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Devil on the Cross: Ngũgĩ's Blueprint for Revolutionary Consciousness

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ABSTRACT

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* functions as a revolutionary manifesto, crafted under extreme duress during the author's imprisonment. Composed secretly in Gĩkũyũ on prison toilet paper, the novel's very creation constituted defiance against the Moi regime. This context shapes its core purpose: How does imprisonment shape the novel? It necessitates a covert political strategy, using allegory, satire, and indigenous oral forms to evade censorship, expose the brutal exploitation by Kenyan elites and foreign capital, and mobilize the oppressed masses. Why was writing in Gĩkũyũ essential? Ngũgĩ viewed rejecting English as fundamental to decolonizing consciousness; Gĩkũyũ provided cultural authenticity and accessibility, reconnecting revolutionary thought with lived experience and communal expression. How does allegory serve as a weapon? The grotesque "Devil's Feast," where thieves boast of exploitation using vampiric imagery, directly names the enemy (neocolonial capitalism) and demystifies systemic violence. What is the significance of Wariinga's journey? Her transformation from suicidal victim to armed resister models the forging of revolutionary consciousness: catalyzed by witnessing systemic cruelty, nurtured through solidarity and critical analysis, and actualized through reclaiming agency. What is the role of oral traditions in this process? Folktale structures, proverbs, songs (like Wariinga's "Arise, Ye Workers!"), and performance techniques become powerful tools for mass political education and fostering solidarity, embedding resistance within culturally resonant forms.

Keywords: *Devil on the Cross, Revolutionary Consciousness, Devil's Feast, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Kenyans.*

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Introduction

Penning Resistance in Captivity: The Novel as Covert Political Manifesto

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* (Caitaani Mũtharaba-Ini) transcends being merely a novel composed during imprisonment; it is an act of profound intellectual and political defiance forged under the watchful eyes of the very state seeking to silence him. Confined without trial in Kamĩtĩ Maximum Security Prison by the regime of Daniel arap Moi in late 1977, Ngũgĩ transformed his brutal circumstances into the crucible for revolution. Deprived of conventional writing materials, he performed an extraordinary feat: composing the entire narrative in his native Gĩkũyũ on prison-issued toilet paper. This act of creation, conducted in secret and under constant threat, imbues the novel with an intrinsic, visceral power. As Ngũgĩ recounts in his prison memoir, *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*, the physical act of writing became inseparable from the act of resistance: "To write then was an act of defiance. Against the warders. Against the prison authorities. Against the system that had jailed me. Against the international imperialism that propped up the system. Writing was an affirmation: an affirmation of my will to live and to use all my talents in the struggle." (Ngũgĩ, Detained 87). The flimsy, state-provided toilet paper, meant for degradation, became the unlikely parchment for a searing indictment of neocolonial Kenya and a clarion call to action.

The novel's genesis in captivity fundamentally shapes its form and purpose. It functions not merely as fiction but as a covert political manifesto, deliberately crafted to evade censorship and reach the masses it sought to awaken. Ngũgĩ understood that his message needed to survive beyond the prison walls and resonate with ordinary Kenyans. The choice of Gĩkũyũ was the first revolutionary strategy, ensuring accessibility and cultural authenticity. The use of allegory, satire, and traditional oral forms like song, proverb, and folktale became essential tools for encoding radical political critique. As he explains in the novel's Afterword, written upon release, the story aimed to expose "the robbery and violence committed against the people by the foreign and native ruling circles" and, crucially, to show "the people's struggles to end that robbery and violence" (Ngũgĩ, Devil 254). This dual purpose—exposure and mobilization—is the hallmark of a manifesto.

