IS THE 'POST' IN POSTCOLONIAL THE 'POST' IN POSTPONE? A READING OF DREAMS DEFERRED IN PETER KIMANI'S *BEFORE THE ROOSTER CROWS*

Christopher Odhiambo Joseph

Department of Literature, Theatre and Film Studies, Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya. E-mail:cjodhiambo@hotmail.com

Abstract

In the 1950s and 1960s, nationalism was still regarded as the feature of the victorious anti-colonial struggles in Asia and Africa…By 1970s, nationalism had become a matter of ethnic politics, the reason why people in the Third World killed each other…in cruel and often protracted civil wars…The leaders of African struggles against colonialism and racism had spoiled their record becoming heads of corrupt, fractious, and often brutal regimes (Partha Chatterjee 1999). For JaramogiOginga Odinga nationalism lost its glamour in Kenya when Kenyatta, the founding father of the nation and who was generally perceived as one of the foremost nationalist in the continent failed to mention the role played by the nationalists in his speech ushering independence. He reminds us that:

> *Kenyatta's own speech inexplicably made no mention of the people who had laid down their lives in the struggle, the fighters of the forests and the camps who have been in danger in Kenya of becoming the forgotten men of freedom fight because it suits the ambitions of the self-seeking politicians to divert our people from the real freedom aims of our people (p.253).*

Key Words: Postcolonial, Nationalism, Ethnicity, Politics, Racism

Introduction

Peter Kimani's debut novel *Before the Rooster Crows* can perhaps be read as an imaginary and fictional re-interpretation and rendition of sentiments such as those of Chatterjee and Odinga. It is in this sense then that one can argue that in its representations, the novel explicitly questions and critiques the meaning(s), essence and value of both the nationalists' struggle and the resultant Kenyan independence. However Kimani's enterprise is not new. Similar efforts are evident, for instance, in Francis Imbuga's*Betrayal in the City*, and Ngugi waThiong'o's*Petals of Blood, Matigari*and *Wizard of the Crow* among others. However, what makes Kimani's project fascinating, to me, is the way that he frames his vision of nationalism and post-colonial Kenya. Both nationalism and independence are represented within existentialist realm. Thus his vision of independence and nationalism can be

interpreted as over determined by fate. This is hailed by the very title of the novel which is obviously derived from an archetypal trope of fate and predestination. It gestures to the biblical allusion of Jesus Christ's own prediction of his own fate as he would finally be denied and betrayed by his most loyal disciple - Peter- three times, before the rooster (cock) crows. The novel's title therefore alludes to the denial and betrayal of the nationalists and the deferred vision of independence by the founding fathers of the post-colonial nation-states. This existential dimension of nationalism and independence is aptly recorded by Odinga (1966, pp.255-256) when he predicts that:

> The stage following on independence is the most dangerous. This is the point after which many national revolutions in Africa have suffered a setback, for there has been a slide back into complacency after the first victory over external control and pressure, and national governments have left too much in their countries unchanged, have not built for effective independence by transferring power and control to the authentic forces and support of the national revolution, and have forgotten that internal elements of exploitation are closely related to reactionary external pressures.

Nationalism and Sovereignty

It is in fact the inability of the nationalist leaders of the new nation-states to break away from the entrapment of colonial history that informs Kimani's romantic and utopian nationalistic vision in this fictionalized representation of Kenya's history and reality. This deterministic vision is further emphasized in the epigram that acts as a pretext, derived from 'The Dirge' in John Gay's *The Shepherd's Week* which unambiguously cautions that: "The boding raven on her cottage sat, and with hoarse croaking warned us of our fate".. This fate had already been predicted in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* but most aptly articulated by Mosese, the intellectual character in Imbuga's play- *Betrayal in the City* - when he laments about the elusiveness of independence as follows:

> Mosese: That is why I don't believe in such crap as the last shall be first, and the blessed are the poor for they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven! For years we waited for the Kingdom, then there it had come. Our Kingdom had come at last, but no. It was all an illusion. How many of us have set eyes upon that Kingdom? What colour is it?
>
> ……
>
> Mosese: It was better while we waited. Now we have nothing to look forward to. We have killed our past and are busy killing the future (Imbuga, 1976, , pp. 31-32).

