Visions of Freedom and Democracy in Postcolonial African Literature

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“Why not leave this country, even Africa, to trial and error?” he said slowly, uncomfortably. “This is only my opinion. I don’t think I approve of dictatorship in any form, whether for the good of mankind or not. Even if it is painstakingly slow, I prefer a democracy for Africa, come what may.”

—Makhaya in Bessie Head, When Rain Clouds Gather

“In many countries, one hasn’t rights; but neither does one really have them in Western Europe or North America although one is made to believe one does. . . . Democracy is the instrument with which the elites whip the masses anywhere; it enables the ruling elite to detain some, impoverish others, and makes them the sole proprietors of power. Who knows what is good for the people? Who knows whom the people love most? Who knows best what the people need?”

—Zeinab in Nuruddin Farah, Sardines

“Tomorrow it would be the workers and the peasants leading the struggle and seizing power to overturn the system and all its prying bloodthirsty gods and gnomic angels, bringing to an end the reign of the few over the many and the era of drinking blood and feasting on human flesh. Then, only then, would the kingdom of man and woman really begin, they enjoying and loving in creative labour.”

—Akiyi in Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Petals of Blood

Introduction
As the 1990s draw to a close, Africa has become the most democratically tested continent in the world; so stated The Economist (February 3, 1996: 17), commenting on the fact that eighteen countries in 1996 and another eight in 1997 were expected to go to the polls. It is quite...
clear from the media that the current struggles and transitions to
democracy have been dazzling and messy, their results contradictory
and unpredictable, yielding both successes and defeats, concessions
to the future and compromises with the past, heroism and tragedy,
hope and pessimism. Already, the euphoria that was so evident at the
beginning of the decade—inspired by the release of Nelson Mandela,
the electoral defeats of Benin’s Mathieu Kerekou and Zambia’s
Kenneth Kaunda, and the flight of Ethiopia’s Mengistu Haile Mariam
and Somalia’s Siad Barre—has been tempered by the return of
Kerekou and the attempted return of Kaunda, not to mention the
ambiguous transition of Kenya, the aborted transition of Burundi, the
terror in Nigeria, the rise of religious fundamentalism in Algeria and
the Sudan, and the continuing nightmare of Angola, Liberia, Somalia,
and Rwanda.

All these conflicting realities and possibilities have given rise to
intense and agonizing debates on the forces that are driving this new
“wind of change” and, more importantly, to controversies about the
social basis of the democratic movements and about the concept of
democracy itself, its meanings and trajectories. To some, democracy is
coterminous with the pluralism of periodic electoral contests, with effi-
cient governance. To others, democracy must be conceived in broader,
more generous and more complex terms, beyond the political domain,
beyond the trappings of “multipartyism”; it must be seen as a project
for collective freedom and empowerment and as the agent of Africa’s
regeneration in all spheres—political, economic, cultural, and moral.

This paper seeks to examine the conflicting visions of democracy
from the different perspectives of three writers: Bessie Head, Nurrudin
Farah, and Ngugi wa Thiong’o.1 These writers are products of, and
write on, different political formations, so that they offer quite diverse
and complex visions of democracy. Head, the South African exile who
migrated to Botswana, typifies the Southern African condition, the
complex interplay of migration and the constructs of race, national-
ity, and gender. Also, Botswana is one of the few African countries that
has maintained a liberal parliamentary system since independence.
Through Head the attributes and limits of this system are thrown into
sharp relief. Farah’s Somalia is a unique African country in that its peo-
ple share the same nationality, language, and religion. Its intense inter-
nal divisions and its collapse in the early 1990s, therefore, raise
fundamental questions about the articulation of nationhood and state-
hood in this era of resurgent nationalisms. Moreover, Somalia’s offi-
cial ideology has swung the ideological pendulum of postcolonial
Africa: from “scientific socialism” to alliance with the West and fun-
damentalist Islam. Finally, Ngugi’s Kenya typifies most postcolonial African states: It is multiethnic, neocolonial, and has vigorously pursued an authoritarian developmentalist model. The apparent ambiguity of its current transition to democratic politics also seems ominously typical.

Together, the creative visions of these writers capture the cultural and moral dimensions of freedom and democracy that are sometimes silent in purely academic discourses. I will begin by briefly examining the African scholarly debate on democracy, against which the visions contained in the novels of the three authors will be read. African intellectuals are generally agreed on the desirability of democracy, but they disagree on its form and content. Also, having fed on a diet of developmentalism for so long, they tend to be critical of defining democracy as the exclusive domain of politics, and especially of the equation between democracy and multipartyism, but they disagree on the articulations between development and democracy, cultural predispositions and competitive politics.

