

**COMMODIFICATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND MORALITY IN NGŪGĨ WA
THIONG'O'S *PETALS OF BLOOD***

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Abstract

This study probes into the vicious intersection of neocolonialism, epistemological mistreatment and ethical decay in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's novel, *Petals of Blood* (1977). Set against the fast transforming setting of the oppressed rustic village of Ilmorog, the narrative relates how the local peasantry is methodically dispossessed by post-independence Kenyan state amid global corporate interests. This critique opines that the evolving national elites, in connivance with global capital, rationalises deprivation, effecting wide-spread violent mistreatment by means of land grabbing, physical hostility and blood-letting. The paper views the height of this vicious trend as the commodification of traditional knowledge systems and the undermining of communal morality. Engaging the analysis with a Marxist-materialist framework, the study reveals how natural cultural practices like the native brewing and perceptive properties of the theng'eta plant, is emptied of its sacred importance, hence, engaging in mass production for corporate proceeds. The reading probes into formal, Eurocentric educational systems as a tool to isolate the subaltern, while diminishing intimate relations and ethical veracity for utilitarian deals in an ever-growing capitalist system. Findings confirm the dawn of extreme disillusionment among major characters like Karega, Wanja, Munira and Abdulla, whose nightmares are traceable to this far-reaching vicious commodification. The neo-colonial machinery simply generates pervasive sorrow and isolation, having diminished human life and legacy to mere economic worth. For Ngũgĩ, therefore, genuine emancipation demands the conscious discarding of predatory economic foundation, a feat only attainable through shared, revolutionary class awareness and efforts.

KEYWORDS: Neocolonialism, commodification, Marxism, morality, epistemology.

1.1 Introduction

This research paper explores neo-colonial capitalism and its role in deforming human significance, turning traditional knowledge and communal decency to mere commodities and monetary gains. Relying on close reading of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1977), therefore, it pictures privatisation of land and Western education as tools in the corrosion of native moral principles, pushing oppressed Kenyans to survive by discarding their communal identity and dignity. The narrative is a sarcastic critique of post-independence Kenya, positing that the postcolonial elites took to the greedy and exploitative ways of former colonial over-lords, instead of delivering on

the dividends and promises of liberation. Thus, with their quick transformation of informal education, sacred communal land and friendly relationships into objects of transactional benefits, the neo-colonial capitalism debases communal connections in the manner of colonial masters.

Standing on the premise that the calamity in Ilmorog is rooted in the systematic erosion of native traditions and their replacement with the tenets of Western utilitarianism, the reading agrees with the novelist that genuine emancipation would depend on the conscious discarding of predatory economic foundation through shared, revolutionary class awareness and efforts. In formal educational institutions like the Siriana educational system where characters like Karega experienced a suppression of local history and traditional farming knowledge and their substitution with capitalist ideologies, the characters face a harsh ethical disaster. They discover that they must be assimilated into a vicious and exploitative system or be consumed by it, just as Wanja described “You eat or are eaten”.

1.2 Purpose of The Study

The specific objectives of this study are to:

- i) identify some of the emblems of the commodification of indigenous knowledge and resources by the neocolonial elite;
- ii) assess how formal knowledge systems and institutions are co-opted by capitalist interests, turning education into a stratified commodity of the ruling class; and
- iii) explore the ruthless “eat or be eaten” capitalist framework that forces vulnerable characters to commodify their bodies, efforts and relationships, leading to severe moral decay and disillusionment.

2. Review of Relevant Literature

Available literature shows the triumph of neo-colonialism and its systematic deprivation of the masses, underscoring the betrayal of independent promises. Thus, disenchantment with the fruits of independence is the foremost concern of *Petals of Blood*. This study concurs that diverse existing scholarly perspectives on the novel synthesis the effects of commodification on education and human relationships in post-independence Kenya. The relevance of critical studies on erotic materialism to the present research effort cannot be under-estimated. They show how Ngũgĩ denounces the shameful utilitarian, transactional character of human relationships under consumer capitalist operation, using the *Theng'eta* brewery and prostitution as specific models of this moral erosion. They directly sharpen further exploration of immorality, showing how ethical values are abandoned in favor of material greed, while connecting this moral rot to the deformation and commodification of knowledge. Some prominent literary critics who expose this trend of systematic socio-economic and political deprivation of the masses include Maughan-Brown (1988, pp. 128–45), Williams (1999, pp. 75–92), Gikandi (2000, pp. 242–55) and Lovesey (2000, pp. 105–22).

