

## Rewriting History of the Kenyan Nation in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir

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### Abstract

Literary works offer platforms where society can engage in discourse with itself. It is in this sense that the study examined how Ngugi wa Thiong'o provides a re-write of history of the Kenyan nation in his novel *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir*. The study was qualitative in nature, employing discourse data obtained from a close reading of the text. This paper examines how Ngugi wa Thiong'o narrates his life experiences and how he weaves his story to accommodate the history of the Kenyan nation. wa Thiong'o survived traumatic moments and he tends to write depending on story lines on which the traumas is given prominence. This renders the study of his episodes in *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir* appear as a diary entries whereby he records historical events steadily. The paper argues that wa Thiong'o dwells so much on history to make a significant contribution to the lives of Kenyans by persuading and convincing people that colonialism had an adverse effects on the lives of the Kenyan people. Through history, he is able to raise the consciousness of society to reflect back at its history. He brings out the cruelty, the humiliation people went through in order to gain independence. He foregrounds Mau Mau wars, Second World War at the backdrop of his struggle to attain the *white man's* education therefore creating the irony of goodness verses badness of colonialism. The paper then comes to a conclusion that *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir* gives more fundamental historical issues and events that helped shape Kenya as a nation. Therefore, it is actually a book that helps rewrite history of Kenya.

### INTRODUCTION

For a proper understanding of the relationship between autobiography and history, it is important to highlight key features of an autobiography and memoir. An autobiography is an account of an individual human life, written by the self. This was coined from three Greek words, "autos", "bios", and "graphe". In Greek, autos mean self, bios means life, and *graphe* writing. The words denote self-life writing. This form existed much earlier than 18<sup>th</sup> century with terms such as memoir and confessions being used to mark the writer's reflection of life. Misch (1950) describes the term memoir as "the peculiarly loose and apparently unregulated method pursued by writing" (p. 23). He adds that a memoir does not have a person as its subject. This definition tends to demean the significance of a memoir. Therefore, a memoir is close to the autobiography as both are based on personal experience and are reflective. The distinction between the two is that of intensity, depending on the amount of self-revelation contained in the memoir.

In distinguishing the two Muchiri (2010) in her work on *Women's Autobiography: Voices from Independent Kenya*, gives a distinction between a memoir and an autobiography. She states that, "the autobiography largely focuses its attention on the self, but the memoir devotes more attention to occurrences around and outside the writer. From the memoir we learn a great deal about the society in which the writer or subject moves, but only get limited information about the writers themselves" (p. 39). Muchiri's argument shows that a memoir, although about the self, dwells on the people and events around the author. This statement qualifies the reasons as to why wa Thiong'o seems to be re-writing Kenyan history rather than his own life history. On the other hand, the term 'autobiography' was more appropriate for this paper since its basic meaning is that of self-writing.

Smith and Julia (2010), in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, discuss the relationship between the novel and life writings. They argue that a life narrator is confronted by two lives: the one known to the people and the self that can only be felt from the inside. This observation helps in this study in the sense that it leads the author to self-discovery through retelling his life history as part of Kenyan history. Smith and Watson define life narratives as "self-referential practices that engage the past in order to reflect on identity in the present" (p. 3). In analyzing *Dreams in a Time of War: A childhood Memoir*, this work makes an attempt to unearth how wa Thiong'o engages the past in the hope of reconstructing the present which involves drawing a lot from history through the perspective of a child. Smith and Watson also examine time and the timing in life narratives. They argue that, for a life narrator, his or her death marks the end of the narrative. A clear indication that it is impossible to have a life narrative after the person is dead, in other words, an autobiography can only be while the author lives. This argument is valuable for it informs the background to this study because in the text wa Thiong'o gives a slice of his childhood life from birth to around 1955 when he completes his primary school. Therefore, memory and account of growing up are deemed important. As Pascal (2015) puts it:

The common accounts of childhood is given by its common theme – growing up. It is a theme peculiarly appropriate for autobiographical treatment, since the inner development is embraced in

outer events. In this state, when the child scarcely scrutinizes himself/ herself, he/she comes to be and know himself/herself through his/her awareness of others of the outer world (p. 85).

The memory of a child records various events that remain engraved almost permanently in his mind especially if the events were traumatizing or thrilling or motivating. This notion points to the fact that whatever a person observes or encounters at childhood and during growth takes a lively concrete form. In order not to leave his readers 'hanging' wa Thiong'o writes a sequel novel *In the House of the Interpreter* (2015) to continue giving accounts of his teenage life at Alliance High school.

