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Colonial Violence, Postcolonial Violations: Violence, Landscape, and Memory in Kenyan Fiction

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ABSTRACT

One of the most persistent concerns of Kenyan literature is violence generated by colonial injustice and perpetuated in independent Kenya through unaltered colonial structures and institutions. In their fiction, writers discussed here demonstrate complex linkages between colonial violence, the violent responses to it, and the violations of the rights of citizens in the postcolonial nation-state. Violence is seen as a crucial tool to both revolutionary nationalism and the constitution of the revolutionary subject, while colonial representation of land and its inhabitants becomes a form of epistemic violence to the extent that it involves immeasurable disruption and erasure of local cultural systems. Colonial representation aimed at the suppression of the difference of the "other" is countered in Kenya literature through a grammar of contestation that constructs not only a counterdiscourse to colonial ideologies of conquest and domination but also a liberation aesthetics that justifies anticolonial violence while legitimating postcolonial struggles.

Fictional representations of colonial violence in Kenya demonstrate complex linkages between colonial violence, the violent responses to it or decolonization, and the violations of the rights of citizens in the postcolonial/neocolonial state. Colonial violence will here be understood to mean relationships, processes, and conditions that attended the practice of colonialism in Kenya and that violated the physical, social, and/or psychological integrity of the colonized while similarly impacting on the colonizer.[1] Given this definition, colonial violence in Kenya could therefore be said to begin at the very moment when regulation or conquest of space and territory for purposes of European settlement and exploitation takes place, and since this conquest of territory not only constitutes military subjugation but also in involves constructions as territory as empty and hostile jungle that must be conquered and

tamed for "human" settlement, the history of colonial violence blends appropriately with the long history of European imperialism.

As represented in Kenyan literature, this hegemonic construction that justifies colonial occupation is pitted against the muted resistance of the indigenous population, which soon develops into a violent reaction to marginalization and occupation. A superb illustration of this is to be found in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel *Weep Not, Child*, especially in the relationship between the white settler Mr. Howlands and his servant Ngotho. It is a relationship that demonstrates competing representations of the land and inscribes a dialectic of attitude into the landscape between master and servant that foreshadows the violence ahead. In fact, Mr. Howlands and Ngotho already share, and are products of, a violent past, both having participated in the First World War, an experience the narrator calls "four years of blood and terrible destruction" (30). The tension underlying the relationship of the two is captured early in the novel:

> They went from place to place, a white man and a black man. Now and then they would stop here and there, examine a luxuriant green tea plant, or pull out a weed. Both men admired this *shamba*. For Ngotho felt responsible for whatever happened to this land. He owed it to the dead, the living and the unborn of his line, to keep guard over this *shamba*. Mr. Howlands always felt a certain amount of victory whenever he worked through it all. He alone was responsible for taming this unoccupied wildness. (31)

The representation of land as "unoccupied wildness" or, in the imagination of Mr. Howlands, "a big trace of wild country" (30) is a hegemonic impulse that underlies the process of imperial annexation of territory. Territory targeted for colonization is first reproduced in the imperial imagination as an empty space that must be regimented so as, in the words of John Noyes, "to order the chaos of the savage land or the empty space of 'virgin nature'" (136). Noyes has discussed how the idea of empty space is crucial in the process of colonial expansion. The concept of the empty space, he has argued, serves as a useful ideology of expansionism:

> [I]t enhances the romantic longing which seeks to transpose primary narcissim onto a landscape in which, for the sake of phantasy, it cannot afford to encounter a human being who is radically other, and it expresses a real inability of the European eye to look at the world and see anything other than European space—a space which is by definition empty where it is not inhabited by Europeans. (196)

Such (re)ordering of land and its inhabitants becomes a form of epistemic violence to the extent that it involves immeasurable disruption and erasure of local systems of meaning that guide the ownership and use of land. Because it actually suppresses the difference of the Other, colonial representation in this sense is a mode of violence. An actual example of this is the colonial government's rejection of the Gikuyu demands for land tenure rights in the 1920s. Referring to this episode, Simon Gikandi notes that the action by the government "was not simply questioning their (Gikuyu) narratives of ownership and possession, but their notions of the past and the future" (19).