Maughan-Brown (1988, pp. 128–45) scrutinises the novel’s brutal condemnation of neo-colonial capitalism, while exposing the fraudulent indigenous leaders who connive with global firms to systematically dispossess the poor masses. On his own, Williams (1999, pp. 75–92) who focuses on post-colonial marginalisation posits that neo-colonial “development” programs in Ilmorog are express instruments of class stratification amid deprivation of the oppressed. Another scholar, Gikandi (2000, pp. 242–55), agrees that the novel serves as an allegorical critique of post-

independence African disillusionment with the fruits of political freedom, confirming that the new emergent native ruling class colludes with international capitalism to generate socio-economic misery, physical brutality and suffering for the masses. Again, Lovesey (2000, pp. 105–22) stresses the significance of Marxist/socialist technique in appraising the neo-colonial ruling class. This analysis exposes the obvious betrayal of the underprivileged workers and peasants who fought for *uhuru* (freedom) only to be enslaved by home-bred capitalist operators. This transition of Ilmorog from an impoverished traditional village to an oppressed capitalist centre launches the socio-economic background for analysing the new roles of education, knowledge and traditional morality as commodified assets of these capitalist operators symbolised by characters like Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria.

Another set of critics concern itself with the commodification of intimacy and morality in the analysis of *Petals of Blood*. These scholars include Ndosi and Maro (2021, pp. 119-132), Omutere (2021, pp. 38-52), Haruna (2026, pp. 75-89) and Onkoba (pp. 293-298). The critics, Ndosi and Maro (2021, pp. 119-132), look at transactional sex as a survival instrument under neocolonialism, showing how cherished human relationships become means of material returns, losing their clarity and value. Omutere (2021, pp. 38-52) also investigates “erotic materialism” saying that the narrative depicts the serviceable utilisation of relationships where the material capital is accumulated at the detriment of ideal and honest moral worth. On his submission, Haruna (2026, pp. 75-89) supports radical feminist and Marxist critiques, asserting that neo-colonial oppression pushes women into moral negotiation that makes sexual commodification a survival strategy under the brutal arrangement of patriarchy. Confirming the above stated notions of “ethical revisionism”, Onkoba (pp. 293-298) explores how Wanja utilises her body as a practical means of economic liberation undermining the commodification and ethical double standards inbuilt in the acts.

Literatures reveal another group of critics who emphasis on education, intellectualism, and the betrayal of knowledge in the analysis of *Petals of Blood*. Prominent among these postcolonial scholars are Nazareth (1972, p. 135), Killam (1980, p. 112), Ngara (1985, p. 78), Gikandi (2000, p. 124). These scholars relate how Western education and intellectualism are weaponised against the peasantry in *Petals of Blood*, isolating characters like Munira and Chui. While Nazareth stresses the ideological encounters over knowledge, positing that true intellectualism is deformed by those who prefer Western greed over communal cohesion; Killam affirm that European schooling as a means of distancing the African elite from their indigenous roots and from the needs of the working class. Again, Ngara scrutinizes the Marxist facets of the narrative, concurring that the adulteration brought by Western education is responsible for the miseducation of those characters who refuse to apply their intellect for the revolutionary emancipation of the proletariat. Thus, Gikandi discusses the tragedy of the intellectual in neocolonial Kenya, focusing on how institutions of higher learning produce bureaucrats who serve global capitalism rather than intellectual liberation. The forgoing illustrates that the ideological outlook in the narrative is compromised, with the intellectuals and educators (Munira, Chui, et cetera) being co-opted by the neocolonial state in the project of commercialising knowledge to uphold class stratification and resist emancipation of the masses.