Kimani's representation of post-colonial Kenya in many ways echoes Mosese's disillusionment; a state that seems to preponderate most postcolonial African literary

imaginary. It is in this regard that one can argue that Kimani's mode of representing history and reality, in fact, participates in questioning and critiquing the meanings of nationalism and independence in Kenya. Indeed this novel is a fictionalization of a particular historical incident that took place in Kenya. The novel interprets and re-imagines the story of a Kenyan woman-prostitute - who was murdered by an adventurous white American Marine in Mombasa in the 1980s. This incident, and the drama that it generated, in many ways undermined the very logic of Kenya's sovereignty; that very essence that defines independence. It is this drama of murder and how it was interpreted by the popular imaginary that Kimani employs as an organizing idiom to interpret, critique and question the meaning(s) of the notions of nationalism and independence in Kenya. It was a drama full of ironical twists and reversals. For instance a white expatriate judge who presided over the case thought that the offence was not serious enough and therefore fined the murderer five hundred Kenya shillings only and asked him to be of good conduct. It can be argued that it is the simultaneous acts of the American marine's murder of a Kenyan national and the judge's 'light sentence of the murderer' that informs Kimani's vision of Kenya's independence as fated; still, ensnared within the colonial strictures of structures. Though Chatterjee (1999) argues that in Asia and Africa nationalism declares the domain of the spiritual, its sovereign territory, Kimani's representation of independent Kenya seems to contradict this assertion since in his representation, the material aspect which is essentially the Western modular of imagining the nation and sense of nationalism, is the one that is apparently more privileged. For instance, the judge who presides in this case that indeed catalyzes the conflicts in the novel is a white expatriate; an act that explicitly signifies that Kenya, as an independent nation, had sacrificed its spiritual domain of nationalism as the very premise of cultural identity. It is the paucity in nationalism's spiritual/cultural identity domain that might have most probably provoked Kimani's creative instinct and intuition to interrogate and analyze the notions of independence and nationalism in Kenya. However, because he frames his representation of both the performance of nationalism and post-colonial independent Kenya within existentialist postulations, his vision tends to remain problematic, romantic and utopia as he frequently alludes to the myth of Sisyphus.

Before proceeding with the discussion on Kimani's questioning, re-interpretation and critique of the notions of independence and nationalism within the specificity of the Kenyan context, a brief synopsis of the novel should be illuminating. This novel is structured, simultaneously, on two motifs: romance and quest, but which eventually collapse into one plot after Mumbi's rescue of Muriuki from abjection in the streets of the City (Githuka). As such, on the one hand, it is a story of a young village youth called Muriuki and his childhood love Mumbi, while on the other, it is the story of Muriuki's quest for opportunity and self-fulfillment in the city, which he perceives as the ultimate realization of the promise of 'the gifts' of nationalists' movement struggle and independence. The main plot of the story is, however, structured around Muriuki's life and his myriad experiences in different parts of the country: Gichagi, Gichuka (the Capital City) and Pwani (Island Coastal town).

His quest begins with his departure from Gichagi (Village) for the City in search of prosperity but it is foreshadowed with the fear akin to Jesus Christ, it might be his last supper. But of utmost significance, is the promise that he makes, before he sets out on his quest, to his mother and siblings that when he eventually returns, he will bring each one of them a gift. As such his quest is more driven by the desire to fulfill this promise that has become for him some kind of a covenant. Metaphorically his promise alludes to the earlier ones made by the nationalists to their people.

Though Muriuki has been hankering for the promises of the city, his encounter with the city is full of twists and reversals of fortunes. He is welcomed into the ways of the city by the fake blind beggar, followed by his humiliation in a city hotel for failing to pay his bill as he had given part of his money as alms to the fake beggar; this is also followed with his discovery that Mumbi, his childhood love, is a prostitute. Thus, his dreams of beginning a better life in the city are shattered right at the outset. With nowhere to go, he remains on the margins of the city, perpetuating his abjection. His quest for a job is frustrated as everywhere he goes he is met with signs of "Hakuna Kazi"—NO Vacancy. (This seems to be an ironic undercutting of Jomo Kenyatta, the founding father of the nation's independence clarion call- "Uhuru naKazi")

Persisting in his quest, he finally, in what seems like a miraculous act, gets a job. But this does not last for long as when he is just about to settle in the job there is a twist in his fortune: his female employer proposes for relationship but he declines. The infuriated woman, in anger, throws him out of her house and the job. Thus once again he ends up in the streets, a mendicant like many other jobless city dwellers.