Jomo Kenyatta pioneered the fictional contestation of this (il)logic of colonial dispossession in his allegorical fable "The Gentlemen of the Jungle." The tale features a benevolent man who gives shelter to an elephant during a storm only for the latter

to displace him from his hut. Following the man's protestations, a one-sided Imperial Commission of Enquiry is set up by the Lion, the King of the Jungle, and comes up with a verdict favorable to the elephant. The man is told: "As it is clearly for your good that the space should be put to its most economic use, and as you yourself have not reached the stage of expansion which would enable you to fill it . . . Mr. Elephant shall continue the occupation of your hut" ("The Gentlemen" 38). Using the same trickery, the other animals follow suit as they keep displacing the man each time he builds a new hut. Kenyatta's allegory illustrates the aforementioned point, that colonial appropriation of land is achieved through redefinition of such land as "waste" and the rationalization of an otherwise perfidious and brutal practice as a civilizing mission. But as the tale demonstrates, this colonial trickery and treachery, effected through what Ali Behdad calls "cold-blooded militarism of discipline, torture and pain" (203, is what awakens the colonized into a violent revolt.

The concept of the empty space is also challenged in *Weep Not, Child*. Ngotho's relationship to the alienated land shows that precolonial territory was never an empty space in the way the colonial expropriators visualized it, but rather a landscape already defined and mapped by local histories, myths, and memories of bequethal and ownership. What a colonizing topography therefore maps out as untamed, depopulated, wildness is acknowledged by the indigenous perspective as a scenic landscape of valleys, ridges, and hills that constitute "the heart and soul of the (Gikuyu) land" (*The River Between* 3), while the "labyrinth of bush thorns and creeping plants" is revered not only for their medicinal resource but also because they form part of the "blessed and sacred place[s]" (14).

It is such spatial and cultural knowledge of the territory—the kind demonstrated by Chege in *The River Between* when he conducts Waiyaki in the tour of the hills as part of the latter's initiation into the secrets of the community—that represents a particular form of land tenure that the settler lacks. As demonstrated in the action of Mr. Howlands, the colonial settlers sought to legitimize the possession of land through its utilization. But this utilization, which in effect involves clearance, demarcation, and enclosure, leads also to the production of a bounded space to which the settler can easily relate while at the same time controlling the extent of the indigenous people's relationship with it. The "native," on the other hand, correctly reads this as an act of dispossession and resists it through the activation of collective memory in which the land is, as in the case of the Gikuyu, mythologically imaged as a divine bequest to Gikuyu and Mumbi, the forebears of the Gikuyu, "to rule and till in serenity" (*Weep Not, Child* 23).

The spatial stratification of physical space in conquered territory is the means by which colonialism annexes and marks exclusive ownership of the land, and yet, ironically, the privileged enclosures, the no-go zones that this demarcation creates, invite the violation it intends to forestall. In other words, the violent transgression of the bounded space with all the hegemonic subjectivities it encodes is adopted by the "native" as a form of resistance to colonial presence. The hit-and-run guerrilla tactics adopted by the Mau Mau fighters would later constitute the main form of transgressing the space of the colonizer who, in turn, reacts by creating more barriers aimed at isolating Mau Mau in the forests but which in reality are markers of the increasing instability of the colonial world. The curfew that followed the State of Emergency declared in October 1952 may be seen in this respect as the ultimate attempt to control violation of the privileged colonial space.