Indangasi (1993), in *The Autobiographical Impulse in African and African-American Literature* observes that, "the writer of an autobiography, being the artist that he is, selects, reorganizes, rearranges, and reshapes the facts of his life in order to communicate a higher truth. A photographic reproduction of these facts would indeed be unthinkable" (p. 114). Indangasi believes the work cannot just be presented as it is, plainly without artistry. The artistry is what brings out the literariness of the work. What he seems to emphasize is truth as one of the natures of autography which is truth. The questions that we may ask for instance in this paper is, can we believe wa Thiong'o (as narrator?) and can we believe the text? Are there historical evidence in *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir* that can be verified from records and archives? In the same article, Indangasi also observes the importance and functions played by autobiography; that of offering a voice for the voiceless. For instance, he cites Camara Laye's *The African Child*, Ezekiel Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* and Peter Abraham's *Tell Freedom* and notes that, "these autobiographers in their narratives see themselves as members of an oppressed race championing the cause of freedom" (p. 116). He recognizes the literariness of autobiography and it does not only tell the story of an individual but also that of a people. Similar issues can be observed in wa Thiong'o's *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir* whereby wa Thiong'o paints the history of the African past as the history of an oppressed race as we shall see in the next section.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o was born in Kenya in 1938 in rural Kenya. He studied at the Makerere University in Uganda. He published his first short stories when he was still a student at Makerere University. He later on became a professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California. He has taught in different universities around the world. He is a novelist and dramatist, and he has also written children's stories. His other publications include *Weep Not Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Devil On the Cross* (1982), and *Matigari* (1989).

In the first three works, wa Thiong'o focuses on writing back to the colonialists by giving an account of their deeds during the colonial period in Africa. The last three are about African leadership after independence. They reflect on the issues of governance that affect the society including corruption and moral decay. wa Thiong'o is also a political writer who was once detained for having being critical about the government. He has also been in the frontline defending and supporting the use of African languages in writing African literature as seen in *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986). His other essays include: *Homecoming* (1969), *Moving the Centre* (1993), *Writers in Politics* (1997), and *Globalectics* (2012).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Rewriting of History in *Dreams in a Time Of War*

*Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir*, which was published in 2010, etches a bygone era. It captures the life of wa Thiong'o as a child and others who bear witness to the social and political vicissitudes of life under colonialism and war. This work is wa Thiong'o's attempt to represent and rediscover himself at a time when the country is experiencing colonial domination under the British rule. He sets out to tell the story of his struggle to acquire western education against the backdrop of war and colonial oppression. Through child-narrator technique, the reader is able to relate with a growing boy who dreams to achieve his goal amidst the myriad challenges that he faces. First, there is poverty and the family struggles to make both ends meet. Secondly, there is struggle for independence not to forget the Second World War. wa Thiong'o remains determined to excel in his education. Towards the close of the memoir there is a dramatic turn of events where the protagonist almost misses the chance to go to school but eventually arrives in a cargo train.

Afejuku (1988), in his essay *Autobiography or History?*, which is a study of Lawrence Vambe's *An Ill-Fated People*, poses some fundamental questions: can autobiography be history? And can history be autobiography at the same time? He goes further to quote James Olney by stating that "the subject of autobiography produces more questions than answers, more doubts by far... than certainties." Olney observes that "What is autobiography to one observer is history or philosophy, psychology or lyric poetry, sociology or metaphysics to another." Afejuku further observes that "One never knows where or how to take hold of autobiography." He further posits that *An Ill-Fated People* is a book that is significant both as history and as autobiography. As an autobiography, as a literary work that offers us the testimony of a man about himself and people, its value is real. However, the literary value itself, if one would really understand the essence of autobiography, appears yet secondary in comparison with the anthropological, historical significance, of which in this study of wa Thiong'o's *Dreams in a time of War*, the literary value and autobiographical aspects go hand

in hand.

It is worth noting that autobiography is sometimes intertwined with history and sometimes people read autobiographies as historical documents or evidence for the analysis of historical movements, events, or persons. The autobiography can be read as a history of the writer but it serves more purpose than just a historical record. It may contain facts, but it is not factual history, about a particular time, person, or event (Muchiri, 2010, p. 84). Autobiographers may get some of the information for their narratives from history because:

History can provide many messages to those who turn to it for succor. It can provide opportunities for escape, blame, resentment, consolation, vindication, nostalgia. For some it can be a gateway into unparalleled aesthetic fulfillment or an opportunity to enjoy the frisson or thrill of safely viewed horror. It can feed an appetite for “experience,” reinforce pride in heritage and tradition and proffer a degree of reassurance and reaffirmation regarding the closure of the past and the nature of our own identity in the present and future. It can also fuel serious – sometimes explosive – social and political aspiration (Ogot, 2010, p. 21).

