



The Major Influences on Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Writing Career

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Abstract:

Do you think that the late Kenyan born celebrated African novelist, dramatist, essayist and critic Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who rose to stardom with the publications of 6 novels, 4 plays, 5 memoirs and autobiographical works, 12 essay collections and monographs, 1 collection of short story and 2 children's books was born with the ideology and the vision that had shaped the content and form of his literary oeuvre? The inspirational root of Ngugi's influences discovered from Alliance High School through to Makerere University College Uganda had laid the stair case that he had desired to climb the writing ladder fully equipped to be read and critique by the world. The thrust of this paper is to reveal the great learned minds that had influenced Ngugi as a literary writer. It unveils that Joseph Conrad, D H Lawrence and Gorge Lamming were the renowned European and African writers that had influenced him on the one hand and in the political plane, Karl Marx, VI Lenin and Franz Fanon had exerted mammoth influence on him on the other. They had shaped his ideology and equally accorded him with the vision that inspired him to write and enriched the content and form of his writings.

Keywords: Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Major Influences, Writing Career.

Original Research

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INTRODUCTION

Thomas Carlyle, in Mahesh Chopra, A Book of Proverbs and Quotations (86)

The Scottish philosopher, writer and poet has disclosed in the above philosophical epigraph the universal truth associated with learned men or the "clever men" on earth. What turns them out as distinctive human creatures is the profound epistemology and wisdom they have acquired. Yet, they aren't "the best": for there are more innumerable learned more than they are and this trend goes on and on. So, albeit Ngugi is an archetypical of the learned class, the "good", his ideology and vision have been shaped by others, deemed in this instance as "the best", his super models. These are the large minds that have influenced him a great deal, in his literary writing career ever. This paper explores Conrad, Lawrence, Lamming, Marx, Lenin and Fanon as the major literary writers and political thinkers that had influenced Ngugi

wa Thiong'o underscoring the significance of this influence in his literary writing career.

The Literary Writers

In *Decolonizing The Mind*, Ngugi reveals that he had been powerfully influenced by Gorge Lamming the Caribbean writer. He also states that other European and American literary writers from whom he has so much learnt the technique of writing and expression are Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Gorky, Sholokhov, Balzac, and Faulkner. They have shown him "more possibilities for the novel in terms of thematic concern and range of techniques" (77). Let us turn to the major literary influences.

Joseph Conrad

In his book *Joseph Conrad: A Study*, Richard Curle opines that Teodor Joseph Konrad Korzeniowski was born in Ukraine on 6th

December 1857. He had study for six years at St. Petersburg University, which he left before earning a degree, he translated works of Shakespeare, Dickens, and Hugo which together with polish romantic poetry that he read aloud, provided Conrad's first contact with literature (Simmons 2-3), before he later carried his son to Cracow, the old Polish capital, and died there in 1870. Conrad was sent to the gymnasium of St Anne, the foremost public school of the city.

There, Conrad came under the care of a tutor who influenced him profoundly and who according to some reminiscences was man of remarkable intuition. He was put forward by the relations to counteract Conrad's strange and in-born desire for a sea-life, after some earnest and futile talks he realised that his efforts would be useless and ceased to trouble the boy. So, brought up in a country without a cost, in a country where he saw no English, he had yet resolved that he would be an English seaman of the merchant service. Against all odds, Conrad carried out his plan. In 1874, he went to the sea and Marseilles was his jumping-off ground in France. However, it took some years prior he was able to sail under the Red Ensign. For it was not till three years later that he set foot in England. Prior to that, Conrad had some adventures in the Mediterranean and had twice been to the West-Indies. He calls this his 'wild oats sowing period'. In May 1879, he landed at Lowestoft and first touched the English soil. At that time, he did not know a word of English, but he learnt it rapidly, being helped in a general sense to some extent, by a local boat builder who understood French. For five month, he was on board, a Lowestoft coaster, The Skimmer of the Seas that traded between the port and Newcastle. In October 1878, he joined the Duke of Sutherland, bound for Australia as ordinary seaman (Curle: 16).

