

**WOMEN AND TRANSFORMATION: A STUDY OF THE
PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN IN SELECTED NOVELS BY BESSIE
HEAD AND NGUGI WA THIONG'O**

BY

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my father, the late Prof. Gert Johannes Pienaar.

ABSTRACT

In my thesis I have endeavoured to evaluate, within the context of the increasingly important position assigned to African literature in general (and the novel in particular), the dominant roles played by Bessie Head and Ngugi in establishing and cementing this genre, all with a special focus on the two writers' significant contribution concerning the theme under discussion: women and transformation.

The need for this study has been proved because although various aspects surrounding this debate have in fact been investigated in isolation, no systematic study of any magnitude has been undertaken in this field.

It has evolved that there exist significant similarities but also considerable differences in Head's and Ngugi's portrayal of women in postcolonial twentieth century fiction concerning African females and change. It has also become obvious that the cultural, religious, educational, social, political and traditional backgrounds of Head and Ngugi, respectively, have shaped their views of the "Other", or of the oppressed in general and women in particular.

Both Head and Ngugi must be viewed as writers who place a high premium on *womanism*, in other words, they have shown themselves as champions of especially sexual and racial freedom for all women. Head, however, becomes increasingly autobiographical in her articulation of her female protagonists' struggle to realize their own individuality in a traditionally male-dominated, sexist and racist postcolonial society. Ngugi, on the other hand, tends to become politically biased in expressing his Marxist social, political and economic doctrines to the detriment of his artistic achievement.

This study has also revealed significant differences pertaining to the two authors' views on transformation and a sense of belonging. While the driving force behind Ngugi's depiction of change is undeniably situated in his unflinching love

for his country Kenya, including the liberation of her indigenous people from all forms of exploitation and oppression, Head's quest is much more restricted. Her own personal striving for a sense of belonging may be detected mainly in her female protagonists' struggle to come to terms with their often hostile spiritual and physical surroundings.

Both Head and Ngugi succeed in convincingly portraying female characters in a rapidly changing world. These two writers successfully employ apposite literary devices to articulate their concerns centring on women.

However, this study has demonstrated that Ngugi is a more accomplished literary craftsman than Bessie Head, a fact to which his wider international critical acclaim and popularity testify. An examination of his portrayal of women and change against a developing African country reveals him as an exceptionally talented and conscious novelist, a novelist who confidently plays with language and relevant stylistic devices to roam widely, while simultaneously focusing on detail.

An outstanding aspect of Ngugi's strength as a novelist is his virtuoso use of irony. Although his ironic tone increases with his scathing revelation of exploitation in *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, it cannot be regarded as excessive in the light of his personal suffering as a result of oppression. Bessie Head's novels, it is maintained, lend themselves more than adequately to comparison and contrast with those of one of the *doyens* of African literature, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, even though she might be generally considered to be somewhat less accomplished in her literary achievement.

OPSOMMING

In my studie het ek gepoog om die toenemend belangrike rolle van Bessie Head en Ngugi wa Thiong'o teen die raamwerk van Afrika in die algemeen te bepaal, veral ten opsigte van die totstandkoming en vestiging van die literêre genre Afrikaliteratuur, met die klem op hul bydrae tot die tema onder bespreking en dan met besondere verwysing na vroue en verandering.

Die noodsaaklikheid van hierdie studie is aangetoon deur verwysing na die feit dat hoewel sekere aspekte van hierdie debat al in isolasie bespreek is, geen omvangryke studie in hierdie veld van ondersoek tot dusver onderneem is nie.

Dit het duidelik geblyk dat daar waarneembare ooreenkomste asook merkbare verskille bestaan tussen die karakteruitbeelding van veral vroue in die werk van Ngugi en Bessie Head. Dit blyk duidelik dat die kulturele, religieuse, opvoedkundige, sosiale, politiese en tradisionele agtergronde van Head en Ngugi, onderskeidelik, hulle siening van die "Ander", of van onderdrukte mense in die algemeen en vroue in die besonder, beïnvloed het.

Beide Head en Ngugi moet gesien word as skrywers wat 'n hoë prioriteit plaas op *vroues*, met ander woorde, hulle het huself bewys as beyweraars vir veral seksuele en rassistiese vryheid vir alle vroue. Head, egter, word toenemend outobiografies in haar artikulering van die stryd van veral haar vroulike hoofkarakters om hul eie identiteit in 'n tradisionele manlik gedomineerde, postkoloniale, seksistiese en rassistiese samelewing te handhaaf. Ngugi, aan die ander kant, neig om polities bevooroordeel te word in die artikulering van sy Maksistiese sosiale, politiese en ekonomiese beginsels, tot nadeel van sy romans.

Hierdie studie het ook gedui op merkbare verskille in die siening van hierdie twee skrywers ten opsigte van verandering en die gevoel van tuishoort, "behoort tot". Terwyl die krag van Ngugi se uitbeelding van verandering gesetel is in sy

onfeilbare liefde vir sy vaderland, Kenia, insluitende die bevryding van die inheemse bevolking van alle vorme van oorheersing en uitbuiting, is Head se visie meer beperk. Haar eie strewe na 'n sin van behoort word waargeneem in veral die stryd van haar vroulike hoofkarakters om vrede te maak met hul dikwels vyandige geestelike en fisieke omgewing.

Beide Head en Ngugi slaag daarin om die rol van vroulike karakters in 'n snelveranderende omgewing geloofwaardig weer te gee. Hierdie twee skrywers maak suksesvol gebruik van toepaslike literêre stilistiese middele om hulle sieninge ten opsigte van vroue te verwoord.

Die studie het egter bewys dat Ngugi moontlik 'n meer bedrewe skrywer is as Bessie Head, 'n feit wat gestaaf word deur sy groter internasionale aanhang. 'n Studie van sy uitbeelding van vroue en verandering teen die agtergrond van 'n veranderende Afrikaland bevestig hom as 'n buitengewoon veelsydige en toegewyde romanskrywer, 'n skrywer wat doelgerig met die taal en stilistiese verskynsels toor ten einde wyd uit te reik, dog tegelykertyd op detail te fokus.

'n Uitstaande aspek van die sterkte van Ngugi as romanskrywer is sy meesterlike gebruik van ironie. Alhoewel sy ironie skerper word met sy bytende openbaring van veral uitbuiting in *Petals of Blood* en *Devil on the Cross*, kan dit nie as oordrewe beskou word in die lig van sy persoonlike lyding as gevolg van onderdrukking nie. Alhoewel sy in die algemeen as minder suksesvol as 'n skrywer gereken word as Ngugi, leen die romans van Bessie Head hulself nogtans tot 'n vergelykende studie en vorm hulle 'n waardige teenstelling met die werk van een van die groot figure in die Afrikaliteratuur, Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Pages
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	i
DEDICATION	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
OPSOMMING	v
PREFACE	1
1 CONTEXTUALIZATION	1
2 PROBLEM STATEMENT	14
3 THE AIMS OF THE STUDY	14
4 CHAPTER DIVISION	15
5 LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE THESIS	16
CHAPTER 1	18
1.1 GENERAL COMMENTS ON REGIONAL LITERATURE IN SOUTH AFRICA AND EAST AFRICA	18
1.2 DEFINITION OF THE NOTION OF "AFRICAN LITERATURE"	22
1.3 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN LITERATURE	26
1.4 DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF AFRICAN LITERATURE	31
1.5 LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND LIBERATION	41
9 1.6 THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE	45
1.7 POSTCOLONIALISM AND TRANSFORMATION	55
1.8 APPROACH TO ANALYSIS	59

	CHAPTER TWO	67
	* CHANGE AND TRANSFORMATION AS EVINCED IN THE EARLIER NOVELS BY BESSIE HEAD AND NGUGI	67
*	2.1 BESSIE HEAD	67
	2.2 NGUGI'S EARLIER NOVELS	86
	CHAPTER THREE	
	A STUDY OF HEAD'S AND NGUGI'S MIDDLE PERIOD NOVELS	135
	3.1 INTRODUCTION	135
*	3.2 BESSIE HEAD'S "MIDDLE PERIOD NOVEL"	135
	3.3 NGUGI'S "MIDDLE PERIOD NOVEL"	156
	CHAPTER FOUR	
	THE DISCOURSE OF TRANSFORMATION IN HEAD'S LAST AND NGUGI'S LATER NOVELS	181
*	4.1 BESSIE HEAD'S FINAL NOVEL	182
	4.2 NGUGI'S LATER NOVELS	203
	CHAPTER FIVE	
	RECAPITULATION AND CONCLUSION	256
	5.1 AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL VERSUS POLITICAL WRITING	257
	5.2 A CHANGED PERSPECTIVE: THE DISCOURSE OF FEMALE LIBERATION	261
*	5.3 THE DIALOGUE OF TRANSFORMATION AND A SENSE OF BELONGING	266
	5.4 THE MYTHO-HISTORICAL APPROACH EMBODIED IN THE NOVELS BY HEAD AND NGUGI	269
	5.5 HEAD AND NGUGI: TWO CONTRASTING APPROACHES TO COLONIALISM	271

5.6	CONCLUSION	272
6	BIBLIOGRAPHY	275
6.1	PRIMARY SOURCES	275
6.2	BIBLIOGRAPHICAL WORKS	277
6.3	CRITICAL SOURCES	277
6.4	CONFERENCE REPORTS	293
6.5	DICTIONARIES	294

PREFACE

1 CONTEXTUALIZATION

African literature has recently become a major field of research, provoking increasing interest in the domain of comparative literature, while female/feminist postcolonial literature has also been recognized as a significant facet of the literary output of the twentieth century. At a crucial time in the histories of South Africa and Africa, and with the emergence of an ever more significant role for women on the continent (against the background of prevalent patriarchal notions about women, the role of women is becoming more acute) it is considered apposite to look at literary renderings of the place and role of women in African society/ies because literature can provide a quintessential and illuminating perspective on society. The study of female literature has, of course, become an important phenomenon in its own right in twentieth century cultural, political and intellectual discourse. In her *Preface to The Female Form: Women Writers and the Conquest of the Novel*, Miles (1990:ix) underscores the importance of female literature by saying that "This stunning explosion of female talent has created a new wave of women writers, most of whom are only beginning to realise their potential, and who will go further in directions that are yet unimagined".

In investigating views and perceptions of women in African literature, it was decided to use Ngugi and Head as exemplars - Ngugi's unchallenged position as a novelist of note would provide a useful foil for the more focused view on difference and otherness evinced by Head - as will be explicated in some detail below.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is considered by distinguished critics (cf. Gérard below) as the doyen of African (male) novelists. His representations of women in many ways are traditional and patriarchally stereotypical, although his empathy with the victims of oppression does at times extend to women as a marginalized group. In fascinating juxtaposition Bessie Head, regarded by some as the foremost woman

women
+
ngugi

novelist of the continent (cf. Maxwell-Mahon below), assumes an overtly feminist stance in her work - although her stance is defined more by a general awareness of abuses of power, not just the abuse of women. Her writing is a clear and conscious attempt to *write women into history*, from whence they have been resolutely and traditionally excluded. She is, therefore, one of the women writers who

Ngugi → > *Head*

Power roles

Head depicts / trans the S. African how

have resorted to an effective, quietly devastating subversion of the traditional stereotypical roles ascribed to women by asserting their independence and rewriting literature and, by implication, history - and thus finally and irrevocably (re)-inscribing themselves into history (Wenzel, 1995:Abstract).

A comparative approach evinces remarkable similarities and differences in Head's and Ngugi's portrayal of women and change, culminating in male and female views on a crucially important issue within the African context. These arise both from the gender perspective and from the different political situations which have a profound influence on the world view that emerges from the works of the authors under review - Ngugi (Kenya) and Bessie Head (South Africa and Botswana [as an exile]).

Africa in general

Ngugi's work in particular has vitally influenced the literary history not only of East Africa (Kenya in particular) but of Africa as a whole, and indeed of the black diaspora globally, as Robson (1979:133) states: "As a leader in an emerging literature, Ngugi plays a vital part in establishing and defining the status and identity of the East African". Cook and Okenimkpe (1983:11) justly praise Ngugi's contribution to African literature by remarking that his "voice of protest in the cause of social justice is known and respected throughout Kenya and Africa, and widely in the world at large". Gérard (1981:312) regards Ngugi as "one of the finest novelists in black Africa, as perhaps the best writer to have come not only from his country Kenya, but from the whole of what used to be British East Africa". For the purposes of this study, an important factor in shaping Ngugi's view of women is revealed in a passage written in his prison diary during his

detention without trial. In *Detained - A Writer's Diary* (1981:10) he justifies the creation of the heroine of his second last novel, *Devil on the Cross*:

Because the women are the most oppressed and exploited section of the entire working class, I would create a picture of a strong determined woman with a will to resist and to struggle against conditions of her present being Waringa will be the fictional reflection of this resistance heroine of Kenyan history.

Although perceived by certain critics to be perhaps less successful in her achievements, the late Bessie Head established herself as perhaps Africa's leading woman writer. In her article entitled "Bessie Head: Production under Drought Conditions", Gardner (1985:226) aptly remarks: "In many ways Bessie Head's reputation is made. However, she is not as well-known as she should be in South Africa, enjoying a far greater overseas eminence". Head's artistic exploration of central issues such as prejudice and discrimination has earned her both a local and an international readership. In regarding Head's sympathetic portrayal of women as comparable to Olive Schreiner's, Heywood (1979:18) states that "The existence of this vision of genius is among the best literary achievements of the continent". MacKenzie (1989b:19) views Bessie Head's novels as "intensely private, remarkable works. They are charged with an honesty and power that arise from deep personal experience with the issues explored".

Although extensive research has been done on Ngugi's major novels, Bessie Head's works have not, to my mind, been investigated to the same extent. Maxwell-Mahon mentions this fact in his article "Out of Africa: A Tribute to Bessie Head" (1992:39), where he says that

Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer, Mary Morrison Webster, Sheila Fugard, Sheila Roberts - we all know who they are ... but Bessie Head? Who is she? Well, on the grounds of literary merit rather than the promotion of this or that racial or political ideology, she is one of the finest novelists to come out of Africa.

The fact that Bessie Head received less critical acclaim and attention than Ngugi may be attributed to the inescapable reality that the works of black female were not as readily published as those of their male counterparts. Moreover, being a poor woman from the relatively unimportant Botswana also made Head's work less accessible to the world market in contrast to the works of Ngugi, who studied in England, where he played a leading and visible role in African literary and political circles.

Bessie Head's novels cannot be regarded as representative of the mainstream of aggressive feminist literature so characteristic of the latter part of the twentieth century American, European and even Australian fiction. This is a result of her own marginalized position against which she struggled so unflaggingly all her life. She was born as a Coloured in apartheid South Africa. Her position of difference, or alterity, was aggravated by being a non-White *female* writer who was to spend fifteen (her most productive) years in exile in a bleak and unwelcoming Botswana. Her own frail mental health was another obstacle that shaped her view of the world in general and of women in particular. Her first novella, *The Cardinals*, published posthumously in 1993, anticipates much of the autobiographical tone of her last novel, *A Question of Power* (1974). Her novels form an interesting contrast to many strident, mainstream contemporary feminist novels. In a sense, Head's novels possibly served as an exorcism of her own personal anxieties rather than as an outcry or protest against the violation of women's rights, although the effect of the novels is an extraordinarily powerful and eloquent generalized plea rather than a merely personal agony.

Data: Although very extensive research has been done on Ngugi's work, including his six novels, Head's canon has not received the critical attention its intrinsic merit warrants. The NAVO Database computer search as well as an intensive MLA search has nevertheless indicated that no comparative research on the theme of women and transformation in the works of these two renowned authors has been undertaken. It is therefore, on the basis of the exposition above, considered of importance to undertake the present study.

Because the discourse of women and transformation cannot be investigated in isolation from the mainstream of literary criticism on the whole output of these two well-known writers, a brief survey will be given of the main areas of critical concern.

1.1 An overview of the main lines of Head criticism[1]

My study of criticism of the Head canon has clearly demonstrated the central role assigned to determining the influence of the author's personal life on her work as a whole, including her basic approach to writing *per se* and novel writing in particular. The overtly autobiographical nature of Head's work has elicited both positive and negative criticism.

Craig MacKenzie, for instance, introduces his *Bessie Head: A Bibliography* (co-authored by Catherine Woeber, 1992:1) by hailing her unique position as a female African writer who has initiated an inclination to introspection in other African female authors on the African continent:

By the time of Bessie Head's tragically premature death in Serowe at the age of 49, she had gained recognition as a writer of extraordinary power and insight. In her concern with women and madness in her third novel *A Question of Power*, claims Charles Larson, Bessie Head 'has almost single-handedly brought about the inward turning of the African novel'... . This novel was ranked eighth of fifteen 'most influential books of the decade' by the journal *The Black Scholar*... . Head has also been acclaimed by such internationally renowned authors like Nikki Giovanni and Alice Walker and has served as an inspiration to women writers of Africa, and, more particularly, to the suppressed women of her native South Africa.

It is, however, imperative to keep in mind the sound pronouncement by the often provocative Mbulele Mzamane (1977:29) when he cautions against seeing Bessie Head as having "single-handedly transformed the African novel in an

introspective direction". He then justly refers to the mammoth contribution of Ezekiel Mphahlele in this regard. It cannot, however, be denied that Bessie Head has played a leading role in changing the approach of the work especially of female African writers into a more personalized nature, becoming an "interesting cross between autobiography and the novel" (Mzamane, 1977:28-29), as the novels of Head and Mphahlele may be called.

Mackenzie and Woeber (1992:1) appositely remark that Head's tragic life-story truly "encapsulates in microcosm the greater social and political evils" of apartheid South Africa because "she is in many ways the physical and psychological meeting point of forces that have been in conflict with each other for centuries in Africa". She does indeed epitomize the struggle between the value systems of Europe and indigenous Africa.

Literary criticism has generally regarded Head's novels and some of her short stories as more autobiographical than her other writings. It is interesting to note that in their *Bessie Head: A Bibliography* MacKenzie and Woeber list twenty-two items under the heading *Autobiography*, thirty-eight under the heading *Fiction* while nine are classified as *Non-fiction*, one as *Poetry* and seventeen as *Broadcast and Published interviews*. Although the novels are classified as *Fiction*, MacKenzie and Woeber in the *Compiler's Preface* draw attention to "the difficulty of categorising Head's writings" (1992). These figures do, however, establish the autobiographical nature of Head's whole output, because the novels are regarded as *Fiction*, while this study, especially of *A Question of Power*, demonstrates the personal nature of Head's work. Some of the latest pronouncements on Head's work, such as reviews on the first Head biography, namely Gillian Eilersen's *Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears* (1995) comment on the personal note in Head's writing. Stephen Gray, for example, notes in his review in *Literary Supplement to the Mail and Guardian* (August 1995:2): "Head was not such a fine writer and self-analyst for nothing: she knew well enough how to make a case on her own behalf and out of her difficult times".

Gorry Taylor remarks in *Times Literary Supplement* (27 August 1995:): "Her

fiction, essays and letters were dramatic, poignant and original, closely reflecting her life and, for the most part, inspired by her love/hate experience of Botswana".

The following works should suffice as examples of literary critiques which concentrate on the autobiographical nature of Bessie Head's work: "Production Under Drought Conditions" (Susan Gardner, 1985); "Don't Ask for the True Story: A Memoir of Bessie Head" (Susan Gardner, 1986); "Reconstructing The Self: Black Women Writers and the Autobiographical Text" (Dorothy Driver, 1988); "A Question of Power: Susan Gardner's Biography versus Bessie Head's Autobiography" (Teresa Dovey, 1989); "A Note on the Life and Work of Bessie Head" (MacKenzie, 1989); *The Tragic Life* (Abrahams, ed., 1990); and finally, *Thunder Behind Her Ears* (Eilersen, 1995).

As might be anticipated in an era when feminism has come to constitute such an important part of literary criticism, Bessie Head's stance on feminism has come under close scrutiny. Although Bessie Head has herself denied being a feminist writer, this statement, like most of her random pronouncements about herself and her work, has formed an interesting section of Head criticism. Most critics do concede that she cannot be regarded as a conscious feminist writer in the western or Afro-American sense - and most certainly not as a radical feminist - but sensitive critics usually view Head as a feminine writer, as the discussion of the terms *feminine*, *feminist* and *female* in Chapter One (1.6) of my thesis will indicate.

As influential instances of criticism in this regard the following works have exerted considerable influence: "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English" in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (Ogunyemi, 1985); "Feminist Perspectives in African Fiction: Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta" in *The Black Scholar* (Nancy Bazin, 1986); "Changes in the Image of the African Woman: A Celebration" in *Phylon* (Ebele Eko, 1986); as well as various articles on feminism in female literary journals, such as *Hecate*.

Postcolonialism in its various guises and manifestations plays a mammoth part - perhaps *the* most important one - in African writing, and this aspect has been addressed as a characteristic of Head's work, but not to the same extent as in the works of African novelists in general, and most certainly in Ngugi's literary output. Many critics have, however, quite validly ascribed a great deal of Head's prejudices, mental agony, feelings of otherness, loneliness, and stigmatization, to the effects of postcolonialism. To be more specific: much of Head's agonized personal traumatized wrestling to come to terms with life as an exile in Botswana can be attributed to her feelings of otherness as a result of her unhappy South African past.

Illuminating studies in this context include Cecil Abraham's "The Tyranny of Place: The Context of Bessie Head's Fiction" in *World Literature Written in English* (1978); Ogungbesan's "The Cape Gooseberry Also Grows in Botswana: Alienation and Commitment in the Writings of Bessie Head" in *Journal of African Studies* (1979); and Arlene Elder's article, "Bessie Head" in Martin Tucker's *Literary Exile in the Twentieth Century: An Analysis and Biographical Dictionary* (1991).

An impressive part of criticism on Head's work examines her preoccupation with the human and especially her own psyche. A study of psychological approaches to Head's work, especially attempts at determining the exact nature of Head's mental disturbance and her wrestling with philosophical concepts such as good and evil which culminate in *A Question of Power*, refutes glib generalizations (still treasured by a large part of the so-called privileged white populations globally), namely that Africans are not subject to mental problems in the way Whites are [2]. This aspect of Head's work has received a fair amount of often extremely paradoxical critical attention. As examples one could cite a few contributions to *The Tragic Life* (1990), namely Roger Berger's "The Politics of Madness in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*"; Carol Davidson's article in the same critique, "A Method in the Madness: Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*", as well

as Ola Virginia's "Power and the Question of Good and Evil in Bessie Head's Novels". Linda Beard has contributed to this line of criticism with her useful article, "Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*: The Journey through Disintegration to Wholeness" (1979), while Pearse addresses it in his article in *Kunapipi*: "Apartheid and Madness: Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*". Pearse (1979: 81), for example, states:

No work in the corpus of African literature dealing with the theme of madness, for example Achebe's *Arrow of God*, Kofi Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother*, or Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments*, captures the complexity and intensity of the insane mind as does Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*. Bessie Head's thrust into the insane mind and her ability to speak the highly symbolic language of madness derives, it seems, from a combination of the painful personal experience of mental aberration and an interest in psychoanalytical theories.

The unabated interest in Head's psychological wrestling is apparent in later articles, such as Elizabeth Evasdaughter's article, "Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* Read as a Mariner's Guide to Paranoia" (*Research in African Literatures*, 1989). At the 1994 *Ngugi: Texts and Contexts Conference* in Philadelphia this aspect of Head's work was often raised in general discussions on African literature, while Edward Eden delivered an informative paper on "Madness and Narrative in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*".

Since this thesis is essentially a comparative study which represents an attempt to illuminate my own belief in evaluating a writer's/writers' achievement by studying the specific artists in comparison to a related aspect/aspects in the work of another author, I explicitly endorse T.S. Eliot's main pronouncements in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (Maxwell-Mahon, 1988:191), especially the following statement:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall

conform, that he shall cohere, is not onesided; what happens when a work of art is created is something which happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them.

As may be anticipated, most comparative literary criticism on Head focuses on her work in relation to that of other, mostly African female, novelists [3]. Bessie Head has, for example, been compared to white female South African novelists, such as Olive Schreiner, Pauline Smith, Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer: "Lessing and Head: A Comparison" (Linda Beard, 1979) and "The Farm: A Concept in the Writing of Olive Schreiner, Pauline Smith, Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer [sic] and Bessie Head" (Marquard, 1979). More studies have concentrated on Bessie Head and other black female writers, both from Africa and from other countries. These include "Bessie Head and Her Black American Sisters: A Comparison of Bessie Head to Alice Walker and Toni Morrison" (Sue Houchins, 1979), "Four Women Writers in Africa Today" (Lauretta Ngcobo, 1984) and "Feminist Perspectives in African Fiction: Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta" (Nancy Bazin, 1986). Certain aspects of Head's work have been compared to those of male authors, as witness the Alex La Guma-Bessie Head Memorial Conference which was held in 1988. I could not find specific comparative studies on Head and Ngugi, except for a few brief references indicating similarities or differences in their works randomly sprinkled in various critical works - and this became one of the incentives to undertake this specific study.

1.2 Ngugi and the critical debate

Being a pioneer in many areas, Ngugi has elicited much wider critical attention than Bessie Head. Bernth Lindfors underlines the main areas of Ngugi criticism in his *Preface to Carol Sicherman's Ngugi wa Thiong'o: A Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Sources* (1989:ii):

Ngugi has been a pioneer in many sense [sic] of the word: he was the first student from his area of Kenya to attend Alliance High School, complete a B.A. in English at Makerere University, and go on to postgraduate study of literature at Leeds University in England; while an undergraduate, he won the first English-language novel-writing competition sponsored by the East African Literature Bureau; before going abroad to study, he wrote a regular column for a Nairobi newspaper, being one of the earliest African journalists to do so; he became the first Kenyan author to publish novels and plays in English; upon returning from Leeds, he was among the first Africans to be appointed to lecture in the English Department at Nairobi University, a Department that he and his colleagues quickly transformed into Africa's first Department of Literature, putting indigenous and other black literatures at the heart of its curriculum; he was the first East African to write a book of literary criticism, and he co-authored the first musical dramas in Gikuyu, his mother tongue; he may be the only Kenyan ever to have been detained for a year for writing and staging a play in a Kenyan language, though formal charges were never brought against him; when his first works in Gikuyu were published a few years after his release from prison, they instantly turned into record-breaking bestsellers in Kenya.

Lindfors concludes this list of Ngugi's innovations by firmly establishing the general trend of Ngugi criticism: "Throughout his career Ngugi has been a courageous pioneer whose bold trailblazing and independent thinking have opened up new imaginative territory, vastly extending Africa's literary frontiers".

This passage reiterates the deepseated, fundamental influence of Ngugi's fierce patriotism on his literary output as a whole. Literary criticism has clearly revealed that the driving force behind most of his work, whether in the writing of novels, dramas, literary criticism or political treatises and essays, has been his increasing belief in Marxist social, economic and political doctrines. In 1987 Ede, for instance, completed an M.A. dissertation on *The Marxist Perspective in the Novels of Richard Wright and Ngugi wa Thiong'o*. Lazarus has often commented on Ngugi's political stance. Neuhaus argues in his 1987 article, "How Ngugi wa Thiong'o Lost his Way: A Writer and the Politics of Disillusion in Africa" that Ngugi has reverted from a sensitive conciliator to a revolutionary Marxist advocating a creed of violence.

Ngugi's insistence on exploring the phenomenon of change has been an important element in criticism of his whole output. In 1965, for instance, Chukwukere published an article in *Phylon*, entitled "African Novelists and Social Change". Lindfors's early criticism, namely an article published in 1969, already emphasizes Ngugi's insistence on change: "The African Politician's Changing Image in African Literature in English". In 1970 Mutiso addressed this aspect of Ngugi's writing in two separate articles, namely in "Social Change and Pan-Africanism" and "Socio-Political Ideas in African Literature in English, 1945-1967". This debate has continued with, for example, Peter Nazareth's article in 1972, entitled "Is a *Grain of Wheat* a Socialist Novel?" and Okenimpke's "Culture and Revolution in the Novels of James Ngugi". In the mid-eighties several departmental projects on various aspects of Ngugi's work were launched at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. These include studies of Ngugi's doctrines on politics and his yearning for meaningful change, for example Adegboye's "Colonialism and Neocolonialism in the Writings of Ngugi wa Thiong'o". Ngugi's increasing politicizing of the novel has elicited negative criticism as well. In 1985 Henry Manzo, for instance, criticized Ngugi for popularizing his political belief at the expense of creative writing ("Kenyan Writers: What Went Wrong?").

My overview of Ngugi criticism has, I hope, persuasively demonstrated that Ngugi's pioneering work in the novel received earlier critical acclaim than did literary aspects of his work, such as his concern with characterization, and more especially with the creation of credible female characters. In an early review in *Daily Telegraph* (30 March 1967:21), David Holloway rather naively generalizes about five novels, including *A Grain of Wheat*, as having "sympathetically drawn, believable characters" with "similar unrecognisable names"[sic]. In 1973 Gachikia concentrated on "The Role of Women in Ngugi's Novels", while Erika Rausch's "The Central Male-Female Relationship in *The River Between* and [Mungo Beti's] *Mission to Kala*" serves as an example of the shift to gender issues in criticism of the African novel. Ngugi's increasing empowerment of women as instruments in the political struggle finds expression in articles such as "Women as Guardians of the Tribe in Ngugi's Novels" in *Bulletin of the*

Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies (1977). The recent upsurge of interest in feminine issues coupled with the vital roles of Ngugi's later female protagonists, such as Wanja and Wariinga, has also inspired more investigation into Ngugi's unique portrayal of the changing role of females in a transitional postcolonial context.

After the first general upsurge of African criticism dealing mainly with political and postcolonial aspects, more attention has been devoted to issues such as the choice of language medium, the reliance on the oral tradition, the employment of myth and legends, as well as general stylistic aspects. Herta Meyer's "*Justice for the Oppressed*": *The Political Dimension in the Language of Ngugi wa Thiong'o* may be regarded as an influential textbook, systematically illuminating Ngugi's conscious use of language and stylistic features, while Awoonor's 1973 article, "A Study of the Influences of Oral Literature on the Contemporary Literature of Africa" to some extent reaffirms the reawakening of scholarly interest in the oral roots of traditional African literature.

To recapitulate, this brief survey of Head and Ngugi criticism has underlined both the importance of these two renowned literary figures while it has also indicated the need for the ensuing comparative study of women and transformation in the novels of Head and Ngugi. This survey has indicated that there exist remarkable similarities in the situation of these two writers in that, as twentieth century postcolonial African writers, they both earnestly strive to employ the pen to contribute towards changing the position of lonely, stigmatized and oppressed females. However, this review of criticism has indicated that there are also significant differences in their approach towards the theme of females in a rapidly changing Third World environment, an aspect of the present investigation which will hopefully make this study a meaningful contribution to existing critical literature on these two prominent authors.

2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

In view of what has been outlined above, the following questions need to be asked:

- 2.1 In the light of the demonstrated stature of both authors, and their overt concern with various classes of the oppressed, the "Other", it is important to ask how the cultural, religious, educational, social, political and traditional backgrounds of Ngugi and Head, respectively, shape their views of the oppressed in general and women in particular in a *changing* and ultimately *transformed* world.
- 2.2 Following from this, and the preceding contextualizing, a further important question would hinge on the possible significant differences and/or similarities in the portrayal of the role and function of female characters in the novels written by these two important (male/female) writers.
- 2.3 A subsequent question would hinge on the issue as to whether the depiction of female characters in a rapidly changing world, as depicted by Ngugi and Head, can be considered to be convincing - that is, do they succeed in employing apposite literary devices to give adequate voice to their concerns centring on women?
- 2.4 Ngugi is mostly regarded as being superior to Head in literary terms. Does this perception emanate clearly from a close study of the novels, and is it applicable to the facet of their work under discussion?

3 THE AIMS OF THE STUDY THEREFORE ARE:

- 3.1 to examine the continuity and discontinuity in the portrayal of women in traditional oral literature and more recent postcolonial written African literature to provide a framework and rationale for the present study;
- 3.2 to evaluate the literary depiction of women and the plight of women as seen from both a male (Ngugi) and a female (Head) perspective with specific reference to the elements of change and transformation;

- 3.3 to further determine the differences in their perception of the female role in the historical, social, economic, political and cultural spheres;
- 3.4 to assess the individual stance/s adopted by these two authors as a result of the geographical factors impinging on their lives and work: Ngugi has lived and written his major novels in the Gikuyu region of East Africa (and his work is soaked in the sense of the land his characters inhabit), while the late Bessie Head fled from South Africa to spend the rest of her (short) life in Botswana - the aridity of the landscape echoes throughout her work; and to focus on and assess the individual stylistic features employed by Ngugi and Bessie Head in the pursuit of their literary aims.

There exist inherent, crucial similarities yet also differences between Ngugi's and Head's portrayal and evocation of women and the plight of women in a transitional postcolonial phase. It is also postulated that this facet of their work is vitally important within the oeuvre of each writer, and illuminates important notions of women and their transformational role within African society at this juncture in history. The potential contribution of the study is situated in this area, as has been anticipated in the validation for this investigation earlier in the review of Head and Ngugi criticism.

4 CHAPTER DIVISION:

- Chapter 1: General introduction and contextualization; background (sociological, historical, religious, political and geographical factors); theoretical frameworks: postcoloniality and feminism; autobiography; the stylistic approach to analysing fiction.
- Chapter 2: The portrayal of women in the earlier novels of both authors: Head (*When Rain Clouds Gather*, 1969) and Ngugi (*The River Between*, 1964). In this section it will emerge that Ngugi's initial depiction of women was less successful than that of males (also apparent in *Weep Not, Child*, 1965).

- Chapter 3:* More mature developments in the works of both authors in terms of their depiction of women and change. Head (*Maru*, 1971) and Ngugi (*A Grain of Wheat*, 1967) both show remarkable development in the depiction of women: "Ngugi's characterization in the novel can hardly be faulted" (Palmer, 1981:47).
- Chapter 4:* Head (*A Question of Power*, 1973 - her final novel) shows a strong development towards the autobiographical (Sarvan, 1987:82) with interesting implications for the present study. Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* (1977) represents something of a disappointment in his line of development in view of its strident political overtones. His last major novel, *Devil on the Cross* (1980), "introduces heroines who have made a decisive break with a former life of mothering and/or whoring in their total commitment to a revolutionary cause" (Boehmer, 1991:190). Ngugi's most recent novel, *Matigari* (1987), satirizes the betrayal of human aspirations in its revelation of a post-independence African society.
- Chapter 5:* Conclusion and recapitulation: This chapter concludes my thesis by underlining the central importance of the development of the theme of women and transformation in the works of two eminent African authors. It indicates that the study makes a contribution to debates on African literature, on women in African literature, and on the shift in the social arena with the adoption of twentieth century attitudes as against the still prevailing traditional patriarchal views.

5 LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE THESIS

5.1 Bessie Head's Novels

WRCG *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968)

M *Maru* (1971)

AQOP *A Question of Power* (1973)

TC *The Cardinals* (1993)

5.2 Ngugi's Novels

TRB *The River Between* (1965)

WNC *Weep Not, Child* (1964)

AGOW *A Grain of Wheat* (1967)

POB *Petals of Blood* (1977)

DOTC *Devil on the Cross* (1982)

Ma *Matigari* (1986)

ENDNOTES

- [1] In this part of my thesis I am not going to repeat the content of the standard complete critical texts on Head and Ngugi, because they mostly, albeit to a varying degree, deal with mainstream aspects of Head and Ngugi criticism.
- [2] In a much later work than Head's writings, namely in the young Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), the white male psychiatrist articulates this mistaken concept when he roughly brushes aside the seriousness of Nyasha's nervous breakdown: "But the psychiatrist said that Nyasha could not be ill, that Africans did not suffer in the way we had described. She was making a scene. We should take her home and be firm with her" (1988:201).
- [3] In this study I deliberately chose to compare Bessie Head and Ngugi, because of the dearth of this kind of approach, while it was also my intention to examine the anticipated differences in the approach to females in a transitional phase as experienced and reflected by authors of both sexes. This selection has indeed opened up unique opportunities for comparison and contrast.

CHAPTER 1

1.1 GENERAL COMMENTS ON REGIONAL LITERATURE IN SOUTH AFRICA AND EAST AFRICA

There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees (Emerson, 1803-1882)[1].

Against this philosophical concept of the universal and everlasting nature change as an inevitable phenomenon affecting all spheres of life, this study primarily concerns itself with two areas of change and transformation: those pertaining to Africans and those concerning females.

In his famous "Winds of Change" speech delivered to both Houses of Parliament in 1960, the then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Harold MacMillan, also stressed both the universality and inevitability of the process of change and the resultant state of transformation:

Ever since the breakup of the Roman Empire one of the constant facts of political life in Europe has been the emergence of independent nations. They have come into existence over the centuries in different forms and different kinds of governments. But all have been inspired by a deep, keen feeling of nationalism, which has grown as the nations have grown.

In the twentieth century, and especially since the end of the war, the processes which gave birth to the nation states of Europe have been repeated all over the world. We have seen the awakening of national consciousness in peoples who have for centuries lived in dependence on some other power. Fifteen years ago this movement spread through Asia. Many countries there, of different races and civilizations, pressed their claim to an independent national life. Today the same thing is happening in Africa.

The most striking of all the impressions I have formed since I left London a month ago is the strength of this African national consciousness. In different places it may take different forms. But it is happening everywhere. The Wind of change is blowing throughout the Continent.

And this tide of national consciousness which is now rising in Africa is a fact for which you and we and the other nations of the Western World are ultimately responsible. For its causes are to be found in the achievements of Western civilization in pushing forward the frontiers of knowledge, applying science to the service of human needs, expanding food production, speeding and multiplying the needs of communication and perhaps, above all, and more than anything else, in the spread of education (Mansergh, 1963:347).

In the course of the study it soon became apparent that the terms *change* and *transformation* were troubling ones in view of the fact that they are often used interchangeably and (seemingly) indiscriminately. For the sake of establishing some kind of system for a discussion of these phenomena, on which the entire thematic structure of the thesis rests, it was decided to determine the etymological charge of the terms, and then to use the terms in the contexts suggested most powerfully in standard and respected dictionary sources.

The Oxford English Dictionary (1978) as an example of a standard British dictionary defines *change* as follows:

- * To put or take another (or others) instead of, to substitute another (or others) for, replace by another (or others); to give up in exchange for something else... .
- * To substitute one thing for another of the same kind; to quit one and take another... .
- * To give and receive reciprocally, exchange, interchange....
- * To give or bestow in exchange.
- * To make an exchange.
- * To make (a thing) other than it was; to render different, alter, modify, transmute.
- * To become different, undergo alteration, alter, vary.
- * To shift, transfer (*from one place to another*).

This definition clearly stresses the idea that *change* involves a process, which may in a sense be seen as a kind of action. *Change* has the same lexical content in American English, as evinced by the following definition of this word in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1976):

- * The action of making something different in form, quality, or state: the fact of becoming different: introduction of novelty....
- * An instance of making or becoming different in some particular: a departure from a norm: a deviation from established character, sequence or condition: a divergence from uniformity or constancy in any quality, quantity or degree....
- * The action of replacing something with something else of the same kind or with something that serves as a substitute....
- * The reciprocal giving and receiving.

The word *transformation* in its narrowest sense, refers to a different state as a result of the process of change, in other words, the being in an altered state. *The Oxford Dictionary* defines transformation as follows:

- * The action of transforming or fact of being transformed....
- * A complete change in character, condition, etc.

Webster's Third New International Dictionary, however, does not distinguish quite as clearly between change as a process and transformation as a state caused by this process. It defines *transformation* as

- * An act, process, or instance of transforming or being transformed...
- * The changing of an expression, formula, or statement in logic into a different form without altering its substance or intent.

After careful consideration, I decided to follow the lexicon of *The Oxford Dictionary* for a working definition for my thesis, thus generally (but not necessarily exclusively) using *change* to indicate the process of alteration and *transformation* as referring to a state resulting from the process of change. This

decision rested to some extent on the fact that both Ngugi and Head would of necessity be more British-oriented than American in view of their backgrounds and origin. It has to be emphasized, however, that this distinction is fraught with difficulties as other terms enter the configuration, such as metamorphosis.

A subsequent principle regarding my approach is that the discourse of change/transformation (as used in the literature consulted) will be viewed against the postcolonial background.[2] As will be substantiated later in this chapter, postcolonialism is taken as not starting with the end of the period of colonial rule, but with the onset of colonization, because the process of taking over a country initiates the resultant transformation which has such a radical influence on all spheres of the lives of the indigenous population of the colonized country. This study will illuminate the drastic - and often traumatic - influence of colonization on the lives of Africans, with special reference to African females, because the history of the European invasion of Africa has irrefutably shown that change, if not well managed, can be extremely painful.

African literature may be regarded as one of the latest, and most certainly as one of the most exciting new branches of literature to have evolved in the course of the second part of the twentieth century. Commenting on the time in which Bessie Head and Ngugi started to contribute significantly to the establishment of an African literary tradition, Klima et al. (1976:279) remark: "The origins of written literary works in the countries lying south of the Sahara and the rapid development of these literary activities are relatively rare phenomena in the history of world culture". In similar vein Jahn et al. (1972:9) also acknowledge the growing and lasting importance of African literature by stating that "African literature has established itself as a new and genuine branch of world literature".

Most modern critics endorse this view. Ashcroft et al. (1993:7), for instance, question the continued literary engagement of postcolonial [3] societies with the imperial experience. Their justification of this continuous discourse reinforces the importance of both postcolonial and female literature: "More recently ... the range and strength of these literatures has become undeniable ... the parallel

between the situation of post-colonial writing and that of feminist writing is striking". These two literary genres are similar in dealing mainly with recent Third World issues, such as oppression, exploitation and corruption, as the introductory remarks on the features of African literature (1.4) and postcolonialism and transformation (1.7) will reveal. Ashcroft et al. (1989:174-175) comment on the place of female literature in a postcolonial world:

Women in many societies have been relegated to the position of "Other", marginalized, and, in a metaphorical sense, "colonized", forced to pursue guerilla warfare against imperial domination They share with colonized races and peoples an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression, and like them they have been forced to articulate their experiences in the language of their oppressors.

Feminism and postcolonial forms of criticism have, however, developed as "a coincident and parallel discourse" (Ashcroft et al., 1989:177), apparent in the work of writers such as Henry Handel Richardson, Alice Walker, Doris Lessing, Buchi Emecheta and Margaret Atwood. The fusion of these two discourses in the novels of Ngugi and Bessie Head will form the focal point of this thesis.

1.2 DEFINITION OF THE NOTION OF "AFRICAN LITERATURE"

As may be expected, literary critics have espoused quite divergent definitions of African literature, in the words of Ursula Barnett (1985:7): "The definitions of black or African writing are as many as the writers defining it". She mentions that they vary from "distinction according to colour and birth", to a "loose description that you can't carve up a country of the imagination" (Segal, 1963:9) and to Janheinz Jahn's (1966:24) "meticulous classifications" based on stylistic features. She furthermore refers to the definition compiled at the Freetown Conference on English Language literature of Africa (1963). Mphahlele (1963:175) reports that African Literature was there defined as a literature with "an African setting authentically handled and to which experiences originating in Africa are integral".

Benedict Egbuna (1986:2) also remarks that African literature "has a serious problem of definition" which he ascribes to a lack of suitable critical theory. This assumption is invalid as the ongoing critical debate on the demarcation of critical theory for the evaluation of African literature demonstrates[4]. The theoretical discourse focusing on all facets of African literature is one of the dominant critical discourses in modern literary studies. Recent critics, such as Ashcroft et al. (1993:11), for example, address the problem of finding suitable critical theories for postcolonial literature:

The idea of 'post-colonial literary theory' emerges from the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of post-colonial writing. European theories themselves emerge from particular cultural traditions which are hidden by false notions of 'the universal'. Theories of style and genre, assumptions about the universal features of language, epistemologies and value systems are all radically questioned by the practices of post-colonial writing. Post-colonial theory has proceeded from the need to address this different practice. Indigenous theories have developed to accommodate the differences within the various cultural traditions as well as the desire to describe in a comparative way the features shared across those traditions.

The ensuing critical theories on African literature will reveal the vast perceptual differences concerning virtually all features of the critical debate surrounding African literature.

Ernest Emenyonu (1982:1), for instance, believes "African literature has come to mean several things to several people". He points out that some people view it as "a tool for the literate African's arrogation of the essence of his cultural heritage", while others regard African literature as a "new literature" with "authentic and original genres, themes, and message". Furthermore, Emenyonu mentions that it is sometimes reviewed as "a political document of protest against the assumptions of colonialism and imperialism as they relate to the world of the black man". However, he incorrectly remarks that "African literature in all its ramifications represents a mere appendage to British or French literature", the languages in which most African literary works are written. While Emenyonu's

assumption about the diversity of meaning African literature has for different recipients is sound, African literature can never be relegated to being a mere appendage to British or French literature, because it is a strong and emerging literature - a literary discourse that exhibits its own characteristics and aspirations. It is not the literature of the conquered, slavishly imitating the examples of the conquerors.

The South African writer and critic, Nadine Gordimer (1973:5) defines African literature as follows:

My own definition is that African writing is writing done in any language by Africans themselves and by others of whatever skin colour who share with Africans the experience of having been shaped, mentally and spiritually, by Africa rather than anywhere else in the world. One must look at the world *from Africa*, to be an African writer, not look *upon Africa* from the world.

Gordimer extends her examination of the term *African literature* by comparing it with *négritude*, a term which she rejects. The concept *négritude* was developed by the Martinique poet, Aimé Césaire, and the Senegalese poet and politician, Leopold Sedar Senghor. According to Klima et al. (1976:280) the term *négritude* "is usually understood as a rediscovery and strong assertion of the black man's values, historical roots and accomplishments". These critics, however, point out that the undue stress on the racial aspect invalidates the suitability of this term, since black cultures globally differ too much for all black cultures to unite. Ashcroft et al. (1993:21) also object to the use of *négritude* for postcolonial literature being "the most pronounced assertion of the distinctive qualities of Black culture and identity". As such "it could easily be reincorporated into a European model in which it functioned only as the antithesis of the thesis of white supremacy". Sidney Walker (1984:3) effectively renounces *négritude* critical theories as "outmoded, emotion-laden critical features".

Wole Soyinka (1976:134) also objects to the use of *négritude* for postcolonial literature:

Négritude, having laid its cornerstone on a European intellectual tradition, however bravely it tried to reverse its concepts (leaving its tenets untouched), was a founding deserving to be drawn into, nay, even considered a case for benign adoption by European ideological interests.

The well-known Austrian critic of African literature, Janheinz Jahn (1968:22-23), in turn goes even further in coining the phrase *neo-African literature*. He bases his term on the fact that Africa's written literature was founded on the "overlap" area of the cultures of Africa, the Islamic-Arabic and the Western. He calls the literature resulting from the overlap of African and Islamic cultures Afro-Arab and that from the overlap of African and Western cultures neo-African. He thus sees neo-African literature as the "heir of two traditions: traditional African literature and Western literature". Jahn regards a work devoid of any European influences as belonging to traditional African literature, while a work revealing "no African stylistic features or patterns of expression" should be classified as Western literature, even if produced by an African. He himself readily admits that this criterion is difficult to apply in practice, since literary critics are often unfamiliar with the styles, patterns of expression and attitudes of traditional African cultures.

This innovative terminology thus adds a new dimension to existing literary discourse, but is extremely hard to apply in practice [5].

The above discussion has focused on literature in general. For the purposes of this study, however, the position of the novel in the context of postcolonial literature should be determined. Egejuru (1980:110) vaguely, and purely by implication, defines the African novel by stating that African novelists have "added new dimensions to the Western novel. They have given it such an African flavour and texture that no reader will confuse an African novel with a Western one". He believes that the African experience must "be lived and not researched" to constitute a real African novel. Adrian Roscoe (1971:75) points out that the novel has no history in Africa, being "a literary import" from Europe. He does, however, concede that the novel may perhaps be of "developing significance" in postcolonial African literature. Although the novel has played an

increasingly vital role in the discourse of African literature, it is by no means the dominant literary genre, as evinced by the literary output of both Ngugi[6] and Bessie Head[7].

To conclude: for the purpose of this thesis, the term *African literature* will thus be applied to literature written by Africans in various regions of Africa, excluding those of North Africa and Ethiopia because the latter literatures differ substantially from that of the rest of the African continent.

Ngugi has, for the most part, lived and written his novels in Kenya, while the late Bessie Head initially lived in South Africa, where she wrote her first novella, *The Cardinals With Meditations and Short Stories* which, as has already been noted, was rediscovered and published posthumously in 1993. She wrote her other works, including her three novels under discussion in this thesis, in Botswana. I intend using Stephen Gray's (1979:2) demarcation of the areas in which Head lived as referring to the Southern African triangle, with Cape Town as its axis. This region then includes what were in Head's lifetime known as the Republic of South Africa, Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland, Zimbabwe and Namibia.

1.3 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN LITERATURE

A significant number of critics maintain that the African novel evolved as a literary genre after World War II, at the time when the "winds of change" started blowing across sub-Saharan Africa, especially since 1957 when Ghana was the first colony in this part of the world to receive independence from her previous colonizers (Goldberg, 1981:1). This assumption is not wholly correct, since Sol Plaatjie (1876-1932), a fairly prolific writer, published his classic novel, *Mhudi*, in 1930[8]. This novel is generally regarded as the first novel in English written by an African. It would, nevertheless, be more accurate to connect the beginnings of African creative writing in general to postcolonialism. Despite isolated

instances of published works in this genre during the first half of the twentieth century, African writing gained impetus during the last part of the colonial period, in other words, in the second half of the twentieth century.

Gérard (1983:30) ascribes the "explosion of African writing in European languages" after World War II to the works of Césaire and Senghor, written while they were students in Paris during the 1930s. Their elaboration of the *négritude* ideology "acted as a powerful catalyst for the hopes and energies" of a large number of French-speaking black intellectuals. According to Gérard, *Black Orpheus*, Sartre's *Preface* to Senghor's pioneering work, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de français*, aroused wide international interest at the World Conference of Black Writers and Artists, held in Paris in 1956. Césaire in turn "humanized *négritude*, releasing it from prescriptive codification" (Dathome, 1974:312).

The innovative work of Césaire and Senghor led to a blossoming of literary activity by francophone black writers in especially West Africa. Among the most important authors in this region in the fifties are Birago Diop, Ousmane Socé, Sembene Ousmane and Cheikh Hamidou Kane from Senegal, Camara Laye from Guinea, and Bernard Dadié from the Ivory Coast.[9] This interest decreased remarkably after the gaining of independence in most of the French colonies, but it did spur on writing by English-speaking intellectuals in other parts of Africa. A new incentive to write was initiated by the two Germans, Ulli Beier and Janheinz Jahn, who started publishing a literary journal, *Black Orpheus*, in the university town of Ibadan in 1957. Although initially consisting of translations of French poetry and stories, black writers of English from West African countries were soon followed by their co-authors from East and South Africa. In the late fifties the first important Nigerian writers - Amos Tutuola, Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo and John Pepper Clark - published their work in book form. As a result of this early enthusiasm, literature has ever since flourished in Nigeria.

By contrast, literary activity in East Africa in general and in Kenya in particular started somewhat later than in West Africa. This may perhaps be ascribed to the fact that literary activity was retarded in Kenya because it was one of the few colonies which gained independence after waging a devastating war. The Mau Mau rebellion seriously hampered all levels of education because institutions of learning were often closed during this period of bloody warfare. The resistance effort also engaged the attention of many of Kenya's later political and spiritual leaders, including a number of academics and creative writers. When the Kampala Conference was held in 1962, only Ngugi had succeeded in having some of his work printed as contributions to *Pinpoint*, a journal issued by the English Department at Makerere College. This Conference so inspired East African writers to publish their literary efforts that Ekwensi applauded the increase in publication when he wrote in *Nigeria Magazine* in March 1964(297): "East Africa, once considered infertile is now producing writers". Among the pioneers of East African writing he cites David Rubadiri (Malawi), E.M. Karuiki (Uganda) and Ngugi. Literary activity has since increased remarkably in East Africa, mainly in Kenya, as Gérard (1983:31) notes: "By the late 1970s Kenya had become the most prolific producer of creative writing in black Africa, second only to Nigeria". Kenya's prominence on the literary scene may largely be ascribed to Ngugi's unstinting efforts to effect radical changes in his own country through writing in different genres.

Where early postcolonial African writing largely concerned itself with the revelation of corruption by the colonial powers, namely the exploitation, destruction and dehumanization of the oppressed indigenous population, literature produced after the granting of formal independence mainly focused on the corruption of its own former nationalist leaders. This kind of protest literature resulted from the realization that the expectations raised by these élitist groups would not come to fruition. Writers such as Achebe also demanded the liberation of all Africans, the affirmation of their lost values and the reassertion of respect for the positive side of traditional life. The continuing deterioration in the African

socio-economic sphere as well inspired a kind of revolutionary writing, aimed at the attainment of a definite vision:

a creative concern which conceptualizes or extends actuality beyond the purely narrative, making it reveal realities beyond the immediately attainable, a concern which upsets orthodox acceptances in an effort to free society of historical and other superstitions, these are qualities possessed by literature of a social vision. Revolutionary writing is generally of this kind (Soyinka, 1976:66).

As a result of missionary initiative, creative writing by black South Africans can be traced back to the middle of the nineteenth century with I.W.W. Citashes's poem, *Your Cattle are Gone*. In his paper delivered at the AUETSA Conference in July 1990 at Stellenbosch, Marcus Ramogale mentions the fact that from its inception, black South African literature was a people's literature, intent on exposing social injustices in an attempt to rectify them. Ramogale mentions Peter Abrahams and Herbert Dhlomo as early exponents of protest writing who broke away from their missionary background and played a vital role in the development of a people's literature. The works and literary theories of the writers of the 1950s reflected the principles encompassed in the Freedom Charter of the 1955 Congress of the People.

The next generation of black South African writers, the so-called Drum/Sophiatown authors, believed in both a community-based and a universal literature. They attempted to awaken white consciousness to black frustration, but their efforts were thwarted by the formation of the Pan Africanist Congress in 1959 who adopted the slogan "Africa for the Africans". On 21 March 1960 the fatal Sharpeville incident occurred in which sixty-nine people were shot following a demonstration against the pass laws. This bloody confrontation with the South African authorities led to the declaration of a state of emergency, as well as to the banning of the PAC and the ANC. According to Adey et al. (1986:181) these repressive actions caused a period of "increasing racial polarization in thought and art". In the so-called post-Sharpeville literary climate a sense of radical alternatives to the official socio-political problems in South Africa characterized

the literary scene. During the ensuing five-year period, called the time of "the censored imagination" (Manganyi, 1981:53-64) virtually no literary works by Blacks were published inside the country[10], but exile literature outside the country flourished. The most distinctive characteristic of this upsurge of exile writing was its commitment to change. The 1976 uprisings and the formation of the Black Power Movement gave vent to a new black literary movement, called the New Black Soweto or Township writers. African literature still retained its revolutionary nature in the 1980s, mainly because of these writers' deliberate use of literature as a means of protest against the then still existing apartheid laws, in the words of Ndebele (1988:337): "every aspect of life, if it can be creatively indulged in, is the weapon of life itself against the greatest tyranny".

By contrast, Botswana, the former British Bechuanaland Protectorate which became independent in 1966, is unique in the postcolonial debate, as Bessie Head observes in "Social and political pressures that shape writing in South Africa" (MacKenzie, 1990:66): "It has a past history that is unequalled anywhere in Africa". Because it was never conquered or dominated by foreign powers "a bit of ancient Africa, in all its quiet and unassertive grandeur, has remained intact there". In another instance she wrote in a paper to be delivered at a conference in Zimbabwe which she failed to attend owing to an airline tickets mix-up:

In reality the country has a unique colonial history as a British Protectorate - the land, the culture and the people survived almost intact and undisturbed. I know of no other British protectorate in Africa where the soul of the people was left intact and undisturbed, the British being mainly interested in resources, not the people Here you have ancient Africa almost intact but with many subtle blendings of everything new that was introduced to the people over the centuries (*New Statesman*, 16 August 1985:21).

Although Bessie Head published mainly in Botswana, she rejects being called a Botswana writer as she declares in "An African Story" (1972:736): "I have so often been referred to as 'the Botswana writer', while in reality the Botswana personality isn't as violent as me".

Moreover, she acknowledges her indebtedness to her South African past, including *inter alia* the influence South African literature has had on shaping her unique personality, by remarking:

I could not be considered as a South African writer in exile, but as one who has put down roots (in Botswana). And yet ... certain themes I am likely to write about, have been mainly shaped by my South African experience (*New Classic*, 1978:229).

Her reliance on her South African background is further reinforced by her inability to speak or write in the indigenous language, as well as by her refusal to associate herself with writers' groups in Botswana, whom she regarded as "narrowly nationalistic and prescriptive" (Gardner, 1985:229). Although Botswana had never been subjected to the tyranny of imperialism and colonization, it practised its own internal forms of subjugation, such as racism against the Masarwa.

An examination of the literary developments in Botswana is therefore irrelevant for the purposes of this study, since Bessie Head deliberately excluded herself from them.

1.4 DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF AFRICAN LITERATURE

Since the main focus of this study is on women and transformation, viewed against the postcolonial African background, only a few outstanding characteristics of African literature will be highlighted, such as its reliance on the oral tradition, the often committed nature of African literature, the increasing shift from the communal to the individual, as well as certain stylistic features generally found in African literature.

The oral tradition is of paramount importance in determining the nature of African literature since it forms the basis of this literary discourse as "the African novel has an identity of its own derivable from the oral narratives" (Dseagu, 1987:20).

Lusweti (1984:1) quite justifiably stresses the place of oral literature in the African literary discourse, a fact non-African critics should keep in mind in studying African literature, because modern Western written literature is not steeped in this literary tradition. Lusweti proceeds by rejecting the following terms sometimes used for oral literature: *folklore*, *unwritten literature*, *popular literature* and *primitive literature* because these terms are vague and misleading. Lusweti gives a fairly simple definition of oral literature:

Strictly speaking, 'oral' means 'expressed in spoken words', but oral literature now includes material in written form (as long as it was originally expressed orally). The immediacy of the spoken word contributes to the richness and beauty of the written language.

Lusweti furthermore distinguishes three elements of oral literature: oral composition, oral performance and oral transmission.

In 1967 the Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo (1972:23) asserted her belief in the living value of oral literature when stating that she differed from people who regarded oral literature simply as a stage in the "development of man's artistic genius. To me it's an end in itself".

Gérard (1983:1) postulates that every society, however distant, underdeveloped or old, has "some sort of literature". He believes that "we do not know of any human society, however remote, primitive or archaic, which does not have some sort of literature". This term includes "verbal artefacts, not necessarily written, which are the results of skilful application of speech to the products of the imagination". He furthermore notes that oral art can fulfil the most important functions which literate societies designate to writing. He singles out three main functions of oral production: its social, educational and entertainment roles.

Kunene (1976:29) in turn stresses the importance of the oral tradition in especially religious ceremonies. He (1976:33) mentions that oral literature "not only affirms the positive social actions and ideas but also creates them".

In his discussion of orature, Whiteley (1964:7) focuses on the role of the court historian who still plays an important part in many African countries such as Rwanda, Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, parts of Uganda and South Africa. The court historian contributes to the variety of the oral tradition because he makes use of verse rather than prose, which thus constitutes another form of oral literature. Whiteley (1964:8) also refers to the role played by the renowned professional Kamba singers in Kenya as a unique part of the existing oral tradition, because they employ the medium of song as another aspect of the oral tradition.

Adrian Roscoe (1977:9) emphatically advocates a study of African oral literature for a better understanding of literature globally. He (1971:75) regards vernacular writing as the "outgrowth" of an oral literature. Roscoe quite rightly sees the oral story as "Africa's dominant form". In similar vein Gérald Moore (1980:1) remarks that much of the "exaggerated surprise" which followed the publication of numerous African novels and poems in the 1950s resulted from a "general failure to connect literary activity which expressed itself in writing, with the immense riches of African oral culture".