The above point is best illustrated in those war of liberation novels that feature actual combat, like Meja Mwangi's two novels, *Carcass for Hounds* and *Taste of Death*, and Sam Kahiga's *Deda Kimathi: The Real Story*. These novels show how the guerrilla warfare is aided greatly by the existence of that other space that, though already declared part of the colony, is to a great extent out of the reach of colonial surveillance. This other space may be mythical, as when an ancient precolonial history is retrieved in Ngugi's texts, or physical, as in Mwangi's and Kahiga's novels, where an actual retreat into the forests and mountains takes place. It is in the forested mountains, specifically Mount Kenya and Nyandarua, that the Mau Mau guerrillas enact mastery of the landscape to the awe of the colonial police. They become experts at moving and blending into the local terrain. In the war of liberating the land, the landscape itself becomes an invaluable ally. It yields actual military value for the Mau Mau fighters while signaling to the colonial authorities the limitations of their control. In *Carcass for Hounds*, one could cite the experience of Captain Kingsley, the man charged with the task of hunting and capturing General Haraka, a former colonial chief turned Mau Mau leader. He cannot understand how Haraka could survive the harshness of the Mount Kenya environment: "The Mount Kenya forest was ugly with storm. How the devil did the notorious Haraka live through that" (16). Such a feeling of impotence before the difficult terrain is contrasted with the ease with which General Haraka and his fighters find their way in the thick and apparently impenetrable bamboo vegetation:

> A cold wind, the harbinger of heavy rains, whistled through the treetops, shaking even the giant figs even to the tips of their roots. Rain birds called a wet message through the cold, almost dark forest. The doves cooed in their nest, preparing to meet the storm. The cicadas sounded harsh and terrified. [. . .] The two men, one small, one big, walked carefully, picking their way among the giant creepers that covered the jungle [. . .] the little man walked into the bamboo as one would walk through a bead curtain. (16)

It is not surprising then that the Mau Mau leader in both Mwangi's and Kahiga's novels is captured only after the colonial army has enlisted defecting guerrillas to help in the hunt. I am not, however, creating an impression that the fighters' mastery of the terrain came to them merely by virtue of their indigenous relation to the land. Historians have shown how like any other guerrilla movement, Mau Mau painstakingly produced and exploited knowledge of the terrain as part of wartime survival tactics. The fighters, in the words of Kennel Jackson, "transformed themselves, often from scratch, into encyclopedias of forest knowledge: its vast geography, paths and routes, flora types and animal habits, new place-names" (180), exactly the kind of transformation in Kahiga's *Dedan Kimathi: The Real Story*. Here the fighters do not merely transform themselves into "encyclopedias of forest knowledge," but also re-work the harsh terrain into a fortified, habitable world, through what Kennel would call "insurgent architecture" (176). Apart from the numerous hideouts, a good example of such architecture described in Kahiga's novel is the "Kenya parliament," a structure built by fighters as part of their attempt to imagine a state parallel to the colonial one.

To return briefly to the use of myths, especially by Ngugi, I should note here that although the Gikuyu myth of creation is central of Ngugi's textual strategies of destabilization, he does not use exclusively Gikuyu myths in his probing of the

colonial hegemonic formation. In his decolonization novels, he often resorts to both indigenous and Judeo-Christian myths and legends, in order to evolve a grammar of contestation with which to construct not only a counterdiscourse to colonial ideologies of conquest and domination, but also a liberation aesthetics that justifies anticolonial violence. In the Gikuyu myth of creation referred to earlier, a kind of creative violence—"thunder, a violence that seemed to strangle life" (*Weep Not* 23)—accompanies the molding into being of Gikuyu cosmos that is alluded to by the author. This ironic violence that destroys in order to create is echoed in the revolutionary or redemptive violence that Ngugi, following Frantz Fanon, advocates as the inevitable response to colonial oppression.

It was noted that colonial violence begins at the very point when regulation or conquest of space and territory takes place. This, of course, is a concept that is well expounded by Frantz Fanon, who asserts that the very first encounter between "native" and settler was a violent one and that "their existence together was carried on by dint of a great array of bayonets and cannons" (36). In many respects, Fanon's thesis on decolonization and its attendant violence has greatly influenced fictional representations of colonialism and its aftermath in Kenya. In fact, his influence in both postcolonial writing and theory is widely acknowledged. Robert Young notes, for example, that postcolonial writing's concern "with individual human experience and cultural identity alongside the more objective field of history is partly the result of the influence of Fanon [. . .]" (275). Using the Algerian situation, Fanon analyzes the dynamics of violence and its consequences in situations of colonial oppression. He elaborates on colonialism's assault on the humanity of the colonized and how the Manichean compartmentalization of the colonized world constitutes the expression of violence, and can only be dismantled or confronted using the same means. Colonialism, he writes, "is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and will only yield when confronted the greater violence" *48).