It is while lying half unconscious in the park that his childhood love, Mumbi, in what seems to be a coincidence, comes to the park to seek for salvation from the street preachers, when she decides in a Christian gesture, to act like the biblical Good Samaritan. This is how Muriuki is saved from the vagaries of nature in the street by his childhood love. This marks a new turn in his life. But once more he seems to be fated as there is yet another twist in his life. As he begins to dream about his new love life with Mumbi, she informs him that they must travel to Pwani because a ship has docked with American marines. Mumbi sees this as an opportunity to make some quick bucks from the marines and which she believes will enable Muriuki and herself to begin a new life. Unfortunately, this does not come to be: for in yet another reversal of fortune, Mumbi is brutally murdered by a marine as Muriuki impotently watches.The murder of Mumbi introduces new twists and complication to the plot of a story that had hitherto looked very ordinary, simply describing the everyday practices of life.

But the acquittal of the American marine by a white expatriate judge pricks Muriuki's conscience, catalyzing him into action to revenge the death of Mumbi because he realized that the institution charged with dispensing justice had failed to punish the murderer of his

lover. In what seems to be a contrived plot, he eventually kills the murderer and surrenders himself to the police. The news that he had revenged the killer of his fiancée permeates the public domain via the media, triggering a series of activities that provide new meanings and possibilities to his act of revenge. His act of murder is presented as a re-interpretation and a questioning of meanings of notions such as sovereignty, nationalism and independence. However, the novel ends rather pessimistically with Muriuki waiting for his execution for the murder of the American marine, after the country's constitution is altered to allow the president to have power to decide on judicial matters.

However, what is of significance to me in this novel is how the murder of an ordinary Kenyan woman prostitute by an American white marine officer and his subsequent acquittal becomes an important trope of imagining possibilities for re-interpreting and critiquing the meanings of Kenya's independence, nationalism and sovereignty.

Thus the question that Kimani's novel seems to pose is: if a foreigner can come to an independent nation like Kenya and kill one of its citizens, and get away with it so easily and lightly, then what is the meaning of independence? What was the essence of the nationalists struggle for (national) sovereignty? Reading the fictionalized version of this murder, one then realizes that its significance must only be understood within the frames of both colonial and neo-colonial (imperial) structures of awareness. That is why an analysis of Kimani's mode of representation becomes important in my explication.

Images of Fragmentation, Everyday Life and Abjection

Kimani's novel is deceptive in many ways. It begins with the description of the everyday lives of ordinary village folks. As noted earlier this is a story of Muriuki's quest and to some extent that of his childhood love. But what is of interest to us here is how a story of the everyday life of ordinary people eventually transforms into a project of interrogating and critiquing such fundamental notions such as nationalism and independence. To begin with, a demonstration of how this is a story of the everyday life of the Gichagi people provides some interesting insight. The novel begins with children innocently and enthusiastically, playing in the rain:

> The sky was pregnant with rain. Trees swayed in ecstatic anticipation as sparrows swirled high in the air, like harbingers of a great event. Even the children playing in the homestead could not hide their excitement; they ran helter-skelter, waiting the first drops to descend (Kimani, 2002 ,p.1).

However, this ordinary event, the coming of the rain is used as a backdrop to question the meaning of independence and the value of nationalists' struggle. Through the use of the rain and its consequences, Kimani provides us with images of primordiality and abjection; images that ironically undercut and undermine the very vision of the nationalists' struggle and independence's modernity. But first a brief introduction of the usage of the term

abjection. The term 'abjection' literally means "the state of being cast off." In usage it has connotations of degradation, baseness and meanness of spirit. In this paper its deployment follows that of Julia Kristeva, where the abject is one that is situated outside the symbolic order, being forced to face an inherently traumatic experience. An act done in the light of the parts of ourselves that we exclude: for instance the mother. We must abject the maternal, the object which has created us, in order to construct an identity… in order to maintain clear boundaries between nature and society, the semiotic and the symbolic. How then does this notion of abjection relate to Kimani's representation as a critique of Kenya's nationalists' struggle and independence?