Whiteley et al. are seen as pioneers in the field of conserving African oral literature by including it in their *Oxford Library of African Literature*. In the *Preface* to this series (1964), Whiteley expresses his view of the value of oral literature:

We approach Africa now as general editors of this library of her literature ... with a sense of exhilaration and of urgency: exhilaration because so much unexplored country can be discerned ahead, urgency because in our own short time many compositions recorded only in human memory were being everywhere lost But our intention is not to be misunderstood as the conservation, merely, of archaic conventions or of

passing forms of social experience. On the contrary, we think it harmful to African studies to divide the past from the present.

Okot p'Bitek may be regarded as one of the most important literary figures in the field of orature. This East African poet, scholar, singer and raconteur concerned himself with one of the predominant themes of African literature world-wide namely, in the words of Roscoe (1977:32), that of "making tradition meaningful to modernity and avoiding Western solutions to African problems". It is significant to note that Ngugi (1966:70) himself has commented on the importance of one of p'Bitek's most important oral poems, *Song of Lawino*:

Song of Lawino is the one poem that has mapped out new areas and new directions in East African poetry. It belongs to the soil. It is authentically East African in its tone and in its appeal. This can be seen in its reception: it is read everywhere, arousing heated debates.

Both p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and the poem written as its reply, *Song of Ocol*, deal with the theme of this thesis, namely change or transformation and its resultant influence not only on the relationship between an individual and his family but which extends itself to affect the whole village concerned. Roscoe (1977:33) deftly sums up the thematic concerns of these two poems as issues "commonly explored in African fiction - the fight between the old and new, town and country, flesh and spirit, bureaucrat and peasant".

In contrast to Kenya, where oral literature has thus been recognized as one of the most vital and valued parts of African literature, some critics feel that the same cannot be said of South Africa, where Bessie Head hails from. Annamarie van Niekerk, for example, remarked at the New Nation Writers' Conference (3 December 1991) that in spite of their traditional involvement in oral poetry and story-telling, this contribution of black women has never been recognized as part of the South African literary canon. Consequently, "a large number of culturally active women were excluded by most institutions from the culture of narrative art" (Unpublished Conference Paper). This may be regarded as an overstatement of

her case, as a study of Head's work will reveal. MacKenzie (1989a:17) himself comments on Head's reliance on the oral tradition by saying that

she is writing from within a culture with no written history, where storytelling and the oral tradition generally are the means whereby the community explains itself. Contemporary village life displaces the oral tradition but is itself characterized by a milieu of informal gossip and tales.

Mackenzie (1989a:22) finds an "interpolation of traces of an oral culture in the written form" in some of Head's short stories, like "Heaven Is Not Closed". Susan Gardner (1986:117) writes: "Ultimately, 'teller of tales' would be the most neutral term one could devise for Bessie Head, for this frees her from bondage to fact while releasing her into folklore, epic and myth", as this thesis will demonstrate, especially focusing on Bessie Head's reliance on the oral tradition in her novels.

In an interview with Egejuru (1980:81), Ngugi commented on his own use of the oral tradition:

In so far as the oral tradition is part and parcel of one's cultural upbringing, it is bound to affect one's narrative technique. But there is another more immediate way the people can affect one's narrative. I have in mind, in the village, two or three women sitting by the fire talking of something that affected them recently. Let's say they are describing a journey from a village to Nairobi. Now the description of the journey will take several forms: The first narrator tells a certain amount, and this portion will remind the listener of another episode, and she will stop the first narrator to tell more about this episode. And this can make another narrator take up another episode, etc. So the whole narrative structure can become more and more involved and by the time you reach Nairobi, you have covered a whole history of the community.

In his plea for placing oral literature at the centre of the English curriculum at the University of Nairobi, Ngugi and some of his colleagues, Owuor Anyumba and Taban Lo Liyong, issued the following statement:

The oral tradition is rich and many-sided ... the art did not end yesterday; it is a living tradition ... familiarity with oral literature could suggest new structures and techniques; and could foster attitudes of mind characterized by the willingness to experiment with new forms The

study of the Oral Tradition would therefore supplement (not replace) courses in Modern African Literature. By discovering and proclaiming loyalty to indigenous values, the new literature would on the one hand be set in the stream of history to which it belongs and so be better appreciated; and on the other be better able to embrace and assimilate other thoughts without losing its roots (*Decolonising the Mind*, 1981:94-95).

The eminent Igbo folklorist, Rems Umeasiegbu (1980:11) points out that there exist literary criticisms for oral texts and advocates that these criteria should be identified by fieldworkers such as the anthropologist I.Schapera. They should extract relevant criteria from those Africans who themselves still practise this art form. Schapera himself collaborated with Umeasiegbu, translating and editing *Praise Poems of Tswana Chiefs* (1965) an anthology revealing the influence of the oral tradition on written African literature.

To conclude: although an in-depth study of oral African writing falls beyond the scope of this thesis, written African literature can never be properly studied without viewing it as being firmly rooted in the oral tradition. To apply these theoretical considerations to the topic of this thesis: literature changes profoundly and often irrevocably with any change in society. No meaningful study can thus be made of social, cultural, political, religious and educational transformation without a sound understanding of the manifestation of the true nature of these conditions in the past. Such a knowledge can best be accumulated by studying the relevant oral literature. Moreover, oral literature constitutes one of the most powerful means of social protest, as Mbele demonstrates in his article, "Oral Literature and Social Protest" (1989), where he comments on the effective use of the oral tradition to articulate protest as a means of changing conditions and perceptions, as the subsequent discussion will reveal.

The next, and one of the most memorable characteristics of African literature is that no matter whatever language it is written in, it is essentially a committed literature, a literature "dedicated" to social protest. Neil McEwan (1983:ix)

remarks that since "African writers express a view of the world from within a culture which has been more or less politely disregarded" by quite a number of modern Western societies, African novelists see their role in shaping Africa's future as "an urgent commitment". McEwan bases his assumption that the African traditions were "disregarded" by some Europeans by referring to Conrad's view of the African as being "prehistoric". He continues by stating that although Western diction has changed when referring to the African way of life and literature, the Western mental attitude still remains aloof. According to McEwan (1983:ix) this manifests itself in referring to, for example, *barbaric* as *traditional*, and *civilised* as *modern or developed*. He also detects a "recent complacency" in critics who speak of Africans as having a "hybrid" culture and of people who live "in two worlds". He emphatically states that "African novels are not underdeveloped". McEwan (1983:18) sees the mission of African writers as a "wish to explore through the realism and freedom of contemporary fiction the integrity of modern Africa". This study will show that the true African novel is not merely a recast of African materials into the traditional form of the Western novel.

The unique nature of African literature is the result of being rooted in the oral tradition, while simultaneously being an expression of postcolonial experience and thinking. The novels of both Bessie Head and Ngugi are proof of the African novel's roots in and reliance on the oral tradition. Both Head and Ngugi make frequent use of characteristics of the oral tradition, such as the reliance on myth and legend, while they also employ the device of narration or storytelling. Moreover, they create authentic African settings. Their novels simultaneously radiate a feeling of being part of the African soil in their characters' passionate feelings about land and its cultivation. Ngugi in particular deliberately employs writing to instruct his readers, thus serving one of the main functions of the oral tradition, namely in being one of the major means of instruction.

A fairly strong note of protest underlies a significant number of works in African literature. This may be ascribed to historical, political, social and economic conditions that prevailed in most African countries in that many of these countries went through what used to be regarded as three different phases: a precolonial,

a colonial and a postcolonial phase - although I chose the term *postcolonial* to embrace the colonial phase for my definition of these phases. Corruption may be singled out as a general characteristic of each of these stages. It is, therefore, quite natural that with the advent of literacy, black writers should regard literature as the means by which to protest and demand, in the words of Gordimer (1973:11): "Black writers choose their plots, characters and literary styles; their themes choose *them*". In her doctoral thesis, Irene d'Almeida (1987:280) concludes that African literature is "politically loaded". Because this thesis deals with transformation, it will naturally expose weaknesses in various spheres of life. It by no means intends postulating that African literature, especially oral literature, does not also convey the beauty of a tribal past - a past reflective of the richness and integrity of an organized and original culture. This study will thus attempt to achieve verisimilitude by exposing the paradoxical nature of postcolonial African life. It will reveal the complex and painful paradox between retaining the positive values of traditional life and adapting to a completely new value system accompanied by transformed physical environmental factors.

Povey (1972:69) ascribes the strong note of protest in South African non-European literature to the country's prolonged adherence to the principle of segregation. He remarks that African "writing is understandably a protest writing reflecting the day-to-day despair that marks life for the non-white in the rigorously restricted existence imposed by the racial legislation of South Africa". Povey notes that racial tension would be an inescapable topic of writing because it infuses all spheres of the existence of the non-Whites.

It must, however, be noted that an increasing number of literary critics have objected to scaling down the magnificence of African literature by using the concept *protest literature* as a distinctive umbrella term in defining the nature of this literary phenomenon. Mzamane (1991:59), for example, criticizes Nadine Gordimer's definition of Black South African literature as resting on "such wobbly theoretical underpinnings":

Black South African literature is a literature of protest. It protests against social, political, economic and military arrangements which deprive black people of civil rights and the free expression of their aspirations. As a result, this literature has tended to be overwhelmingly political and proletarian in outlook, and concerned with the problems of colour and class. This preoccupation with politics makes it incumbent upon black South African writers to address themselves to the subject in a manner that reveals commitment. By commitment I mean 'a matter of orientation, a matter of perceiving social realities and of making those perceptions available in works of art in order to help promote understanding and preservation of, or change in, a society's values and norms' (1973:52).

In contrast, Mzamane (1991:60) defines protest literature not only in terms of intentionality and envisaged reader response, but also as "writing by the racially oppressed addressed to readers from the ruling class in an attempt to solicit their sympathy and support against discriminatory laws and practices". This - rather narrow - definition of protest literature definitely excludes the novels of Bessie Head and Ngugi from being branded as protest writing, as this thesis will demonstrate.

Apart from being rooted in the oral tradition and being a committed literature, more recent African literature is characterized by its strong emphasis on individualism, in contrast to the traditional belief in man as part of the community.

Bjornson (1991:10) mentions a number of reasons why the new sense of individualism has increasingly appealed to many Africans. He states that it is "liberating" in providing them with a "freedom of choice" in fields previously ruled by an adherence to customs or decision-making determined by their parents. These include choosing their own careers, marriage partners and enjoying the results of modern economic progress. On the social side, young African intellectuals are drawn by the contemporary promise of respect for human rights, the opportunity for everyone to participate in policy-making and the expectation of a better future. A study of traditional African literature, especially of oral literature, elicits a more rigid conformity to customs, in other words, there was less emphasis on individual rights and democratic principles.

Bjornson stresses the important effects of this realization of the existence of the "self" on the nature of African literature:

In conjunction with the increased use of writing, individualism also fostered the emergence of a literature that reflects a new preoccupation with the self and its place in history. Authors asserted the uniqueness of their identities by signing their work; poetry and prose fiction focused upon problems of self-definition; histories reinforced the notion that individuals do participate in shaping their own destiny. In short, many Africans began to perceive themselves in terms of an identity schema that presupposes every person's right to self-realization. As an alternative to the restrictiveness of traditional society, this schema offered people a chance to emancipate themselves from the weight of the past, and by calling certain aspects of ethnic allegiance into question, it at least theoretically opened the way for individuals to identify more closely with the new states of Africa.

This study will attempt to illuminate this new emphasis on the self, on the individual's right to choose for himself. Although this new tenet is very evident particularly in Ngugi's later works, it infuses Bessie Head's novels as well. The portrayal of mothers who still unquestioningly accept traditional values is often opposed to their daughters who assert their right to think for themselves. In this regard Muthoni in *The River Between* serves as an excellent example, because she is willing to die for her convictions, while her mother's belief in submissiveness towards her husband prevents her from even defying his strict censure about visiting their dying daughter.

Other aspects characteristic of African literature, such as the frequent use of myth, allegory, legend and symbolism, the reliance on dreams, its tendency towards autobiographical writing, the dominant role of setting, the functional use especially of proper names, and other relevant stylistic aspects will be highlighted in the examination of the context in which these phenomena appear in the works of Head and Ngugi. Although glimmerings of these typical African stylistic devices are apparent in the earlier novels of Head and Ngugi, their later works, in particular Head's *A Question of Power* and Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, are richly symbolic novels. These novels

are generally infused with dreams, myths, legends, and the skilful use of clusters of images, comparisons, contrasts, and a fusion of elements from both biblical references - often with deep-seated ironic reverberations - and philosophical as well as literary concepts. Bessie Head's novels become increasingly autobiographical, in contrast to Ngugi's work which tends increasingly to develop in a Marxist social, political and philosophical direction. Ngugi's third novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, is his most personal novel in that it illuminates a situation comparable to Ngugi's own experiences as an adolescent desperately trying to receive an education despite problems caused by the Mau Mau revolution.

In the subsequent section special attention will also be paid to the authors' choice of language: especially since Ngugi, for political reasons, has deliberately chosen to write his most recent novels and dramas in Gikuyu.

1.5 LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND LIBERATION

Controversial attitudes prevail about the choice of language as the medium of expression, especially in the case of creative African writers. This moot issue, which has elicited wide and heated controversy, also plays an important part in the study of Head's and Ngugi's individual choice of language for their novels, because language is both central to culture and especially in the case of Ngugi, an instrument of social, economic and political protest. Chris Searle (1984:3) underscores the importance of language as an instrument of culture:

As culture arises directly from work and production, language is its messenger. When that work is a result of a deformed or unequal relationship, when it is organised by the exploiter against the exploited, the coloniser against the colonised, the master against the slave, then there will be two cultures and thus two forms of language in direct opposition.

Bessie Head's background and life dictated her choice of English as the medium for her writing. This study will indicate that her use of English is fairly

representative of South African English, being reasonably close to Standard English but in contrast to the West African experience, devoid of a parallel development of pidgin (Ramogale, 1995:25). Bessie Head's literary language does, however, contain traces of the influence of African languages, especially in her diction, as well as in the frequent use of proverbs and idiomatic expressions.

She was in no way prejudiced against the use of English, in contrast to numerous leading South African scholars who have increasingly articulated strong views about "the inglorious part English has played in the country's history" (Roscoe, 1995:4)[11].

Ngugi, however, "deliberately uses different languages with the intention of politicizing the reader" (Meyer, 1991:9). According to Meyer, Ngugi's "firm Marxist posture" must be seen

in a socialist sense, namely that ... the writing of literature in the way Ngugi does it demands a politically committed patriotic attitude, a class-partisan line that the literary characters and the readers are urged to take and which the author has involved himself in by using language with this "revolutionary" impulse for combatting social and cultural oppression.

To aid in understanding the existing language situation in Kenya, the following brief exposition should suffice. According to Meyer (1991:12) "linguistic colonialism has existed [in Kenya] since the arrival of the British, but the tendency to learn English made itself felt only late", that is after 1940. Till then the British actively discouraged the acquisition of English to prevent the local population from reading what they perceived as radical progressive books in English. Controversy surrounds the debate concerning the advantages and disadvantages of mastering the language of the conqueror. Mazrui (1975:48), for instance, serves as an example of linguists who believe that learning English has been an important tool in the growth of African nationalism:

In a variety of ways the English language was an important factor in the growth of African national consciousness Language is the most important point of entry into the habits of thought of a people. The English language as a partial embodiment of Anglo-Saxon habits of thought must

therefore carry with it seeds of intellectual acculturation for the African who learns it. That is why learning English was, to a non-Westerner, a process of Westernization. And to the extent that an English-speaking African was thus partly 'westernized' he was indeed partly detribalized.

Meyer (1991:12-19) traces the progress of English in Kenya. In the second half of the twentieth century English was being used more frequently in Kenyan schools. Wardlaugh (1987:198) believes that "Swahili and English found themselves in competition but English always had the upperhand, particularly after World War II when, in the last years of colonial rule, the British did their utmost to promote English at the expense of Swahili". English has thus been the medium of instruction from primary level onwards from 1979, increasingly revered as the language of advancement.

Meyer states that there are currently about fifty different local languages in Kenya. Almost 65% of the population speak African languages. The indigenous languages usually have little prestige value and are spoken in the homes of most of the people in the rural areas. Swahili is generally regarded as a lingua franca and has different dialects at the coast of Kenya. Gikuyu is today spoken by about 20% of the Kenyan population. About 65% of all Kenyans speak Swahili as a second language. Although English is regarded as a prestigious language, gaining importance as the language of administration and the courts in the colonial era, it is currently used by about 15% of the population, and mostly in urban areas.

In 1970 Swahili was declared the national language in Kenya, while Kenyatta promulgated it as the country's parliamentary language in 1974. In 1979 English replaced Swahili as parliamentary language, while it became an optional language in schools in the same year. At present English is the dominant language in the urban areas, while the mother tongue is mostly used in informal situations, but with code-switching[12].

Before Ngugi openly declared his intention to write in his vernacular to promote his Marxist ideological stance[13], in the words of Meyer (1991:15), before "Ngugi's writing of fiction became Gikuyu [his mother tongue] all the way", his use of language was characterized by a number of transitory stages:

The vestiges that the African languages left in his work multiplied at a similar rate as his socialist engagement grew and between the Makerere novels and the last English novel *Petals of Blood* the reader is exposed to a more and more prolific amount of language blending. This hybridization is continued in his Gikuyu novels - only in a reversed way (Meyer, 1991:15-16).

I intend quoting only one of Ngugi's numerous pronouncements on his later preference for writing in the indigenous languages to substantiate the interrelatedness he perceived between the use of language and the attainment of his Marxist ideologies. He declares in *Decolonising the Mind* (1987:29-30):

We African writers are called by our calling to do for our languages what Spencer, Milton and Shakespeare did for English; what Pushkin and Tolstoy did for Russian; indeed what all writers in world history have done for their languages by meeting the challenge of creating a literature in them, which process later opens the languages for philosophy, science, technology and all the other areas of human creative endeavours.

But writing in our languages per se - although a necessary step in the correct direction - will not itself bring about the renaissance in African cultures if that literature does not carry the content of our people's anti-imperialist struggles to liberate their productive forces from foreign control; the content of the need for unity among the workers and peasants of all the nationalities in their struggle to control the wealth they produce and to free it from internal and external parasites.

In other words writers in African languages should reconnect themselves to the revolutionary traditions of an organised peasantry and working class in Africa in their struggle to defeat imperialism and create a higher system of democracy in alliance with all the other peoples of the world. Unity in that struggle would ensure unity in our multi-lingual diversity.

In the course of this study, attention will thus be devoted to elements of language as employed by Head and Ngugi. These elements include, for instance, the writers' choice of linguistic medium; finding solutions for cultural terms which

cannot be adequately translated; the reliance on allegorical names of characters; the use of proverbs, songs, verse and slogans; the functions of African myths and legends; as well as the interference and role of the Bible. These aspects will, however, be seen against the background of the notion of transformation, especially as they concern the role of women in these two societies: Botswana and Kenya.

1.6 THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE

Elaine Showalter's well-known distinction between feminine, feminist and female will serve as the theoretical basis for my thesis (although no exhaustive overview of theories of feminism has been deemed necessary for purposes of the thesis). She (1982:13) bases her distinction of these terms on historical perspectives, writing as follows:

In looking at literary subcultures, such as black, Jewish, Canadian, Anglo-Indian or even American, we can see that they all go through three major phases. First, there is a prolonged phase of *imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and *internalization* of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of protest against these standards and values, an *advocacy* of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy. Finally, there is a phase of *self-discovery*, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency on opposition, a search for identity. An appropriate terminology for women writers is to call these stages Feminine, Feminist and Female.

Showalter then cautions against regarding these classifications as rigid:

These are obviously not rigid categories, distinctly separable in time, to which individual writers can be assigned with perfect assurance. The phases overlap; there are feminist elements in feminine writing, and vice versa. One might also find all three phases in the career of a single novelist. Nonetheless, it seems useful to point to periods of crisis when a shift of literary values occurred I identify the Feminine phase as the period from the appearance of the male pseudonym in the 1840s to the death of George Eliot in 1880; the Feminist phase as 1880 to 1920, or the winning of the vote; and the Female phase as 1920 to the present, but entering a new stage of self-awareness about 1960.

Hawthorn (1992:62) gives a slightly different view of feminism by regarding it as referring to "the qualities of females". He, however, modifies the term by adding that from the end of the nineteenth century the meaning of feminism was extended to include "those committed to and struggling for equal rights for women - including men". This assumption immediately establishes the link between feminism and change: "a feminist is someone who perceives that women in a given society are oppressed as *women*, and believes that this should be changed" (Walker, 1991:xxiii), one of the premises on which I based my decision to compare the mode of treatment of *women* and *transformation* in the novels of Ngugi and Bessie Head.

Most critics of feminine literature regard George Eliot and the Brontë sisters as the real forerunners of this ideological movement. Black female writing started relatively late: towards the end of the nineteenth century feminism became a strong literary movement, especially in America with the appearance of Afro-American females on the literary scene. According to Hazel Carby (1987:303) the 1890s was a time of immense literary activity and productivity for Afro-American women intellectuals. African female novels of the early part of the twentieth century may be seen as fairly conventional, in the words of Rosalind Miles (1990:50), "fiction in the old Trollopian mode". Conversely, the works of the prominent female Afro-American writers in the 1920s and 1930s start revealing the so-called "feminine consciousness", thereby becoming distinct from the works of most male writers. Feminism as a socio-political movement manifested itself with renewed energy in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in Western Europe and the United States. It extended its influence to become an international struggle in which literature has played a significant role.[14] The most important champions of modern feminism are among widely read women academics, predominantly Afro-Americans. Some of their works may be classified as *radical feminism*, thereby referring to the branch of feminism which, according to Hawthorn (1992:64), insists upon the "fundamental and all-embracing significance of gender differentiation", which includes a complete

rejection of collaboration with men, also discernible in some of the literary products of postcolonial female writing.

In recent years the debate surrounding postcolonial female/feminist issues has been given increasing prominence by, for example publications like the journal *Hecate*, which represents the Australian view of the female discourse. It has become increasingly clear that postcolonial and female/feminist approaches to literature both "focus on the peripheral, or what used to be considered peripheral within the context of mainstream theory Both theories tend to foreground the mechanisms of oppressive power, in the case of post-colonial theory the imperialist power, and in the case of feminist theory masculine power" (Coetzee, 1995:14). The works of both Head and Ngugi are essentially postcolonial and female, because they speak of "the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power" (Ashcroft et al., 1989:2), while simultaneously revealing the oppressiveness of male power.

Jones et al. (1987:1) remark that two outstanding facts characterize the role of African female writers. Firstly, there were very few African female writers till the end of the 1960s. Secondly, till fairly recently, they received virtually no critical attention in the "largely male-authored" bulk of literary criticism. These writers, therefore, feel that the "tremendous blossoming of highly accomplished works by African women writers" now merits serious critical attention. At the 1993 AUETSA Conference held in Port Elizabeth Salome Kiyaga even stated that most of Sub-Saharan African post-independence discourse is/was largely regarded as a "male preserve". Nancy Bazin (1985:183) also stresses the rising importance of African female writing by remarking that the novels of writers such as Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa from Nigeria, Bessie Head from Botswana and Mariama Bâ from Senegal "believe the myth that feminist issues are not important to African women". Barbara Christian (1985:335) regards African female writing as "a contemporary literature bursting with originality, passion, insight and beauty".

While illiteracy may be singled out as one of the most important factors contributing to the previous dearth of female writing, it was not its only cause. African culture had been firmly entrenched in the patriarchal tradition even before the advent of colonialism. The patriarchal system, which has a male dominant figure in the father, is basically oppressive of women. For example, men are heads of families. Their opinions have to be complied with unquestioningly, even by their wives, who are by definition minors. The inferior role of females finds expression in various proverbs, even from birth onwards. The Southern Sotho proverb 'O felededitse ba bangwe' ('She has just accompanied others') often heralds the birth of a girl. The lobola system is another example of the exploitation of females, in the sense that a woman is seen as constituting goods. Moreover, by the time a traditional girl gets married, she knows exactly what her future role will be: to serve her husband with her body and strength, bear and raise his children. The idea that a woman's beauty, and therefore her worth, is determined by her ability to slave for her family is clearly revealed in the Northern Sotho proverb: 'Mosadi ke tshwene, o lena mabogo' (literally translated as 'A woman is a baboon, her hands are eaten'). The strong influence of the patriarchal system has also made itself felt in the way in which traditional African society was affected by colonialism. In what can be termed a "dual-sex role system" existing in this region, male and female domains have been separated, with women subordinated to men, as Achufusi (1991:3) remarks: "though colonialism created new realities in colonial societies, it did not significantly alter the bases of social relations between men and women, by which men were deemed superior and women inferior". The third important factor that prevented traditional African women from becoming involved in the literary scene, has been their contribution to the economic and material welfare of the family. Apart from their mammoth domestic tasks in child-bearing and child-raising under often appallingly poor economic conditions, they have been expected to participate in certain aspects of farming. In a sense colonialism increased the task of women, since many men and boys were taken away from home to work for the colonizers, thereby forcing women to perform tasks traditionally assigned to men and boys. Achufusi furthermore mentions that the colonizers gave preference to

boys to receive education. The inferior role of women was also often reinforced by the fairly generalized attitudes of the missionaries, who usually provided women with an inferior education. According to Achufusi (1991:5), "the African woman laboured under the double yoke of being a colonial subject and being a woman". In spite of these obstacles, African women have continued their struggle against sexist exploitation, utilizing all opportunities to prove themselves in all spheres of life and have started making a definite impact on the contemporary literary scene. According to Brenda Berrian's *Bibliography of African Women Writers and Dramatists* published in 1985, there were about fifty novelists, twenty-seven dramatists, and one hundred and fifty-eight African writers at that stage (Achufusi, 1991:8). The most outstanding female African writers are Ama Ata Aidoo and Efua Sutherland (Ghana); Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Zulu Sofola, Mabel Segun, and Adaora Lily Uiasi (Nigeria); the late Mariama Bâ (Senegal); the late Bessie Head (South Africa); Grace Ogot (Kenya); as well as Rebeka Njau (Uganda).

Marita Wenzel (1995:i-ii) deftly summarizes the need for investigating the still subservient position of females when she writes in the *Preamble and contextualization* to her doctoral thesis:

Despite the active opposition initiated by feminist movements in the 1960s against social discrimination and the physical abuse of women, various forms of discrimination are still prevalent in contemporary society. This is evident in the plethora of feminist publications which attest to and expose social and literary discrimination; it is present as a main theme in women's novels and features as a prominent issue in feminist criticism. Its relevance is also confirmed by the number of women's societies, bookshops and publishing houses - such as Virago in London and Harvester in Brighton - which have been established to meet and promote the interests of women. Furthermore, the fact that the position of women is still being addressed and debated in a number of doctoral theses also serves to underline its relevance to a study of contemporary social and intercultural relations and stresses the fact that it has not yet been satisfactorily addressed and resolved.

In South Africa the position has been even worse than in other postcolonial African societies. Cherry Clayton (1989:1) cites three factors causing the

absence of African women from the literary scene: South Africa's isolation from European and American cultural shifts, the enormous economic difficulties facing most non-White South African women, coupled with the conservatism and passivity of many white South African females. She mentions that there have only been seven women writers among the more than 140 black South Africans writing in English since the 1920s. They are Miriam Tlali, Fatima Dike, Bessie Head, Noni Jabavu, Zindze Mandela, Laurette Ngcobo and Miriam Basner (Zell et al., 1983:205-219). The system of exploiting South African women on the labour market, including their being used as grossly underpaid domestic servants, has left most of them with virtually no leisure time in which to practise their creative talents. Single parenting and the frequent incidence of illegitimacy have also negatively influenced all spheres of their lives.

Clayton (1989:4) states that the "radical political and cultural differences" which inform the "subjective experience" of South African women, have influenced their writing. In similar vein Rebecca Matlou (1986:65) feels that the South African female creative writer "is born into a political environment where the society is uneven, the people are racially divided and the laws discriminatorily imposed by the regime, place her at the lowest economic and political ladder". Consequently, South African female literature exhibits its own unique characteristics. Clayton (1989:5) sees the black or coloured South African woman writer as being restrained by "internalised racial contempt, a self-hatred which intensifies a female tendency towards low self-*é*steem". This inferiority complex is often the direct result of a male dominated society. For example, a study of Bessie Head's final novel, *A Question of Power*, will demonstrate the devastating influence of both sexism and racism on a sensitive African female writer.

The perception of female characters in literature also sheds interesting light on the female discourse. Barthold (1981:99) suggests that in spite of the fact that women "share with men a No Man's Land of temporal chaos" in contemporary black fiction, they have been "denied the psychological complexity" of males. As

a result they have been viewed as mere character types. Although this kind of portrayal also appears in Western fiction, different symbols distinguish the perception of women in these two literary phenomena. In the course of this thesis, close attention will be paid to a study of the portrayal of women to determine whether in fact they are depicted as mere character types or as individuals[16]. Susheila Nasta (1991:xv) remarks in this regard:

The post-colonial woman writer is not only involved in making herself heard, in changing the architecture of male-centred ideologies and languages, or in discovering new forms and language to express her experience, she has also to subvert and demythologise indigenous male writings and traditions which seek to label her. An entrapping cycle begins to emerge. In countries with a history of colonialism, women's quest for emancipation, self-identity and fulfilment can be seen to represent a traitorous act, a betrayal not simply of traditional codes of practice and belief but of the wider struggle for liberation and nationalism.

The traditionally inferior position assigned to both female writers and female characters in novels may have caused the feminine novel in Africa to be generally "more radical, even more militant" (Frank, 1987:15) than its Western counterpart. The novels of many African female authors have a fairly strong cynical tone. Frank, however, overstates her case by remarking that *all* these novels "embrace the solution of a world without men: man is the enemy, the exploiter and oppressor". This, she argues, leaves no possibility for any compromise or truce with the male *enemy*, but leads to a kind of *feminist separatism*. Bessie Head's novels in particular refute this assumption, as this study will demonstrate.

Rebecca Matlou (1986:76) feels that the female South African writer should commit herself to correct the distorted perceptions about South African women, especially those of some men as well as by a number of white writers. The female South African writer should thus strive at being a committed writer, as a writer, as a woman and as a person aspiring to change the South African situation to become a better world.

Finally, despite recent studies, there still exists an urgent need for defining criteria for the evaluation of black female writing in general and in postcolonial African fiction specifically. The role of criticism in shaping and encouraging literature is indisputable, yet not enough attention has been paid to criticism of African literature. In an anthologized article Barbara Smith (1982:164) advocates the development of a black feminist criticism. She feels that a critic should in the first instance study the works of other black female writers to become aware of existing trends in this genre: "she would think and write out of her own identity and not try to graft the ideas or methodology of white/male literary thought upon the precious materials of black women's art".

Ashcroft et al. (1989:175-176) have, however, significantly contributed to the development of black female criticism in linking African female writing to postcolonial literature. They maintain that women "like postcolonial peoples, have had to construct a language of their own when their only available 'tools' are those of the 'colonizer'". Such a postcolonial theory should include elements like language, voice, phenomena of speech and silence, mimicry, as well as "the connections between literature and language, political activity, and the potential for social change". They extend their critical stance by even discarding traditional biologicistic premises, on the grounds of race and gender, as I intend doing in this thesis.

The male rendering of females in African literature forms an interesting part of this literary discourse. Ebele Eko (1986:210) finds that from the period of colonization when women played an important part in practising the oral tradition to the rise of serious African female writers "lies a foggy lowland for the image of women in African literature - a lowland of male writers' idealization, rigid conventionality, stereotyping, superficiality and nonchalance, occasionally relieved by realistic and inspiring portraiture". Male writers have tended to concentrate on two extreme views of women: the traditional mother figure as opposed to the "city types with fairly loose morals" (Mutiso, 1974:51), in the words of Little (1980:9), the "good-time girls". An example of the idealized view

of the African female as both symbolic of Africa, mother earth and natural motherhood is found in Senghor's *Black Mother*:

Nude woman, black woman
Clothed in your colour which is life in your form
 which is beauty!...
And high on the fiery pass, I find you, Earth's promise,
 in the heart of summer and noon,
And your beauty blasts me full-hearted like a flash of
 an eagle in the sun (Williamson, 1976:33).

Eko detects a considerable change in the attitude of male writers towards African females in the period between 1950 and 1960. At this time writers such as Achebe, Amadi, Aluko, Munonye and Ngugi usually depicted women in the traditional role of rural mothers and wives. By contrast, male urban novelists have tended to depict a fair number of females as corrupt figures who attempted to demonstrate their independence by going to urban areas where they often imitated materialistic Western behaviour. Eko (1986:212), perhaps somewhat too rashly, remarks: "Thus, whether as disreputable prostitutes or materialistic bitches, the picture painted of the urban woman in Africa is, to say the least, negative, unrepresentative and condemnatory". She, however, singles out postcolonial African male writers, such as Ngugi, Ousmane and La Guma, who have exerted considerable influence on their contemporaries by giving a more balanced view of females. These writers changed perceptions about women by regarding women more seriously, viewing them with humanity and by asserting their dignity. These three writers have constructed characters who mature through experience, and who resultantly play a significant role in transforming traditional societies. They also portray women more realistically than many of their male counterparts by exposing both the weaknesses and strengths of these female protagonists. However, women writers generally have also made remarkable progress in rectifying this distorted projection of the female

experience. They have succeeded in revealing the complexities of the postcolonial female's world, in the words of Eko (1986:218):

Their projection of women as protagonists, the preponderance of female-related themes in their works, their concern for the psychological growth and liberation of women from all forces of oppression and limitations, and the very fact that they bring to their work a personal commitment and a sharper vision, all lend their portraiture the authenticity and vitality so lacking in most male writers' depiction of women They have played a heroic role in humanizing African literature.

This study will reveal that in "humanizing" African literature, Bessie Head broadened the horizon by extending her vision from the oppressed individual to include all oppressed people in her juxtapositioning of good and evil and by her emphasizing the spiritual and creative aspects of mankind, irrespective of gender. She, however, does not regard herself as a feminist writer:

Writing is not a male/female occupation. My femaleness was never a problem to me, not now, not in our age. More than a century ago, a few pioneer writers, writing fearfully under male pseudonyms, established that women writers were brilliant thinkers too, on a par with men. I do not have to be a feminist. The world of the intellect is impersonal, sexless (*New Statesman*, 1985:22).

She does, however, feel strongly about the plight of women, as she writes in *The Collector of Treasures* (1977:92):

The ancestors made so many errors and one of the most bitter-making things was that they relegated to men a superior position in the tribe, while women were regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of human life. To this day, women still suffer from all the calamities that befall an inferior form of human life.

Ngugi's writing also testifies to the fact that a writer need not be a female to stress the need for radical change concerning the postcolonial African women's degraded position as the underdog of society. His approach, however, differs. He often concentrates on degraded females, such as prostitutes like Wanja and Wariinga who grow spiritually and become willing to accept sacrificial

responsibility. Both writers have thus contributed to re-inscribing black females into history.

1.7 POSTCOLONIALISM AND TRANSFORMATION

Soon will the earth cover us all: then the earth too will change, and the things also which result from change will continue to change forever, and these again forever (Marcus Aurelius, AD 121-180).

One of the predominant themes of African literature in general and African female literature in particular is change or transformation. Priebe (1990:8), for example writes: "The most basic and pervasive theme in African literatures is change, change in all its cultural and social manifestations".

Ashcroft et al. (1993:1) emphasize the magnitude of change resulting from the colonial experience by stating that "More than three-quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism".

However, these writers reject the use of the term *postcolonial* as indicative only of the period after the departure of the imperial powers: "We use the term 'post-colonial' ... to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (1993:2). The rationale for this approach is the existence of a "continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression". They also regard it as the most suitable term for recent cross-cultural criticism and the discourse which constitutes this critical approach. Ashcroft et al. thus regard African literature as part of a vast branch of global literature:

So the literatures of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, and Sri Lanka are all post-colonial literatures.... What each of these literatures has in common beyond their special and distinctive regional characteristics is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and

asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre. It is this which makes them distinctively post-colonial.

An examination of the theme of women and transformation in the works of Bessie Head and Ngugi will thus be seen in the context of the canon of postcolonial literature, emphasizing the parallel between the situation of postcolonial writing and of feminist writing, especially noticeable in the increasing range in the growth and strength of these two discourses.

The theme of change or transformation, as expressed in many African novels, may be viewed as the tragic consequences of the African encounter with Europe. Most of these novels reflect the social and psychological conflicts created by the emergence of the White man in Africa and the efforts to enforce the Western culture on the till then self-contained world of African society. These endeavours often led to a distortion and disruption of the existing African consciousness.

We are reminded by Jomo Kenyatta's (1965:297) *Facing Mt. Kenya*, an impressive document on traditional Gikuyu life, of the wholeness of their traditional life:

we cannot too strongly emphasise that the various sides of Gikuyu life here described are parts of an integral culture. No single part is detachable; each has its context and is understandable only in relation to the whole.

The key to an understanding of most African societies is the tribal system. The bases of the tribal system are the family group and the age-grades. These shape the character and determine the outlook of every man, woman and child.

Kenyatta mentions that in Gikuyu society nobody is an isolated individual whose uniqueness is secondary to traditional beliefs and customs. Unwritten laws govern his whole life: spiritually, economically, biologically and socially.

George Kimble (1962:26-29) regards the magnitude and speed with which change has come to Africa as among the most important characteristics of the process of change. Transformation in Africa manifested itself especially in physical factors such as land tenure, farming methods, eating habits, housing and many more. Change has also affected social relationships, both in the family and all beyond, including customs, such as those pertaining to religion, marriage and burial rites. Kimble states that in many cases the outlines of traditional life have become blurred. However, John Mbiti (1970:xi) stresses the fact that in spite of the magnitude and speed of change in Africa, it would be incorrect to believe that everything traditional has been completely modified or eradicated. He sees change as existing more on the surface. It initially mostly concerns material matters, while only later starting to penetrate to the deepest levels of "thinking pattern, language content, mental images, emotions, beliefs and response in situations of need".

Tom Mboya (1963:92) believes that women, both literate and illiterate, have played a significant role in the traditional process. He remarks that women constitute one of the most important support groups of a nationalist movement because they are more susceptible to discipline, readier to accept leadership, and more willing to give any new leader their unflinching support. He backs his assumption by referring to the active role Kenyan women played during the Mau Mau rebellion by sheltering the freedom fighters, as well as by serving as couriers, especially for smuggling weapons and ammunition to the freedom fighters.

A moot point that should not be neglected in any analysis of the process of change in Africa is the dual nature of the researchers' perspective on change. A significant group of African writers, both male and female, such as Soyinka and Armah, tend to view the past with an undue sense of reverence, noting only the beauty of a lost Eden. They, therefore, concentrate on merely portraying the positive side of traditional culture and the negative side of colonization. The other extremist group of critics and writers unduly emphasize the positive side of

change at the expense of perceiving the negative results of this process of acculturation. To cite an obvious example, the rise of socialism in Africa has had both beneficial and harmful results. The movement from village to city has also been constructive as well as destructive to Africans, especially to women who are often left destitute at home in the rural areas, or have to create a living for their families in black townships and even increasingly under slum conditions. Mutiso (1974:73) points out that the conflict between the urban and rural sectors of the society cannot be solely attributed to geographical factors, but that it "stems from the fact that the two situations call for radically different rules of operation" in the specific environment.

Finally, I.M. Lewis (1968:87) states that the characteristics of many urban Blacks are still not fully understood, despite massive research already undertaken in this area. He attributes this lack of true understanding to the degree of detribalization of the city-dwellers, but mentions that even those Africans who apparently participate actively in city-life may still retain links with traditional rural life. African literature and criticism should, therefore, not ignore the "institutionalised continuity in social relations between town and country as parts of a variably weighted continuum of interaction".

Lauretta Ngcobo (1984:64) singles out four women writers in Africa who succeed in "revealing in their writing how the male writers' present emphasis on tradition is tragically outmoded" - a generalization which I cannot endorse. Of importance, however, is that she regards Bessie Head, Rebecca Njau, Mariama Bâ and Buchi Emecheta as the four African female writers who expose the real emotions and feelings of African women in a changing postcolonial world because "they monitor their own changing hearts and minds". For Head, a prerequisite for any meaningful change is "the needs for inner and personal reform or rehabilitation" (Ngcobo, 1984:65), as this study will hopefully reveal.

Ngugi himself has commented on his belief in the role writers should play in establishing significant change in Africa:

I believe myself that the African novelist can help in building a place to feel at home. But he cannot do that if he insists on his liberal posture. He must, I think, be committed on the side of the majority whose sudden clamour for change is now rocking the continent. By diving into himself, deep into the collective consciousness of our own people, he can seek the roots, the trends of the revolutionary struggle. In a capitalist state the past is a romantic glimmer, gazing at it is a means of escape from the present. I believe that it is only in a socialist context that a look at yesterday can be meaningful in illuminating today and tomorrow (1979:8).

For the purposes of this study, it is noteworthy that Gerald Moore (1980:264) comments on Ngugi's preoccupation with women and transformation as one of the author's main themes since his earliest writings:

Many of these early stories [namely those later collected in *Secret Lives*] show a preoccupation with one of the favourite themes of Ngugi's fiction, the relationship of mothers and children It is Ngugi's compassion for women in these early stories which prepares us for their transformational role in his later fiction.

1.8 APPROACH TO ANALYSIS

This thesis examines the novels of Bessie Head and Ngugi, with special emphasis on their being postcolonial African writers, to elicit their visions of African societies in a process of change/transformation and determine the interaction between their respective social visions, personal backgrounds and socio-historical environments with special emphasis on the role of women within these varied and interrelated concerns. The main thrust of this thesis is thus to demonstrate how these multiple interactions are embodied in and given voice by the novels by Head and Ngugi and since the interest of this thesis is primarily thematic, stylistic elements will be dealt with to the extent that they are crucial to the issues under discussion. I also decided to choose Head and Ngugi as exemplars of the theme of women and transformation because the difference in their social, geographical and historical backgrounds has resulted in an almost paradoxical development in their work. Bessie Head writes from the perspective

of the self towards an inclusion of the other, in other words, elements of both her White and Black background are visible in her work. Ngugi, however, as a patriotic Black Kenyan, writes from a position firmly entrenched in the African communal system, where the communal interests are intrinsically of more importance than personal ones.

This thesis is the product of library research, consisting of a study, evaluation, comparison and assessment of existing literature on postcolonial African literature in general, and of the novels of Head and Ngugi in particular.

ENDNOTES

- [1] Epigraph to Mphahlele's *The African Image* (1974).
- [2] However, I deliberately refrain from a philosophical analysis of phenomena of change and transformation because different value systems and varying norms determine the qualitative meaning of any form of change and the resultant state of transformation. What one individual thus regards as progressive, may be seen as threatening and destructive to another. McEvan's (1983:1) remarks about the linguistic vagueness of *modern* may perhaps be applied appositely to the key concepts used in this thesis, change and transformation:

Modern is a complex word which means different things to a geologist, an historian and an aircraft-designer. The senses of 'now existing' and 'of recent origin' have grown further apart in every century since the word appeared in English in 1500. Much that now exists is held to be obsolete, in life and literature. Competing voices claim their own modernity and *modern* becomes increasingly highly charged when it means what is now desirable and elastic in its sense of now existing. Podsnap's 'not English!' has been replaced by 'not modern!' Africans have suffered most from other people's misguided attempts to modernise them.

Despite the obvious obstacles hampering the formulation of a clear-cut definition of change, I endorse Mutiso's (1974:123) views on the nature of social change:

Social change is a synergistic process for which there is no adequate theory. However, looking backward historically, one can always attempt to point out what probably happened and what were the causes or effects Finally, the writers ... [should look] at the past and the present with an eye to what should be in the future

This process [of change in Africa] has been one of changing the society from a particular set of socio-politico-economic relationships and beliefs into another set. This process is still going on Social change to the extent that it is synergistic by definition can only be viewed as a spiral dialectic whose cut-off points are not clear. Social change is not unilinear or caused by one agent. It also comes at different rates for different individuals and institutions. Sociologically then the limits of change are always clear *a posteriori* - a fact which should be imparted more thoroughly to theoreticians of development.

- [3] The term *postcolonial* is used in my own writing, but the word is hyphenated where the hyphen is used in a quotation. The same principle applies to words such as cooperative and others, where the original spelling is retained in quotation.
- [4] In his recent paper at the AUETSA Conference (Pietermaritzburg, 9-13 July 1995), Dseagu once more stressed the need for a redefinition of African Literature. In his paper entitled "The Definition of African Literature Revisited", he for instance remarks:

The definition of African Literature has been a controversial issue since the 1960's. Two broad categories of views have been expressed on the subject of classification:

- 1 that it should be based on style
- 2 that it should be based on heritage.

The proponents of heritage can be sub-divided into the pragmatists, who would include in the classification all writers born and bred in Africa; the radicals, who would restrict it to only black Africans; and the diffusionists, who would extend it to all blacks of the diaspora and any others sympathetic to Africa. In the light of

the present multi-racial composition of Africa, a re-assessment of the definition is called for.

[5] See for instance Iyasaere's doctoral thesis, *The Rhetoric of African Fiction* for illuminating analyses of different critical approaches to African Literature.

AS

[6] Ngugi wa Thiong'o (christened James) was born on 5 January 1938 in Limuru, Kenya. In 1947 his mother sent him to Gikuyu Kariug'a School, Kamandura, Limuru, a Christian mission school. In 1954 he was enrolled at Alliance High School, Gikuyu. Between 1959 and 1964 he studied at Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda. After receiving a B.A. degree in English at Makerere University College in Uganda in 1964, Ngugi worked briefly as a journalist in Nairobi before leaving for England to pursue postgraduate studies at the University of Leeds. Upon his return to Kenya in 1967, Ngugi taught at the University of Nairobi where he eventually became head of the literature department. He resigned in 1969 over the principle of academic freedom. In 1978 he was detained without trial, following the success which met the performance of his drama, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, which was regarded as subversive. Ngugi left the country as a political exile and is currently a full-time writer based in the United Kingdom.

Ngugi's fairly extensive literary output can be divided into four main genres: novels, plays, essays and short stories. His novels are *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Devil on the Cross* (1982) and *Matigari* (1987). His plays include *The Black Hermit* (1962), *This Time Tomorrow and Other Plays* (1972), *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) and *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (1980), later translated as *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982). His best-known essays appeared in three anthologies: *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics* (1972), *Writers in*

Politics (1981), and *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1981). *Secret Lives*, an anthology of short stories, was published in 1975.

- [7] Bessie Head was born on 6 July 1937, in the Pietermaritzburg mental hospital, where her white mother was institutionalized after falling pregnant to a black stable hand working on the family estate in Natal. Her mother subsequently committed suicide. The infant was then handed over to a white foster family who returned her after a week because they realized that she was a Coloured, whereupon she was placed in foster care with a coloured family with whom she stayed until she was thirteen. In 1950 she was put into an Anglican mission orphanage in Durban. She attended a high school there and later trained as a primary school teacher. Between 1956 and 1958 she worked in this capacity and from 1958 to 1960 she was employed as a journalist on *Golden City Post* (later known as *Post*).

Being a Coloured in an apartheid South Africa was one of the most important reasons why Bessie Head felt herself a lonely marginalized person for the whole of her blighted life. The second factor that shaped Head's destiny was her marriage to the ex-convict Capetonian journalist, Harold Head, in 1962. On the break-up of her marriage she and her young son left South Africa for Botswana on an exit permit in March 1964. She returned to teaching and also started publishing her first novels. She was granted Botswanan citizenship in 1979, fifteen years after her entry into the country. The year 1969, however, marked the onset of spells of mental illness which led to her being certified and admitted to a psychiatric hospital in Gaborone. However, she recovered sufficiently to continue her career as a writer who travelled fairly extensively until her death in Serowe, Botswana, of hepatitis, on 17 April 1986, when she was only 49 years old.

At the time of her death, Head had published six books: her three novels, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969), *Maru* (1971), and *A Question of Power*

(1973), as well as three anthologies of short stories. These are *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1972), *The Collector of Treasures* (1977), and *A Bewitched Crossroad* (1984). Her miscellaneous uncollected writings appeared as two posthumous publications: the mainly fictional *Tales of Tenderness and Power* (1980) and the chiefly autobiographical *A Woman Alone* (1990). The first collection of her letters was published in 1991, entitled *A Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head. 1965-1979*. In 1993 her first novella and a couple of short stories, *The Cardinals with Meditations and Short Stories* was published, edited by Margaret Daymond.

- [8] It is generally assumed that *Mhudi* was written in 1917/ 1918.
- [9] It is, however, interesting to note that the authors listed did not reject the European influence. Kane, in fact, is at pains to stress that, unlike many others who share his skin colour, he is at once Moslem and a 'Toncouleur', schooled in Western Europe.
- [10] As examples of this radical kind of fiction in South Africa B.E. Ondepasa's *The Hero of Sharpeville* (1961) and Lauretta Ncgobo's later *Cross of Gold* (1981) may be cited.
- [11] Roscoe refers to leading black academics such as Njabulo Ndebele who frankly criticized the unconditional acceptance of English as the official language. Ndebele, for example, vented his disapproval in an address to the English Academy of South Africa in 1986:

Basically, I think that we cannot afford to be uncritically complacent about the role and future of English in South Africa, for there are many reasons why it cannot be considered an innocent language The guilt of English ... must be recognised and appreciated before its continuance can be advocated (1994:110).

Manganyi addressed the same body in similar vein when he remarked in 1992:

It may be timely to recall that the language you rightly cherish and promote was used for long years in this country to defend oppression and injustice - used indeed to deny a voice to the majority of our people - and used so eloquently, so subtly, in government propaganda, that overseas listeners to the SABC, as

they were meant to, often thought its broadcasts came from the BBC itself (Young, 1993:4).

- [12] Code-switching is here used in the way Ngara (1982:43) defines it, namely when a speaker of a subordinate language (such as an African language) can hardly sustain a conversation in his or her language without falling back onto the dominant language (in this instance English) at times.
- [13] Cf. Ngugi's pronouncements in *Decolonising the Mind* and "Looking at Africa from the outside in" in *Weekly Mail*, 3-9 Nov. 1989.
- [14] William's (1990:24) cry encapsulates the universal nature of the many oppressions which black females struggle against:

I wonder which of the many oppressions in my femaleness and in my blackness weigh the heaviest on me. Which of the many liberations do I thirst most for? Do I thirst most of all to be liberated from my colour, from my class, my ignorance of my tradition, from economic domination? Or is it the liberation from all male domination that women all over the world are struggling for today?

- [15] Matshego succeeds in stressing the incessant demands made on a black mother, driving her to seem to suppress all feeling:

A Woman is a Baboon

A woman is a baboon, her hands are eaten.
A woman is a hoe, she is a broom.
Marrying for beauty is just a habit.
We marry her for her labour, ugly though she might be.

She goes out during the month of October.
Carrying a hoe she goes to plough.
Little water in a leather bottle she carries
With seeds made into little bundles.

She fastens her dress, rolled up in perseverance.
Her dress is up to her knees,
Chopping the virgin ground with the hoe
In stifling sun's heat, to the song of the beetle

The month of October is drawing to a close.

The woman toils the field she has split apart.
Her toddlers show utter neglect
Their overgrown hair ringed with dust.

The first clouds of the driving first rains
Are the clouds for the seeds on the fields.
Ploughs penetrate in the wake of oxen to enter.
Where shall we take the wailing orphaned?

Soon there is eating and plenty -
No more picking of rinds of sweet-reeds along the paths.
We pass each other with stomachs satiated.
Children alight with health, drunkenness abounds.

The baboon has smoothed the courtyard and house.
It goes to the fields having smeared them with dung.
Even the walls are beautiful having been smeared
And decorated with calabashes in apparent indifference.

(M.J. Matshego, in Muller, 1988)

- [16] In her paper at the 1993 AUETSA Annual Conference, Felicity Woods quotes as examples of "stereotypical extremes" often found in the portrayal of African female characters the picture of Mumbi as the woman "dreaming of supporting, caring for and nurturing her man", or as typical of "the Mother Africa stereotype - women as Mother above all else, whose fertility symbolizes growth and regeneration". She contrasts these two conventional images with Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jague Nana* who "represents the diametrically opposed stereotype, the glamorous, seductive city woman, often a prostitute, associated with the dangers of modern life" (1993:2).

CHAPTER TWO

2 CHANGE AND TRANSFORMATION AS EVINced IN THE EARLIER NOVELS BY BESSIE HEAD AND NGUGI

Bessie Head's first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, and Ngugi's first two novels, *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child*, may be regarded as examples of the postcolonial African novel. They are also situational novels (Larson, 1978:116) since each of these three novels depicts "group-felt experiences" encountered by the inhabitants of the specific villages or members of clans in the process of change resulting from their encounter with the West. As such, these novels delineate experience rather than character. Larson (1978:117) mentions that although this kind of novel may focus on one or two individual characters, the course of events influences the lives of all the characters. The community thus becomes the "collective consciousness" of the novel. The focal point of this chapter will therefore be a study of how change, brought about by especially the female characters, results in the transformation of the lives of the inhabitants of the respective villages portrayed in these three novels.

2.1 BESSIE HEAD

2.1.1 *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969)

When Rain Clouds Gather reveals characteristics typical of Head's oeuvre as a whole: her novels in particular are "intensely private, remarkable works. They are charged with an honesty and power that arise from deep personal experience with the issues explored" (MacKenzie, 1989b:19). This novel introduces the central concern in her literary output as a whole, namely her preoccupation with aspects of the male/female discourse, as well as with the discourse of transformation.

In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Bessie Head deftly and inextricably weaves the underlying notion of change into the plot. She chooses a remote Botswana setting which she then shapes into a model for transformation in the rest of Africa. In this novel she uses the construct of Botswana as a sociopolitical haven for Makhaya, a black South African refugee. Initially an outsider, he endeavours to integrate himself into the small community life of rural Botswana after serving a two-year jail sentence for intended sabotage in South Africa. The female protagonist, Paulina Sebeso, dominates the novel. She settles in Golima Mmidi (meaning "to grow crops"- (WRCG:28)) with her two children following her husband's suicide. She is portrayed as a woman who scorns tradition and custom by refusing to pretend to be inferior to men: "A few men had said she was too bossy. Then they all said it, overlooking the fact that they were wilting, effeminate shadows of men who really feared women" (WRCG:93). Makhaya eventually marries Paulina. Makhaya's closest friends are Gilbert Balfour, a British agronomist who heads the local cooperative, and Gilbert's wife, Maria, the daughter of a local chief.

The loosely constructed plot centres on the various stages of the development of the cooperative and the changes wrought in the lives especially of the four protagonists. Head reveals how change takes place in spite of physical and mental obstacles. Gilbert's innovatory plans are opposed by the ingrained conservatism of the local people and their suspicion of new techniques. The fiercest opposition, however, comes from the reactionary and exploitative sub-chief, Matenga, and the semi-literate Pan Africanist, Joas Tsepe. The discourse of physical transformation comes to a head when Matenga summons Paulina to his house, intending to punish her for taking a leading role in spearheading female involvement in the new agricultural project. Upon realizing that he has completely misjudged the villagers' support for change, Matenga commits suicide. The ensuing unhampered process of transformation of the economy then heralds a new era in the personal lives of the members of the community. The results of acculturation are externalized by the renewal in the lives of the major characters: "The cooperative represents the creation of a new world, or

the possibilities of creating a new world, from the nothingness of Botswana's harsh landscape and from the destructiveness of the refugee's past" (Brown, 1981:161).

Paulina plays a key role in Head's depiction of women in a transitional society. Her central role in the novel is stressed when she is introduced in Chapter Six:

One might go so far as to say that it is strong, dominating personalities who play a decisive role when things are changing. Somehow they always manage to speak with the voice of authority, and their innate strength of character drives them to take the lead in almost any situation. Allied to all this is their boundless optimism and faith in their fellow men. One such personality in the village of Golema Mmidi was Dinorego, and it was his support of and belief in Gilbert that swayed the villagers over to a support of the cattle co-operative. Another such personality was Paulina Sebeso, who was to bring the women of the village to the farm and help open up the way for new agricultural developments in Golema Mmidi (WRCG:75).

Paulina came to Golima Mmidi about eighteen months before Makhaya, following the death of her Rhodesian husband who had committed suicide after being falsely accused of fraud. Brown (1981:166) regards her as "a uniquely 'new' woman in the overall context of Head's narrative" because of her strong assertive personality. Her physical features reinforce her determined, positive outlook on life: "Perhaps Paulina was not a very beautiful woman" (WRCG:77). She is "tall, thin and angular, with a thin, angular face". Although she feels concerned about her small breasts, she has "lovely big black eyes that stared at everything in a bold way" (WRCG:77). She has "long straight black legs [which] were the most beautiful legs in the village". Moreover, she "had a decisive way of walking as though she always knew where she was going and what she wanted". Her love for bright colours also underlines her boldness.

Given this attractive, forceful personality - rather strong for a traditional tribal African female - Paulina's deliberate taking charge of her life after the tragedy of her husband's death and the loss of all her possessions, is true to character. Moreover, being a "passionate and impetuous woman with a warm heart", she is

set on remarrying. But Paulina is all too keenly aware of the "untrustworthiness of men with no strength or moral values" (WRCG:93) - the kind of men women traditionally succumbed to.

As the leader designated for initiating the women in the tobacco project, Paulina is an immediate success. Paulina is the female counterpart of Gilbert. She is like him in being dynamic, strong, filled with inexhaustible energy and with a vision to recognize the ultimate sense of cultural and agricultural change. Paulina and Gilbert are bold enough to effect this change at the cost of defying centuries old, traditionally established patterns in the village. Gilbert ascribes the real agricultural problems in the country to the outmoded attitudes towards the roles designated to men and women in rural Botswana: "He felt that he had stumbled on to one of the major blockages to agricultural progress in the country" (WRCG:34) when he realizes that the women who are the traditional tillers of the earth, "the backbone of agriculture", are excluded from all programmes aimed at promoting innovatory farming techniques. He also realizes his own limitations in trying to convey his progressive ideas to the villagers:

Gilbert He needed, more than anything, someone with the necessary mental and emotional alienation from tribalism to help him accomplish what he had in mind. Three years of battling had already made clear to him his own limitations in putting his ideas across to people, and he had also learned that change, if it was to take place at all, would in some way have to follow the natural course of people's lives rather than impose itself in a sudden and dramatic way from the top (WRCG:30).

With this insight, Gilbert, the Westerner, involves Makhaya and Paulina in his agricultural projects, thereby instigating radical change in the traditionally patriarchal society.

Paulina's close contact with Makhaya while engaged in the tobacco project, draws them closer together. Head now describes Paulina's conflict about sexual matters. Being "first and foremost a physically alive woman" (WRCG:111), Paulina yearns for sexual fulfilment, but she refuses to succumb to the traditional

belief in polygamy. She thus scorns tradition and feels embittered about the lot of women:

And there was something so deeply wrong in the way a woman had to live, holding herself together with her backbone, because no matter to which side a woman might turn, there was this trap of loneliness. Most women had come to take it for granted, entertaining themselves with casual lovers. Most women with fatherless children thought nothing of sending a small boy out to a lonely cattle post to herd cattle to add to the family income. But then, such women expected life to give them nothing (WRCG:119).

Although Paulina scorns the traditionally inferior position of tribal women, she finds it hard to accept that Makhaya is different. Even while still at home, Makhaya has revolted against patriarchy or the authority of the father-figure:

He had sisters at home.... But he was the eldest in the family, and according to custom he had to be addressed as 'Buti', which means 'Elder Brother', and treated with exaggerated respect. As soon as his father died he made changes in the home, foremost of which was that his sisters should address him by his first name and associate with him as equals and friends (WRCG:15).

