

From Disillusionment to Defiance: Citizens' Resistance in Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii's *I Will Marry When I Want*

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Abstract

This research examines how Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii's *I Will Marry When I Want* portrays the collapse of post-independence expectations in Kenya and the subsequent rise of popular resistance amidst the oppressed. Guided by Frantz Fanon's revolutionary postcolonial theory, the study explores how political leaders, religious institutions and foreign economic interests reproduce the same patterns of domination associated with the colonial era. The evaluations focuses on how the three frameworks create disillusionment among ordinary citizens whose hopes for freedom and social justice remain unfulfilled. Through a critical reading of the play, the scholarly exploration traces the gradual political awakening of the characters such as Kiguunda and Gikonyo, showing how awareness of exploitation transforms into a determination to challenge unjust authority. The findings reveal that Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii use drama as a weapon to explore the failure of post-independence governance while emphasizing the power of collective action in confronting systemic oppression. The study concludes that the play reflects a broader African reality in which citizens must reclaim the unfinished project of liberation through organized resistance. This study adopts a qualitative content analysis framework.

Keywords: Post-independent, Domination, Disillusionment, Resistance, Liberation

Introduction

The promise of political freedom following decolonization in various African nations has often been marred by the rise of domestic elites that perpetuate economic exploitation and social inequality. Such tension is sharply dramatized in Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii's *I Will Marry When I Want*, where the very institutions that were supposed to deliver liberation instead become tools of oppression. This dynamic reflects a broader reality: even after independence, African societies continued to operate within neoclassical economic frameworks.

In his seminal work, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Walter Rodney (1972: 45) contends that “throughout the period that Africa has participated in the capitalist economy the wealth created by African labour and from African resources was grabbed by the capitalist countries of Europe”. By spotlighting the expropriation of surplus and resources, Walter Rodney demonstrates how political

independence enact little to dismantle the economic foundations of colonialism. Such exploitation did not vanish from constitutionally independent governments; rather, it was reproduced through local elites who colluded in the process.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in his expository literature, also warns against this internal betrayal. In *Secure the Base: Making Africa Visible in the Globe*, he argues that Africa's continued economic subjugation is not simply a result of external forces but is abetted by African institutions that replicate global capitalism, "those who act on behalf of our nations are not necessarily the ones who read these materials if only they would, they might be inspired to act – a stitch in time can save nine" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 2016: 104). Ngugi wa Thiong'o thus underscores a disconnect between political leadership and the people, suggesting that the privileged class often remain ideologically distant from the masses they claim to represent.

Chinweizu, in his trenchant criticism, *The West and the Rest of Us: White Predators, Black Slavers, and the African Elite*, goes even further by indicating African leaders as complicit in their own people's subjugation. He writes, "African elites served as "black slavers" by sustaining neocolonial dependency" (1975: 78). By framing the local bourgeoisie as agents of neo-colonialism, Chinweizu's argument aligns closely with the central conflict in *I Will Marry When I Want*, the betrayal of the masses by those ostensibly charged with their emancipation in postcolonial societies.

This convergence of scholarly interrogation and dramatic representation offers a powerful foundation for examining how *I Will Marry When I Want* uses theatre to expose and challenge the post-colonial era exploitation of the mass of the citizenry by the overbearing ruling elites. By drawing on the insights of Walter Rodney, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinweizu, this research argues that the play is not just a work of art but a political intervention – a call for grassroots solidarity, systemic change and genuine liberation. The resultant study analyzes how disillusionment with national governance evolves into radical consciousness and resistance, while at the same time illustrating that the play echoes a broader continental struggles and resistance against neo-colonial elites.

Theoretical Framework

In analyzing *I Will Marry When I Want* through the lens of Frantz Fanon's revolutionary postcolonial theory, this study draws principally on the concepts of national consciousness, the national bourgeoisie, neo-colonialism and revolutionary violence. Those Fanonian ideas provide powerful analytic tool in order to understand how post-independence disillusionment and resistance emerge in African societies that, despite political liberation, continue to be dominated by oppressive class structure.

1. Public Consciousness and Its Pitfalls

Frantz Fanon critically examines the notion of "national consciousness" in newly independent states, warning that it often becomes a superficial shell that conceals deep class divisions. As he argues in *The Wretched of the Earth*,

“HISTORY teaches us clearly that the unpreparedness of the educated classes, the lack of practical links between them and the means of the people, their laziness their cowardice at the decisive movement will give rise to tragic mishaps (1963 : 149).

