and complacent prayer meaningless in that situation. Later the traditional sacrifice of a ram is even more meaningless, as Warui says:

> The field was so empty. Only four (or were we five?) left. We slaughtered the rams -- and prayed for our village. But it was like warm water in the mouth of a thirsty man. It was not what I had waited for, these many years. (p. 273).

Mugo's acceptance of responsibility, for which he dies, is the only positive thing in the whole ceremony. It is only through this that the individual, and through him, the whole society can expect hope and fulfilment.

But accepting responsibility is not easy. Responsibility sometimes is frightful and hard to face as we see in both Mugo and Gikonyo: "So [Mugo] was responsible for whatever he had done in the past, for whatever he would do in the future. The consciousness frightened him" (p. 267). This fright is not without reason on the more immediate level for this acceptance of responsibility becomes fatal or as General R. says: "Your deeds alone will condemn you. . . . No one will ever escape from his own actions" (p. 270).

We cannot dispute the justice of this statement if everyone else is willing to come forward and acknowledge responsibility for his own actions. General R. himself is the least qualified to judge Mugo. Nearly all the people at the meeting have their own hidden guilts. But society would rather forget or ignore the forces of weakness and evil lying within it (as Gikonyo tries to) which inevitably leads to the sliding

back to saying with Mugo: "the day ahead would be just like yesterday, and the day before". (p. 4) And asking with Karanja: "was death like that Freedom? Was going to detention freedom"? (p. 261). Mugo's fate at the end arouses a curious mixture of deep emotions: awe, admiration, embarrassment and self-shame -- (why didn't he let Karanja take the 'rap'?). His act therefore becomes a challenge which is not taken up. Gikonyo's epitaph for Mugo is valid:

> "He was a brave man, inside," he said. "He stood before much honour, praises were heaped on him. He would have become a chief. Tell me another person who would have exposed his soul for all the eyes to peek at." He paused and let his eyes linger on Mumbi. Then he looked away and said, "Remember that few people in that meeting are fit to lift a stone against that man. Not unless I -- we -- too -- in turn open our hearts naked for the world to look at". (p. 265).

It is Mugo's confession which takes away the pleasure and value out of the Uhuru celebrations. Its total implication is the questioning of the meaning of Uhuru for the people. Like Gikonyo's and Mumbi's new resolution, (in the last chapter called Harambee or public endeavour), Mugo is showing the only way that Harambee would come about. Reconstruction involves human relationships founded on honesty and trust. It is only through these that the deep wounds left by the war could be healed. Above all, he shows the need for new dedication, based not on unfounded confidence, but on a dogged determination not to betray, not to make the past struggle and pain futile but to bring it to fruition like the grain of wheat.

But the failure of this need to reconstruct and make Uhuru meaningful gives a disturbing element to the story. It is an important element which Ngugi unfortunately does not bring out into the open but rather

hints at subtly. Very early in the novel we overhear Warui telling Mugo:

> "Like Kenyatta is telling us . . ., these are days of Uhuru na Kazi". He paused and ejected a jet of saliva onto the hedge. (p. 5).

On the same page we are introduced to Githua who cries out to Mugo: "In the name of blackman's freedom, I salute you". After this he bows "several times in comic deference", and Githua's antics fetch laughter from several children. It is this sensibility which leads to the politician's corruptions. But ultimately it is Githua's mocking laughter we come back to at the end of the novel. Githua is not only a hypocrite, but he articulates society's hypocrisy when he mockingly laughs at Mugo after his confession. He is the man least qualified for this and he embarrasses the people as much as Mugo does. It is horrifying to think that apart from Gikonyo and Mumbi, society is left in disintegration, and that the meaning of seven years of pain and suffering, is only the brooding and guilty silence shattered by Githua's mocking laughter and cynicism.