In a sense, Makhaya here expresses Bessie Head's own repugnance of male domination and the resultant subjugation of women, often by spiritually inferior men who rely on traditional views to maintain superiority in a patriarchal society. This can be extended to infer Head's unquestionable denunciation of the apartheid policies of the South African regime. Head views apartheid as the supreme form of patriarchal tyranny in that it assigns a position of inferiority, of subjugated alterity, to non-Whites. A person is thus stigmatized on the colour of his skin, irrespective of his own intrinsic worth. Head's intolerance of racial oppression is deep-seated, possibly because she herself experienced the agony of belonging to a subjected class while growing up as a Coloured in South Africa.

She strongly condemns racial discrimination even in her first novel, *The Cardinals*, her only work written in South Africa. The discussion of racial oppression in *The Cardinals* in Chapter Four of my thesis shows that not only women suffer as a result of racial oppression, but even men are also paradoxically and perhaps equally (insidiously) destructively victims of this

inhuman system. In this novella Head, for instance, ascribes the wide-spread and open homosexuality among coloured men to an inferiority complex fostered and nurtured by the apartheid laws which rob these men of their manhood and pride.

Although fairly liberated in her views, Paulina is still confused by changing attitudes towards gender issues. When Makhaya visits her and offers to make the fire, she is alarmed and remonstrates: "Don't touch the fire. It's a woman's work" (WRCG:139). But Makhaya is just as resolute in his views on tradition. He thus retorts: "It's time you learned that men live on this earth too. If I want to make tea, I'll make it, and if I want to sweep the floor, I'll sweep it" (WRCG:139).

The climactic moment in their relationship occurs at the cattle post when Makhaya takes Paulina to see her son, Isaac, after hearing about his illness. On finding Isaac's corpse, Makhaya asserts his authority and forbids Paulina to enter the hut to look at her son's remains. The fact that Paulina obeys Makhaya's instructions, signals both her willingness to change and discard old tribal customs as well as her submission to Makhaya:

'The boy is dead,' he said sharply. 'Why do you want to go in?'

'I must see the body,' she said, but with dry, taut lips. 'I must see the body because it is our custom.'

'You see,' he said, in a deliberately harsh voice. 'All these rotten customs are killing us. Can't you see I'm here to bear all your burdens? Come on.'

And he walked towards the car, knowing she would meekly follow him (WRCG:162).

Significantly, Paulina's submission is not the blind adherence of the ordinary tribeswoman to male authority, but a sign of her willingness to look up to a man she can really respect, a man who has developed in the course of the novel to be worthy of her love. Ironically, Paulina - the independent, assertive young widow - changes into a soft and more conciliatory woman. Yet there is a sense of

ambiguity in this process of transformation. While marking conformity to traditional values on the one hand, it on the other hand reveals that Paulina's new views are unique because she only partially supports change. She will retain her individuality in her approach to their marriage, demonstrated by her refusal to accept a polygamous union. Even Makhaya, who often talks about sexual equality, assumes the role of a tribalist lover and husband, except that it is obvious that he will not have many wives. Their marriage thus symbolizes a synthesis of tradition and modernity.

The delineation of Maria forms an interesting sub-discourse in the novel's main discourse of transformation in that it depicts an interracial relationship. When Maria's father, Dinorego, speaks about her for the first time in the novel, he singles out her inclination towards change: "I stay alone with my youngest child. Her name is Maria. She likes all things modern" (WRCG:27). Dinorego then proudly tells Makhaya how she carved shelves in the mud wall after having seen a picture with kitchen shelves in a book Gilbert has given her. Her innovative streak is soon followed by all the women in the village. They also imitate her use of curry in the preparation of goat's meat.

Like Ngugi, Head is fond of employing parallelism in character portrayal. Characters are often paired off, thereby reinforcing specific characteristics, or contrasting opposites. Maria differs vastly from Paulina in being more introverted. Maria speaks with the "crisp clear voice of a busy, preoccupied, self-absorbed woman" (WRCG:28) and has "an almighty air of neatness and orderliness" about her. Maria is "very thin with a long pretty neck on which was poised a serious, quiet face, and her small black eyes never seemed to gaze outward, but inward. In fact, she was often in the habit of staring meditatively at the ground" (WRCG:28-29).

Unlike the other females in Golima Mmidi, Maria yearns to be educated. When Gilbert thus asks her to marry him, she declines his offer because she is uneducated. As a result they decide to instruct each other: she teaches Gilbert

Tswana and he teaches her English. Although their eventual marriage demonstrates one of the most profound changes that take place in the course of the novel, Head relates it in simple terms as Gilbert tells Makhaya:

'It's not you I was mad at, Mack,' Gilbert said. 'It was Maria. You've no idea how she's made me run in circles for three years. Now it's all ended so easily, I can't believe it myself. I don't know why I have never thought of going to Dinorego in the first place. You know what he said: "Do you hear, Maria? Gilbert says he's going to marry you. Do you agree?" And all she said was, "Yes, Papa" ' (WRCG:88).

In spite of admitting to Mma-Millipede that she does not fully understand Gilbert, Maria's quiet devotion to him is obvious when she remarks: "I don't care about myself, but nothing must harm Gilbert" (WRCG:89). Head's realism is evident in portraying the doubts Gilbert also feels after the marriage:

Gilbert turned his head and looked at her, feeling strangely uncertain that he was really married to this changeable, unpredictable woman. There were two women in her - one was soft and meditative and the other was full of ruthless common sense, and these two uncongenial personalities clashed and contradicted each other all the time. He wasn't ever sure if Maria was in need of his constant protection or whether everyone was really superfluous to this still, midnight world of quiet self-absorption in which she lived (WRCG:101).

When he subsequently questions her about her withdrawal from him, she reveals her fears about his possible return to England. She thus reveals her trepidation about such a radical change in her lifestyle, about a physical uprooting from her environment.

This marriage across the racial barrier must be seen implicitly as one of Bessie Head's most profound pleas for radical social change which should culminate in a transformed society. Mixed marriages were not prohibited in Botswana in the 1960s, but in practice they occurred very rarely. Consequently, the marriage between Gilbert and Maria heralds a movement towards sexual experience based on mutual respect and shared equality, signifying a complete break with
* the traditionally inferior role of African women in sexual relationships. In the

words of Huma Ibrahim (1988:64): "There are no echoes of Old Africa in their relationship as there are in Makhaya and Paulina's". In spite of some obvious differences, Gilbert and Maria show a basic, fundamental recognition of each other's humanity. Resultantly, they are totally unconscious of each other's race. Their marriage is an affirmation of Bessie Head's belief in the fundamental humanity of all races at a profound moral level. She will expound this belief in more detail in her second novel, *Maru*.

Mma-Millipepe plays a paradoxical role in the discourse on women and transformation: on the one hand she serves as the epitome of the traditional wise old woman, but on the other she is one of the strongest proponents for change.

When Dinorego speaks of her to Makhaya - the first reference to her in *When Rain Clouds Gather* - he relates how she has become a successful chicken farmer after heeding Gilbert's advice.

Although well versed in the ways of the tribe, Mma-Millipepe has acquired some education and is a devout Christian. In a village consisting mainly of commoners, her existence initially posed a threat the Chief Matenga because she was once married to the son of a chief. Nevertheless, Chief Matenga soon scorns her because he now sees her as "a rejected ... and a degraded woman" (WRCG:44). Upon learning about her popularity in the tribe and that people often consult her, he brushes his fears aside because he becomes aware that this is only due to people's respect for her religious views. He thus concludes: "The villages were full of such cranky old women with a bit of missionary education and the Tswana version of the Bible".

In a later passage, Head discusses Mma-Millipepe's true stature in being simultaneously a devout Christian and a transformed person. Head remarks that while Mma-Millipepe was growing up, men were constantly engaged in their cattle farming. As a result, women were often idle. To while away the time, some of them drifted over to the church where they received a smattering of mission education. Head explicitly states: "But in spite of the advantage they had over

men educationally, few of the women developed a new personality" (WRCG:68).

Mma-Millipede is one of the exceptions. She is changed into a new person:

Perhaps Mma-Millipede was one of those rare individuals with a distinct personality at birth. In any event, she was able to grasp the religion of the missionaries and use its message to adorn and enrich her own originality of thought and expand the natural kindness of her heart (WRCG:68).

Her strong religious beliefs sustain Mma-Millipede through the many crises in her personal life. Her engagement to Dinorego, the one man whom she really loves, is forcibly ended and she has to marry the unworthy prince, Ramogodi. Having been a womanizer all his life, Ramogodi abruptly divorces her to marry his brother's wife. Her son is subsequently exiled to a distant village because of his unrestrainable urge to kill his father.

In Golema Mmidi Mma-Millipede plays an active role in the community as a spiritual and practical leader. She, for example, constantly endeavours to bring peace to Makhaya's troubled soul, sees to it that Paulina does not act rashly in exposing her love to Makhaya and prevents Paulina from committing suicide after her son's tragic death.

Although I have in the foregoing discussion of the role of women in a transitional phase, where change and flux are the prevalent condition, leading to an altered state of society, briefly mentioned some of Head's male protagonists, mainly in their interrelationship with these women, especially Makhaya and Gilbert play such an important part in transforming tribal customs and values, that their views on transformation will merit some further discussion.

The autobiographical streak, which will later become dominant in Bessie Head's work, is already discernible in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Head met the model for Makhaya in a refugee camp in Francistown where she stayed when she first arrived in Botswana (Marquard, 1978/79:53). Head was attracted to the mixture of opposing elements in him, stemming from his tribal and urban background.

His views inspired in her a longing to initiate and execute a process of change, in this instance from the constraints of narrow tribalism.

Makhaya's name is ironic. He himself tells Dinorego: "That tribal name is the wrong one for me. It is for one who stays home, yet they gave it to me and I have not known a day's peace and contentment in my life" (WRCG:9). Initially, he is the typical lonely exile, the anti-hero of postcolonial fiction: "In fact, the inner part of him was a jumble of chaotic discord, very much belied by his outer air of calm, lonely self-containment" (WRCG:7)[1].

Makhaya's efforts to shake off his South African past and start a process of change in Botswana seem a little contrived. Head exaggerates her point when stating that Makhaya extends his criticism of South Africa to everything that hampers the course of change on the African continent. He initially has mixed feelings about Gilbert because he has always distrusted Whites:

and there was still the man, Gilbert, who sat there talking and for whom Makhaya could not account. He had been accustomed to reacting in only one way to a white man and that was with a feeling of great unease. Most southern Africans reacted in this way, and few black men in their sane mind envied or cared to penetrate the barrier of icy no-man's-land which was the white man and his world...

Makhaya's other griefs were more difficult to resolve, as these turned inward to his own life and his own need to attach a meaning to it. It was because his inner life had been a battleground of strife and conflict that made him attach such importance to its meaning. There was something in this inner friction that had propelled him, all by himself, along a lonely road, and he could not help noticing its loneliness because everything he desired and needed seemed to be needed by no one else in his own environment, among his own people or clan (WRCG:123-124).

His reveals his own inner confusion to Paulina when he vows to eradicate all poverty worldwide:

"Poor people are poor because they don't know how to get rich. I also live in this small dark room and I have counted the change over and over. Now, I'm tired of counting the change. I'm going to be a millionaire. But poverty is like glue. All poor people stick on me and they have to become

millionaires with me. But poverty is like glue. By this I mean that there will be no poverty left in Africa by the time I die" (WRCG:143).

By contrast, his rejection of tribalism as a barbarous system because of its discrimination against women and its perpetuation of the powers of witchdoctors marks him as an exponent of the modern. Gilbert thus capitalizes on Makhaya's realism to aid him in the agricultural project.

Despite also being an exile, Gilbert is the direct antithesis of Makhaya. This "giant" (WRCG:29) radiates virile energy: "Life never seemed to offer enough work for his abundant energy, and his gaze forever restlessly swept the horizon seeking some new challenge". Although enthusiastic about effecting agricultural change in the arid Botswana, Gilbert remains realistic about his own shortcomings and the feasibility of altering tribal customs:

He needed, more than anything, someone with the necessary mental and emotional alienation from tribalism to help him accomplish what he had in mind. Three years of uphill battling had already made clear to him his own limitations in putting his ideas across to people, and he had also learned that change, if it was to take place at all, would in some way have to follow that natural course of people's lives rather than impose itself in a sudden and dramatic way from on top. He hadn't the kind of personality that could handle people, because everything in him was submerged to the work he was doing. He lacked sympathy, patience and understanding (WRCG:30).

His realization of his own shortcomings, therefore, does not prevent him from affecting agricultural change in Botswana, a country which he views as Utopia, and for which he has "the greatest dreams" (WRCG:31).

Bessie Head's conception of characters undeniably demonstrates an awareness of her South African coloured background. Her novels are enriched by the manner in which she examines the metaphysical dimensions of African life. Her writing is thus characterized by incorporating mythical qualities in her character portrayal, resulting in the moulding of some of her characters on well-known archetypes, as Ogunyemi (1986:225) mentions: "The result of her awareness of

the possibilities of using the novel to make political and cultural statements is a fusion of myth with psychology, politics, and ideology".

Although not quite as developed as in the later novels - in her article, "Some Notes on Novel Writing" (1990:64), Bessie Head herself has termed this novel an "amateur work" - *When Rain Clouds Gather* contains the rudiments of Head's unique stylistic qualities. In this, her first novel, Head begins to give shape to her sense of the discourse of women and the complex notion of transformation by employing mythical and allegorical references, paradox, elements from the oral tradition and symbolism.

Head's use of mythical and allegorical elements is, for instance, more obvious in *Maru* and especially in *A Question of Power*, but this technique is already discernible in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. The opening of the novel is symbolic: Makhaya crosses the border to Botswana, in a quest for peace of mind. Head's introduction of the mysterious, tinkling sounds suggests an eerie atmosphere which blends with malevolent forces or witch doctors. This sense of evil infuses the whole novel until it is finally exorcised with Matenga's death. Makhaya, like most of the characters, is mysterious. Mma-Millipede endeavours to interpret the mysteriousness of human beings in a religious way: "It's not the white man who makes life but a deeper mystery over which he has no control. Whether good or bad, each man is helpless before life" (WRCG:131). Head believes that it is this very mystery that will finally destroy the system of apartheid with its power lust and injustices. It is also at work in the lives of the characters in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. It brings Gilbert and Maria together while it simultaneously lets Makhaya succumb to Paulina's attractions. The mythical overtones in Paulina's securing Makhaya's love are apparent in that she has to perform certain tasks, like Psyche in the case of Cupid, to win him over. She has to play an important role in arranging Maria's wedding feast as well as fulfilling a mammoth task in the agricultural projects.

Bessie Head's demonstration of the benign influence which Paulina and Mma-Millipede have on Makhaya's initial tortured soul is in accordance with the traditional image of the archetypal woman of mythology where a woman

represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know. As he progresses in the slow initiation which is life, the form of the goddess undergoes for him a series of transfigurations: she can never be greater than himself, though she can always promise more than he is yet capable of comprehending. She lures, she guides, she bids him burst his fetters. And if he can match her import, the two, the knower and the known, will be released from every limitation. Woman is the sublime acme of sensuous adventure.... The hero who can take her as she is, without undue commotion but with the kindness and assurance she requires, is potentially the kind, the incarnate god, of the created world (Campbell, 1988:116).

The incident where Makhaya insists on making the fire substantiates this viewpoint and has undeniable mythological significance. Fire is a centrally important element in mythology: fire-making, for instance, symbolizes the mythical hero's freeing himself from the monster which has threatened him. It also symbolizes the sexual act with the flame being the symbol of newly created life. Fire symbolism constitutes an important part of the patterns of imagery in both Head's and Ngugi's novels, as this study will indicate.

The drought also assumes symbolic undertones in that it heralds the possibility of a new beginning after the death of Isaac and the decimation of Paulina's cattle. Makhaya himself expresses his awareness of having attained self-knowledge and social consciousness which herald his rebirth:

Surrounded by tragedy and seated in the shade of a ramshackle mud hut in the Botswana bush, he began to see himself. In retrospect he seemed a small-minded man. All his life he had wanted some kind of Utopia, and he had rejected in his mind and heart a world full of ailments and faults. He had run and run away from it, but now the time had come when he could run and hide no longer and would have to turn round and face all that he had run away from. Loving one woman had brought him to this realization: that it was only people who could bring the real rewards of living, that it was only people who give love and happiness (WRCG:163).

This personal metamorphosis enables him to ask Paulina's hand in marriage which signals a new beginning for both of them.

Children too form a part of the mythological discourse. In this novel Paulina's daughter adopts the role of seer whose magical power transforms the lukewarm relationship between Paulina and Makhaya into something positive[2]. Her sculpture of the mud village has symbolic meaning. It is a microcosm of Golima Mmidi, while Gilbert and Makhaya's placing of the palm trees in the village has sexual overtones. This act represents a phallic gesture infusing the village with life while the additional greenery is symbolic of their endeavours to create the possibilities of a better life for the villagers.

Furthermore, allegorical elements also constitute the discourse of transformation.

For example: Isaac and Matenga may be viewed as allegorical figures in the struggle between good and evil. Isaac's death is symbolic of the ritual sacrifice of the good character who is vindicated in the course of exposing the ills of the evil spirits. Chief Matenga may be equated to the mythical wizard who harasses his subjects. Poetic justice in the mythical sense thus demands his death as a prerequisite for the attainment of a better life for his subordinates.

Apart from containing mythical and allegorical overtones, Head's manifestation of the cultural evolution in African life is based on a Freudian premise. This is evinced by the steps in which she portrays change. The first step depicts the slow and painful awakening of a society from the primeval stage where magic governed human actions. This step is followed by a stage in which westernization, especially in the form of education and religion, slowly encroaches on existing beliefs. In *When Rain Clouds Gather* the role-model of this transformed version of mankind is Mma-Millipede. The final stage in the transitional discourse is the scientific era where Gilbert and Makhaya initiate change by employing scientific agricultural principles. The co-existence of the three stages causes the spiritual disorder prevalent in the lives of most of the characters. There is, unfortunately, an indication that Bessie Head tends to

negate the harsh social, political and economic realities of Botswana into a romance. This tendency brings a facile ending to the novel. As such, Head fails in her endeavour to implement the subterranean element to resolve the social, political and economic problems. According to Ogumyemi (1986:230), Head's romantic rendering of the reality of the subordinate position of Blacks in their own country tends to be insubstantial. Huma Ibrahim (1988:50) remarks that the world of *When Rain Clouds Gather* results from the idealism Head experienced upon first coming to Botswana[3]. She attributes her creation of characters to her wish at this stage to establish a kind of Utopia, peopled with an abundance of good characters, such as Gilbert (who is "nearly God-like in his goodness and strength and irresistible in his power to persuade"), Makhaya, Dinorego, Mma-Millipede and Paulina. Mma-Millipede and Dinorego may be seen to be counterparts in creating this idyllic bliss in the barrenness of the Botswanan landscape. They collaborate to do good and are the "spiritual leaders and wisdom-givers" (Ibrahim, 1988:51) of their small community. Ibrahim makes the possibly disputable statement that Dinorego and Mma-Millipede "play the fairy godfather and fairy godmother" to their community. Ibrahim herself modifies this statement by mentioning that Makhaya, and by extension, Bessie Head, are so overwhelmed by their initial sense of freedom after being submitted to all the racial restraints of South Africa, that they experience an overwhelming sense of "euphoria" (1988:52) on settling in Botswana.

Like Ngugi, Head often constructs her discourse by employing paradoxes. The setting of the novel is constructed on contrast, as Marquard (1978/79:56) observes: "In the creation of Golema Mmidi Bessie Head combines fictive metaphor - the village as Eden - with realistic social detail". Moreover, the theme of *When Rain Clouds Gather* is paradoxical in itself: it juxtaposes tradition and innovation. Ibrahim (1988:63) says: "In Golema Mmidi, ... tradition in and of itself is a value to be respected. Yet the village ... is new enough - because of all the progress that results from the agricultural advancement imposed on it by the steady and forthright Gilbert". Moreover, paradox often forms the basis of character delineation. Paulina's boldness, for example, contrasts with Maria's

introverted nature. Despite being similar in the sense of being innovative, Gilbert and Makhaya display marked differences in their worldview: "Gilbert was a complete contrast to 'his wavering, ambiguous world in which Makhaya lived'" (WRCG:81).

There is some validity in Craig MacKenzie's (1989b:24) criticism of the novel when he feels that Bessie Head constructs a "tenuous" link between public awareness and personal motives. This is especially the case with the attitude Mma-Millipede and Paulina reveal towards the cooperative. Mma-Millipede recommends to Paulina to encourage female involvement in the cooperative because the former sees this as an excellent opportunity to bring Makhaya in closer contact with Paulina. The older woman thus lacks the perception to see this undertaking in a broader impersonal context.

Head's relative immaturity as a novelist is also obvious in that too many elements in the development of the plot result from sheer coincidence. MacKenzie (1989b:24-25) rather scathingly remarks: "This indeed is an example of the whole tone of the novel: everything positive develops by happy accident". He goes even further in his criticism: "The introduction of the 'God with no shoes' at the end of the novel (p.185) is an attempt to make events less arbitrary - to supply the causal connection that is lacking between events". Arthur Ravenscroft (1976:178-179) also faults Head's vagueness in determining the characters' motives while engaged in a process of change:

The precise relationship between individual freedom and political independence, and between a guarded core of privacy and an unbudging towards others, may seem rather elusive, perhaps even mystical ... and I see it as one of the weaknesses of *When Rain Clouds Gather*.

Despite this criticism, Ravenscroft (1976:179) appreciates the existence of "a shadow-novel that works in the dimensions of allusiveness and embryo symbolism" below the novel's apparent straightforward narrative. Although aware of the novel's "moments of melodrama and excessive romanticism", Ravenscroft justly praises its "creativity, resilience, reconstruction, fulfilment".

According to Brown (1981:162), Bessie Head's first novel is by no means flawless. He believes, for instance, that its didacticism mars its credibility. As such it becomes too simplistic, giving rise to questions about Head's historic sense and about the depth of her social perspective. Furthermore, Brown states that Head's rather limited vision also manifests itself in the writer's viewing traditions solely in negative terms: she sees traditions merely as narrow conservatism and stultifying oppressiveness. I cannot, however, fully agree with Brown's criticism. It is true that Head offers seemingly simple solutions to rather complex problems. Yet this seeming simplicity is not merely naive: it suggests moral strength. Because Botswana offers a new life to both Makhaya and Bessie Head, this novel may be regarded as a tribute to a new country. Bessie Head (1979:21) herself has said:

In my eyes Botswana is the most unique and distinguished country in the whole of Africa. It has a past history that is unequalled anywhere in Africa. It is a land that was never conquered or dominated by foreign powers and so a bit of ancient Africa, in all its quiet and unassertive grandeur, has remained in tact [sic] there.

Moreover, Makhaya and Paulina's marriage, which symbolizes a blend of tradition and transformation, amply proves Head's awareness of both the positive and negative characteristics of tradition. In the words of Heywood (1979:17):

On the surface, the novels of Bessie Head offer a vision of an Africa reformed by progress and co-operation, the values of John Stuart Mill and Olive Schreiner and the long submerged liberal political tradition of the western Cape Colony. In their inner workings, however, they offer, like the work of p'Bitek, Soyinka and Achebe, the vision of a future which has accepted and modified but not betrayed the traditional African past.

It must unfortunately be conceded that Head's style reveals a degree of unevenness. For example, there exists in the novel a certain "thinness and disturbing conventionality" (Brown, 1981:163) in the use of terminology. The use of *black* may be seen as an example of traditional Western symbolism where it is used in a derogatory sense when referring to Africans. This kind of diction, however, contrasts sharply with passages which reveal Head's imaginative

power and a remarkable originality of style. Examples of Head's mastery of style and technique are found in her descriptions especially of the Botswanan landscape during periods of drought.

To conclude, *When Rain Clouds Gather* demonstrates the limitations which strongly entrenched customs impose upon attempts at change. Head's discourse indicates that the creation of new institutions or social customs relies on changing perceptions in the characters themselves. This novel documents the inner conflicts that accompany any process of acculturation, although it does not relate the excruciatingly painful experiences inherent in this phase, as delineated in her later novels, as well as in virtually all of Ngugi's novels.

This novel introduces general thematic concerns in all Bessie Head's novels which tend to follow a pattern. This pattern reveals itself in a dual way: at the level of plot, there is a directional movement from one environment to another; at the level of conflict, there is a movement from the external world of the protagonist's consciousness to its inner world. Ifeyinwa Achufusi (1991:50) believes that this movement is more explicit in *When Rain Clouds Gather* than in *Maru* and *A Question of Power*. In *When Rain Clouds Gather* Makhaya, Gilbert, Paulina and Mme-Millipede are all foreigners who settle in Golema Mmidi where they are instrumental in effecting powerful changes. In this process, their attitudes towards phenomena such as sexism, racism and tradition change radically as well.

Head actively explores the dynamics of change within the narrative itself in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. It constitutes the major subject matter of the plot. Consequently, the reader constantly witnesses the activities of the forces of change: the process itself unfolds within the story. The ending firmly reinforces the novel's discourse of change by stating that "a quiet and desperate revolution" (WRCG:180) is sweeping through the world, including Golema Mmidi, where the remnants of conservatism and feudalism are being blown away and the commoners are emerging as a lively social force.

Finally, the examination of Head's first novel demonstrates Head's artistic achievement in the portrayal of a fairly general theme in African literature. Charlotte Bruner (1977:23) captures the essence of the novel when she remarks that even if the "nostalgic defence of traditionalism" might be outworn, Bessie Head, together with Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo and Grace Ogot, has brought "fresh insight and literary expression to the changing role of women" in sub-Saharan Africa.

2.2 NGUGI'S EARLIER NOVELS

Ngugi's first two novels, *The River Between*, and *Weep Not, Child*, may also be regarded as situational novels, but they differ from *When Rain Clouds Gather* in having the structures of a "truncated *bildungsroman*" (Mohamed, 1983:194). This classification rests on the nature of the protagonists. While *When Rain Clouds Gather* traces the actions and development of adults in a period of change, Ngugi's first two novels start recording the development in the lives of children. Like Head's first novel, Ngugi's initial two novels, although "inadequately resolved ... are testaments of the conflict and confusion caused by the peripeteia of values in a colonial situation" (1983:194), and as such they tie in persuasively with the central theme being explored in this thesis.

2.2.1 *The River Between* (1965)

Although *The River Between* was Ngugi's second novel to be published, it was written before *Weep Not, Child* which appeared in print in 1964. I intend discussing these two novels in the chronological order in which they were written to identify certain characteristics in the development of Ngugi's portrayal of women in the process of change. In any study of these two novels, it must be remembered that the later publication of *The River Between* may perhaps be

ascribed to Ngugi's continued revision of it, thus rendering it stylistically superior to *Weep Not, Child* (Palmer, 1981:11).

The River Between introduces one of the predominant themes of all Ngugi's novels, namely change as the most outstanding characteristic of a postcolonial society. The effects of this process of acculturation are visible on the basic spheres of the lives of his characters, both mentally and physically. According to Cook and Okenimkpe (1983:27) the "exceptional speed with which change has come to Africa in the twentieth century has brought sharp contrasts between life patterns and assumptions", especially as manifested in the clash between ancestral and modern ways of living, and between traditional religion and Christianity. They (1983:28) maintain that these fundamental changes led to the depiction of characters in *The River Between*, as in most of Ngugi's novels, as the "victims of their situations [who] struggle inadequately against forces around them". In the words of Larson (1978:135), *The River Between* portrays a traditional African society experiencing the "initial frustrations of Westernization".

Dathorne (1976:128), on the other hand, more accurately defines the basic theme of the novel as the division which in its turn leads to change as the inevitable result of initially tribalism and later the introduction of Christianity. Zida (1991:49) shares this view: "Although the conflict between traditional and Christian-influenced cultures is shown to have been triggered by external forces, *The River Between* also hints at the latent conflict between the two ridges on which the villages stand". She finds it ironical that the ridges are separated as well as united by the river Honia.

The River Between is set in Kenya's Central Province, the traditional territory of the Kikuyu. This fertile, fairly densely populated and intensely cultivated area was the focus of land expropriation in the late 1920s and early 1930s when White settlers were increasingly encroaching on land traditionally belonging to the Gikuyu.

The introductory paragraphs of the novel expose the basic situation, by reflecting the peaceful existence of the inhabitants of the villages of Kameno and Makamu.

These two villages face each other across a valley in which the river Honia - meaning "cure, or bring-back-to-life" (TRB:1) - flows. The river serves as one of the strongest symbols of the tranquil precolonial existence of the inhabitants of these two villages: "Honia river never dried: it seemed to possess a strong will to live, scorning droughts and weather changes. And it went on in the same way, never hurrying, never hesitating. People saw this and were happy" (TRB:1).

The intrusion of westernization in the form of the introduction of Christianity and education widens the rifts that existed between the inhabitants of the two villages.

Palmer (1981:13) underscores the importance of the destructive effects of colonization on the indigenous Africans: "It is here that Ngugi launches his general theme of the disintegration of indigenous society and the collapse of its morale as a result of the gradual encroachment of the white man". The arrival of the white missionaries causes clashes between Gikuyu tradition and Christianity, with Kameno representing the adherence to Gikuyu tradition and Makuyu Christianity.

The male protagonist in *The River Between* is Waiyaki, the Black Messiah, as the novel was originally entitled. He follows the advice of his father, Chege, namely to attend the Mission school without rejecting his own tribal customs and beliefs: "Go to the Mission place. Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites" (TRB:20). Waiyaki sees this mission as the partial fulfilment of a political destiny, because Chege has instilled in his son the belief that the latter is the chosen one who would come from the hills to save the Kikuyu. The existing feud between the mission and the clan reaches a climax with the death of Muthoni, daughter to Joshua, the fiery and uncompromising Christian evangelist. She undergoes circumcision and dies as a result of infection contracted during the operation. Having attended the Mission school, Waiyaki returns home to set up his own school, but rejects Christianity. The tribe accepts him as its true leader,

partly after having been convinced by Nyambura - Muthoni's sister, with whom he falls in love - that formal education alone cannot save his people. He joins the Kiama - later to become the Mau Mau - at its inception when it is still a cultural organisation, but resigns from it when it becomes more militant. He later rejoins the organisation, but cannot commit himself fully to leadership. This is partly due to the relationship which develops between him and Nyambura because the Kiama forbids its members to associate with Christian converts. He is branded a traitor when he warns the Mission of a planned attack by the Kiama. The novel ends when he and Nyambura are tried before the Kiama. Although the conclusion of the novel may be regarded as open-ended, there is a strong indication that the lovers will be convicted and ultimately executed.

The depiction of Muthoni and Nyambura in particular reveals rudiments of Ngugi's stance about women and transformation. This discourse will be explored much more forcefully in his later novels, such as in *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*. In *The River Between* Ngugi relies heavily on oral history when he firmly establishes the reader's understanding of traditional life in the two villages before introducing the female protagonists in Chapter Six. It is significant that they are first seen while fetching water from the river Honia:

Mornings were normally chilly and cold in both Kameno and Makuyu. Nyambura felt the cold bite into her skin as she sat on her already full water-barrel. She looked fixedly at her younger sister, who was still in the process of filling hers. Then she looked at the pale dark water of the river.

It flowed on just as it had done for years, making incessant gurgling sounds as it made its way round the projecting rocks. Nyambura was fascinated and felt attracted to the river. Her breast, glowing with pleasure, rose and fell with a sigh: she felt something strange stirring in her bowels. It was an exhilaration, a feeling of acute ecstasy, almost of pain, which always came to her as she watched the snaky movement and listened to the throb of the river.

The importance of Honia could never be overestimated. Cattle, goats and people drew their water from there. Perhaps that was why it was called 'Cure' and the valley, the valley of life, that is what it was, a valley of life (TRB:26).

Ngugi then continues by moving quite naturally to the theme of circumcision, a rite that takes place next to the river. Subsequently, he focuses on the two sisters, describing the intimate relationship between them: "the two were inseparable" (TRB:27). Ngugi's fondness of paradoxical character construction is already revealed in his very first novel: Nyambura is "quiet", while Muthoni is "vivacious".

While at this symbolic place, Muthoni now confides in her sister her desire to be initiated[4]. It must be borne in mind that circumcision may be regarded as one of the most important tribal rituals, signifying purification and rebirth, as Jomo Kenyatta himself states in *Facing Mt. Kenya* (1938:132):

No proper Gikuyu [sic] would dream of marrying a girl who has not been circumcised, and vice versa. It is taboo for a Gikuyu man or woman to have sexual relations with someone who has not undergone this operation.

Kenyatta mentions that those who do not follow this vital Gikuyu custom, are bound to be excluded from society, facing disinheritance and even landlessness. He continues (1938:134):

It is important to note that the moral code of the tribe is bound up with this custom and that it symbolizes the unification of the whole tribal organization The *irua* [ceremony] marks the commencement of participation in various governing groups in the tribal administration, because the real age-groups begin from the day of the physical operation. The history and legends of the people are explained and remembered according to the names given to the various age-groups at the time of the initiation ceremony.

In *The River Between* circumcision plays an even more important role than in the general African community: before the advent of westernization, the Kikuyu from the two ridges overcame their division by symbolically demonstrating their unity in ceremonies of circumcision on the banks of Honia. Christianity has, however, shattered this fragile unity, leaving the people in utter confusion. In *Homecoming* (1972:31-32) Ngugi later comments on the basic contradiction inherent in Christianity and its negative influence on the indigenous population of Kenya:

I say contradiction, because Christianity, whose basic doctrine was love and equality between men, was an integral part of that social force – colonialism – which in Kenya was built on the inequality and hatred between men and the consequent subjugation of the black race by the white race. The coming of Christianity also set in motion a process of social change, involving rapid disintegration of the tribal set-up and the frame-work of social norms and values by which people had formerly ordered their lives and their relationship to others. This was especially true ... where the Church ... could not separate the strictly Christian dogma from the European set of values, and from European customs.... So that in Kenya, while the European settler robbed people of their land and the products of their sweat, the missionary robbed people of their soul. Thus was the African body and soul bartered for thirty pieces of silver and the promise of a European heaven.

Ngugi introduces the theme of female circumcision by stating that Nyambura feels "slightly guilty" (TRB:26) when even thinking about circumcision. When Muthoni thus calls for her attention on this morning, Nyambura wakes up from her "wicked reverie" (TRB:27). In telling her sister that she has decided to be circumcised, Muthoni reveals her inner turmoil about coming to this fateful decision: "My thoughts terrify me" (TRB:28). Nyambura's reaction to Muthoni's startling announcement reveals the strong feelings of the converts towards the issue of circumcision: "For a second Nyambura sat as if her thoughts, her feelings, her very being had been paralysed". Despite Nyambura's remonstrance that they "are now wise in the ways of the white people", Muthoni passionately defends her wish to be circumcised: "I want to be a woman. I want to be a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges" (TRB:29). When Nyambura reminds her of their father's certain wrath, Muthoni unequivocally states:

'Why! Are we fools?' She shook Nyambura. 'Father and mother are circumcised. Are they not Christians? Circumcision did not prevent them from being Christians. I too have embraced the white man's faith. However, I know it is beautiful, oh so beautiful to be initiated into womanhood. You learn the ways of the tribe. Yes, the white man's God does not quite satisfy me. I want, I need something more. My life and your life are here, in the hills, that you and I know' (TRB:29-30).

This passage clearly demonstrates that Muthoni desires both Christianity and the tribe. She "needs religion but knows that Christianity can meet that need only if it comes to her through the idiom of her way of life" (Williams, 1982:56). In this scene she resembles Makhaya and Paulina whose actions consist of a fusion of traditionalism and modernity.

When Waiyaki subsequently accuses Muthoni of being a rebel for having run away to attend the initiation school under the tutelage of her aunt who lives in Kameno, he wonders whether "there was a streak of sadness" (TRB:50) in her eyes. Her answer, however, exposes the bitter agony she has suffered before finally succumbing to the overwhelming urge to be circumcised. She herself articulates her lonely agonized struggle:

'No one will understand. I say I am a Christian and my father and mother have followed the new faith. I have not run away from that. But I also want to be initiated into the ways of the tribe. How can I possibly remain as I am now? I knew my father would not let me and so I came.' Her voice seemed to change. Yet she was speaking in the same tone. Waiyaki, however, felt as if she had forgotten him, as if she was telling her story to the darkness. 'I want to be a woman. Father and Mother are circumcised. But why are they stopping me, why do they deny me this? How could I be outside the tribe, when all the girls born with me at the same time have left me?' (TRB:50-51).

Significantly, not only women are affected by the acute suffering involved in making choices resulting from the process of transformation: Waiyaki at this point recalls that he also had "such another dream, long ago" (TRB:51) but that Muthoni's vision "was of a different nature, stirring violent and contradictory forces in him". After this encounter Waiyaki feels that "he is apart from it all". The chapter thus ends with a beautiful, albeit short, portrayal of Waiyaki's sense of isolation and feeling of unfulfilment: "That night a feeling that he lacked something, that he yearned for something beyond him, came in low waves of sadness that would not let him sleep" (TRB:51).

Palmer (1981:15) regards Muthoni as a "controversial figure", mainly because she - like Waiyaki to a lesser extent - succeeds in bridging the gap between

opposing ideologies, although she sacrifices her life in the process. She is a committed Christian as her dying words "tell Nyambura I see Jesus. And I am a woman, beautiful in the tribe" (TRB:61) stress. She thus dies, convinced that her adherence to the tribal rituals, especially to that of circumcision, would enable her to experience complete self-fulfilment. In other words, the "poignant and touching subplot" (Mohamed, 1983:202) relates Muthoni's doomed attempt to unify what she sees as the noblest aspects of pagan religious beliefs and Christian dogma. Muthoni's unflinching desire to be circumcised manifests her conviction that there are no fundamental differences between the dictates of Christianity and their traditional religious beliefs.

Muthoni's death has a profound impact. As far as her immediate circle is concerned, it exposes Joshua's uncompromising, harsh spirit. His reaction to her death serves as severe criticism of religious fanaticism: "From that day Muthoni ceased to exist for him, in his heart. She had brought an everlasting disgrace to him and his house, which he had meant to be an example of what a Christian home should grow into" (TRB:42). It raises serious doubts about her father's nature in Nyambura, while shared grief simultaneously draws Nyambura and Waiyaki closer together. Consequently, Muthoni's death has far-reaching results for the community as a whole. While it serves as a serious setback for the Christians, the traditionalists regard it as a clear indication that their gods are angered by change as a result of evangelism: "This new faith had contaminated the hills and Murungu was angry" (TRB:67). The white missionaries regard her death as a confirmation of the barbarity of Gikuyu custom of clitoridectomy. More importantly, it causes the elders to become suspicious of Waiyaki's western education, a factor which will contribute to his final alienation from the tribe.

Nyambura never experiences this excruciating pain of being torn between the demands of her traditional pagan religion and Christianity, because she is much more docile than her sister. "Nyambura could not say anything. She did not follow Muthoni's logic or line of thought. She had never thought so deeply about these things. She was content to follow whatever her father said was right. And

she feared his anger" (TRB:30). She cannot, however, accept her father's harsh adherence to such a hellfire and brimstone Christian doctrine. His complete cutting off of Muthoni after her circumcision serves as an example of the negative aspects in his view of Christianity. Ngugi states that after his conversion, Joshua "found a sanctuary [in Siriamu] and the white man's power and magic. He learned to read and write. The new faith worked in him till it came to possess him wholly" (TRB:33). Ngugi's fine use of irony which will later infuse even his strongest works of protest, like *Devil on the Cross*, is apparent in his depiction of Joshua's conceit before Muthoni runs away to her aunt. On seeing his daughters returning from the river in the earlier scene, he muses:

Joshua himself was strict and observed the word to the letter. Religious uniformity in his own home was binding. He meant it to be an example to all, a bright light that would show the way, a rock on which the weak would step on their way to Christ.

Joshua was sitting outside his house when the two girls came and put their water-barrels down. He looked at them, at the way they were working, the way they kept together, and felt a father's pride. His house had a strong Christian foundation and he wanted his daughters to wax strong in faith and the ways of God. Would this not prove to all what a Christian home should be like? (TRB:34-35).

This complacency gives way to unrelenting fury when he learns that Muthoni has gone to her aunt to be circumcised. His unrelievedly harsh nature allows no personal contact between him and his dissident daughter, not even when her condition becomes critical. His unchristianly vengeful and unforgiving spirit is exposed in Ngugi's direct statement that his daughter "ceased to exist for him, in his *heart*" (TRB:42) [My emphasis]. Her death may be viewed as an insult to his pride because he regards himself as the epitome of Christianity: "She had brought an everlasting disgrace to him and his house, which he had meant to be an example of what a Christian home should grow into" (TRB:42).

By contrast, Nyambura finds solace in the doctrines of peace and reconciliation as espoused in the Bible and as such, she exhibits a much sounder understanding of the true spirit of Christianity than Joshua:

A religion of love and forgiveness stood between them. No! it could never be a religion of love. Never, never. The religion of love was in the heart.... If the faith of Joshua and Livingstone came to separate, why, it was not good. If it came to stand between a father and his daughter so that her death did not move him, then it was inhuman. She wanted the other (TRB:154-155).

She yearns for a kind of religion symbolized by the image of the leopard and the kid lying together, because to her this epitomizes "the faith that would give life and peace to all" (TRB:155).

In serving as mediator between her mother and sister, Nyambura plays an important role in endeavouring to maintain the family unity. Her consolatory role is apparent in her efforts to conceal from her father especially her sister's initial decision to undergo circumcision. During Muthoni's illness she tries to maintain the link between her sister and her mother.

Muthoni's death sparks off vital conversations between Nyambura and Waiyaki about the discourse of religious transformation. Waiyaki gradually realizes "that not all the ways of the white man were bad" (TRB:162). However, he feels that this religion "needed washing, cleaning away all the dirt" so that the eternal should remain and "that eternal that was the truth had to be reconciled to the traditions of the people" because he knows that a nation's traditions could not simply be discarded. Although still fearful of her father's wrath, this shared view of a new and better future provides Nyambura with the courage to side with Waiyaki when they finally face the Kiama.

Miriamu represents the older generation of traditional African women who seem to live in complete submission to their husbands. Ngugi portrays Miriamu as a "peace-loving woman" who "never liked unnecessary tension in the house" (TRB:39). She has always urged her children to obey their father "without fuss, without resentment". In spite of holding up this facade of submission and

docility, coupled with her apparent full support of her husband's Christian beliefs, Ngugi skilfully hints at a dichotomy in Miriamu's innermost being:

She had learnt the value of Christian submission, and she thought every other believer had the same attitude to life. Not that she questioned life. It had given her a man and in her own way she loved and cared for him. Her faith and belief in God were coupled with her fear of Joshua. But that was religion and it was the way things were ordered. However, one could still tell by her eyes that this was a religion learnt and accepted; inside the true Gikuyu [sic] woman was sleeping.

This description exposes Ngugi's implied condemnation of Joshua's religion. It indicates that this kind of religion has to be acquired from external sources and does not become an inherent part growing and flourishing within its adherents. Nevertheless, Miriamu succeeds in concealing her conflicting views from Joshua, who would not have tolerated any religious dissension from his wife. He regards circumcision as the "unforgivable sin" (TRB:35), feeling so serious about this heathen practice that he even succumbs to secretly blaming his wife for having been circumcised before her conversion:

In fact, Joshua believed circumcision to be so sinful that he devoted a prayer to God asking God to forgive him for marrying a woman who had been circumcised.

God, you know it was not my fault. God, I could not do otherwise, and she did this while she was in Egypt.

Sometimes, when alone with Miriamu, his wife, he would look at her and sadly remark, 'I wish you had not gone through this rite'.

Miriamu knows Joshua as such a "staunch man of God and such a firm believer in the Old Testament, that he would never refrain from punishing a sin, even if this meant beating his wife" (TRB:35-36). A glimmering of Ngugi's unconscious irony is evident in the fact that Joshua does not deem it necessary to pray for forgiveness for his own circumcision!

This study of characterization in *The River Between* has undeniably initiated the revelation of general features of Ngugi's portrayal of female characters in the process of change. Firstly, it may be mentioned that Muthoni and Nyambura

represent the rudiments of Ngugi's perception of the ideal woman, because both of them are prepared to suffer for the attainment of their beliefs, to speak out fearlessly to defend their convictions. Ngugi's later female protagonists, such as Wariinga in *Devil on the Cross*, will even go to the extent of killing The Rich Old Man to defend her belief in the rights of women.

Another characteristic of Ngugi's characters in general - and women in particular - is a shared feeling of loneliness and alienation as a result of taking a lead in the process of change in a postcolonial society. Roscoe (1977:180), for instance, states: "Ngugi's men and women are lonely, and feel lonely, in a new way; and it is clearly, from textual evidence, as a result of their encounter with Europe". In this novel, the loneliness of the two daughters partly stems from their inability to communicate meaningfully with their mother, seemingly a convinced traditionalist, at least in her behaviour. This contrasts sharply with the traditional view of the mother as a source of wisdom, warmth, comfort and consolation to her family, especially to her daughters.

Roscoe (1977:174) further mentions that a study of the portrayal of the female characters in Ngugi's first novel is a definite indication that although "Ngugi's creative work clearly shows that for all his sensitivity to political and social issues, human relations are what he cares about most passionately". Although Ngugi's later works, such as *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, become more socialist, human relationships are still fundamental to his discourse of change. In these later novels, however, the setting widens, centring on individuals in a community instead of operating within the constraints of a family unit.

The importance of female characters in Ngugi's canon is obvious in that the relationship between Waiyaki and Nyambura occupies "a focal position in the total structure of the novel by encompassing all the major themes and conflicts of the novel" (Rausch, 1975:42). In a sense this relationship represents a microcosm of society at large, revealing the fact that changing conceptions about the male/female relationship in this tribal society form a vital part of the novel's

main discourse. Their relationship also stands in juxtaposition to accepted social norms because it contrasts with standard notions of male/female relationships. It is, moreover, significant that despite coming from diametrically opposed backgrounds, Waiyaki and Nyambura both feel impelled to synthesize their tribal past with positive aspects of westernization.

Mohamed (1983:202) aptly remarks that in *The River Between* "Characterization too is stylized to reflect this antagonism between the desire for cultural purity and the desire to abrogate the traditional society". Among the older generation Chege and Joshua are the exponents of these conflicting ideologies. Chege advocates the preservation of Gikuyu purity as well as its survival by absorbing certain beneficial elements of the new western culture. Conversely, Joshua - an ardent convert - renounces Gikuyu culture because he sees it as a dirty, heathen and evil practice. According to Mohamed (1983:202) "Ngugi balances the static and absolute cultural oppositions that are embodied in Chege and Joshua with the dynamic and relativistic attitudes of their children ... who attempt in their different ways to synthesize the two cultures". Apart from portraying the social consequences of the cultural clash in the form of the severe dissensions and the resultant disintegration of Joshua's family, Muthoni's circumcision also exposes "the more profound problems of cultural transition" (Mohamed, 1983:203). Because her notion of womanhood is based on a specific physio-cultural ritual it becomes obvious that peripeteia involves social, metaphysical and cosmological changes. Furthermore, Mohamed argues that "specific modifications in culture become meaningless unless the entire cultural gestalt is altered to accommodate the particular infusions". It is, therefore, clear why the traditional Kikuyu cannot understand the Christian interdiction of circumcision. As a result, both the Christian converts and the traditional Gikuyu regard Muthoni's death as a vindication of their own faith: "The death of Muthoni for ever confirmed the barbarity of Gikuyu customs" (TRB:63). The traditionalists view it differently, as expressed by Chege's musing:

Chege beheld this in silence. No longer would the voice be heard; no longer would he give warning. He had done his work. Had he not

foreseen this drama? Had he not seen the estrangement between father and daughter, son and father, because of the new faith? This was a punishment to Joshua. It was also a punishment to the hills. It was a warning to all, to stick to the ways of the ridges, to the ancient wisdom of the land, to its ritual and song (TRB:62).

The absence of any sense of communal compassion on both sides and the abuse of Muthoni's death to justify their beliefs reveal the anxiety caused by the peripeteia. As such, adherence to any one of these two distinct sets of values becomes "an act of faith" (Mohamed, 1983:203). In 1966 Ngugi (*Union News*, Leeds University, 18 November 1966) revealed the belief he then cherished for the fusion of Christianity and traditional culture:

I had come from a missionary school and I was deeply Christian In school I was concerned with trying to remove the central Christian doctrine from the dress of western culture, and seeing how this might be grafted on to the beliefs of our people. *The River Between* was concerned with this process.

Despite Ngugi's avowed aim to Africanize Christian doctrine as this quotation suggests, *The River Between* in fact shows the unwillingness and inability of his people to respond to this idealist view, as the novel in fact demonstrates.

In addition to the preceding discussion of the novel which has focused on theme and character, critical attention will now be paid to other literary aspects, including some pertinent stylistic features.

The most outstanding stylistic feature of *The River Between* is its apparent simplicity, which is highly deceptive. The novel, however, is a stylistic feat in that for a first novel, Ngugi achieves a remarkable degree of unity and evenness. His artistry is, however, firmly established by his ability to employ richly suggestive language. *The River Between* clearly reveals stylistic features which will become more prominent in Ngugi's later works, such as his brilliant use of clusters of associations, complex symbolism, his incorporation of elements of the oral tradition, his skilful use of ironic and satiric twists, as well as lyrical and pastoral descriptions of exceptional beauty.

The landscape plays such an important role in *The River Between* that it may be regarded as a "main character in its own right" (Zida, 1991:54). Ngugi's change of the name of the novel from *The Black Hermit* to *The River Between* reinforces the importance of the setting of the novel: the river Honia and the two ridges serve as symbols to establish Ngugi's main discourse in this novel, namely the real cause of the African predicament in a postcolonial world. Although triggered by external forces, there has always been an inherent conflict between the two ridges, with Makuyu as the seat of political power and Kameno as the centre of "spiritual superiority and leadership" (TRB:2). Ngugi forcefully establishes this traditional dichotomy by describing the two ridges as "sleeping lions united by their common source of life" (TRB:1). Unfortunately, they "became antagonists. You could tell this, not by anything tangible but by the way they faced each other, like two rivals ready to come to blows in a life and death struggle for the leadership of this isolated region" (TRB:1). Ironically, this dissension manifests itself in the life-giving powers of the river Honia. Because Christianity forbids circumcision, the river becomes a sign of the rift between the communities, in the words of Ikeddeh (1969:5), this symbolism serves as an example of the "ironic unity-in-division symbols" of the novel.

Ngugi's reliance on the oral tradition also needs some more illumination, as *The River Between* is firmly rooted in the oral tradition. Its plot shows how Ngugi employs historically significant moments in the lives of his characters which he interweaves with myths and legends characteristic of the oral tradition. Vuiningoma (1987:66) believes that Ngugi establishes an "oral universe" in *The River Between* "and carries the reader into a world of magic, spiritual and mystical powers with myths and legends ... integrated into the text". Chapter One immediately establishes the tone of orature by describing the historical and mythological background to the rivalry between the two ridges and by stressing the life-giving qualities of the river Honia: "Honia was the soul of Kameno and Makuyu. It joined them. And men, cattle, wild beasts and trees, were all united by this life-stream" (TRB:1).

Ngugi continues his reliance on the oral tradition by firmly establishing the history of the two tribes when he relates how Kameno has traditionally been the place where the archetypal father and mother of the tribe, Gikuyu and Mumbi, have stopped and been given the land by Murungu (God). Kameno has thus assumed spiritual superiority over Makuyu and hosts the origins of the great prophets and seers of old, Mugo wa Kibiro, Kamiri and Wachiori. Over the years, however, Makuyu has challenged its rival's historic claims to supremacy.

Chege represents the wise tribal figure in traditional oral literature: "For he knew, more than any other person, the ways of the land and the hidden things of the tribe. He knew the meaning of every ritual and every sign" (TRB:8). Ngugi's extensive recounting of the ancient history and origin of the tribe is typical of the oral tradition which employs legend and myth to acquaint the present generation with historical facts and instill in them a sense of pride and admiration for the ancestors of the tribe. Ngugi succeeds in naturally fusing historical fact within the narrative discourse, in that Chege takes Waiyaki to Murungu, the name also given to the sacred tree of the tribe. While they are on their way, Chege recounts tribal history to his son.

An interesting fact concerning the reversal of the male and female roles emerges from Chege's historical account to Waiyaki:

Long ago women used to rule this land and its men. They were harsh and men began to resent their hard hand. So when all the women were pregnant, men came together and overthrew them. Before this, women owned everything. The animal you saw was their goat. But because the women could not manage them, the goats ran away. They knew women to be weak (TRB:18).

This apparently simple observation serves as an example of how young boys naturally assume a position of superiority towards women: "It was then Waiyaki understood why his mother owned nothing".

Ngugi's conclusion of this decisive moment reveals even more features of the oral tradition, such as its frequent use of symbolism and personification:

The ridges slept on. Kameno and Makuyu were no longer antagonistic. They had merged into one area of beautiful land, which is what, perhaps, they were meant to be. Makuyu, Kameno and the other ridges lay in peace and there was no sign of life, as one stood on the hill of God (TRB:19).

Apart from history being related according to the oral tradition, the novel abounds with stylistic features characteristic of the oral tradition. Names, for example, have symbolic overtones: *Kenninyaga* refers to "the mountain of He-who-shines-in-Holiness" (TRB:20). In addition, there are numerous examples of alliteration, a device employed in orature to emphasize key concepts. At the important moment when Chege reveals to his son that the latter is the last in their line, implying that he might be the saviour of the nation, Waiyaki's trepidation is stressed by the use of alliteration: "Waiyaki felt as if a heavy cloud was pressing down his soul and he felt a strange sensation of suspension in his stomach" (TRB:23). Ngugi frequently makes use of both repetition and of parallel construction as in the description of Joshua's feelings after his conversion:

He felt a happiness which cut sharp into him, inflaming his soul. He had escaped Hell. He felt a new character...

He was washed new. He became a preacher, brave, having been freed from fear. He no longer feared Chege or what the hills and their inhabitants would say to him. He went back to Makuyu and preached with a vehemence and fury that frightened even his old listeners (TRB:34).

This passage also reveals the beginnings of Ngugi's masterly use of irony. While it seemingly exposes the benign qualities of Joshua's transformation, it hampers on his blind egotism by stressing *he*. Being strategically placed at the beginning of every sentence, it firmly establishes Joshua's over-reliance on his own views.

As can be expected from criticism, especially of any writer's first novel, *The River Between* elicited divergent views, including critical evaluation of the main

discourse of women and transformation. During a visit to Iowa in 1986, Ngugi himself admitted that this novel has "limitations" (Zida, 1991:54), such as the vague and general treatment of central issues, and Waiyaki's rather simplistic solutions of complex problems. Of more crucial importance for this study, however, are critical views about the degree of success with which Ngugi portrays his female characters in a transitional role. Moody, et al. (1984:255) cryptically pose this question in their schematic literary assessment of *The River Between*: "Women less successful"? In similar vein Cook and Okenimkpe (1983:31) criticize both Ngugi's thematic concerns and his characterization in his first novel. They state that Ngugi himself would remark privately in later years that he found this novel "somewhat embarrassing" to turn back to. They argue that this might be the result of his own changed vision which might perhaps have made the notion of "reconciliation with even a purged and Africanized Christianity" less attractive to him. Although they regard a writer's sensitivity about his earlier work as quite natural, they state that "even more gauche is the glib phrasing of Muthoni's dying words [already quoted] which provide such an important thematic refrain in the book: 'tell Nyambura I see Jesus. And I am a woman, beautiful in the tribe'" (TRB:61, 117-118, and 121).

Conversely, Howard (1973:102) hails the portrayal of Muthoni as one of the strong points of this novel: "As an insert in the novel, Muthoni's tragedy is a perfect piece" because "her story is merely presented with simplicity and completeness. Nevertheless, the dream, the symbolism, the question, the desire for discovering a way to unity through love and thus to life is reinforced again and again later".

In *The River Between* Ngugi's depiction of male characters is superior to that of his female characters, a trait which will be reversed in his later novels. Although Muthoni and Nyambura do not seek martyrdom, they suffer in the pursuit of the fullness in life and have the courage to defend their convictions fearlessly and unequivocally. They do, however, veer in the direction of remaining flat characters who do not really develop in the course of the novel. By contrast,

despite the fact that Waiyaki may be regarded as the epitome of the African hero of the 50s in being "the man between two worlds" (Ikeddeh, 1969:4), he grows as the novel progresses until his vision is coherent at the end of the novel. Although his mind "was full of many thoughts and doubts that came and went" (TRB:174) while facing the Kiama, he is still convinced of having acted according to his own principles:

Waiyaki tried to silence them but they would not listen. They only cried 'The oath' and their cry was echoed in the forest. And how could he tell them now that he had not betrayed them, that this was not what he meant by unity; that he was not in league with Joshua? How could he tell them that he meant to serve the hills; that he meant to lead them into a political movement that would shake the whole country, that would tell the white man 'Go!'

This passage reveals Waiyaki's real plight: his realization that elements of the Western culture cannot really be fused with traditionalism. In other words, he cannot select what he regards as beneficial in the Western culture and fuse it with the traditional/pagan culture.

An assessment of criticism of Ngugi's first novel requires a critical study of the views of the writer's portrayal of the theme of transformation, which has also elicited varied and at times rather biting criticism. Lewis Nkosi (1981:73), for example, remarks that in *The River Between* "Ngugi was concerned with the conflict between tradition and modernism, a trite theme in modern African literature, with a rather over-heated love affair to give the story its glossy 'Romeo and Juliet' finish". Michael Ward (1969:219) also detects some sentimentality in *The River Between*: "there is a cross current of idealistic sentimentality spoiling Ngugi's account" of tribal society. According to Cook and Okenimkpe (1983:42-43) the "weaknesses of the novel ... are related to the paradoxes inherent in its themes". They contend that some aspects of the social conflict involved "were as yet no clearer to the author than to his characters", a factor which "leads to some underdevelopment in areas where a more explicitly committed writer (as Ngugi has now become) might have left fewer gaps". Nevertheless, they do concede that the African novel in general is often shorter and more concentrated than its

Western counterpart, but still believe that the "abruptness" of the African novel can be overdone, as is the case with the novel under discussion: "*The River Between* is one of a number of novels that might have been strengthened by further judicious development in places". As examples of such undeveloped scenes, they cite Waiyaki's earlier meeting with the Kiama as well as the way in which he withdraws from this powerful body. Conversely, Nadine Gordimer (1973:26) criticizes the novel for being too long in its depiction of the central theme of change when she says that: "This over-long and clumsy novel does analyse with considerable insight the spiritual conflict between the values of tribal life and those imposed by white conquest".

To conclude, the true artistic and creative brilliance of *The River Between* "lies in its authentic dovetailing of the complex public themes with the private drama of individual characters" (Cook & Okenimkpe, 1983:40). In this novel Ngugi definitely succeeds in conveying a clear and simplified picture of how a traditional African society experiences and reacts to foreign ideas imposed on it. Moreover, he portrays characters who remain convincing as human beings. These fictional characters display a compelling range of emotions when they are subjected to the tensions inherent in a society wrestling to find solutions for the problems caused by change and transformation.

As Ngugi's first novel, *The River Between* serves as an important springboard for further investigation, especially with regard to his portrayal of postcolonial female characters in a transitional period.

