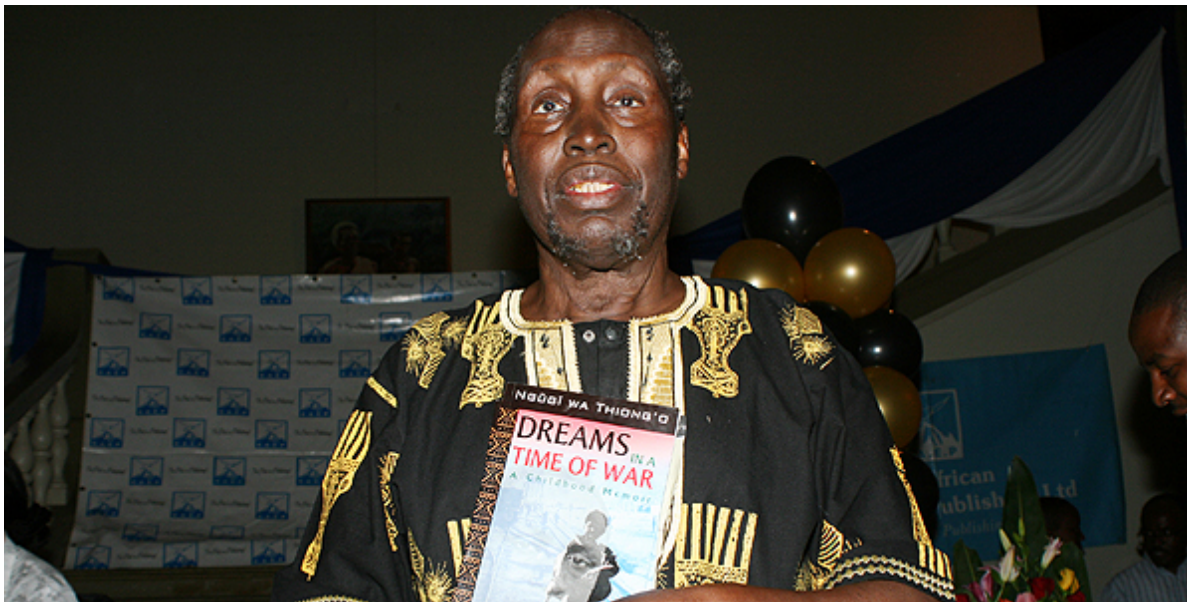


DAILY NATION

Thursday
November
11, 2010

 DN2

Despite the criticism, Ngugi is 'still Africa's best writer'



Author Ngugi wa Thiong'o poses with his latest book, *Dreams in a Time of War*, during its launch at the National Museums of Kenya last month.

Jennifer Muiruri | NATION

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Posted Monday, November 8 2010 at 17:00

In Summary

- The most famous indigenous East African writer, this 'warm, witty and unassuming' literary giant carries not only the Nobel dreams of his native land, but also those of the entire African continent

Even after missing the Nobel Prize for Literature by a whisker this year, Ngugi wa Thiong'o remains East Africa's best bet if the prize is ever to come to the continent again. Other likely African winners would be Algerian female writer Assia Djeber and Somali novelist Nuruddin Farah.

Ngugi would have been the fifth African writer to win the coveted prize, after Nigerian Wole Soyinka (1988), Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz (1988), and white South Africans Nadine Gordimer (1991) and JM Coetzee (2003).

Other Nobel winners with an African connection are African American novelist Toni Morrison (1993) and black Caribbean poet Derek Walcott (1992) and VS Naipaul (2001), who lived in Uganda in the 1960s and has written, albeit cynically, about Africans.

Although Ngugi's Leninist-Marxist ideology and endorsement of violence as a therapeutic method of fighting oppression might not amuse the staid libero-humanist Swedish Academy judges any time soon, international literary circles had picked the radical writer as their favourite, with the British gambling company Ladbrokes placing him top of the pack.

The prize went to Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa, who, like Ngugi, is overtly political in his writing, but believes in real-life activism and politics, having run for president in his country in 1990. Wole Soyinka, too, has joined active politics and might run for president in Nigeria.

The most famous indigenous East African writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o was born in Kamiriithu, Limuru, in Kiambu District, Central Kenya on January 5, 1938 to Wanjiku wa Ngugi and Thiong'o wa Nducu, a polygamous man.

The young Ngugi went to school barefoot, attending Kamaanduura and Mangu schools near his home for primary education in the 1940s.

After the separation of his parents in 1947, Ngugi was brought up by his mother, a fact registered in his writing through his sensitivity to the plight of women in Kenya and Africa.

His deaf-and-dumb step-brother was shot and killed by the colonial government forces in 1954, and is immortalised as Gitogo in the novel *A Grain of Wheat*.

His experience of the Mau Mau has marked almost everything he has written, especially as he tries to correct what he considers as misrepresentations of the freedom fighters in colonial and neo-colonial history books.

In December 1960, he married Nyambura, with whom he got six children. Ngugi later got three other children, including two with Njeeri, to whom he got married in 1991 in a civil ceremony while in exile in the US.

Upon return from exile in 2004, he consecrated his marriage to Njeeri according to Gikuyu traditions. Separated from Ngugi for 14 years, his first wife, Nyambura, died in 1996 in Kenya.

From 1954 to 1958, Ngugi was a student at Alliance High School, Kikuyu, where he was admitted because of his outstanding performance. The school is registered in his work as Siriana, a probable Kikuyu anagram for “Alliance” (Arayansi); the language’s speakers pronounce ‘l’ as ‘r’ and their ‘y’ is usually silent.

He described his struggle to enter Alliance during the state of emergency in his childhood memoir, *Dreams in a Time of War*.