**Visions of Democracy**

Like a chameleon, democracy can wear many colors of convenience. Some prefer the gloss of imported liberalism, others the radiance of socialist egalitarianism, or the earthy hue of traditional communalism. The liberal model of competitive party politics is justified on the grounds that it ensures the trinity of “good governance”: efficiency, accountability, and the protection of individual rights (World Bank 1989; Fatton 1990; Harsch 1993). Critics have pointed out that this model has failed in Africa. It primarily serves the interests of the elite and is restrictive for it focuses on political rights at the expense of economic and social rights. And even the political rights, Mamdani argues, are limited and statist in conception, for they are confined to the citizen as a member of the political community defined by the state and exclude those resident labor migrants who, thanks to the legacy of colonial capitalism in Africa, are in the tens of millions (Mamdani 1992; Mafeje 1992; Mandaza 1990).

The socialist model has historically put a premium on economic and developmentalist rights. For Onimode (1992) and Ake (1993) political democracy and economic democracy are indissolubly linked. Following the collapse of the Soviet empire, African Marxists began to revise their visions of socialism. According to Wamba-dia-Wamba, neither the Westminster model nor the Stalinist model, the two dominant historical modes of politics since the nineteenth century, “support a
process of human and social emancipation today” (1992, 1, 22). The new emancipative politics must be a politics with “several sites and a multiplicity of processes.” “The democratic re-politicization of the people,” in Samir Amin’s words, “must be based on reinforcement of their capacity for self-organization, self-development, and self-defence” (1990, 18).

According to its critics, socialism in Africa has only bred statism, repression, corruption, and economic stagnation. Its failure in Africa has not only been a manifestation of what Brzezinski (1989) calls the Grand Failure of Communism on a world scale but is also due to the fact, so the argument goes, contrary to what its proponents say, that socialism was an alien European intellectual import that failed to put down deep roots in a foreign cultural and historical terrain. Many of these critics are proponents of the indigenous model that advocates a return to the virtues of village cooperation and consensus politics. As Owusu puts it, all imported democratic models have failed and “unless the rebirth of democracy in Africa is rooted and grounded in the villages and small communities, the end-product is bound to be elitist and another example of the failed urban-based development” (Owusu 1992, 387; also see Ayittey 1991, 1992).

The rising waves of concrete struggles and debates about democracy are dissolving the old and predictable ideological lines of confrontation between revolutionaries and reactionaries, committed internationalists and conservative nationalists, the left and the right. But developmentalism refuses to die. The new debates center on the developmentalist and distributionist potentialities of the emerging democracies, the possibilities of recasting African states as “democratic developmental states,” to use the title of Mkandawire’s 1995 article as a descriptive term. Mkandawire, a long-standing and distinguished radical intellectual, believes that out of the current conjuncture will emerge a developmentalism with an abashedly democratic and capitalist face, democratic because of the continuing popular struggles against authoritarianism, and capitalist because capitalism constitutes the political program of the key actors in the current struggles for democracy and of the dominant forces at the global level, following the collapse of “actually existing” Soviet socialism. Amin (1995) and others remain unimpressed by the vows of eternal compatibility between capitalism and democracy and are wary of too close an association between democracy and development, of judging the nascent African democracies on the quicksands of economic performance. An instrumentalist view of democracy cannot be entirely avoided, Olukoshi (1995) has argued, because the struggles for democracy of
the 1980s and 1990s were ultimately struggles for material existence, although they were not purely economic. Distinguishing between democratic struggles and democratic consolidation, he contends that the possibilities of democratic consolidation are firmly tied to the demanding oxcart of development.

We can clearly find echoes of these scholarly discourses on democracy in the works of Head, Ngugi, and Farah. As creative works, they present fuller and finer social imaginaries of African worlds, more textured testaments of African problems and possibilities, values and visions. Given considerations of time and space, I will focus only on four visions: what I would call, first, reconstructing the boundaries of home; second, reimagining the community; third, restructuring development; and fourth, empowering women.

Reconstructing the Boundaries of Home

The postcolonial state in Africa inherited the ill-fitting clothes of liberalism and nationalism. In the liberal tradition, the nation is the bearer of the collective right of self-determination, while the citizen is the bearer of individual rights. This raises vital questions. In a continent where the state is a recent and external construct straddling disparate collections of ethnic groups or nationalities, what constitutes nationality? And doesn’t the conception of individual rights in terms of citizenship effectively disenfranchise millions of people, given Africa’s history of massive labor migration and flows of refugees?