In 1886, he became a British subject and master mariner in 1894. He settled in England and devoted himself to writing. He published his first novel at the age of 38. Writing in English is Conrad's third language. His first novel *Almayer's Folly* (1895) was

followed by *An Outcast of Islands* (1896), *The Nigger of Narcissus* (1897) and *Lord Jim* (1900). The sea continued to supply the setting for his novels and short stories. His narrative technique is characterised by a skilful use of breaks in time-sequence and he uses a narrator. This is why Conrad is called an impressionist because the movement of the stories images and emotions is portrayed through each characters vision of reality. In his novella *Heart of Darkness* (1902) Conrad had carried this issue to a terrifying conclusion. *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911) are both novels with political themes. His works was at first ill-received by critics and public alike, and it was the novel *Chance* (1913) that brought him his popular and financial success. His other major works include *Youth* (1902), *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906) *Victory* (1915), *The Shadow-Line* (1917), *The Rescue* (1920), and *The Rover* (1923). His unfinished novel *Suspense* was published in (1925). By the time of his death, Conrad was well established in the literary world as one of the leading Modernists.

Conrad had profoundly influenced Ngugi in that as he himself admits in *Decolonizing the Mind*, he is a European author whose works he had studied as a "special paper" at Makerere. Ngugi had seen how Conrad has used variety of "narrative voices at a different times and places in the novel with tantalizing effect." (75). With him "the same event could be looked at by the same person at different times and places and each of these multiple voices could shed new light on event by supplying more information, more evidences, or by relating other episodes that preceded or followed the event under spotlight" (76). What is more, other scintillating techniques used by Conrad are "the shifting point of views in time and space". Much more than this is "narrative-within-a-narration which delayed the information that helped the revision of a previous judgement so that only at the end with the full assemblage of evidence, information and points of view can the reader make full judgement. "These techniques" as

Ngugi concluded had impressed him” so much (76).

Similarly, in an Interview with Pieterse and Dennis Duerden (1972) Ngugi tells us a little more what impressed him about Conrad was:

The way he questions things, re-questions things like actions, like action, the morality of action, for instance.... Reading Conrad one feels struck by man's capacity for bearing suffering, but much more than this, he questions what appears on the surface. He questions what I would call “the morality of action”. “What is success for instance, what we would normally call success? What is action”? Is failure to make a decision a moral action or not? So you find that some characters in Conrad fail to do something, but their failure to do something is a moral decision with Conrad. This kind of questioning has impressed me a lot because with Conrad I have felt I have come into contact with another whose questioning to me is more important than answers which he gives (123-4).

What the reader swiftly discerns from Ngugi's proposition above is that Conrad had taught him a literary style of presenting characters, whose actions he questions and persistently re-questions and man as his male characters exemplify, whose life is characterized by incessant sufferings, following the trials and tribulations he undergoes are what earns him the status of a man. These, along with the questions which sound philosophical and for which reason they are more significant than their answers, Ngugi too tried to emulate in his literary writings.

D.H. Lawrence

According to Bloom (2002) D.H. Lawrence's full name is David Herbert Richard Lawrence. He was born on September 11, 1885 (1-5). He was the fourth son of Arthur Lawrence a miner and Lydia Beardsall Lawrence. During his school years, Lawrence began frequent visits to the chambers family at their farm, where his friendship with Jessie Chambers the model for

Miriam Leivers of *Sons and Lovers* developed. He continued his schooling by winning scholarships and placing first in divisional exams so that by 1908 he qualified for a normal school teaching certificate. In the meantime, in late 1910, Lawrence broke his engagement to Jessie Chambers. She continued a friendship with Lawrence and read the first draft of *Sons and Lovers* in the autumn of 1911. After the break, Lawrence became engaged to Louie Burrows, a fellow teaching student and later headmistress of schools. While teaching, Lawrence published his first poems, and his first novel entitled *Laetitia*, later published as *The White Peacock* (1911). The same year, his teaching career was cut short due to a case in Pneumonia (13).

During these years of early writing and changing relationships, Lawrence's work was often interrupted by poor health. In February 1912, Lawrence ended the engagement with Louie Burrows citing his illness as the cause for the break. In March, Lawrence met Ernest Weekly and his German wife Frieda, a title member of the aristocratic von Richofein family. Frieda believed in sexual liberation and although married had several affairs before meeting Lawrence. They began a relationship almost immediately but kept it private. Shortly thereafter, around the time that Lawrence last saw Jessie Chambers, Lawrence revealed his relationship with Frieda in a letter to Edward Garnett of Duckworth publishers. Even through the many difficult times ahead, from 1912 on, Frieda was part of D.H. Lawrence. The novel *Trespasser* was published in (1912). In March of the following year, 1913, Lawrence and Frieda were served with divorce papers by Ernest Weekly. *Sons and Lovers* was published shortly thereafter by Duckworth which advanced Lawrence £100 for the novel. Frieda Weekly's divorce in which she lost all contact with her three children became final in April 1914. She and Lawrence married in July of that year. During this time period, Lawrence worked on the drafts of *The Sisters*, versions that later evolved into the *Rainbow* and *Women in Love* (13).

