



**A Postcolonial Evaluation of the Concepts of ‘Nation and Nationalism’ in
*Mayombe and Petals of Blood***

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Abstract

The Anglo-African postcolonial literature is profound and multi-messaged. The writers have shown resilience to evaluate the pre-independence era and its ramifications on post-colonial Africa with objectivity and accuracy. The present study appraises the concepts of ‘nation and nationalism’ with reference to *Mayombe* and *Petals of Blood*, two successful novels from the postcolonial perspective. The former narrates the colonial hegemony of Portugal and how the same is countered and resisted with the help of nationalism. *Petals of Blood* on the other hand,

presents a post-colonial anarchy which emerges in the wake of liberation. The paper reviews how the ideas of nation and nationalism pave a way for independence and how the same independence turns into imperialism when people assimilate westernization by ignoring their local culture and national heritage.

Introduction

Postcolonial Literature is a colossal body of writing produced by erstwhile colonized nations mostly as a resistance and partly as a projection of their socio-cultural identity. These writings deal with aftermaths and ramifications of what western colonizers did during their hegemonic occupation. Though these colonizers and imperial forces claimed that their mission was to educate, enlighten, civilize, and humanize the barbaric and irrational people (as they thought colonized), yet their cunning policies were never accepted. As not admitted anywhere, these so-called educators were reacted and retorted by the colonized people ceaselessly till redemption had been attained from them. It was not only during their powered presence, but even after winding up their bag and baggage, they are intellectually and literary rectified by the once sabotaged people. The critical attention to this kind of literature is influenced and accelerated by a distinguished school of postcolonial theory emerged in the 1980-90s under the strong wave of Edward Said's landmark *Orientalism* (1978).

The issues of postcolonial writing are multiple. These writers have created an infinite number of masterpieces which have not only served their immediate purpose of displaying their personal potential and cultural-national flexibility and profundity, but have also furnished a

space for them at the international forum and got a status and recognition of which colonized people were hitherto deprived of. The colonial reading mostly focus on the concerns of indigenous cultural in contrast to colonizer's, native politics in relation to global politics, multiculturalism and transnationalism, education and hegemony, hybridity, subalternity, and centre and periphery, racial and ethical clashes, decolonization and extremism and so on. Besides these subjects, the concepts of 'nation and nationalism' in both colonial and postcolonial scenario are much motivated and discoursed issues.

The existence of nation and the essence of nationalism are important for everyone when seen in relation to broader perspective beyond individual self. Man is bound to relate himself to a certain community-nation and to disclose his passion for it-nationalism. Without it life seems lost and hallow. In the postcolonial context, the notions of nation and nationalism are fully pregnant with meaning and it is the same which led to decolonization, and freed colonized from the clutches of colonialism. It is nationalism which has created self-awareness and self-expression. It has fostered strong communal and national feelings and caused a pervasive resentment against western colonizers. It has radiated native people to realize their actual reality and shed away colonizers' deluded colour. But after the attainment of autonomy and independence, the compact concepts of nation and nationhood have blurred slowly but steadily, and its nature has become adulterated and imagery. Behind this, globalization, multiculturalism, and westernization are the root causes. These concepts have radically reversed the meaning of nation and cultural. The physical boundaries have been eroded. The immigration has become common phenomenon, and international communication and interaction have enlarged the ambit of modern man's mental space. He is apparently the citizen of many nations and in reality of none. The idea of nation is now only as 'imagiNation' i.e. nation in imagination only without any solid status and particular

identity. Pertaining the same, Benedict Anderson says: “In an anthropological spirit, then, I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (5). He adds that nation is a cultural product and man made object.

During colonialism, the colonizers encouraged their subject to foster a sense of national spirit. In India, for instance the British wished the native inhabitants to extol India as English conceived her. Before the control of English, India was a country of diverse and heterogeneous population hailing from various cultures, religions, languages, and political beliefs. But once they established their roots firmly, Indians of different communities and regions were expected to think themselves as Indian conceived by English. So the model of the nation was given to colonized by colonizers, and it had been accepted and embraced mostly. This is what Anderson names as “mental miscegenation”.

Anderson asserts that there is a need of a capability to see oneself as a member of a larger community of which he/she has no apparent association. He argues that with the help of media, people do interact with the people in the same language simultaneously and share their aspirations and dealings. Though the people of the nation share and adhere numerous things, yet Calhoun enlists some comprehensive and distinctive elements which simplify the concept of nationhood. They are- boundaries, indivisibility, sovereignty, legitimacy conferred by conformity with the interest of the people, popular mobilization and participation, direct individual membership, common culture, historic depth, common descent and territoriality. This theory of nation and nationhood determines the body in which nation can be perceived. But when the nation or nationhood is analyzed in the light of postcolonial theory, it becomes complex.