2.2.2 Weep Not, Child (1964)

Weep Not, Child was one of the first English novels to be published by an East African, an achievement that has contributed to "giving Ngugi a certain distinction and making him something of a leader" (Robson, 1979:137)[5]. In spite of its historical interest, the following critical analysis, focusing on the discourse of women and transformation, reveals both its strengths and weaknesses

Howard (1973:95) justly remarks that Ngugi's vision in this novel is a "personal one". In a sense, *Weep Not, Child* is Ngugi's most personal novel, as he himself has admitted in an article in *Union News*, Leeds University (18 November 1966): "In my second book, *Weep Not, Child*, I was primarily interested in evoking what a simple village community felt, caught between forces which they could not quite understand. I lived through the period myself". The personal nature of the novel is evident in that the male protagonist, Njoroge, is about the same age as Ngugi was at the time of the Mau Mau rebellion. His agonized state of mind may thus reflect Ngugi's struggle to be educated despite all the problems caused by the armed struggle in Kenya. It is interesting to note that Ngugi's works after *Weep Not, Child*, tend to become more impersonal, while the opposite can be said of Bessie Head: her novels have become increasingly personal, in a sense almost autobiographical.

Ngugi's central thematic concern in *Weep Not, Child* is his preoccupation with the Mau Mau rebellion and the resultant changes wrought on the lives of his characters. Nkosi (1981:72) states that a significant national trauma or personal obsession often leads to the creation of powerful literary works - in this case the Mau Mau freedom struggle which involved personal sacrifices, triumphs and betrayals. Within the larger framework of the national events, *Weep Not, Child* still focuses on the family. As such, the changes wrought upon each member of Ngotho's family especially constitute the nucleus of the novel. In the opening chapter Ngotho verbalizes the dominant discourse of the novel, namely change: "But time had changed" (WNC:11) and "Well, times are changing" (WNC:12).

Like most of Ngugi's other novels and short stories, *Weep Not, Child* is constructed as an indictment against the administration of Kenya's Central Province. The Kikuyus who occupied this part of Kenya suffered badly during the first part of the twentieth century when vast areas of their communal land were appropriated and made available to European settlers. The resultant feelings of bitterness and frustration of these people constituted one of the main

causes for the guerilla warfare of 1952-56, the so-called Mau Mau rebellion. This ferocious resistance struggle eventually led to the proclamation of the Land Freedom Act. This novel delineates the period immediately before the Emergency as well as the terrible war years, examining the conflicts between the African tenant farmer (Ngotho) and the white landowner (Mr Howlands).

While *The River Between*, usually regarded as a more symbolic novel than *Weep Not, Child*, opens with a description of its primary symbol, the river Honia, the latter novel immediately focuses on Ngotho's family. It starts off with swift, straightforward narration, introducing Nyokabi, mother of the male protagonist, Njoroge. Her first words relate to one of the most important thematic concerns of the novel, namely education:

Nyokabi called him. She was a small, black woman, with a bold but grave face. One could tell by her small eyes full of life and warmth that she had once been beautiful. But time and bad conditions do not favour beauty. All the same Nyokabi had retained her full smile - a smile that lit up her dark face.

'Would you like to go to school?' (WNC:3)

The rest of Chapter One then introduces the other members of the family, its interrelationship within this central family, as well as its relationship with other families in the village.

This central family in the clan is described as traditional and peaceful. Ngotho epitomizes the father figure in a traditional rural family in Kenya. His two wives, Njeri and Nyokabi, are depicted as devoted wives and mothers who obey his commands. The focal point of the novel is Njoroge, Ngotho's youngest son. The novel mainly deals with the period from the time he enters school until the decisive moment during the Emergency, about twelve years later, when he attempts to commit suicide. He is driven to this act of desperation primarily by his disillusionment with the destruction of the family as a result of the actions of the Mau Mau. Moreover, the realization that his overriding ambition to redeem his

family and village by attaining a westernized education has failed contributes to his attempted suicide.

Njoroge's relationship with Mwhaki, daughter of the wealthy black farmer, Jacobo, constitutes a sub-discourse in the novel. Despite the social and economic differences between Njoroge and Mwhaki, they are close friends at school where Mwhaki initially protects the sensitive and timid Njoroge. Their friendship even survives Jacobo's murder, for which Njoroge's family is blamed.

A final general observation: Killam (1980:36) maintains that all the members of Ngotho's household suffer as a result of change. The novel thus portrays fairly similar themes to those treated in *The River Between*: the influence of Christianity on the lives of these East Africans, coupled with the causes and results of the ensuing independence struggle. Although the presentation of these themes could easily result in the novel becoming a political treatise, Palmer (1981:1) justly remarks:

Ngugi partly alleviates the effect of a depressing series of historical and political events, by filtering through the mind of a central consciousness, Njoroge, the hero of the novel. Furthermore, by concentrating on the members of the Ngotho family he ensures that interest centres not on political matters but on relationships, and on the effect on the characters of the pressure of events. The novel is not propagandist work solely designed to put the African case against the White settlers: Ngugi's balanced viewpoint takes into account the weaknesses of the Africans themselves as well as of the Europeans.

Despite the fact that women still play a far less important role than in the later novels, notably in *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, *Weep Not, Child* reveals in embryo the formidable women who develop into leaders in crises resulting from acculturation and evangelization. Moreover, it initiates the trend of development noticeable in Ngugi's later novels, namely that his female protagonists mature in the course of the novel. Walker (1983:252) fittingly remarks that *Weep Not, Child* "looks at the beginnings of the fledgling African" woman who will play a more dominant role in the later novels. A study of the

female protagonist, Mwhiki, as well as of Njoroge's two mothers, will demonstrate this assumption.

Ngugi's introduction of Mwhiki is fraught with significant statements:

On Monday, Njoroge went to school. He did not quite know where it was. He had never gone there, though he knew the direction to it. Mwhiki took him and showed him the way. Mwhiki was a young girl. Njoroge had always admired her. Once some herd-boys had quarrelled with Mwhiki's brothers. They had thrown stones and one had struck her. Then the boys had run away followed by her brothers. Njoroge who had been watching the scene from a distance now approached and felt like soothing the weeping child. Now she, the more experienced, was taking him to school (WNC:13).

This passage reveals the richness of Ngugi's seemingly unruffled and objective prose. Ngugi delicately foreshadows the fluid and changing roles of the protagonists: where Njoroge has been the stronger of the two in their traditional rural set-up, Mwhiki now assumes the role of guardian in the westernized world of education. The subtle play on the title words of the novel, *weep* and *child*, indicates that the crying child does not refer to Njoroge only, but includes Mwhiki: "She had been left alone crying" and Njoroge "felt like soothing the weeping child". By analogy, this emphasis on sadness may be extended to all children suffering as a result of the inevitable but harrowing processes of transformation. Of moot importance, moreover, is the exposure of the cosmic loneliness of Ngugi's characters: Mwhiki is left *alone*, and Njoroge "had been watching the scene from a distance". When the older pupils try to bully Njoroge, Mwhiki comes to his rescue, claiming that he is her new boy: "He is my *Njuka*. You cannot touch him" (WNC:14). Head's characters often share this feeling of cosmic loneliness with Ngugi's. In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, for instance, most of the protagonists are outsiders, exiles, lonely individuals who are gradually integrated into the society of Golima Mmidi.

When Njoroge eventually catches up academically with Mwhiki and joins her class, their relationship becomes even closer: "Mwhiki was always pleased with

Njoroge. She felt more secure with him than she felt with her brothers who did not care much about her. She confided in him and liked walking home with him. She was quite clever and held her own even among boys" (WNC:44). Although Ngugi emphasizes the innate loneliness of his female protagonist, he underlines her ability to maintain herself, even among boys. This demonstrates a sign of change in the traditional African society where girls would not have associated with boys or have shared a position of equality with them. Mwhiki thus deviates from the traditional norm where a girl was supposed to play an inferior part, notwithstanding her own abilities or potential. Ngugi's encouragement of formal education for girls approximates the attitude expressed by Dangarembga in *Nervous Conditions* (1988) because Tambu resents the fact that her brother Nhamo gets the first opportunity to be educated solely because he is a boy. This idea is reinforced by the fact that Tambu, both her aunts and her cousin, Nyasha, are all educated women.

The fact that Njoroge's examination results surpass those of Mwhiki serves as proof of Ngugi's superb craftsmanship. He does not overburden his male/female discourse by constantly assigning the leading role to Mwhiki: "And then he heard his name. It was topping the list. Mwhiki too had passed" (WNC:55). The attachment between Njoroge and Mwhiki now finds expression in a physical gesture: "They came near Mwhiki's house and there stood for a moment holding each other's hands" (WNC:55).

When Njoroge and Mwhiki meet during the heat of the Mau Mau rebellion after having attended different schools, the old devotion still exists between them: "Njoroge was now a big boy, almost a young man. The full force of the chaos that had come over the land was just beginning to be clear in his mind" (WNC:84). Mwhiki has also developed into a rather attractive woman: "Mwhiki was tall, slim, with small pointed breasts. Her soft dark eyes looked burningly alive. The features of her face were now well-defined while her glossy mass of deep black hair had been dressed in a peculiar manner, alien to the village" (WNC:86).

Their subsequent meeting on the Sunday marks one of the climactic points in the novel. In spite of being acutely aware of changes in their physique, Mwhiki is still untouched by the great national traumas of which Njoroge's family is an integral part:

Yet as the years went by and she heard stories of Mau Mau and how they could slash their opponents into pieces with Pangas, she became afraid. She had heard that Boro, Njoroge's brother, had gone into the forest, but she could not quite believe this. To her, the Mau Mau were people who did not belong to the village and certainly were not among the circle of her acquaintances (WNC:89).

The subsequent conversation between them is of central importance for the delineation of the theme of women and transformation. It foreshadows the important final meeting between the two protagonists when Njoroge reverses their roles. At this early meeting Mwhiki is again vulnerable and depends on Njoroge for strength and support - as shown by the fact that she is the one who suggests that they should flee.

When Mwhiki confides her anxiety about how the Emergency has changed her father, Njoroge is not interested and casually retorts: "'It is the same everywhere,' he said irrelevantly. All things would change. Only people had to believe in and trust God" (WNC:94). Mwhiki, by contrast, again reiterates her feeling of loneliness, which she in this instance ascribes to her father's political activities: "'I hate to think that he may have killed some man because at night he wakes and says that he heard some people talking of his own death. And people you know are always avoiding me, even girls of my age. It is, oh -'" (WNC:94). Being startled by Mwhiki's tears, Njoroge assumes the role of comforter: Njoroge "said firmly, 'Peace shall come to this land!' His task of comforting people has begun" (WNC:95). Mwhiki responds by "creeping near him as if he was the comfort himself".

Roscoe (1977:182) regards this scene as almost a carbon copy of the meeting between Waiyaki and Nyambura when they come together again after Waiyaki had gone to Siriamu: "Two lonely souls are coming together after a long absence; there is strain and awkwardness, yet great tenderness". Roscoe (1977:183) aptly captures the delicacy of feeling that characterizes these moments of tenderness:

The hesitation, the shyness, the desire in Njoroge not to finger old wounds, her initial loss for words, the general hovering quality of the encounter - all these give the incident the stamp of a real life encounter as well as emphasising the element of solitude. The whole scene is rendered with that exactness, delicacy, and underlying sense of sadness that are a hallmark of Ngugi's writing.

The conversation between Mwhiki and Njoroge quoted below serves as proof of Ngugi's fine orchestration of the characters' feelings. It reveals both Mwhiki's childlike trust in and admiration for Njoroge. There is an exceptionally delicate balance between her as yet unformed perception of the seriousness of their situation and an innate innocence in her belief that they could flee where she could be "such a nice sister" (WNC:95) to Njoroge. Despite his dedication to his cause, Waiyaki, on the other hand, sounds a rather hollow note in his superficial reasoning interspersed with clichés:

'Yes. Sunshine always follows a dark night. We sleep knowing and trusting the sun will rise tomorrow.' He liked this piece of reasoning. But he was rather annoyed with her when she laughingly said, 'Tomorrow. Tomorrow never comes. I would rather think of today.' But her eyes dilated like a child's as she looked hopefully at him. An idea came to her. She held Njoroge by the neck and shook him excitedly.

'What is it?' asked Njoroge, startled.

'Something. Suppose you and I go from here so that we come back when the dark night is over'

'But - '

'I could be such a nice sister to you and I could cook you very tasty food and - '

'Just a minute.'

'It is a good idea, isn't it?'

Njoroge was very serious. He saw his vision wrecked by such a plan. And what would God think if he deserted his mission like this?

Despite the faintly melodramatic tone of the above passage, the rest of their conversation contains touching moments, especially in the revelation of Mwhiki's innate loneliness and her insistence that Njoroge should not abandon her. "'When you come back, you will not let me alone?' she appealed" (WNC:96). He retorts in a "brotherly fashion". The last paragraph of this chapter concludes the section on a detached and rather ominous note: "They moved together, so as not to be caught by the darkness. A bird cried. And then another. And these two, a boy and a girl went forward each lost in their own world, for a time oblivious of the bigger darkness over the whole land".

Their next meeting on a Sunday almost two years later before Njoroge leaves to attend the missionary Secondary School at Siriana, indicates a subtle shift in their relationship. At this stage Njoroge's pride approaches hubris: "Njoroge had now a feeling of pride and power for at last his way seemed clear. The land needed him and God had given him an opening so that he might come back and save his family and the whole country" (WNC:105). Mwhiki reveals a much more realistic attitude, indicative of a new maturity she has acquired since their previous conversation. Her lament about conditions in Kenya demonstrates her awareness of the seriousness of the political situation: "'The country is so dark now,' she whispered to herself" (WNC:106). Superficially, Njoroge sounds more mature when he consoles Mwhiki:

"You and I can only put faith in hope. Just stop for a moment, Mwhiki, and imagine. If you knew that all your days life will always be like this with blood flowing daily and men dying in the forest, while others daily cry for mercy; if you knew even for one moment that this would go on for ever, then life would be meaningless unless bloodshed and death were a meaning. Surely this darkness and terror will not go on for ever. Surely there will be a sunny day, a warm sweet day after all this tribulation, when we can breath the warmth and purity of God ' (WRC:106).

Ngugi's fine orchestration of ideas is apparent when he skilfully rounds off this climactic conversation by letting Njoroge express his gratitude to Mwhiki for always having been like a "true sister" (WNC:107) to him. He thereby echoes her wish in the previous conversation to be "such a nice sister" (WNC:95) to him.

This veiled suggestion of a reversal of their roles finds full expression in their last encounter in the novel. The final meeting allows the reader a further glimpse of Ngugi's superb ironical twists. Preceding this final meeting, Mwhiki comforts her mother after her father's death. She does so by using Njoroge's favourite expression: "The sun will rise tomorrow" (WNC:130). Significantly, at this stage Njoroge has fallen into an abyss of utter despair. Even the physical appearance of the two protagonists indicates their transformation. Mwhiki "had grown thinner. Her former softness seemed to have hardened so that she appeared to have all of a sudden grown into a woman" (WNC:131). Conversely, Njoroge's countenance reflects his agonized state of mind: "She saw frustration and despair and bewilderment in his eyes".

At this crucial stage, Mwhiki finds consolation in religion: "So, far from losing faith in God, she had put all her trust in Him" (WNC:130-131). Although Njoroge becomes progressively weaker in the course of this encounter, his first words reveal an awareness of a deeper understanding of their relationship:

'I have known you for all those years when I was young and foolish and thought of what I could do for my family, my village, and the country.... It's only now that I do realize how much you had meant to me and how you took an interest in my progress. Because of this it makes it all the more painful what my people have done to you. I, alone, am left. Hence the guilt is mine' (WNC:131).

Where Mwhiki's earlier lamentations about her loneliness sounded a note of sincerity, it is questionable whether Njoroge's utterance here does not contain a measure of self-pity, especially when judged in the light of the rest of their conversation and his half-hearted attempt at committing suicide.

With consummate skill, Ngugi focuses on the reversal of the roles and stature of these two characters. Mwhiki increases in mental strength, becoming resilient and intent on shouldering her responsibilities. Conversely, Njoroge is reduced to a pitiable figure lacking all inclination to bear his burden, let alone to assume the traditional masculine role in the sorely afflicted household:

'Mwhiki, dear, I love you. Save me if you want. Without you I am lost.'

She wanted to sink in his arms and feel a man's strength around her weak body. She wanted to travel the road back to her childhood and grow up with him again. But she was no longer a child.

'Yes, we can go away from here as you had suggested when -'

'No! no!' she cried, in an agony of despair, interrupting him. 'You must save me, please Njoroge. I love you.'

She covered her face with both hands and wept freely, her breast heaving.

Njoroge felt sweet pleasure and excitedly smoothed her dark hair.

'Yes, we go to Uganda and live -'

'No, no.' She struggled again.

'But why?' he asked, not understanding what she meant.

'Don't you see that what you suggest is too easy a way out? We are no longer children,' she said between her sobs.

'That's why we must go away. Kenya is no place for us. Is it not childish to remain in a hole when you can take yourself out?'

'But we can't. We can't!' she cried hopelessly.

Again he was puzzled. As a child Mwhiki had seemed to be the more daring. She saw the hesitancy in him. She pressed harder.

'We better wait. You told me the sun will rise tomorrow. I think you were right.'

He looked at her tears and wanted to wipe them. She sat there, a lone tree defying the darkness, trying to instil new life into him. But he did not want to live. Not this kind of life. He felt betrayed (WNC:133).

This key passage is central to an understanding of Ngugi's delineation of female characters in a period of change. It constantly reinforces Mwhiki's longing to be protected by a strong man - an expression of the traditional view of a brave man's part in an African society. Moreover, the passage explicitly states that Mwhiki has become a woman who has outgrown all childish and irresponsible desires. Although still a lonely, and innately vulnerable figure, Mwhiki is resolute about fulfilling her obligations, at whatever cost. Ngugi's real achievement in Mwhiki's portrayal rests on his sensitivity: she remains essentially lonely, feminine and capable of deep feeling. She in no way becomes overbearing in her resolution to embrace her future responsibilities. By contrast, Njoroge reveals an increasing degree of inability to focus primarily/rationally on the real issues at stake as the novel progresses. His "surrender" - in this instance his yearning to succumb to the urge for an easy escape by fleeing the country and later by attempting to commit suicide - is indicative of his mental deterioration. His progressive mental break-up, however, does not strike a discordant note, because his visionary ideals have always sounded a hollow note. He becomes a Kurtz-like character, a man who lacks inner strength to sustain himself when dark clouds gather around him.

As the conversation continues, Mwhiki's maturity and integrity contrast even more sharply with Njoroge's wilting attitude. She convincingly insists that they should be motivated by their sense of duty towards their families: "Our duty to other people is our biggest responsibility as grown men and women" (WNC:134). Mwhiki exhibits her sensitivity when she tactfully withdraws at this stage. At the end of their final conversation Mwhiki feels sad but "victorious", while Njoroge feels utterly lonely and rejected:

She had conquered. She knew now that she would not submit. But it was hard for her and as she left him she went on weeping, tearing and wringing her heart. The sun was sinking down. Njoroge's last hope had vanished. For the first time he knew that he was in the world all alone without a soul on whom he could lean (WNC:134).

A distinguishing feature of Ngugi's constructing a narrative of change in his novels is his deliberate pairing off of characters. In *Weep Not, Child*, Mwhiki serves as a foil to Njoroge, being used as the instrument to "put his day-dreaming and his basic immaturity in perspective" (Palmer, 1981:6). However, I cannot agree with Martin Tucker (1967:140) who views Njoroge's earlier decision to reject the idea of flight as an endeavour "to create a hymn of loyalty to his African ideals". It is merely an expression of his unattainable visionary ideals which directly contrast with Mwhiki's sincere dedication and determination exhibited in this decisive encounter between them.

This final scene between the lovers calls to mind the epigraph of the novel, the extract from "On the Beach at Night" by Walt Whitman:

Weep not, child
Weep not, my darling
With these kisses let me remove your tears,
The ravening clouds shall not be long victorious,
They shall not long possess the sky...

The peripeteia suggested in this epigraph serves as another sign of Ngugi's inherently ironical stance. It now becomes obvious that the epigraph refers to Njoroge rather than to Mwhiki, because suffering has had a cathartic effect on her. The opposite is applicable to Njoroge: he has deteriorated into a pitiable figure, a grown-up man without a vision, without the courage or drive to fulfil his traditional obligations towards his family, his girlfriend and his tribe. The conclusion of the novel masterfully expresses this atmosphere of defeat. After his abortive suicide attempt, he follows his mothers home, "saying nothing" (WNC:136), being intensely aware of his cowardice:

He was only conscious that he had failed her and the last word of his father, when he had told him to look after the women. He had failed the voice of Mwhiki that had asked him to wait for a new day Again Njoroge did not speak to Njeri but felt only guilt, the guilt of a man who had avoided his responsibility for which he had prepared himself since childhood.

To conclude: Mwhiki exhibits both a clearer vision of the new situation and more strength to cope with the stress and social trauma caused by change in this postcolonial country than Njoroge.

In depicting Ngotho's two wives, Njeri and Nyokabi, Ngugi continues to deconstruct the myth of women being socially and economically inferior in the patriarchal Kenyan society. Despite their traditional submissive role, their portrayal reinforces the perception of Ngugi's view that even rural Kenyan women have the innate ability to grow in mental strength and adapt to changing times. These two women serve as foils to their husband, Ngotho, who fails the final test of strength and the ability to change. Ngugi deliberately focuses on the changed role of women by introducing and concluding the novel with women playing a leading part. As already noted, *Weep Not, Child* opens with the scene where Nyokabi is the harbinger of good news when she tells Njoroge that they are eventually in a position to fulfil his heart's desire by sending him to school. In the last scene the two mothers prevent Njoroge from committing suicide, thus confirming the discourse of the positive and life-affirming role played by so many of Ngugi's females.

The intuitive understanding between mother and son characterizes the opening dialogue of the novel. Njoroge's initial thoughts immediately establish his trust in her: "His mother understood him" (WNC:3). The introduction also demonstrates Njoroge's reverence for his mother: a fundamental feature in the traditional mother-son relationship. Njoroge muses: "O, mother, you are an angel of God, you are, you are. Then he wondered. Had she been to a magic worker? Or else how could she have divined his child's unspoken wish, his undivulged dream?" Ngugi reinforces the profound but unspoken understanding between mother and son: "However his eyes spoke it all. Again Nyokabi understood. She was happy" (WNC:4). Ngugi's tendency to employ repetition clearly shows the influence of the oral tradition on his style.

Ngotho's thoughts about his household and wives underscore the traditional aspects of their family life before the Mau Mau rebellion causes the destruction of their relatively peaceful existence. He reflects that "his wives were good women. It was not easy to get such women these days Such a woman he had in Njeri and Nyokabi especially when he married them. But time had changed them" (WNC:11). Despite Ngotho's slight feeling of uneasiness about the fact that his wives have changed, Ngugi creates a degree of suspense by not immediately revealing the nature of the transformation effected in Ngotho's wives.

However, it is soon evident that Nyokabi is alive to the social changes occurring in the village as a result of westernization, as her reluctance about Njoroge's friendship with Mwhaki exhibits. She does not want him to "associate with a family of the rich because it would not be healthy for him" (WNC:15). Roscoe (1977:185) comments on the profound impact of the encroachment of westernization on this rural community:

To read even this brief encounter is to hear, softly, yet unmistakably, a note of radical social change; change as momentous as Achebe's arrival of the Missionaries, the prophecy of Mugo Wa Kibero, or the arrival of the railway in the Kenyan Highlands. To hear it is to learn that something profound has occurred in Gikuyuland: the hatred, the fear, the envy, and the class lines of Europe are suddenly glimpsed in an African setting.

Despite Nyokabi's justified trepidation about the possible harmful effects of social change on her son, she is simultaneously aware of the beneficial effects of certain aspects of it. She fully understands and endorses the value of a westernized education:

Nyokabi was proud of having a son in school. It made her soul happy and light-hearted whenever she saw him bending double over a slate or recounting to her what he had seen at school. She felt elated when she ordered her son to go and do some reading or some sums. It was to her the greatest reward she would get from her motherhood if one day she found her son writing letters, doing arithmetic and speaking English. She tried to imagine what the Howlands woman must have felt to have a daughter and a son in school. *She wanted to be the same.* Or be like Juliana. Juliana was the wife of Jacobo and she must surely have felt proud to have a daughter who was a teacher and a son who would

probably be flying to foreign parts soon. That was something. That was real life (WNC:15-16)[My emphasis].

Even this initially happy traditional family cannot escape the anguish caused by the march of transformation. When the family members gather in the evening, the seeds of dissension caused by the impact of westernization are apparent. Ngugi at first establishes their adherence to the traditional way of addressing a mother in a polygamous household: "Our elder mother wanted you" (WNC:22). Ngugi then expounds that Njeri, being the first wife, is referred to a "our" or "my elder mother", while Nyokabi as the younger wife, is addressed as "mother". On this evening, however, the atmosphere is tense with the brother Kamau's voice sounding "thin in the dark". Simultaneously, his habitual teasing of Nyokabi sounds "forced" (WNC:23). Boro's pent-up resentment against his father whom he scorns for having allowed the colonizers to take away his land, turns into "a growing anger" (WNC:27). Boro openly derides "all this superstitious belief in a prophecy" his father clings to by directly confronting him: "How can you continue working for a man who has taken your land? How can you go on serving him"? This dissension in the family cuts deeply into Ngotho who weakly laments that the "second Big War took his two sons away to kill and change the other" (WNC:29). Furthermore, change effected by urbanization has contributed towards the destruction of the secure rural family life in that Ngotho's other sons have also "been called. Though they came home quite regularly, yet they were changing" (WNC:48).

Change is responsible for the cline of destruction in this household. Njoroge is shocked when he for the first time witnesses a bitter clash between Ngotho and Nyokabi. In this instance Nyokabi defies her traditional submissive role in an endeavour to prevent Ngotho from taking part in the strike:

'Shut that mouth. How long do you think I can endure this drudgery, for the sake of a white man and his children?'

'But he's paying you money. What if the strike fails?'

'Don't woman me!' he shouted hysterically. This possibility was what he feared most. She sensed this note of uncertainty and fear and seized upon it.

'What if the strike fails, tell me that!'

Ngotho could bear it no longer. She was driving him mad. He slapped her on the face and raised his hand again (WNC:53).

This important encounter externalizes the mounting tension in Ngotho's home. Nyokabi unwittingly exposes the conflict of ideas inherent in this discourse of acculturation, which is such an important concomitant of change. She bewails the fact that her husband is "bewitched" and laments that he is "changed". While witchcraft constitutes an integral part of traditional African religion, the concept of going on strike is a foreign element initiated by westernization. Palmer (1981:3) comments on Nyokabi's defiance of her traditional submissive role, a role which does not tolerate a woman's intrusion in a man's decision-making: "With unerring feminine intuition Nyokabi lays her finger on Ngotho's doubts, indecision, uncertainty, and fears". Ngugi thus portrays the sensitivity of women to transformation, but also their growing willingness to shed their traditional submissive role. Of importance is also Ngotho's reaction. He resorts to violence as a final attempt to maintain his fragile hold on authority. He is clearly the victim of change, of land alienation, which Kiiru (1973:57) singles out as one of the most devastating results of colonization. Kiiru quotes Steinbeck's words which beautifully capture the feelings of former farmers in this predicament:

One man, one family, driven from the
land ... I lost my land ... I am alone
and I am bewildered.

Diametrically opposed to Ngotho's "teleological view of history" (Dramé, 1990:77), consisting of his belief in the prophecy of Mugo wa Kibiro that the land will be returned to the Kikuyu people, is that of Boro. This son is the direct antithesis of Njoroge as well. He rejects his father's docile stance, rebels against the cruel exploitation of the landless peasants and eventually joins the Land and Freedom Army, an organization which advocates armed struggle. Having taken

their oath, he joins the freedom fighters in the bush and later kills Howlands. His active involvement in the struggle reveals Ngugi's inherent ironic streak: Boro, and not his father, succeeds in effecting change in restoring the land to the indigenous population.

In Part Two of *Weep Not, Child* Ngugi uses the construct of Ngotho's family to symbolize the destruction wrought by colonization in Kenya. Larson (1978:126) remarks: "As Ngotho's family begins to crumble, so does British colonial influence in Kenya. Time and again Ngugi will return to this picture of Ngotho's family and the external forces which will slowly lead to its collapse". After the failure of the strike, the family is driven off Jacobo's land. Boro's outspoken contempt for and taunting of Ngotho's increasing submissiveness add to the existing tension and dissension in the family. The wives, especially, suffer as a result of these changed circumstances. Ngugi mentions that Njeri "was growing old. Her days of poverty and hardship were being made heavier by this anxiety" (WNC:71).

However, physical suffering cannot daunt the spirit of Ngugi's resilient heroines: both wives grow in insight and mental strength in an effort to resist the negative influences of change that threaten to destroy their domestic circle. The increasing understanding of Njeri, for example, is amply demonstrated in the scene where Boro endeavours to force his father to take the oath of loyalty to the Mau Mau. Ngotho, traditionalist that he is, refuses to do so. He is not against the principle of oath-taking which constitutes part of his traditional past, but resents the idea of submitting to a son. Njeri articulates her understanding of the complexities involved in the situation, although hesitantly: "It is more than that And although I am a woman and cannot explain it, it seems all as clear as daylight" (WNC:75). Njoroge is aware of his mother's intuitive understanding of the situation: "there seemed to be something in what she had said".

The rest of the novel constructs a narrative where the wives assume a more positive role while Ngotho exhibits a steady decline, both mentally and physically.

This decline reaches a climax with Ngotho's inertia when Njeri and Kori are arrested for breaking the curfew. Ngotho is pitifully aware of his own weakness:

He felt like crying, but the humiliation and pain he felt had a stunning effect. Was he a *man* any longer, he who had watched his wife and son taken away because of breaking the curfew without a word of protest? Was this cowardice? It was cowardice, cowardice of the worst sort. He stood up and rushed to the door like a madman. It was too late. He came back to his seat, a defeated man, a man who cursed himself for being a man with a lost manhood (WNC:80).

This scene demonstrates Ngugi's reinforcement of key concepts or thematic concerns. It foreshadows the conclusion of the novel which finally emphasizes the idea of male cowardice and the redemptive influence of females.

The last scene, which "has disturbed a number of readers" (Larson, 1978:134), firmly cements the superior position of females in this novel's dominant discourse of women and transformation. *Weep Not, Child* concludes with a seemingly simplistic scene:

Nyokabi clung to him. She did not ask anything.

'Let's go home,' she commanded weakly.

He followed her, saying nothing. He was only conscious that he had failed her and the last word of his father, when he had told him to look after the women.... They met Njeri who too had followed Nyokabi in search of a son in spite of the curfew laws....

'Yes,' he whispered to himself. 'I am a coward.'

And he ran home and opened the door for his two mothers (WNC:136).

In spite of its apparent simplicity, this passage is inherently contradictory and charged with meaning. Although Nyokabi "weakly" commands Njoroge to return home, she is in fact the strong figure in the scene: her weakness has a compelling force. Njoroge's attempted suicide and his admission that he, like his father, is a coward, are in themselves ambiguous. Larson (1978:134) states that they "represent a major change in Njoroge from a passive observer to an active

participant, one who from now on will not remain uninvolved". A sounder interpretation of this scene would, however, be to view this deed in a more negative light. Njoroge's opening of the door for his two mothers does not herald a fundamental change in his personality. It is no indication of his willingness to fulfil the traditional male role in an African society, which has already been called into question by his father's ineptitude, but constitutes a mere practical deed. The gradual negative development of his personality all along verifies this assumption. Palmer (1981:8) is of the same opinion: "The overall effect here is of cowardice. Njoroge realizes that his failure to commit suicide, itself an act of cowardice, was not due to a belated awareness of his duties, but to failure of nerve". Palmer predicts that he will "merely continue to be a passive, weak, introspective and sensitive boy". Dathorne (1976:127) rather bleakly remarks: "Ngugi does offer some hope, however, by leaving Njoroge alive at the end" - no resounding praise for a man in the African cultural milieu where bravery is the highest achievement a man can strive for, as *Things Fall Apart* so aptly demonstrates. Njoroge may be viewed as the opposite of Okonkwo who also had a weak father. But Okonkwo's contempt for his poor, inefficient and lazy father has the opposite effect on his son:

But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these: It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father (Achebe, 1958:9-10).[6]

Despite the gloomy view of the future facing Ngotho's household after his death, the assertive positivity of the two mothers offers a glimmer of hope:

For it is out of the syncretism of the future - which will incorporate the best from the past, the best from the two worlds - that peace will once again return to the troubled land. The peacefulness of Ngotho's family, the lack of rivalry between his two wives, has been presented throughout the novel as an indication of the oneness which lies at the roots of African society - the basic family unit, and the adjacent communal life which nourishes it and can only be the foundation of the collective consciousness. Out of a regeneration of the basic values of traditional life, and especially the

extended family, the new society will once again be purified (Robson, 1978:134-135).

This remark fully endorses Larson's praise for Ngugi's achievement in his deconstruction of the inferior role of his female characters, a distinctive quality in his writing which will gain impetus especially in *Petals of Blood and Devil on the Cross*. Mphahlele (1969:33) detects a prophetic note in Ngugi's portrayal of the symbolic union of the two mothers. He regards it as indicative of the birth of "the new Kenya - multi-racial and complex The binary aspect of the extended household will serve as the basis for the union of all the opposites" which have pulled postcolonial Kenya apart. The mothers thus encapsulate the cornerstones of Ngugi's stance on change, namely historical realism and visionary outlook.

The delineation of two additional female characters, Mrs Howlands and Juliana, merits brief attention.

Larson (1978:130) believes that Ngugi succeeds in presenting his European characters almost as skillfully, realistically and sympathetically as his African characters. He ascribes this achievement to Ngugi's so-called intention to reveal that the Mau Mau uprising "involved the best and the worst people on both sides" (1978:130). The negative depiction of Mrs Howlands does not lend credence to this view, however. Where Ngotho's two wives are the epitome of industry, Mrs Howlands is seen as the inefficient, lazy white housewife: "Mr. Howlands was up. He never slept much. Not like Memsahib who sometimes remained in bed until ten o'clock. She had not much else to do" (WNC:29). In contrast to the established idea of the westernized wife who is a soulmate to and equal of her husband, Mrs Howlands plays a very minor role in her husband's life: "Even his wife mattered only in so far as she made it possible for him to work in it [his shamba] more efficiently without a worry at home". The spirit of aloofness in which he married her contrasts sharply with Kamau's jovial teasing about Ngotho's wooing of Nyokabi in the previous chapter: "It is a bad woman this. If I had been my father, I would not have married her" (WNC:23). Nyokabi is quick to retort that Ngotho could not resist her. By contrast, Mr Howlands' wooing and

winning of his wife lacked all spontaneity. Upon realizing that he needed a wife, he "went back 'home' a stranger and picked the first woman he could get. Suzanna was a good girl - neither beautiful nor ugly" (WNC:30). Her life in Kenya is recorded as being rather insipid. Resultantly, she alleviates her boredom and loneliness by finding solace in her children.

Mwihaki's mother figures prominently in one scene only. Ngugi briefly describes Juliana as "a fat woman, with a beautiful round face and haughty eyes" (WNC:18). Nevertheless, she also believes in change: she is a committed mother who shares Nyokabi's ideal of having her children educated. She is not, however, pictured as a woman radiating warmth and love, as Njeri and Nyokabi are. Njoroge still remembers his humiliation when she scolded him for laughing when she earlier said grace during the Christmas party.

Apart from Ngugi's overall successful portrayal of women in a changing milieu, his delineation especially of Mwihaki confirms his skill at characterization. Roscoe (1977:186) mentions that Ngugi's "usually tough handling of virtually every character" is absent in his sympathetic portrayal of most of the female characters in *Weep Not, Child*, as Mwihaki's construction proves. The delicacy which characterizes her portrayal, especially the development of her mental abilities coupled with the retention of her femininity and sensitivity, constitutes one of the strengths of the novel. Roscoe (1977:182) remarks that Ngugi develops the relationship between Njoroge and Mwihaki with a "care reserved in African writing usually for mother-son relationships". Moreover, Ngugi's skilful orchestration in using Mwihaki as a foil to Njoroge serves as another demonstration of his increasing artistic skill. Contrary to Njoroge, she has "developed fully from childhood, through adolescence to emotional and psychological maturity, and realizes that adulthood imposes responsibilities" (Palmer, 1972:6). She is thus portrayed as a fully rounded character who has the ability to develop and adapt to changing circumstances.

The delineation of Njoroge's two mothers occupies a central position in the construction of the theme of women and transformation. Cook and Okenimkpe (1983:67) appreciate their realization as "positive characters" throughout the novel, constituting "the centre of the harmonious collaboration in Ngotho's family, involved with other people, concerned and informed about their environment". They succeed in blending the positive elements of a past culture with beneficial innovations of a new era.

This study of *Weep Not, Child* once again underscores the vital importance of Ngugi's achievement in his presentation of various aspects of change and transformation. Ngugi may justly be regarded as one of Africa's leading spokesmen in this regard, persuasively demonstrating the way in which literature can be a powerful instrument for change in its ability to topple prejudices and disturb existing customs and ideas.

Ngugi's discourse of change and transformation may be regarded as superior to that of a significant number of African writers. In comparing Ngugi's treatment of this theme in his first three novels with that of Chinua Achebe and Onuora Nzekwu, Martin Tucker (1967:141) comments on Ngugi's supremacy as a writer: Although these two authors construct the same settings as the background of their novels, namely a village in conflict with old and new customs and approaches to life, Ngugi stands out for his "tactile imagery, and in the coolness of his prose". Ngugi's settings usually form a fitting background against which the drama of change is played out: "Ngugi's landscape is filled with growth and vegetation; the demanding sun and sultry flatlands have not yet desiccated hope, even for a union of understanding with the white settler" (Robson, 1978:117).

Ngugi's "lively ear for dialogue" (Chukwukere, 1965:230) enhances his rendering of the discourse of social change and its resultant transformation. Because differences of opinion, conflicts and temptations are characteristics of change and transformation, characters are often in opposition to each other. The altercation between Ngotho and his senior wife about the intended strike serves

as an excellent example of Ngugi's delineation of conflict. Njoroge sees this violent scene between the parents as the first "real discord in the home that had hitherto been so secure" (WNC:52).

A unique stylistic feature of *Weep Not, Child* (which constitutes one of its weaknesses) is frequent authorial intrusion. Ngugi often intervenes to explain especially Njoroge's statements. This may be ascribed to Ngugi's use of the novelistic third person biographical structure in the first two novels, a device which he abandons in *A Grain of Wheat*. In an interview Ngugi admitted that he found this device limiting because "nobody invents what is happening to a person in a logical, historical, chronological sequence" (Egejuru, 1980:108).

In spite of the similarity of theme in Ngugi's first two novels, namely the changes wrought on traditional village life by the intrusion of westernization, *The River Between* is a better novel than *Weep Not, Child*. The narrative skill of *The River Between* surpasses that of *Weep Not, Child*, "an interesting but unpolished story" (Tucker, 1967:140). This can be attributed to the depth of Ngugi's visionary insight in *The River Between*. Tucker (1967:141) believes that if "the conflict between black and white provided the *modus operandi* of *Weep Not, Child*, the conflict between black and white reveals a deeper tonality in *The River Between*".

These two novels clearly demonstrate that character portrayal will become Ngugi's *forte*. Although Larson (1978:124) feels that Ngugi's characters, even in his early novels, are usually more fully realized than Achebe's, he is perhaps too generous in remarking that in Ngugi's first two novels the characterization is "impressionistic and vivid, full of sounds and colors and emotional tones rarely expressed in the African novel". Njoroge, for example, does not deserve this praise. In an early review of *Weep Not, Child* Ikeddeh (1969:6-7) has already commented adversely on Ngugi's choice of a "child-hero who is at the same time an innocent". I fully endorse his observation that Toundi in Oyono's *Houseboy* is a more complex character than Njoroge, while Oyono's "tough satiric comedy

does not encourage any sloppy sentiment". Ikeddeh (1969:7) thus regards *Weep Not, Child* as a "slight novel":

The novel could hardly be built on a larger scale if Njoroge had to remain the focal point. Since he is so one-dimensional, uncomplex and passive except for his sensitive nature and make-believe, and since the incidents of the novel are unfolded more or less through his obviously limited consciousness, the writer could only have added more to the novel with the alternative risks of padding, anti-climax, or melodrama.

It is true that Njoroge "had always been a dreamer, a visionary who consoled himself faced with the difficulties of the moment with the hope of a better day to come".

The artistic supremacy of *The River Between* also manifests itself in Ngugi's use of "image patterns" (Howard, 1973:108) which are absent in *Weep Not Child*.

Weep Not, Child is by choice contained within a cosmos of secular history, and presents a whole set of new problems for Ngugi, which are immediately reflected in the novelist's craft. Swift straightforward dramatically narrative craft characterizes the opening; obvious aesthetic patterning is gone. Stylistically Ngugi has opted for a progressive realism, which gives evidence of a completely different view of history, hinted at but never completely espoused in *The River Between*.

Although *Weep Not, Child* may be regarded as "a slight novel" (Ikiddeth, 1969 7) as noted above, especially when compared to Ngugi's earlier short stories, it marks the beginning of his later undeniable literary adroitness. Despite weaknesses, it must in the final instance be viewed as "an impressive beginning for the East African novel and Ngugi's own literary career" (Mphahlele, 1967:30), a novel that won a special award at the Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar in 1965.

Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* and Ngugi's *The River Between* as well as *Weep Not, Child* may, for lack of a better term, be described as fictional autobiography. Bessie Head's next two novels, *Maru* and *A Question of Power*, will become more intensely personal. By contrast, Ngugi's third novel, *A Grain of Wheat* reveals his movement away from the intensely personal level towards his

growing social and political consciousness which will increasingly infuse his last novels. *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross*, and finally *Matigari*, will thus construct a more impersonal discourse of women and transformation.

This investigation has demonstrated that although both Bessie Head and Ngugi are intensely occupied with deconstructing the myth of the inferiority of the African female protagonist, there exists a difference in their settings against which this reversal of roles takes place. In Ngugi's first two novels the primary construct for the discourse of change is a single traditional household consisting of the father, his wife/wives and children. Bessie Head, perhaps not surprisingly when her anguished background is taken into account, focuses on heroines who are exiles, single parents, or marginalized social outcasts who have to fend for themselves and change their traditional views and customs in an effort to come to grips with the dislocation of their lives.

Initially Head and Ngugi choose different kinds of heroines to serve as the vehicles for inculcating an awareness in the reader as to the changing concepts of women's rights. While Paulina Sebeso in *When Rain Clouds Gather* is a mature woman, a widow and mother of two young children, Nyambura and Muthoni in *The River Between* and Mwhiki in *Weep Not, Child* are teenagers when the respective novels commence. This difference in age allows one to broadly classify Ngugi's novels as examples of the bildungsroman as well. As such, these novels trace the development of the protagonists from a fairly early age. Despite this opportunity for profound character development, it must be noted that Ngugi's female protagonists grow in the course of the novels in that they acquire a deeper understanding of the complexities of change, but their inherent natures remain fairly static. For example, Muthoni has already made up her mind about her intention to be circumcised when she is introduced in *The River Between*. Nyambura, however, shows mental growth as evidenced by her willingness to defy the negative aspects of traditionalism in her support of Waiyaki. In *Weep Not, Child* Mwhiki's steadily increasing mental strength foreshadows Ngugi's later dominant heroines. Both Paulina and Maria in *When*

Rain Clouds Gather reveal a greater willingness to embrace and further the positive aspects of change than their male counterparts, but this does not indicate a major growth or radical change in their personalities. These two women, together with Mma-Millipede, are introduced as independent thinkers who have already exhibited an individual and questioning spirit.

A final assessment of Head's and Ngugi's construction of the discourse of women and transformation must take into account the different settings against which these authors construct their novels. As remarked earlier, Botswana was never conquered or dominated by foreigners, while Ngugi portrays a country bleeding in an effort to shake off foreign domination. This accounts for Head's revelation of a greater degree of co-operation between white foreigners and the indigenous population, as well as for the spirit of acceptance of Whites, for example of Gilbert in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. There are also no marriages across the racial barrier in Ngugi's first two novels, while the marriage between Gilbert and Maria serves as one of the strongest icons of change in *When Rain Clouds Gather*.

Thematically, Head and Ngugi are concerned with different aspects of change. Bessie Head's main interest lies with economic change. The primary emphasis in *When Rain Clouds Gather* is undoubtedly agricultural innovation, while social, political, educational and religious change is of secondary importance. In Ngugi's first two novels the peripeteia of values caused by the intrusion of postcolonialism, especially ideas related to education and religion, forms the thematic focal point.

A final remark: the discourse centring on women and change is central to both Head's and Ngugi's earlier novels. Each of these two novelists, however, approaches this theme from a different angle. Ngugi's more impersonal approach evidences his being a male writer from Kenya who is part of a traditional society, while Bessie Head's work immediately testifies to the facts of her life, exposing her as the sensitive coloured exile who endeavours to find

roots for herself and her son in a new country. Although all three novels show signs of immaturity in the portrayal of the theme under discussion, they also reveal the undeniable artistic skill of these two authors which will increase as the rest of this thesis will demonstrate.

ENDNOTES

- [1] An important characteristic of postcolonial fiction is the fairly general feeling of degrees of loneliness, isolation, marginalization and rejection by society. Feeling an outcast in a traditionally secluded society in a tribal community with strong family ties is the direct result of a lack of acculturation: contact with especially western education and christianity has alienated people from their traditional filial and societal ties. This feature emerges strongly in works of many postcolonial African writers. This study will indicate that most of Head's and Ngugi's protagonists, both male and female, are lonely, stigmatized and marginalized figures. Roscoe (1977:180-181) remarks in this regard and with reference to Ngugi:

Three colonial products which Ngugi frequently identifies are loneliness, class divisions, and guilt. Loneliness is common in all three novels [as well as in his later novels], and in the short stories. We are meant to see this, I think, not as reflecting a modern existentialist infection but as a palpable result of the fracture of an old order by the engines of capitalism, the Puritan ethic, and the progress myth.

Roscoe then urges the reader to compare the feeling of security expressed in Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mt. Kenya* (1965) with feelings of insecurity and loneliness as revealed by Ngugi's, and by implication his contemporaries' work:

The change worked on the Gikuyu [sic] people since Kenyatta wrote in the Thirties is astonishing. The first is a picture of tight cohesion where men and women acknowledge a common cause in a highly democratic society. The second is a picture resembling Picasso's *Guernica* (a significant favourite among African writers), where all is fragmentation and anxiety as members of the same

group cut throats and betray friends, all in a chaotic fight for selfish enrichment.
Hence the sight of so many lonely figures scattered against the landscape of Gikuyuland.

Bessie Head's own lonely, stigmatized South African background, coupled with the autobiographical nature of her novels, naturally finds expression in the creation of similar characters.

- [2] At the Ngugi Conference (*Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Texts and Contexts*, Penn State Berks Campus, Reading, PA: 7-9 April 1994) it was mentioned that children play a very minor role in Ngugi's later novels. This may raise the question that Ngugi later in life lost touch with the realities of family life, a troubling question worth considering in a study of this renowned author.
- [3] In this regard Bessie Head's work may be regarded as fictional autobiography. Fictional autobiography refers to literature in which the personal experiences of an author infuse and direct the plot and nature of characterization to a remarkable degree, but differs from real autobiographical writing because the protagonist is a third person, thus a more detached figure than the first person narrator in an autobiography. As such, fictional autobiography is more impersonal than autobiographical writing in the conventional sense. Fictional autobiography thus relates a story in which elements of the author's own life are clearly visible, while having been fictionally transmitted to a greater degree than in "real" autobiography.
- [4] See Brendon Nicholl's illuminating paper on "The Production of 'woman' in *The River Between*" for an analysis of the historical, social, religious and ethical implications of circumcision among the Kikuyu.
- [5] Ngugi shares this position with Josiah Kariuki whose autobiographical novel, *Mau Mau Detainee*, was published in 1963, while R.J. Mugo Gatheru's autobiography, *Child of Two Worlds* appeared in 1964.
- [6] This view of bravery is, however, deliberately simplistic to stress a generally perceived feature in the African ethos - Okonkwo's "bravery" is constantly interrogated by Achebe.

CHAPTER THREE

A STUDY OF HEAD'S AND NGUGI'S MIDDLE PERIOD NOVELS

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Interesting perceptual and stylistic differences characterize Head's and Ngugi's rendering of the theme of women and transformation in the single novel written by each of these two novelists in what may be termed their middle period. Where Head's middle and late period novels become increasingly personal, almost autobiographical, allegorical and symbolic, Ngugi's novels start displaying a greater degree of impersonality, realism and objectivity.

This chapter will reveal that there is "a sequential movement away from the realism of *Rainclouds* ... to a more allegorical mode" (MacKenzie, 1989b:20) in the presentation of this theme in Bessie Head's *Maru* (1971), her middle period novel. Ngugi's third novel, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), heralds a marked improvement on his first two novels, especially regarding character portrayal, as Eustace Palmer (1981:47) states: "Ngugi's characterization in the novel can hardly be faulted". This novel undoubtedly demonstrates that some of Ngugi's female characters may be regarded as pioneers in the field of Anglophone African fiction by men.

3.2 BESSIE HEAD'S "MIDDLE PERIOD NOVEL"

3.2.1 *Maru* (1971)

Head's novels may be regarded as a kind of trilogy. Ravenscroft (1976:175), for instance, feels that each novel "strikes out anew, and also re-shoulders the same burden. It is as if one were observing a process that involves simultaneously

progression, introgression, and circumgression; but also ... organic growth in both her art and her central concerns". An exploration of *Maru* indicates that Bessie Head's work is constantly concerned with aspects of the discourse of transformation, especially concerning the role of women. Jean Marquard (1978/1979:58), for example, concisely pinpoints Head's thematic concern in *Maru*: "In *Maru* Head continues to explore the conflict between change and tradition in rural South Africa". In similar vein Ursula Edmonds (1984:21) defines the theme of *Maru* as Bessie Head's exploration of "the growth of 'humanity'" as experienced by an outsider who comes to Botswana. Nonetheless, the author strikes a new note in that she tackles the problem from the angle of Black on Black instead of the more general White on Black discrimination. Ezekiel Mphahlele (1974:240) comments on the merits of this deliberate choice of focal point: "It is quite evident that if you look into your community and avoid the big broad general theme of the black-white encounter, you will find a diversity of material you could not exhaust in a lifetime".

Maru illuminates this discourse from the viewpoint of the teacher, Margaret Cadmore, who belongs to the downtrodden and despised Masarwa. Head openly pronounced her purpose in writing *Maru* as the exposure of the "hideousness of racial prejudice" (1979:23). Margaret is an orphan, the offspring of a destitute Masarwa woman who dies in labour. Margaret's white foster mother, a missionary's wife, brings up the child with a sense of pride and dignity to become her foster mother's "programmed alter ego" (Eko, 1986:145). Having qualified as a teacher, Margaret takes up a teaching post at Leseding school in the rural village of Dilepe where she becomes a catalyst for change. Margaret is initially acceptable to the traditional society because they regard her as a Coloured. When she openly announces that she is a Masarwa she is subsequently ostracized and subjected to extreme forms of humiliation in spite of her superior education, refinement and artistic talents. Her endearing human qualities, however, earn her the love of the two most powerful men in the village: Maru and Moleka. Moleka suppresses his love for her in conformity to tradition, as Maru tells her: "Moleka did not want to approach you because he is such a

tribalist" (M:122). Maru, the paramount chief elect, frees himself from the bondage of tradition and flees with Margaret, accompanied by three loyal retainers.

In *Maru* Bessie Head thus explores the discourse of transformation in the context of love and marriage, rather than against the construct of agricultural progress, as in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. The relationship between private and political life forms a secondary discourse, since the change wrought by Maru's personal life and perceptions, exerts an influence on the tribal life as a whole. This changed attitude is felt even after he has left the village because Maru's renunciation of the traditional contempt for the Masarwa has farreaching ramifications for the community as a whole. The Masarwa, in particular, view this step as a break with tradition, an opening up of new vistas of future freedom and acceptance.

The portrayal of Margaret Cadmore undeniably displays the more autobiographical nature Bessie Head's novels increasingly assume, in the words of Robin Visel (1990:120): "Margaret the artist is clearly Head the writer, the outsider who reveals people and their setting to themselves while subtly subverting the established order". *Maru* exposes Head's "feelings about the senselessness of hatred" (Barnett, 1985:121), a condition that the author identifies with, having herself experienced it throughout her life as a Coloured. She was scorned in South Africa and initially felt an alien even in Botswana where no apartheid laws existed. Head could not tolerate the separation of people on the basis of race or colour, as her comment on the intrinsic injustice of the existing social hierarchy early in *Maru* shows:

Before the white man became universally disliked for his mental outlook, it was there. The white man found only too many people who looked *different*. That was all that outraged the receivers of his discrimination, that he applied the technique of the wild jigging dance and the rattling tin cans to anyone who was not a white man. And if the white man thought that Asians were a low, filthy nation, Asians could still smile with relief - at least, they were not Africans. And if the white man thought Africans were a low, filthy nation, Africans in Southern Africa could still smile - at least,

they were not Bushmen. They all have their monsters. You just have to look different from them ... then seemingly anything can be said and done to you as your outer appearance reduces you to the status of a non-human being.

Of all things that are said of oppressed people, the worst things are said and done to the Bushmen (M:11).

After this scathing (and overtly didactic?) attack on racism, Bessie Head relates how Margaret grows up with a feeling of dislocation, because "there seemed to be a big hole in the child's mind between the time that she slowly became conscious of her life in the home of the missionaries and conscious of herself as a person" (M:15). Despite her foster mother's efforts to develop Margaret's mind as fully as possible, the author remarks that there "was no one in later life who did not hesitate to tell her that she was a Bushman, mixed breed, half breed, low breed or bastard" (M:15-16). Bessie Head reinforces her belief in the uniqueness of every human being by emphasizing Margaret's superiority over her tormentors because of her talented nature nurtured and developed by an unbiased education:

Her mind and heart were composed of a little bit of everything she had absorbed from Margaret Cadmore. It was hardly African or anything but something new and universal, a type of personality that would be unable to fit into a definition of something as narrow as tribe or race or nation. Her educator was like this (M:16).

The simplicity of the discourse revealing Margaret's suffering effectively heightens the pathos of the girl's situation:

It was only when she started going to the mission school that she slowly became aware that something was wrong with her relationship to the world. She was the kind of child who was slyly pinched under the seat, and next to whom no one wanted to sit...

She had no weapons of words or personality, only a permanent silence and a face which revealed no emotion, except that now and then an abrupt tear would splash out of one eye. If a glob of spit dropped onto her arm during the playtime hour, she quietly wiped it away (M:17).

This passage thus indicates that although on the surface Margaret stoically resigns herself to the demeaning status of a social outcast, she is sensitive to this inhuman persecution instigated by racial hatred.

Head's identification with the duality of Margaret's situation is apparent in her delicate understanding of Margaret's confusion by living "on the edge of something" (M:16) because of the inherent contradiction in being a partial member of a family. Margaret Cadmore senior treats her as a "semi-servant in the house", albeit giving her "kisses on the cheeks and toes at bedtime, a bedtime story" (M:16). Despite equipping her foster daughter as fully as possible for facing the problems she is bound to deal with because of belonging to a scorned race, Margaret senior realizes that nothing could really safeguard her daughter against racial prejudice:

Good sense and logical arguments would never be the sole solutions to the difficulties the child would later encounter, but they would create a dedicated scholar and enable the child to gain control over the only part of her life that would be hers, her mind and soul (M:16).

Margaret exhibits her foster mother's undauntingly honest spirit in never even considering the easy way out by lying about her racial identity when she takes up a teaching post in Dilepe. She bears the humiliation caused by her being a Masarwa with the same fortitude she had earlier done as a child. Nevertheless, the truck driver senses her uncertainty and voices the essence of the thematic concern of the novel by reassuringly telling her: "You must not be so afraid of the world, Mistress People can't harm you" (M:22). He introduces her to Dikeledi, sister to Maru. The two girls immediately relate to each other. Although Dikeledi is initially taken aback by Margaret's confession that she is a Masarwa, the former becomes one of Margaret's most important protectors when the full force of racial oppression hits her.

Dikeledi intervenes when the pupils openly taunt Margaret by asking in class: "Since when is a Bushy a teacher?" (M:45). Margaret's mental torment is externalized by the abrupt removal of the bed which Moleka lent her before

becoming aware of her racial identity. Bessie Head's fine use of irony is apparent in that Maru also demands the removal of the bed upon hearing that the new teacher is a Masarwa. His initial prejudice is thus solely based on traditional racism. Pete, the principal, negates Margaret's humanity by thinking of her in terms of "it" (M:40). In his eyes "she was no longer a human being". He has a double-edged axe to grind because he bases his contempt for her on two grounds: racism and male chauvinism. Consequently, he vows to Seth, the education supervisor, that he can easily get rid of Margaret because she is a Masarwa and a woman: "'She can be shoved out,' he said. 'It's easy. She's a woman'" (M:41). This statement constitutes one of Bessie Head's most open denouncements of male chauvinism and the traditionally inferior position of women in a predominantly rural tribal situation. Although Pete vows: "Either the Maserwa teacher goes or I go" (M:89), the protection Margaret receives from Dikeledi, Moleka and Maru turns the tables on Seth and Pete. Head effectively emphasizes the victory of both personal merit over racial bias and that of feminism over male chauvinism by stating in three short parallel sentences:

Three bombs went off in Dilepe village, one after the other. First, Pete the principal fled. Then Seth the education supervisor fled. Then Morafi [a rich cattle thief] kept looking over his shoulder for two days and he also fled Dikeledi was promoted to be the principal of Leseding School (M:92).

Margaret's adult character is clearly an amalgamation of her childhood experience and artistic temperament. Like her guardian, Margaret finds solace in creativity whenever prejudice threatens her survival: "There was a part of her mind that had saturated itself with things of such startling beauty and they pressed, in determined panorama, to take on living form" (M:101). Margaret's paintings symbolize the strength of will and latent power of the silent slave class over its oppressors, by boldly proclaiming: "... it is I and my tribe who possess the true vitality of this country. You lost it when you sat down and let us clean your floors and rear your children and cattle. Now we want to be free of you and be busy with our own affairs" (M:109).

The conclusion of *Maru* serves as final proof of its author's growing artistic mastery. Maru and Moleka both fall in love with Margaret. Although her accomplishments cause radical changes in Moleka, he remains a traditionalist. As a result, the reader more readily accepts Maru's engineering the marriage of Dikeledi and Moleka and the former's elopement with Margaret. The conclusion of the novel assumes an even profounder significance because Bessie Head employs the flashback technique having revealed in a brief introduction that Maru is fully aware of the painful fact that his wife's love will never solely belong to him: in her heart there "were two rooms. In one his wife totally loved him; in another, she totally loved Moleka" (M:8). This emotionally complicated ending adds to the psychological density of the novel because it refutes the unfounded criticism that it has a fairy-tale ending in which the charming prince carries off his beautiful bride to eternal bliss where their love for each other is absolute[1].

Second to Margaret, Dikeledi plays a vital role in Head's construction of women who cause transformation in *Maru*. As a secondary character, she has by no means an inferior role to play in the evocation of Head's central idea of women and transformed perceptions regarding race and ethnicity in a changing world.

Dikeledi is initially seen through the eyes of Maru, as "the next best woman in the world" (M:9). Even Maru has to admit that the "next best woman in the world had more intellectual attainments than his wife. She had style and class and immediately impressed people as someone worth noticing and listening to". Head does not portray Dikeledi as a simplistic traditional woman: "She was so startling and unexpected in her elegance that anyone could draw any number of conclusions about her and still be puzzled" (M:23). Dikeledi is, however, "a drastic revolutionary" (M:25), the characteristic which distinguishes her from the villagers and which enables her to recognise Margaret's true worth. Dikeledi's unbiased acceptance of Margaret as a person initiates their instinctive understanding of each other: "There was no tension, restraint, or false barriers people usually erect towards each other. It was mostly Dikeledi" (M:38). When she confronts Maru after having had Margaret's bed removed, Dikeledi once

more shows her unprejudiced spirit: "There's no such thing as Masarwa,' she said, a sudden shrill edge in her voice. 'They are only people'" (M:65). Dikeledi's inherent honesty is apparent when she later in the novel admits to herself that Margaret has changed her life: "'Why,' Dikeledi thought. 'She has changed my life. I am becoming a more sincere person'" (M:105).