In Ngugi’s vision, ethnic nationalism, as opposed to pan-territorial nationalism, lacks an organic vitality, thanks to the homogenizing influence of the anticolonial struggle, and only thrives because of the class and crass manipulations of the neocolonial elites. As one of the protagonists, Gatuiria, puts it in *Devil on the Cross* (henceforth *DC*):

We all come from the same womb, the common womb of one Kenya. The blood shed for our freedom has washed away the differences between that clan and this one. Today there is no Luo, Gikuyu, Kamba, Giriama, Luhya, Maasai, Meru, Kalenjin or Turkana. We are all children of one mother. Our mother is Kenya, the mother of all Kenyan people. (234–235)

He plans to compose a “truly national music for our Kenya, music played by an orchestra made up of the instruments of all the nationalities that make up the Kenyan nation, music that we, the children of Kenya, can sing in one voice rooted in many voices—harmony in polyphony” (*DC*, 60).
These are sentiments echoed by the protagonists in Ngugi’s other two novels, such as Wanja and Karega in *Petals of Blood* (henceforth *PB*) and Matigari in *Matigari*. The heroic Wanja not only knows all the languages of Kenya, but when she establishes her whorehouse she deliberately employs barmaids from different ethnic groups. To Karega, the fiery teacher and later trade union organizer, tribalism is fanned by the corrupt elites in order to divide the workers, demobilize their collective struggles, and facilitate their exploitation. “A worker,” he declares, “has no particular home. . . . He belongs everywhere and nowhere,” for he has no property to bind him to a place; he has nothing but his labor which he can carry everywhere with him (*PB*, 291). The archetypal and messianic Matigari represents, and speaks for, all working people in Kenya against the imperialist oppressors and their local compradors, or agents.

In Ngugi’s nation, therefore, the boundaries of difference are drawn by the polarities of class. It is an unambiguous, dualistic world, of the “Mercedes family” and the family of the people (*PB*, 98), of the “clan of parasites” and the “clan of producers,” of people with “evil hearts” and those with “good hearts” (*DC*, 53, 54). The overdetermination and simplification of the class dichotomy in *Petals of Blood* deepens as Ngugi’s narrative of liberation becomes angrier and more impatient in *Devil on the Cross* and *Matigari*.

This vision of patriots and traitors can be an intolerant one; it certainly has no room for labor migrants and refugees. Thus Karega’s statement that “a worker has no particular home” would seem to apply to labor within the colonial boundaries. Thus contrary to Aizenberg (1991, 86), I would argue that Ngugi’s narrative does not challenge “the nation and the identity wrought by independence.” It seeks to constitute it.

Farah questions this grand nationalist discourse. He probes the meaning and boundaries of nationality in a country where the idea of nation appears least problematic. Outwardly, the people of Somalia are one: They speak the same language and adhere to same religion. Yet, in Farah’s trilogy, and as the world has seen in recent years, Somalia is a country rent by clan conflicts, tribalism, as Farah calls it, and ruled by “government of tribal hegemony” (*Sweet and Sour Milk*, henceforth *SSM*, 88). In the absence of a definable ethnic other, the nation feeds on itself, fracturing into the imagined differences of clan communities.

In *Maps* the “nation’s insatiable need,” to borrow a phrase from Parker et al. (1992, 5), “to administer difference through violent acts of segregation, censorship, economic coercion, physical torture, police
brutality” is externalized into the aggressive Pan-Somali nationalism of the Ogaden War between Somalia and Ethiopia. The protagonist, Askar, is born into this disputed territory and is brought up by an Oromo servant woman, Misra. The bonding between Askar and Misra, suggestive of the indeterminacy of ethnic and sexual identities, is tested by the exclusivist demands of nationalism. Askar is shocked to learn that Misra is excluded on his newly acquired Somali citizenship papers. When he asks what is the essence of Somaliness, he is given a tortured answer by Hilaal:

A Somali . . . is a man, woman or child whose mother tongue is Somali. Here, mother tongue is very important, very important. Not what one looks like. That is, features have nothing to do with a Somali’s Somaliness or no. True, Somalis are easily distinguishable from other people, but one might meet with considerable difficulty in telling an Eritrean, and Ethiopian or a Northern Sudanese apart from a Somali unless one were to consider the cultural difference. (Maps, 166)

He soon adds a caveat, however: Although Misra speaks fluent Somali and has lived with Somali communities all her adult life, she does not qualify. Indeed, Somalis living outside the nation-state are inferior because “they lack what makes the self strong and whole” (Maps, 167). And hence, the need to liberate them from their fallen state, to bring them back into the nationalist enclosure. Following Somalia’s defeat in the Ogaden War, Misra is accused by the Somali community of betraying them to the Ethiopians, for which she is tortured. She flees to Mogadiscio where Askar, whom she hasn’t seen for more than a decade, now lives as a member of the Somali Liberation Front. She is bludgeoned to death and Askar is implicated in the murder. Her body is found without the heart, suggesting that he has appropriated important aspects of her character; suggesting, too, the ultimate futility of nationalist and sexual identities constructed around absolutized differences. To Farah nationalism, or nationalist fictions according to Cobham (1991, 1992), is an irredeemably reactionary force. Identities are not fixed; they are provisional, like the notional truth in Askar’s maps: “I identify a truth in the maps I draw,” he says to Hilaal (Maps, 216). This is a celebration of the liberal values of tolerance and pluralism.