History provides material for autobiographers to include in their autobiography. Though the historical events are not given much prominence because the main aim of the autobiographer is to narrate his life history giving his personal experience intertwined in history.

In *Dreams in a Time of War: A childhood Memoir*, wa Thiong’o develops his narrative in such a way that the reader is able to take a journey with him through his childhood days. Taking a cursory glance at the title of the memoir, one notes that wa Thiong’o employs suspense that leaves the readers questioning what kind of war he is referring to. Suspense at this point captures the attention of the reader and when one flips through the first pages, the suspense is heightened through an event that happens on their way home from school. This suspense is used to highlight the tension that was experienced during the colonial period. It is actually meant to advance the story and in the process bring out the atrocities committed by the colonial masters to the indigenous people hence acting as historical records. wa Thiong’o listens to the conversation about a man who was shot by the British soldiers without the slightest idea that the man is his brother. He hides his identity from the readers until he finally reaches home.

Suddenly, the man had jumped out and run. Caught unawares, the police turned the truck around and chased the man, their guns aimed at him. Some of them jumped out and pursued him on foot. He mingled with shoppers and then ran through a gap between two shops into the open space between the Indian and African shops. Here, the police fired...he disappeared, apparently unharmed, into the European – owned lush green tea plantations (p. 7).

Later on, through his mother, it emerges that Wallace Mwangi, as described above, is the one who had escaped death narrowly.

In the end, my explanation was not necessary. My mother broke the silence. Wallace Mwangi, my elder brother, Good Wallace as he was popularly known, had earlier that afternoon narrowly escaped death. We pray for his safety in the mountains. It is this war, she said (wa Thiong’o, 2010, p. 8).

wa Thiong’o narrates his life experiences as if he were speaking directly to an audience that is already seated before him. He gives a testimony to the historical time in which he lived at his childhood when the colonial masters were very brutal. He is from school and the stories that revolve around him is full of war, terror and distress.

wa Thiong’o then begins to introduce his motive of re-writing history. The reader is introduced to the Agikuyu traditional set up that was there during and before colonialism. Using his father’s polygamous family as an epitome of the larger African set up, he mentions his father’s four wives, twenty-four children and a large home with five huts forming a semicircle (wa Thiong’o, 2010, p. 9). In order to juxtapose the tranquility that was enjoyed by the Agikuyu community and the disturbances caused by the Europeans. He opts to describe his village first:

My earliest collection of home was of a large court yard, five huts forming a semicircle. One of these was my father’s where goats also slept at night... it was called *thingira*...each woman’s hut was divided into spaces with different functions, a three-stone fire place at it’s centre; sleeping areas and a kind of pantry; a large section for goats and a pen...each house hold had a granary, a with walls made of thin sticks woven together. The granary was a measure of plenty and dearth.

After good harvest, it would be full with corn, potatoes, beans, and peas (wa Thiong’o, 2010, p. 9).

Here, from the historical point of view we are presented with the Agikuyu traditional customs and culture. With the main economic activities being farming and cattle keeping. We also see the African communal lifestyle which is again later juxtaposed with the European individualized lifestyle. The communal lifestyle brings out the Agikuyu identity. From wa Thiong’o’s work, one can see the unity of life and the communality of existence, which Olney describes thus: “the individual is taken as essentially identical with the group and the group as identical with the individual” (Olney, 1973, p. 58). It is the life of the community that provides the framework

for individual experience. wa Thiong'o fixes the Agikuyu/African identities at some mythical point in history. This means that oral tradition in *Dreams in a Time of War* is important in transmitting the African traditional values to the contemporary generation. As much as we interact with history of the past, the origin, for instance, of mankind according to the Agikuyu community is of much relevance to date.

For the present generation and one who is born in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is able to have a picture of what African traditional set up was like in the past. It is worth noting that the historians are usually observers to the experiences they write about while autobiographers are both observers and participants in the events they narrate. wa Thiong'o, therefore, as an autobiographer takes us through a journey into modernity. As a narrator, he is shocked by the steady rice of the urban centers. He says: "I learned that down beyond the forest was the Limuru Township and across the railway line, white-owned plantations where my older siblings went to pick tea leaves for pay" (wa Thiong'o, 2010, p. 10).

wa Thiong'o, the bitter reminiscer and historian in this case, temporarily looks back into the past in an attempt to make us see the sharp contrast between what had been there before the colonialism and probably during colonialism. He gives an account of how things suddenly changed.