In his response to the interview with Pieterse and Duerden Ngugi declared that it was

from Lawrence he had learnt to enter into the soul of the people the soul of the land and that of the countryside of things such as plants and the atmosphere. This is why Ngugi admitted that when he was reading D.H. Lawrence he felt the spirituality of things near him as if he was touching the very spirits of things (123-4). For Gikandi however, “reading Lawrence provided the young Ngugi with the language that would enable him to capture the essence of things” (267). In an extended view Gikandi, argues that in what he describes as the famous African writer’s “liberal phase” Ngugi “conceived the use of language as a means of entering into the spirit of things and of establishing communion with his environment” (266).

George Lamming

George Lamming is a Barbadian novelist, essayist and poet and a pertinent figure in Caribbean literature. He was born in Carrington village, Barbados, of mixed African and English parents (Hughes 69). He had published six novels. *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), *The Emigrants* (1954), *Of Age and Innocence* (1958), *Season of Adventure* (1960) *Water With Berries* (1971) and *Natives of My Person* (1972). As Ngugi admits, George Lamming had impressed him in his masterly handling of different narrative techniques within the same novel, particularly in *The Castle of My Skin*. The omniscient narrator, drama, the diary, reportage, autobiography, third person narration and direct authorial intervention to the side of character are all used by Lamming in varying ways in his early novels. “it is in *The Castle of My Skin*”, Ngugi reveals in *Decolonizing the Mind*, “*The Emigrants of Age, Innocence, and Season of Adventure*, that Lamming’s anti-imperialist consistency, his commitment to Third World struggles, his clear base in peasants and work, and the social political issues in his work, brought his world close to me and my experience of life of Kenya” (77).

The Political Thinkers

It is pertinent to note that while Marx and Engels were contemporaries, united by parallel political and economic doctrines and philosophy, Lenin and Fanon were all disciples of Marx.

Karl Marx

In *Marx and Engels: Through the Eyes of Their Contemporaries*, a collection of essays published in the reminiscences of Marx and Engels, Vladimir Lenin, provides a brief biography of Karl Marx. He was born on May 5, 1818 in the city of Trier (Rhenish Prussia). Marx father was a lawyer, a Jew, who in 1824 adopted Protestantism. His family was well-to-do, cultured, but not revolutionary. Marx entered the University, first at Bonn and later in Berlin, where he read law, majoring in history and philosophy (12). He concluded his university course in 1841, submitting his thesis on the philosophy of Epicurus. Marx and Friedrich Engels met in Paris for a few days, when Marx went there to publish a radical journal in 1844. They became closest friends. Both took an active part in seething life of the revolutionary groups in Paris. They worked out the theory and tactics of revolutionary proletarian socialism or communism. At the insistent request of Prussian Government, Marx was banned from Paris in 1845 as a perilous revolutionary (12).

So, in the opinion of Sandors and Lindfords Marx, Engels, Lenin and Fanon were “political theorists that deeply influenced Ngugi’s thinking and shaped the writing of his two later novels, probably *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*. Marx’s influence on Ngugi, a scholar and thinker he discovered when he was a student at Leeds, Killiam argues that “it is Marx who articulates a political and economic philosophy which in Ngugi’s view suits the needs for development in post-independent Kenya” (12).

V.I. Lenin

According to Margaret J. Goldstein, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin was born at Simbirk town in Russia on April 10, 1870. It is important to note that Lenin was not his original last name. His name at birth was Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov. His father is Ilya Nikolaevich Ulyanov, a school inspector at time when Lenin was born, but who subsequently became the Director of Public Schools in 1878 (12-14). Socially however, Lenin did not excel. This is why he had no close-friends at school. His school mates remembered him as a loner. He was very self-confident and he could also be rude and

condescending. This is not astonishing as his unfriendliness and attitude of superiority distanced him from his fellow students. His teachers, parents and classmates agreed that the young Lenin was heading towards a bright future and that nothing would stand in the way of his success (20). He loved the works of Russian novelists such as Nikolay Gogol, Leo Tolstoy and Ian Turgenev (16-20). He studied law in the University and subsequently begun a practice after he had left the law school prior he became obsessed with revolutionary vision.