With the exception of colonial novels like those of Robert Ruark, Karen Blixen, also known as Isak Dinesen, and Elspeth Huxley, which because of the authors' allegiance to the colonial state, tend to view colonial violence as a legitimate tool of governance, most novels of decolonization, and especially those informed by overt ideological positions, interconnect with Fanon's ideas on the inevitability of violence as an antidote to colonial brutality and therefore as a tool of liberation in situations where all other means have failed. Writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, San Kahiga, Leonard Kibera, and, with some reservations, Meja Mwangi and Oludhe MacGoye understand anticolonial violence as derivative of settler violence and therefore as an act of self-defense. Kihika, a character in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, explains it succinctly:

> "We don't kill just anybody," "We are not murderers, we are not hangmen—like Robson—killing men and women without cause or purpose. . . . We only hit back. You are struck on the left cheek, you turn the right cheek. One, two, three—sixty years. Then suddenly, it is always sudden, you say: I am not turning the other cheek any more . . . you strike back . . . we must kill." (166)

This sudden inspiration, or to use Mahmood Mamdani's equally Fanonian phrase, the "native impulse to eliminate the settler" (22), has a history that begins with muted grievances over land alienation and expropriation of labor and climaxes in the

portrayal of the settler as a bloodthirsty beast who can only understand the language of violence. In other words, the settler deserves to be destroyed. As typified by Kihika in *A Grain of Wheat* and Kamau in *Weep Not, Child*, anticolonial violence becomes an expression of unmitigated anger in response to intolerable injustice and anomic conditions created by colonialism.

Kihika's position above may indeed sound like a celebration of violence or its exaltation and yet Ngugi's texs problematizes the relationship between violence and liberation even where the author's intention was to inscribe a direct corollary. Despite Ngugi's open support for revolutionary violence, his novels resist any simplistic correlation of revolutionary violence and liberation. One reason for this, I would suggest, lies in the fact that revolution itself does not always seem to lead to liberation, so that the result in Ngugi's fiction is the concern with armed struggle, betrayals, and another cycle of armed struggle—so-called second liberation—to resist postcolonial oppression.

To structure the subversive impulses of his characters, Ngugi resorts to paradigms of self-sacrifice and messianic models grounded not only on Fanonist principles of redemptive violence, but also on materialist interpretations and inverted models of Judeo-Christian doctrines of salvation. G. D. Killam has noted, for instance, how Ngugi in *A Grain of Wheat* has used "a sustained comparison with Christian teaching, action, and theology" to explain the origin of the anticolonial struggle and especially its legitimacy (55). Hence, in the novel *A Grain of Wheat*, Kihika, reacting to the extreme violence visited on the populace by colonial agents during the State of Emergency, chooses heroic martyrdom. He is convinced that a grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die in order to bring forth much fruit.

Indeed Kihika, like Christ, anticipates his own violent death, for he is later hanged in public, but not before he has unleashed such devastating destruction on the agents and structures of the colonial state. Lessons drawn from Kihika's violent death vary. Thompson, the District Officers who hangs him, is determined that such a public display of raw terror will discourage other acts of violence against the state. This does not quite occur. Hanging and torture are forms of violence used by the colonial state to suppress popular dissent. Castration is another popular form of torture. Having enlisted as a District Officer in order to fight Mau Mau, Mr. Howlands resorts to this mode of torture against his former servant Ngotho. But this violation against the body and its public display does not necessarily result in reversing the liberation struggle, but instead worsens the colonial situation. It does, however, cause psychological trauma. Ngugi's characters are maimed by this exposure to violent acts.