On the whole, most scholars concentrate on Marxist class struggle, postcolonial disaffection, and eco-critical concerns. There is paucity of investigative efforts on precise interface of ethical erosion with epistemological commodification. Hoping to fill this essential critical gap, this study explores

Ngũgĩ's narrative critiques on Western educational and intellectual system, underlining its injurious prioritisation of economic usefulness over human dignity and communal moral principles.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This investigation is anchored in a dual theoretical framework, blending Marxist Literary Theory with Postcolonial Theory. The roots of Marxist literary theory are traceable to the ground-breaking writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1846). However, the theory later expanded and regularised in the 20th century by major theorists like Georg Lukács (in Verso, 2023), Antonio Gramsci (1971), Louis Althusser (Verso, 2005, pp. 219–47), Walter Benjamin (1999, pp. 768–82), Raymond Williams (1977) and Terry Eagleton (1976). It relies precisely on Marxist concepts of commodification and historical materialism to scrutinise the corrosion of communal ethical values and education in neo-colonial Kenya. The term historical materialism was developed by Marx and termed the “materialist conception of history” by Engels. It is a theory that contends that the foundational driver of human history and societal progress is material and economic production. Again, Marx propagated the idea that capitalism diminishes human labour natural resources, and social relationships into exchangeable commodities with monetary value.

With historical materialism, the study explores the movement from pre-capitalist modes of production to monopoly capitalism, embodied by the Theng'eta brewery and land grabbing, which changes the societal foundation. With wealth accumulation taking the centre stage as the eventual social good, traditional moral conventions and communal harmony are extremely destabilised. There is a conscious commodification of knowledge, as education personified by characters like Munira and Karega turn to an instrument of class stratification instead of emancipation. Knowledge is, hence, repackaged as a marketable product to serve the emergent postcolonial elites and global capital. There is also a conscious commodification of morality. Wanja's body and the spiritual drink Theng'eta are turned to transactional, financial values. The ruling class employs institutionalised principles and religion as disguise to both exploit and appease the masses.

The study applies Postcolonial Theory to evaluate the betrayal of the fruits of independence by the indigenous ruling class. Hence, postcolonial struggle: propagated by the novelist is the necessity of proletarian class consciousness and collective battle to regain historical agency, land, human identity and dignity.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative literary research design based on close textual analysis. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1977) serves as the primary text, while relevant scholarly works constitute secondary sources. Selected episodes, characters, images and expressions relating to education, indigenous knowledge, land, human relationships and moral values are purposively examined. The analysis is guided principally by Marxist Literary Theory, with Postcolonial Theory as a supporting framework, to show how neocolonial capitalism transforms knowledge, resources and human relationships into commodities. Particular attention is paid to the experiences of Karega, Wanja, Munira, Abdulla and other relevant characters, as well as the symbolic significance of Siriana School, land and the *Theng'eta* enterprise.

4.0 Analysis

4.1 Commodification of Knowledge in *Petals Of Blood*

This analysis of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* underscores neo-colonial capitalism and its deformations of customary educational system, social values and human relationships in post-independence Kenya. The narrative reveals how institutions, for instance the school in Ilmorog shifts its attention from serving the community as an empowering device to one of socio-economic profit: "...and there was much blood, many motherless, many maimed legs, many broken homes and all because a few hungry souls sick with greed wanted everything for themselves." (Part 3, Chapter 13, p. 327). The self-seeking elite whose unchecked acquisition destroys the social fabric is brought under direct severe indictment. This also exposes a society that believes in forceful, every-person-for-themselves philosophy that destroys humane principles like generosity, pity and communal responsibility, a society that uses its unchecked selfish ambitions to annihilate itself. Thus, the Eurocentric educational legacy is perceived as knowledge commodified to create submissive cogs for the benefits of neo-colonial machine, leaving the society with gullible thinkers and isolated characters.