In this novel the representation of abjection as a ritual of the everyday life is an appellation that recalls the futility of both the vision of the nationalists' struggle and independence. The description of Gichagi signifies both its marginalization and otherness; a space, that has remained static in spite of the promises of change articulated by the nationalist elite leaders. This is in contrast with the city, the signification of capitalist modernity, the symbol of independence that the village natives such as Muriuki and Mumbi hanker for with obsessive passion. The following description for instance bears such witness:

> When they could not stand it any longer, the children drifted to the small hut where dark, thick smoke was issuing from. Almost instinctively, Muriuki turned inside his room.
>
> "Huuuhhhh," he gasped in horror. He had been so drawn in the children's play that he forgot to change the position of his bed and move it to a different location, where it would not get soaked when water seeped in through the leaky thatch. This was an action that many Gichagi dwellers had developed over the years; they responded in similar manner—without their conscious notice— whenever it rained…
>
> "It's the last time anyway," he muttered to himself with resignation. (Kimani, 2002, p. 2)

Because of the abjection, Muriuki does not envisage any ameliorative possibilities in the village milieu and as such decides to escape into the city. This move raises intriguing questions in respect to nationalism as a function of sentimentality. With this kind of abjection can the villagers have any sentimental affinity to their place? Or must they always hanker for the illusions of the city? IndeedMuriuki's first encounter is quite revealing of this hankering for the city: "He marveled at what he was seeing, and decided he was very lucky to be in the City. The core of sophistication. The source of all that's good and dignified" (Kimani, 2002, p.19).

This brings us to the question of how the post independent Kenyan nation, defined in Anderson (1983) as an imagined political community, remains an illusion given its fragments such as the primordial/abject village and the capitalist modernity of the city. Does Muriuki's hankering for the city suggest that the independent nation is imagined only in terms of the capitalist modernity of the city since the village is already cast off as a result of its primordiality and abjection? To echo Chatterjee's cynical question in reaction to Anderson's idea that the nation is an imagined political community, "whose imagination" is the independent Kenyan nation? This is in regard especially to the paradox of the Gichagi villagers who sacrificed their lives during the nationalist struggle, and yet their conditions remain unchanged, primordial and defined by its abjection long after independence. It is indeed ironical that Muriuki's father was a nationalist who spearheaded the struggle for a better future and yet his family remains trapped in this primordial kind of existence defined by abjection. As such, Kimani's representation of Kenya as a fragment contests the very claims of nationalism. As Craig Calhoun proclaims "Nationalism…involves a distinctive new form of group identity or membership. It is a new rhetoric of belonging to large scale collectivities" (Calhoun, 1993, p. 229). Following Calhoun, do these Gichagi people, whose lives are defined by idioms and images of abjection as opposed to the capitalist modernity of the city, feel that they belong to the large scale collective that is the independent Kenyan nation?

This question of nationalism and independence though becomes more complex and complicated when Muriuki travels to Pwani where he first encounters a large number of whites, mainly tourists. It is while in Pwani that he realizes that independence for him as a black person has remained a chimera. He discovers that he is not part of the imagination of his own nation. It is through Muriuki's encounter with Pwani that Kimani offers a harsh criticism on the paucity of Kenya's spiritual aspect of nationalism. The following are illustrative. First is an incident in a hotel significantly called Watalii (Tourist) Hotel?

> "Where are all the waiters?" He asked to no one in particular.
>
> "One can stay a whole day without being served," Mumbi replied, shrugging helplessly.
>
> He noted a bevy of waiters swarming round a group of white tourists refilling their glasses after every sip…He tried to catch the attention of one of the waiters but it was all in vain. He tried again, but without success. When one waiter turned slightly while pouring fresh wine into a glass, Muriuki shouted, "Hey! Hey You! Hey!"
>
> A few white heads turned to face him, looking quizzically at him as if to say, "Man, people here speak in a mannered way"….