The novel's political setting therefore becomes one of challenge and the need for moral commitments, which is lacking, especially near the end of the novel. This is what heightens the disastrousness of Mugo's fate. What after all does he die for on the social level? As the quotation from St. John 12:24 tells us, a man on earth is an individual, unless he is committed to a cause for which he is willing to die. Then his death becomes a martyrdom, a point of unity and inspiration for others. Clearly, this is Kihika's role in the novel. He is a redemptive martyr in political terms. Mugo is pointing out the way in which Kihika's death, as a grain of wheat, could be brought to fruition on the more important

social level, so as to be a source of inspiration for the new nation. But in killing him, society rejects redemption, so that in a subtle and complex way, Mugo's death becomes as meaningless as his betrayal of Kihika and his consequent death. They are both grains of wheat tramped on by the wayside. But Mugo's death, if it does not immediately give social hope, does at least instil in others a sense of loss and guilt. Even Kihika's mother is overcome:

> They bent down their heads and avoided his eyes. Wanjiku wept. ("It was his face, not the memory of my son that caused my tears", she told later). (p. 252).

Ultimately the quotation from Revelation 21:1 is central to any thematic discussion of A Grain of Wheat:

> And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away. (p. 229).

Ngugi has shown us how the first heaven and earth passed away. The end of the novel gives a few strong pointers on what is necessary to make a new heaven and a new earth if it is to be remade at all.

FOOTNOTES (CHAPTER SIX)

[1]David Cook, 'A New Earth; A Study of James Ngugi's _A Grain of Wheat_', _East Africa Journal_, VI No. 12, (December 1969), p. 15.

[2]E. M. Forster, _Aspects of the Novel_, (London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1949), pp. 27-28.

[3]One can see how this element of the cleansing power of open confession is almost a religious act, related to the kind of "Revival" preaching and practice mentioned in _Weep Not, Child_ and common in Kenya in the late forties and in the fifties.

CHAPTER SEVEN

EMERGING THEMES AND CONCERNS

It is now obvious that I regard the works of both James Ngugi and Okot p'Bitek as the best, so far, produced in East Africa. Both derive their power of imagery from a modest and simple local setting, and the texture of their works is bold, honest and original. Both are concerned with a vanishing village life and the need to replant the pumpkin in a new homestead, the need to mould a new earth and a new heaven out of the old one.

Most of those writing after Ngugi and p'Bitek have tended to be more concerned with contemporary life. They tend to be more topical and less historical than either Ngugi or p'Bitek are. They are, nevertheless, acutely conscious of their individual past lives in the village, and the conflict in their works is one of trying to live with the present and the legacy of the past. Professor Arnold Kettle noted this in his review of Leonard Kibera's and his brother Samuel Kahiga's anthology of short stories, Potent Ash:

> What strikes me particularly, as a European outsider, is the gap between the sort of education the young Africans have acquired and the often brutal necessities of the situation within which they operate. I get the sense of an acquired world of more-or-less sophisticated values almost totally at variance with down to earth issues of struggle and hardship.[1]

What Professor Kettle says applies, of course, to Waiyaki in The River Between, Njoroge in Weep Not, Child and even to Ocol in Song of Lawino in a rather less obvious sense. But it is more noticeable in the short stories, a large number of which tend to deal with young men, fresh out of school, seeking jobs or trying to live with the realities of urban life.[2] David Rubadiri's character, Lombe, in No Bride Price and Peter Polangyo's Ntanya, and especially James, in Dying in the Sun, also belong to this group. It is from this preoccupation with the present that we should expect most of the forthcoming literature from East Africa to derive its themes. This justifies a closer look at how most of these writers feel about their present situation, and this is articulated, if rather incoherently at times, in Leonard Kibera's "Letter to the Haunting Past".[3]

The importance of "Letter to the Haunting Past" arises not so much from its dramatic interest, neither is it an exceptional work of art, though Kibera does achieve some forceful and striking phrases. We are interested in the "Letter" more from its close appraisal of the author's present in relation to his past. Kibera does recognize that the past -- addressed as 'You' in the "Letter" -- is part of his present: "You and I revolve in a tied history". (p. 221). But this link with the past is tenuous:

> I never knew you, never met you . . . I do not know much about the old wine. From the cradle, the better part has drunk of the new gourd. (p. 220).

It is this alienation from the past which makes Kibera realize that his place is in the present:

> For how can I, so involved in what you term aimless struggle, go back? Here I am, groping paddle in hand, pledged to blend in the mortar the ethnic of the native and the exotic grain. In the dark chaos of my endeavour, is it a wonder that I am, as you bitterly accused, the penumbra, the black sheep of a finer and gone society? But no, wait: Gone . . . yes; but Finer? (p. 221).