The life and work of Bessie Head poignantly captures the dilemmas and incompleteness of the statist liberal conception of individual rights. Head migrated from apartheid South Africa to Botswana in
1964, where she lived until her death in 1986. She left South Africa because of political repression, which she found “so evil that it was impossible for me to deal with, in creative terms” (Head 1990, 67). But her experiences in her new adopted homeland, Botswana, were traumatic and helped induce a lengthy and debilitating nervous breakdown. Botswana is renowned for its adherence to the liberal principles of parliamentary democracy. But Head painfully discovered that as a refugee she could not enjoy the rights of individual liberty accorded to the citizens. She led a restricted, dependent, and humiliating life, as is so evident from her private correspondence. She had to report to the police regularly and even had her mail opened. She was only granted Botswana citizenship in 1979, thanks to the fame she had achieved by then.4

Head’s protagonists, Makhaya in When Rain Clouds Gather (hereafter WRCG), Margaret in Maru, and Elizabeth in A Question of Power, experience the anguish of migrant and exile life. Makhaya and Elizabeth are fleeing the oppression and insanity of apartheid South Africa, while Margaret, a Botswana citizen, comes from the outcast Baswara community. The first two expect a new, normal, and fulfilling life in a little corner of the vast continent “without end” (WRCG, 16). But they are haunted by the suffocating insecurities of the refugee condition, a life devoid of the rights and liberties of citizenship, regardless of their productive contributions to their adopted community and country of residence. Makhaya is told in no uncertain terms by the ruthless and greedy chief of Golema Mmidi, Matenge, that he is unwelcome: “We want you to get out. When are you going?” (WRCG, 67). Makhaya lives under the permanent threat of deportation as a “security risk.” So enraged is he that he comes close to killing the chief.

For Elizabeth the agony of not belonging drives her literally mad. She comes from South Africa on a quest for self-definition and self-actualization, to put together her fragmented life, which began in the tragic circumstances of a mental hospital where her white mother was sent for getting pregnant by a black man. She grew up a marginalized, despised Coloured and was further traumatized by her marriage to a perverse and abusive husband. But in the Botswana village of Motabeng, where she settles, she is detested and rejected as well as a racial inferior, a political alien, a cultural outsider. Her new country begins to feel like South Africa: “Just the other day she had broken down and cried. Her loud wail had only the logic of her inner torment, but it was the same thing: the evils overwhelming her were beginning to sound like South Africa from which she had fled. The reasoning, the viciousness were the same, but this time the faces were black”
Lonely and afraid, she withdraws into herself and descends into a terrifying mental hell filled with witchcraft, evil forces, and misogynist men. While Elizabeth’s nightmarish dreams may seem to be rooted in her South African background, the hallucinatory personages, Sello and Dan, who persecute her are both black men, so that her neurosis is an encounter of colonial apartheid and postcolonial pathologies of power. The descriptions of madness as a mental disorder and as a metaphor for political powerlessness and social alienation are hauntingly powerful.

Through Makhaya’s and Elizabeth’s agonizing struggles against the oppression of exile and marginalization, and their desperate wish to belong, Head articulates a compelling vision for a more humane world, one in which the rights of the individual are inclusive and generous, based on the fact of residence, not merely the fiat of birth, on the universal canvas of labor rather than the narrow shell of citizenship. It is a vision for a truly democratic Pan-Africanism.

**Reimagining the Community**

The community as a formation of cultural practices, a process of associational life, and as a moral landscape is historically constructed. African writers and intellectuals have grappled with the questions of cultural continuity and change, autonomy and dependency, uniformity and difference, ever since the tragic encounter with an imperialist, intolerant, and universalizing Europe. Head, Farah, and Ngugi exhibit divergent understandings of the kinds of traditions and social orders that can accommodate the expansive and humane values of a democratic culture. To Farah and Head “traditional” values and institutions are largely seen negatively, as authoritarian, patriarchal, and tribalistic, while for Ngugi they offer positive alternatives to the tyrannies, corruptions, and confusions of the neocolonial era.

In Farah’s trilogy the ruthless general is not an arbitrary, superficial presence but an authentic, organic configuration of Somali life, an embodiment of the articulation between traditional despotism and modern state terror. Indeed, the repression is so vicious precisely because it is woven into an intricate web that links the authoritarian patriarchal family, the tribal oligarchy, and the despotic state.

Farah’s vision of traditional culture is bleakest in Sweet and Sour Milk, in which the interlocking and mutually reinforcing tyrannies of the family, clan, and the state are represented by the ruthless, misogynist, and opportunistic Keynaan, an ex-torturer and paid informer of the regime. He forcibly marries Beydan, whose husband he killed, and
connives at his son’s death in exchange for a police inspector’s job and a fat gratuity, part of which he uses to marry his third wife. His son Soyaan, an economic adviser to the president, is murdered through food poisoning by state agents for his clandestine antistate activities. But the state cynically wants to honor him as a hero in order to confuse and divide the opposition. As befitting a revolutionary hero his last words are said to have been: “Labor is Honor and there is no General but our General.”