> "Why do you keep us waiting this long," Muriuki was on the attack again. "Why do you treat me so in my country?"…
>
> "Is it because I am black? Or is it that I have no money" (p. 98).

The second incident is a conversation between Muriuki and the same waiter regarding the food to be served:

> "What do you have to offer?" The harsh tone could still be traced in Muriuki's voice.
>
> "Meat, fish or fowl?" The waiter said in small voice.
>
> "Meat," Muriuki replied.
>
> "Rare, medium or well done." He pursued.
>
> Muriuki was a bit confused. "Well done," he said.
>
> "Do you want that served with baked potatoes, fluffy rice or pasta?"
>
> "Baked potatoes." He chose what sounded familiar.
>
> "What kind of dressing? Dijon, Italian or American?"
>
> Muriuki was lost. Had the waiter sensed his ignorance, and was now testing his wit? he wondered. He felt demeaned. It is true this was his first time to learn that food was dressed, but the waiter had no right to make a fool of him. (pp.98-99)

The conversation between Muriuki and the waiter is fundamental as it, in many ways, resonates with Chatterjee's notion of the duality of nationalism - that is - material and spiritual. From the argument that ensues between Muriuki and the waiter it is apparent that Muriuki seems to be the only one who has retained the spiritual aspect of nationalism which Chatterjee argues is fundamental for any meaningful anti colonial nationalism. This of course validates Kimani's deployment of Muriuki as vehicular of the vision of the new nationalist struggle against neo-colonialism and imperialism.

Muriuki's nationalist consciousness is aroused inadvertently though as it begins as an act of revenge against the unjust judicial system that acquitted the murderer of his childhood love. In his bid to make the revenge a site of nationalist struggle, Kimani in his fictional reworking of the murder of the ordinary prostitute woman invests murder and the consequent revenge with both mythic and symbolic possibilities. For instance he christens the murdered woman Mumbi. This is a direct allusion to Gikuyu myth of origin which has

Mumbi as the founding mother of the Gikuyu nation. Thus the murder of the prostitute woman is re-imagined within a larger discourse of women's resistance and their consequent violation. This is magnified in the novel by the character Kuria Machuiri, an intellectual law scholar in a paper in which he profiles women's violations:

> Since AgunaAgu, the African Woman has been an abused woman. But nothing can be compared to what the African Woman has undergone in the hands of white men…
>
> What I have in mind are the likes of Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru who dared the whites outside the Norfolk Hotel in 1922 and suffered for her courage.
>
> I am thinking of MekatililiwaMenza, the heroine who led her Giriama people to revolt against the Geretha white invaders before she was arrested and banished from her people. I am thinking of the Gikuyu women who had to endure rape during the Mau Mau rebellion as their men rotted in incarceration.
>
> That was before our Uhuru. That was during the period we refer to as the Dark period. That period has resumed. The darkness has set in and sufferance has begun (p. 137).

Muriuki's name on the other hand alludes to "kuriuki", that is to resurrect. This is significant because his father was the leader of the first movement for the national struggle against colonialism but who was betrayed and his vision hijacked by the elite nationalist who later became the founding fathers of the new nation. As Odinga argues:

> Neo-colonialism, after all, is not centered in a vacuum. It is built on the previous colonial history of the country in which it operates, from foundations that the colonial regime lays before its ostensible departure. The object of neo-colonialism is to ensure that power is handed to men who are moderate and easily controlled political stooges. Everything is done to ensure that the accredited heirs of colonial interests capture power (1966, p. 256)

Thus for Kimani, Muriuki's act of revenge should not be construed as an isolated case but as part of the larger history of the national struggle against foreign domination. By locating Muriuki's act of murder within earlier nationalist struggles, his act of murder can be therefore interpreted as a nationalist agency to reclaim the nation's sovereignty that had been mortgaged to imperial powers.