It is this need to struggle which forms the moral point of Ngugi's A Grain of Wheat and p'Bitek's Song of Lawino, and which, when neglected, leads to the dangers we are warned against: "the emptiness of paper talk which conceals the lie in cocktail occasions and yields nothing real to reinspire the native ego". (p. 223).

Kibera eventually states with sharp awareness what is gradually coming to be the central concern in East African writing. Shortly stated, this is the need to resolve the antimonies at the individual and social level:

> You spat the vehement spit of scorn and bid that I look at the young of the day. I know we have failed you. The reality of urban day, alive with anxiety, idleness and ignorance; the grandeur of the nocturnal neon and the brothel harlot for the escapist -- these have yielded in my fellow urban youth a certain barrenness, a lamentable moral depravity for which you indict me. I do not mean to exonerate them. But . . . I know that somewhere deep inside lurks the reservoir of good craving for an outlet, a direction, but only untapped in the brainwashing escapism of ephemeral novelties. (p. 222).

The "Letter" ends with a resolve to "divorce this complex which pains the mind", to "stay and strive to yield shape to this transitory embryo. . . ." (p. 223).

The "Letter" is obviously not a story but a terse statement attempting to express coherently a fragmented and tortured conscience. Its importance lies in expressing themes which Kibera, for example,

treats more artistically in "The spider's web" and "The Stranger".[4] In the latter story, for example, the disruption of the traditional values wrought by the Emergency, much as in A Grain of Wheat, is very clear. People like Wangeci are left to learn their values from Women Fair and to use Lux toliet soap "since it was recommended by some of the world's most beautiful women including nine out of ten film stars. . . . (p. 34). The young "scholar' Mwangi experiments with smoking and the cowboy cartoons he reads so avidly form part of his moral outlook. These are clearly the "ephemeral novelties" Kibera talks about. It is not too much to read the dumb stranger as a Christ-figure (he paints a red cross on his door) whose act of mending men's souls, or at least their devious ways, is symbolized by his mending their shoes:

> It soon became evident, however, that [the stranger's] one purpose in life was to mend our sickly soles which seemed to approach the roads of life from all kinds of illogical directions. (p. 55).

It is clear that Kibera is playing with words here. "Soles" could be easily read as "souls".

In this story, the area of human awareness and values seems to lie within the stranger. It is in such figures as this stranger, and even in Teresa in Polangyo's Dying in the Sun, that one can see where East African literature will come to be linked with literature at large. After all, Yeats's writing was greatly inspired by a need to resolve his own individual antimonies. Soyinka's characters in The Interpreters are trying to do the same and E. M. Forster's Mrs. Moore in A Passage to India and Gino in Where Angels Fear to Tread also embody an area of a universal human awareness.

Kibera's concern in the "Letter" therefore sets an exciting and hopeful trend in East African writing and his statements lead to a clear understanding of Rubadiri's No Bride Price and Polangyo's Dying in the Sun. In some of his other stories, Kibera has been obviously influenced by the modern English and American writers. His "1954" for example is told in a Joycean style which does not quite suit the matter of the story. He is therefore open to the charge of an obvious self-consciousness and some pretentiousness in style. But where he resolves his stylistic difficulties, he reveals a very promising talent. "The spider's web", for example, is intensely angry and bitter at the new master/servant relationship in East Africa among Africans. But Kibera artistically harnesses this anger. He grapples with character and situation, drawing a disturbing picture of human relationships which ultimately drives the story's point home forcefully. One feels in his writing an energy and at times a cynical sense of humour which could well lead to the quality Mphahlele praised Soyinka for, that of being able to laugh at himself, at others, and at a situation, with words.[5] So far, none of the published writers in East Africa have shown this quality.

Kibera, like Ngugi and p'Bitek, realizes the need for a sensitive and intelligent examination of East Africans and their society, the need for a healthy self-criticism, and the need to jolt his readers into a real understanding of this situation. David Rubadiri's novel No Bride Price does come close to this self-criticism. But it fails structurally as a unified and forceful work of art. Rubadiri fails to delineate carefully his characters, their situation, and their human relationships

or the lack of them. He fails to show the cause and effect of what he talks about and his novel lacks the drama of confrontation, either between individuals, or between the individual and his situation.