This caution is closely related to *I Will Marry When I Want*, where the leaders who claim to speak for newly liberated nations often lack real social roots among the rural and working masses. Frantz Fanon critique suggests that political leadership in such contexts may simply replicate colonial structures rather than transform them.

2. National Bourgeoisie and New-Colonialism

Central to Fanon's theory is his scathing critique of the national bourgeoisie-the class that assumes power after independence but fails to effect genuine structural change. Rather than forging a new and independent political economy, this class often acts as a “transmission line” for foreign capital.

He further elaborates that, in many postcolonial societies, the bourgeoisie “uses its class aggressiveness to corner the positions formerly kept for foreigners It waves aloft the nation of nationalization of the ruling class” (1963: 156). This observation underscore many “independent” states continue to be governed by elites who replicate the colonial order, maintaining economic dependency rather than autonomy.

Fanon foresees that this national bourgeoisie is ultimately self-defeating: “In fact, the bourgeoisie phase in the history of underdeveloped countries is a completely useless phase. When this caste has vanished, devoured by its own contradictions, it will be seen that nothing new has happened since independence was proclaimed”. Such a prognosis resonates with Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii's portrayal in the play of leaders who become indistinguishable from colonial-era oppressors once they assume power.

3. Class and Revolutionary Subjects: Peasantry and Lumpenproletariat

Unlike classical Marxism, Fanon does not privilege the industrial proletariat as the inevitable revolutionary subject in postcolonial contexts. Rather, he identifies the peasantry and the lumpen proletariat-those marginalized classes left out of formal economic structures – as the potential engine of revolutionary change. As articulated in research based evaluations, “Fanon ultimately argues that the peasant masses constitute one of the most spontaneously and radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people”, and that their inclusion is vital for meaningful decolonization.

This point is critical for interpreting the political awakening in *I Will Marry When I Want*. The characters who resist-workers, peasants and other socially marginalized figures-embody exactly the kind of revolutionary potential that Fanon envisions in postcolonial struggles.

4. Violence as Political Imperative

Fanon controversially but unapologetically argues that decolonization

necessarily involves violence. He contends that for those who have no stake in the colonial system, violence becomes the clearest form of political action. Within the play, this framing helps explain how defiance can grow into revolutionary force. The systemic exploitation faced by the characters-economic, religious and political- is not merely a policy failure but a structural violence inherited from the colonial past. Fanon's insistence on violence as a transformative tool underscores the urgency of the citizens' resistance in the face of entrenched neo-colonial class domination.

5. Decolonization as Subjectivity Transformation

Finally, Fanon's postcolonial theory is not only about overthrowing external systems of power; it is deeply concerned with psychological liberation and the creation of a "new man". In his work, he emphasizes that decolonization must involve a transformation of consciousness, not just of institutions. As researchers note, Frantz Fanon links the political project of liberation to a broader process of self-creation and collective renewal.

Applied to *I Will Marry When I Want*, this aspect of Fanon's theory helps us see the play as more than social critique: it stages a deep ideological and emotional revolution, where oppressed individuals come to see themselves as agents of their own history.

Neo-Colonial Betrayal and Grassroots Resistance in Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii's *I Will Marry When I Want*

At its ideological core, *I Will Marry When I Want* reflects Fanon's assessment of postcolonial leadership in Africa. This depicts that the national bourgeoisie often lacks genuine independence or revolutionary spirit:

KIGUUNDA:

You talk about prices,
 But tell me a single item whose price has not gone up?
 In the past a mere thirty shillings,
 Could buy me clothes and shoes,
 And enough flour for my belly.
 Today I get two hundred shillings a month,
 And it can't even buy insecticide enough to kill a single bedbug.
 African employers are no different
 From Indian employers
 Or from the Boer white landlords.
 They don't know the saying
 That the hand of a worker should not be weakened.
 They don't know the phrase, "increase wages"! (20).

WANGECI:

Are we the pot that cooks without eating? (20).

Rather than transforming society, this class of post independent African rulers functions as the intermediary between foreign oppressors and the masses and thus reinforces economic subordination.

This implicitly betrays the ideals of nationalism and raises the specter of neo-colonialism.

WANGECI:

The difference between then and now is this!

We now have our independence! (19).

KIGUUNDA:

I ran away from coldland only to find myself in frostland! (19).

WANGECI:

But even if prices rise

Without the wages rising,

Or even if there are no jobs,

Are we expected to eat saltless food?

Or do they want us to use ashes?

Gathoni! (19).