Bessie Head's realism in dealing with human relationships characterizes the final union of Dikeledi and Moleka. Despite Dikeledi's usual dignified behaviour: "Dignity and Dikeledi were the same names" (M:97), she can be sensuous and provocative, as Moleka's accusations reveal:

Moleka gave a snort of laughter: 'Then why do you advertise your thighs?' he demanded. 'I'd like you to stop that. You think men don't know what you mean when you walk around swinging your thighs like that? They can't take their eyes off you and here you want to pretend all kinds of innocence before me. Women like you are the cause of all the trouble in the world' (M:83).

When Dikeledi confides in Margaret that she has to marry Moleka because she is expecting his child, Head verbalizes the victory of good sense over prejudice. Margaret finally realizes that she is her friend's equal: "Oh, what did all the reasoning help now? There was a point at which she was no longer a Masarwa but the equal in quality and stature of the woman who sat opposite her" (M:118).

In Head's oeuvre Margaret Cadmore senior is one of the clearest examples of a woman who possesses remarkably stronger and more refined qualities especially of tenacity than her male counterpart, her husband George. Bessie Head virtually dismisses him with a single stroke of a pen, by remarking that there is hardly anything to say about the husband who "was naturally dull and stupid only people never noticed because he was a priest and mercifully remained silent for hours on end" (M:12). Head completes this rather unflattering picture by remarking that he "had a long, mournful face. His mouth was always wet with saliva and he frequently blinked his eyes, slowly like a cow".

Bessie Head's skilful management of material is demonstrated in that she includes only what is essential and relevant. For example, she merely briefly once again refers to the dull missionary who lacks all mental and physical attributes to fulfil the emotional and intellectual needs of his wife. She does this at the climactic moment when the young Margaret despairs because she realizes that Moleka will never love her. Here Bessie Head reflects that Margaret Cadmore senior is "a woman who lived without love, without her equal in soul stature" (M:94) but who survives "the ordeal of being married to a dead and stupid man" by drawing on her own inner resources. Similarly, her daughter's emotional needs are partially unfulfilled despite her husband's unflinching love.

Like Ngugi, Head here also displays her fondness of pairing off characters, either by revealing similarities or by employing paradox.

Margaret Cadmore senior possesses exceptionally fine human qualities. The central focus in her construction is on her most important characteristic: her ability to challenge existing customs and to transform the world:

It is preferable to change the world on the basis of love of mankind. But if that quality be too rare, then common sense seems the next best thing. Margaret Cadmore, the wife of the missionary, had the latter virtue in over-abundance. It made her timeless, as though she could belong to any age or time, but always on the progressive side (M:12-13).

She is "highstrung, nervous, energetic" and able to take charge efficiently of any situation, as demonstrated by her instant and determined actions when summoned to the hospital when the nurses do not wish to have anything to do with the corpse of Margaret's mother. She brushes aside the nurses' reluctance to treat Margaret's Masarwa mother's corpse with ordinary human dignity and respect. The note beneath the sketch she makes of the dead woman - "She looks like a Goddess" (M:15) - as well as the way in which she brings up the little orphan, demonstrates her unselfish and unbiased nature. Bessie Head describes Margaret Cadmore senior as "the universe itself" (M:20). Although Margaret senior is childless, she is "an educator of children" (M:15), who uses

her foster daughter to prove her scientific theory of "environment everything; heredity nothing", another manifestation of her belief that radical change in perceptions is possible.

Margaret's parting with her foster daughter reinforces the ambivalent nature of their relationship. "The old plump lady pretended to cry, dabbing at dry eyes with a dry handkerchief" (M:19). Textual evidence throughout the novel has constructed Margaret senior as a woman who cannot pretend. Consequently, this insert raises questions about Bessie Head's possible bias in her portrayal of Whites. However, the legitimacy of this suspected prejudice is questionable when compared to the portrayal of Gilbert in *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Gilbert is depicted with an exceptional degree of compassion. Moreover, Bessie Head's ensuing reference to the relationship between Margaret Cadmore and her stepdaughter seems to convey the idea of a softer side of the older woman's nature:

A month later the young girl received a curious postcard from England. The ink was smudged in a number of places, as though the postcard had been posted during pouring rain, or the writer of the postcard had been crying profusely. It said, simply: 'I had to do it for the sake of your people. I did not want to leave you behind. Margaret Cadmore' (M:20-21).

Despite the extreme economy of construction, the brief sketch of Margaret's Masarwa mother serves as one of the most important examples of the results of racial discrimination. Here Bessie Head undoubtedly succeeds in exposing the almost animal cruelty of the more privileged races who despise the Masarwa. The brief depiction of this unnamed Masarwa woman implicitly and achingly uncovers a world of suffering and deprivation: "True enough, the woman who gave birth to a child on the outskirts of a remote village had the same thin, Masarwa stick legs and wore the same Masarwa ankle-length, loose shift dress which smelt strongly of urine and the smoke of outdoor fires" (M:12). This description masterfully perpetrates the discourse of dehumanization, mainly effected by the skilful use of diction. Words such as *the woman*, *outskirts*,

remote, slick legs and the formless dress that smells of *urine* all manifest aspects of degradation, neglect and suffering. The reference to "no one wanted to bury the dead body" intensifies the lack of humanity bestowed on a social outcast. When Margaret senior demands to see the corpse, the repulsiveness of this pathetic figure is reinforced: two nurses take Margaret to the slop room where "on the stone floor lay the dead woman, still in the loose shift dress, more soiled than ever from the birth of the child" (M:14). The reader cannot miss the social protest inherent in Bessie Head's plea for change when Margaret who always "took revenge with a sketch pad and pencil" (M:13) sees something divine, as reflected in the earlier reference to her goddess-like appearance, in this degraded being:

She took in too much after that: the thin stick legs of malnutrition and the hard calloused feet that had never worn shoes. She took in also the hatred of the fortunate, and that if they so hated even a dead body how much more did they hate those of the woman's tribe who were still alive. Maybe she really saw human suffering, close up, for the first time (M:15).

The above discussion has amply demonstrated the various degrees of suffering and exploitation of females in a hostile and in a real sense essentially a patriarchal environment.

The role of women, especially in relation to their impact on women in a changing world, will now be investigated.

Where Gilbert and Makhaya play a mammoth role in effecting especially agricultural change in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Maru and Moleka mainly contribute to effecting social transformation in *Maru*.

Maru and Moleka are introduced as close friends. Bessie Head immediately constructs a discourse of celestial magnitude when she describes the two royal friends: "They were kings of opposing kingdoms. It was Moleka's kingdom that was unfathomable, as though shut behind a heavy iron door" (M:34). Maru's

kingdom knows no boundaries: "He'd mix the prosaic of everyday life with the sudden beauty of a shooting star" (M:34).

The relevance of these two male characters is stressed by constructing *Maru* on two central metaphors, both related to Maru and Moleka. The first metaphor concerns the rain cloud that fails to produce rain. Maru's name appears in the saying "Maru a lwala", meaning "The clouds are sick" (Joyce Johnson, 1986:61), in other words they fail to produce rain. Similarly, Maru is unwilling to assume the paramourcy. As such he does not live up to the expectations of the people. Significantly, Head employs another characteristic associated with the thundercloud, namely its power. She does so to render the violence and forcefulness of Moleka's nature: "A young man sat alone.... There was a heavy thunder-cloud around his eyes. He looked grim and vehement and gruesomely ugly. When he spoke his voice had such projection and power that the room vibrated" (M:27).

The second striking cluster of associations in the novel, which will be discussed in more detail later, is based on the alternation of sun and moon in the solar system. Maru is identified with the moon, whereas Moleka is symbolized by the sun. This symbolism, seen in the context of traditional African oral poetry, underlines Maru's superiority: "Did the sun have compassion and good sense? It had only the ego of the brightest light in the heavens. Maru preferred to be the moon. Not in any way did he desire Moleka's kingdom or its dizzy, revolving energy" (M:58).

Bessie Head initially employs these two male protagonists to reveal degrees of traditional male chauvinism. There is a significant ironical thrust in their description as "notorious" (M:34) womanizers whose methods differ:

The clue to Moleka and Maru lay in their relationships with women. They were notorious in Dilepe village for their love affairs, and the opposing nature of their temperaments was clearly revealed in the way they conducted these affairs. The result was the same: their victims exploded like bombs, for differing reasons. At the end of a love affair, Moleka would

smile in the way he smiled when he made people and goats jump out of his path, outrage in their eyes Moleka and women were like a volcanic explosion in a dark tunnel. Moleka was the only one to emerge, on each occasion, unhurt, smiling (M:34-35).

Maru, on the other hand, reacts differently after the termination of a love affair: "At the end of a love affair, a deep sorrow would fill his eyes. He often took to his bed with some indefinable ailment. The victims, too displayed alarming symptoms" (M:35). Moleka is unscathed by love, whereas both Maru and his so-called victims suffer intensely. The outcome of the marriages of these two male protagonists once again illuminates Head's inherent ironic streak. Moleka, the person who has apparently scorned the feelings of his mistresses, laughs when he reads the note that Maru has once more outsmarted him in fleeing with Margaret. Bessie Head, however, concludes her account of his union with Dikeledi by remarking that everything "went smoothly for Dikeledi after that. She found she had a real husband" (M:125) who gets rid of the wedding guests, an action which may imply that he is willing to accept his responsibilities towards his wife. The more sensitive of the two friends, Maru, on the other hand, has to console himself with the bitter fact that he will never have his wife's undivided love.

These two men also play important roles in Head's deconstruction of the discourse of racial prejudice. Moleka initiates the action to end racial prejudice against the Masarwa slaves by letting them have dinner with him at his own table when the community is still reeling with the waves of shock caused by Margaret's appointment as a teacher in Dilepe. Moleka acts with characteristic boldness when he "could not make allowance for the slow removal of prejudice" (M:53). He thus invites Seth to share this Sunday meal at which Moleka "took up his fork and placed a mouthful of food in the mouth of a Masarwa, then with the same fork fed himself". By so doing, he openly defies tribal tradition, expressed by the saying: "Prejudice is like the old skin of a snake. It has to be removed bit by bit". This bold action lets Ranko express the feelings of the community by telling his

master, Maru: "Moleka is a changed man" (M:54). Maru, however, fathoms the real reason for the transformation in Moleka, namely his love for Margaret:

At first Maru blinked, thinking he saw almost a replica of himself before him. The savage, arrogant Moleka was no longer there, but some other person like himself - humbled and defeated before all the beauty of the living world. So is that what love is like, he thought (M:57).

Margaret meets Maru when she approaches him in her endeavour to get his permission to extend the loan of the bed. His haughty treatment of people immediately repulses her:

Suddenly she felt as if her throat were being choked. The man was Dikeledi's brother. Dikeledi spoke of him with reverence. And how much had Dikeledi invaded her own life without giving her these awful details - that she, Dikeledi, was related to someone like this who had slaves as part of his hereditary privilege? Did you ever sort out one thing from another with people, especially when you were a no-people? (M:63).

The central focus of Dikeledi's subsequent conversations with her brother frequently revolves around racial prejudice. She objects, for example, to his treatment of his slaves who sleep around the fire. He ultimately discards his traditional views and admits to her: "I was not born to rule this mess. If I have a place it is to pull down the old structures and create the new. Not for me any sovereignty over my fellow men. I'd remove the blood money, the cruelty and crookery from the top, but that's all" (M:68). Maru's realization of the universality of oppression and prejudice is espoused in his reflections which finally lead to his effecting a vast degree of transformation:

How was it then that he had inherited so much blood money and so many slaves whose only blanket was an outdoor fire? Had they not all been a little like Morafi, with a few principles, and these principles had saved them from outright damnation? Maybe he concentrated on his immediate situation. It was African. It was horrible. But wherever mankind had gathered itself together in a social order, the same things were happening. There was a mass of people with no humanity to whom another mass referred: Why, they are naturally like that. They like to live in such filth. They have been doing it for centuries (M:68).

This climactic inner monologue foreshadows the conclusion of the novel which relates the different ways in which people react to Maru's denunciation of his traditional rights and his marriage to Margaret. With a final touch of supreme irony, Bessie Head highlights the paradoxical views to Maru's act. She advances from the villagers' generalizations to the specific view of a prostitute:

When people of Dilepe village heard about the marriage of Maru, they began to talk about him as if he had died. A Dilepe diseased prostitute explained their attitude: 'Fancy', she said. 'He has married a Masarwa. They have no standards' (M:126).

Bessie Head's irony becomes scathing when she remarks that this diseased prostitute has so little comprehension of Margaret's true attributes that she believes Maru would have been better off had he married the prostitute herself! Head once more reveals her own awareness of the complicated nature of transition by remarking that quite a number of these people "knew nothing about the standards of the soul, and since Maru only lived by those standards they had never been able to make a place for him in their society".

Head's exultation at the triumph of freedom over bondage and prejudice is evident in her description of the reaction of the Masarwa to Maru's actions:

When people of the Masarwa tribe heard about Maru's marriage to one of their own, a door silently opened on the small, dark airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time. The wind of freedom, which was blowing throughout the world for all people, turned and flowed into the room. As they breathed in the fresh, clear air their humanity awakened.... How had they fallen into this condition when, indeed, they were as human as everyone else. They started to run out into the sunlight, then they turned and looked at the dark, small room. They said: 'We are not going back there' (M:126-127).

An examination of stylistic features employed in the construction of this novel reveals Head's increasing artistic growth. *Maru* is a more complex and accomplished novel than *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Striking stylistic devices include, for instance, the functional use of proper names, the fusion of elements from various mythological systems with realities in Botswana, the deft use of

metaphor and clusters of association, the effective pairing of characters by employing similarities and paradox, as well as the powerful evocation of atmosphere.

There is a strong "religio-mythic" (Goddard, 1990:108) element evident especially in Head's skilful choice of proper names. In all three her novels, Head constructs her themes, including those of women and transformation, by the use of meaningful proper names. Johnson (1990:132) points out that in contemporary African societies the social significance of names is still strongly emphasized. This serves as another example of Head's reliance on elements of the oral tradition, because proper names play "an indispensable part" (Finnegan, 1970:470) in the oral tradition. Joyce Johnson (1990:134) remarks: "The device of naming is integral to the structure of *Maru*, which has characteristics in common with the folktale"[2].

Maru is identified with both the moon and the rain cloud: "Maru preferred to be the moon" (M:58). By contrast, Moleka is identified with the sun: Moleka was a sun around which spun a billion satellites". According to Schapera (1971:41), the word *maru* may be translated with *rain cloud* in the context of Tswana rainmaking ceremonies. The word *maru* also forms the first two syllables of the word *marumo* meaning *army*. Maru's changed ideas about women and racial oppression coupled with his resultant flight clearly demonstrate his break with his traditional duties: being rainmaker, chief and head of the tribal army. Moreover, Maru's name has mythical connotations: it slightly differs from the Dahomean creator god Mawu who was also identified with the moon (Johnson, 1990:135). Significantly, this god also withdrew from active participation in guiding the affairs of man. Johnson extends the symbolism of Maru's name by indicating the close affinity of his name with that of Mara, who exemplifies the concept of death in Buddhist-Hindu myth. Maru's partial destruction of one half of Margaret's soul exposes his destructive powers.

The first two syllables in *Moleka* are similar to those of the name of the Canaanite sun god Moloch. Moleka, who is constantly identified with the sun, has a dual nature. In the first instance, he is like the sun: autocratic, violent and harsh in his anger. But he can also radiate force and dynamism. These characteristics are reflected in the last two syllables of his name which partly resemble those of the name of the god Lesa, a god believed in many areas in Southern Africa to control thunder (Johnson, 1990:136). His boldness is shown in the novel by the decisive way in which he demonstrates his changed racial perceptions.

Significantly, the name Margaret, which has come from Greek through Latin to English, means *pearl*. In earlier forms of English a pearl was called a *margaret*. A pearl can symbolize disillusionment and sorrow, as the story of Margaret amply demonstrates. The name Margaret also has a deeper significance when viewed in the context of Head's interest in the significance of the word combinations that form a name. The first two syllables of Margaret, *marga*, represent the Hindu-Buddhist concept of *the way*. The connection between way and change is obvious and thus establishes Margaret's central role in effecting change in *Maru*.

Even Dikeledi's name has symbolic implications. Her name means *tears*, a concept which underlines the unhappiness that is such an integral and paradoxical part of this girl's life. On the surface she seems to be endowed with abundant blessings, but for the greater part of the novel she suffers constant agony caused mainly by Moleka's indifference to her feelings towards him.

Following from this, one can also maintain that apart from the symbolism employed in the construction of proper names, *Maru* contains beautiful symbolism and nature imagery. *Maru* differs from *When Rain Clouds Gather* in that it does not follow a strictly chronological order. Bessie Head introduces Maru, Margaret and their three loyal retainers after having settled far away from Dilepe. However, the exposition, like that of her first novel, is fraught with

symbolism which immediately reflects the thematic concerns of the novel: the paradox between bondage and freedom after radical change has been effected. The juxtapositioning of references to prisoners or confinement with yellow daisies reinforces this contrast:

The rains were so late that year. But throughout the hot, dry summer those black storm clouds clung in thick folds of brooding darkness along the low horizon. There seemed to be a secret in their activity, because each evening they broke the long, sullen silence of the day, and sent soft rumbles of thunder and flickering slicks of lightning across the empty sky. They were not promising rain. They were prisoners, pushed back, in trapped coils of boiling cloud (M:5).

This passage as a whole creates an atmosphere of fearfulness and deceit with its resultant connotation of unhappiness, expressed by words such as *black storm clouds, brooding darkness, sullen silence, rumbles of thunder and flickering slicks of lightning, empty sky, prisoners and trapped*.

Significantly, the passage above contrasts sharply with Maru's unfailing optimistic efforts to effect change, symbolized by his attempts to brighten the life of his beloved Margaret by beautifying the environment:

Like one long accustomed to living in harmony with the earth, the man had continued to prepare his fields for the seasonal ploughing, and even two brand new water tanks had been fixed to the sides of his small new home to catch the storm water, when it rained. He wanted a flower garden of yellow daisies, because they were the only flowers which resembled the face of his wife and the sun of his life (M:5).

This paragraph radiates a feeling of hope, reflected in Maru's desire to tame the elements, thereby expressing the expectation of future happiness, life, warmth, freedom and beauty. The contrast between the colours referred to in the two opening paragraphs underlines the difference in tone and mood between these two passages. The use of the colour *yellow* captures the essence of life and beauty, while being simultaneously indicative of the possibility of happiness once racial and sexual prejudice has been eradicated.

The symbolism is intensified by also being connected to the mythical connotations in the names of Maru and Moleka, as discussed earlier.

In assessing Bessie Head's contribution to postcolonial female African writing with the publication of *Maru*, a few critical viewpoints will now be discussed.

Bessie Head's whole output, but especially *Maru*, "successfully demonstrates that any form of segregation based on ethnicity or race causes indelible human alienation and estrangement" (Uledi-Kamanga, 1987:21). This is inevitable when people see themselves firstly as members of a specific racial group and secondly as human beings. The universality of the atrocities of racial prejudice is reinforced by Head's constructing her thematic concern of oppression on Black on Black and not White on Black discrimination (as mentioned earlier). This shift in emphasis is also noticeable in Ngugi's novels in his last period, where he exposes the corruption and exploitation of black Kenyans by their own leaders as revealed in Chapter Four of this thesis.

The autobiographical nature of the novel also merits some critical scrutiny. Jane Watts (1989:3-4) serves as an example of literary critics who regard the perceived tendency towards autobiographical writing among a vast number of Black writers as a result of western influences on Black writing. She also views the autobiographical nature of a number of South African poets and authors who were exiles as well, such as Dennis Brutus, Arthur Nortjé, Bessie Head and Ezekiel Mphahlele, as reflecting the "temporary bewilderment" of these people after the banning of their political organizations. This form of writing allows these displaced authors a way of coming to grips with the dislocation of their own lives. Watts distinguishes between two kinds of autobiographical writing in this quest for finding a meaning for life, especially while living in exile. Where a writer such as Matshikiza produces straightforward autobiography (for example in *Chocolates for my Wife*), authors such as Mphahlele, Bessie Head, Manganyi and Nkosi employ fictional autobiography in either novels, essays or short stories to "embody their autobiographical fragments" (Watts, 1989:108). It is thus

obvious that the specific nature of postcolonial twentieth century life, especially in countries like South Africa, needs a literary form to allow its creative writers to come to grips with their own feelings of oppression, alienation, and rejection. I therefore fully endorse Virginia Ola's (1986:43) viewpoint that Head "manages with enough artistic distance" to render Margaret's history "a representative one", which is perhaps not true of Head's subsequent novel, *A Question of Power*, which will be examined in the following chapter.

Elinor Flewellen (1985:13) captures the essence of Bessie Head's depiction of women in a transitional phase in *Maru* when commenting on the constant struggle against traditional oppression and dehumanization Margaret and Dikeledi are engaged in:

Although neither woman could be accurately termed 'submissive,' that is, in the sense which conveys docility or manipulability inside male dominance, they are observed existing as limited 'independents' continually in search of individualism; that they are thwarted by male contrivance is to be expected in a society characterized by sexual dominance and racially hierarchical relationships.

Moreover, Head's growing skill at characterization is strikingly apparent in the seeming lack of textual evidence that Margaret feels herself as a female inferior in a male-dominated world - perhaps the natural outcome of her western upbringing. Nevertheless, she demonstrates an acute awareness of what it means to be a Masarwa in an African world, a feeling the author identifies with. Dikeledi, on the other hand, enjoys an extremely secure position in the society, but constantly fights male dominance by employing sarcasm. The density of Bessie Head's social perception is, however, evident in that it is Dikeledi who eventually becomes the victim of male dominance and contriving.

Bessie Head's reliance on the oral tradition is once again remarkable in *Maru*. Masizi Kunene (1980:202) observes that the African story is "characterized by a fantasy-tale or a dramatized report of actual events". He believes that in African literature authors often aim at constructing characters through mythification and

symbolism. This study has undeniably demonstrated that Bessie Head's aesthetic account of women and transformation rests on these two strategies. Although *Maru* reflects events in modern Botswana, the characters act like figures in local myths, legends and folktales. This approach masterfully links the present and past, while simultaneously interlinking the local with the wider cosmic context (Johnson, 1985:5). In this regard, *Maru* evinces Bessie Head's growing stylistic skills, paving the way for her literary achievement in her last novel, *A Question of Power*.

Maru undoubtedly reflects its author's artistic maturation, but is not flawless. Rasebotsa's (1993:29) observation that Maru's personality is "a blend of traditional values and Western romantic ideals" is relevant. It is questionable whether Maru is a realistic representation of a rural chief in a typical remote Botswana village. Moreover, Head's view of tradition is often paradoxical. Consequently, she alternates between condoning traditional customs and treating the remote ancestors of the Batswana with respect while they were in actual fact the originators of Setswana traditional values - the very values which encourage racial and sexual prejudice.

Moreover, there exists an ambivalence in Head's construction of thematic concerns in *Maru*. While she depicts "the new world of true racial identity" (MacKenzie, 1989b:27) in her efforts to effect change, to eradicate racial and sexual prejudice, she paradoxically lets Maru escape from it, thereby forfeiting the opportunities he would have had of wiping out the injustices still prevalent in the society had he shouldered the burden of leadership. As such, Head demonstrates her inability to consolidate what she perceives as the demands of public life with those of a quest for individual fulfilment in the lives of some of her characters, in this instance Maru himself.

Despite these weaknesses, *Maru* remains a fine achievement, perhaps as a result of Bessie Head's empathy with suffering caused by racial and sexual domination.

3.3 NGUGI'S "MIDDLE PERIOD NOVEL"

3.3.1 *A Grain of Wheat*

A Grain of Wheat is generally regarded as an improvement on Ngugi's first two novels. In this chapter I intend illustrating that Ngugi constructs the discourse of women and transformation with increased skill, as Palmer (1981:24) remarks:

A Grain of Wheat is Ngugi's most ambitious and successful novel to date. In the depth of its psychological penetration and the power of its characterization, in the subtlety of its narrative technique, in the density of its texture, it exceeds all expectations raised by the earlier novels, promising though they were.

This novel may be classified as dramatic fiction. As such, it differs radically from *Maru* which belongs to the genre of autobiographical fiction. Although there still exist similarities in Ngugi's and Head's middle period novels, mainly evident in their thematic concern with women in a transitional postcolonial situation, these works reveal the growing attitudinal and stylistic differences in these writers' construction of this dominant discourse.

Biblical quotations precede each one of the four sections of *A Grain of Wheat*, thus signifying the impossibility of reading and comprehending this novel without seeing it in a Christian context despite Ngugi's ambivalent attitude towards Christianity [3]. The first of these references firmly postulates the theme of change as the novel's predominant concern:

Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die. And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain (1 Corinthians 15:36).

This biblical reference thus constitutes a discourse of struggle, demonstrating a concerted effort to transform the colonial oppression of the Kenyan society into a community where the indigenous people could once again live in freedom and peace. *A Grain of Wheat* is a powerful work, underlining the need for constant struggle, suffering and even the willingness to die to achieve a desired goal: the

Mau Mau dream of eventual freedom from British colonialism and oppression. Although the symbolism of the seed is universal, Kihika is the main embodiment of this reference. He is the seed which, by dying first, comes to life and brings forth much fruit.

The novel reconstructs the thoughts and feelings of its five major characters who relive their experiences of the Mau Mau struggle on the four days preceding the celebration of the Kenyan Uhuru on 12 December 1963. These characters are Mugo, Gikonyo, Mumbi, Karanja and Thompson. Central to Ngugi's focusing on the remembrances of these protagonists are their divergent relationships with the famous freedom fighter, Kihika, Mumbi's brother. Kihika was betrayed and hanged. The novel starts when two of his comrades, General R. and Lt Koinandu, come to the village, Thabai, to track down the traitor who betrayed Kihika, intending to expose his identity at the festivities.

Where Bessie Head employs the flashback technique with artistic economy in *Maru*, Ngugi's frequent use of this stylistic device accounts for the craftsmanship displayed in *A Grain of Wheat*. Ngugi constantly alternates the centre of a character's consciousness by interpolating present action with references to the past. He increasingly employs stream-of-consciousness and interior monologue as techniques to expose the behaviour of individuals under stress.

The seemingly loose incidents in the plot combine to form "an elaborate network of gateways which lead towards a central theme" (Dathome, 1974:128), namely various forms of betrayal effecting different kinds of change, both on the national and personal level. The narrative discourse of the novel depicts Gikonyo's victory over Karanja in their rivalry to win Mumbi's hand in marriage. While Gikonyo is in detention, Karanja betrays his people by joining the ranks of the oppressors by becoming one of the despised Homeguards. He succeeds in seducing Mumbi in a moment of weakness on her part, after having informed her that Gikonyo has been released from detention. Gikonyo, who admits that he has taken the Mau Mau oath solely for the sake of being reunited with his wife, is

shattered when he finds her suckling his old rival's child. The couple's agonized struggle to be reconciled forms part of the novel's main discourse. Mugo's exposure as Kihika's traitor becomes the central focus of the secondary discourse, while the reaction of various Whites to changed circumstances receives prominent attention. In the delineation of white female colonizers, the relationship between Thompson and his wife, as well as their leaving the country, reinforces the theme of alienation as depicted in the severed relationship between Gikonyo and Mumbi. The Thompsons' return to England externalizes an aspect of change: the abandoning of a place in an effort to find fulfilment in settling in another environment. This is, in a sense, reminiscent of Maru's elopement with Margaret.

An examination of the role of female characters in effecting change in the revolutionary period in Kenya will centre on Mumbi, the only female amongst the novel's five protagonists. However, this study will reinforce the vital role females in general played during the Mau Mau revolution. Their depiction reveals Ngugi's growing awareness of the inner strength and resultant courageous role women play in times of turmoil: "In their strength of character, their spirit, and their self-reliance, they are undoubtedly unique. More often than not they demonstrate a firmer resolve and a deeper understanding than their male counterparts" (Boehmer, 1991:192).

Mumbi is constantly depicted in terms of her relationship with Gikonyo. As such, the central focus on her personality and function in the novel will invariably include elements of her association with her husband. This relationship demonstrates one of the surest signs of Ngugi's increasing excellence in characterization. It signals a marked improvement on the portrayal of the central love affairs in both *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child*. The naivety and superficiality which characterize the construction of these earlier love affairs are now replaced by a more mature, serious and sensitive discourse: "Gikonyo and Mumbi are two mature people whose love is described in terms of sensations,

inner feelings, fears and jealousies. They seek to communicate their feelings towards each other in terms of motifs and symbols" (Palmer, 1981:30).

Mumbi is introduced while listening to Kihika's famous speech at Rung'ei market. Significantly, she is immediately placed next to Gikonyo: "Mugo sat in a place where he could command a good view of the speakers. Gikonyo, then a well-known carpenter in Thabai, sat a few feet away. Next to the carpenter was Mumbi" (AGOW:14). She is "one of the most beautiful women on all the eight ridges". Her beauty leads to her association with Gikuyu ancestry: "Some people called her Wangu Makeri because of her looks" (AGOW:14).

Ngugi's deliberate use of a shifting chronology in structuring the novel heightens and sustains the feeling of suspense. After the brief introduction of Gikonyo and Mumbi at the meeting at the market place, the ensuing account of his return home after having visited Mugo following his release from detention constructs the discourse of disharmony in their home, but Ngugi gives no reason for Gikonyo's contemptuous treatment of his wife. This scene recounts Gikonyo's unwillingness to have supper at home, as well as his irritation because Mumbi has not gone to bed yet. Ngugi recaptures the subdued suffering of Mumbi with much more subtlety than he exhibited in the evocation of the suffering of either Nyambura in *The River Between* or Mwhaki in *Weep Not, Child*. When Gikonyo roughly pushes away his food and demands a cup of tea, Mumbi apparently retains her composure:

'Make me a cup of tea,' he said between his teeth.

'You must eat,' Mumbi appealed. Her small nose shone with the light of the lamp. The appeal in her eyes and voice belied the calm face and proud carriage of her well-formed body (AGOW:27).

Gikonyo is slightly unsettled by her outwardly calm behaviour. "Gikonyo kept quiet. In detention, he had longed to come back to Mumbi. Was this the same woman? He looked at her. She had turned her face to the door. Maybe she was crying". The element of foreshadowing, evoked by his "relenting a little" is

another instance of Ngugi's increased narrative skill also obvious in his withholding of information to increase and maintain suspense. This puzzling encounter appears in Chapter Three, while the flashback in Chapter Seven eventually sheds light on the deterioration of their relationship. Chapter Seven relates their courtship, initial marital bliss, Gikonyo's suffering in detention and his final disillusionment when he finds out about Mumbi's adultery with his arch-enemy, Karanja. While waiting for the water to boil, Mumbi appears "expectant, a bird ready to fly at the first sign or word from the master". Although Mumbi has learnt "to school her desires, to accept what life and fate" give her, she tries to communicate with her husband, but he roughly scorns her efforts even to discuss the recent political developments with her. In her humiliation, she refers to her dehumanized position: "I had forgotten that I am a nobody" (AGOW:28). Gikonyo rudely brushes aside her continued efforts to effect a reconciliation. On this occasion he rebuffs her attempt to put her arms round his neck, to talk about the child or to share her bed. Despite revealing her apparent submission to this extreme form of psychological torture, Ngugi illustrates Mumbi's inner strength: "Mumbi stood there, cold. Her breasts moved up and down. She opened her mouth as if to shout. Then suddenly she grabbed her knitting from the ground and ran to the bedroom" (AGOW:28).

This scene is followed by an account of their courtship. Ngugi beautifully captures the essence of the youthful joy coupled with a kind of reverence Gikonyo and Mumbi experience when they initially physically surrender to each other after having abandoned the race to the station: "She lay against his breast, their heart-beat each to each. It was all quiet. Mumbi was trembling, and this sent a quiver of fear and joy trilling in his blood" (AGOW:80).

The revelation of the harmonious relationship between Mumbi and Gikonyo's mother, Wangari, reinforces Mumbi's adherence to tribal custom. Initially Mumbi is portrayed as an uncomplicated woman who only yearns to make her husband happy, as she later tells Mugo:

'Even when I got married, the dream did not die. I longed to make my husband happy, yes, but I also prepared to stand by him when the time came. I could carry his sheath and as fast as he shot into the enemy, I would feed him with arrows. If danger came and he fell, he would fall into my arms and I would bring him safely to myself.

He saw the light at the bottom of the pool dancing in her eyes. He felt her dark power over him. "Yet when they took him away, I did nothing, and when he finally came home, tired, I could no longer make him happy" (AGOW:120).

Significantly, Ngugi now demonstrates the effect of the national turmoil on the lives of this once happy couple. When Gikonyo comes home, he finds a transformed world, as he despairingly reveals to Mugo that "everything had changed; the shambas, and the villages, and the people" (AGOW:61). He then expresses the core of the discourse of transformation in this novel by whispering: "She [Mumbi] too had changed.... God, where is the Mumbi I left behind"?

Even while subjected to her husband's excessive humiliation and rejection, Mumbi exemplifies the inner strength characteristic of so many of Kenya's Independence heroines. While baring her soul to Mugo, "her whole body [is] expressive of a resilient desire for life despite suffering" (AGOW:119). She shows the same fortitude when she takes charge of affairs during Gikonyo's detention: "Mumbi was depressed because there was no man in the house. In the end, she tied a belt around her waist and took on a man's work" (AGOW:123).

The contrasting views Mumbi and Gikonyo have about her illegitimate child illustrate the density of Ngugi's writing. In a traditional African society having a child by another man during her husband's prolonged absence is usually socially acceptable and condoned. Mumbi may express the moral acceptance of the traditional Kikuyu, while her husband's extreme censure of her deed may be incomprehensible to traditionalists. By contrast, his mother's acceptance of the child reflects the traditional African view. While Gikonyo constantly broods over his imagined version of a long-lasting adulterous relationship between Karanja

and Mumbi, she reveals her spontaneous surrender to Karanja in a moment of weakness when learning about her husband's release, as she tells Mugo:

'What else is there to tell you? That I remember being full of submissive gratitude? That I laughed - even welcomed Karanja's cold lips on my face? I was in a strange world, and it was like if I was mad. And need I tell you more? I let Karanja make love to me' (AGOW:131-132).

The impersonal tone of this passage amply sustains the idea of Mumbi's lack of involvement, both spiritually and physically, from actual love-making as a comparison with her spontaneous surrender to Gikonyo's initial consummation of their love demonstrates.

Nevertheless, she becomes aware of the extent of the irresponsibility of her behaviour immediately after the moment of exultation has passed: "When I woke and realized fully what had happened, I became cold, the whole body" (AGOW:132). The words *the whole body* reinforce her feeling of being distanced from herself, and thus not being fully responsible for what has happened to her. Moreover, her immediate confiding in her mother-in-law lucidly proves Mumbi's inability to view this crucial incident in the same harsh light as Gikonyo: "I went to Wangari and this time I cried and I could not clearly tell her what had happened. But she seemed to understand, and she held me to her and tried to remove my shivers with words" (AGOW:132). Unfortunately, Gikonyo rejects Mumbi without affording her the slightest opportunity to justify her behaviour, including the mitigating factor that she has for years withstood Karanja's determined and cunning efforts to wear down her resistance and submit to his sexual desires.

However, when Gikonyo resorts to physical violence, Mumbi returns to her parents. His changed attitude to her son spurs on her defiance. Where Gikonyo has usually treated "the boy politely" (AGOW:145), on coming home in one of his bad moods, he "roughly pushed the boy away from his knees, disgust on his face" (AGOW:145). This demonstration of cruelty destroys Mumbi's ability to endure Gikonyo's rejection of her and her child in silence any longer.

Mumbi stood up, and for a minute anger blocked her throat.

'What sort of a man do you call yourself? Have you no manly courage to touch me? Why do you turn a coward's anger on a child, a little child...'
She seethed like a river that has broken a dam. Words tossed out; they came in floods, filling her mouth so that she could hardly articulate them.

'Shut your mouth, woman!' he shouted at her, also standing.

'You think I am an orphan, do you? You think the gates of my parents' hut would be shut against me if I left this tomb?'

'I'll make you shut this mouth of a whore,' he cried out, slapping her on the left cheek, and then on the right. And the flow of words came to an abrupt end. She stared at him, holding back her tears (AGOW:146).

In this scene, which unflinchingly manifests Gikonyo's inhumanity and egocentricity, Mumbi emerges as the stronger figure morally. The fact that his harsh treatment of her child finally breaks down her fortitude is another proof of her endearing human qualities, also demonstrated by the tenderness with which she has always treated her younger brother, Koriuki.

There is no ambivalence about the discourse of women and transformation in the reconciliation between husband and wife. It is obvious that Gikonyo has to accept Mumbi on her own terms which are in a sense contrary to the traditionally subservient position of a woman in this social milieu. Moreover, Mumbi once more reveals both her innate humanity and resolution by initiating the process of reconciliation. She visits Gikonyo in hospital, but refuses to resume their marriage as if nothing has happened despite his willingness to talk about the child. When he asks her to go home with him after his discharge from hospital, to "go back to the house, light the fire, and see things don't decay" (AGOW:213), she refuses to ignore the past. Her denial indicates her inner strength and maturation through suffering:

'No, Gikonyo. People try to rub things out, but they cannot. Things are not so easy. What has passed between us is too much to be passed over in a sentence. We need to talk, to open our hearts to one another, examine them, and then together plan the future we want'.

Gikonyo immediately comprehends his wife's seriousness and dignified determination because he is unable to hide his "anxiety and fear": "He knew, at once, that in future he would reckon with her feelings, her thoughts, her desires - a new Mumbi".

A Grain of Wheat ends on a clearer and much more positive note than Ngugi's first two novels. It is obvious that the two spouses will come to a more mature understanding of their expectations from and responsibilities in their marriage. Ngugi encompasses this idea by stating that Mumbi walks away with "determined steps, sad but almost sure", while Gikonyo decides to change the wedding gift, the carved stool by altering the woman's figure to that of "a woman big - big with child". The realism of the conclusion of *A Grain of Wheat* thus also contrasts with the ambivalent ending of *Maru*.

Ngugi's portrayal of the two women in Kihika's life, Wambuku and Njeri, again reflects his increasing artistic proficiency. These two women demonstrate the different reaction of individual female characters to the discourse of transformation in their relationship to men. In his earlier novels, for instance in *The River Between*, there exist marked similarities between Nyambura and Muthoni. Significantly, Ngugi's characters now start displaying individual and contrasting personalities. The reaction to the changing situation in postcolonial Kenya of both Wamburu and Njeri forms a sharp contrast to Mumbi's. Moreover, the construction of Wambuku and Njeri serves to reinforce the basic theme of the novel, namely that any form of transition involves an extremely painful process.

Unlike Mumbi, Wambuku is not physically attractive but vivid: "Wambuku was not beautiful. Except when she laughed or was animated with passion. Then, with her eyes dilated, her lips parted in expectation, and with her dark face glowing, she could be irresistibly attractive" (AGOW:84-5). She differs from Mumbi in being "gifted with tremendous capacity for life, she lived for the moment, exploring and devouring its alluring possibilities" (AGOW:85).

Where Gikonyo and Mumbi initially live in extreme bliss, Wambuku's relationship with Kihika has always been unfulfilling. Where she desires "life with Kihika", he is a man "following an idea" (AGOW:85). Their conflicting ideals form the core of the depiction of their relationship, as evidenced in their first conversation. While Wambuku yearns to hear Kihika declaring his love for her, he views his personal life in terms of his commitment to the struggle: "Kihika returned the pressure of her hand, experiencing the exquisite delight of a man who has found a comforting soul in his set course of action... had she not alone among all the people believed wholly in him, in his ideas?" (AGOW:85). As a result, he promises never to let her alone, but sees this as a commitment on her part to join him in the struggle: "'Never!' Kihika cried in ecstasy, seeing Wambuku at his side always. When the call for action came, he alone among the other men would have a woman he loved fighting at his side" (AGOW:86). Conversely, Wambuku regards his commitment to transformation through struggle as a demon against which she is powerless. Ngugi concludes this encounter by remarking that they return to the dancers in the wood, "hands linked, their faces lit, both happy, for the moment, in their separate delusions".

Wambuku gives vent to vehement grief when she is forced to accept the extent of her delusions. Her world is shattered on finding that Kihika has joined the freedom fighters. Ngugi's increasing fondness of structuring his novels on paradox is shown in Wambuku's reaction here which contrasts with Mumbi's subdued acceptance of Gikonyo's detention. Ngugi heightens the dramatic effect of Wambuku's lamentation in compounding the irony inherent in the situation: Wambuku discloses her true feelings to her real rival for Kihika's love, Njeri.

Mumbi's later revelation to Mugo, that Wambuku was the woman he saved from the soldier's merciless beating in the trench, has a dual function. Firstly, it adds to the density of the plot, thereby creating suspense. Secondly, it reaffirms the thematic concern of exposing the suffering caused by domination and change. Where Wambuku has explicitly told Njeri that her love for Kihika has let her

abstain from any sexual encounters with men, Mumbi tells Mugo that Wambuku became totally promiscuous after Kihika's death. In fact, she was pregnant when she was beaten by the one homeguard whose advances she refused.

Despite the seemingly minor role Njeri plays in *A Grain of Wheat*, her portrayal is important for the construction of this novel because it enhances Ngugi's fine use of irony and paradox. The core of Ngugi's irony in this instance is that despite Mumbi's view of Wambuku's death as a sacrifice for her brother, it is Njeri who fights at Kihika's side as he has mistakenly believed Wambuku would do. Njeri's death in battle soon after Kihika's hanging constitutes another sacrifice for this hero. The use of paradox demonstrates the integral differences between these two girls. Where Wambuku openly reveals her love for Kihika when speaking to Njeri, the former is unaware of Njeri's own love for the same man.

Njeri may be viewed as one of the first examples of Ngugi's tough women who played such an important role in the struggle for independence. Her portrayal reveals her undauntingly resolute spirit: "Though Njeri was a short girl, her slim figure made her appear tall. But there was something tough about that slimness" (AGOW:89). She despises any signs of weakness, like tears, and can hold her own with most men, even in a physical encounter. Ngugi reveals the intensity of her love for Kihika by exposing her reflections after her decisive conversation with Wambuku when she resolves to join Kihika in the forest:

Now she felt superior and stronger and could not help her contempt for Wambuku. She stood alone in the dark outside her home, peering in the direction of Kinenie Forest.

'He is there,' she whispered to herself. Then she addressed him directly with a passionate devotion. 'You are my warrior.' She raised her voice, letting loose her long-suppressed anger. 'She does not love you, Kihika. She does not care.' She walked a few more steps and then wheeled round, willing the waves of the dark to carry her declaration of eternal devotion to Kihika.

'I will come to you, my handsome warrior, I will come to you,' she cried, and she ran into her mother's hut trembling with the knowledge that she had made an irrevocable promise to Kihika (AGOW:89).

Njeri is but one of many women in *A Grain of Wheat* who play an active role in the revolutionary struggle. For instance, Ngugi briefly refers to Wambui who acts as a courier to carry weapons to the rebels during the Emergency. He especially concentrates on the incident in which she outwits the police in a body search while concealing a pistol under her clothes. She succeeds in avoiding a full search by cunningly reminding the young policeman of his breach of tradition by not showing respect for the private parts of a mother of the tribe.

Apart from their active participation in the struggle, the mere thought of their wives and children inspired the fighters to endure extreme forms of hardship and torture, as Mugo says:

'In those days we did not stay alive because we thought our cause strong. It was not even because we loved the country. If that had been all, who would not have perished?

'We only thought of home.

'We longed for the day when we would see our women laugh, or even see our children fight and cry. When we thought that one day we would return home to see the faces and hear the voices of our mothers and our wives and our children we became strong. Yes, we became strong even in days when the cause for which blood was spilt seemed - seemed -'
(AGOW:58).

Ironically, Mugo does not have anyone to come back to. After this speech, he reflects: "I did not long to join my mother, or wife or child because I did not have any".

Ngugi's depiction of the role of Whites, especially white females, in the transitional period in postcolonial societies, forms an interesting subdiscourse in his novels. Some attention will therefore be given to the portrayal of Margery Thompson and Dr Lynd.

The relationship between Margery and her husband is of central concern in the novel. It serves as an extension of the discourse of unfulfilment in marriage,

thereby intensifying the impact of the alienation in the Gikonyo-Mumbi relationship. Furthermore, it reveals Ngugi's rather unsympathetic portrayal of white colonizers, an aspect that will be commented on in the final critical evaluation of this novel.

Ngugi once more effectively uses the flashback technique by introducing Margery shortly before Uhuru and then slowly unfolding significant information about her past. This introduction focuses on two important aspects of her life: her boredom as a result of having had to live in a foreign country and her resultant distorted sensuousness. When her husband sends her a message with Karanja, she invites him into the house because she "was bored by staying in the house alone" (AGOW:34). Her sexuality is immediately revealed: "She was dressed in thin white trousers and a blouse that seemed suspended from her pointed breasts". Karanja arouses a kind of sexual feeling in Margery: "Margery felt a sensual power at the fear and discomfiture she inflicted on Karanja". This reference indicates a certain malicious streak in Margery, also apparent in her noisy quarrels with her servants. The "thrill" Margery experiences in Karanja's company, reminds her of the only other occasion on which she experienced a similar "flame" (AGOW:35): the dance after which she for the first time committed adultery with Dr Van Dyck. Although Margery could not resist Van Dyck's sexual advances, it "was never a happy affair".

As in the case of Gikonyo and Mumbi, there is a total breakdown of communication between the Thompsons, as Margery sadly reflects: "They were on the brink of change ... and still he would not talk. Uhuru had brought their lives into a crisis and he behaved as if nothing was happening" (AGOW:46). The degree of alienation is so great that she does not know what she wants him to say, but yearns to share her thoughts with him: "but let a man and wife at least share their anxieties about everything: their past, the party tomorrow, their flight home on Wednesday" (AGOW:47). She subsequently joins him in his study and puts her arms around his neck, like Mumbi with Gikonyo in an earlier scene (already alluded to). The reactions of the characters on these fairly similar

occasions, however, differ. Where Gikonyo resists yielding to Mumbi's endeavour to bridge the communication gap between them, it is Margery who withdraws from her husband in this instance: "Suddenly her grim determination to force their relationship into an open crisis subsided". Despite her withdrawal, there are faint reverberations indicating the possibility of a reconciliation between the spouses, although not as transparent as in the case of Gikonyo and Mumbi. While on their way back home after the farewell party, Margery's increasing awareness of the uncertainty of their future again draws her nearer to her husband. Ironically, when her husband stops the car and lights a cigarette for each of them - a gesture of sharing something with her - it is at the exact spot where she first committed adultery with Van Dyck. The Thompsons' last conversation, however, is ambivalent:

'Perhaps this is not the journey's end,' he said, at last.

'What?'

'We are not yet beaten,' he asserted hoarsely. 'Africa cannot, cannot do without Europe.'

Margery looked up at him, but said nothing (AGOW:144).

Where John's words that they have perhaps not reached the journey's end sound a hopeful note for a happier future for them, his concern with politics shows that his primary interest is still himself and his work. Margery's silence strengthens this assumption.

Although playing perhaps a less important role than Margery, Dr. Lynd's inclusion as a character is thematically significant. Dr Lynd is bluntly introduced as "an ugly white spinster" (AGOW:25), another indication of Ngugi's dismissive lack of sympathy in his portrayal of white females. He completes the unappealing picture by stating: "She was a grey-haired woman with falling flesh on her cheeks and under her eyes ... a solitary being, like a ghost" (AGOW:40). The word *being* strongly reinforces the idea of dehumanization, degrading her to an undefined object. This seemingly derogative reference reminds us of the

principal's allusion to Margaret Cadmore as *it*, thereby denouncing her existence as a human being with a distinct personality.

The earlier rape of Dr Lynd stresses the theme of betrayal because of the involvement of her houseboy who abused her trust and tricked her into opening the door for the initially unknown rapist and his accomplice. Furthermore, it adds to the density of the plot because if later transpires that Lt Koinandu was her houseboy at that stage. Ngugi's careful selection of diction is obvious in that the ruthless fighter, Koinandu, is still haunted by her ghost: "Why then should her ghost shake him so?" (AGOW:185). The inclusion of the rape of a female sheds interesting light on the theme of women and transformation because the real reason for the rape in this instance is Koinandu's wish to retaliate and let Dr Lynd suffer for the injustices caused by change as a result of White colonization and domination. Koinandu's act is thus the direct result of his resentment of a foreign white woman's occupation of such a big house while he himself is living in an "one-roomed shack". In itself rape constitutes the final form of male dominance over women.

Only male characters who exert a direct influence on women and transformation will be included in this brief discussion of the changes in postcolonial Kenya in this novel. As such, a few cursory remarks focusing on Gikonyo and John Thompson will suffice in dealing with the role of men in the discourse of transformation.

Like most of Head's protagonists, Gikonyo is an outsider, an "immigrant" (AGOW:64) in Thabai. However, he soon becomes part of the community, especially because of his skill at carpentry. Throughout the novel, Gikonyo expresses his love for Mumbi by utilizing his skills, either by playing the guitar or by making exquisite wooden articles for her, like the panga and the wooden stool (as noted earlier). The stool in particular assumes a symbolic meaning in that it becomes the central symbol of their eventual reconciliation.

Gikonyo's initial happiness and fulfilment in marriage contrast sharply with the account of Thompson's egocentric courtship of his wife where the emphasis is on the latter's ideals and aspirations. Ngugi never relates any scene of intimacy between the Thompsons: "It was to Margery that he often revealed his ambitions. She was first attracted to him by the sadness and distance in his face. She admired his brilliance. His moral passion gave life a meaning" (AGOW:48). By contrast, Gikonyo's tells Mugo how his marriage has radically changed him:

- 'Before, I was nothing. Now, I was a man. During our short period of married life, Mumbi made me feel *it* was all important Suddenly I discovered ... no, it was as if I had made a covenant with God to be happy. How shall I say it? I took the woman in my arms - do you know a banana stem? I peeled off layer after layer, and I put out my hand, my trembling hand, to reach the Kiana coiled inside' (AGOW:86).

Gikonyo's marital bliss does not, unfortunately, last long. Ngugi implicitly states that soon Wangari and Mumbi notice "a change in the man" when he starts singing songs of defiance with the rebels. Yet, in detention his love for Mumbi sustains him though all the hardship he is subjected to. Like Margaret Cadmore, he finds consolation in practising his artistic skills. He carves the stool for Mumbi. His love for Mumbi even compels him to admit having taken the oath. He does so solely because he has dreamt of Mumbi carrying a torch in the darkness on the night when he nearly breaks down: "He raised his hand and saw her angel's smile and her hands carried a flaming torch that dispelled the darkness in front of her" (AGOW:98).

Interestingly, Ngugi perpetuates his use of religious diction even while focusing on Gikonyo's despair when he finds Mumbi with another man's child: "He knew without being told that the child strapped on Mumbi's back was from another man's seed The years of waiting, the pious hopes, the steps on the pavement, all came rushing into his heart to mock him" (AGOW:99). Gikonyo's resultant severe punishment of Mumbi - namely his continued ignoring of her and the child as well as his refusal to sleep with her - may perhaps be justified by the intensity of his love for her. The mere fact that it is Karanja's child, aggravates

his aggression and may be regarded as a mitigating factor for his harshness towards his wife and her child.

Gikonyo also serves to initiate Ngugi's concern with economic exploitation of peasants by their own people, a theme that will become increasingly important in Ngugi's later fiction. Despite being an essentially good man, Gikonyo falls prey to greed, like so many Blacks who imitate the example of the colonizers. After Uhuru, Gikonyo becomes prosperous as a rather sordid businessman who is highly respected by the new élite. The following passage speaks of Ngugi's own condemnation of this "pattern of creeping corruption" (Roscoe, 1977:186):

God helps those who help themselves, it is said with fingers pointing at a self-made man who has attained wealth and position, forgetting that thousands of others labour and starve, day in, day out, without ever improving their material lot. This moral so readily administered, seemed true for Gikonyo. People in Thabai said: detention camps have taught him to rule himself (AGOW:51).

He makes money by denying his family necessities while using his cash to buy maize and beans cheaply during the harvest which he hoards and later sells at exorbitant prices in times of scarcity. Gikonyo breaks social conventions by entering the market personally, "Brushing sides with women's skirts" (AGOW:68), but gains respect because of his increasing wealth. Here Ngugi expresses his social criticism by employing irony: Gikonyo's exploitation of the peasants is related in the same chapter that records the failure of his effort to secure a loan to buy Burton's farm due to the fraudulent behaviour of an M.P..

The above examination of characterization in *A Grain of Wheat* has identified transformation as the central thematic concern in this novel. Dramé (1990:78) views *A Grain of Wheat* as a novel that "simply marvels at the possibility of a new order. What it will bring no one knows yet, but the general perspective is one of optimism against the background of the present condition". He sees the sowing of the grain as a "major moment of the odyssey". Dramé refers to "collective transformations" in this novel: transformation that affects the lives of the

characters, as well as change altering the environment. Having highlighted transformation in the lives of individual characters up to now, the impact of transformation on the environment will also be examined as it impacts materially on the lives of the characters.

In a sense, change is reflected as a rather negative force. Initially Kinenie Forest was a place where the youngsters experienced mirth and romantic encounters. After the Emergency it becomes a fearsome place, symbolized by being the spot where Kihika is caught and hanged. Similarly, the towns of Thabai and Rung'ei are radically changed by the war, as Gikonyo experiences on his return from detention:

He went out of the hut - how it reeked with smoke - and wandered through the new Thabai village where one street led into another and dust trailed at his heels. The very air choked him; Thabai was just another detention camp; would he ever get out of it? But to go where? He followed the tarmac road which led him into Rung'ei. The Indian shops had been moved into a new center, the tall buildings were made of stones The sewage smelt; it had not been cleaned for a year. He went on and came to the African shops in Rung'ei; they were all closed; tall grass and wild bush clambered around the walls of the rusty buildings and covered the ground that was once the market-place. Most of the buildings had battered walls with large gaping holes, smashed and splintered doors that stared at him - ruins that gave only hints of an earlier civilization (AGOW:102).

Ngugi subsequently refers to the "ghost-ridden Rung'ei". This passage, abounding with images of death and decay, evidences Ngugi's more mature descriptive style. He succeeds in conveying the idea of a wasteland, especially through his careful selection of diction.

Like Bessie Head, Ngugi makes use of myth and symbolism in the evocation of his theme of women and transformation. In Gikuyu mythology, Mumbi is "the repository of traditional culture which is transmitted from generation to generation" (Lebdai, 1987:331). According to Jomo Kenyatta (1965:5-6), Gikuyu and Moombi (creator or moulder) are regarded as the ancestors of the Kikuyu.

With the extension of their family, the need for social organization necessitated certain changes:

After the system of kinship was extended from Mbari ya Moombi to several *mbaris* and *meherega*, it was then thought necessary to bring all these groups under one strong bond of kinship, in which they could act in solidarity and regard one another as members of the big family.

This large group was then formed and given the ancestral collective name of Rorere rwa Mbari ya Moombi, namely, children or people of Moombi or Moombi's tribe (1965:8).

The further addition of the fact that these women acted as the heads of their families or clans until this matriarchal system changed to a patriarchal one is of importance for the theme under discussion: women's yearning to shake off the yoke of male domination and repression. Despite the evidence of a long history of gender rivalry, in *A Grain of Wheat* Ngugi's female protagonists do not want to assume a position of authority or supremacy but merely want to share their husbands' lives and aspirations. Later heroines, such as Wariinga in *Devil on the Cross*, play a much more dominant role in entering the traditionally male professional world. Moreover, Ngugi's psychological subtlety in assigning a certain role to a specific character is evident in the part Mumbi plays in the novel. She does not join the ranks of the fighters, like Wambuku or Njeri, but tries to preserve the unity of her family. In a sense she resembles Wangari in *Devil on the Cross*. Wangari also acts as the guardian of tradition. Lebdai feels that "Ngugi's fascination for the Mumbi women is certain" (1987:331) since this kind of woman features more prominently in his later novels.

In addition to the use of Christian discourse, as discussed earlier, Ngugi makes frequent and striking use of elements of Christian myth throughout the novel. According to Sharma (1978:169) Christian myth "not only constitutes the basic framework of the story and incorporates the author's message but also dominates his use of image and symbol". The major characters - Kihika, Mugo, Gikonyo and Mumbi - all employ Christian concepts to convey their dreams and aspirations.

To conclude this chapter, the critical evaluation of *A Grain of Wheat* which follows will be followed by a comparison of Head's and Ngugi's portrayal of women and transformation in their middle period novels.

A Grain of Wheat definitely demonstrates Ngugi's increasing artistic proficiency. This improvement is especially noticeable in Ngugi's characterization, his manifestation of the theme of change, as well as in his compositional techniques, his register of expressions and his judicious choice of words.

Paradoxically, Ngugi's characterization constitutes simultaneously one of the strengths and one of the weaknesses of the novel. Ngugi's African characters are usually depicted with insight and sensitivity, while the portrayal of the white colonials is less convincing, as Howard (1973:118) states: "Without carping, I think it safe to claim that *A Grain of Wheat* has two major flaws: the first the treatment of the colonials, especially Margery; and the second, the excessive amount of historical detail included in the novel". While partially agreeing with the criticism about the rather negative and unsympathetic portrayal of white characters, a later discussion will negate the validity of criticism against the inclusion of too much historical detail. Lebdaï (1987:303), for instance, endeavours to justify Ngugi's delineation of Kenya's white settlers by remarking that seventy-five years of British colonial rule in Kenya established "a set of fixed relations" between the settlers and the Africans, constructed on a basis of racial domination versus submission. In an early review of the novel, John Povey (1969:67) contradicts the criticism usually levelled at Ngugi's portrayal of white characters. He applauds Ngugi's "underlying tone of moderate humanism", his compassion, and believes that although the Whites are often cruel, Ngugi traces their "moral disintegration in the face of the anticipated violence of Mau Mau ... with understanding". Povey feels that Ngugi "never falls into the cheap stereotypes of white villains and black heroes", as his depiction of Mugo verifies.

Ngugi's female characters, especially Mumbi, are complex and convincing. The strength of Ngugi's characterization rests mainly on the fact that the characters suffer because they are both "guilty and self-aware" (Cook, 1980:100). Jean Zida (1991:62) represents critics who appreciate the universality in the depiction of characters in this novel: "*A Grain of Wheat* becomes gradually a panoramic human drama of all races, with its actors either faithful to or betrayers of oaths and causes, struggling among themselves or against inborn contradictory forces". Significantly, transformation involves all members of the community. Even a character such as Karanja is seriously affected by the war because he becomes a Homeguard, one who turns against his own people. Similarly, the selfish Mugo who endeavours to remain aloof and uninvolved in the struggle is drawn into the action when Kihika takes refuge in Mugo's hut, the deed which leads to Mugo's betrayal of this famous freedom fighter.

Although the dominant theme of a *A Grain of Wheat* is transformation, the novel demonstrates Ngugi's broader world view, including his more universal comprehension of this leading thematic concern when compared to his thematic portrayal in his two earlier novels. In depicting a process of change from colonialism to Independence, through a bloody revolutionary war, Ngugi realistically evaluates the eventual outcome of the struggle. The thoughts, feelings and actions of the characters on the days preceding the Uhuru festivities expose the paradoxical outcome of the struggle: where the peasants have been actively involved in and suffered for the achievement of their right to win back the land from colonial oppression, local politicians now take over the appropriation of land. Ngugi takes up this theme in more detail in his next novel, *Petals of Blood*. This new realism lends greater credibility to Ngugi's work, as Ezekiel Mphahlele correctly states: "The lyricism we find in Ngugi's first two novels disappears in *A Grain of Wheat*" (1974:252).