Rubadiri insists, by his constant mention of Miria's name, that her relationship with Lombe, his naive and passive central character, should be the central concern in the novel. Yet we are only allowed to see them together three times, and they do not speak to each other the second time. In her absences, she does not seem to have any influence on the working of the plot. In fact nobody does. Things just seem to happen on their own to the people in the novel, including the unexplained coup at the end.

The coup assumes a lot of importance, yet one suspects that Rubadiri invents it to save Lombe from his imminent trial. True, we have seen the moral depravity of Minister Chozo, but we are not shown political corruption on a wide scale to warrant the coup as Achebe shows us in _A Man of the People_. Then there are the many questions the coup leaves unanswered: how do Sammy and Brute, who throughout the novel have been no more than the flotsam and jetsam of urban society, assume such importance in the coup? And how does Miria become associated with the coup? Is she a victim of an individual social and cultural situation, or of a wider political situation, or are they all inseparable?

One can however see the links Rubadiri _wants_ to establish between the personal and the social. The beating of the drums after the coup calls to mind the purifying dance at the village in which Lombe and Miria took part earlier in the novel. One gathers that the moral depravity within

the government which leads to the coup arose from a lack of a firm cultural basis and social values. It is a point which Lombe tries to make to Chaudry vaguely and philosophically:

> It is those that we are putting at the altar. Frankly our interest in all this feverish inadequacy which we have named progress is merely personal desire to shine before the altar. We burn the soul, watch it reduce to ashes while we admire ourselves in the glow of the priest's robes. (p. 162).

p'Bitek makes the same point much more effectively in the eleventh part of Song of Lawino.

What Rubadiri says about the coup is important. It heralds a nation in which the "ephemeral novelties" will move over to make room for some of the people's ethnic culture. Yet this important point is hardly given weight in the novel, just as Lombe's lack of a firm cultural and moral basis (which is really the explanation that Rubadiri wants us to take for his predicament) fails to come across in the novel.

No Bride Price leaves the reader feeling that Rubadiri had many important things to say, perhaps too many things, which could not be accommodated in the basic plot of the novel. But its more basic failure is one which was central to my criticism of the poets featured in Drum Beat. Bren Hughes states this criticism clearly. He is initially writing on Wilson Mativo's "The Park Boy":

> This story obviously deals with an important issue, yet it cannot be said to be successfully filling the literary vacuum. This is because it lacks the taut directness needed to give the sharp impact and because throughout the writer remains in a way detached, as though he were not really involved in the situation -- the exposure thus becomes something of an exercise.
>
> And to my mind it is something like this that happens in No Bride Price. Here is an exceedingly intelligent and pertinent exposition of the more important aspects of East African life, but for all its insistence upon the essential vitality of the real leaders of the society the novel remains too exclusively on a cerebral level.[6]

FOOTNOTES (CHAPTER SEVEN)

[1]East Africa Journal, VI No. 1, (January 1969), p. 60.

[2]Among the many stories with this theme are Wilson Mativo's stories: "Lesson One", East Africa Journal, III No. 6, (September 1966); "The Park Boy", East Africa Journal, IV No. 6, (September 1967); and "The Other Alternative", East Africa Journal, V No. 7, (July 1968). See also Grace Ogot's "Elizabeth", Jonathan Kariara's "Karoki", Zuka, I No. 1, (September 1968); Samuel Kahiga's "In Silent Shadows", Nexus, I No. 3.

[3]Leonard Kibera and Samuel Kahiga, Potent Ash, (Nairobi, 1967), p. 220.

[4]Ibid., pp. 134 and 30.

[5]Ezekiel Mphahlele, The African Image, (London, 1962), p. 197.