In the novel, interpretations of Kihika's self-sacrifice occur as part of postindependent rememorations of the war of liberation. And therein lies the problem, because as the moment and site in which the memory of the war of independence is enacted, the postcolonial moment is itself a painful inversion and denial of the objectives of the war. In other words, the ironies and paradoxes that circumscribe the postindependence moment tend to question the success of decolonization in general and armed struggle in particular. For if the genuinely essential moment of revolution is the conquest of power, then in the case of Kenya this was not achieved. Ngugi negotiates this aporia in his later novels like *Petals of Blood* and *Matigari* not by calling into question the achievements of the violent tactics adopted by the Mau Mau fighters, but by charting grounds for a second armed struggle, this time against the neocolonial state. Where Fanon had seen the colonial state as a structure based

on violence, Ngugi sees the same structures inherited by the neocolonial state and generating violence akin, if not subtler, to that of the colonial state. It is, in fact, in *Petals of Blood* more than any of his other works that Ngugi makes clear the cathartic effects of revolutionary violence.[2]

Central to the writings of Mwangi, Ngugi, Kahiga, and Kibera is the rehabilitation of the Mau Mau movement, the Land of Freedom Army that colonial representation sought to discredit by projecting it as a violent, terrorist organization whose members were driven by atavistic motives to kill and rape. Yet ironically, the same writers find themselves undertaking a similar task in postindependent Kenya, this time to defend the memory of Mau Mau in situations where the nation-state has suppressed it, or so it is felt, in favor of a sanitized version of history. While it projects itself as the legitimate author of national culture and identity by virtue of its being central to the process of decolonization, the nation-state is, however, unable to sustain an identification with the radical histories of decolonization, for it soon finds them subversive to its appropriations of the victorious nationalist discourse.

Sam Kahiga in *Dedan Kimathi: The Real Story* and Leonard Kibera in *Voices in the Dark* represent this suppression of Mau Mau memory as a form of violence and so does Ngugi. In *Petals of Blood* and *Matigari*, Ngugi's so-called progressive characters who identify with what the author delineates as history of resistance are hounded by the state as part of what the writer interprets as a scheme to silence that history. The heroes of *Voices in the Dark*, Irungu and Kimura, are two ex-freedom fighters turned beggars in the murky pathways of the streets of Nairobi. One lost both hands and the other both legs during the war of liberation. The violence of colonialism inscribed in their deformed bodies could be read positively, as they themselves are wont to do, as marks of the heroism of decolonization. But this is hardly the way the public perceives them and therefore the tragedy of their situation rests on the fact that their identity as war veterans is now replaced by one generated by the structural violence of capitalism and repositioning them as poor, idle vagabonds. Having been reclassified as vagrants, the two are now the appropriate objects of state violence, eyesores to be constantly put on check by the sanitary unit of the Nairobi city council. The personal stories of their participation in the liberation struggle are erased by the brutal hegemony of the neocolonial state whose construction of the new nation involves a monolithic reconstitution of that past in a way that silences certain aspects of it.

In Kibera's writing, memory of the war of liberation is tyrannical in two respects. First, for the wretched ex-freedom fighters like Irungu and Kimura, the choice is between therapeutic amnesia or traumatic memory, none of which salvages them either from the terrors of the past or the agonies of the present. Second, memory becomes a burden to the extent that the state-enforced amnesia criminalizes remembrance. Memory of Mau Mau, with its subversive tendency to cast doubts on the authority of the postcolonial order, becomes the first casualty of the political establishment's desire to fashion a monolithic history of the new nation that firmly legitimizes its power. To remember the past, according to Jomo Kenyatta, is an expression of disloyalty to the nation, is "to stoke fires of revenge or animosity" (xv). Indeed, Kenyatta's postindependence slogan—"forgive and forget"—was to become the entrenchment of his government's policy of amnesia. But, as Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale attest, Kenyatta "simultaneously also asked [Kenyans] to remember another past in which we all fought for *Uhuru*—freedom" (4), thus effectively devaluing any sectarian claims of privilege based on participation in the war of independence.