...the changes in the physical and social landscape were not occurring in any discernible order: ...I learned that our land was not quite our land; that our compound was part of the property owned by an African landlord, lord Reverend Stanley Kahahu, or Bwana Stanley as we called him; that we were now *ahoi*, tenants at will...Had we lost our traditional land to Europeans? The mist had not cleared entirely (wa Thiong'o, 2010, p. 10).

Here, wa Thiong'o not only seems to be telling an individual or personal story but a story of his people; the Agikuyu community and how they came to lose their land to the white settlers and more so to the blacks who collaborated with the Europeans. The family's response to this incident is a mixture of fear and helplessness. The society finds itself in hostile circumstances and so wa Thiong'o develops a hankering to discover the cause of this anxiety and tension.

As the narrative progresses, wa Thiong'o seems to have found the cause of this acrimony. He tells of the bad blood between the Europeans and the Africans caused by the dispossession of land by the whites, exploitation of the natives like his own father, conversion of people, against their wish to Christianity; to destroy their civilization. Therefore, *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir* is more of a historic telling of wa Thiong'o's view and interpretation of how the whites who conquered his people during the period of colonialism oppressed and humiliated them. The narrative rejects all the social ills brought by colonialism because it seeks to preserve for posterity that the kikuyu people are indeed cultured. The kikuyu led or lived their own life according to their own precepts even before the Europeans set foot in Kenya.

### **Narrative of War: A Tool of Liberation Struggle**

The reading of *Weep Not, Child* (1964) by wa Thiong'o makes one feel that he is narrating the historical developments of the colonial era in Kenya. In this book, wa Thiong'o tells a story characterized by violence and suffering under the domination of colonial power. Later when he captures the same experiences in *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir* (2010), we observe that the protagonist's experiences are paralleled to those of Njoroge in *Weep Not, Child*. Njoroge's story is a fictionalized version of wa Thiong'o's 'true' story in *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir*. wa Thiong'o himself notes that:

Years later, in my novel *Weep Not, Child* I would give to the young fictional Njoroge an aura of fact and rumor, certainty and doubt, despair and hope, but I am not sure if I was able truly to capture the intricate web of the mundane and dramatic, the surreal normality of ordinary living under extraordinary times in a country at war. In the facts and rumors of the trial and imprisonment of Jomo Kenyatta and the heroic exploits of Dedan Kimathi, the real and the surreal were one. Perhaps it is myth as much as fact that keeps dreams alive even in times of war (wa Thiong'o, 2010, p. 195).

The colonial era and its evils had an impact on wa Thiong'o's life and this might have compelled him to narrate the atrocities committed by the whites and make a historical record that will be read by the generations to come. He seems to admit that the two texts mentioned above are one and the same thing.

*Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir* documents Kenyan experiences of pain, betrayal, and oppression during colonialism. The autobiography also records how this cruelty was met with rebellion and uprisings. For instance, it details account of Mau Mau movement that rises against the imperialist wish to fight for their freedom. wa Thiong'o narrates the activities of Mau Mau as part of his life narrative, trying to explain how those who participated in this rebellion were affected by it. Mau Mau rebellion was part of a national struggle to gain independence and above all their lost land. wa Thiong'o gives a scanty information about Mau Mau because most of their activities were carried out in the forest. He says:

I had heard similar stories about Mau Mau guerrilla fighters, Dedan Kimathi in particular; only, until then, the magic had happened far away in Nyandarwa and the Mount Kenya mountains, and

the tales were never told by anybody who had been an eyewitness. Even my friend Ngandi, the most informed teller of tales, never said that he had actually seen any of the actions he described so graphically (wa Thiong'o, 2010, p. 7).

This struggle led to bloodshed, deaths and setting up of detention camps in attempt to make the Africans docile. Details and accounts of Mau Mau struggle have been given by several autobiographers such as Jomo Kenyatta in *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (1938), Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: One Woman's Story* (2006) and J.M. Kariuki's *Mau Mau Detainee* (1964). Kariuki gives his personal account on the Mau mau struggle for independence between the years 1952 to 1955. He posits that the main reason for the formation of the Mau Mau movement was to drive away the colonialists and restore the land back to the Agikuyu community. Charles Hornsby, as cited in Muchiri (2010), notes that:

The Mau Mau guerilla war of 1952-5 was a key event in Kenya's history, and shaped its future political, economic and social structure. It was unstructured, violent revolt amongst Africans – mostly kikuyu – against foreign rule, land alienation and political and economic inequality (p. 44).