Keynaan colludes in the lie, at this mockery of Soyaan’s memory and negation of his revolutionary activities, despite being challenged by his other son, Loyaan, who was the last person to see Soyaan alive. To Keynaan, it doesn’t matter that he was not there; he is the father, the Grand Patriarch, with power “to give life and death as I find fit” over his children (SSM, 95). For conducting an inquiry into his brother’s death and disputing the official version of his last words, Loyaan is deported into exile in Eastern Europe.

This omnipresent dictatorship is maintained by the oral mode of communication. The vast oral networks of rumor, gossip, and speculation keep everybody guessing, insecure, and suspicious. It is an obscurantist tyranny where “everything is done verbally,” and there are no “traceable . . . written warrants,” death certificates, or imprisonment records (SSM, 136). Once again, traditional culture is mobilized for repression; orality dooms the ordinary people to policing themselves, to sustaining and reproducing state tyranny. The aspiring revolutionaries worship the written word, so Loyaan’s quest becomes a search for the secret memorandum his brother wrote. Farah polarizes “a primitive reactionary orality and a sophisticated Westernized literacy, between oralized despotism and written revolution,” as Wright (1990, 27) has put it.

This is a nihilistic world, in which popular politics and culture are despised, and resistance is reduced to the futile gestures of a tiny intellectual elite. The wholesale condemnation of tradition is tempered somewhat in the two subsequent novels. Through the rebellious activities of the singer Dulman, the official “Lady of the Revolution,” who smuggles tapes of subversive poems in Sardines, orality is furnished with a more positive face. And in Close Sesame (henceforth CS), we get a fascinating portrait of the protagonist, Deerive, the liberated widower patriarch, who still mourns his wife and sees himself as a Pan-Somalist, a Pan-Africanist, and as a devout Muslim. He is respected as a hero of the anticolonial struggle and loved by his children and grandchildren, with whom he discusses weighty political and philosophical issues.

Also, we see clan leaders taking a principled stand against arbitrary
power, and neighborhoods and Islamic ideas of brotherhood seem to provide a basis for interclan solidarities and friendships. Through Deeriye, Farah offers a tantalizing vision of transformed gender roles and political values within a harmonious social order. But it is a vision that is overwhelmed by the elitist adventurism and futility of the resistance against the dictatorship, symbolized by two failed assassination attempts, one of which is made by Deeriye when his son, Mursal, is killed by the security forces for his involvement in the original assassination debacle. All that the two seem to have achieved, according to the women mourning at the end of the novel, is that “at least neither died an anonymous death—and that was heroic” (CS, 207).

Head’s Botswana villages are more complex sites of struggle between the forces of good and evil, order and chaos, life and death, tradition and change. Scenes of pastoral beauty vie with harsh images of drought and desolation. Beneath the apparent tranquillity and simplicity of village life lies a world mired in poverty and greed, cruelty and callousness, intrigue and fear, conformity and apathy. It is a world in which women are subjugated by men, ordinary people are terrorized by venal chiefs, and strangers are loathed.

In Maru the object of disdain is the Moswara school teacher, Margaret. The abhorrence toward her is far more violent than that shown to the Coloured Elizabeth, as is clear when Margaret meets the headmaster for the first time: “‘Excuse the question, but are you a Coloured?’ he asked. ‘No’ she replied. ‘I am a Maswara.’ The shock was so great that he almost jumped into the air . . . she was no longer a human being” (40). Margaret encounters racial prejudice as vicious as that accorded to blacks in South Africa. The evils of prejudice and hatred, Head is saying, are not a unique invention of the Europeans but are deeply embedded in African societies as well. “They all have their monsters,” the narrator laments (Maru, 11). In Head’s vision, therefore, a truly democratic world must be free from the pernicious cancers of racism and tribalism.

There is “a greater urgency in Head’s fiction,” unlike Farah’s, “to create ‘new worlds’ of new men and women” (Brown 1981,160). Out of the confrontation between the forces of good and evil new harmonies can emerge, new communities can be forged, a more humane society can evolve. The solution has to be sought at both the personal and the community levels, for these forces jostle within the individual soul as well as within the collective consciousness. In When Rain Clouds Gather, Head tilts toward organized communal action, while A Question of Power describes a harrowingly personal struggle.

In Golema Mmidi, the community gradually reconstructs itself
through the cooperation and the transformation of the hierarchies of power, symbolized by the mobilization of the women and the suicide of a terrified chief Matenge. The proposed marriage of Makhaya, who speaks to the women “as an equal” (107), and Paulina, the lonely and fiercely independent leader of the women’s farming team, points to the liberating possibilities of a democratized community.

The harmonizing energies of cooperative labor in Motabeng plays a similar role in Elizabeth’s recovery from her horrifying madness and alienation. But the healing is also an intensely personal and spiritual one, rooted in a deepening love for her own humanity and the humanity of others, out of the realization that God is not a heavenly absentee landlord but is in “ordinary, practical, sane people” (QP, 31). “Her realization that God is everything allows for celebration of otherness; power becomes relational rather than a system of domination and submission” (Tucker 1988, 175). At the end of the novel, a new beginning beckons: “As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging” (QP, 206).