It may be argued then that voices of dissent in Kibera's *Voices in the Dark* are responses to such strategic moves by the political establishment. Kibera's novel is a satiric countertext to this policy of amnesia, which it parodies all through in passages such as the following:

> Now a freedom fighter who can't sleep because his stomach aches need never wake his neighbour to recount for the tenth time his bravery in the forest, or to complain that his role lies forgotten, buried under the pavement. For how can he be forgotten when he is actually and in fact registered in writing as unemployed, of no fixed address [. . .] the process of forgetting the past so as to build the future is, as the expatriates never weary of saying, a very sensitive affair. But there will always be some people like Irungu here who think that because they lost a hand here and a hand there in a brief engagement with the enemy [. . .] they shouldn't tighten their belts a little on the long road to Prosperity. (16–17)

In the fate that meets Gerald Timundu, the committed socialist playwright-protagonist of the novel, Kibera shows how the wrongs of a colonial past reverberate in the present with violent consequences. Timundu's father died fighting in the war of liberation, and in this way Timundu shares a similar past with the two beggars whose plight he highlights in his plays. But his rage against the establishment, coupled with the realization that his theater of the oppressed can neither change the politics of the day nor rouse the awareness of his target audience, enfolds him in an overwhelming cynicism that leads him to suicide.

Another writer whose novels touch on the violence of both colonial and postcolonial politics is Oludhe MacGoye; but colonial violence, especially in her second novel, *Coming to Birth*, is subordinated to the violence against women generated by other hegemonic cultural formations such as patriarchy. This relocation of violence within the patriarchal system has the effect of devaluing the significance of the colonial context even as MacGoye retains it as a backdrop to the story of Paulina, the female protagonist of the novel. In a sense MacGoye regards colonial violence, especially the State of Emergency, with a measure of ambivalence. For her, the State of Emergency is neither the peak of colonial suppression and violence, as Ngugi would have it, nor a legitimate attempt to restore law and order, as a colonialist writer like Robert Ruark would see it. MacGoye's position is somehow in between the two, although she tends slightly toward the vantage point that considers actions of colonial police during the State of Emergency as genuine. The positioning of characters in relation to nationalist history in her third novel, *The Present Moment*, sheds some light on her ambivalent handling of colonial violence. In this novel, which is set in a postcolonial Kenya that has seen the crumbling of the dream of independence, the memory of the colonial past, and especially of Mau Mau, triggers disparate reactions among the women undergoing rehabilitation at the Refuge, a church-run charity home. The reminiscences of these women show that the past means different things to different people. Among these women, the recollection of that past is the cause of both acrimony and solidarity, and again it is the memory of Mau Mau that generates discordant conversation:

> 'Nobody wanted to be watched in the forest,' put in Wairimu. Quiet you had to be, deadly quiet, or else you were a dead man.'
> 'Can't we leave it alone?' asked Priscilla. 'The emergency finished twenty years and

> more ago. We are free now. Let us not keep chewing over it.'
> 'Some of us had losses,' insisted Mama Chungu. 'You may not like to be made to remember it, but it's true. We cannot get away with it.'
> Indeed we cannot get away from it, thought Priscilla. But we can try to keep it in the past instead of living haunted with the images of blood and iron. (34)

It may seem, then, that MacGoye's ambivalent treatment of the colonial past emanates not only from her recognition of competing versions of, and attitudes to, that past, but also her reluctance to follow the path of nationalist fictions that read anticolonial histories as projects of national liberation. In her novels, MacGoye substitutes such projects with feminist struggles, although she does this sometimes in a way that decontextualizes the oppression of women under colonial rule from the hegemonic space of colonialism. This, however, is compensated for by her representation of historical experience as heterogeneous, a strategy that allows for the objectification of those subaltern voices and stories, mainly of women, suppressed in nationalist fictions and political discourses of nation building, both of which tend toward homogenization of the past.

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NOTES

1. I have adapted this definition from Bulham Hussein Abdilahi, who defines violence as "any relation, process, or condition by which an individual, or group violates the physical, social, and/or psychological integrity of another person or group" (135).
2. For more on this, see Maughan-Brown.

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