Ashcraft and other corroborators write that postcolonial theory is an engagement with and contestation of colonialism's discourses, power structures and social hierarchies. This criterion of the postcolonial approach defies the clear cut definition of nation or nationality. Though nationalism played a vital role in decolonization, yet postcolonial mode focuses on subaltern type of people as projected by discourse of colonizer, and resist to rectify wherever it is misrepresented.

There are two contradictory concepts of the origin of nation- modernist and ethnic. The former believes that nation is more or less a product of industrialism and capitalism. On the contrary, ethnic view is that even the new nations evolve and develop, yet their roots are not new. They have connection to the ancestral myths and old indigenous backgrounds. Therefore, the feeling of nationalism would support the nations to develop and sustain them at the face of changing world scenario.

Mayombe

Artur Carlos Mauricio Pestana das Santos also known as Pepetela in literary world was born in Benguela in 1941 and is verily the acclaimed Angolan novelist. As a distinguished literary artist, he surprisingly and skillfully amalgamates personal and political elements, and historical and national events which are of utmost significance for the understanding of colonial and postcolonial scenario. *Mayombe* (1980) is his masterpiece when perused from the postcolonial point of view. It is a dynamic book with numerous issues buried in its texture and one of its chief and debatable concerns is the concept of nation and nationalism.

Angola, the setting of the novel, is bestowed upon with tremendous treasures of natural resources including forests, oil deposits and plentitude of precious minerals. These indigenous

sources tempted the colonizers to dominate the place commercially, politically and militarily. With the result by the end of the nineteenth century, Angola was declared as a Portuguese colony at the international forum, and this colonial empire curtailed the power of native kingdoms. Portugal like France adopted a strategy of assimilation and the same policy encouraged the metropolitan establishment and suppression of everything belonging to Africa. The main objective of this assimilation policy was to prepare a sect of people who would be mentally corrupted and colonialism favouring as Anderson calls it “mental miscegenation”. In this way, the western colonizers tried to strengthen their roots and extend the empire. This policy of rejecting all African ultimately led to the nationalistic consciousness and resistance to the imperial preoccupation. The People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) mustered up their nationalistic zeal and prepared a collective ideology to route the Portuguese colonialism.

Pepetela is a staunch believer of Marxian ideology. He shows a motivated tendency towards labourers and farmers. As European masters control all main sources of production and reduced the native inhabitants to mere bread earners, it is obvious that the relation between the two would not be mutually benefited but exploited. From this perspective, Pepetela writes as a guerrilla to liberate his nation. He wants to be identified as a revolutionary Angolan freedom fighter. The guerrillas are the main supporters of MPLA. The notion of nation has directed the colonized to carve out a self image and eventually to free them from the forced colonialism. But before departing, the white imperialists have segmented Angola into some sovereign states, and these states comprise diverse sections of people. In *Mayombe*, there are different groups of people like Kikongo, Kimbundu, Flote and Umbundu. In postcolonial context, the concept of nationalism is understood in its proper psychological role to unite these diversified people. The

nation sustains itself only when its members try to see themselves with the same identity and entity without expressing their individual egoism. In the novel, the MPLA has got victory to attract the general public to a considerable extent. This success can be seen in the form of socio-political awareness, mobilization, and civilian aegis. It is realized that the determination and strength of unified public is stronger than diversified groups. The civilians and guerrillas facilitate each other with support and information to defeat the alien force. Fearless accepts that the joining of working class in the struggle would definitely and surely pave away for winning. The nationalism and national identity are crucial for the creation of a nation. In *Mayombe*, the Commissar, Joao feels it through the sincerity and dedication of the people.

Mayombe presents a unity in diversity-a good number of people from Kikongo, Kimbundo and Umbundu and it is common ideology which makes them one nation. Nationalism is such a power which leads to the self-independent nation and helps to counter the enemy successfully. As most states in Alba and Africa, Angolan nationalism wields a potent force to eradicate the imperialistic empire. The historical background and nationalism are dependable entities to which every person identifies himself. The characters in the novel suffer from psychological trauma and they are in a fix to which identity relate themselves as is the case of freedom fighters (MPLA). This tension is seen in all ethnic groups in Angola- Kikongo, Umbendo and Kimbundo. The freedom struggle is weakened by suspension and hate which people bear for one another. They do not even trust and accept commander Fearless as he belongs to different tribe Kikongo while they are Kimbundos. Tribalism is shown as a detrimental to developing nationalistic consciousness. When commander orders volunteers to conduct search for Muatianvua, nobody heeds him as he is detribalized. In this critical situation

where regional and individual motives are rampant, the nationalistic ideology still plays a role of uniting force for all of them.