Ngugi was influenced by Lenin's view about imperialism/colonialism and its nature and the evil of capitalism brought about by the neo-colonial order which he read in his book *Imperialism the Last Stage of Capitalism* (1999). It were Lenin's and Fanon's view on colonialism and neo-colonialism Ngugi had explored in *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and in his later novels *Petals of Blood* (1977) *Devil on the Cross* (1980) and *Matigari* (1982). What is more, Lenin's book *State and Revolution* (1965) also opened Ngugi's eyes about the state's effort to "kill the power of art through taming it" (*Gunpoint, Penpoint and Dreams*: 32). The book celebrates the fate of revolutionary theory in bourgeois society. (32).

Franz Fanon

According to Ziaddin Sardar, Frantz Omar Fanon was born on 20th July 1929 in Fort-de-France, in the French colony of Martinique. He was a complex figure with multiple selves. Although he was from Antilles, he ended his life thinking himself as an Algerian. His parents belonged to the middle-class community of the island: father a descendent of slaves, mother of mixed French parenthood. In Fort-de-France, he studied at Lycee Schoelcher, where one of his teachers was poet and writer (vii). Aime Ceisaire's passionate denouncement of colonial racism had a major influence on the impressionable Fanon. He agitated against the Vichy regime as a young dissident in the Antilles. He also travelled to Dominica to support the French resistance in the Caribbean. Soon later, Fanon found himself in France. He joined the resistance against the Nazi German forces that occupied them (vii-viii).

One thing which marked him out as a psychiatric physician is using psychoanalysis to study the effects of racism on individuals, particularly, its impact on the self-perception of blacks themselves. There is a reason for that. In 1950s, France was a centre of revolutionary philosophy and a magnet for writers, thinkers and activists from Africa. Fanon imbibed the ideas of philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. He and Octave Mannoni, a French psychoanalyst and author of *Psychology of Colonization* became friends. One remarkable thing about Fanon is that he identified with the African freedom fighters that came to France seeking allies against colonialism, as a young man searching for his own identity in racist society. This is the reason why he begun to define a new black identity. Interestingly, he also became actively involved in the anti-colonialist struggle. This is why he turned down the offer in 1953 when he was appointed as the head of the psychiatric department of Bida Joinville Hospital in Algiers (Sadarviii).

He experienced innumerable death threats. Since then Fanon identified himself as an Algerian. He travelled throughout Africa speaking on behalf of FLN. He once served as an ambassador to Ghana on behalf of the interim government of Algeria. Sadly however, fanon did not live to witness of Algeria acquired full independence. This is because while he was still in Ghana he was diagnosed with Leukaemia. He first went to the Soviet Union for treatment and subsequently to the United States. He died in Washington on 6 December 1961 (Sardar ix).

Fanon's influence on Ngugi for Killam is unequivocal, as it is he who placed "the thinking of Marx in the Kenyan and African context. It is what Fanon calls the Manichean nature of the colonial world that provides identification for Ngugi" (12). Furthermore, Kolhe and Tagad stress that Ngugi imbibed Fanon's notion of anti-colonial nationalism and the concept of neo-colonialism. He was also impressed by Fanon's assertion of the rights of the colonized people "to make their own self-definitions rather than be defined by the colonizers" (224). Thus, "Ngugi is a perfect disciple of Fanon in that, his prime focus is on ordinary people not their leaders and he adherers

strictly to Fanon's concept of nationalism when he seeks to give voice to the people's collective identity and history" (225) in his literary masterpieces and critical essays.

CONCLUSION

Thus, it is crystal-clear that these phenomenal intellectuals of living memory, Ngugi had discovered from Alliance High School to Makerere and post-Makerere had exerted a gargantuan influence on not only his writing career but also his life in to-to. Indubitably, their wisdom, knowledge, eloquence, style, use of language, character freedom and management in plot, action and narrative technique, character-action-questioning, philosophical and political ideologies had broadened Ngugi's horizon, literarily and politically, placing him appropriately on the way he had been groping for. The bottom-line is they had equipped him with the gun (knowledge) and bullet (pen) to confront the world as would a valiant indomitable army.

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