Having usurped the African space, the Eurocentric educational legacy becomes a fashionable Capitalist doorkeeper, hence the exposition: "...in a world where some can eat while others can only toil, some can send their children to schools and others cannot..." (Chapter 8, p. 178)

As a commodity to be bought, knowledge is now only accessible to the privileged ones. Education is simply made a status marker for the middle class and not a mechanism for emancipation. This pushes people like Wanjia to engage in unfair, oppressive low-wage labour practices. Eurocentric educational legacy is also viewed as the erasure of indigenous African reality for the advancement of imperialist ethos: "He did not therefore want to hear any more nonsense about African teachers, African history, African literature... What mattered were good teachers and sound content..." (Chapter 9, p. 192). Accordingly, school authorities are mandated to promote "neutral" curriculum that ignored native knowledge. Unwittingly, this practice dissociates education from learner's experiential realities, hence, preparing them to accept instead of questioning the neo-colonial configurations of reality. In the long run, teachers like Karega are forced to conform or weeded out for insisting on sound pertinent educational practices. This is clearly hinted as follows: "The voice [of the intellectual] merely rationalizes the needs, whims, caprices, of its owner, the master" (Chapter 7, p. 165). Hence, the lawyer clarifies that educated elites, symbolised by Chui, Mzigo and their likes, only exist as administrative instruments in the hands of foreign capitalists in far away Europe. Moreover, they use their exalted positions to sustain the new, black ruling elite and isolate the down-trodden who like Karega hunt for genuine emancipation.

The betrayal of the fruits of independence is clear. Characters like Chui, Mzigo and Kimeria operate as "black oppressors in white masks", using the people's as alien investment. With them, morality is reversed as Abdulla, Karega and other honest patriots languish in prison or indigent condition. This is depicted in: "When Chui arrived... the children expected a savior. Instead, he out-Fraudshamed Fraudsham... enforcing the social status even more strictly, preventing them from even wearing shoes" (Part 2, Chapter 5, p. 172). Here, Chui is seen as a leader of strikes against the racist, Eurocentric colonial headmaster, Fraudsham. He later returns from England to take over the prestigious Siriana High School, yet, he does not decolonise the establishment. He assumes, rather, an even more callous, elitist posture than his white precursor, vigorously repressing student personality. This case confirms that the post-independence leading class were

hardly interested in obliterating the oppressive schemes; instead they coveted and desired for selfish reasons to take over such systemic positions left behind by the white imperialists. In the long run, they ensured the full betrayal of the promise of independence: “They told me: this is New Kenya. No free things. Without money you cannot buy land: and without land and property you cannot get a bank loan to start business or buy land...” (Part 3, Chapter 7, p. 246). Not only did they discard the freedom fighting project, they supported dubious men with capital and substituted traditional community values with consumerist greed. The narrative points at the sabotage and theft of the nation’s promises, demonstrating that the privileged black elite merely replaced colonial domination with a financial, neocolonial system that bars the poor masses, for their greedy considerations.

4.2 Commodification of Morality in *Petals Of Blood*

This erosion of collective moral principles is revealed in the obliteration of sacrosanct communal bonds of pre-colonial Ilmorog and their substitution with the hostile, individualistic or every-person-for-themselves capitalist philosophy. This moral depletion is exposed in the emblematic loss of communal “Shamba” the people ancestral essence of life: “Kenya, the soil, was the people’s common shamba, and there was no way it could be right for a few, or a section, or a single nationality, to inherit for their sole use what was communal...” (Chapter 12, p. 301). The significance of this loss is also marked by the narrator intense lamentations on how land, their previously shared, life-sustaining communal store, has been commodified (becomes an economic product) by a covetous ruling class. One irreparable consequence is the people’s disconnection from their sacred communal bond tied to the land (earth). This amounts to a deliberate uprooting of a shared destiny.

With privatisation, individuals are forced to abandon communal moral codes in order to survive, as seen in characters like Munira and Wanja who experience spiritual paralysis as another consequence of this disconnection. The neo-colonial Kenya’s ethical rot reached an alarming heartless state where the dog-eat-dog survival principle becomes the order of the day, showing that destruction of pre-colonial communal conformity entails systemic materialism and individual vulnerability. Hence, confession to prostitution is emblematic of wider societal prostitution: “We are all prostitutes, for in a world of grab and take, in a world built on a structure of inequality and injustice, in a world where some can eat while others can only toil [...] we are all prostituted” (Part 2, Chapter 10, p. 233). With these words, Wanja throws out the moral verdict placed on her sexuality, making it a more encompassing judgment to be placed on the entire capitalist state and its structures. Through her spiritual and moral paralysis, she is able to recognise that the hostile capitalist philosophy is to blame for pushing everyone to commodify themselves, diminishing human beings into transactional instruments of survival. Munira’s words corroborate this: “We went on a journey to the city to save Ilmorog from the drought. We brought back spiritual drought from the city...” (Part 3, Chapter 13, p. 293). Here, Munira identifies the centre of Kenyan society’s tragedy, showing physical pleasures and needs as the cost of spiritual death in the new capitalist economy.