> "I tell you, *ma ya Ngai.* The BBC said it again this morning," Muchene maintained. "They said that thousands are starving in the Northern Frontier, and Muriuki's case might determine if they shall be rescued or not. Muriuki may determine whether they live or die"

> "But how could that be?" Perplexed youth asked.
>
> "I also don't understand." Muchene confessed, regaining his confidence as he explained further: "The ways of those distant nations are hard to understand. All I know is that the BBC said it. The food might be withheld because the man Muriuki killed was a citizen of that country."
>
> "Which country?"
>
> "The donor nation—that is what the BBC called it. America."
>
> 'I can't believe such distant lands can have such a connection to our village, on account of our own Muriuki," the curious young man said (p. 166).

The conversation among these villagers based on news reportage by BBC reveals both the ironies and paradoxes of independence in the post-colony. For instance the Kenyan woman is murdered and the murderer gets away with it without the state's intervention, and yet the imperialist nation intervenes to see justice when the murderer is killed in an act of revenge by Muriuki. It is interesting that Muriuki begins to interpret the murder in terms of nationalism especially when the narrator asserts that: "it wasn't the thought of dying; he was thinking about the future that was survival of his Nation—a future that was in the hands of the few who had lined their pockets with money stolen from the nation's coffers" (Kimani, 2002, pp. 168-169). The murder opens up Muriuki's consciousness to the extent that he can now relate the abjection that defines his village to the corruption and exploitation of a few against the rest of the nation.

Conclusion

But why does his act of nationalism remain romantic and utopian?

As had been mentioned earlier, Kimani uses the everyday life in his imaginary to question and critique the essence and value of both the nationalists' struggle and the consequent post-colonial condition in Kenya. His representation, deploying the everyday life, is somehow consistent with Andreas Eckert and Adam Jones observation that: "interest in everyday life 'and micro worlds' give new actors prominent roles on the historiographical stage: rebels, maids and porters etc". In fact the main actors in Kimani's texts are the subalterns. In his imaginary therefore, the everyday is used to unpack the futility of independence as well as to foreground an awareness of ambiguities of nationalism, and to subvert the master narratives of progress (Eckert & Jones, 2002, p.8). Whereas the representation of the everyday privileges the subaltern, there is a sense in which in Kimani's novel, the nationalist agency of his main character remains in the realm of the romantic and utopia. Muriuki's killing of the marine is simply a fantasy in the novelist's mind's eye... It is a wishful desire on the part of the writer meant as a response to the government's impotence in matters fundamental to

the nation's sovereignty. Muriuki's vision of nationalism is also utopian because he does not share it with anybody else. He is the only one who seems to imagine his act of murder as a continuum of the earlier nationalists' struggle in which his father was betrayed by his fellow fighters. But his nationalist agency becomes more romantic and utopian because of its framing within the everyday life of the subalterns which Ecker and Jones have criticized as follows:

> At the same time many of the strengths of history of everyday life also represent weaknesses. The discovery of historical subjects of 'ordinary people' has been accompanied by a tendency to attribute to these subjects nearly unlimited power and autonomy…The worlds which these 'ordinary people' lived have tended to be romanticized. (p. 8)

In fact this is what Kimani does in his re-interpretation and re-imagining of the murder of the Kenyan woman prostitute by the white American marine in the 1980s at the Coast. He romanticizes Muriuki's act of murder by elevating him to the pedestal of a national hero in the popular imaginary. He however down plays other new nationalists' initiatives that dominated the Kenyan's quest for democracy in the 1980's, but acknowledges the nationalist elite legal fraternity that was common then.

Works Cited

Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Anderson, B. (1994). "Imagined Communities". As reproduced in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (Eds) *Nationalism*. New York: Oxford Reader.

Chatterjee, P. (1994). *The Nation and its .Fragments: Colonial and Post Colonial Histories*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Calhoun, C. (1993). Nationalism and Ethnicity.*Annu. Rev. Sociol*. 19:211-39.

Eckert, A., & Adam, J. (2002) "Everyday life in Colonial Africa", *Journal of African Cultural studies,* Vol. 15, No.1.

Imbuga, F. (1976). *Betrayal in the City*. Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya.

Kimani, P. (2002). *Before the Rooster Crows*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.

Oginga, J. O. (1966). *Not Yet Uhuru*. Nairobi: H.E.B.