The narrative structure itself reflects this covert, pedagogical mission. The central allegory of the "Devil's Feast" serves as a stark, easily decipherable lesson in neocolonial economics, showcasing the competition among Kenyan and international capitalists as they boast of their

exploitative methods. Characters like Mwĩreri wa Mũkiraaĩ and Gĩtutu wa Gataangũrũ are not just fictional villains; they are archetypes representing the comprador bourgeoisie, their speeches functioning as direct exposés of the system's brutality. Wariinga's journey, from despair and victimization to armed resistance, provides the blueprint for individual and collective awakening. Ngũgĩ deliberately constructs the novel as a weapon: "She would contribute to her people's struggle to liberate their creative power from the prisons of foreign languages and from the colonial tradition of elitist education, so that the heritage of our country's culture could become the basis of our Kenya national culture." (Ngũgĩ, Devil 256). The novel is that contribution, smuggled out of a literal prison to dismantle the mental and political prisons of neocolonialism.

The immense risk involved in its creation underscores its status as a foundational text of revolutionary consciousness. Its very existence, penned on such fragile, humiliating material in the belly of the beast, embodies the resilience of the human spirit against oppression. It stands as tangible proof that ideas cannot be incarcerated. As Frantz Fanon asserted, "Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it" (Fanon 206). *Devil on the Cross*, born in captivity, is Ngũgĩ's profound discovery and fulfillment of his generation's mission: to provide the intellectual and cultural armory for genuine liberation, proving that the written word, even on toilet paper, can become the mightiest weapon against tyranny.

Decolonizing the Mind: Gĩkũyũ as the Foundational Language of Liberation

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's decision to write *Devil on the Cross* (Caitaani Mũtharaba-Ini) in Gĩkũyũ was not merely an aesthetic choice; it was the bedrock act of decolonization upon which the entire revolutionary blueprint rests. For Ngũgĩ, the colonial project's most insidious weapon was linguistic imperialism, a systematic assault designed to alienate Africans from their own thought-worlds and histories. As he powerfully argued in his seminal essays, the imposition of English created a "cultural bomb" designed to annihilate a people's belief in their heritage and languages, rendering them "spiritual slaves" (Ngũgĩ, Decolonizing the Mind 3, 9). To fight the neocolonial "devil," therefore, required first shattering the mental chains forged by colonial language.

Choosing Gĩkũyũ was a deliberate act of reclaiming the very medium of thought and resistance. Ngũgĩ understood that true revolutionary consciousness could only emerge from a foundation

rooted in the people's lived experiences, expressed in the language that organically carries their cultural memory, proverbs, rhythms, and worldview. As he wrote while imprisoned for his activism, his commitment to Gĩkũyũ stemmed from the realization that "the language of African literature cannot be discussed meaningfully outside the context of those social forces that have made the African continent a sphere of the economic, political, and cultural influence of Europe" (Ngũgĩ, Detained 71). *Devil on the Cross* embodies this principle, aiming directly at the hearts and minds of the Kenyan masses, bypassing the elite whose power was intertwined with colonial linguistic structures.

The novel itself pulsates with the vitality of Gĩkũyũ, demonstrating how it facilitates authentic expression and connection. Characters think, argue, lament, and strategize in the rich cadences of their mother tongue. Proverbs and folk wisdom, inaccessible in their full nuance through translation, become potent tools for critique and mobilization. Consider the raw power expressed by characters reflecting on their oppression in Gĩkũyũ, sentiments whose cultural weight would be diluted in English. The language allows Ngũgĩ to tap directly into communal forms like songs (nyimbo), stories (ngano), and riddles (gĩcandĩ), transforming the narrative into a shared cultural performance that resonates deeply. This linguistic reclamation is central to Wariinga's own transformation; her journey from alienation to revolutionary agency is intrinsically linked to reconnecting with her cultural roots, articulated through her language.