In an early review of the novel, Derek Elders (1969:52) praises Ngugi's construction of characters who conveniently epitomize the theme of the novel:

This third novel is remarkable for approaching the theme of Uhuru in terms of the minute conflicts that actually make up life. The central characters have a resilience and solidity hitherto lacking; their intimate relationships and inner lives animate and explore the ground plan of the novel with a subtlety and insight altogether admirable. These characters are not postulates in an illustrated debate but people with a recognizable identity as individuals, living their lives and facing their problems in a vividly caught environment [4].

The unity of theme, characterization, plot and setting undeniably endorses a view of Ngugi's artistic improvement in this novel.

Ngugi's technical and stylistic achievement in *A Grain of Wheat* is impressive, as Dramé (1990:82) observes: "Ngugi's concern for precision and harmony appears in the organization of the narrative" as has been mentioned before. This organization, for example, is apparent in the fact that this novel consists of four parts. Moreover, Part One contains three chapters, while the remaining parts each has four chapters, signalling Ngugi's concern with the more detailed structuring of his later novels.

In *A Grain of Wheat* paradox plays a vital role in the composition of Ngugi's multi-dimensional exposition of character and thematic concerns. The author skilfully employs interrelated time sequences by combining the past-present perspective with the present-future point of view. The conscious use of juxtapositioning is also apparent in the author's note that precedes the novel, printed on the page opposite the Biblical reference at the beginning of the first chapter. Ngugi's note stresses the duality of the novel, namely the author's intention to create fiction while simultaneously recounting history [5]:

Although set in contemporary Kenya, all the characters in this book are fictitious. Names like that of Jomo Kenyatta and Waiyaki are unavoidably mentioned as part of the history and institutions of our country. But the situation and the problems are real - sometimes too painfully real for the peasants who fought the British yet who now see that all they fought for being put on one side.

The reference to I Corinthians 15:38, which highlights the necessity for the grain to die in order to be reborn, suggests the natural relationship between life and death. It thus establishes the inevitability of transformation as a universal process, both in nature and in society.

In his well-known *Tasks and Masks* (1981:30) Lewis Nkosi recommends the new approach discernible in African fiction towards the 1970s. Ngugi follows this new trend of projecting the African society as both history and fiction:

If African literature can be said to divide itself according to its two main preoccupations to which I have assigned the classificatory terms 'tasks' and 'masks', the balance has for too long, it seems to me, remained firmly fixed in favour of the 'mask' school; but if we are not to see African society as merely static, or rather as a 'mask' which is perennially being turned and examined in detail by our novelists; if we are also to see African society as a living organism, we surely need the novelist as much as the professional historian to recover for us the essential meaning from the 'supple confusions' of history and to guide us with a firmer hand than we have been accustomed to through history's 'cunning passages'.

Nkosi therefore classifies writers such as Peter Abrahams, Ngugi, Ousmane and Yambo Ouologuem as "fiction writers" who "possess a large historical sense" (1981:31). I cannot, however, go along with Nkosi's assumption that history becomes the true hero of *A Grain of Wheat* since Ngugi's character portrayal remains one of the strengths of this novel.

Nadine Gordimer (1973:27) hails the fact that "none of the protagonists in this novel is marred by the pseudo-nobility" characteristic of some of Ngugi's major characters in his first two novels. She continues by stating: "and yet he succeeds in placing the so-called Mau-Mau movement in the historical, political and sociological context of the African continental revolution".

Lazarus (1992:213) views *A Grain of Wheat* as the watershed between Ngugi's earlier novels with their "messianic and intellectualist field of vision" and his "new politically committed writing", as emerges in his fourth novel, *Petals of Blood*. In

certain respects, nevertheless *A Grain of Wheat* may be regarded as a more satisfying novel than *Petals of Blood*, as the examination of the latter novel in Chapter Four of this thesis will indicate.

In an evaluation of Ngugi's depiction of heroism, Eileen Julien (1980:13) praises Ngugi's aesthetic stance. She regards *A Grain of Wheat* as a "mimetic novel that does not yield to a glum naturalism. Ngugi's fiction is more powerful, his sober vision more haunting because he never abandons his prerogative to seek in one stroke both truth and beauty". In similar vein Ravenscroft acclaims Ngugi's achievement in his approach to his subject matter: "The novel is mature and disturbing because it is sober". It does not glorify his characters. On the contrary, he focuses on human weaknesses of characters during a time of national and personal trauma. Interestingly, in an article published as early as 1967, Eldred Jones (1967:5) already singles out *A Grain of Wheat* as one of the three outstanding African novels published in 1966, calling it "a work of real distinction". Moreover, it "does indeed possess the ambivalence which characterizes serious art" (Malzahn, 1994:20).

ENDNOTES

- 1 Jane Watts (1989:139) justifies what she calls the "fantasy ending" of *Maru*. "Certainly the fantasy ending of *Maru* mirrors the fantasy everyone indulges in real life - seeking alternative endings to humiliating life-experiences". Huma Ibrahim (1988:76) states that "Margaret's story is similar to the Cinderella story" but detects a purpose in Bessie Head's use of the fairy tale genre: it serves "the specific purpose of aiding an understanding of the subject of racism and exile without any complicated political and historical explanations which would only obscure the purpose of the author" (1988:75). Finally, Daniel Gover (1990:114) also notes the fairy tale elements in Bessie Head's first two novels, stating that the author "depicts love as a magical force from a fairy tale that overcomes insurmountable obstacles and unites people of different classes and

cultures". This "dream pattern of love" is, however, "abruptly shattered" in *A Question of Power*, as a study of Head's final novel in Chapter Four of this thesis will attempt to indicate.

- 2 See "Structures of Meaning in the Novels of Bessie Head" for a detailed discussion of the significance of Maru's name, as well as for more information about the symbolism attached to Head's characters in both *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *A Question of Power*.
- 3 In his address to the Fifth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa at Nairobi on 12 March 1970 Ngugi categorically denied being a Christian: "I am not a man of the Church. I am not even a Christian" (*Homecoming*; 1972:31).
- 4 It is important to note that Elders (1969:53) refers only to Ngugi's *central characters*, because she simultaneously criticizes Ngugi's rendering of the European characters. She remarks, for instance, that Thompson "is allowed none of the rounded and circumspect sympathy shown to the African". Moreover, he objects to the "facile glibness" of Thompson's depiction.
- 5 In an early review of *A Grain of Wheat*, John Reed (1968:136) saw Ngugi's simultaneous portrayal of history and fiction as a weakness in the novel: "The book is rich, but in a way weakened by its richness. It attempts two things together which really work against each other: the complicated external story with many characters, which gives an image of a whole epoch and situation; and the concentrated unfolding of a single state of mind, here, Mugo's guilt".

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DISCOURSE OF TRANSFORMATION IN HEAD'S LAST AND NGUGI'S LATER NOVELS

A study of the discourse of the processes of change and the conditions of transformation emanating from these changes in the novels under discussion in this chapter displays the inherent differences in the development of these two writers[1]. While an examination of their middle period novels has indicated that their works have started manifesting divergent directions, the analyses of these particular novels clearly reveal the dissimilarities in both their approach to and delineation of the theme of women in a changing environment. Head's *A Question of Power* becomes virtually purely autobiographical writing, while Ngugi's last three novels speak far more unequivocally of his Marxist aspirations for a transformed Kenya.

A brief discussion of *The Cardinals* (published posthumously in 1993) will precede an exploration of the theme of women and transformation in Head's final novel, *A Question of Power*. I have deliberately delayed discussing *The Cardinals* earlier in my thesis, since the publication of this novella, Head's first long piece of writing, and the only one to have been composed in South Africa, sheds interesting light on the indisputable autobiographical nature of Head's most personal novel, *A Question of Power*, which may be termed "a fictionalized account of the author's own life" (Uledi-Kamanga, 1987:25). This study will reveal that Head's work is "peculiarly postcolonial" (Maithufi, 1993:15) in the sense that Head relocates the "sign of the marginal ... as site of the struggle" (1993:15).

Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* (1977) appeared ten years after its predecessor, *A Grain of Wheat*. Both *Petals of Blood* and Ngugi's penultimate novel, *Devil on the Cross* (1982), differ radically from his first three novels in that they are overtly political. *Matigari* (1986), Ngugi's most recent novel, was regarded as so subversive that it was banned in Kenya in 1987, thereby joining its author in exile.

4.1 BESSIE HEAD'S FINAL NOVEL

4.1.1 *A Question of Power (1973)*

The Cardinals with Meditations and Short Stories foreshadows important aspects characteristic of Head's last novel. Firstly, it illuminates Head's conception of writing and the role of female writers in South Africa. Secondly, it demonstrates the seriousness with which Head approached her literary career from the outset. Thirdly, it initiates the autobiographical nature Head's work increasingly assumes which culminates in the composition of *A Question of Power*. In the last instance, it clearly heralds Head's concern with the discourse of women and transformation, and it therefore of importance in a discussion of the theme under consideration.

The title of this novella singles out change as its most important thematic discourse. In its astrological sense, the term *cardinals* refers to those who serve as the base or foundation for change. The exposure of existing ills in District Six, the notorious slum area in the Cape Peninsula, the results of the injustices caused by the Immorality Act, male chauvinism and recurrent references to incest combine to reveal the young Bessie Head's deepfelt need for radical changes in the judicial and social systems in apartheid South Africa.

The construct of the novella resembles much of Bessie Head's own life, as Daymond writes in her Introduction to *The Cardinals* (1993:x):

What we can now see in *The Cardinals* is how, from the beginning, she worked to transmute this personal pain and fear into larger, impersonal forms of expression. She strove to make space in the material which came to her from her own life for what she saw and understood from other lives around her.

The Cardinals relates how Mouse (originally called Charlotte, later Miriam), the offspring of a coloured fisherman and a white woman, leads a life of poverty and deprivation after being adopted by a coloured family. She eventually succeeds in landing a job on *African Beat - The Paper of the People*. Mouse, however, finds the job rather taxing because of her innate shyness and the cynical approach of most of her male

colleagues. She later moves in with the sneering, but essentially intense, idealistic reporter and dreamer, Johnny, who is in love with her. Ironically, Johnny is her father, a fact unknown to either of them.

Although political and social ills abound in the novella, its primary concern, which should by implication be faced, addressed and changed, is incest. Among the many instances of incest are Mouse's first foster-father's unsuccessful attempt to molest her, Johnny's illicit love for his older sister and his efforts at courting his daughter Mouse, although he is unaware of the true nature of their relationship. Daymond (1993:xiii) comments on Bessie Head's choice of subject matter:

In *The Cardinals* she did, however, take the risk of writing her profoundest angers in non-protest form. A sense of what she was risking as well as the anger she felt can be seen in her choice of an almost forbidden subject, incest, for her novella. The unwittingly incestuous love which grows between Mouse and Johnny can be read as dramatising and defining her political anger - when set against the trivialising, power-serving prohibitions of the Immorality Act, the taboo on incest is a serious matter. The forbidden nature of such love also dramatises the fear Bessie Head must have felt at releasing into her writing the angers which stemmed from her own early suffering.

Interestingly, this early work by Bessie Head already foreshadows her later searing use of irony. In *The Cardinals* it operates within the plot structure in the re-rendering of the Oedipal myth. At times Head also verbalizes her irony, as the following account of Johnny's scorn for the unjust South African social system shows:

Society ... would condemn me as unspeakable filth for making love to my own sister. A man like that, it would say, would stop at nothing. He'd even make love to his own daughter. All I can say to society is that it's just as well I have no daughter. I'd probably make love to her too (TC:70).

He then tells Mouse that his sister was forced to be a prostitute from the age of ten to earn money to provide for the family: "She never complained, but at night she used to come and lie next to me and cry. One night she was stabbed to death. I think I would have never forgiven myself if I had withheld the kind of love she wanted from me". He thus scorns societal norms, saying that all the hardship he has endured "makes me not

care one hell about the laws and rules of society. They are made by men and women who know nothing about suffering" (TC:70).

Head minces no words when she writes about the sexual exploitation of women, as the following passage shows. It relates the Fish and Chips shop assistant Sammy's sexual harassment of women:

[Women's] bodies fascinated him. They were so different from his. The way they reacted to him too provoked, excited and intrigued him. He just had to look at them and they would stammer and blush. Sometimes if he got a girl alone at night on a dark street-corner he would trap her up against a wall just so that he could feel the soft and surprizing curves of her body. It would make him fall into a dizzy ecstasy (TC:40).

Two episodes amply illustrate the grotesque injustice of the Immorality Act. In the first place Head relates the court appearance of a twenty-year old Norwegian sailor who stands trial for having contravened this act. This young man has no idea why he is thrown into jail, as the court interpreter explains to the magistrate: "The accused says that he has not been in a prison before. It has upset him immensely. He cannot understand why he was arrested. He was only looking for a bit of fun" (TC:69). PK, the editor of *Post*, is also charged under this notorious act but the case is withdrawn when the real facts emerge in court: he was drunk and a sixteen-year old coloured girl led him to a nearby bench. Unfortunately a policeman on patrol saw the girl with "her brown arm around a so-called White man" (TC:125) and took him to jail where he alleges he "was kicked around by the cops. They thought I was a Jew".

Being so intensely aware of the injustices of the South African scene, Bessie Head fled to Botswana, since she felt the impossibility of writing in a country whose laws caused such fear and hatred, thereby restricting literary creativity. There is a misconception that her settling as an exile in Botswana was the direct result of her own involvement in politics, but this is refuted by fact. While in South Africa, her writing does reflect her intense opposition to political oppression, but she herself wrote to Patrick Cullinan from Botswana that it's "no longer South Africa and protest writing. It's myself and myself

alone that I have to present" (Daymond, 1993:xii). This struggle to come to terms with herself and finding her true being forms the central discourse of *A Question of Power*.

Bessie Head's last novel, *A Question of Power*, is her most complex and intense work. It signals the crisis in the author's personal life in that her alienation from traditional African society in Botswana induces in her an inward-turning of mind, a constant soul-searching. In his anthologized article "Bessie Head: A Question of Power and Identity", Charles Sarvan (1987:82) calls this novel "a strongly autobiographical work". The overtly personal nature of the novel is evident even in the writer's assigning her own name, Elizabeth (of which Bessie is an abbreviation) to the protagonist. Much of the subject matter of the novel mirrors Bessie Head's external situation: her flight from South Africa with her young son, her struggle against poverty and her inability to retain her teaching post. The novel simultaneously externalizes and verbalizes her feeling of being an outcast and her resultant difficulty in trusting and relating to people. Bessie Head herself has commented on her personal nature in determining the technical quality and thematic concerns of this novel:

In *A Question of Power* the work-out is ... subtle - the whole process of break-down and destruction is outlined there. A person in the grip of such a process has very little to say. I felt I had overcome that tendency in me to moral preachiness. The question is left so open. There is a line that forms the title of the book - if the things of the soul are really a question of power then anyone in possession of power of the spirit could be Lucifer. That is, I might in my essence then symbolize Satan. I'd lost, in *A Question of Power*, the certainty of my own goodness. The novel was written under pressure. I was alarmed. If you feel that you have moved into another world where no human decencies are observed and basically you are a normal, decent human being, there is this high alarm.... I cannot help feeling that a type of book like mine has so much validity because it comes from Southern Africa. The whole world is aware that the situation here is so wry. My book has been shaped in such an abnormal way and with such a fierce work-out of good and evil where goodness itself can be questioned to show how fallible [it is] (Marquard, 1978/1979:53).

This statement of Head's refutes Achufusi's (1991:220) view of Bessie Head's rendering of colonial contact and society in transition as "so subdued ... that a reader hardly notices the muted evidence of contact and conflict between indigenous African and alien European cultures". Achufusi definitely misses Head's social criticism by stating that in

When Rain Clouds Gather and *A Question of Power* the reader will detect that this "harmonizing tendency is part of Head's essentially idealistic vision of society and social relationships" (1991:220). Transformation is at the core of the novel's main discourse, albeit in a different guise from that of *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Maru*. Where agricultural change characterized the exposition of the theme of change in *When Rain Clouds Gather* and the conversion from racial and sexist subjection to freedom from these forms of bondage constructed the narrative of *Maru*, Head's last novel depicts Elizabeth's struggle between the poles of sanity and insanity. In this work transformation may thus be seen as a psychological journey. It is evident that *A Question of Power*, in spite of all its emphasis on individual breakdown and recovery, expressed in terms of a frightening journey into psychic regions, tackles the thematic concerns of the first two novels, but from a totally different perspective. Elizabeth's journey encompasses a finding of herself as a Coloured from South Africa, as well as a coming to terms with her new country Botswana, and its people. As in the case of the earlier two novels, this probing and wrestling with both her physical and spiritual environment assumes a universal character. In this process of re-interpreting her own life story, Elizabeth is also tackling the question of universal good and evil.

A Question of Power reveals Head's keen awareness of the psychological and philosophical impact of racism and sexism on the South African woman in particular and women in general. Head constructs her narrative by relating how Elizabeth leaves South Africa with her young son because of the country's double standards: fidelity for women and promiscuity for men. In Botswana she suffers from frightening hallucinations in which the two male protagonists, Sello and Dan, figure prominently - Sello, a crop farmer and cattle breeder, serves as the symbol of love and compassion, his appeal is spiritual and Elizabeth associates him with the power of creative imagination, while Dan, one of the few black cattle millionaires in the country, epitomizes destructive male egotism. As a result, Elizabeth identifies him with power which is direct and uncompromising.

As a marginalized individual Elizabeth suffers, feeling neither assimilated by the black or the white community. Elizabeth's plight is worsened by her not only being the product of

two racial groups and two social classes, but also a representative of "an urban syncretic culture which has moved away from the traditional ways" (Johnson, 1985:198). Her inner turmoil leads to two nervous breakdowns, but her work on a communal garden project helps her regain her mental stability and enables her to reach out to other people. As such, the novel concludes this agonized mental journey on a rather positive note.

The construction of a narrative of change in which a single female character dominates the scene, substantiates the increasing importance of women in Bessie Head's canon. Apart from centring the discourse of transformation on Elizabeth, Head depicts two opposing kinds of female characters: those who aid Elizabeth on the road towards acquiring a trust in manhood and those who threaten her fragile hold on sanity. Kenosi and Birgitte serve as examples of women who positively influence Elizabeth's mental growth, while Camilla reminds Elizabeth of Whites in South Africa who tormented and dehumanized her, such as the white principal of the mission school.

Although the novel focuses on Elizabeth's mental struggle, viewed as "a trajectory of paranoid schizophrenia, observed from within" (Evasdaughter, 1989:74), it is divided into two sections according to the dominant male protagonist in each: Sello and Dan.

The novel starts with a description of Sello, but the second paragraph already emphasizes his mental kinship with Elizabeth:

The man's name was Sello. A woman in the village of Motabeng paralleled his inner development. Most of what applied to Sello applied to her, because they were twin souls with closely-linked destinies and the same capacity to submerge other preoccupations in a pursuit after the things of the soul. It was an insane pursuit this time (AQOP:11-12).

The same paragraph introduces Dan. Bessie Head immediately exposes the thematic concerns of the novel by referring to madness and that the "three of them shared the strange journey into hell" (AQOP:12).

The introduction of the novel thus exposes the complexity of the work because there are no clear demarcations between Elizabeth's spells of sanity and insanity, in the words of Rosemarie Townsend (1993:113): "the reader is taken with her on the terrifying rollercoaster of emotion and occasionally unreality, or should one say, alternative reality". Furthermore, Head also makes use of shifting chronology which intensifies the ambivalence of the novel.

The novel covers the period of about three years in Elizabeth's life when she experiences these two nervous breakdowns. She loses her teaching post when she loses control over herself in a public office and screams abuse at the people around her. She is hospitalized for a short period after which she joins the Motabeng Secondary Project as a volunteer gardener. However, her fantasies and nightmares increase until she is placed in an asylum for seven months where she contemplates committing suicide and infanticide. According to Head it was "in Botswana where, mentally, the normal and the abnormal blended completely in Elizabeth's mind" (AQOP:15).

While being hospitalized, Head accompanies the reader on a journey into Elizabeth's past, clearly indicating that Elizabeth's problems are the result of her being a Coloured from South Africa. With scathing irony Head relates how the principal of the mission school grinds Elizabeth about her mother's liaison with a Black and her mother's resultant "madness":

The principal of the mission school was a tall, thin, gaunt, incredibly cruel woman. She was the last, possibly, of the kind who had heard 'the call' from Jesus and come out to save the heathen. Their calls seemed to make them very bitter at the end of it, and their professed love for Jesus never awakened love and compassion in their hearts (AQOP:16).

The principal instils in her pupil the seeds of fearing insanity when she bluntly enlightens the thirteen-year old Elizabeth about her past: "If you're not careful you'll get insane like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to lock her up, as she was having a child by the stable boy, who was a native" (AQOP:16).

Even the other pupils become aware of the double standards in Elizabeth's treatment: "The other children soon noticed something unusual about Elizabeth's isolation periods. They could fight and scratch and bite each other, but if she did likewise she was locked up". As a result, they also maltreat her: "They took to kicking at her with deliberate malice as she sat in a corner reading a book. None of the prefects would listen to her side of the story" (AQOP:16). Her persecution at school results in her later inability to lead a normal adult life of trust and confidence.

Bessie Head extends her social criticism by calling South Africa "a country where people were not people at all" (AQOP:17). Elizabeth also "lived the back-breaking life of all black people in South Africa. It was like living with permanent nervous tension, because you did not know why white people there had to go out of their way to hate you or loathe you" (AQOP:19). Being a Coloured in South Africa stigmatized Elizabeth even further, "in South Africa she had been rigidly classified Coloured. There was no escape from it to the simple joy of being a human being with a personality They were races, not people" (AQOP:44).

Elizabeth finds no consolation in her overhasty marriage to a gangster. Her twisted views about sex and men are also the result of her having been a South African Coloured. Head bluntly states that apartheid robs men of their manhood: "How can a man be a man if he is called boy?" (AQOP:45). Head reveals another aberration from the generally accepted norms when ascribing the widespread and open homosexuality among coloured men to the suppression of their masculinity as another consequence of the unjust social system:

She had lived for a time in a part of South Africa where nearly all the Coloured men were homosexuals and openly paraded down the street dressed in women's clothes. They tied turbans round their heads, wore lipstick, fluttered their eyes and hands and talked in high, falsetto voices. It was so widespread, so common to so many men in this town that they felt no shame at all. They and people in general accepted it as a disease one had to live with (AQOP:44-45).

As a Coloured, Elizabeth finds herself in a racial no-man's land even in Botswana where the majority of European volunteers fail to "see the shades and shadows of life on black

people's faces" (AQOP:82). She feels alienated in the largely tribal village of Motabeng, as she reflects: "Definitely as far as Botswana society was concerned ... she was an out-and-out outsider and would never be in on *their* things" (AQOP:26). The ambivalence of Elizabeth's position is externalized when she refuses to assist the other inmates in keeping the hospital clean. She does so, claiming that she is "not an African" (AQOP:181).

Elizabeth's work in the school garden, however, helps her to regain her mental stability and to reach out to other people:

It is impossible to become a vegetable gardener without at the same time coming into contact with the wonderful strangeness of human nature. Every man and woman is, in some way, an amateur gardener at heart and vegetables are really the central part of the daily diet (AQOP:72).

Elizabeth's nickname "Cape Gooseberry" becomes a symbol of both her successful resettlement in Motabeng and of the progressiveness of the multi-national Motabeng community who assimilate her into their lives: "The work had a melody like that - a complete stranger like the Cape Gooseberry settled down and became a part of the village life of Motabeng" (AQOP:42). As such, the final part of the novel exceeds the regaining of individual integrity or of individual integration into a new community. It heralds the liberation of the woman and the artist. Elizabeth's final words signify female tenderness and reflect her acceptance of being one of the people of her new country:

It was quite the opposite in Africa. There was no direct push against those rigid, false social systems of class and caste. She had fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man, because when a people wanted everyone to be ordinary it was just another way of saying man loved man. As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging (AQOP:206).

She also finds spiritual consolation when she realizes that "There is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet" (AQOP:206). She feels healed: "A peaceful, meditative privacy settled on her mind. Her painful, broken nerve-ends quietly knit together"(AQOP:206). The creation of Kenosi (literally meaning "I am alone" in Setswana), a woman friend of Elizabeth's who works with her in the garden, exhibits

Head's frequent use of contrasts in the construction of her discourse. Kenosi is the direct antithesis of the white principal in South Africa: where the principal primarily caused Elizabeth's ostracism and non-acceptance, Kenosi plays a redemptive role because she supports and boosts Elizabeth, in the words of Nancy Bazin (1990:54):

On a philosophical level, Elizabeth is saved from permanent madness by her faith in a value system different from Dan's and Sello's and by a different concept of God. In practice, she is saved by working in a garden with a woman friend Kenosi, who admires and respects her. Her work relationship with this woman provides her with a feminist model. Ultimately, Elizabeth rejects the patriarchal mode of thinking and behaving in favour of a feminist mode of thinking and behaving.

Bazin's use of the word *feminist* is significant, because it underscores Showalter's earlier remark that there is no absolute dividing line between the concepts of *feminine*, *feminist* and *female*. Resultantly, aspects of all three of these concepts may appear in the work of a writer. It is, nevertheless, clear that Head portrays overwhelmingly strong indications of being a female writer, a writer revealing her quest for womanism.

Kenosi's quiet strength and determination support Elizabeth in her struggle against her own nihilism: "Elizabeth clung to the woman. There seemed to be no other justification for her continued existence, so near to death was she" (AQOP:89). Kenosi's "knowingness and grasp of life" (AQOP:90) have a positive influence on Elizabeth in her agonized struggle to regain a hold on her own life. The mere fact that Kenosi needs her, instils in Elizabeth an affirmation of a belief in the meaningfulness of life. Kenosi beseeches Elizabeth never to leave her: "You must never leave the garden ... I cannot work without you" (AQOP:142). Moreover, Kenosi's acceptance of Elizabeth as an equal initiates a belief in the latter that she is worthy of egalitarian relationships, a major step in combatting her lack of self-esteem: their "work-relationship had been established on the solid respect of one work partner for another" (AQOP:160). In a sense Kenosi can be equated to Dikeledi in *Maru*, who also brings Margaret to the final realization of her equality with her friend and by extension, with her fellow human beings. In this respect Dikeledi and Kenosi both contribute towards the spiritual growth of their respective female protagonists in the two novels in which they function.

Birgitte, another white female, differs radically from her counterparts in the novel, namely the principal and Camilla, who will be discussed below. Birgitte resembles Elizabeth's vulnerability and fear of people, as Camilla tells Elizabeth: "Don't worry about Birgitte. She's very shy and frightened of people" (AQOP:80). When Camilla addresses her, Birgitte "abruptly withdrew into her own shell" (AQOP:80). Her appearance reinforces her demure nature: "She was so blonde that her hair was snow-white. The short-cropped hair fell like a shaft of silk across her face as she turned her head and hid her face from view" (AQOP:80).

Elizabeth senses a kinship of sadness and suffering between herself and Birgitte: Elizabeth is struck by "the anguished face of the blonde girl, full of shadows as though she secretly endured an intolerable sorrow". In spite of her softness, Birgitte has a "proud, serious face" (AQOP:81) and believes in living according to a noble code, as she tells Elizabeth: "I make all my decisions in a split second And I know they're all noble". Like Elizabeth, she contemplates the meaning of life, though in a much less agonized way: "Life is such a gentle, treasured thing. I learn about it every minute. I think about it so deeply" (AQOP:81). Although Elizabeth rejoices in Birgitte's being so "sensitively attuned ... to the feelings" (AQOP:81), there is something too good and noble in Head's construction of this white woman. Thematically, however, Elizabeth's identification with a white female who also suffers is of vital importance. In the first instance, it indicates Elizabeth's realization that she cannot condemn all Whites. As such, it reveals her gradual negation of her hatred for all Whites, a major step in the direction of coming to terms with some of her prejudices stemming from her unhappy South African past. Secondly, Birgitte's confession to Elizabeth that some of her friends ignored her on a visit back home in Europe after having taught in Algeria demonstrates the universality of racism.

Camilla, who assists the class instructor Gunner in the agricultural project, is the epitome of a white female racist. Her appearance in the garden and ensuing contact with Elizabeth cause the latter's agony about racism to resurface. Bessie Head's picture

of this domineering, overbearing woman exhibits the author's ingrained fear of white oppression.

Camilla's first entrance totally destroys the peacefulness of the garden: "There was a sudden, jarring interruption from the gate. A woman's high, shrill voice swept over the garden. It was Camilla" (AQOP:74). Head openly articulates the destructive quality of this kind of white female: "Her voice had an insistent command to it, yet it was no command of life. It was a scatter-brained assertion of self-importance" (AQOP:75). Camilla's contemptuous treatment of all characters, including the men working in the garden, reduces them to mere objects, reminiscent of Bessie Head's criticism of homosexuality in South Africa in *The Cardinals*. Here Elizabeth expresses the feelings of the workers caused by Camilla's high-handed approach towards Blacks:

All of a sudden, the vegetable garden was the most miserable place on earth. The students had simply become humiliated little boys shoved around by a hysterical white woman who never saw black people as people but as objects of permanent idiocy. She could not even begin to see the extreme delicacy and precariousness of the experiment, that they were young men who had had no future and were suddenly being given one, and that they took Eugene's offer very seriously (AQOP:76).

This ferocious female has a devastating effect on Elizabeth, who immediately concludes that "I loathe her". Head's comment on Camilla's insistence on driving Elizabeth home is ironic: "After all, she was here to help the natives and she couldn't miss this wonderful opportunity" (AQOP:77). Head adroitly links Elizabeth's reaction to Camilla by employing the diction associated with a garden: "She had been wilting under the strain of Camilla's company" (AQOP:77).

The male characters in *A Question of Power* are mainly seen through Elizabeth's distorted and turbulent mind. They are, therefore, ambivalent. The density in fathoming the real nature of especially Sello and Dan is intensified by Elizabeth's disturbed view of men and their sexuality, a part of her mental retention of her South African past. As a result, Sello and Dan are "not the real human characters of conventional literature, rather they are aspects of Elizabeth's mind, concretized in her fertile imagination" (Pearse, 1983:88). Head once again makes use of contrast in delineating these two

men as the embodiments of two opposite poles of Elizabeth's subconscious or unconscious mind. In the words of Pearse: "These ghoulis characters, visible only to Elizabeth, are the personified equivalent of her inner being; the subconscious, and the unconscious" (1983:88). Sello represents the part of Elizabeth which wants to believe in goodness, while Dan shares with her the part of her unconscious which battles against the seemingly overwhelming evil forces intent on destroying her.

Head's male figures do not, however, all exert a destructive influence on her. The white doctor, for example, plays a mammoth role in guiding Elizabeth on her journey towards recovery. Similarly, the white South African philanthropist, Eugene, who draws her into the local self-help scheme, contributes to her eventual recovery. While her final recovery is largely the result of her own willpower, her responsibility towards her son encourages and directs her on her transformational odyssey.

Although the structure of *A Question of Power* is based on the events centring on Elizabeth's two mental breakdowns, Sello and Dan determine the course of events of this novel, as its division into the two sections indicates.

The novel opens with a description of Sello, stressing his affirmative qualities, his monk-like disposition: "It seemed almost incidental that he was African. So vast had his inner perceptions grown over the years that he preferred an identification with mankind to an identification with a particular environment" (AQOP:11). Head continues by stressing his spiritual freedom: his having "acquired the kind of humility which made him feel, within, totally unimportant, totally free from his own personal poisons - pride and arrogance and egoism of the soul" (AQOP:11). He is filled with "a quiet and permanent joy" and radiates love, which he views as "freedom of heart" (AQOP:11).

Elizabeth's quest starts after a conversation with her subconscious Sello, who beseeches her to probe into her soul until she comes to terms with the real nature of her disturbance. He remarks of his own earlier psychological struggle: "Everything was evil until I broke down and cried. It is when you cry, in the blackest hour of despair, that you stumble on a source of goodness" (AQOP:34). Unfortunately, the benign side of

Sello in which the redemptive figure of Buddha plays a vital role, soon becomes malignant when he taunts her by conjuring up images of his wife, Medusa. Like the Medusa in Greek mythology, who can only be confronted in a mirror, Elizabeth's Medusa is undoubtedly a story the former tells herself about herself. However, Sello and Medusa conspire to reinforce Elizabeth's fear of homosexuality. Moreover, they harp on the theme of her social inadequacy.

Dan, the cattle millionaire, has a profounder evil influence on Elizabeth:

When Elizabeth looked back she could see that the whole story had its beginnings with Sello. The course and direction of it did not remain in his hands for long. It was taken over by Dan, first as a subtle, unseen shadow in the background, later as a wild display of wreckage and destruction (AQOP:13).

Dan's destructive power lies in his ability to deceive Elizabeth. Where Sello soon reveals open hostility towards Elizabeth, Dan vows to love and protect Elizabeth. He thus manipulates her vulnerability, her feelings of being lost, lonely and dehumanized. Dan reminds Elizabeth of various forms of deviant sexual behaviour, such as the harassment of women, child molestation and rape, homosexuality, bestiality, incest and death. The crudeness with which Bessie Head relates Dan's sexual boasting may be indicative of the writer's own disillusionment with love. She writes: "He had been standing in front of her, his pants down as usual, flaying his powerful penis in the air" (AQOP:12-13). He then boasts of his sexual virility, contrasting it to Elizabeth's lack of sexuality: "Look, I'm going to show you how I sleep with B ... She has a womb I can't forget. When I go with a woman I go for one hour. You can't do that. You haven't got a vagina" (AQOP:13). Dan frequently mocks Elizabeth with his seventy-one good time girls. His references to her sexual depravity are devastating, landing her on "unvolcanic ground" (AQOP:13). Because Elizabeth cannot share his view of love as mere sexual gratification, she increasingly isolates herself from human contact. Dan thus succeeds in intensifying her insecurity and loneliness.

After her release from hospital, Elizabeth comprehends Dan's destructive power over her. Head employs a couple of brief, parallel sentences to reinforce Dan's calculated viciousness by exposing Elizabeth's remembrance of Dan's entrance into her life:

One moment she had sat lost in brooding reflection on all the enigmas of the soul, quietly mending the raw ends of her shattered nervous system, the next a terrible clamour engulfed her. Only on thinking back did she realize that it was the clamour of a man laughing his pissing head off. He had everything arranged in advance. He knew exactly what he wanted. He knew exactly who was going to die and how he was going to pick up the thirty pieces of silver at the end of the job (AQOP:103).

Dan attacks Elizabeth on two grounds: sexism and cruelty. Both these aspects are terrifying to Elizabeth because they represent elements of African culture, Dan's "power of his projection of his own personality as African" (AQOP:137). Elizabeth muses that "the social defects of Africa are, first, the African man's loose, carefree sexuality; it hasn't the stopgaps of love and tenderness and personal romantic treasuring of women" (AQOP:137). She singles out as the second social defect "a form of cruelty, really spite, that seems to have its origins in witchcraft practices" (AQOP:137). To her this is a "sustained pressure of mental torture that reduces its victim to a permanent state of terror", that does not cease before its victim becomes "stark, raving mad".

Head exposes the innate confused nature of every human being as a mixture of good and evil by letting Dan profess that he is essentially a monk: "In my soul I am the monk" (AQOP:115). This combination of good and evil in a character reminds one of Greene's superb juxtapositioning of the Whisky Priest and the Lieutenant in *The Power and the Glory*. Greene depicts the degraded Priest as worthy of salvation, but the ascetic Lieutenant cannot believe and is in consequence excluded from God's grace[2]. Head's revelation of an awareness of the existence of both good and evil in human beings may also reveal her growing understanding - and eventual acceptance of - the complexity of human beings, another indication of her spiritual growth.

Bessie Head relies heavily, and with considerable skill, on various stylistic devices to convey her intricate thematic concerns to the reader.

Of primary importance in this respect is her method of rendering madness through a fictional postcolonial narrative discourse. In this novel all relationships between people - good or evil, natural or perverse, real or fictional, sane or insane - are mediated by

narrative. Although the discourse of the outward circumstances of apartheid and racism shapes these narratives, they are more complex than simple reflections. Head uses narratives to construct a discourse of domination, like those of Sello, Dan and the school principal's story of Elizabeth's mother's insanity, but also to establish the kind of communication of healing Elizabeth eventually achieves in the garden project. The concentration on narrative implies that the most important damage inflicted by apartheid and racism is fictional, because they are visions created by Elizabeth's own schizophrenic personality. By contrast, fiction plays a part in Elizabeth's healing process, because fictional narratives of oppression and distortion are counteracted in her mind by narratives of goodness and benignity, such as expressed by the white doctor and Kenosi. Like quite a number of African novels, *A Question of Power* is structured on an alternation of narratives and counter-narratives.

Myth, allegory and symbolism are of prime importance in the construction of Elizabeth's anguished mental state because they serve to unify the seemingly loose threads in the novel. The novel functions on two levels: the personal and the universal. In reiterating Elizabeth's quest to be liberated from her own suffering caused by prejudice and oppression, the writer extends her discourse to include the oppression of a whole society. Head thereby extends Elizabeth's search for a guiding philosophy to give meaning to her own life to that of a society attempting to define its goals. Consequently, the magnitude of the discourse of transformation in this novel exceeds the scope of Head's earlier novels. Head succeeds in expressing this wider quest by making use of symbolic paradigms in African, Eastern and Western mythologies, coupled with psychological, philosophical and religious concepts and symbols.

The mythical references in the novel centre on man's attempts to acquire self-knowledge and control. The mythical nature of the novel is evident in Head's using as its epigraph a part of D.H. Lawrence's poem, *God*:

Only man can fall from God
Only man.
That awful and sickening endless, sinking
sinking through the slow, corruptive
levels of disintegrative knowledge ...

the awful katabolism into the abyss!

Head masterfully implements allegorical figures to deconstruct the myth of man's fall from and return to God[3], in other words the myth of polarity. In this respect, Sello and Medusa together with Dan may be viewed as allegorical figures who represent the polarities of good and evil accompanying Elizabeth on her nightmarish journey towards and out of her mental breakdown. The *disintegrative knowledge* that Head refers to may indicate Elizabeth's clinging to absolutes which cause her rigidity, an attitude that prevents her from finding her place in society, as well as in acquiring inner tranquillity to cope with life as such. Linda Beard (1979:268) postulates: "The fundamental absolute to be dismantled ... is the myth of polarity". In an allegorical sense Sello and Medusa destroy Elizabeth's illusions, while Dan tries to annihilate her.

Head frequently uses dreams, imaginings and phantasmagoric musing in which myth and allegory merge, in her construction of the novel's thematic concern of transformation. Elizabeth's nightmares may be viewed as disturbances stemming from her troubled past as a coloured woman in a predominantly black African community. Moreover, she mixed mainly with Indians while still in South Africa. Although people and events are distorted in Elizabeth's dreams or hallucinations, Sello and Dan dominate her dreamworld. The Sello figure enters into Elizabeth's confused world three months after her arrival in Motabeng. She becomes aware of a male figure entering her bedroom and sitting on her bed, but is uncertain whether he is part of reality or of her imagination when she is dosing in. Sello's entrance into her life marks a climactic moment in the novel, because "after that the dividing line between dream perceptions and waking reality was to become confused" (AQOP:22). After several visits to her dreamworld, she creates a visual image of him. His appearance manifests to her the impression of one who has also wrestled with life:

He wore the soft, white flowing robes of a monk, but in a peculiar fashion, with his shoulders slightly hunched forward, as though it were a prison garment. He stared straight at Elizabeth in a friendly way and said in a voice of quiet affection: 'My friend' (AQOP:22).

This passage expresses the polarity inherent in life in the juxtapositioning of the soft, flowing robes of a monk with a prison garment. Elizabeth's confusion is apparent in that she sees Sello in different roles, namely as an ordinary man living in Motabeng and simultaneously as a celestial being: "He looked like a man she had seen about the village of Motabeng who drove a green truck, but the name she associated in her mind with the monk-robed man was that of an almost universally adored God" (AQOP:23). At times she views him as an ordinary man in a brown suit but at others he appears as a Buddha figure, signifying the great teacher who leads her to the "Buddhist path, often known as "The Middle Way" (Campbell, 1993:65). Sello even appears as an Asian who expounds Gandhian ideas of tolerance and respect. His multi-dimensional appearances add to Elizabeth's inherent insecurity, because they strengthen her awareness of the duality in her own personality.

In her dreams, Elizabeth sees Dan as representing unlimited power. He appears as the popular nationalist leader who does not humble himself in any way. He invites Elizabeth to a heaven of love that is exclusive:

There was a heaven there where the light had shaded down to a deep midnight blue. A man and a woman stood in it, wrapped in an eternal embrace. There were symbols of their love There was nothing else, no people, no sharing. It was shut-in and exclusive, a height of heights known only to the two eternal lovers (AQOP:108).

Furthermore, his presenting Elizabeth with his card containing the inscription "Directorship since 1910" (AQOP:108) may refer to the declaration of the Union of South Africa. The unification of South Africa deprived Coloureds of their voting rights, thereby establishing a common cause of protest between Blacks and Coloureds. Dan thus cunningly creates a bond between him and Elizabeth, which enables him to increase her sensitivity about being a Coloured. However, only while being in the process of recuperating, does Elizabeth become aware of Dan's cruelty and unscrupulous ways of manipulating people:

A persistent theme was that she was not genuinely African; he had to give her the real African insight. People in her daily life were vividly reintroduced through imagery at night. In almost every way she had slighted somebody.... He could so subtly play on the earlier themes Sello had introduced to her mind about the

poor, their central importance, and yet he twisted and perverted these themes with a merciless cruelty (AQOP:159).

Female figures from myth and folk lore, such as Medusa, Orisis and Isis, also play a role in Elizabeth's delusions. The most important of these is the Medusa figure. To Elizabeth she appears as the African superwoman, thereby intensifying the former's feeling of sexual inferiority. Medusa has a frightening and negative influence on Elizabeth: her incongruous relationship with Elizabeth in the latter's spells of hallucinations causes Elizabeth to become sexually more hostile towards men. According to Ogumyemi (1986:235): "Elizabeth, akin to the wretched, homosexual coloureds of her youth, engages herself in a lesbian relationship with Medusa to prevent her mother's mistake with her father in producing an unwanted child". There is no doubt that Head's nightmarish mental encounters with Medusa are lesbian, as the following passage unequivocally demonstrates:

It was about her [Medusa's] vagina. Without any bother for decency she sprawled her long black legs in the air, and the most exquisite sensation travelled out of her towards Elizabeth. It enveloped Elizabeth from head to toe like a slow, deep, sensuous bomb. It was like falling into deep, warm waters, lazily raising one hand and resting in a heaven of bliss (AQOP:44).

These orgasmic dreams contribute towards Elizabeth's eventual break-down because they so terrify and upset her mentally and physically that she has to drag herself through each day, hardly being able to perform her duties and caring for her son.

Elizabeth's strained relationship with Medusa also stems from Bessie Head's phobia with her racial identity. Elizabeth sees Medusa as a black figure who endeavours to exclude her from inclusion in the black community: "The wild-eyed Medusa was expressing the surface reality of the African society. It was shut in and exclusive" (AQOP:38).

Medusa's eventual reduction to cinders, however, expedites Elizabeth's liberation from both racist and sexist bondage which finally constitutes her acceptance of the reality of and a belief in the brotherhood of mankind.

In this novel Head makes use of striking instances of symbolism and "a network of images" (Tucker, 1988:170). Significantly, she goes to Motabeng, which means *place of sand*. In the context of the novel, this name suggests instability and imbalance, man's search for little bits of rock and patches of firm ground in the sand, in other words for permanence amidst the impermanence. The choice of this proper name for the rural village makes it a forceful symbol for both Elizabeth's displacement in particular and for man's quest for permanence in a constantly changing postcolonial world. As in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, and to a lesser extent in *Maru*, the garden symbolizes spiritual growth and mastery over the aridity of the landscape and the agony of the soul that yearns for revitalization. Significantly, Elizabeth does not make jam out of the first crop of her gooseberries, but sells them, being in "stasis" (Tucker, 1988:175) during that period in her life. Nevertheless, after her spell in hospital, she has more control over her life, enabling her to make jam which she sells, a deed that signifies her hold over a commodity and a firmer grasp on her own life.

A Question of Power is unique in African fiction because it is perhaps the first metaphysical novel on the subject of an African woman's struggle against forces which at times drive her to the brink of madness. Jean Marquard (1978:61) comments on Head's accomplishment in this regard: "It is also a private gesture, with a deeply personal meaning and it exemplifies Bessie Head's achievement in fusing the ideal of community and brotherhood with a belief in the value of the one over the many". She concludes her article "Exile and Community in Southern Africa" by stating that *A Question of Power* is the "first metaphysical novel on the subject of nation and national identity to come out of Southern Africa".

June Campbell (1993:64) hails Bessie Head's success in portraying Elizabeth as "a displaced person in every sense". She states that one can "hardly imagine a more complex and vivid representation of suffering, oppression, alienation and loss". All three Head's novels portray desperately lonely female exiles whose resilience against succumbing to overwhelming forces should be viewed as one of its author's feats in her portrayal of females who fend for themselves and their children against the forces caused by change in a postcolonial situation.

Moreover, *A Question of Power* must be seen as innovative in the postcolonial discourse, because it may be regarded as a "fictional narrative in a postcolonial, or particularly a neo-colonial context, [which] confronts the challenge of developing a narrative voice hitherto unutilized by colonial narratives or by those of the counter phenomenon, protest or anti-colonialism" (Maitufi, 1993:60).

Head's characterization in *A Question of Power* differs somewhat from that of her earlier two novels. Querts (1967:48) quite correctly remarks that although Bessie Head is not an overtly political writer, she creates characters who are seen as exponents of their own "personal politics" (1967:48). Despite the fact that Head's protagonists are usually people who develop an "unusual and egalitarian" (1967:48) trend, Head's characters in *A Question of Power* exceed the boundaries of her earlier, more ordinary people. Her peculiar creation of mythical and allegorical characters is, however, functional and in keeping with the complex nature of her last novel.

One of the merits of this unique novel is definitely Bessie Head's sincerity in portraying her own inner struggle. Cherry William (1983:1) remarks: "She confronts the forces of good and evil with an unprecedented frankness, bluntness, and directness, and deploys her imaginative power and narrative skill to show them in action both within and between individuals and communities". ~~According to Larson (1976:165)~~ at the time when *A Question of Power* was published, "an introspective novel by an African woman" was a fairly rare phenomenon. Head's thematic concerns, namely madness, sexuality and guilt, are also rather novel concepts in this literary genre. In this respect Head's work resembles that of Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer rather than that of her contemporary African female writers. ~~Pearse (1979:81) acclaims Head's unique treatment of the theme of madness by comparing Head to other distinguished African writers also handling this theme:~~

No work in the corpus of African literature dealing with the theme of madness, for example Achebe's *Arrow of God*, Kofi Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother*, or Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments* captures the complexity and intensity of the insane mind as does Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*.

The complexity of this novel may at times be viewed as a weakness. This is partly due to the fact that Elizabeth serves both as a detached narrator and as actor of her own past, in other words although the story is told in the third person, the point of view is constantly Elizabeth's. Some critics, such as Okunyemi (1986:233), regard the work as "an almost impenetrable text". He finds it ironical that Bessie Head should remark on the density of the Danish novel when Camilla says that it "takes a certain level of education to understand our novelists" (AQOP:79). Berger (1990:41) also refers to this novel as "an extraordinary difficult text". Nevertheless, *A Question of Power* can be interpreted in several ways, namely as the portrayal of a woman's insanity; a picture of the South African situation; a mixture of a sexually starved woman combined with her religious growth; a depiction of witchcraft, as well as a mythical rendering of the battle between good and evil. ~~It simultaneously shows characteristics of a female bildungsroman (Carol Davison, 1990:25).~~

Despite its weaknesses, *A Question of Power* is a very powerful novel, bringing to a suitable close Head's career as a novelist. Head's work in general, but especially *A Question of Power* suggests the possibility of a changed world, a world inhabited by human beings who will continue to question the validity of existing systems, and hopefully, find solutions to let people share the prosperity and peacefulness of the brotherhood of mankind in a postcolonial universe.

4.2 NGUGI'S LATER NOVELS

4.2.1 *Petals of Blood* (1977)

Ngugi's first three novels may be regarded as belonging to what Lewis Nkosi (1981:53) terms "the classical tradition of the novel". He applies this term to African novels moulded on Western concepts for novel-writing. The middle of the 1960s, however, heralded a new kind of African novel, of which *Petals of Blood* is an example. During the ten years between the publication of *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood* (1977) Ngugi's ideological and political views changed radically, becoming strongly Marxist and

socialist. *Petals of Blood* was completed almost twelve years after Kenyan Independence and deals with the period following Independence. It starts with Kenyan history where *A Grain of Wheat* concludes. However, *A Grain of Wheat* does not concern itself with the initial stages of the later clash between the bourgeoisie and the peasants which became such a determining aspect of postcolonial Kenyan life. By contrast, *Petals of Blood* assigns a central role to the proletariat. This marked shift in perspective serves as evidence of Ngugi's growing social and political awareness, in the words of Ngugi (1987:75): "Here the working class is asserting itself, and here Ngugi's partisan line is both explicit and unwavering". Ngugi himself comments on the role of literature as a means of change when he writes in the Preface to *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1977):

We believe that Kenyan literature - indeed all African literature, and its writers is on trial. We cannot stand on the fence. We are either on the side of the people or on the side of imperialism. African Literature and African Writers are either fighting with the people or aiding imperialism and the class enemies of the people.[4]

Petals of Blood thus differs considerably from Ngugi's earlier three novels which dealt primarily with transformation within a family or tribe. Lewis Nkosi (1981:73) regards *Petals of Blood* as a "major shift in Ngugi's work, ideological in nature, from the earlier emphasis on nationalism and race questions to a class analysis of society". Zida (1991:73) sees *Petals of Blood* as a hallmark of Ngugi's "evolution from critical realism to revolutionary politics".

This "avowedly, and at times polemically Marxist novel" (Brown, 1980:51) presents the discourse of change from a dual perspective. It retrospectively views the negative effects of change as a result of Westernization while simultaneously revealing the current state of prevailing corruption in a socialist Marxist environment with the ostensible aim of exposing and reforming social, political and economic malpractices. Sumaili (1989:8) believes that this kind of postcolonial writing should "address itself directly to the people reclaiming their history and identity from the cultural terrorism and depredation of the colonial period".

On the surface *Petals of Blood* has a fairly simple and uncomplicated plot structure. This apparent simplicity, however, veils a highly symbolic novel. Initially the novel resembles a detective story. The novel opens with the arrest of the four protagonists - Munira, Abdulla, Wanja and Karega - on a charge of murder and arson following the death of three prominent figures in Ilmorog: Mzigo, an educationist turned businessman; Chui, an educationist and businessman; and Kimeria, a business tycoon. Inspector Godfrey, an experienced criminal investigator, is sent to Ilmorog to find the murderer. While in detention, the schoolmaster, Munira, prefers to write down his statement which incorporates important moments in the lives of the four protagonists since his arrival in Ilmorog twelve years before. Ngugi terms this statement "a mixture of an autobiographical confession and some kind of prison notes" (POB:190). In a sense Munira's "investigation" presents the moral perspective of the novel, while Inspector Godfrey comes to a rational and technical conclusion. Resultantly, the novel becomes a long flashback, providing clues for Inspector Godfrey's investigation. Munira's reminiscences, interspersed with chapters of direct narrative and the recollections of Wanja, Karega and Abdulla, provide a "multiplicity of viewpoints" (Gikandi, 1988:136) and ideologies. The title of the novel is taken from the poem, *The Swamp*, by the Caribbean poet, Derek Walcott. Ngugi's novel is divided into four sections. Each of these sections is subtitled, deriving from the *Song of Solomon*, William Blake, Walt Whitman, Amilcar Cabral, and the Bible respectively. Part One, entitled *Walking*, describes the coming of the four protagonists to Ilmorog, as well as their organising a delegation to Nairobi to seek help for the plight of the drought-stricken and impoverished population of Ilmorog. *Toward Bethlehem*, the Second Part, relates the failure of their mission. In Part Three, *To Be Born*, the village comes to life again after the rains have finally come. The last section, *Again: La Luta Continua!*, relates the disastrous results of foreign invasion on Ilmorog.

According to Dramé (1990:85) *Petals of Blood* "unravels the transformation of a village and its inhabitants through the testimonies of two different, yet complementary, characters". The dominant discourse of the novel is the exposure of social ills, of which the violence of men against women and women's struggle for power are of central

concern. Munira encapsulates these social ills when he muses in his statement in prison early in the novel:

But how can I, a mortal, help my heart's fluttering I who knew Abdulla, Nyakinyua [Wanja's grandmother], Karega? Have I not leaped through the heart of each? In all our conversations and schemes and remembrance of the past ... was always struck by the razor-blade tension at the edges of our words. Violence of thought, violence of sight, violence of memory. I can see that now. In this prison twilight certain things, groves, hills, valleys, are sharper in outline even though set against a sombre sky.... There was a time when I used to think I was saving him [Karega], might have saved her and Abdulla too. Then I suddenly saw Karega about to tumble headlong down the path I myself had gingerly trodden and was struck by my lack of power to hold him back, though I wanted to. For one week I would picture Wanja laughing at our frail efforts to extricate ourselves from her vast dreams and visions, for I now knew ... *that all she wanted was power, power especially over men's souls ... to avenge herself of the evil done to her in the past* (POB:45)[My emphasis].

As may be anticipated, women play an important part in Ngugi's construction of a narrative of change and transformation. In this regard Wanja's "miraculous but painful metamorphosis" (Sharma, 1971:308) dominates the discourse, although her grandmother, Nyakinyua, is central to Ngugi's focusing on issues concerning change. Wanja plays a decisive role because of the interest she evokes in the three male protagonists coupled with the way in which she directs their actions. The fact that Wanja acts as one of the narrators is indicative of the growing importance of women in Ngugi's novels. Up till now this position has been a male prerogative.

In introducing Wanja, Ngugi succeeds in stressing her essentially sensuous but calculating nature, possibly the only means by which to escape being the victim of "sexploitation" (Porter, 1981:64). When Munira meets her, he is immediately fascinated by her difference from the traditional tribal women:

For a few seconds Munira's heart stood still: he could hardly believe his eyes. She left the village path and walked toward him. A bright coloured kitenge cloth, tied loose on her head, fell wide on her shoulders so that her face was half veiled from the sun.

'Are you well, Mwalima?' she called out boldly. Her voice had a studied vibrant purity: the tone was rich and pleasant to his ears. There was a calculated submissive deference in her bearing as she stretched out a small hand and

looked at him full in the eyes, suddenly lowering them in childlike shyness (POB:22).

When Munira offers her some water, she answers him "cooingly" (POB:23), while "her words and voice lingered in the air, caressing the heat-filled silence between them". During a later encounter in Abdulla's little shop, she taunts Munira by "throwing back her head, breasts thrust out in a fatal challenge" (POB:25). Wanja remains a mystery to Munira, who often has sexual fantasies of her in his dreams: "And then she started appearing to him in his dreams: breasts would beat on breasts, body frames would become taut with unspoken desire, eyes would hold onto eyes" (POB:34). Wanja herself soon shows the other side of the coin when she voices her early disillusionment with the position of women in a neocolonial, male-dominated environment:

'boys were always more confident about the future than us girls. They seemed to know what they wanted to become later in life: whereas with us girls the future seemed vague It was as if we knew that no matter what efforts we put into our studies, our road led to the kitchen and to the bedroom' (POB:37).

Wanja's grim view of her inferior position coupled with her father's cruelty towards her mother paves the way for her later falling into prostitution. Her father refuses to have a poor schoolmate date her, thereby driving her into the arms of the rich old man who impregnates her and refuses to marry her when he hears that she is pregnant. His reaction reveals both Ngugi's censure of the exploitation of women and the hypocrisy of certain Christians: "And I ran away from home ... to him. He looked at me once and suddenly he started laughing. He told me not to be funny, he was old enough to be my father, and anyway he was a Christian" (POB:40). Ngugi succeeds in creating tension by withholding any further information about the baby, except that Wanja then finds refuge with her cousin in Eastleigh, where she subsequently becomes a prostitute.

Wanja exhibits her resourcefulness and human kindness when she offers to act as barnmaid to enable Joseph, Abdulla's younger brother, to go to school because it always "pains" (POB:41) her to see children who cannot be educated. She rearranges Abdulla's shop and turns it into a profitable business venture. Despite her apparent success as a prostitute, she is keenly aware of being exploited: "She would suddenly become aware that in the long run it was men who triumphed and walked over her

body, buying insurance against deep involvement with money and guilty smiles or in exaggerated fits of jealousy" (POB:56). Her infertility constantly reminds her of the emptiness of her life: "A child. That is what her body really cried for" (POB:57). With hindsight while in prison, Munira recalls her efforts to lure him into having sex with her on the night when the moon was full, as "yet another example of Wanja's cunning and devilry" (POB:66). At that stage he is unaware that she does so because the medicine man told her that it would be the only way in which she could conceive.

Ironically, in coming to Ilmorog Wanja has decided to change her own life:

Wanja had made a pact with herself. She would have a completely new beginning in Ilmorog. Since she left Ilmorog she had had two humiliating and shameful experiences. She would now break with that past and make something of herself in Ilmorog. As an evidence of her cleansed spirit, she resolved that she would not again obey the power of her body over men; that any involvement was out until she had defeated the past through a new flowering of self (POB:106-107).

In Part Two, while on the journey, Wanja recounts her previous life, thereby revealing the humiliation and sordidness of prostitution. At this stage a close bond has developed between Karega and Wanja. Ngugi employs this strategic moment to bring Wanja into contact with Kimeria, who earlier seduced her. He once again cunningly exploits her vulnerability and compassion by letting her agree to have sex with him by telling the delegation that she was once his wife. Wanja has to succumb to his demands to save the life of Joseph, who has become seriously ill. But she finds the whole affair revolting, as she tells Kimeria: "Why can't you leave me alone? How can't you - but you were always like that - without feelings - you only cared about your thing. And the power of instant conquest" (POB:155).

Part Three celebrates the coming of the rains which infuse nature and the community with new hope. Munira comments on the change in Wanja: "I watched her undergo yet another change. It was a new youthful, life-full, luscious growth after the rains" (POB:244). Despite her apparent happiness, she unveils her private world of suffering when she reprimands Munira for having caused Karega's dismissal. She now enlightens Munira about her barrenness: "I am incapable of having a child. The

knowledge has been a weight, a heavy weight to carry. For children, no matter how we neglect them, are what makes many a barmaid feel human" (POB:250). She thus shares the loneliness, stigmatization and victimization with many of Bessie Head's characters, especially Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*. She tells Munira: "I really want him [Kimeria]. For himself. For the first time, I feel wanted ... a human being ... no longer humiliated ... degraded ... foot-trodden" (POB:251). Ngugi subtly echoes the title of the novel when Wanja remarks: "He has reawakened my smothered womanness, my girlhood, and I feel I am about to flower".

When Ilmorog is transformed into a prospering town and Mzigo, Chui, and Kimeria become directors of the Chiri County Council, Wanja is forced to return to prostitution, running a brothel, ironically called Sunshine Lodge. Unfortunately, she becomes cynical and hardened as her conversation with Munira and Karega demonstrates:

That's how one night I fully realised this law. Eat or you are eaten.... I decided to act, and I quickly built this house ... Nothing would I ever let for free ... I have hired young girls... Me too! I have not spared myself ... It has been the only way I can get my own back on Chui, Mzigo, and Kimeria... I go with all of them now... I play them against one another ... they pay for their rivalry to possess me ... each wants to make me his sole woman (POB:293).