This revelation also shows that modernisation is far more dangerous and problematic for Africans. For Munira, the people who were better with traditional communal attachments are now seeking refuge through intense religious fanaticism or in vicious, self-centred individualism. Notably, Theng’eta is the symbol of a sacred, communal bond, between the people of Ilmorog and their

ancestral heritage. The native flora is seen as a spring of harmony and spiritual force, operating outside the capitalist economy to strengthen the people. The conversion of the native Theng'eta plant from a sacred, shared visionary brew into a mass-produced commercial commodity sums up the wider neo-colonial calamity of Kenya, where ancestral heritage and spiritual meaning are stripped away and packaged for multinational profit: "Only two nights ago we all drank Theng'eta together to celebrate a harvest and a successful ending... It is a good harvest and you'll agree with me that such a sense of common destiny, a collective spirit, is rare" (p. 240). With the new development, the people has no place to fall back for their survival. The plant is exploited by a commercial, Theng'eta Breweries and Enterprises Ltd, representing the neo-colonial elite taking over their local resources. In other words, traditional knowledge has been taken over for the sake of corporate profits. "A man... has been held after a leading industrialist and two educationists, well known as the African directors of the internationally famous Theng'eta Breweries and Enterprises Ltd, were last night burnt to death..."

Another vital critical angle visible in the narrative is its ultimate message, the Marxist-Fanonist revolutionary awakening vision. This is the notion that stipulates that acceptable moral reinstatement lies in a drastic but collective revolt by the proletariat to tear down international capitalism and regain their land and history. This capitalist system arose out of what has been called the trinity of exploitation: "He carried the Bible; the soldier carried the gun; the administrator and the settler carried the coin. Christianity, Commerce, Civilization: the Bible, the Coin, the Gun: Holy Trinity" (Part 1, Chapter 3, p. 87). This clearly underscores the procedures of historical colonialism as well as modern universal capitalism. From Marxist-Fanonist critical angle capitalism involves a trinity of oppressive tools, converging religion (Bible), violence/state control (Gun) and economic dominance (Coin). Fanon posits that these must be systematically destroyed before a true decolonisation could occur in the society. The existence of this "holy trinity" is said to be responsible for draining the proletariat of their agency, coercing them to accept systemic abuses and mistreatment in the pretext of progress.

5. Conclusion

This paper has investigated the commodification of knowledge and morality in *Petals of Blood*; and from the findings, concludes that the narrative exposes how neo-colonial capitalism degrades human values. By transforming education, land, and intimacy into commodities, the ruling elite reduce moral decency to a transactional mechanism. From the novel, the study demonstrates that independence merely reassigned socio-economic and political powers from white colonialists to a native *bourgeoisie*. This new elite commodifies traditional systems, turning knowledge, as evident in the Siriana education establishment, and morality into instruments of suppression. Moreover, the novel reveals that independence is behind the destruction of different pillars of harmony and life. With the disruption of the moral backbones of the village of Ilmorog, characters like Munira and Wanja who symbolise this moral tragedy through their enormous moral compromises captured in the cruel survival principle of "eat or be eaten", sin with the entire society in this abyss of societal rot.

In the long run, the novelist suggests fighting this systemic decay by championing revolutionary working-class consciousness is the only viable path to genuine emancipation. Hence, this paper in concurring with the narrative ideological stance, posits that hope and justice lie in the collective re-awakening of the proletariat and peasantry, seeing the eventual overthrow of the fraudulent

dictators and their agents as the significations that real societal healing entails systemic, grassroots rebellion, instead of relapsing into fatalism.

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