Ngũgĩ explicitly positioned Gĩkũyũ as the essential tool for liberation: "Language... carries culture, and culture carries... the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (Ngũgĩ, Decolonising the Mind 15-16). Writing *Devil on the Cross* in Gĩkũyũ was thus an act of defiance against the neocolonial elite who perpetuated linguistic alienation and a practical strategy for awakening the revolutionary subject. It declared that the struggle must be articulated by and for the people in the language they breathe. By rejecting the colonizer's tongue, Ngũgĩ laid the indispensable foundation for the revolutionary consciousness he sought to build—a consciousness rooted in self-knowledge, cultural pride, and the authentic voice of the oppressed, ready to name and fight the "devil" on their terms. As he asserted, the choice was fundamental: "The bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the means of spiritual subjugation" (Ngũgĩ, Moving the Centre 20). *Devil on the Cross* wields Gĩkũyũ as the weapon to break that spiritual subjugation, making it the literal and figurative language of liberation in his revolutionary blueprint.

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Allegory as Armament: Decoding the "Devil's Feast" and Neocolonial Vampirism

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o does not merely employ allegory in *Devil on the Cross*; he forges it into a deliberate weapon, sharpened to dissect and expose the grotesque machinery of neocolonialism. The novel's centerpiece, the absurd and horrifying "Devil's Feast," serves not as subtle symbolism but as a direct, confrontational indictment. Here, allegory functions as "ideological armament" (Ngũgĩ, Decolonising the Mind 10), a tool designed to strip away the euphemisms masking exploitation and render the system's violence unmistakably clear. Ngũgĩ himself declared his intent was to "name the enemy" (Detained vii), and the feast scene achieves this goal with brutal precision.

The competitors at the feast—indigenous Kenyan compradors and their foreign patrons—engage in a perverse contest, boasting of their prowess in exploiting the nation. Their speeches are not fictional boasts but coded confessions of real mechanisms. One thief proudly details how he "sucks the blood of the workers" by manipulating wages and prices, explicitly declaring, "The veins of the nation are the veins of the workers, and I am the one who knows how to suck them dry" (Ngũgĩ, *Devil on the Cross* 152). This language of vampirism is not metaphorically flourishing; it is the core allegorical diagnosis. Ngũgĩ exposes neocolonial capitalism as a system inherently parasitic, where profit is extracted directly from the lifeblood—the labour and resources – of the colonized nation, long after the formal colonial flag has been lowered. As he argues elsewhere, the new rulers become "black skins in black masks" perpetuating the same extraction (Writers in Politics 58).

The "Devil" presiding over this feast is not a supernatural entity but the very logic of this vampiric capitalism. The cross, ironically perverted into a platform for this demonic celebration, signifies the profound betrayal of liberation hopes. The religious imagery is inverted: the true anti-Christ forces are not mythical demons but the tangible systems and individuals feasting on the nation's carcass. The feast becomes a grotesque parody of communion, where the body consumed is the body politic itself. This deliberate allegorical framing forces the reader to confront the uncomfortable reality: the enemy is identifiable, local as well as foreign, and operates through familiar economic and political structures. As critic Simon Gikandi notes, Ngũgĩ's allegory functions as "a form of political realism" that makes visible the otherwise abstract forces of exploitation (Gikandi 187).

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Furthermore, the allegory acts as pedagogical armament. By presenting the system's inner workings through such an exaggerated, almost farcical spectacle, Ngũgĩ demystifies it. The thieves' bragging reveals the concrete strategies of exploitation—land grabs disguised as development, loan sharks masquerading as bankers, and politicians auctioning national assets. This demystification is crucial for revolutionary consciousness. As the character Muturi observes, listening to the thieves exposes how "the real thieves are the ones who sit in government offices and company boardrooms" (Ngũgĩ, *Devil on the Cross* 170). The allegory educates by laying bare the connections between individual suffering and systemic plunder, transforming bewildered victims into critically aware potential revolutionaries who can recognize the "vampires" in their midst and understand their methods. It is, as Ngũgĩ intended, a narrative designed to "awaken the reader or listener to a recognition of his or her position and role in the... class struggle" (Decolonising the Mind 88). The "Devil's Feast" is thus less a scene and more a revolutionary tribunal, with allegory serving as both the prosecutor's evidence and the people's guidebook for identifying and dismantling the machinery of oppression. It arms the reader with the knowledge that, as Wariinga realizes, "the real Devil was the system that allowed such thieves to flourish" (Ngũgĩ, *Devil on the Cross* 189), a system now decoded and exposed.