Such is Head’s optimistic vision, or moral idealism, that even Margaret is redeemed from her ostracism, not through a reaffirmation of the conventions of the past but through the invention of new community structures of attitude and reference following her marriage to the protagonist, Maru, the enigmatic and visionary chief-in-waiting, who loves nature, especially flowers, and wants to change the world. He is attracted to Margaret because of her sense of mystery and individuality. Although Maru loses his chieftainship, the marriage marks a new beginning for everyone, including the Maswara themselves who see “a door silently opened on the small, dark airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time” (Maru, 126).

Head seems to be saying that the liberation and democratization of African societies involves the invention of new traditions, the imagining of new communities, not the pretentious reclamation of some fossilized heritage. In her later writings, though, she speaks in a more affirmative, “communal voice for the Batswana” (Visel 1990, 120).7

For Ngugi the past can be retrieved and mobilized for democracy and development. The narrator in Petals of Blood tells us that the decrepit and drought-stricken Ilmorog “had its days of glory: thriving villages with a huge population of sturdy peasants who had tamed nature’s forest” (120). In those idyllic days “when Ilmorog, or all Africa, controlled its own earth” (PB, 125), “the land was not for buying” (PB, 82); people worked together and shared “when a bean fell” (Matigari, 56). And then the imperialists came, with their trading stations that siphoned off local surpluses abroad; railways that ate the forests; settlers
who stole the land; cities that swallowed the young; Christianity that imprisoned the people’s souls; colonial education that alienated their minds; and chiefs who terrorized their lives.

That glorious past must be remembered and used. The striking students at Siriana, the secondary school in *Petals of Blood*, demand “to be taught African literature, African history, for we wanted to know ourselves better” (*PB*, 170), and when one of these students, Karega, becomes a teacher, he tries to do just that. Even the more ambivalent Munira, the headmaster of the Ilmorog primary school, resolves to restore himself “to my usurped history, my usurped inheritance” in order to liberate himself (*PB*, 227). Indeed, all of Ngugi’s protagonists wrestle with the past; they seek to reconnect themselves to it.

The very narrative structure of the novels—the intricate interaction of past, present, and future; and the dense allusions to history, in which the fictional characters often intermingle with historical characters and events—underscores the importance that Ngugi attaches to history. In fact, Ngugi has engaged in intense debates with Kenyan historians, most of whom he criticizes for having failed to decolonize the country’s history (*Sicherman* 1989; *Mazrui and Mphande* 1993, 164–167). They are collectively represented in *Matigari* in the pathetic figure of the Permanent Professor of the History of Parrotology.

But Ngugi’s past is not a frozen museum artifact. Indeed, as Karega matures in his politics he comes to recognize that Africa “did not have one but several pasts which were in perpetual struggle” (*PB*, 214), and that it is not enough to “talk endlessly about Africa’s past glories, Africa’s great feudal cultures,” for that would not “cure one day’s pang of hunger . . . quench an hour’s thirst or clothe a naked child.” The past must be studied “critically, without illusions, and see what lessons we can draw from it in today’s battlefield” (*PB*, 323) that can be used “to right the wrongs that bring tears to the many and laughter only to a few” (*PB*, 302).

Thus, for Ngugi, remembering links the past and the present, the individual and community; history provides the communal perspective and the collective myths necessary for the liberation of oppressed peoples. And so we see that the awareness and militancy of the Ilmorog community in *Petals of Blood* is heightened during the journey to see the area’s MP in Nairobi: On the journey members of the group tell each other their personal histories only to discover how interconnected their lives are. Even when the revelations are tragic and stressful, they reinforce the individual and collective determination to fight against the oppression of their present lives. The murder of the three ruthless business tycoons who take over Ilmorog occurs in the context
of the unfolding knowledge of Wanja’s past and continuing abuse by one of these men, Kimeria.

In Ngugi we do not meet Farah’s alienated, brooding elites or Head’s lonely, tormented outcasts but connected individuals, who are always tapping into each other’s memories and are often found in crowds or traveling. I have already referred to the purgatorial journey from Ilmorog to Nairobi in Petals of Blood. In Devil on the Cross there is the journey of the protagonists from Nairobi to the Devil’s Feast in Ilmorog, during which the travelers interrogate one another and the corrupt neocolonial order, and there is the procession of the angry crowd to the cave where the feast is being held. These journeys are rites of passage, enabling a character like Wariinga to grow from an insecure woman “into a lucid, decisive woman” (Julien 1992, 151).

In Matigari there is also the procession and the enraged crowd that gathers at the house where Matigari is expected to make his last, Christlike appearance. The rehabilitation of Christianity in this novel, Brown has argued, reflects Ngugi’s “reassessment of the relationship between culture, religion, and politics” (1991, 177). In short, for Ngugi the past and the present, the individual and the community, culture and politics, appropriate each other’s states, spaces, and symbols in the struggle for a better tomorrow.

