

# Men of Literature and Kenya's History

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DR. Chris Wanjala, in an article which appeared in *The Weekly Review* of September 7, has chosen to ignore issues which were raised at the recent Kenya Historical Association conference and to give the impression that historians organised a conference to discuss literature. As one of those who organised the conference and who presented a paper which has been attacked by Wanjala, I would like to state that contrary to what Wanjala says, we were not eager to learn anything about how literature operates. We know that. The theme of the conference had been circulated many months in advance. The aim was to review the writing of the history of Kenya from independence to the present. The papers presented conformed strictly to this theme and dealt with issues ranging from pre-colonial times to the present.

In appraising what has been happening to the study of Kenya history over the last twenty years, we noted that there were some literary works which purport to say something about our history, either in the way of writing some aspects of it or by way of offering a theory of what history is all about. There were two types of literary works that seemed to do this. These were biographies and historical novels. It was in this connection that Prof. William Ochieng' decided to look at specific biographies of certain leaders in Kenya to see what light if any they throw on our history. He did not therefore set to write a thesis on biography as such. Similarly he looked at Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novels to see what light they could throw on the life of one individual, the late President Jomo Kenyatta. Ochieng' discovered that Ngugi has misunderstood Kenyatta, as he has portrayed him as one who betrayed "the people". Available evidence shows, and Ochieng' marshalled such evidence, that Kenyatta had been consistent and true to himself throughout his life. Consequently he did not betray anybody. Those, like Ngugi, who saw in Kenyatta what he did not have can only blame themselves. No evidence was produced in the Conference to challenge the thesis about Kenyatta, as advanced by Ochieng', and which many of us accepted.

As for Opanga and I, we had, in our study of the history of ideas and philosophy, noted that some great

philosophies or political theories had been enunciated through literary works. These often take the form of plays or drama, as was the case with Plato or Shakespeare; or they take the form of historical novels, as was the case with Tolstoy. Inspired by this discovery, we decided to make a study of the type of theory or philosophy Kenyan historical novelists have or portray of our society. As in the case of Ochieng', we were not interested in novels as such, but in a particular type which fitted into the theme of the conference.

Two of Kenyan novelists have written what one could call historical novels. These are Ali Mazrui and Ngugi. Mazrui was fascinated by Nigerian civil war and used it to construct a novel of ideas but which was based on Africa's historical experience. Ngugi is haunted by Mau Mau. Both were, however, tragic events. What we presented to the conference was the beginning of a study of these two authors and especially Ngugi and what he stands for as seen through his works. We read all of Ngugi's works including his latest, which is not yet in our local bookshops. We found that Mazrui's novel, *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*, contained a well articulated philosophy of history. In contrast, we did not find anything we could term philosophy or theory of society in Ngugi's novels. What is more, much of what passes for Ngugi's work is not original. For instance *A Grain of Wheat*, which some of his supporters consider his best, is not an original work. It is a poor parody or reproduction of *Under Western Eyes* by Joseph Conrad. We said this in our paper and Dr. Indangasi, the only serious scholar there is in the University of Nairobi's department of literature, and who is an expert on Conrad supported our view. Nobody offered any evidence to contradict it. Since there was no coherent theory of society or of history in Ngugi's novels, in our view, we decided to consider his essays to see whether they contained any. *Homecoming* is a collection of undergraduate type of essays. And as I said it contained no new philosophy. Unlike Wanjala, we did not think it was fair to judge a man who bears the title of professor by what could pass as undergraduate performance. We thought *Detained* could pass as Ngugi's best work,

given that the man is a very poor writer indeed though he had the fortune of being imposed on to our country through our education system. This is why we analysed this work to discover what theory of society or of history, if any, it had. Again we were disappointed.

There were a number of Ngugi's fans at the conference. They have an emotional attachment to the man, rather than intellectual understanding of his worth. It was clear at the conference that these fans, Wanjala included, were very hurt emotionally. What hurt them was the realisation that some historians had finally exposed Ngugi's intellectual poverty. His falsification of our history had become apparent. Ngugi has been a champion of well rehearsed orchestrate falsehoods. One of these had to do with what he regards as the place of Mau Mau in the history of this country, especially in relation to independence. The other has to do with the meaning of that independence. His views on these two issues were rejected by us at the conference. The reasons for this rejection were simple. One was summarised by Professor Ogot. In his words, the argument about Mau Mau as advanced by Ngugi is an argument about who should control who, or who should take the largest share of the national cake. In this way Ngugi and those he represents use Mau Mau as an instrument of tribal domination.

The other reason was advanced by me. Mau Mau was both a civil war and a revolt against colonial rule. But it had nothing directly to do with our independence. Kenya was not the first country in Africa to gain independence. Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, to name a few had got independence before us and yet there were no Mau Mau types of movements in those countries. Nor was Mau Mau a liberation movement such as those that took place in Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Angola, whose leaders moved from the bush to state house. Those brought independence to those countries. Mau Mau was defeated militarily and its leaders executed. Furthermore, Mau Mau was not the only resistance movement to colonial rule in this country. Nor was it the most glorious. There are numerous examples in our history of various communities resisting the imposition of colonialism on to this country. ■

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