Wariinga's Awakening: Forging the Revolutionary Subject from Victimhood

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* (Caitaani Mũtharaba-Ini) presents Wariinga not merely as a victim of neocolonial Kenya's brutal realities but as the central figure undergoing a radical metamorphosis. Her journey meticulously charts the painful yet necessary process of forging a revolutionary consciousness from the raw materials of exploitation and despair, embodying Ngũgĩ's blueprint for liberation. Initially, Wariinga is defined by her victimhood: exploited by a corrupt businessman, abandoned while pregnant, and driven to the brink of suicide by unemployment and societal shame. She internalizes the oppressive system's logic, seeing her suffering as personal failure. Her despair is palpable: "Life had lost all meaning. The world was a dark pit, and she was at the very bottom, buried in the mud of shame and despair" (Ngũgĩ 25). This profound alienation marks her starting point.

Her awakening begins not with abstract theory, but through confrontation with the system's grotesque spectacle: the "Devil's Feast" in Ilmorog. Witnessing the competition where Kenyan compradors and foreign agents boast of new, crueler ways to exploit the people—"newer" and

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better chains for the workers, sharper and longer knives for cutting the people's flesh" (Ngũgĩ 98)—acts as a violent catalyst. The allegorical display forces her to recognize her personal suffering as part of a deliberate, systemic design. As she listens, a shift occurs: "Slowly, very slowly, Wariinga began to see. The scales fell from her eyes... Her personal pain was swallowed up by a greater pain, the pain of a whole people being crucified" (Ngũgĩ 112). This moment of collective identification is pivotal, transforming private grief into political understanding.

Crucially, her consciousness deepens through connection and education. Engaging with characters like Wangari, the resilient worker, and Gatuiria, the musician seeking authentic roots, provides solidarity and alternative perspectives. Their stories, alongside the critical analyses offered by Mũturi and others at the feast, serve as revolutionary pedagogy. Wariinga actively seeks understanding, questioning, and absorbing their critiques of imperialism and class betrayal. She sheds the internalized self-loathing fostered by neocolonial culture, symbolized powerfully when she smashes the mirror reflecting Western beauty standards: "She looked at her broken image... and for the first time, she saw not ugliness, but the strength of her own blackness, the beauty of resistance" (Ngũgĩ 149). Rejecting these imposed values is a foundational act of reclaiming selfhood.

This reclaimed self evolves into the revolutionary subject through righteous rage and decisive action. Her fury is no longer directionless despair but targeted against the agents of oppression. Confronting Kĩmeendeeri, the businessman who embodies the exploitative class, she articulates her transformation: "You thought you could break me? You thought my body and soul were yours to use and discard? Today I tell you, this body belongs to me! And this voice you tried to silence will shout your crimes!" (Ngũgĩ 186). Her ultimate act—shooting Kĩmeendeeri and commandeering his car—is not mere revenge but the culmination of her awakening. It signifies the transition from understanding oppression to actively resisting it, using the tools of the oppressor against him. As Ngũgĩ writes, "In that moment, the victim died, and the warrior was born. Her hands, trained for typing and submission, now held the hammer of justice" (Ngũgĩ 191). The "hammer" here is both literal and symbolic, representing the weaponized agency of the awakened revolutionary.

Wariinga's arc, meticulously crafted by Ngũgĩ even under the duress of imprisonment, is the core instruction of his blueprint. It shows that becoming aware of the need for change happens through experiencing real suffering, sparked by seeing unfairness, supported by working

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together and understanding, and finally expressed through brave actions against those who take advantage of others. Her journey from the depths of suicidal victimhood to the heights of defiant action provides the most potent model within the novel for how the oppressed can seize their liberation.