Restructuring Development

Predictably, development in Ngugi’s “literature of combat” is seen in collectivist, socialist terms. Neocolonial, capitalist Kenya is a wretched social terrain that sprouts flowers with petals of blood and roasts under drought and is controlled by the “loyalists,” those who collaborated with the British colonialists during the Mau Mau War for independence. In Petals of Blood Ngugi shows how the coming of “development”—the Trans-African Highway, factories, and modern infrastructure—benefits not the majority of local people but a few elites and foreign business interests. In fact, the local people lose the little autonomy they had before. Peasants lose their land to speculators and local beer brewers are replaced by multinational breweries. The New Ilmorog is divided into the two spatial solitudes of affluent suburbs and slum dwellings.

Three of the four protagonists in the novel are destroyed by this “dependent” development. Abdulla, the proud Mau Mau freedom fighter and owner of the only shop in the old Ilmorog, loses his business and becomes a pitiful alcoholic. When the same fate befalls Wanja, she resorts to prostitution. Munira, the school headmaster,
wallows in his newfound ordinariness in bouts of drunkenness and later embraces the apathetic religiosity of a born-again Christian. Only Karega, who becomes a trade union leader, grows stronger.

The bankruptcy of the development model and of the neocolonial ruling elite is depicted with all the outrage Ngugi can muster and the comic vision of grotesque realism, as Berger (1988) calls it, in Devil on the Cross, an allegorical story of the competition to choose the seven cleverest thieves and robbers in Ilmorog. The judges are renowned thieves and robbers from seven Western countries, “who are able to roam the whole Earth, grabbing everything—though of course we do leave a few fragments for our friends” (DC, 89). The competitors try to outdo each other in displaying their cunning and skills in theft and robbery and in ingratiating themselves with the judges, except one who, to the dismay of everybody, issues the nationalist battle cry: “Every robber should go home and rob his own mother! That’s true democracy and equality of nations” (DC, 171). He is later found dead, which suggests that national accumulation cannot occur and the national bourgeoisie cannot emerge under the present neocolonial conditions.

This echoes a rather crude dependency perspective. Kenyan capitalism and social class structure is far more complex than is apparent in Ngugi’s narrative (Zeleza 1991). Ngugi’s critique of Kenyan capitalism is as simplistic and populist as the process by which he envisages the system will be transformed. He invests messianic faith in what he calls “the holy trinity” of the masses: peasants, workers, and patriots (DC, 250). This voluntaristic vision is based on a romanticization of peasants and workers and assumes the internal homogeneity of each of these classes and an automatic alliance among them. This simplification becomes glaring in Matigari. As Gurnah (1991, 172) has stated: “The people, though ritually valorised, are gullible. They remain satisfied with the fantasy of a miraculous redeemer.”

While Ngugi straddles the rural and urban landscapes and power-scape and deals with the plight of both peasants and workers, Head focuses squarely on rural transformation and on farming as a ritual of material growth and moral healing. For his part Farah dwells on the rarefied universe of the professional elites. For Head there is a necessary link between economic, social, and spiritual well-being. Like Ngugi’s drought-stricken Ilmorog, Head’s villages are landscapes ravaged by the constant threat of drought, which symbolizes crisis in the moral and social order. But her conception of development is far more limited than Ngugi’s. It is primarily seen in terms of bringing outside experts in to disseminate new techniques to the local people, who lack the capacity to develop by themselves. In Rain Clouds, Gilbert, the
English agronomist, and Makhaya, are the development experts, while in *A Question of Power* the experts come from Denmark, England, and South Africa, including Elizabeth herself who introduces Cape Gooseberry.

While Head is critical of the insensitivity, arrogance, and naiveté displayed by some of the expatriates, like Camilla in *A Question of Power*, she doesn’t question their role. Only the greedy chiefs, such as Matenge in *Rain Clouds*, express serious opposition, but since their motives are suspect, their views are discredited. The dedicated, visionary Gilbert is Head’s most endearing development expert. He marries a local woman, the self-possessed Maria, and recruits Makhaya because he has “the necessary mental and emotional alienation from tribalism to help him accomplish what he had in mind” (*WRCG*, 30). Makhaya eagerly obliges and mobilizes the women for the cooperative farming project. Both Gilbert and Makhaya are opposed to socialism because to them “Africa had a small population, and it might well be that socialism of every kind was an expedient to solve unwieldy population problems” (*WRCG*, 83). Makhaya’s vision is shallow and contradictory. He envisions a Golema Mmidi and an Africa

of future millionaires, which would compensate for all the centuries of browbeating, hatred, humiliation, and worldwide derision that had been directed to the person of the African man. And communal systems of development which imposed cooperation and sharing of wealth were much better than the dog-eat-dog policies, take-over bids, and grab-what-you-can of big finance. (*WRCG*, 156)