Karega, however, senses her inner turmoil: she ends on a kind of savage screaming tone, as if endeavouring to answer doubts inside herself. Karega is aware of her trepidation and now looks at her more intently. He detects a hardness on her face that he cannot understand. Her outburst articulates the universality of exploitation in the unjust social system, of which he himself has been a victim.

Like *A Grain of Wheat* this novel ends on a hopeful and positive note when Wanja falls pregnant with Abdulla's child. When her mother inquires who the child's father is, Wanja makes a sketch of a man without one limb. She has come to terms with life: "she felt a tremendous calm, a kind of inner assurance of the possibilities of a new kind of power" (POB:338). Her mother intuitively senses the bond of suffering which has brought Wanja and Abdulla together when she poses the questions: "Who ... who is this ... with ... with so much pain and suffering on his face? And why is he laughing at

the same time?" (POB:338). Wanja's mother herself has changed from a physically abused woman to a warm, strong mother figure after the death of her brutal husband. She is thus able to help Wanja to accept her identity as a mother.

This study has indicated that Wanja is the really new character in the novel, both the product and victim of a changing society with its modern, but often decadent values. She clearly resembles other financially independent prostitutes often found in East African fiction, for example in the works of Ekwensi, p'Bitek, Mangua, Mangui and Oculi. She may be regarded as the fictional counterpart of modern African women who are "paradoxically freer than men in this rapidly changing society, and loom frightening in their lives" (Bardolph, 1980:63). In this respect Wanja brings to mind the protagonists of Rebecca Njau's *Ripples in the Pool* and Samuel Kahiga's *The Girl From Abroad*.

In this novel Ngugi once more resembles Bessie Head in frequently constructing his discourse on opposites. In *Petals of Blood* Munira's wife is the direct antithesis of Wanja. Her exaggerated religiosity drives Munira away from her. In describing Munira's visit home, Ngugi relates Munira's realization that his going to Ilmorog was "like his first conscious act of breaking with this sense of non-being" (POB:15). He derives no happiness from telling his children stories, because his wife censures every tale, but her face "beamed" (POB:16) with pleasure when he reads them a Bible story. She even scolds him for "blaspheming" (POB:16) to the children, thereby merely widening the rift between them:

When the children had gone to bed she immediately turned to him with half-severe, half-reproachful eyes. She could have been beautiful but too much religious living and Bible-reading and daily prayers had drained her of all sensuality and what remained now was the cold incandescence of the spirit.

'You should be ashamed, blaspheming to the children. You should know that this world is not our home and we should be preparing them and ourselves for the next one.'

'Don't worry, I myself have never belonged to this world ... even to Limuru ... Maybe Ilmorog ... for a change.'

By contrast, Ngugi depicts Wanja's grandmother, Nyakinyua, aptly called "Mother of men", as one of his admirable women with an undeniable talent for inborn leadership - a quality she shares with Wanja. She is resolute in fighting for the rights of the villagers: "It is our turn to make things happen. Why should people accept any act of any God without resistance" (POB:115)? Nyakinyua is "the spirit that guided and held them [her fellow villagers] together" (POB:123) on the hazardous trek to the city. She plays a leading role in boosting the morale of the villagers by telling stories of the past, in such a way that it seems "as if the rhythm of the historic rise and fall of Ilmorog flowed in her veins" (POB:123). Simultaneously, she voices Ngugi's stance on the importance of equality of the sexes, as well as his admiration for the women who fought for the liberation of the country: "A man cannot have a child without a woman. A woman cannot bear a child without a man. And was it not a man and a woman who fought to redeem this country?" (POB:161).

Since women, especially Wanja, are central to Ngugi's focus on transformation in *Petals of Blood*, the roles of male characters will receive less attention than those of the female protagonists. Although "strangely inactive most of the time, [Munira] is nevertheless a centrifugal cause of action" (Cook & Okenimpfke, 1983:94) in that his prison document reveals the novel's discourse of transformation. Munira serves as an example of the lonely exile so typical of both Bessie Head's and Ngugi's novels. He rejects his family, including his wife and children, and lives a fairly isolated life in Ilmorog until Wanja draws him into a life of involvement; in other words, he eventually figures rather prominently in the change of society and in that affecting his own personal life. Yet he remains a puzzle to Inspector Godfrey:

How could Munira have repudiated his father's immense property? Could property, wealth, status, religion plus education not hold a family together? What else could a man want? Inspector Godfrey decided that it was religious fanaticism. Yet from his own experience in the police force, such fanaticism was normally found among the poor (POB:334).

It is obvious, however, that Munira killed the rich elite as an act of reform of the prevailing corruption and vice perpetrated mainly by those Kenyans who did not

participate in the struggle but who now want to reap the fruit resulting from the resistance of the impoverished masses.

Ngugi's fondness of paradox is obvious in his depiction of Karega, Munira's "rival" for Wanja's love. Where Munira is presented as an essentially lonely man, Karega is intelligent and resourceful. Although expelled from school, he keeps on fighting the system. He has the intelligence and integrity to do something for his society, but Munira works him out of his post at the school. Nevertheless, Karega himself is aware of having been forced by a corrupt society to deteriorate into nothingness. In a drunken stupor he utters his disgust with prevailing circumstances that have deprived him of helping Kenya on its way to meaningful transformation: "How, now, how could the young, the bright and the hopeful deteriorate so? Was there no way of using their energies and dreams to a higher purpose than the bottle, the juke-box and sickness on a cement floor?" (POB:103). This is no personal lament, but an outcry against corruption as a universal postcolonial phenomenon.

In a sense Karega plays a redemptive role in the novel. His love affair with Wanja signifies new life, becoming almost ritualistic. The descriptions of his love for Wanja abound with images of vegetation, suggestive of growth. Ngugi explicitly stresses the rejuvenating qualities of the consummation of their love when Karega wakes up Wanja by shouting: "Wake up and see signs of dawn over Ilmorog" (POB:230). Unfortunately, the novel tends to become a mouthpiece for Ngugi's own socialist and Marxist ideas when he relates how Karega succumbs to being a trade union leader. In other words, Karega who has shown so much promise as a young man with powers of renewal, degenerates into a mere mouthpiece for his writer's political ideas.

Conversely Abdulla, who is also a victim of the Mau Mau struggle to free Kenya from British domination, keeps on battling to make an existence for himself and his brother, Joseph. Born of an African mother and an Indian father, he is initially in a better position than the other protagonists, Wanja, Munira and Karega because his parents sent him to school and started a saving's account for him. Unfortunately, he abandons school to roam the streets with his idle friends, but subsequently works in a shoe-factory and later

joins the Mau Mau. When he and Nding'uri (who turns out to be Karega's brother) act as couriers carrying bullets, they are betrayed by Kimeria. Abdulla succeeds in escaping to the forest but his friend is hanged. In a skirmish, however, Abdulla is wounded in the leg. He later also becomes a victim of the new exploiters, another clear example of a poverty-stricken sincere Kenyan whose incessant but foiled efforts to improve his lifestyle underline the futility of the struggle. Having applied for a minute piece of land after the declaration of Independence, he becomes a small businessman upon realizing that he would not be given the tiny piece of land. When the new generation of black exploiters take over his business, he is finally reduced to a seller of oranges and sheepskins by the roadside.

Ngugi's constitution of the discourse of change and transformation at this stage in Kenya's history indisputably demonstrates that the resultant effects of the radical changes in this country are that black Kenyans, such as Nderi wa Riera, Kimeria, Mzigo, Chui and Munira's father, replace the previous corrupt white imperialist exploiters. Ngugi is quite explicit in his exposure and denunciation of the "foreign rule policed by colonised blackskins" (POB:4) who have now turned against their own people and collaborate with foreign capitalists to exploit the country. Although Ngugi harps on this theme, I intend quoting just one example of this form of social criticism of conditions in Ilmorog, the construct of the novel:

Within a year or so of the New Ilmorog shopping centre being completed, wheatfields and ranches had sprung up all around the plains: the herdsmen had died or had been driven further afield into the drier parts, but a few had become workers on the wheatfields and ranches on the earth upon which they once roamed freely. The new owners, master-servants of bank power, money and cunning, came over at weekends and drove in Landrovers or Range Rovers, depending on the current car fashion, around the farms whose running they had otherwise entrusted to paid managers. The peasants of Ilmorog had also changed. Some had somehow survived the onslaught. They could employ one or two hands on their small farms. Most of the others had joined the army of workers who had added to the growing population of the New Ilmorog (POB:280).

Ngugi extends his criticism of exploitation to all times and places. He refers, for example, to "adventurers from the north and north-west, Solomon's suitors for myrrh and

frankincense; Zeus' children in a royal hunt for the seat of the sea-god of the Nile, scouts and emissaries of Ghenghis Kahn" (POB:68). The land was also ravished by Arab geographers, slave-traders, "soul and gold merchants from Gaul and Bismarck's Germany" (POB:68), as well as by "land pirates and human game hunters from Victorian and Edwardian England" (POB:68). Although Ngugi admits that some of these foreign invaders were genuinely interested in effecting scientific progress, his bitterness spills over when he refers to those foreigners who were driven by "mercenary commercial greed and love of the wanton destruction of those with a slightly different complexion from theirs" (POB:68).

Ngugi universalizes his theme of especially white exploitation by letting Munira explain the process of postcolonialism to a history class:

Today, children, I am going to tell you about the history of Mr. Blackman in three sentences. In the beginning he had the land and the mind and the soul together. On the second day, they took the body away to barter it for silver coins. On the third day, seeing that he was still fighting back, they brought priests and educators to bind his mind and soul so that these foreigners could more easily take his land and its produce (POB:236).

The conflict between rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed, conqueror and conquered is, however, not restricted to Kenya. Ngugi includes the exploitation of workers in America, in the words of the humanitarian lawyer: "A black man is not safe at home; a black man is not safe abroad" (POB:165). The lawyer then mentions examples of prostitution and of the exploitation of workers in America. Towards the end of the novel Joseph comments: "I have been reading a lot about what the workers and peasants of other lands have done in history. I have read about the people's revolutions in China, Cuba, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Angola, Guinea, Mozambique" (POB:340). His education has made him aware of the need for continuing the struggle for transformation, as he tells Abdulla: "You fought for the political independence of this country. I would like to contribute to the liberation of the people of this country" (POB:339).

Although flawed at times by excessive didacticism, *Petals of Blood* does demonstrate Ngugi's artistic proficiency. This is apparent in, for instance, Ngugi's use of what Ngara (1987:76) terms "para-linguistic affective devices", especially revealed by Ngugi's apt application of symbols, illusions and related forms of indirect reference. The author's artistic growth is also apparent in his application of various technical devices, such as the interesting variation of dialogue (for instance in depicting the arrests), description and narration by way of Munira's diary. Ngugi's careful structuring of the novel, his reliance on the oral tradition by employing songs and legends, as well as his diction serve as ample proof of his increasing stylistic skills. He adds suspense to the plot by his frequent use of time shifts: in *Petals of Blood* Ngugi integrates the past and the present tense to create a multi-faceted viewpoint. The novel's density is furthermore increased by the gradual exposure of the inter-relatedness of people and events.

The most important symbol in this novel is encapsulated in its title. A significant number of symbols relate to flowers and other forms of vegetation. A reference to petals of blood appears on the page immediately preceding the Acknowledgements in a quotation from Derek Walcott's poem, *The Swamp*. Here this flower is related to a hidden but extremely poisonous snake:

Fearful, original sinuosities! Each mangrove sapling
Serpentlike, its roots obscene
As a six-fingered hand,

Conceals, within its clutch the mossbacked toad,
Toadstools, the potent ginger-lily,
Petals of blood....

In the context of the specific poem, this flower symbolizes negative forces such as destruction, corruption, evil and death. Palmer (1982:289) mentions that the ginger lily is "one of the destructive, repulsive plants which give a scene ... an eerie, unnatural and evil aura". In this sense petals of blood may refer to an aberration of normality in nature and society. A study of the novel, however, indicates that these flowers grow wild on the plains, as the following account of Munira's exploration of the veld with his pupils demonstrates:

One child cried out:

'Look. A flower with petals of blood.'

It was a solitary red beanflower in a field dominated by white, blue and violet flowers. No matter how you looked at it, it gave you the impression of a flow of blood (POB:21).

The colour of the flower connects the flower and fire symbolism, while also establishing a link between these symbols and the idea of a Marxist-based revolution. Conversely, the finding of a yellowish red flower with nothing inside it except a worm, allows Munira to extend the flower symbolism to society: "Right. This is a worm-eaten flower It cannot bear fruit. That's why we must always kill worms ... A flower can also become this colour if it's prevented from reaching the light" (POB:22).

Although not original (the allusion to William Blake's "The Rose" springs to mind immediately) Ngugi's use of this symbol is multi-faceted and is sustained throughout the novel. The four petals of the Theng'eta flower may refer to the four protagonists who are all victims of oppression. In this context the worm symbolizes the oppressor who should be killed - ironically Munira is the real murderer. Palmer (1982:290) views the flower with the petals of blood as the victim of evil. The blood undeniably suggests suffering. The flower is also a symbol of Wanja's infertility. Furthermore, the symbolism forcefully demonstrates the plight of the whole society. The potential growth of the society - and the world at large - has been nipped in the bud by prevailing forces of oppression and exploitation.

The eerie feelings created by the flower symbolism are reinforced by Ngugi's quotation from the sixth chapter of Revelations which describes horses and their fighting riders. The extract from a poem by Walt Whitman concludes the preliminaries to Chapter One, by listing subordinates of kings and monarchs who are often associated with instruments of oppression:

Each comes in state, with his train - hangman
priest, tax-gatherer
Soldier, lawyer, lord, jailer, and sycophant.

This reference fittingly heralds the opening scene of Chapter One, in which the murder and arson case involving three people and the resultant four arrests externalizes the evil and corruption hinted at in these passages.

The journey which has literal as well as philosophical relevance for the novel is another forceful symbol. Although the actual journey takes place in Part Two, the journey motif infuses the symbolism of the novel as a whole. A combination of the titles of the four parts of the novel constitutes the phrase *Walking Toward Bethlehem To Be Born Again*. The theme of change or transformation is thus presented as a journey toward rebirth, in other words, a movement towards complete renewal. Apart from personal rebirth and purification, the journey symbolizes a continuation of the political struggle because *La Luta Continua* means *the struggle continues*, a slogan used by a number of African liberation movements, such as Frelimo of Mozambique and ZANU in Zimbabwe. Ngugi undoubtedly also alludes to Yeats' vision of "the rough beast [that] Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born" ("The Second Coming"). One of the possible interpretations for Yeats' vision in this poem may be the destruction of the Christian era and the ensuing rise of socialism. This possible connotation fits into Ngugi's new socialist and Marxist philosophy expounded in *Petals of Blood*.

The extended drought in Kenya manifests another striking symbol which Ngugi skilfully incorporates into the plot structure, like Bessie Head does in her novels. Ngugi demonstrates both the physical and symbolic aspects of the drought. On the physical level it leads to the great trek to the city, but on the symbolic level it vividly portrays the actual suffering of the Kenyan people at that stage. The drought affects the people emotionally, spiritually, economically and politically. It is extended to become a symbol of the aridity of Munira's married life, as well as of Wanja's infertility. Ngugi's skill at foreshadowing finds expression in Wanja's revelling in the rain, and by comparison, in its rejuvenating the arid souls of the inhabitants of Ilmorog: "Wanja was possessed of the rain-spirit. She walked through it, clothes drenched, skirt-hem tight against the thighs, revelling in the waters from heaven" (POB:196). This description harks back to and recreates a sense of Wanja's sensuous nature, so strongly hinted at in her first meeting with Munira.

Fire symbolism likewise plays a decisive role in Wanja's life, herself being involved in four separate incidents where fire is concerned. After witnessing the devastating fire in which one of her aunts was killed, Wanja is scared of fire. She herself was almost killed in a fire while still a prostitute in the city. She is later involved in a fire incidentally started by Munira. The fire symbolism culminates with the fire in which the three businessmen are killed. Ngugi employs the fire symbolism on various levels. Firstly, it foreshadows the final murders, but may also be seen as a means of redemption and purification. Secondly, it may be regarded as a kind of ritual, a process by which Wanja is scorched to emerge in a purified and stronger form. As such, water and fire may be seen in a religious sense. Wanja herself speaks of "the water and fire of the beginning and the water and the fire of the second coming to cleanse and bring purity to our earth of human cruelty and loneliness" (POB:65). Towards the end of the novel, Wanja explicitly states her belief in being cleansed by fire: "She wanted a new life ... clean ... she felt this was the meaning of her recent escape! Already she felt the stirrings of a new person ... she had after all been baptized by fire" (POB:337).

Maiming also serves an important symbolic purpose in terms of representing both physical and spiritual deformation. Abdulla's loss of a leg during the Mau Mau struggle signifies both man's cruelty to man and the acceptance of physical deformity and changing it into something positive. Abdulla thus becomes an example of the peasants who do not readily succumb to defeat.

Apart from his effective use of symbols, as mentioned above, Ngugi opposes two systems of metaphors throughout the novel, namely those of meat and seed, indicative of devouring and germination as paradoxical forces at work in this postcolonial transformational society. Cui (the leopard), Kimeria (he who swallows) and Hawkins (the hawk) may be regarded as scavengers who exemplify the principle expressed by Wanja: "You eat somebody or you are eaten" (POB:291). The metaphor may be extended to include elements such as the train that devours the forest and the machines that destroy the houses (POB:265). By contrast, the author praises the rain, the harvest and the feast accompanying the circumcision rites.

Coupled to the effective employment of these stylistic devices, Ngugi relies heavily on the use of the oral tradition as a means of reconstructing the lost past. The journey to the city, especially, supplies him with ample opportunity for storytelling. Here Nyakinyua plays a mammoth role in recreating the tribe's lost pride by infusing them with appreciation for the achievements of their ancestors with her rich repository of legends, lore, secrets and ideals. Her glorification of her late husband's courage and of his adherence to the honour code instils in the present generation a sense of and respect for the greatness of traditional life and values. It also makes them fully aware of the sordidness of their present life, a condition mainly caused by change. She, for instance, stresses the positive value of their ancient alcoholic drink as a means of sustenance and relaxation if taken moderately, but criticizes modern liquor as "this concoction you and Abdulla are cheating people with" (POB:324). Her praise of traditional drink and drinking habits may be regarded as a beautiful piece of orature in writing:

' ... they would drink it only when work was finished, and especially after the ceremony of circumcision or marriage or itwika, and after a harvest. It was when they were drinking Theng'eta that poets and singers composed their works for a season of Gichandi, and the seer voiced his prophecy' (POB:204).

'Theng'eta. It is a dream. It is a wish. It gives you sight, and for those favoured by God it can make them cross the river of time and talk with their ancestors. It has given seers their tongues; poets and Gichandi players their words; and it has made barren women mothers of many children. Only you must take it with faith and purity in your hearts' (POB:210).

The use of parallel construction in the second part of Nyakinyua's praise song is a typical characteristic of oral literature, used to reinforce a central idea.

As stylistic devices Ngugi also employs dreams and exposition by means of Munira's diary. This device deftly gives the reader intimate details of Munira's own comprehension of the intricate relationships between the characters, as well as of his understanding of both his own and the motives of the other characters. Dreams simultaneously reveal the psyche of various characters and reinforce some of the symbols and themes of the novel, like fire and destruction.

In *Petals of Blood* Ngugi infuses his diction with words, songs, proverbs and even descriptive passages in Swahili and Gikuyu. This nationalistic device may be seen as a weakness in the novel, since it at times disturbs communication and even tends to irritate the reader who does not understand these languages. The following example of foreign diction that negatively affects understanding will suffice:

'These children ... You have too much of the Foreigner's maneno maneno in your heads. Did you have a good gathano harvest in your place? Here it was poor and we don't know if the grains of maize and beans can last us to the end of the njahi rains' (POB:8).

In the same way the untranslated climactic song, which is said to have changed Munira's whole attitude, is lost on a non-Swahili speaker:

Tukiacha dhambi, Mfalme mwema
Hata tukifa, Tutawala tena
Halleluya, Halleluya
Hata tukifa, Tutawala tema (POB:296).

Ngugi probably tried to correct this oversight by writing his next novel, *Devil on the Cross*, in Gikuyu so as to reach the increasingly literate Gikuyu society and by translating it into English for the world market. To generalize, however, a distinctive characteristic of *Petals of Blood* is its fusion of old and new, traditional and innovative, African and Western, in other words, the exposition of various moments of cline along the transitional ladder.

Despite the author's now ostensible intention of writing a socialist-Marxist novel, *Petals of Blood* does exhibit traits of Ngugi's first three novels. These include the author's depiction of the undauntingly resourceful women who overshadow the indecisive males who fail to fulfil their role in effecting transformation. Ngugi's skilful use of symbols and imagery, as well as his concern about the negative effects of change wrought by a westernized kind of education and religion, has already surfaced in his earlier novels. Nevertheless, in *Petals of Blood* his criticism is much more hostile and open than in his preceding novels. It must be borne in mind that *Petals of Blood* was Ngugi's last novel before his detention without trial, although his play *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)* may perhaps be seen as the direct cause of his detention.

Ngugi's structuring of *Petals of Blood* on a definite cyclical pattern serves as another example of the ease with which the experienced craftsman constructs his later novels. The idea that nothing really changes, but simply repeats itself, is indisputably reflected in the history of not only Wanja, Munira, Karega, and Abdulla because Ngugi simultaneously refers to the cyclical pattern of heroism and betrayal which not merely repeats itself in the present generation but also by citing as heroes characters such as Wanja's and Munira's grandfathers, both of whom resisted the invasion of Whites into Kenya; Dedan Kimathi, Ole Masai, and Nding'uri, as well as other freedom fighters in the forests. Opposed to them are the traitors such as the fathers of Wanja and Munira, who sold out to the white man; Kimeria, who betrayed the Mau Mau volunteers; and the unknown informer who betrayed the legendary Dedan Kimathi. Wanja, however, serves as the most prominent character in the context of the novel whose circumstances in post-independent Kenya negate her every effort at changing her lifestyle in a positive way. She starts off as a prostitute after having thrown her illegitimate baby down a latrine. At the time when her relationship with Karega develops, she regards it as "a new beginning" (POB:230). However, when Karega is forced to leave Ilmorog, she ends up as the proprietress of a brothel, in spite of all her efforts to elevate her lifestyle. Her words towards the end of the novel neatly sum up man's struggle against the overwhelming corruption in post-independence Africa: "Maybe life was a series of false starts, which, once discovered, called for more efforts at yet another beginning" (POB:338). Paradoxically, Nyakinyua probably reflects the uncritical acceptance of the cyclical pattern of the older generation when she asks: "How can I understand this alternation of fertility and barrenness, drought and rain, night and day, destruction and creation, birth and death?" (POB:213).

In general Ngugi's characterization contributes to the novel's inferior position when compared to its predecessors, especially *A Grain of Wheat*. Robson (1979:99) feels that characterization in *Petals of Blood* "lacks the clarity and thoroughness" characteristic of Ngugi's earlier novels. The characters tend to become incredible because their actions do not sustain information given about them, causing them to lack emotional conviction. The most obvious weakness of *Petals of Blood* is the absence of

a strong male figure to lend credibility to the novel. Palmer (1982:295) points out that despite the resemblances between Ngugi's earlier male protagonists - Njoroge in *Weep Not, Child*, Waiyaki in *The River Between* and Mugo in *A Grain of Wheat* - Munira is "an anti-hero, an ultra-sensitive young man whose life is a failure". Palmer feels that unlike the earlier heroes who have also struggled against the forces of change, Munira's "sense of insecurity degenerates into an inferiority complex, a conviction of his irretrievable mediocrity". Moreover, Munira's religious fanaticism towards the end of the novel is unconvincing in the light of his earlier lack of involvement. His unscrupulous efforts to get rid of Karega do not reveal him as a fanatic Christian who would set the hut alight in order to get rid of Wanja's whore-house to eradicate the evil in Ilmorog. The portrayal of even minor male characters, such as Joseph, fails because they are not allowed to articulate their convictions or develop in the course of the action. Nonetheless, some critics, such as Niven (1981:90), applaud Ngugi's creation of "psychologically interesting characters". He, however, feels that these characters act in certain ways "in order to illustrate larger points about the claims of capitalism and socialism, tradition and development, or power and corruption". In a sense, however, Abdulla is a more heroic figure than Munira, because he unstintingly strives to compensate for his physical handicap. Moreover, he courageously accepts the changed circumstances in Ilmorog and keeps on trying to support himself.

As a novel, *Petals of Blood* lacks the "subtle interrelationship between structure, narrative method and presentation of character" (Palmer, 1982:289) which made *A Grain of Wheat* such a triumphant manifestation of Ngugi's increasing artistic talent. The plot structure is furthermore marred by an excessive reliance on co-incidence, such as the delegation's meeting with Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria. The fact that it was Kimeria who betrayed Abdulla also seems somewhat too much of a co-incidence.

An interesting development in the African writers' attitude towards postcolonialism became apparent in the 1960s when a new group of writers, such as Yambo Ouologuem of Mali and Armah in Ghana, started making white colonists the scapegoat for everything that went wrong in Africa. By adopting this stance, they actually perpetuated the negative influence of postcolonialism because they refused to admit

any weakness or corruption amongst their own people. Ngugi, however, especially in his later novels, deviates from this general trend by criticizing both colonizers and their black accomplices: "The African ... according to this school of fiction (the main example of which is Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Petals of Blood* ...) freely chooses his own course: it is an aspect of his maturity, albeit a negative one, that he can choose wrongly" (Niven, 1981:82). Even the names of some of the white colonizers in *Petals of Blood* still express Ngugi's earlier more one-sided contempt, for instance Cambridge Fraudsham, Reverend Hollowes Ironmonger and Sir Swallow Bloodall.

Petals of Blood undeniably reveals Ngugi's changed vision and increasing knowledge as a result of his studies at Leeds. He frequently alludes to cross-cultural references and literatures, especially from the Bible and English. These allusions and references are mostly fitting and enrich the symbolic quality of the novel while also reinforcing its main themes. *Petals of Blood* may furthermore be regarded as a synthesis of Ngugi's Marxist and Christian beliefs. In the author's effort to provide "a true communal home for all Africans" (*Homecoming*, 1972:xix), especially for those in Kenya, he relies on Marx's socio-economic ideas. His portrayal of the actual alienation of society rests on his own ambivalent view of Christianity, which is apparent in his use of Christian language and symbolism. Because Ngugi mainly regards Christianity as a Western phenomenon forced onto the traditional African, he often portrays Christians as materialistic, corrupt, opportunistic and hypocritical. Unfortunately, Ngugi's condemnation of such a form of Christianity "coarsens the narrator's irony into sarcasm" (McEwan, 1983:103) as Wanja's father's harsh treatment of this servants exposes.

Zida (1991:73) captures the essence of Ngugi's sincerity in endeavouring to expose and correct existing ills in postcolonial Kenya by stating:

In this novel, the notion of commitment to a cause (be it personal or national, but particularly national) enacts the drama of which the major characters are transformations. Here, Ngugi very clearly demonstrates his belief that the highest human act is through commitment to improve human life, the positive transformation of the African. In effect, he portrays several versions of this ethic of commitment, in a way, as motifs that constitute the ideological framework of the book: commitment is life-giving, commitment to improve life is noble.

Zida's reference to *noble* is in itself ironic. While it is true that Ngugi's avowed intention to create a better and more just transformed society, his novels clearly reveal that Kenya still has a long way to travel along the road to real freedom.

Lazarus (1992:213) shares this seemingly optimistic viewpoint when he writes that although *Petals of Blood* depicts a number of forces that jointly contributed to making the country and its people "sterile and harsh", such as "drought and desertification, colonial neglect and despoliation, postcolonial mismanagement and venality ... there is Ngugi's insistence upon the *transformability* of present negative conditions".

To summarize: in spite of its immediate popularity which led to speculations that *Petals of Blood* might become "an instant classic" (Lindfors, 1991:79), more balanced criticism later revealed both its strengths and weaknesses, as I have endeavoured to point out in the preceding discussion. It must, finally, be noted that Ngugi's fusion of realism and idealism refutes its own purpose and renders the novel unconvincing. It does, however, remain an interesting and worthwhile novel, enriching the canon of African literature.

4.2.2 *Devil on the Cross (1982)*

Ngugi's penultimate novel has elicited mixed criticism: while it is often regarded as his most overtly political novel, it also manifests the skills of an experienced literary craftsman, one perhaps at the zenith of his artistic powers.

The discussion of this novel within the framework of the argument propounded in this thesis is somewhat problematic. In view of the very real shift in the author's preoccupations it would appear logical to look at the overtly political concerns raised in the novel as a precursor to analysing those aspects of the novel that fall within the thematic scope of the thesis. While therefore perhaps deviating to some extent from the main concern, it is nevertheless considered crucial to look at the main thrust of the novel and then to tie that in to the theme under consideration.

One of the most strikingly distinctive features of *Devil on the Cross* is the fact of its being written in Gikuyu (this in line with his avowed intention), entitled *Caitaanin Matharaba-ini*, composed on toilet paper while Ngugi was in detention without trial in Kimiti Maximum Security Prison. He intended translating the book firstly into the national lingua franca, Kiswahili, and then into English "to be able to continue dialogue with all" (*Decolonizing the Mind*, 1994:xiv), in spite of having vowed earlier that he was bidding farewell to English as a vehicle for his writings, having decided to work in Gikuyu and Swahili. Ngugi's own ties with Kenya were severed at this stage, because while he was abroad for the launching of *Devil on the Cross*, he learned that he was to be rearrested on his return home, having allegedly been involved in a failed coup against the current rulers. He has subsequently never returned to his beloved fatherland, and is currently living as an exile in Highgate, London, where he is actively engaged in liberating his countrymen in particular and the black man in general from the atrocities of neocolonialism.

In *Devil on the Cross* he emphatically illuminates the plight of the Blacks who sacrificed everything in the struggle to free their country from colonial oppression, only to be once more subjected to exploitation by their own leaders who have often teamed up with foreign powers in their unscrupulous efforts to continue the oppression of the poor, illiterate masses of workers. An inscription in his prison diary (1981:8) clearly gives voice to his idealistic stance in writing *Devil on the Cross*:

I had resolved not to make any concessions to the language. I would not avoid any subject - science, technology, philosophy, religion, music, political economy - provided it logically arose out of the development of theme, character, plot, story, and world view. Further I would use any and everything I had ever learnt about the craft of fiction - allegory, parable, satire, narrative, description, reminiscence, flashback, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, dialogue, drama - provided it came naturally in the development of character, theme and story. But content - not language and technique - would determine the eventual form of the novel. And the content? The Kenyan people's struggle against the neo-colonial form and stage of imperialism!

Bienen (1974:4) accurately singles out corruption as a result of change as the main problem hampering progress during the neocolonial period in Kenya:

In Kenya's case, the national movement has been said to have been betrayed. The sense of bitterness among Kenya's critics is the greater because Kenya had

such a traumatic colonial past. Africans fought and died during the Mau Mau only to have the loyalists and the Europeans win out in the end, it is argued. It is said that the African elite has accepted the norms of the old rulers. The critics of Kenya point to a faction-ridden party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU), which remains an empty shell.... Growth takes place at the expense of the poor: the rich get richer and the poor stagnate or worse. A privileged elite distributes the benefits of economic growth that it gains through alliances with Europeans and through expropriation of Africans and Asians to tribal clients unfettered by any of the formal mechanisms of control which reside in the Legislature and elections. In the process, it exacerbates tribal tensions. Organised dissent is not allowed and the heavy hand of civil administration and, if need be, police and riot squads are used to put down opposition.

Ngugi expresses his own disillusionment with neocolonialism in Kenya in a number of political treatises collated in *Writers in Politics* (1981). He often refers to the period of neocolonialism as the time of flag-independence in which he objects to the country being reigned by indigenous leaders who continue the oppression and exploitation of the Kenyan masses, especially of the peasants and workers because the leaders serve the interests of foreign investors in the country. He regards these leaders as the slaves of American, European and Japanese capitalism. These essays at times reveal Ngugi's bitterness about existing conditions, particularly when he articulates his concern about the results of this kind of exploitation on his own people. He regards the present corrupt government as a policeman of international capitalism enslaving and impoverishing the ordinary Kenyan citizen. Ngugi repeatedly criticizes the government for its failure to effect meaningful changes, especially in the economic sphere, and to improve the living standard of the whole population.

As a result of Ngugi's profound disillusionment and anger with prevailing political, social and economic conditions, his characteristic use of irony often veers in the direction of biting satire and sarcasm, thinly veiling the author's justified bitterness at existing conditions in Kenya. Hazelwood's *The Economy of Kenya: The Kenyatta Era* (1979:192), for instance, indicates the gross disparities in the distribution of income in Kenya. He refers to evidence in several World Bank publications which reveals that about 20% of the Kenyan population receives approximately 70% of the country's income. *Devil on the Cross* undeniably expresses Ngugi's debt to Fanon and Cabral who adapted Marxist arguments to the African reality. Ngugi thus feels that the

peasantry, the intellectuals and the urban masses should be united to create a new society based on an egalitarian sharing of wealth.

Cook and Okenimkpe (1983:121) detect a duality in *Devil on the Cross*. They regard this novel as "both thematically and stylistically a logical development" from the earlier works, but also as a "startling new departure", because of the new boldness with which Ngugi expresses his Marxist beliefs. Paradoxically, this boldness is expressed in a simplified kind of writing, intended at reaching and influencing a larger, but less exclusive, readership.

When considering *Devil on the Cross* within the thematic framework of the present study, one is struck by the fact that the concerns discussed with relation to the other novels under consideration are still present in this novel, albeit with the emphasis shifted to the more overtly political concerns. To some extent, then, the political predominates, the issues centring on women and change are still of crucial importance and constitute important links and motifs within the larger scope of the novel.

In spite of veering in the direction of fantasy, *Devil on the Cross* has a fairly straightforward plot-structure, in the words of Zida (1991:198): "Though the story of *Devil on the Cross* is not linear and still makes use of the journey motif, of involved narratives, it is less complex" than those of *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*. The story starts with Jacinta Wariinga's decision to return to her home town in Ilmorog after being fired for resisting the sexual demands of her lecherous boss, being dropped by her boyfriend and being forcefully evicted from her room by her landlord's thugs. She travels in Mwaura's Model T Ford Matatu, accompanied by four other passengers. The taxi should be seen as a microcosm of the world as a whole, with its driver and passengers as representative of the various types of characters in society. On the way Wariinga relates the story of her life: how the industrious pupil was corrupted by her uncle and later impregnated by the Rich Old Man who left her in the lurch on hearing about her pregnancy. She nearly commits suicide, but keeps the baby and with the help of her parents completes a secretarial course.

While travelling to Ilmorog the passengers, Wangari, Gatuiria, Muturi and the man with the dark glasses discuss various social phenomena which are to become the main thematic concerns of the novel. These discussions incorporate important moments in the lives of the passengers as well as their different views on moral issues. The conversation remains alive and interesting, because Ngugi combines realistic passages, dramatic narrative, debate and moments of satirical absurdity. The plot structure therefore skilfully combines the life stories of the various characters with the general theme of corruption. In the taxi these two themes merge in interspersing the accounts of the various characters with references to invitations to the Devil's Feast to be held in a cave in Ilmorog on the Sunday.

The scene in the taxi naturally flows into the voice of the Master of Ceremonies introducing the speakers at the Devil's Feast. His account of the parable of the talents becomes the central motif of the novel, namely the use and abuse of talents in a postcolonial country. At the feast several international experts at theft and robbery try to outboast one another, openly flaunting their unscrupulousness which characterizes both their private and public lives. The feast is finally broken up by armed forces and the police.

The novel concludes when we meet Wariinga after two years in which she is a totally transformed woman. She has trained as a workshop engineer and has a black belt in karate. She has consented to marry the music lecturer and composer, Gatuiria. He takes her on another journey - to get the consent of their respective parents for their intended marriage. On realizing that Gatuiria's father is the Rich Old Man who earlier seduced her, Wariinga takes the law into her own hands and shoots him. The novel thus ends on a dark note, with Wariinga realizing that she is faced with the greatest crisis of her life.

Ngugi's characterization in *Devil on the Cross* differs somewhat from that of his preceding novels. In keeping with his avowed intention in *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*, as already quoted, namely to attain unity of plot, style, theme and characterization, the characters in the realistic parts of the novel tend to be more

simplistic than in the earlier novels. They even seem to be closer to stereotypes than the main characters of the earlier novels (Cook & Okenimkpe, 1983:123). This approach has enabled Ngugi to distinguish more clearly between the exploiters and the exploited.

Although men figure more prominently in the *Devil's Feast*, women still take a leading role in being both morally more courageous than their male counterparts and in effecting change in a corrupt society. The novel stresses the mammoth roles that Wariinga and Wangari in particular play in effecting change. The opening words of the novel, namely the appeal to the Gicaandi Player indicate that Ngugi's intention in writing this novel is to reveal the "plight of the most wretched victim of African society, the African woman" (Zida, 1991:97).

As the example of the subjected, suffering Kenyan female, Wariinga initially resembles Ngugi's earlier heroines, especially Wanja in *Petals of Blood*. In a sense, however, she is even weaker and more timid at the beginning of the novel than heroines such as Muthoni in *The River Between* and Mumbi in *A Grain of Wheat*. Ngugi skilfully effects suspense when he lets the narrator, Gicaandi Player, Prophet of Justice, first refer to Wariinga when her mother beseeches him to relate the story of the "child I loved so dearly" (DOTC:7). The use of the past tense verb here is significant because it implies that Wariinga is dead. The mother's next utterance intensifies the mysterious nature of previous happenings: "Cast light on all that happened, so that each may pass judgement only when he knows the whole truth. Gicaandi Player, reveal all that is hidden".

The beginning of Chapter Two links Wariinga to the Devil, thereby reinforcing the ominous feeling: "The Devil appeared to Jacinta Wariinga one Sunday on a golf course in the town of Ilmorog in Iiciri District, and he told her - Wait! I am leaping ahead of the story. Wariinga's troubles did not begin at Ilmorog. Let us retrace our steps" (DOTC:10). Ngugi then relates the "misfortune and trouble [that] had trailed" Wariinga as already mentioned.

This description of external misfortunes is followed by a focusing on Wariinga's image of herself as "very ugly" (DOTC:11), hating her "blackness" and therefore having disfigured herself with skin-lightening creams, leaving her body covered with "light and dark spots like the guineafowl". This unflattering picture is extended when her hair is described as splitting, having "browned to the colour of moleskin" as a result of being scalded by the frequent use of red-hot iron combs. She is even appalled by her teeth which are not white enough and her efforts to hide them, give her an angry appearance. As such, she initially lacks the natural youthful beauty of most of Ngugi's earlier heroines. Despite her negative feelings about her physical appearance, men do find her attractive:

But when Wariinga was happy and forgot to worry about the fading whiteness of her teeth and about the blackness of her skin and laughed with all her heart, her laughter completely disarmed people. Her voice was as smooth as perfume oil. Her eyes shone like stars in the night. Her body was a feast for the eyes. Often, when she walked along the road without self-consciousness, her breasts swaying jauntily like two ripe fruits in a breeze, Wariinga stopped men in their tracks.

Wariinga's initial insecurity and inferiority complex let her yearn "to change herself, in covetous pursuit of the beauty of other selves".

Wariinga plays the role of a mystical figure in her dream in which she is tempted by the Devil. Her cry: "Get thee behind me, Satan" (DOTC:194) recalls Jesus' words when in the same situation. Wariinga also rejects the materialistic proposals of the Devil:

She recalled her recent dream. Had it really been a dream or a revelation? Wariinga put the same question again: Had the voice been real or had it been an illusion?

No. It had been the voice of Satan, the voice of temptation. For although the voice had painted a true picture of what was going on in the country, and it had made pertinent observations about neo-colonial Kenya, the way that the voice had shown her as the escape route from the prison of neo-colonial life was misleading and would have cost Wariinga her life. It had tempted her to walk along a broad highway carpeted with the flowers of self-seeking individualism. It had tempted her to sell her body for money again! (DOTC:212-213).

These reflections reveal that Wariinga's dream, and her nightmares while in a semi-conscious state, result from the prevailing social ills in the country.

Apart from influencing the course of physical events, Wariinga undergoes a complete change as far as her personality and outward appearance are concerned. She changes from a scared, suicidal young girl into a mature, self-reliant woman who radiates poise and refinement. Ngugi's delight with his transformed heroine is unmistakable, in Boehmer's (1991:194) words: "With Wariinga, certainly, Ngugi has pulled out all the stops". When we meet Wariinga two years after the Devil's Feast, she is a qualified workshop mechanic. Even her physical appearance reveals her utter transformation:

No, this Wariinga is not that other Wariinga.

Today's Wariinga has decided that she'll never again allow herself to be a mere flower, whose purpose is to decorate the doors and windows and tables of other people's lives, waiting to be thrown on to a rubbish heap the moment the splendour of her body withers. The Wariinga of today has decided to be self-reliant all the time, to plunge into the middle of the arena of life's struggles in order to discover her real strength and to realize her true humanity (DOTC:216).

Ngugi's socio-political stance is apparent in that he immediately lets the narrator urge Wariinga, and by implication all the modern Kenyan Wariingas, to "work harder to develop our land"! While on her way to work, Ngugi hails Wariinga by referring to both her achievements and physical beauty: "Wariinga, the black beauty! Wariinga of the mind and hands and body and heart, walking in rhythmic harmony on life's journey! Wariinga, the worker!" (DOTC:218). When Wariinga appears in all her splendour in traditional dress while on her way to meet her future in-laws, Ngugi's praise knows no bounds: "As she walked, Wariinga appeared to be the child of Beauty, mother of all beauties, just created by the creator of the twins, elegance and beauty" (DOTC:242). The author's mature stance on the possibility of even changing tradition into something positive is apparent when several passers-by comment on Wariinga's ability to change elements of Kenyan tradition into something pleasing and functional by remarking that "there's no tradition that can't be developed" (DOTC:243). Wariinga's decision to wear a traditional outfit at this climactic moment in the novel shows her as the embodiment of Ngugi's vision of developing a national culture in all spheres of Kenyan life. It is thus

obvious that Ngugi believes that women should employ traditional as well as modern means to effect change.

Ngugi explicitly states his belief in gender equality when he comments on the changed role of women:

People love to denigrate the intelligence and intellectual capacity of our women by saying that the only jobs a woman can do are to cook, make beds and to spread their legs in the market of love. The Wariinga of today has rejected all that, reasoning that because her thighs are hers, her brain is hers, her hands are hers and her body is hers, she must accord all her faculties their proper role and proper time and place and not let any one part be the sole ruler of her life (DOTC:218).

Wariinga's common sense emanates from this observation: she is aware that the modern woman is both an intellectual and a sexual being. As such, Ngugi's vision of a liberated woman exceeds that of, for example, Fatima Memissi (1985:1650), who sees "the liberation of women ... [as] predominantly an economic issue".

Wariinga's conversation with Gatuiria reveals her resolute belief in the ability of women to contribute to their own liberation from male domination and exploitation, as well as her awareness of the role of women in the development of the country:

'Why have people forgotten how Kenyan women used to make guns during the Mau Mau war against the British? Can't people recall the different tasks carried out by women in the villages once the men had been sent to detention camps? A song of praise begins at home. If you Kenyan men were not so scornful and oppressive, the foreigners you talk about so much would not be so contemptuous of us' (DOTC:245).

Wariinga sees her killing of the Rich Old Man as an act of salvation which exceeds personal revenge: "What's done cannot be undone. I'm not going to save you. But I shall save many other people, whose lives will not be ruined by words of honey and perfume" (DOTC:253). Spurred on by the remembrance of Wangari, Muturi and the student leader - "the people who had roused her from mental slavery" (DOTC:254), Wariinga shows her contempt for Kihaahu and Gitutu, two of the international robbers and thieves, by shooting them in the knees. Having completed her sacrificial acts of

revenge, Wariinga accepts responsibility for her deeds: "But she knew with all her heart that the hardest struggles of her life's journey lay ahead" (DOTC:254).

Wangari is "the archetypal strong peasant woman" (Evans, 1987:134). She is seen as the symbol of Mother Kenya. By representing the ordinary Kenyan woman who still believes that conditions can be changed in honest ways, Wangari exemplifies the lot of the exploited Kenyan bourgeoisie. She boards Mwaura's taxi as a barefoot "woman carrying a kitenge upper garment that covered a sisal basket she was carrying" (DOTC:35). When she is unable to pay the fare, Mwaura waves aside her protest that she has fought for Independence with her own hands, by reflecting the modern view that "Independence is not tales about the past but the sound of money in one's pocket" (DOTC:37). When her co-passenger, Muturi, offers to pay her fare, she shows her belief in tradition by showering some saliva on her breast.

She unfortunately becomes a mere mouthpiece for Ngugi's patriotic stance when she relates her life-story while travelling in the taxi:

Wangari licked her tongue, cleared her throat and started talking in a voice full of bitterness: 'You say that if a bean falls to the ground, we split it among ourselves? That we shed blood because of the great movement that belonged to us, the people of Kenya, Mau Mau, the people's movement, so that our children might eat until they were full, might wear clothes that kept out the cold, might sleep in beds free from bedbugs? That our children should learn the art of producing wealth for our people? Tell me this: who but a fool or a traitor would not have sacrificed his own blood for those glorious aims? I, the Wangari you see before you, was a small girl then. But these legs have carried many bullets and many guns to our fighters in the forest ... and I was never afraid, even when I slipped through the lines of the enemy and their home guard allies. Our people, today when I recall those things, my heart weakens and I want to cry! Muturi, what did you say? That the modern Haraambe is for the rich and their friends?' (DOTC:40).

Wangari concludes this patriotic outburst by emphatically stating that they made these sacrifices for "Love for Kenya" and not for money. This emphatic and overtly didactic statement does detract from the power of the novel in the sense that the more organically integrated consideration of women and change in the other novels is absent here. This is also to be taken into account in the analysis below of Wangari's account of

her own suffering as emblematic of that of other people, especially women, in the traditional communities.

Wangari's account of her own suffering after being forced to try and make a living in the city becomes (rather overtly?) symbolic of the displacement of a large section of the traditionally rural Kenyan community. Moreover, she reveals the extent of prostitution in Kenya in that even older women are victims of sexual harassment. After having told her story to the black shop manager, he laughs and tells her "that the only job he could offer me was that of spreading my legs, that women with mature bodies were expert at that job" (DOTC:42). Her story culminates in her account of her arrest for vagrancy in Nairobi which links the two themes, namely that of the suffering of the individual and that of the exploitation of the masses by the gang of international thieves and robbers.

In a weighty, self-consciously ironic passage, Ngugi assigns the task of informing the police about the Devil's Feast to the illiterate Wangari, who is eventually arrested and jailed. There is a veiled suggestion that she, Muturi (a delegate from a secret workers' organization in Nairobi) and the student leader might have been executed. In recounting Wangari's denunciation of the robbers and thieves in the cave, Gatuiria stresses Wangari's determination and courage when he tells Wariinga:

'I've never come across a woman with so much courage! Wangari calmly walked up to the platform, and she silenced the whole cave with the power of her eyes - it was as if they were flames of fire - and then she denounced the thieves in a voice that did not betray the slightest trace of fear' (DOTC:196).

Gatuiria's subsequent enthusiastic account of Wangari's challenge to the robbers in the cave allows Ngugi to reinforce the idea of women as the people's judge. The same role is assigned to Wariinga when she shoots the Rich Old Man and two of the Devil's thieves. Wangari assumes angelic qualities when she executes her task of exposing the thieves for what they are, as Gatuiria's account to Wariinga reveals:

'Oh, Wangari was beautiful. I can tell you. Oh, yes, Wangari's face shone as she stood before us all, and it looked as if her courage had stripped years from her body and given her new life. It was as if the light in her face were illuminating the hearts of all those present, and her voice carried the power and the authority of a people's judge' (DOTC:197).

Muturi regards Wangari as representative of a large number of resolute Kenyan women: "Wangari, heroine of our country - all Wangaris, heroines of our land!" (DOTC:127).

Ngugi's fondness for paradox, as noted earlier in this study, finds expression in his juxtapositioning of Wariinga's mother with Gatuiria's mother. Wariinga's mother is depicted as the traditional mother figure whom we first encounter when she appeals to the Gicaandi Prophet to relate the true story about her beloved daughter. Although she does not figure prominently in the novel, she exemplifies the traditional role of grandmother by looking after Wariinga's illegitimate daughter, Wambui. Wariinga's mother is "elderly, but she is one of those people who never seem to age" (DOTC:234). Ngugi reinforces the idea of the beneficial influence of the traditional woman when Wariinga's mother, like Wangari, "showers her breast with saliva, by way of blessing" (DOTC:234) the young couple. This apparently simple meeting assumes symbolic proportions when Wariinga and her mother discuss the resemblance between Gatuiria and Wambui who later turn out to be brother and sister. Ngugi employs situational irony when he extends the conversation to include the words: "We all come from the same womb, the common womb of one Kenya" (DOTC:234). In this instance, however, the words "the same womb" refer to the one man who fathered both children. Foregrounding plays an important role in this conversation, because Wariinga then, albeit unwittingly, draws the various plots together when she refers to the fact that she nearly threw herself in front of a train "because of being rejected by a Rich Old Man. Really! Fancy throwing myself in front of a train on account of the clan that consigned Muturi and the others to detention!" (DOTC:235).

Although Ngugi often refers to Gatuiria's mother, we only meet her towards the end of the novel. Throughout *Devil on the Cross* there have been constant references to the wives and children of rich exploiters who cheat on their wives, as the testimony of the speakers in the cave bears out. When Wariinga articulates her imagined version of a girl being trapped into having an affair with the boss, she with scathing sarcasm refers to the hypocrisy of these men who want to retain their reputation as devoted husbands and

fathers who want to be regarded as highly esteemed members of society, while simultaneously enjoying their affairs with inexperienced young girls:

'Boss Kihira pauses. He remembers his wife and children. He recalls that often on Sundays, he is the one who reads the Bible at the altar in the Church of Heaven, and that from time to time he gives talks at weddings, advising newlyweds about the need for parents and children to live together in love and harmony' (DOTC:23-24).

It is interesting to note that despite the apparently modern lifestyle of Gatuiria's parents, his mother is absent when his father is supposed to meet his future daughter-in-law, a traditional pattern of behaviour in a black society. Moreover, when Wariinga refers to Gatuiria's mother, the Rich Old Man simply waves her aside and continues pleading with Wariinga to be his mistress: "Jacinta, she doesn't count. No one applies old perfume that has lost its scent. Please, my little lady, my fruit, listen to my words" (DOTC:251).

On the whole, in *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi's male characters tend to be even more stereotyped than his females. As a result, they fail to make the definite lasting impression that women such as Wariinga and Wangari leave on the reader. Moreover, the males in *Devil on the Cross* are generally either depicted as heroes or villains, thus lacking the subtle interplay of good and bad, so characteristic of Ngugi's earlier male protagonists, for instance Waiyaki in *The River Between*, Njoroge in *Weep Not, Child*, and Gikonyo in *A Grain of Wheat*.

As Wariinga's male counterpart, Gatuiria fails in radiating male virility and strength. He often merely serves as a catalyst for purposes of highlighting Wariinga's positive characteristics. Nonetheless, before judging him too harshly, it must be mentioned in mitigation that he is depicted as coming from an altogether different background than she does. Gatuiria does, however, deserve some credit for his efforts to resist the Rich Old Man's plans for his only son to continue his father's career of treachery and exploitation. Gatuiria diligently and laboriously struggles to contribute towards the cultural advancement of the nation, a cause Ngugi himself actively strives for.

The depiction of Gatuiria also exposes the widening of Ngugi's academic horizon in that he now includes a talented academic in his row of characters. This contrasts sharply with his former construction of the discourse of transformation centring on its influence on the lives of ordinary people. Nevertheless, Ngugi's contempt for people who sever the ties with tradition as a result of foreign education is revealed in his account of Gatuiria's conversation in the taxi:

Gatuiria spoke Gikuyu like many educated people in Kenya - people who stutter like babies when speaking their national languages but conduct fluent conversations in foreign languages. The only difference was that Gatuiria was at least aware that the slavery of language is the slavery of the mind and nothing to be proud of. But in the heat of discussion Gatuiria was able to speak his language without pausing, hesitating or reverting to English (DOTC:56).

Gatuiria may be seen as Wangari's counterpart in being used as a mouthpiece for Ngugi's own sentiments. Gatuiria expresses Ngugi's heartfelt concern about the loss of traditional Kenyan culture when he bemoans the fact that Kenyan culture has been "dominated by the Western imperialist cultures" (DOTC:58). Gatuiria's ensuing impassioned speech reveals the negative influence of cultural imperialism which he regards as "mother to the slavery of the mind and the body". This attitude gives birth to the "mental blindness and deafness that persuades people to allow foreigners" to dictate to them. As such, Gatuiria sees their whole culture as being lost, and he utters this fear in a cry of near desolation:

'Where are our national languages now? Where are the books written in the alphabets of our national languages? Where is our own literature now? Where is the wisdom and knowledge of our fathers now? Where is the philosophy of our fathers now? The centres of wisdom that used to guard the entrance to our national homestead have been demolished; the fire of wisdom has been allowed to die; the seats around the fireside have been thrown on to a rubbish heap; the guard posts have been destroyed; and the youth of the nation has hung up its shield and spears. It is a tragedy that there is nowhere we can go to learn the history of our country. A child without parents to counsel him - what is to prevent him from mistaking foreign shit for a delicious national dish?

'Our stories, our riddles, our songs, our customs, our traditions, everything about our national heritage has been lost to us' (DOTC:58-59).

Ngugi's characteristic double-edged irony is apparent when he lets this vehement plea serve as a kind of preamble to the Devil's Feast because Gatuiria is one of the last of the passengers in the taxi to air his views. It is, however, ironic that when Gatuiria is given the opportunity of doing something to rid the country of foreign exploitation (when Waringa shoots his father, Kihaahu and Gitutu) he is passive: "Gatuiria did not know what to do: to deal with his father's body, to comfort his mother or to follow Waringa. So he just stood in the courtyard, hearing in his mind music that led him nowhere" (DOTC:254). His passivity calls to mind Njoroge in *Weep Not, Child*: "He [Gatuiria] stood there in the yard, as if he had lost the use of his tongue, his arms, his legs" (DOTC:254). The use of the word *lost* is significant, because it harks back to the words "our national heritage has been *lost* to us" (DOTC:59) [My emphasis]. Despite having achieved success by composing the oratory inspired by Waringa's love, having given his "heart wings" (DOTC:226), Gatuiria pitifully fails to support Waringa's effort at really effecting transformation.

Ngugi's effective use of contrast and comparison, a characteristic of his work, is once more evident in the construction of the Rich Old Man. Gatuiria's father resembles his son in being an exponent of transformation, but differs from his son in that he actively encourages the prevalent decadent forms of change in the new Kenya. Waringa expresses her contempt for this kind of exploiter in piling up references to repulsive insects in her emotional outburst after having shot Gitahi: "There kneels a jigger, a louse, a weevil, a flea, a bedbug! He is a mistletoe, a parasite that lives on the trees of other people's lives" (DOTC:254).

Mwaura serves as another example of a grossly exploitative, degenerate male. His superficial joviality initially fairly successfully veils his predatory but essentially cowardly nature. He is introduced when beguiling people into his taxi, "with words and songs that were intended to distract peoples' eyes from its [his taxi's] decrepit condition" (DOTC:31). Ngugi, however, soon explicitly reveals Mwaura's greed: "Mwaura was one of those men who can never leave a shining coin lying in the path - even a five cent piece. He would rather fall into a pit in an attempt to reach it" (DOTC:34). Mwaura openly flaunts his adherence to the modern idea that "Independence is not tales about

the past but the sound of money in one's pocket" (DOTC:37). Mwaura resembles Iago in openly boasting about his ability to manipulate every circumstance, a characteristic which indicates his lack of any moral stance as well as his predatory greed:

'Even today there's no song that I wouldn't sing. I say this world is round. If it leans that way, I lean that way with it. If it stumbles, I stumble with it. If it bends, I bend with it. If it stays upright, I stay upright with it. If it grows, I grow with it. If it is silent, I am silent too. The first law of the hyena states: Don't be choosy; eat what is available' (DOTC:47).

When Mwaura "collapsed with laughter" (DOTC:50) at his own jokes about the human heart which he equates with money, Ngugi quietly censures his pretence by stating "Not a single passenger joined in". Muturi's sincere retort contrasts directly with Mwaura's lack of insight and reveals the beneficial effect that change could have had for the ordinary Kenyans: "If the fruits of that co-operation had not been grabbed by the clan of parasites, where do you think that we, the clan of producers, would be today? Would we still know the meaning of cold, hunger, thirst and nakedness?" (DOTC:52-53). Muturi openly denounces Mwaura and his kind when he continues: "humanity is the heart of man because the heart of man is linked irrevocably with the growth of his nature as a man. Can you tell us the price of a heart now, you cheap and foolish merchant" (DOTC:53). Mwaura's final act is one of cowardice: when Wariinga has shot Gatuiria's father and the other two, he speeds away in his car.

Thematically *Devil on the Cross* may be regarded as an outcry against corruption and exploitation as a result of postcolonialism, universally and in Kenya in particular. Ngugi explicitly states his thematic concern when the young man who prevents Wariinga from committing suicide early in the novel reflects: "You are right to be weary.... Nairobi is large, soulless and corrupt ... But it is not Nairobi alone that is afflicted in this way. The same is true of all the cities in every country that has recently slipped the noose of colonialism" (DOTC:15). He ascribes the economic difficulties experienced in these countries to their imitation of the American system of self-interest rather than abiding by traditional principles: these countries "have been taught to forget the ancient songs that glorify the notion of collective good. They have been taught new songs, new hymns that celebrate the acquisition of money" (DOTC:15). The young man then reverts to citing

some of the new songs and incantations that reveal the paradoxical nature that characterizes the morals prevalent in the transitional phase in Kenya:

Crookedness to the upright,
Meanness to the kind,
Hatred to the loving,
Evil to the good (DOTC:16).

The following dance-song clearly exposes the self-seeking nature of the exploiters:

That which pecks never pecks for another.
That which pinches never pinches for another.
That which journeys never journeys for another.
Where is the seeker who searches for another?

Despite its apparent simplicity, this incantation manifests the richness of Ngugi's later style. The use of parallel construction reflects the oral tradition, while the rhetorical question at the end reinforces a feeling of uncertainty, so characteristic of the tone of the novel as a whole. The use of alliteration and the repetition of the same words are also features of oral poetry. The metaphorical references, namely in *pecks*, *pinches* and *journey*, are a continuation of metaphorical and symbolic patterns maintained throughout the text. There are constant references to anomalistic behaviour, gluttony, food, physical and mental brutality, as well as to transformation in the form of actual or symbolic travelling towards a new destination, in short, towards changed circumstances.

In *Devil on the Cross* the idea of change and transformation assumes a different meaning from that employed in the previous novels. This novel clearly exposes the sad reality that where characters had yearned for enjoyment of the expected blissful transformation as a result of the radical changes that have taken place in a now politically independent Kenya, Waringa feels compelled to escape from the results of change: "These troubles have now passed beyond the limit of endurance. Who would not welcome change in order to escape from them"? At the beginning of the novel, Waringa is initially concerned especially with sexual exploitation by the wealthy new generation of businessmen:

To the Kareendis [the modern young working women] of modern Kenya, isn't each day exactly as all the others? For the day on which they are born is the very day on which every part of their body is buried except one - they are left with a single organ. So when will the Kareendis of modern Kenya wipe the tears from their faces? When will they ever discover laughter? (DOTC:26).