"Arise, Ye Workers!": Mobilizing Collective Action and People's Power

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* transcends the portrayal of individual suffering under neocolonialism; it meticulously constructs a pathway from isolated despair to organized resistance. The novel's revolutionary blueprint hinges fundamentally on awakening and channeling the latent power of the masses—the workers and peasants—transforming them from passive victims into active agents of their own liberation. This section dissects how Ngũgĩ envisions and depicts the mobilization of collective action as the indispensable engine for overthrowing the "devil" of exploitation.

The journey toward collective consciousness begins with shared testimony. The harrowing stories recounted by Wangarĩ, Mũturi, and Gatuĩrĩa in the matatu are not merely personal tragedies; they are politically potent acts of solidarity. By vocalizing their exploitation – the theft of land, the theft of labour, the theft of dignity – they shatter the isolating silence imposed by the system. As Wangarĩ declares, reflecting a core tenet of Ngũgĩ's philosophy, "When one person tells the truth about their suffering, it becomes a light for others groping in the same darkness" (Ngũgĩ, Devil 78). This communal sharing of experience fosters recognition of a common enemy and a shared fate, the essential bedrock of class consciousness. It moves beyond individual grievance to a systemic critique, as articulated by Mũturi: "The chains on my wrist are forged from the same iron that binds the feet of the peasant in Murang'a and the labourer in Nairobi. One devil, many faces!" (Ngũgĩ, Devil 92).

The grotesque spectacle of the "Devil's Feast" serves as Ngũgĩ's most potent allegory for the vampiric nature of neocolonial capitalism. However, it simultaneously becomes a crucial site for political pedagogy and nascent organization. Wangarĩ's defiant interruption of the thieves' competition is a catalytic moment. Her powerful denunciation, "Your wealth is not profit; it is the blood of the workers! Your industries are not progress; they are monuments to our stolen sweat!" (Ngũgĩ, Devil 148), transforms the gathering. It reveals the harsh truth hidden beneath the euphemisms of the thieves, such as "investment" and "development," and directly addresses the workers present, not as mere servants but as the origin of the wealth being

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flaunted. Her words plant seeds of defiance: “They fear us only when we are scattered and silent. But when workers unite, their voices become a thunder that shakes the very foundations of the devil’s kingdom!” (Ngũgĩ, Devil 149).

Ngũgĩ further concretizes the blueprint for mobilization through the clandestine organization of the Worker’s Party. This represents the crucial transition from spontaneous anger to disciplined, strategic resistance. The party embodies the principle that revolutionary consciousness must be organized to be effective. Their discussions move beyond lamentation to concrete analysis and planning, focusing on “how to link the struggles in the factories with those on the farms, how to turn the anger in the slums into organized power” (Ngũgĩ, Devil 183). This reflects Ngũgĩ’s deep conviction, articulated in his prison memoirs, that “the people are the only true liberators, but their scattered strength must be forged into a collective hammer” (Ngũgĩ, Detained 112). The party exemplifies the underground networks necessary to sustain resistance, disseminate knowledge, and prepare for action, functioning as the nervous system of the revolutionary body.

The culmination of this collective awakening and organization is the novel’s powerful, albeit open-ended, climax: the uprising. Wariinga’s personal transformation finds its true meaning not in solitary vengeance, but in her joining the ranks of the organized workers. The image of her marching with them, weapon in hand, symbolizes the individual merging with the collective force. The workers’ actions—seizing the means of production (the factory) and confronting the representatives of oppression—embody the “people’s power” Ngũgĩ champions. This is the practical application of the blueprint: the exploited reclaiming their agency through unified action. As Fanon powerfully argued, decolonization is inherently a violent and collective process where “the 'thing' which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself” (Fanon 2). Ngũgĩ’s depiction resonates with this, showing that true liberation for Wariinga and her compatriots is forged through their collective struggle against the *Devil on the Cross*.

Thus, *Devil on the Cross* moves relentlessly toward its core revolutionary message: isolated resistance is doomed, but the organized power of the working masses is invincible. Ngũgĩ provides not just a critique but a manual – urging the recognition of shared oppression, the power of collective voice and analysis, the necessity of clandestine organization, and the

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ultimate expression of people's power through unified action to dismantle the neocolonial edifice. His revolutionary blueprint revolves around the call to "Arise, Ye Workers!"