During this period, the activities intensify and tremendous deaths are witnessed. J. Kelly Soward (1995), in an article entitled *Jomo Kenyatta "The Burning Spear"*, views Mau Mau as a violent group whose last impact was crucial in sending panic among the whites. He states that:

Mau mau created a nationwide panic. White settlers barricaded themselves in their farm compounds. Fearing even their most faithful native retainers. Black tribal leaders who advocated anything short of violent solutions were in danger of their lives. A climax was reached with the murder of a revered senior chief of the kikuyu, chief Waruhiu, in the fall of 1952. On October 20, at the request of the newly appointed governor, Sir Evelyn Baring, the British government issued an Emergency Proclamation (Kelley, 1995, p. 298).

The British government makes an assumption that once the state of emergency is conducted, and once the nationalist leaders are out of the way, peace would return among the normally law-abiding natives of the colony. This then leads to the arrest of the African leaders as confirmed by wa Thiong'o:

October 20, 1952, came the shocker. Jomo Kenyatta, Bildad Kaggia, Fed Kubai, Paul Ngei, Achieng Oneko, Kungu' Karumba, and other leaders had been arrested, under operation Jock Scott...Governor Evelyn Baring, who had recently taken over from the previous governor, Philip Mitchell, had declared a state of emergency. Things seems to be escalating (wa Thiong'o, 2010, p. 154).

wa Thiong'o documents the societies' collective effort in ensuring that the white man is send back abroad. Though the struggle for independence puts the African leaders in trouble and they are locked behind the bars. In his narrative, wa Thiong'o tries as much as he can to describe the events that took place in 1952, including the declaration of state of emergency by Philip Mitchell which is significant in Kenyan historical calendar. In the narration of history, wa Thiong'o acts as a mouthpiece of his society and Kenyan people at large. He also presents numerous characters that certainly help us to understand and appreciate the various political and historical figures that he describes as the narrative progresses. One of these characters is his childhood friend called Ngandi.

As the narrative advances, wa Thiong'o informs the readers about other political figures who also helped in the struggle for independence. He actually learns of these idols through this friend called Ngandi who acts as a know-it-all character. He mentions of Waiyaki wa Hinga, Jomo Kenyatta and Harry Thuku among others (p. 137). For instance, Waiyaki wa Hinga was the paramount leader of the Gikuyu of southern Kiambu when Europeans arrived at Dagoretti in 1887. In 1890, he welcomed Captain Lugard in Dagoretti, where they took a solemn oath of brotherhood between the two peoples (p. 136). Harry Thuku was the leader of the Kikuyu Central Association and association that would be used as a vehicle in representing Africans (Kenyans) abroad. Kenyatta was a freedom fighter who later becomes the first African president of Kenya.

As a Kenyan reader, I tend to disagree with wa Thiong'o's depiction and representation of freedom fighters but disagree on a few issues. A number of tribes fought the imperialist from different quarters yet wa Thiong'o highlights more on the Agikuyu community and the central part of Kenya is given prominence as the only region that guerilla war enhanced liberation of Africans. He proceeds to give historical facts. For instance, in August 1950 the government announced that a secret movement called Mau Mau had been banned. On October 20, 1952, Jomo Kenyatta, Bildad Kaggia, Fred Kubai, Paul Ngei, Achieng Oneko, Kung'u Karumba and other leaders had been arrested under operation Jock Scott (p. 154). One can quickly spot a name like Achieng Oneko then infer that in his presentation of struggle for liberation, wa Thiong'o fails to recognize the input of other communities in the struggle for independence. He mentions them in by passing, insinuating that the struggle was left for one community. This may not be the true history of the Kenyan society though he has made efforts to recreate it a new to the present generation.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear from the above discussion that wa Thiong'o's *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir* is an autobiography that tells the author's childhood experience from 1938-1955. Notably, the book also addresses fundamental historical issues and events that clouded the Kenyan experience through the process of colonialism. wa Thiong'o understands the woe of his people through this period. Therefore, he acts as a mouthpiece and a window through which Kenyan history is presented. Out of this, we see him dig into the past and therefore opens our eyes to understand the present. This makes *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir* a remarkable autobiography that rewrites history in its unique way.

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