Although his writing career started in earnest later during his college years at Makerere University, it was at Alliance High School, a Protestant missionary institution, that Ngugi started writing short stories, influenced by Western children’s writing, including Robert Luis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*.

Great tradition

He joined Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda, in 1959, graduating in April 1964 with a BA in English. In Makerere, the region’s top college at the time, he imbibed the “Great Tradition” of English literature.

After graduating from Makerere, Ngugi worked briefly for the *Daily Nation*. Advocating for the recovery of African cultures destroyed by colonialism, Ngugi’s articles also criticised tribal chauvinism and urged the newly independent nation to be selective in the pre-colonial traditions it sought to retain.

In September 1964, he joined Leeds University, UK, on a British Council scholarship. He did not complete revisions suggested by his dissertation supervisor, and therefore did not receive a degree. However, sections of the dissertation covering African, Caribbean, and African American writing were published in his collection of essays, *Homecoming* (1972).

Honouring courage

Leeds was later to offer Ngugi an honorary degree. In response to the honour, Prof Martin Banham of Leeds — who taught Soyinka in the 1960s — said Ngugi’s choice to write in Kikuyu was “a political move, a one courageous move.

We were honouring courage.”

In *Homecoming*, now out of print, he seems critical of moderate black liberators like Martin Luther King, Jr. Following Frantz Fanon, author of *The Wretched of the Earth*, whose works he encountered at Leeds, Ngugi sees the use of violence to liberate one's nation and race as noble.

Echoes of Fanon are heard in his later works, including *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) which he wrote as a student at Leeds. Like his characters Kihika and Njamba Nene, Ngugi abandoned his postgraduate studies at Leeds after the supervisors of his thesis declared him incapable of rigorous academic work.

In July 1967, he returned to Kenya and became a Special Lecturer in English at the University of Nairobi, resigning in 1969 in protest against violations of academic freedom at the university.

He rejoined the university in 1971 after teaching and fellowship stints at Makerere and Northwestern, the latter being an elite institution which, at the time, lagged behind other US institutions in rejecting racial policies. He doesn't seem to have been very happy at Northwestern, where he started writing his magnum opus, *Petals of Blood*.

Ngugi became the first African head of the Literature Department at the University of Nairobi in 1973. Baptized James in the 1940s, he dropped his given name in the early 1970s to renounce Christianity, which he saw as implicated in the colonisation and enslavement of Africa.

He legally changed his name to “Ngugi wa Thiong'o” on September 21, 1977. However, in spite of this renunciation of Christianity, Ngugi's fiction and drama resonate with its impulses in both obvious and subtle ways.

Biblical imagery and African mythology are woven together to signal possibilities of synthesis between different cultural practices and the possible use of anti-colonial Christian theology for the purposes of political and cultural liberation.

Cultural conflict

His creative works cover the late colonial period, the era of decolonisation, and the post-colonial period. The three short plays in the collection *This Time Tomorrow* (1970) deal with the themes of cultural conflict, dehumanisation of Africans by their governments to please foreigners, and traumatic memories of the fight for independence and the return from liberation war to a betrayed romance.

The tension between colonialism and pre-colonial African culture is reflected most powerfully in his novel *The River Between* (1965) and the play *The Black Hermit* (1969), first performed in 1962 to celebrate Uganda's independence. *Weep Not, Child* (1964) is a semi-autobiographical story of a young man's struggle to acquire an education against the backdrop of the Mau Mau war (1952-1956) and colonial terror at the time.

Ngugi was detained without trial in December 1977 as a result of his political activism and involvement in indigenous-language community theatre.

Upon his release in December 1978, he was denied his job as a professor at the University of Nairobi and his works were removed from secondary school syllabi. In *Detained* (1980), he narrates his experiences as a political prisoner. The detention and political harassment by the state radicalised him even further.

An important moment in Ngugi's life and career is represented by his decision to stop writing in English, opting to write in his mother tongue, Kikuyu. The play *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)* was co-authored with Ngugi wa Mirii in 1977 and published in Kikuyu and English 1980 and 1982 respectively. It dramatises the exploitation of workers and peasants in post-independence Kenya.

Maitu Njugira (Mother, Sing for Me) was an equally radical play that fused traditional song and dance in its critique of neo-colonialism in Kenya. The actors were barred from technical and dress rehearsals at the Kenya National Theatre on February 15, 1982.

However, although the play was never formally performed or published, over 10,000 multi-ethnic spectators from across the country watched the Kikuyu play during continuing rehearsals at the University of Nairobi before the university banned it from its premises. The government withdrew the performance license and razed to the ground Ngugi's open-air theatre at Kamiriithu.

An indefatigable worker, Ngugi can write for hours on end without rest. At 72 years of age, the author of seven novels, numerous essays and several plays still believes he is yet to publish his best book yet.

Ngugi has taught in major universities in the world, including Yale University and University of New York. He has bagged many awards, including the Medal of the Presidency of the Italian Cabinet.

He is currently the Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine, where he also serves as Director of the International Center for Writing and Translation.

Full of praise

His colleagues at the University of California are full of praise for the Kenyan writer as a warm and collegial worker. “Professor Ngugi wa Thiong’o (“Ngugi” to everyone here) is an extraordinary colleague for all of us at the University of California, Irvine,” says the chair of his department, Prof Susan C Jarratt.

“Ngugi is warm, witty, unassuming, always eager to share ideas and his amazing experiences. He brings equal measures of creativity, integrity, and tenacity.”

Ngugi’s essays examine the intersection of art, language and politics. Like in *Homecoming* (1972), the essays collected in *Writers in Politics* (1981; 1997) address the role of politics in cultural production, emphasising the centrality of indigenous languages and pre-colonial values in modern Africa.