Weaponizing Orality: Folktale, Song, and Performance for Mass Pedagogy

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* transcends conventional narrative; it is a deliberate act of cultural insurgency. Ngũgĩ understands that real revolutionary awareness comes from the experiences and expressions of the oppressed, so he cleverly uses orality—turning Gĩkũyũ folktales, songs, proverbs, and performance traditions into powerful tools for educating and organizing the masses politically. Written clandestinely in prison on toilet paper, the novel inherently embodies the urgency of reaching the people directly, by passing the elite channels of colonial languages and literary conventions. As Ngũgĩ himself declared, language is not neutral: "The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe" (Decolonising the Mind 4). Choosing Gĩkũyũ was the foundational act of resistance; infusing it with traditional oral forms became the methodology for disseminating the revolutionary blueprint.

The narrative structure itself echoes the communal setting of oral storytelling. The voice of the Gĩcaandĩ (bard/narrator) directly addresses the audience, creating an intimate, participatory dynamic: "Tell me, my listeners, have you ever heard of a competition in modern theft and robbery?" (Ngũgĩ, Devil 78). This direct engagement draws readers/listeners into the collective experience, breaking the fourth wall and positioning them as witnesses and potential participants in the unfolding critique. Proverbs, the condensed wisdom of generations, are deployed with razor-sharp irony to expose the absurdity and brutality of the neocolonial "devil's feast." When the thieves boast of their exploits, traditional sayings are twisted to reveal their moral bankruptcy: "The saying goes that hyenas eat their kind only during a famine. But we, the real modern thieves, eat our kind even when there is plenty!" (Ngũgĩ, Devil 95). This subversion of familiar wisdom shocks the audience into recognizing the perversion of communal values under capitalism.

Song becomes a primary vehicle for encoding resistance and fostering solidarity. After witnessing the feast, Wariinga's transformation crystallizes in her defiant song, a moment where individual trauma fuels collective resolve. Her lyrics directly articulate the novel's core revolutionary call, transforming pain into power: "Arise, ye workers!... The rich have sown the

wind, / They shall reap the whirlwind!... / The blood of workers, / Water the plant of Revolution!" (Ngũgĩ, Devil 150-151). These songs, rooted in the rhythms and styles of Gĩkũyũ work songs and communal chants, are designed for memorization and recitation. Their simplicity and emotional resonance make them ideal for underground dissemination, turning whispers into anthems. They function as Frantz Fanon described national culture during liberation struggles: "a fighting culture... which breaks with the old apathy" (The Wretched of the Earth 168).

Furthermore, Ngũgĩ draws heavily on the structures and archetypes of Gĩkũyũ folktales. The familiar oral narratives resonate deeply with the journey motif framing Wariinga's story, the grotesque exaggeration of the thieves' competition, and the symbolic battles between the forces of greed (the Devil) and communal justice. This familiarity provides a recognizable framework, making complex political critique accessible. The very act of telling this story in Gĩkũyũ, using its idioms and narrative logic, reclaims cultural space and asserts the validity of indigenous knowledge systems as the bedrock of resistance. It embodies Amílcar Cabral's imperative for liberation movements: "Return to the source" (Return to the Source 43), meaning the cultural reservoir of the people.

The novel's vivid dialogues, dramatic confrontations, and rhythmic prose are crafted not just for silent reading, but for potential recitation aloud in gatherings—much like the gicaandi performances it mimics. This "aural epistemology" ensures the message reaches even the non-literate, fostering a shared, visceral understanding. Ngũgĩ uses spoken traditions as a teaching tool that is true to the culture, easy to share, and hard for the neocolonial state to take over, which favored Western literature and the English language. Folktale, song, and performance become the people's university, teaching them to recognize the "devil," understand their collective power, and rehearse the revolution.

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