The essence of nation and nationalism also suffer from mean individual and local missions. In the novel *Mayombe*, the guerrillas tend to grind their own axis in the name of nation. Apparently their ideology propagates the struggle for liberation. But the question rises ‘whose liberation’ when everybody has his personal motives which are preferred to national ones. The Operation’s Chief is fighting in Cabinda to protect his land from external threats. Theory, a mullato is in search of a world where hybridity would be acceptable. All these groups work more for heterogeneous and individual identities rather than one national recognition. But these problems are bound to arise in a community consisting of diverse castes, languages and religions. The well designed nationalistic ideology can serve as ‘emotional glue’ to unify the people and abolish the foreign reign as has been done in Angola.

Mayombe also focalize that nation entails the belongingness of diverse sects of people irrespective of caste, colour, creed, and other community differences. Classists argue that a nation is a homogeneous, socio-cultural entity. This notion of nation is countered by social critics by foregrounding that a nation is bound to be contested and confronted by diverse sections of people. In the novel Theory’s determination is not due to his internal consciousness but of external circumstances. He realizes that hybrid person is deprived of identity and belongingness: “I carry in me the irreconcilable and that is my driving force” (1). He is fighting the myth of racialism which detracts the essential identical element of the people. Theory’s mission is to show that colour variation is not any basic difference and ought not to become a hurdle in the path of nation’s construction, and fostering of nationalism. It means that a nation should be

rested on shared and cared consciousness. Theory comes from Gabla which guarantees him absolute citizenship of Angola. But unluckily this shared consciousness is not seen among guerillas. Theory is motivated to fight, even sacrifice for the sake of Angola. He tries to project the real concept of nation free from all malign selfish ends. Nation is a mixture of varied social groups and everyone should be recognized with dignity without causing superior-inferior complex.

Day and Thompson postulates that a nation is deemed as a community whose norms, values and identity are negotiable and reflective. It gathers huge but diverse masses together under the same consciousness and sensibility, and creates a single identity for all. Pepetela also philosophizes that the need of the hour is to transcend from ethnic interests to larger national demands. It is also emphasized that it is the nationalism which plays a pivotal role in terminating the colonizers away. In the death of Fearless, the claim of syncretism is truly executed as he along with his fellow martyrs is buried in the same grave. This practice rises above the trivial hurdles of individualism and paves a way for nation construction.

Petals of Blood

Kenyan writer, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o was born in 1938. He is one of the leading figures who deal with western colonialism and its aftermaths. His novel *Petals of Blood* (1977) narrates Kenya's changing scenario after her freedom from the British colonizers. It raises question whether liberated Kenya has transcend from oppression and hypocritical policies of colonialism or is still suffering from the same. Ngugi deals with outcomes of westernization and globalization with masterly illustrations through the personages of the novel-Munira, Abdulla, Wanja and Karega.

The novelist tries to compare and contrast a notion of postcolonial nation with a desire to assimilate the agents of socio-cultural change seen in independent Kenya.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o foregrounds the concepts of nation and nationhood from the point of globalization and multiculturalism. The notion of traditional nation and nationalism is slowly but steadily crossing the boundaries and is adulterated by many cosmopolitan traces. It is being eroded by the confrontation of foreign cultures and communities. Though geographically the concept of nation cannot be altered, yet psychologically and culturally it is increasingly shifting by global culture. The same causes an alarming threat to the integrity and autonomy of a nation and deters nationalism. The ideas of nationalism and nation are merely now in consciousness and imagination with loosen corners. It is expanding its ambit and embracing the universalism. The result is that the citizen of modern state is in dilemma whether he belongs to a particular place or to the whole planet. Such indefiniteness causes a crisis regarding the identities of individuality and nationality.

Global market, international communication and migration have contracted the geography of the world. The political boundaries have become irrelevant. Harvey's popular concept of "time-space compression" has great relevance and impact on growing globalization and universalism. The idea of nation-state is weakening. Many transnational factors such as global politics and World Trade Organization have blurred the concept of national governance and authority. There are others who look upon this modernization with optimism. They believe that people still maintain the national identity and cherish national aspirations. The developments of multiculturalism and globalization go side by side with nationalism. People embrace modern interaction without shedding away the indigenous heritage. The diasporas live elsewhere, but

their native sensibility is following them like shadow. Thus, the present scenario demands the assimilation of new trends and the perpetuation of old ones. This leads to the psychological equilibrium.