By replicating colonial economic structures, the post-independence African elites fail to deliver substantive change for the masses.

I Will Marry When I Want also reveals how religion becomes a tool of oppression, turned into a form of ideological control. Gicaamba, one of the working-class characters, denounces it as “the alcohol of the soul”, a metaphor that suggests spiritual intoxication mask real suffering and maintains the status quo:

GICAAMBA:

And how does religion come into it?

Religion is not the same thing as God.

All the religion that now sit on us

Were brought here by the whites

Is still called the Roman Cathholic Church.

P.C.E.A. belongs to Scottish protestants.

The Anglican church belongs to the English.

The Orthodox belongs to the Greeks.

The Baptist belongs to the Americans.

There are many more religions

All the missionaries of all the churches

Held the Bible in the left hand,
 And the gun in the right hand,
 The white man wanted us
 To be drunk with religion
 While he,
 In the meantime
 Was mapping and grabbing our land,
 And starting factories and businesses
 On our sweat
 He drove us from our best lands,
 Forcing us to eke a living from plots on road sides
 Like beggars in our own land,
 Some of us dying in his tea and coffee plantations
 Others dying in his factories (56–57).

Through the above lines, the playwrights evokes the duality of religion: it offers solace but also obscures exploitation.

1. Neo-Colonial Betrayal by the Post-Independence Elites

One of the central themes in *I Will Marry When I Want* is the betrayal of the masses by local elites who replaced colonial rulers but perpetuated economic and political exploitation. This reflects a larger reality in post-independence African nations, where formal political independence masked the persistence of colonial-era's inequalities. Josephine Ntelamo Sitwala (2018: 12) explains that after independence, Kenya elites did not dismantle colonial structures but instead, “became complicit in the perpetuation of foreign capital and neo-colonial dependency”. These elites, educated and politically connected, effectively serve as intermediaries between international oppressive collaborators and ordinary Kenyans.

Similarly, Most Umme Atia Khatun (2024: 44) argues in her scholarly work that this new ruling class, “parrots the former colonial government” in political, social and economic interactions as seen in *I Will Marry When I Want*

GICAAMBA:
 Today all the good schools belong
 To the children of the rich.
 All the big jobs are reserved
 For the children of the rich.
 Big shops,
 Big farms.
 Coffee plantations
 Wheat fields and ranches,
 All belong to the rich (38).

Most Umme Atia Khatun (2024: 144) emphasizes that this elite continues the, “subtle means of domination” that exclude direct colonial violence but nonetheless sustain power imbalances.

This betrayal is not simply political, but also spiritual and cultural. Some scholars analyze how neo-colonial elites co-opt religious institutions to reinforce their dominance, Most Umme Atia Khatun (2024: 147) points out, “the corrupted Christian Churches exercise cultural imperialism as they impose European practices and abolish Kenyan cultural values. In effect, religion becomes a veneer that disguises economic exploitation in postindependent Africa.

2. Grassroots Resistance and Popular Agency

Despite the betrayal, the playwrights depict powerful awakening among the oppressed. *I Will Marry When I Want* does more than lament the new oppression; it stages a revolution of consciousness. This resonates with scholarly observations that postcolonial African literature frequently portrays grassroots resistance as the only viable force for genuine change. Josephine Itelamo Sitwala (2018: 15) argues that the play's marginalized characters-peasants, labourers and the working poor-embod, “a revolutionary potential rooted in their shared suffering and collective memory”. Their political awakening is not imposed from above but emerges from lived inequalities and historical consciousness.

Other scholars highlight how *I Will Marry When I Want* uses symbolic spaces to mobilize ordinary people. For example, in theatre, performance becomes a potent form of protest:

GGICAAMBA:

The question is this:

who are our friends? And where are they?

Who are our enemies? And where are they?

Let us unite against our enemies (114).

ALL:

The trumpet of the masses has been blown.

Let's preach to all our friends

The trumpet of the masses has been blown

We change to new songs

For the revolution is near (115).

The communal performance of *I Will Marry When I Want* in Kamiriithu (the community space) reinforced the message that the play was not only cultural but deeply political – a “public pedagogical tool” for resistance.

3. Postcolonial Disillusionment and the “Poisoned Gift” of Independence

In his discerning reflections, Ngugi wa Thiong'o often remarks on how independence proved to be a “poisoned gift” for many Africans – promising political freedom but failing to deliver economic justice or social equality. This idea is echoed in scholarly writing. These betrayals are not accidental but systemic, sustained by economic policies that favour the wealthy few.