CONCLUSION

Bren Hughes's criticism of No Bride Price echoes what has been my major concern in the writing of this thesis. Throughout, I have been inevitably influenced by the awareness that we in East Africa, and indeed in the whole of Africa, are at that stage where our literature is part of our historical, cultural and economic evolvement. I have been eager to gain some more knowledge about myself from what East African writers have to say of the East African situation. This feeling -- which admittedly is in part subjective -- comes near to Achebe's own awareness that society has certain expectations of its writers,[1] which again is linked to the points made by Joseph Okpaku and Leonard Kibera discussed in chapter one. Professor A. N. Jeffares underlines why this had to be so:

> An African finds himself, in part, by reading what his own authors say about Africa. His situation is, in part, relfected or interpreted by his authors. An image, admittedly a varied image, of Africa is being created by African writers. And this is no isolated phenomenon. It happens at different times in the history of nations.[2]

This is a valid observation, for oftentimes the writer has been said to be the sensitive point of his community. And it is this sensitivity which ultimately unites all literature. Different literatures bring new ideas, new interpretations of life to us. They do not necessarily need to have a "local colouring" for what interests is the picture they give us of the human predicament; of the individual's struggle with his environment and his role within his society. Such an individual ultimately claims his essential kinship with the rest of the world's humanity.

It is this sensitivity which I find necessary for East African writers to cultivate if their writing is to find a place beside the rest of the world's literature. This means, in effect, calling for a commitment and a moral stand. It means a genuine concern with what is happening to the people around them, and a moral stand connected with human issues such as love, hatred, betrayal, and intrigue. And because these issues are complex and not easy to define, the moral stand taken must reflect an awareness of this complexity in man. I feel strongly that an authentic literature comes with an honest appraisal of the writer's subject, which in turn is within the bounds of the writer's experience. This implies a certain amount of individual and social diagnosis, painful at times, but all-important if literature is to be meaningful. This calls for an incisiveness and "an unflinching grappling with what we appear to have done to ourselves as men".[3] It is this which, for example, forms part of Soyinka's strength as a novelist and dramatist.

Part of the present weakness in East African literature comes from the writers shying away from mercilessly exposing themselves, their strengths and weaknesses. Except in the works of Ngugi and p'Bitek, and in some of Kibera's stories, most writers are still tooself-conscious, not of their art, but of the need not to reveal too much. I found this especially disturbing in Grace Ogot's story "Night Sister".

Of course writing is a highly conscious art, and a writer must always narrow the gap between the "Vision Splendid" and the actual product through ceaseless struggle to embody this vision in words. For, ultimately, there is no special pleading in the world of the arts. Each product is

judged according to its merits as a work of art however pertinent the author's vision is. There is a deep need for East Africans to discipline their artistic methods and to overcome a certain feeling of complacency which lulls them into satisfaction with their first drafts. There is also the very pertinent question of language and how the writers bring this alien language -- English -- to bear on their own cultural and social environment. Here, I would agree with the editor of Drum Beat that language is not really the major problem.

I will maintain my original point that a writer can only draw strength in his writing from a close empathy with his subject. He cannot solve his stylistic problems and problems of language before he is clear in his vision and is totally committed to this vision. East African writers are still too detached and reserved from their subject. It is this detachment which is the major weakness of the writers and it can be attributed, in part, to what du Bois said about black people in general.[4] Its effect is to make the writers look at the East African situation as if someone else, not them, was involved in it. And this is why I said that perhaps we might need in East Africa a literary movement less romantic, but as inspiring as Négritude was to Francophone West Africa and the West Indies, a movement that would help in resolving the cultural conflicts articulated in Song of Lawino.

The obvious question which the topic of this thesis arouses is whether East African literature in English can claim to be on its feet already. It is obvious by now why this should be answered negatively. In fact, East African literature has only started to find its feet. Till

there are more Ngugis and p'Biteks, people who, in their writing, show a provocative examination of the East African moral climate, East African literature will not be said to be "growing" no matter how much writing is published.

FOOTNOTES (CONCLUSION)

[1]See Chinua Achebe's article "The Novelist as Teacher" in Commonwealth Literature, ed. John Press, (London 1965), p. 201.

[2]Ibid., p. xv.

[3]Bren Hughes, "Filling the Literary Vacuum: Thoughts", East Africa Journal, V No. 1, (January 1968), p. 7.

[4]See page 10 above and note.

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