In *petals of Blood*, Ngugi fictionalizes the traditional Illmorag straying away from its cultural inheritance. Behind it is the speedy sway of materialism and global culture. The present day version of Illmorag is graphed through the four main characters-Munira, Abdulla, Wanja and Karega. The past pastoral version of the place is caught through the reminiscence of Wanja's grandmother, Nyakinyua. The readers are travelled to glimpse glorious past and peaceful life. The old woman deplors the tarnished condition of Illmorag which creates a contrast. This difference between bygone times and present is seen through the mentality of Kimeria, Mzigo and Chu: "...built Illmorag from a tiny nineteenth century village reminiscent of the days of Krapt and Pebman into a modern industrial town that even generations born after Gagarin and Armstrong will be proud to visit" (5).

The postcolonial Kenya is portrayed with many vices brought merely by so-called progress. The hypocrisy and self-centered attitude of aristocracy is revealed through the opportunists and exploiters like Kimeria and Mzigo. When Karego takes delegation to Nairobi to tackle the crisis taken birth by unbroken drought, they are not heeded, instead misguided by their own elite people. The establishment of Trans Africa road, the interference of African Economic Bank. police and church are all sources of fraud and treachery which deter the prestigious idea of nation and nationhood.

The novel *Petals of Blood* brings together multiple communal voices to recount diverse experiences and happenings. Wanja is bewitched by the western values, and becomes a prostitute

only in the race of materializing them. The experienced woman Nyakinyua is the precious asset of the past informing about the colonial regime and the encounters occurred between native Kenyans and alien hegemony. She serves as a connection between the traditional nation and its modern version. Through her, a reader is able to visualize a difference between the two. Even at the face of globalization and changing milieu, the older people are capable to deal with challenges and preserve the inherited values. Nyokinyua instructs Illmoragians how to consume *Theng'eta*, an inspired brew within the socio-cultural setup. In this way, the past can protect and flourish the present. They qualify each other and one is used for the betterment of other.

In the post-independent Kenya, a reader can witness a wide gap between elite and general public. This is created out of avarice among rich class to accumulate more and more material without having an iota of consideration for the down trodden. The people at the helm of authority deter the people's initiatives. The culturally inspired brew *Theng'eta* is turned into trade by MP Nderi. The establishment of transnational highway also leads exploitation of common people. The notorious Nderi and Chief Nanga have scarcely any concern except amassing huge wealth and constructing spacious buildings. They appear more as tradesmen than elected legislators. Their ideology is that of capitalistic and doctorial. These follies at the level of governance emasculate the nation and discourage nationalism.

Ngugi reflects the impact of westernization and globalization which has rendered everything in Africa redundant not less than colonialism. The transnational companies have exhausted the treasures of national sources for the accomplishment of their own motives. The railroad which once joined Illmorog with Rumaini carrying goods like charcoal and wood has been stopped. The national sentiments and communal harmony which the people displayed

during pre-independence to eliminate foreign rule are missing altogether in present scenario. Immediately after freedom, people began to follow blindly the cosmopolitan cultural and forgot their rich heritage. It adversely affected the idea of nationhood and nationalism. In the long run, people faced the problems like-psychological trauma, cultural shock and crisis of belongingness.

The novelist also hints at exclusion of local and national trade from the international market. The promise of globalization to ameliorate the condition of people by annexing them with transnational organizations for the better tomorrow has been vindicated by Ngugi as fraud. In *Illmorag*, the farmers have been provided loans for the adequate productivity and when they fail to return it on time, their land is abducted. They become pauper instead of self-sufficient. All this has turned once resourceful nation into bankruptcy.

Conclusion

Reflecting these analyses, it is evident that nation and nationalism are dynamic terms in postcolonial context. They can be evaluated diversely. Pepetela foregrounds the essence of nationalism for the existence of nation. He vindicates that only nationalistic zeal and selfless intentions can make a nation strong and sound. Nation provides a social status and nationalism a psychological balance. The power of nationalism leads a nation self-identity and self-sufficiency. Moreover, this reading explores the impact of westernization and globalization on the traditional concepts of nation and nationalism as perceived in *Petals of Blood*. It is substantiated how these modern developments abduct the feeling of nationalism from the newly independent nations. International can be assimilated, but not at the cost of national.

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