The ensuing analysis of the way in which Ngugi constructs the discourse of change and transformation in *Devil on the Cross* reveals Ngugi to be a conscious and talented writer at the height of his literary, stylistic and imaginative powers. *Devil on the Cross* fulfils the expectations raised by its writer in vowing to write a closely-knit novel, forcefully relaying its message of corruption in post-independent Kenya by employing every applicable stylistic device.

The frame of reference of *Devil on the Cross* is religious and mythical. The title itself, however, immediately reveals the paradoxical nature of Ngugi's own religious stance: instead of the sacrificial Christ on the Cross, Ngugi ironically assigns this position to the Devil. In this novel the Devil is supposed to have been crucified by the workers only to be resurrected by the rich international robbers and thieves. The main discourse of the novel may therefore be summarized as a tussle between God and the Devil, good and bad, oppressed and oppressor, exploited and exploiter. Symbolism, myth, biblical references and parable may be regarded as cornerstones on which Ngugi constructs this discourse. The text is furthermore enhanced by the rich use of stylistic features, such as repetition, parallel construction, patterns of imagery, rhetorical questions, proverbs, irony and satire, as well as well-considered diction. Moreover, the text exudes a rich African resonance, especially in its reliance on features of the oral tradition. As may be expected, Ngugi also reveals himself as a past master in the creation of suspense, achieved mainly by making use of the withholding of information, subtle hints and foregrounding.

Ngugi blends elements from Christianity with characteristics of the oral tradition by his combination of the parable of "Earthly Wives" with images such as the Devil's feast. While the concept of the Devil as the supreme embodiment of evil is derived directly from the Bible, it also echoes the people's belief in witchcraft or the supernatural. According to Zida (1991:201), Ngugi employs this image to show "neo-colonialism as a

new form of witchcraft that makes it possible for a country's life-blood to be pumped away by foreigners through their local surrogates". In this context the satirical references to buying a new human heart assumes added significance. The Devil's Feast may furthermore be seen as a kind of Witches' Sabbath, an activity intended to ruin the country.

Although Ngugi makes profound use of irony in his portrayal of the thieves, the seriousness of their destructive powers should not be minimized. They are described in anomalous terms: "Whenever one of the thieves yawned, Gatuiria thought he saw his teeth transformed into blood-soaked fangs that were turned towards where he and Waringa sat. He heard a voice whisper to him: These are the eaters of human flesh; these are the drinkers of human blood" (DOTC:175). Even the names of the thieves expose Ngugi's ability to be humorous even when being satirical. Their "kilometric names that encapsulate cupidity, lust, emptiness" (Zida, 1991:202), such as Rottenborough Groundflesh Shitland Narrow Isthmus Joint Stock Brown (DOTC:99) or Lord Gabriel Bloodwell-Stuart-Jones (DOTC:109) are amusing, but reveal both their pretentiousness and their unscrupulous, materialistic carnivorous intentions.

Significantly, one of Ngugi's best-known ironic speeches[6] deals with male chauvinism or the double standards in regard to sexual freedom of men and women. In the following highly ironic speech Nditika wa Nguunji fantasizes about manufacturing additional human parts to satisfy male lust:

'Whenever, I Nditika wa Nguunji, contemplate my extraordinary wealth, I ask myself sadly several searching questions. With all my property, what do I have, as a human being, that a worker, or a peasant, or a poor man does not have? I have one mouth, just like the poor; I have one belly, just like the poor; I have one heart, just like the very poor; and I have one ... er, you know what I mean, just one like the poorest of men' (DOTC:179-180).

He then bemoans the fact that he can be satisfied with only one plateful of food at a time, and be content to wear only one set of clothes - and be exhausted by only one girl. He therefore detects no difference between the rich and the poor: "So, seeing that I have only one mouth, one belly, one heart, one life and one cock, what's the difference

between the rich and the poor? What's the point of robbing others?" (DOTC:180). Nguunji continues by relating how it was "revealed" to him that night that they could have factories for manufacturing human parts - for the rich: "This would mean that a rich man who could afford them could have two or three mouths, two bellies, two cocks and two hearts". He gives his imagination - and lust - full range when he continues:

'When an old man like me had a sugargirl, instead of falling asleep soon after the first engine had stalled, he would simply start up the other engine and continue with the job in hand, the two engines supporting each other all night long, so that on waking up in the morning he would feel that his new heart and body were completely relaxed. We could coin some new sayings: a rich man's youth never ends. When a man possesses two hearts, he virtually possesses two lives. This would mean that a really rich man would never die. There's another possible proverb: a rich man never dies. We could purchase immortality with our money and leave death as the prerogative of the poor'.

Despite its superficially humorous tone, this passage is one of Nguunji's most scathing indictments of the attitude of the wealthy exploiters towards the poor. The irony is extended when Nguunji's wife revels at the idea of the wives that these wealthy men could also have "two or more female things" (DOTC:181). This remark leads to Nguunji's resorting to violence and insisting on his wife abiding by tradition: "*Here we are Africans, and we must practise African culture*" (DOTC:181).

The frequent use of parables also adds to the impact of *Devil on the Cross*. This novel contains more proverbs and sayings characteristic of the nation's ancient wisdom than any of Nguunji's earlier novels. However, these proverbs are not mere embellishment: they are used to illuminate certain key concepts in the novel or appear at climactic moments to lend finality to an argument. For instance, the overriding idea of the novel, namely that the present generation should have benefitted from the sacrifices of the Mau Mau, is succinctly contained in the proverb: "These days the land rewards not those who clear it but those who come after it has been cleared" (DOTC:37). Similarly, Waringa's actions are sanctified by referring to the old saying " ... when a bird in flight gets tired, it will land on any tree" (DOTC:33). The frequent use of proverbs should be seen as another device to recall the beauty of a lost past, one of Nguunji's avowed aims in writing *Devil on the Cross*.

In addition, Ngugi's skilful employment of various registers of language constitutes one of the stylistic feats of this novel. There is a marked difference in the diction of for example ordinary Kenyans such as Wangari and Wariinga's mother, the more standard kind of language used by Gaturia and the bland tones of international intercourse in, for example, the keynote address by the Master of Ceremonies:

'And now, before I sit down, I shall call upon the leader of the foreign delegation from the International Organization of Thieves and Robbers (IOTR), whose headquarters are in New York, USA, to talk to you. I think you all know that we have already applied to become *full* members of IOTR. The visit of this delegation, plus the gifts and the crown they have brought us, marks the beginning of an even more fruitful period of co-operation' (DOTC:87).

The ease with which Ngugi plays with the pomp and applause of the jargon of the world of international trade indicates his extended range of international exposure and differs remarkably from his earlier, "rural" vocabulary.

Ngugi's merging of oral and ritual tradition, as discussed in some detail earlier, unifies the novel's form and content. The increased skill with which Ngugi integrates song, dance and formal patterns of traditional ritual into his narrative and dialogue may be ascribed to his involvement in drama. The best example of merging the traditional and modern is the meeting in the cave which essentially recalls a meeting of the chief and elders in a traditional setting, while the novel abounds with songs, written according to the oral tradition. Apart from traditional songs, there are snatches as well from various other kinds of songs, such as pop-songs, freedom fighters' songs and hymns. The inclusion of Gikuyu stories, songs and proverbs richly and rewardingly serves Ngugi's purpose of making the political discourses meaningful to the general reading public.

Devil on the Cross refutes Mphahlele's (1970:29) anticipated fear that Ngugi's obsession with the Mau Mau revolt might prevent this talented writer from dealing with more modern issues. Mphahlele has earlier stated that at "times Ngugi gives the appearance of being so obsessed with this theme [the Mau Mau theme] that the implications are that he will not be able to write a novel of contemporary life ... until he

has fully exorcised himself of this curse" (1970:29). *Devil on the Cross* is contemporary, depicting life in post-independence Kenya because it deals with issues of its time while also being written in a modern idiom.

In a sense *Devil on the Cross* is more successful as a novel than its predecessor, *Petals of Blood*, because it reflects a more balanced view of characters in a rapidly changing world. Ngugi succeeds in revealing both the negative as well as the possible although marred results of acculturation. *Devil on the Cross* remains satisfying in literary terms, exceeding being of interest solely as a sociological or anthropological document. I definitely find that Ngugi's earlier novels tend to become more of a sociological document than his later fiction. Chukwukere (1965:228) has levelled the justifiable criticism of Ngugi's earlier novels: "I would not want any of my readers to get the impression that I regard ... novels by contemporary African authors, as documentary sources for sociological data. Novelists are not, of course, ethnographers; but if they happen to be, they are creative artists first". In *Devil on the Cross* Ngugi succeeds exceedingly well in presenting "the personal conflict, emotional ... and intellectual, that emanates from the rapid social transformation characteristic of the continent of Africa as a whole" (1965:228) and Kenya in particular. This is especially true of the delineation of Waringa.

Cook and Okenimkpe (1983:123) applaud Ngugi's characterization in *Devil on the Cross* by mentioning that this novel more closely resembles certain African works than Western novels. They feel that Okara's *The Voice* and Laye's *The Radiance of the King* also "combine out-and-out ironic satire of the exploiters with a realistic, more life-like story of some of their victims. To dovetail these two modes is a literary *tour-de-force*", which Ngugi has succeeded in doing.

Characterization in *Devil on the Cross* deviates from Ngugi's usual pattern which includes fairly detailed descriptions of a number of white colonisers. This should be seen as a manifestation of Ngugi's avowed aim of concentrating on achieving unity in this novel. Since the theme of the novel is exploitation by Kenyans themselves, the role

of Whites in a transformed Kenya has little relevance on shaping Kenya's development in this era.

Because characterization is all-important for Ngugi's construction of the theme of change and its resultant effect of transformation in a postcolonial African country, this aspect of his work should always be scrutinized before coming to a final evaluation of any of his novels. As a general comment, the words of Boehmer (1991:194) sum up Ngugi's attitude towards his female characters in *Devil on the Cross*: "Ngugi ... introduces heroines who have made a decisive break with a former life or mothering and/or whoring in their commitment to a revolutionary cause" (1991:194). Boehmer sees Wangari as representative of the traditional figure of the old seer, such as Wambui in *A Grain of Wheat* and Nyakinyua in *Petals of Blood*. Wangari, however, plays a more dominant role in the novel than her predecessors. According to Boehmer, the younger female protagonists in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) and Wariinga in *Devil on the Cross* are even more forceful than Ngugi's earlier heroines: "If the heroines of the earlier novels were forceful, then these women characters, in their fortitude, the fierceness of their resolution, and their resourcefulness, are larger than life" (1991:194). They, however, share the loneliness of their earlier counterparts.

In assessing Ngugi's successful construction of female characters, the complete transformation of Wariinga merits some attention. Zida (1991:198), for instance, mentions that Wariinga's "evolution may be seen as unconvincing, especially when she is suddenly thrust on the reader toward the end of the novel with the information that she has metamorphosed". In the light of my application of the terms *change* and *transformation*, this statement contains a certain paradox, because *evolution* refers to changes that take place over an extensive period of time, while the words *suddenly thrust* and *metamorphosed* create the idea of rapidity. I do, however, agree with the view that Wariinga's complete transformation is convincing if seen as an ironic commentary on the earlier avowal to project the whole truth about her life, another proof of Ngugi's attempt at achieving a close-knit effect.

In *Devil on the Cross* Ngugi expresses his criticism of exploitation in a more modern idiom than in his previous novels. At times his criticism borders on the ridiculous or contains elements of speculative fiction, for instance when Gitutu wa Gataaguru plays with the idea of canning air from the sky to sell to peasants and workers. He even considers the possibility of importing air, to sell to the people at special prices or to export their air and resell it as "*Made in USA; Made in Western Europe; Made in Japan; This Air is Made Abroad*" (DOTC:107).

This reference reveals that Ngugi's reliance on irony and satire in *Devil on the Cross* differs from that in his earlier works. In the earlier novels irony and satire were mostly used by a third person narrator or an omnipotent narrator to reveal hidden motives or inconsistencies in the deeds of characters. This subtler form of humorously exposing weaknesses in people, instances or systems, however, changes to outspoken satiric revelations by a group of self-proclaimed villains who revel in their villainy. The reaction of the spectators in the cave is also of significance: unlike in the earlier novels, they have the opportunity of openly jeering at their oppressors or censuring their villainous bragging. The social commentary thus becomes much more explicit, mainly because it directly exposes the disastrous effects it has on the lives of individuals as well as on the nation as a whole. Cook and Okenimkpe (1983:123) regard Ngugi's "blending of formalized realism and extreme ironic satire ... [as] more than a technical triumph" since it forcefully "expresses something of the temper and frustration of contemporary radical thinkers in the Third World as typified by Kenya". These critics justly praise the scene in the cave which occupies about half of the book for Ngugi's feat in sustaining an ironic-satiric tone for so long:

The scene in the Cave mirrors the brazen confidence now being expressed by comprador capitalist society in parts of Africa. So sure of themselves are the moneyed elite that they feel little need to conceal their real methods or motives. While the competition to crown Kenya's leading extortioner is satirically exaggerated, the assertive cocksure tone that emanates from the body of the meeting will be menacingly familiar to many readers. The unqualified satire gives the victims of neo-colonialism a rare opportunity of seeing their tormentors reduced to comic caricatures by being made to boast in public of their conscienceless excesses.

This scene persuasively serves to unite the oppressed and to instil in them a feeling of hope to form a united front against exploitation. Ngugi mentions that when the spectators flee from the cave, the scene is "both comic and sad" (DOTC:207), a tone perhaps of the novel as a whole as evinced by earlier references to Ngugi's use of irony and satire. Gitutu wa Galaanguru and Nditika wa Nguunje, for example, are seen: as "two spiders with eggs, while their buttocks were lashed by their pursuers with sticks. By the time they had reached their cars, they were panting, and the sweat of pain and fatigue and fear fell to the ground in drops like rain during a heavy downpour" (DOTC:207). When the robbers try to escape the laughter of the crowd, however, "turned into menacing roar. The people roared like a thousand angry lions whose cubs had been taken away from them" (DOTC:207). They then start singing the workers' anthem, ending with the words:

I therefore vow always to struggle against neo-colonialism,
For neo-colonialism is the last vicious kick of a dying imperialism (DOTC:210).

Ngugi's intensified and varied use of irony and satire should therefore be viewed as one of his finest literary accomplishments in this novel, in the words of Cook and Okenimkpe (1983:122): "Ngugi's deep-seated irony, which we have noted all along, now blossoms into a full-scale set-piece of ironic satire". Cook and Okenimkpe regard the thieves' speeches as "savagely comic rhetorical self-exposures" (1983:122). The masterful employment of irony and satire in *Devil on the Cross* sets Ngugi on a par with acclaimed ironic-satirists such as Swift, Fielding, Pope and George Orwell.

Finally, a word about Ngugi's curious blend of realism and idealism in *Devil on the Cross*. It is true that despite luring the reader into expecting a happy ending with Wariinga and Gaturia getting married, the final scene is characteristic of Ngugi's depiction of the harsh realities of post-independence Kenya: there are no easy solutions to the problems especially of women who strive to change conditions in an impoverished and down-trodden African society. Throughout the novel Ngugi with extreme sensitivity depicts Wariinga's fight against postcolonialism: as going hand in hand with her own liberation as a woman. Consequently, Ngugi's portrayal of Wariinga

radiates warmth, sympathy and enthusiasm. Lebdai (1987:233) sees Wariinga as "a carrier of hope for all women who fight all forms of oppression".

This study has striven to show that *Devil on the Cross* defies easy literary classification because it is a novel that is both provocative and disturbing. It also constitutes a new trend on the literary scene by relying on features characteristic of various literary genres, conventions and nationalities. It is immensely rich in texture and the application of various stylistic devices, thereby exceeding the limitations and constrictions often found in less superior protest or subversive literature.

Devil on the Cross is remarkable in the sense that this talented writer still remains extremely innovative after having written so prolifically and often on basically similar themes. The device of letting his protagonists go on a fairly long journey together is an extension of the trek in *Petals of Blood*, although in *Devil on the Cross* it focuses in more detail on the distinctive people and what they represent. This novel is also more philosophical and symbolic than its predecessors. Although Ngugi succeeds in conveying the general sense of decay and dilapidation, the novel is much more refined than, for instance Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, where the emphasis on stench and filth symbolizes moral decay, but becomes almost revolting. On the negative side, however, it must be noted that *Devil on the Cross* tends to become repetitive, especially in the long, rambling speeches of the international robbers and thieves. Therefore, the pace tends to be rather slow, causing a perceived loss in intensity.

4.2.3 Matigari (1986)

Ngugi's latest novel, *Matigari*, also written in its writer's mother tongue, was published in English in 1986 (the edition used was published in 1987). It differs significantly from *Devil on the Cross*, lacking both the artistic depth and impact of the former. Although dealing with the theme of corruption in a transformed postcolonial state as well, *Matigari* is cast in the form of a moral fable. Nevertheless, the novel excels in exposing that those who

zealously fought for and suffered for independence, are gaining the least for their unstinting sacrifices.

Matigari was regarded as so subversive that it was banned and removed from all bookshops. This prompted Ngugi to retaliate by writing in *The Weekend Guardian* (27-28 May, 1989):

But in the neocolonial situation fiction seems to be more real than the absurdity of the factual world of a dictator. The world of a dictator has an element of pure fantasy. He will kill, jail, and drive hundreds into exile and imagine that he is actually loved for it. One of course wishes that the world of a dictator was only confined to hard covers. But it isn't and a dictator will even think of dragging characters from fiction into the streets. Perhaps that proves the relevance of literature to life. Or put it this way: dictators are the best students of literature! This does not mean they have learned anything from either literature or history.

The plot structure and narrative of *Matigari* are remarkably simpler than those of *Devil on the Cross*. Matigari relates how a member of the legendary Mau Mau, Matigari na Njiruungi, literally meaning "the patriots who survived the liberation war, and their political offspring" (Ma:20), journeys through Kenya after the war to see how his offspring are. Matigari does so after having spent a long time in the bush where he has hunted and finally tracked down his former white boss, Settler Williams, together with the latter's cook, John Boy. Matigari is sadly disillusioned upon realizing that the noble objectives, for which the Mau Mau made every sacrifice, are betrayed. He becomes aware of all the negative changes in the country, that "society has undergone a process of transvaluation" (Zida, 1991:199). Matigari is shocked by the degree of corruption existing in all spheres of life, the exploitation of the weak, as well as the mockery of justice. When Matigari exposes corruption, he is arrested, imprisoned and persecuted. He escapes with the help of a woman, Guthera, and an orphaned child, Muriuki. Matigari and Guthera are killed while crossing a river in an attempt to reach the spot where he has buried his weapons which he wants to retrieve in order to continue the armed struggle. The novel ends on a sad, but strangely hopeful note in that Muriuki arms himself with Matigari's weapons, implying that the next generation will continue fighting for the real liberation of all exploited masses:

He [Mariuki] recalled the night of the workers' strike. And suddenly he seemed to hear the workers' voices, the voices of the peasants, the voices of the students and of other patriots of all the different nationalities of the land, singing in harmony:

Victory shall be ours!
Victory shall be ours!
Victory shall be ours!
Victory shall be ours! (Ma:175).

The dedication of the novel clearly reveals its author's aims: "This novel is dedicated to all those who love a good story; and to all those who research and write on African literature; and to all those committed to the development of literature in the languages of all the African peoples". Ngugi (1986:vii) has himself added an explanatory note to the English edition of *Matigari*, in which he explains that the novel is partly based on an oral story relating a man's search for a cure for an illness. He looks for an old man, Ndiro, until he finds him and is cured. In contrast to *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* Ngugi remarks that the "story is simple and direct, and ... dispenses with fixed time and place" (1986:vii). It relies on the "rhythmic restatement of the motif of search", while suspense is maintained by "the urgency of the man's need for a cure" (1986:vii).

Although the novel focuses on Matigari, it touches on issues of women, change and transformation. On his return from the war, Matigari is disgusted by all the negative changes that have turned the country into a spiritual and actual desert, a place where children sleep in a scaperyard: "Matigari held his chin, sadly contemplating what had taken place. Age crept back on his face; the wrinkles seemed to have increased and deepened. How everything had changed. What was this world coming to?" (Ma:29). However, amidst this world of disintegration, Matigari comments on the role of women. He is aware that they are still both sustaining tradition and effecting change: "Indeed, women were the corner-stones of the home ... Women are the ones who uphold the flame of continuity and change in the homestead" (Ma:27).

Ngugi's concern with the plight of women, especially in terms of their being sexually exploited and harassed, surfaces in his relating the story of Guthera, the prostitute. Her persecution by the police is well motivated and serves as a stringent attack on the

critical aspect to Head?

abuse of power, so prevalent in many postcolonial countries. Unfortunately, Guthera does not convince as a character because she is too one-sided: she is consistently portrayed as an innocent victim. Guthera's description of being born again, in addition, tends to become sentimental: "She became a born-again Christian. She started praising the Lord so earnestly she felt as though she had grown wings of holiness and could just fly to heaven" (Ma:34). The relation of her choice between her earthly and Heavenly father degenerates into mere melodrama. Her situation is portrayed as so desperate that her turning to prostitution lacks the authenticity of Ngugi's earlier prostitutes because there seems to be no other solution to her problems.

Although the simplicity of *Matigari* may be more effective in reaching its target reading public, namely the common Kenyan population, it is less satisfying to informed students and critics of literature than, for instance *Devil on the Cross*, in my opinion Ngugi's most accomplished fictional work.

To summarize: the study of Head's last and Ngugi's three most recent novels has revealed the inherent dissimilarities in the portrayal, by these two authors, of gender stratification towards the end of their respective careers as novelists. These differences may be ascribed to both the contrasting directions into which their lives veered and to the political, economic and social environments in which each of them has fended for the rights of women in a postcolonial world of changing circumstances and ideological stances, as the ensuing brief remarks will elucidate.

Head's final novel, *A Question of Power*, may be seen as introducing an intriguing kind of female writing, in becoming more introspective. It mainly reveals the mental suffering of female characters who cannot bear the constraints of male patriarchy, domination and class stratification any longer. This may be regarded as a forerunner to novels such as Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* which explore the theme of female exploitation from a psychological point of view. Like Dangarembga, Head's "female voice promises a fresh insight on women's reality and experiences" (Uwakweh, 1995:76). This "fresh insight" arises from her own personal struggle with life. Although one of the most sympathetic defenders of the female cause, Ngugi remains more

objective and understandably more aloof in his depiction of the females in an often hostile postcolonial male-dominated environment. He, so to speak, writes from without, while Bessie Head writes from within in revealing her innermost feelings and tortured suffering.

Another significant difference between Ngugi and Head is that in Ngugi's last novels the setting becomes increasingly urban, while Head still depicts her characters against a rural background. Consequently, Ngugi depicts his female protagonists wrestling with problems in a changed postcolonial world even further removed from their traditional life in rural villages, which still remains the geographical construct of Bessie Head's final novel. As such, Ngugi's women have to find a niche in a world of discrimination on the grounds of gender, sex and race in the more urbanized world, strongly influenced by Western capitalist, materialistic and moral norms. This may account for Ngugi's obsession with prostitution, the final act of female degradation which is often the last option for sustaining a destitute woman and possibly her family as well.

The growing polarization in the most recent fiction of Bessie Head and Ngugi manifests itself in marked stylistic differences. Where Head continues publishing in English, Ngugi's avowed patriotic drive forces him to write in his mother tongue. Ngugi's last works also strongly reflect features from the African tradition, such as the reliance on the oral tradition, the frequent employment of fable, myth, song and incantations, as well as the use of traditional proverbs. By contrast, Head's *A Question of Power* continues exhibiting literary and stylistic qualities which can be ascribed partly to her South African educational background.

The lasting impression emanating from a study of the novels of Bessie Head and Ngugi, however, is that *A Question of Power* and *Devil on the Cross* are aesthetically highly accomplished works of art, finally reasserting the position of their respective authors as figures of indisputable literary repute in the African canon.

ENDNOTES

- [1] This chapter, the longest of my thesis, will exert a strong influence on the final assessment of the literary achievement of Head and Ngugi with special emphasis on their contribution concerning the theme of women and transformation because trends that have been to a greater or lesser extent discernible in their preceding novels have asserted themselves strongly in the writers' last novels. The continuing shift in vision (with Head becoming more visibly autobiographical and Ngugi increasingly employing the novel as a vehicle for propagating his more pronounced Marxist social, political and economic principles) will be examined more closely in the final chapter of this thesis.
- [2] See my M.A. dissertation, *Aspects of Belief and Unbelief: A Study of Selected Novels by Graham Greene*, for a detailed analysis of the inability of certain characters to believe in anything, in other words, those people who are totally rootless, uninvolved and uncommitted.
- [3] Although Elizabeth's quest is a religious one, it does not see God in the exclusive Christian sense. Head brings in characters from the Judaic religious tradition, Christianity, Buddhism and classical mythology. Consequently, Elizabeth's final acknowledgement that there "is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet" (AQOP:206), defines the whole as the total of all the fragments: "normal and abnormal" (AQOP:15); the "height of goodness" and the "depth of evil" (AQOP:36); the "demon" and the "goddess", as well as God and Satan (AQOP:161).
- [4] Achebe (1972:8) comments on the same trend in his own writing when remarking in an interview during a visit to The University of Texas at Austin in November 1969:

Well, my role has been changing. And I think this is true of all the other writers in one way or another. We started off - and this was necessary - showing that there was something here - a civilization, a religion, a history. Then we had to move on to the era of independence. Having fought with the nationalist movements and been on the side of the politicians, I realized after independence that they and I were now on different sides, because they were not doing what we had agreed they should do. So I had to become a critic. I found myself on the side of the people against their leaders - leaders this time being black people. I was

still doing my job as a writer, but one aspect of the job had changed. I think what you do as a writer depends on the state of your society.

- [5] This symbolism harks back to Blake's well-known poem, *The Rose*, where it also refers to hidden corruption. Moreover, echoes of this implication are also to be found in Bob Leshoai's more recent play, *The Rendezvous*, in which the prostitute, Sponkie, also ironically comments on the African under oppression who tries very hard to be different in spite of the mud in which they all wallow.
- [6] It is significant to note that Ngugi himself chose this passage as one of the few extracts for his reading from his own works at the international Ngugi conference which I attended. The conference was entitled *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Texts and Contexts* and was hosted at Penn State Berks Campus (7-9 April 1994).

CHAPTER FIVE

5 RECAPITULATION AND CONCLUSION

This thesis has uncovered several important issues which critically affect women in a transitional period as observed and represented in different ways by Bessie Head and Ngugi. Their contribution to this specific aspect of literature has been investigated from different viewpoints, among others in terms of their being female/male authors, authors from different countries with often strikingly dissimilar political, social, -historical and economic backgrounds, and as writers with totally different artistic visions - but at the same time there are persuasively and inescapable similarities in their postcolonial situations. These varying factors have influenced Head's and Ngugi's choice and handling of themes, as well as of aspects of form and technique. It is therefore at this stage both necessary and possible to highlight a few important characteristics of the contributions of Head and Ngugi to the twentieth century postcolonial literary debate, from the specific angle of vision adopted for purposes of this thesis.

My investigation of the key concepts *women*, *change* and *transformation* has striven to underline the vital role women have increasingly been playing in effecting the processes of change with their inevitably visible transformation on postcolonial twentieth century life, globally but also increasingly in sub-Saharan Africa. This study of change and transformation within the context of postcolonialism assumes a significant degree of relevance, especially for South Africans, who are part of perhaps the most sweeping and exciting because it focuses on the process and manifestation of change and transformation during a time of rapid and irreversible changes in Africa. More changes, both in number and kind, have taken place in the postcolonial period than in any previous era, as Nemoianu recently pointed out in his 1995 Conference Paper, entitled "Globalism, Multiculturalism, and Comparative Literature" (1995:11):

Under British overlordship in India and Africa many features of traditional society were preserved: it is in the post-colonial age that Westernization advanced more rapidly. The dismantling of apartheid in South Africa is likely to accelerate Westernization in that part of the world, not to slow it down.

The novels of Ngugi and Head to my mind underscore Achebe's proverbial words forming the title of his 1975 critical essay, namely that it is still not Uhuru in the fullest sense of the word, but *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. Thematically, both Head's and Ngugi's major novels thus represent their authors' gripping rendering of central issues of current literary and critical concern. In other words, although their novels deal with matters and ideas that still preoccupy their contemporaries, thereby revealing a fair amount that is conventional, they contain much that is peculiarly unconventional and characteristic to each of these writers. A few of these aspects will therefore be analysed in the conclusion of this thesis and by way of firmly outlining the niches occupied by these authors within the context of postcolonial African writing.

5.1 AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL VERSUS POLITICAL WRITING

This study has raised questions and considerations about the fundamental nature and aim of fiction as perceived by Head and Ngugi. In a letter to Charles Sarvan (1990:13) on 26 June 1980 Bessie Head quite validly stated that all three her "novels are continuous autobiographical records"[1]. *When Rain Clouds Gather* testifies to Head's concern with the personal experiences of lonely exiles, displaying a fairly discernible relation between fact and fiction. In *Maru* Head's preoccupation with displaced, stigmatized and persecuted female characters is also indicative of the sensitive woman writer struggling, as noted earlier, to come to terms with and realize her artistic talents in what she perceives as a hostile environment. However, the foundational autobiographical premises of *A Question of Power* have elicited ambivalent reactions from critics which underpin the validity of Head's conception of the novel as a fictional genre. As has been noticed, this trend is discernible in Head's earlier novella, *The Cardinals*. It is thus quite obvious that Head does not view the novel as a realist genre but rather as a subjective vehicle which plays a constructive and cathartic role in solving her own personal anxieties.

Lewis Nkosi tends to be understandably critical of the unabashedly autobiographical nature of Head's novels. He (1981:102) feels that the "passion to make the feature of

personal experience a governing emotion" may result in becoming "a compulsive disposition" in the works of any writer, especially a so-called "protest" writer. In consequence, Nkosi justifies the inclusion of personal details in a novel only when it serves as an incentive to artistic creation: "Nevertheless, where a writer is absolutely in control over the materials of his life the pressure acts as a necessary key which unlocks the imagination and provides us with the necessary means for reconciling the author's private world of subjectivity with objective world of universal significance". Lewis therefore views Bessie Head as "a writer who throws in every flotsam and jetsam" of her private life into a novel "in an untested supposition that we, as readers, will find significance in it". By contrast, Nkosi regards Ez'kia Mphahlele as an author "who constructs out of these fragments 'a separate place', full of meaning and instruction for us" (1981:102).

Although essentially an autobiographical and highly committed author, Bessie Head is not generally viewed as a political writer. Nkosi, for example, categorically states: "Bessie Head is not a political novelist in any sense we can recognise; indeed, there is ample evidence that she is generally hostile to politics"[2]. He quite rightly feels that Head's self-avowed political resentment has a negative influence on her character portrayal as the paradoxical nature of Makhaya, for example, amply demonstrates: despite having been jailed for two years for attempted sabotage, Makhaya claims to be disinterested in politics!

Nevertheless, Head ascribes one of the most appealing characteristics of her work, namely her connectedness to Africa, to her admiration for Robert Sobukwe, as her letter to Charles Sarvan (25 April 1980) indicates:

I dearly loved Robert Sobukwe and the politics he expounded ... Sobukwe's view was Pan African and generally included *all things African*, with an edge of harshness in it that forced one to make an identification with being African and a sense of belonging to Africa. This helped me to adjust and get a sense of balance. Mostly, all black people born in South Africa, live with a very broken sense of history. Apart from this slight acquaintance with the world of politics, I have carefully avoided power and politics both in a personal capacity and in my work (Sarvan, 1990:13)[My emphasis].

Ngugi's basic artistic premises, by contrast, may be criticized on the opposite grounds: he progressively views his novels as a means by which to express his Marxist political, social and economic ideologies. Nemoianu (1995:1) shares Ngugi's belief in the usefulness of literature as a means of instruction:

I am convinced that the art of literature in general ... [is] not only indispensable to a sane and humane society, but also that ... [it provides] many useful insights and pointers for social functioning.

In the context of Nemoianu's paper as a whole, especially since it deals with various aspects of change, this statement may legitimately be extended to include the influence of literature on effecting change resulting in a transformed society, the most obvious areas of change being the economic, political, religious and educational spheres. Nemoianu's (1995:3) explicit criticism of the manner in which colonialism was forced on the indigenous populations in the world at large and in Africa in particular, serves to justify Ngugi's bitterness at the devastatingly painful effects of colonization discernible in a postcolonial Kenyan society:

Nowadays the most frequently proposed explanation [for the manner of colonization] is simply a power-based one: the aggressive initiative and military-political dynamism of Western civilization led to assert its domination over the rest of the world. No dispute here: there is much truth in this explanation, Western civilization having shown from its very beginnings a very energetic willingness to expand and to use force in its self-affirmation.

Careful consideration of the often brutal and inhuman way in which the process of colonization in Kenya was undertaken, together with the remarkable degree of corruption prevalent among the privileged colonizing powers, justifies Ngugi's insistent rejection of the new African elitist rulers who practise and even revel in their abuse of power and their exploitation of the proletariat, as especially *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* so forcefully demonstrate. In these two novels Ngugi levels his criticism at the police and armed forces who abuse power in curbing any form of resistance, while *Matigari* exposes the injustices inherent in the application of the legal system in a corrupt post-revolutionary Kenyan society.

In his unpublished paper delivered at the 1995 AUETSA conference in Pietermaritzburg, James Ogudu (*Programme and Abstracts*, 1995:29), however, cautions critics against the possible negative influence of Ngugi's political bias in his novels:

Ngugi's recent discourses on the post-colonial state can be described as a counter narrative of liberation. It is a narrative that seeks to deconstruct the hegemonic constitution of the colonial subject by the coloniser and in the process to will, out of conditions of displacement and fragmentation wrought by colonialism and now, neo-colonialism, the emergence of a new nation still subterranean. Ngugi's response has been to give form to this state of 'chaos' by revisiting the dominant history which was the construction of the coloniser. In doing this Ngugi has sought to speak back to colonial history and to foreground the history and struggles of the subaltern classes.

Ogudu continues by revealing that Ngugi's novels thus tend to display a romantic portrayal of the workers and peasantry, which in turn leads to an inclination "to project a unity and coordinated will upon the masses", as well as to "the attempt to mythologise the subaltern as heroes and redeemers of disproportionate heroic qualities". I do, nevertheless, suspect that Ogudu rather belabours his critical views when he inscribes personal nationalistic and revolutionary ideals into Ngugi's artistic portrayal of his transformational themes:

Finally Ngugi's portrayal of the subaltern points to two things: that either Ngugi sincerely believes in the revolutionary readiness of the Kenyan workers and peasants - the African masses - and like Fanon, he is convinced that the masses have simply been betrayed by the national bourgeoisie or, alternatively, Ngugi as a political activist desires and wills a revolution that would lead to a total overhaul of the 'capitalist' system in Kenya and he therefore uses the narrative to negotiate the possible revolutionary strategies that he would wish to see used by the oppressed in their conditions of marginality, displacement and fragmentation (1995:29-30).

Where Bessie Head's aversion to politics may therefore be regarded as a limitation to her work, Ngugi's insistence on using the novel for propagating certain political ideas, should be seen as a more overt inclination towards of pamphleteering.

5.2 A CHANGED PERSPECTIVE: THE DISCOURSE OF FEMALE LIBERA

The canon of both Head and Ngugi firmly denies the traditional image of the African woman as being dominated, exploited, abused and merely used as a beast of burden. In other words, Head and Ngugi may both be regarded as feminist writers, according to Cheryl Walker's (1991:xxiii) definition that "a feminist is someone who perceives that women in a given society are oppressed as women, and believes that this should be changed". A chronological study of female characters in the novels of both authors simultaneously indicates a new conception of effective women who grow in strength and influence as the individual novel progresses while also reflecting an increasing empowerment of women in the writers' output as a whole.

Brown (1981:180) distinguishes an interesting feature in Head's empowerment of women:

The importance of private growth as a prerequisite for social change is more explicit in the works of Bessie Head than in ... [the works of many female writers], but she is representative rather than unique in this regard. In retrospect, all the major writers are preoccupied with the woman's personal strength - or lack of it - when they analyse sexual role and sexual inequality.

There is definitely a similarity between Ngugi and Head in this respect - especially Ngugi's later female protagonists possess an exceptional capacity for personal growth.

In an early article in *Busara*, Eddah Gachukia (1971:30) criticizes Mutiso's article on "Women in African Literature" (*East African Journal*, 1971) for its limited view of Ngugi's contribution in inscribing the new role of women into African literature. Gachukia notes with [partial] insight that it "cannot be by chance that all [sic] Ngugi's women characters have the qualities of insight and foresight, strength, courage, perseverance and, therefore, are able to act as pillars to their men often guiding them from illusion to reality". Despite the naivety of this early critic in failing to differentiate between Ngugi's usually strong protagonists and the generally representative figure/s of (a) degenerate female character/s in Ngugi's novels, Gachukia should be applauded for singling out one of Ngugi's main contributions to the African novel, namely his emphasis on the

changing perceptions of the female role. The repulsive picture Ngugi sketches of Mugo's aunt who brought him up serves as one of the most striking instances of Ngugi's portrayal of a degraded woman:

She [Waitherero] was a small woman who always complained that people were after her life; they had put broken bottles and frogs into her stomach; they wanted to put poison in her food or drink.

And yet she always went out to look for more beer. She would pester men from her husband's rika till they gave her a drink. One day she came back very drunk.

'That man Warui - he hates to see me eat and breathe - that sly - smile - he - creeps - coughs - like you [Mugo] - you - go and join him.'

And she tried to imitate Warui's cough; but in the attempt lurched forward and fell; all her beer and filth lay on the floor. Mugo cowered among the goats hoping and fearing that she had died. In the morning she forced Mugo to pour soil on the filth. The acrid smell hit him. Disgust choked him so that he could not speak or cry. The world had conspired against him, first to deprive him of his father and mother, and then to make him dependent on an ageing harridan (AGOW:8).

Ngugi's extension of the negative influence of this repulsive character on Mugo serves as a contrast which highlights and reinforces the beneficial influence of the morally strong women, such as Gikonyo's mother, and even Mumbi. Ngugi clearly states the negative role Waitherero plays in Mugo's life because her constant criticism of him instils in him an inferiority complex. This in turn, dominates his whole life: feeling unwanted, rejected and lonely, he in consequence withdraws from people, while also shying away from positive action and deliberate involvement:

The more feeble she became, the more she hated him. Whatever he did or made, she would deride his efforts. So Mugo was haunted by the image of his own inadequacy. She had a way of getting at him, a question maybe, about his clothes, his face, or hands that made all his pride tumble down. He pretended to ignore her opinions, but how could he shut his eyes to her oblique smiles and looks? (AGOW:8).

To recapitulate, I include a brief reminder of Ngugi's discourse of strong forceful women who become increasingly resourceful as the novels progress. Both Muthoni and Nyambura in *The River Between* display an exceptional degree of insight in defying the restricted view of their father, Joshua. Ngugi's sensitivity and psychological insight are

also discernible in his subtle portrayal of the difference between the two sisters. Where the younger Muthoni opposes her father with daring and an unconcern for the consequences of her rebellion, the older sister does so by displaying more tact and understanding for her parent's traditional views. Ngugi deftly intensifies the dilemma of his female characters in this difficult time of acculturation by revealing Miriamu's reservations about her husband's full surrender to Christianity, when he "gets swept wholesale into the Christian religion" (Gachukia, 1971:30).

Despite credible moments of lonely agony Mwhiki, the young protagonist of *Weep Not, Child*, constantly portrays more self-confidence and realism than Njoroge. She assumes greater significance as a character because she serves as a yardstick against whom Njoroge is constantly measured, a comparison that tends to reinforce his selfish and negative qualities. The two mothers may be viewed as more progressive than Miriamu in that Nyokabi takes a lead in getting Njoroge educated, while they serve as pillars of strength in the virtually destroyed household after the actual death of the father and his elder sons and the spiritual death of Njoroge.

Almost the same pattern informs the revelation of male/female relationships in Ngugi's next novel, *A Grain of Wheat*. Where Gikonyo has always displayed obvious characteristics of an inferiority complex, Mumbi is more self-assured and capable of action. Gikonyo's mother, Wangari, refuses to accept defeat when her husband, Waruhiu, beats and rejects her, accusing her of sexual coldness. She displays undaunted courage when she settles in Thabai with her baby son for whom she also later secures some knowledge of carpentry. Her instinctive protection of Mumbi on hearing of her daughter-in-law's adultery serves as a remnant of her traditional views, while simultaneously revealing her generosity of spirit and her acceptance of the fallibility of the human condition by voicing one of Ngugi's thematic concerns: "Read your own heart, and know yourself" (AGOW:154). Wambui introduces the active role of women in the Mau Mau struggle, while Karanja's mother, Wairimu, mirrors Nyokabi's defiance of the traditional submissive female role by questioning the actions of men: where Nyokabi anticipates the cruel realities of a failed strike, Wairimu employs traditional wisdom in warning Karanja against joining the ranks of the white oppressors

by becoming a despised home guard: "Don't go against the people. A man who ignores the voice of his people comes to no good end" (AGOW:196).

Although the female protagonists of Ngugi's next two novels show distinctive differences from those reflected in the first three novels, Wanja and Wariinga may be regarded as even stronger figures than their predecessors. The convincing creation of these two protagonists as regenerated lapsed urban women attests to Ngugi's insight into the peculiar predicament of females in a post-independence state while also revealing the dexterity of the author's creative mind. In no way does Ngugi stagnate or shy away from tackling recent challenges facing women whose innocence has been abused and who in different ways overcome the crisis of an illegitimate pregnancy coupled with sexual exploitation and harassment in the more modern business world. Both Wanja and Wariinga succeed in taking an exceptionally strong stand in combating general social ills by forcefully acting for the good of their people: they undauntingly endeavour to eradicate what they perceive as the root of their own personal and societal ills. Wariinga in particular proves that it is "in the towns that women have staked their claim for equality most strongly" (Walker, 1991:3). The novel shows that Wariinga has benefitted from the new freedom and educational opportunities for women, but has suffered from additional emotional stresses placed on women actively engaged in fighting exploitation by men who still regard them as passive victims of patriarchy and of male chauvinism.

It must be re-emphasized that Ngugi's most recent novel, *Matigari*, does not continue its author's rising cline in the portrayal of females representative of their times. Guthera lacks the authenticity of the earlier female protagonists, while her efforts at assisting Matigari's liberating quest merely repeat earlier actions of more convincing individual women. She does not show any signs of growing or maturing in the novel because the novel itself does not allow any character development. She is introduced as an old woman who assists Matigari in his search for his lost past. The plot structure of the novel allows her merely to relate incidents from her past life during the resistance struggle and her hardships after independence when she is subjected to the corruption and exploitation of a post-independence Kenya. As a resultant she never becomes an

active participant in the ongoing struggle for effecting change, and thereafter in experiencing the results of change in the ensuing period of transformation, whether positively or negatively, as earlier female protagonists such as Wanja and Wariinga do. As a fairly flat or static character, she lacks the vivacity and life so characteristic of the portrayal of these vivid young female protagonists, whose more convincing creation may herald the height of Ngugi's achievement in his depiction of strong, courageous and resilient young women. The women of this new generation are both actively involved in and crucial for the realization of the role of women in a transitional period in the history of independence in the postcolonial Kenyan society, as already indicated, this being the setting against which Ngugi's last novels are depicted.

Bessie Head's female protagonists are often stronger and more resilient than their male counterparts, in the words of Achufusi (1991:355-356): "Head ... had first-hand experience of what it means to be a woman in a male-dominated society". As such, we notice in her novels "the predominance of female over male protagonists, the tendency to endow the heroines with sympathy-evoking qualities and the unusually articulate nature of these heroines". This portrayal of female protagonists induces Achufusi to note in Head a pronounced determination "to destroy the male stereotypes of women" (1991:356). However, Head's female protagonists also reflect the author's own uncertainty about basic roots: they are portrayed as the characters of "a writer whose status in this world is further compromised by her sex, by her social and cultural past, by her political insights and particularly by her status of many years, as a person without a nationality" (Huma Ibrahim, 1988:5). Ibrahim therefore regards Bessie Head as a "third world woman writer for whom the sinister structures of anglophile colonial oppression still exist under South African apartheid, and for whom the battle against actual as well as abstract colonialism is not yet over". Paulina, Margaret, and Elizabeth in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, *Maru* and *A Question of Power* respectively, are all foreigners or exiles who settle in another country or a distant part of the country where they are engaged in a struggle to secure their own future. In the earlier two novels this struggle encompasses change from which the society as a whole benefits. In *A Question of Power*, by contrast, Elizabeth's battle against hostile forces is limited to regaining her own sanity and a feeling of unity with her community. Her contribution to transformation

is therefore more limited and restricted than that of her predecessors and especially of Ngugi's major female characters. The same applies to Mouse in Head's earlier novella, *The Cardinals*.

To summarize, Head's more markedly autobiographical stance limits the opportunities for effecting the radical and more encompassing kind of change that Ngugi's strong and increasingly militant women achieve so convincingly. Despite employing converse discourses, both writers nevertheless succeed in creating a range of credible female characters operating in a postcolonial third world African situation.

5.3 THE DIALOGUE OF TRANSFORMATION AND A SENSE OF BELONGING

A man, I suppose, fights [for transformation as well] only when he hopes, when he has a vision of order, when he feels strongly there is some connection between the earth on which he walks and himself (Naipaul, 1967:248).

Naipaul's statement pinpoints the fundamental shared ground which underlies the striving for change leading to transformation in the novels of Head and Ngugi. Because Ngugi was a rooted Kenyan citizen when he started publishing his novels, his passionate love for his country must be seen as the driving force behind one of his most powerful themes, transformation into a new Kenya, a Kenya where the true inhabitants can develop the country, to live in peace and security by reaping the benefits of struggle and change. Some of his most beautiful lyrical descriptions testify to his passionate sense of belonging to his fatherland, a land from which the very aspirations he has so unflinchingly striven for, has virtually banned him.

The opposite applies to Bessie Head. She endeavoured frantically for almost all her mature life to achieve "a sense of belonging", to transform the hearts of the people to accept racial and sexual equality. *Medusa*, for instance, articulates Head's agonized struggle to achieve a precarious sense of belonging in what Head has experienced as a

cold, inhuman and unwelcoming new country: "Africa is troubled waters, you know. I'm a powerful swimmer in troubled waters. You'll only drown here. You're not linked up to the people" (AQOP:44). Because alienation signifies having no roots in the community, Sello feels "I am just anyone" (AQOP:11), a statement which encapsulates Head's mental agony and which she herself regards "as one of the most perfect, and a very African one" (Barnett, 1985:123). Barnett then explicitly connects rootedness in Africa as a common feature in the novels of Head and Ngugi: "Belonging also means having one's roots firmly planted in the land. In her grasp of the significance of land in Africa, both as a symbol and a fact, Bessie Head is perhaps nearest to the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o". This attainment of a sense of belonging which indicates a feeling of being accepted by a society that has transformed into one that displays more tolerance towards otherness, especially pertaining to otherness of caste and gender, has enabled Head to write her novels, as she reveals to Sarvan in her letter dated 25 April 1980:

My world is a quiet backwater where ideas and inventions dominate and where people have time to love each other. I was aided in this attitude by living in a very stimulating part of Botswana. I came to Botswana when I was 27 and lived for a long time in Serowe. The people there had been very independently concerned with their own progress. They would experiment with *anything*, new ideas for educational progress, new agricultural techniques, new anything. This world moved into my novels (Sarvan, 1990:13).

It is thus clear that in sharing a feeling of Africanness, both Head and Ngugi may be regarded as active advocates of dismantling the myth of the "culture of silence' of the dispossessed" (Freire, 1968:10).

The lasting value of the works of Head and Ngugi may also be attributed to their dismantling another myth (still being propagated when they wrote their novels) that the main functions of African literature are its capacity for moralistic, educational, sociological, historical and political instruction. This belief has been expounded by both African and non-African writers and critics, such as Achebe and Palmer[3]. Achebe, for instance, assigns such a limited and simplistic position to his novels when he writes in 1965:

Here, then, is an adequate revolution for me to espouse – to help my society regain its belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration

and self-denigration. And it is essentially a question of education in the best sense of that word. Here, I think, my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure. But who cares? Art is important but so is education of the kind I have in mind (1965:204).

Bessie Head has never indicated any desire to use her literary gifts to promote any doctrines because of her uncommitted stance towards politics as well as to South Africa and later to Botswana. The essentially autobiographical nature of her novels testifies to the fact of endeavouring to find her own identity and a sense of belonging through the cathartic effects of writing. Despite Ngugi's open pronouncements about his use of writing as a means of effecting change and transformation, none of his novels may be regarded as an overtly sentimental endeavour to capture the perceived romantic nature of traditional African life. Although his first novel, *The River Between*, reflects the beauty and orderliness of traditional Gikuyu customary life, it introduces the realities of initial changes being waged in this postcolonial African society. Ngugi's ensuing novels all deal with aspects of change and colonization. An important characteristic of Ngugi's novels, therefore, is the increasingly important role which the themes of change and transformation assume in his literary career, in his novels as well as in his dramas, political treatises, and short stories. His vision of change and transformation always focuses on the role of females in any transitional situation, usually firmly establishing their positive role in effecting change in a beneficial way, while also striving courageously to adapt to and aid their families in the process of assimilating to and surviving the often cruel and merciless onslaughts of a forced process initially of westernization and later internal corruption and exploitation by the new black leaders.

This thesis has, I hope, demonstrated to some extent that the novels of Bessie Head and Ngugi are products of artistic genius, far exceeding the constraints the merely documentary or didactic impulse would lead to. They are likely to become lasting literary treasures, because they do propound the deepest desires and longings of their creators, in the words of Rabadiri (1964:16), they do not like "this literature of protest, assertion and declamation ... [produce] writing which lacks balanced sensitivity and has

tended to cloud the understanding of values which, above all, society requires of an artist". Iyasere (1972:5) quite validly mentions that "if the function of literature is to [merely] create an atmosphere for social change ... what distinguishes political pamphleteering from works of art"? Moreover, he poses the probing question about the future of such literary creations after the desired change has been effected[4]. The lasting interest in and appraisal of the novels of Head and Ngugi thus testify to their being works of pure art, gaining instead of waning in popularity as time progresses.

Moreover, my examination of stylistic aspects has striven to establish that the novels of both Ngugi and Head can in no way be regarded as so intensely preoccupied "with themes and the neglect of form, and thus the failure to be concerned about the establishment of a tradition" (Wake, 1969:50). The mere concentration on theme at the expense of form poses a real threat to any essentially committed, and especially to a politically committed, artist because it weakens the impact and durability of such a work[5]. The novels of Head and Ngugi intrinsically satisfy because they display a high degree of "internal coherence" (Ndebele, 1991:22) rather than "a high level of explicit political pre-occupation which may not necessarily be critically aware of the demands of the artistic medium chosen" (1991:22-23), to apply Ndebele's critical yardstick to Head and Ngugi.

5.4 THE MYTHO-HISTORICAL APPROACH EMBODIED IN THE NOVELS BY HEAD AND NGUGI

Head and Ngugi both employ a mytho-historical approach to literature: a method "whereby socio-historical phenomena are explored and explained within a framework of myth-and-history" (Achufusi, 1991:343). Achufusi quite rightly states that this approach is not new in world literature, but relatively novel to African literature. In Head's novels this approach culminates in *A Question of Power* where myth and fact are at times so closely intertwined that they become virtually inseparable. Achufusi (1991:344) singles out this characteristic as bold and innovative in the canon of a female African writer:

Bessie Head is the first female African writer (at least the first major one with internationally circulated works) to portray African social realities consistently on

such a large canvass in which myth and history interpenetrate each other. Consequently, though she may be described as working within established traditions when viewed in the total context of world literatures (and even African literature), she is certainly an innovator when considered within the smaller sector African women's writing.

In her recent doctoral thesis, *Literary convention as a feminist strategy*, Marita Wenzel notes an affinity between Bessie Head and Latin American women writers who often employ what she terms "magic realism or combine it with other modes" (1995:216). Wenzel continues: "It is interesting to note that, with the exception of perhaps Bessie Head and more tenuously Doris Lessing, English South African fiction, and women's fiction in particular, has not yet adopted magic realism as a mode". Wenzel believes that in *A Question of Power* Bessie Head responds to what Walker (1990:22) has claimed as a function of dreams and forms of madness, namely their aiding the attempts of characters to "find or invent a past that will allow them to make sense of the present". Regarding madness as symptomatic of both a sick society and representing a dual personality, Wenzel quotes Lorna Irvine (1986:58) whose remark summarizes Head's reliance on madness in her last novel, because in

much fiction by women, the madwoman is the author's double rather than her foil; her own story rather than the culturally accepted story Forced to recognize her double, the female character often discovers in madness a cleansing that allows her to face the actual madness of her culture more openly.

Bessie Head's novels moreover reveal the trend that "the line between dreams and fantasies, on the one hand, and madness on the other may be almost indistinguishable in the contemporary women's novel" (Walker, 1990:35). Like her contemporaries, Head thus uses "the divided self as a narrative device to indicate change" (Wenzel, 1995:217), in the words of Walker: "the need for social change and the recognition that social change begins with individual change" is clearly evinced by Head's novels. Like many of her contemporaries, Head has thus contributed significantly to existing twentieth century female writing by examining and revising the male canon, thereby re-inscribing women into society after years of denigration and marginalization.

In Ngugi's novels, especially in his later novels such as *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, Marxist social and political doctrine is expressed in terms of class struggles

within a framework established by history and myth. In Ngugi's first novel, *The River Between*, Chege regards his son Waiyaki as the predestined natural leader to effect change solely on the grounds of legends and ancestral belief. He sees his son as the natural descendant in the line of legendary leaders. In his fourth novel, *Devil on the Cross*, however, there exists a clear distinction between the elitist ruling classes and the ordinary citizens, a distinction based on money and power. In this regard his work is comparable to that of Wole Soyinka and Yambo Ouologuem, writers who also expose, and by implication criticize, the postcolonial tendency of empowerment of a small but privileged group of society, completely disregarding the traditionally revered group of leaders, a distinction based on historic tradition.

5.5 HEAD AND NGUGI: TWO CONTRASTING APPROACHES TO COLONIALISM

This study has tended invariably to demonstrate the existence of two different approaches to colonialism, postcolonialism and neocolonialism. Head's novels do not explicitly condemn the attitudes of Whites, with the exception of occasional references to white females such as the principal of the school in *A Question of Power* who negatively influences Elizabeth by vindictively reminding her about her mother's insanity. Head's work in general reveals a greater awareness of the fact that oppression is a universal evil, perpetrated by both Blacks and Whites.

In Ngugi's earlier novels, such as in *The River Between* and *A Grain of Wheat*, Whites are treated with much more open scorn and derision, a response that seems as if he had been cut on the raw. The very overt and scathing critical stance might be ascribed to his fear that westernization, especially concerning religion and education, might irreparably sever traditional loyalties and bonds. In his later novels, however, Ngugi reveals a growing awareness of the corruption of traditional values and the unprincipled exploitation by the new black elite who conspire with international finance to perpetrate their evil.

This comparison leads to another difference in the social vision of Head and Ngugi. It may be stated in general that Head's unconcern for colonial oppression (which is also a result of the absence of a pronounced anticolonial struggle in Botswana) leads to a lack of interest in social and cultural institutions and values barring the way in which these approaches suppress women and violate their basic human rights. *The Cardinals*, her first and only novel written in South Africa, as alluded to earlier, criticizes oppression as caused by the country's rigid application of the doctrines of apartheid. Her novels written in Botswana, however, show a virtually complete lack of interest in political matters. Ngugi, by contrast, draws extensively on traditional cultural values for the definition of models to serve as guiding principles in the creation of a just society. This is evident from his first novel, *The River Between*, which reveals a remarkable number of fairly extensive references to indigenous history and culture till the novels written in his last period. Although there exists a remarkable shift of interest from the more rural setting of the first novels to the urban background of the last ones, such as particularly *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi's ostensible aim of revealing the orderliness and justness of traditional Kenyan life, determines his approach to his subject matter.

5.6 CONCLUSION

Finally, the novels of Head and Ngugi, although firmly entrenched in the oral tradition, should be regarded as modern African literature, as opposed to traditional African literature. Irele (1977:9) claims that this is a distinction which is probably useful in the sense that traditional African literature is something which exists in our indigenous languages and which is related to our traditional societies and cultures, while modern African literature has grown out of the rupture created within our indigenous history and way of life by the colonial experience, which is naturally expressed in the tongue of our former colonial rulers.

The mere fact that the novels of Head and Ngugi may be regarded as modern African literature serves as a signifier of their lasting universal appeal, although each of them displays his or her own "particular brand of universalism" (Ibrahim, 1988:10). In short,

the novels of Bessie Head and Ngugi are fully contemporary, revealing the authors' sincere striving at exploring through the freedom of postcolonial fiction the integrity of sincerely striving to change Africa into a freer and more unbiased country. These two writers have undauntingly striven to move away from the constraints of "the old language of the West" (Wicomb, 1992:15), in this instance specifically the unjustness of racial and sexual domination and exploitation. In the words of Mphahlele (1974:78), writers such as Bessie Head and Ngugi "came in during the most exciting epoch in African life - at a time when things are taking shape". In this regard Ngugi's own words in *Homecoming* (1972:47) may be adapted. Head and Ngugi himself succeed in fulfilling the roles as the "sensitive needles" of society: they have definitely reflected "with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions" in their transforming societies.

ENDNOTES

- [1] Head continues: "The only link *Rain Clouds* has with *Maru* and *A Question of Power* is Makhaya's early statementHe is brought to a crossroad and looks both ways: One road leads to fame and importance, the other to peace of mind. He chooses beautifully. 'I shall choose the road to peace of mind. I shall choose a quiet backwater and work together with people.'

There is almost an identical statement in *Maru*. The gods in his heart say to him: "Choose that road. Take that companion"

There is the same sense of choosing and selecting in *A Question of Power*, in spite of its apparent chaos and confusion.

All three books are concerned with stating a personal choice and an anxiety that that personal choice be the right one" (Sarvan, 1990:13).

- [2] Discussing two letters Head wrote to him, namely on 25 April and 26 June 1980 (referred to as L1 and L2), Charles Sarvan (1990:11) comments on Head's

political bias: "Feeling unaccepted (even ridiculed); failing to find a personal relationship of some permanence (I never found love: L1); rejecting trivial, sexual 'affairs', she yearned for that kind of politics she associated with the later Robert Sobukwe of the Pan African Congress. Yet elsewhere she explicitly rejects politics and its concomitant, power: what attracted her to the politics of Sobukwe is indicated by words and phrases such as 'included', 'identification' and 'a sense of belonging'".

- [3] It would, however, be just as damaging to overlook the significant number of critics, such as Soyinka and Mphahlele, who have fairly constantly and incisively applied true literary criteria in their pronouncements about the nature of African literature, as well as in their practical application of these norms in their evaluation of individual literary products.
- [4] Iyasera here cites as examples of protest literature that have faded into "obscurity and oblivion because of their failure to respond to the essential qualities of significant form" (1972:5) Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk*, the "literature" of the French Resistance and Benjamin Disraeli's *The Young Duke*.
- [5] In his very early appraisal of critical criteria for the evaluation of African literature, Clive Wake already cautions against the abuse of commitment:

Commitment can be creative, in the literary sense, but it can also destroy a creation. In other words, is the African literature of the present and immediate past simply going to be a land of literature that, in a few years will be of interest only to sociologists and historians, or the academic historia? Even at the moment it is receiving an amount of attention from sociologists that seems ominous to the literary critic. Essentially, the danger is that there is a serious temptation for writers to be inspired too much by the more ephemeral features of the present, making creative writing an agent of political revolution, and failing to send its roots deeper into the more substantial [sic] soil so as to bring about its own, although parallel revolution (1969:49-50).

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