Ajia Singh and Ram Sebak Thakur (2025: 5) in their historical reading of *Devil on the Cross*, also speak of post-independence disillusionment: they describe how neo-colonial elites, “monopolise the rewards of independence in alliance with the white capitalists”. This critique, although focused on another of Ngugi wa Thiong'o literary work, mirrors the thematic concerns in *I Will Marry When I Want*- that independence has been undermined by internal elites and external economic foes:

NDUGIRE:

A grave is not even the best comparison
 Since there are many state-owned graveyards.
 But how many hundreds of Kenyans
 Are now roaming all over the country
 Looking for any type of job whatever the pay
 And they can't get any? (86).

KIGUUNDA:

I wanted to find out
 If you could lend us money
 To meet the cost of the wedding ceremony (86).

4. The Role of Cultural and Ideological Resistance

In addition to political and economic resistance, the play also stages a cultural and ideological struggle. Ngugi wa Thiong'o broader intellectual project underscores the importance of reclaiming cultural and rejecting Western ideological domination.

For example, in *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues that language and culture are central to genuine liberation. He writes that colonialism devalues indigenous languages and replace them with the language of the oppressor, thereby controlling not just land and economy, but thought itself (1986: 5-6). By reclaiming their own voice, people resist not only material domination but mental subjugation.

KIGUUNDA:

Church, your churches?

Let me tell you a thing or two Mr Ahab Kioi

Even if you were now to give me all the wealth

Which you and your clansmen have stolen from the poor

Yes, the wealth which you and your Asian and European clansmen

And all the rich from Kenya share among yourselves,

I would not take it (102).

Josephine Ntelamo Sitwala (2018:10) analysis also shows that the Kenya elite's embrace of Western religion, education and economic models is part of a neo-colonial strategy that maintains cultural alienation. In *I Will Marry When I Want*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii dramatize this alienation, but they affirm that resistance involves re-rooting in local traditions – a reclaiming of cultural dignity that is political at its core:

KIOI:

True,

But these workers cannot let you acumultae!

Every day: I want an increment

Workers are like the ogres said to have two insatiable mouths.

When they are not demanding a rise in wages

5. Implications for Revolutionary Theory (Fanonian Resonance)

Using Frantz Fanon's revolutionary postcolonial theory, one can interpret the betrayal and resistance in the play as deeply Fanonian. Fanon's critique of the national bourgeoisie—that finds a literary echo in Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii's portrayal of the post-independence elites.

Frantz Fanon theoretical influence is evident: the betrayal of independence, the mobilization of the marginalized and the cultural reclamation all reflect *I Will Marry When I Want* not simply a social critique but a call to revolution. Yet in *I Will Marry When I Want*, there is more than despair; there is awakening:

ALL:

The trumpet of the masses has been blown.

We are tired of being robbed

We are tired of exploitation

We are tired of land grabbing

We are tired of slavery

We are tired of charity and abuses (116).

Conclusion

The analysis of *I Will Marry When I Want* illustrates that Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii craft constitutes a powerful criticism on the political and social order that emerged after Kenya's independence from British colonial power. Rather than depicting freedom as a complete achievement, the play unveil independence as an unfinished project, compromised by indigenous rulers who adopt the logic and practices of the former colonial masters. The struggle of the rustic and working-class characters display how the promises of liberation is undermined by systems of economic privilege, land inequality and through ideological manipulation. This betrayal underscores the wider pattern of neo-colonial governance across Africa, where sovereignty at the level of the flag and anthem does not always translate into meaningful change in people's lived realities.

At the same time, the play asserts that disillusionment can be a catalyst for the resilience of the oppressed and for renewed political engagement. The rising awareness among the oppressed portrayed in the characters highlights how critical consciousness develops through everyday experiences of injustice. The willingness of the oppressed to question authority and challenge imposed narratives marks a transition from passive endurance to active resistance. In this sense, the drama becomes not just a call to recognize the power of collective struggle.

Consequently, the study affirms that *I Will Marry When I Want* is an essential voice in postcolonial conversations and illuminates the failures of the post independence society while asserting the people's power to reclaim control over their identity and collective destiny.

The play's emphasis on collective resistance implies that authentic liberation cannot be imposed from above; it must be shaped through the resolve and agency of the marginalized. As contemporary African societies continue to grapple with colonial residues and persistent governance challenges, the play's message remains compelling: freedom is an ongoing endeavour, and the fight against exploitation must endure until justice and equality are fully realized.

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