Ngugi, of course, despises external dependency. So does Farah. But they have different culprits and visions of their country’s economic futures. The capitalist west is the object of Ngugi’s wrath, while for Farah it is the Soviet bloc. Soyaan in *Sweet and Sour Milk* notes bitterly in one of his secret memorandums that East German and Russian aid consists of prisons, not factories, and half-baked experts who come to replace the nation’s jailed or exiled “professionals, intellectuals, and technicians” (*SSM*, 137). Medina, the protagonist in *Sardines*, tells Sandra, the Marxist journalist whose grandfather was once a colonial governor, that the flame of Marxism was lit when the “light of the civilizing mission of the crucifix . . . waned” (*SSM*, 206).

Development in this scientific-socialist-Islamic revolutionary dictatorship consists of “showy pieces of tumorous architecture” and new roads and roadsides “decorated with neon signs illuminating with the brilliance of [the general’s] quotes” (*SSM*, 73, 74). So bankrupt is the
dictatorship and the international economic system that famine is big business for the multinationals and the general, who also uses it to break the resistance, to "starve and rule" (Sardines, 103). There can be no solution to the economic crisis of underdevelopment without dismantling the dictatorship, after which efforts must be made, in the words of the singer Dulman, to belong to the twentieth century and "to use its technology" (Sardines, 163).

There is really no blazing vision of a new economic tomorrow from Farah’s muddled, elitist intellectuals, as there is from Ngugi’s restive masses. Samater meditates with bitter defeatism: "We the intellectuals are the betrayers. . . . We the intellectuals are the ones who tell our people lies. . . . We are the ones that keep dictators in power" (Sardines, 72).

Empowering Women

All three writers condemn the oppression of women in African societies and advocate women’s liberation as an integral part of the processes of democratization and development. They leave us with unforgettable images of women’s subjugation and struggle, marginalization and empowerment. Farah’s women struggle against a vicious patriarchal order, in which their voices are silenced, their humanity is denied, and their sexuality is negated through the practice of infibulation. Keynaan expresses disappointment in Loyaan for discussing ideas with women. Women, the Grand Patriarch tells his incredulous son, “are for sleeping with, for giving birth to and bringing up children; they are not good for any other thing” (SSM, 84). Men’s domination seems total, except for those women outside the traditional order, such as Margaritta, the half-Somali and half-Italian partner of the murdered Soyaaq in Sweet and Sour Milk, and the educated or foreign women in Sardines and Close Sesame.

Women are at the center of the narrative in Sardines. Medina, a cosmopolitan journalist, leaves her husband, Samater, to protect her daughter, Ubax, from her grandmother’s threat to “have her circumcised” (Sardines, 66–67). Medina also leaves to write a book against the regime that she detests partly because “the general reminded her of grandfather who was a [patriarchal] monstrosity” (Sardines, 16). She is disappointed when Samater accepts a ministerial appointment, ostensibly to protect his clansmen from possible victimization should he refuse. But Farah does not idealize the women. Medina’s uncompromising stand increasingly looks self-absorbed and obstinate, her single-minded protection of her daughter smacks of emotional and intellectual tyranny. The little girl is rarely allowed to play with other
children. As for “the foreigners Sandra and Atta, respectively the white stooge and black spy of the ‘revolution’ [they] connive at elit-ism, clan nepotism, and the Islamic subjugation of women in the name of Marxism and Africanity” (Wright 1990, 29).

The “female privilegentsia,” as they call themselves, live in the same claustrophobic elitist world as their men, indulging in equally impotent gestures of literary defiance: Medina edits the general’s speeches, and anonymous girls write slogans on walls. At the end of the novel Medina is confronted by her sister-in-law, Xaddia, and reminded that her actions contributed to Samater losing his job and others getting arrested. When she is asked: “What point have you made?” (Sardines, 246), she has no convincing answer, except to mouth an anguished cliché: “I say the struggle must go on” (Sardines, 246). The novel ends with Medina, the just released Samater, and their daughter walking away, “refusing to play host to the guests who waited to be entertained with explanations, explications and examples. Medina, Samater and Ubax behaved as though they needed one another’s company—and no more” (Sardines, 250). And so they move away from the oppressive tentacles of the extended family into the liberatory embrace of the nuclear family. Once again, Farah gives us a peculiarly petty-bourgeois vision.

In contrast Ngugi deals mostly with peasant or working-class women. Elite women, like the wife of the Minister of Truth and Justice in Matigari, who is caught making love with her driver in the back seat of a Mercedes Benz, are portrayed with contempt. He focuses on the lower-class women because in his view they are the ones who bear the brunt of class and sexual exploitation. Wanja in Petals of Blood and Wariinga in Devil on the Cross represent resilient, young working-class women, while Nyakinyua and Wangari represent strong, older peasant women, respectively. As teenage girls both Wanja and Wariinga are bright, but the chances to develop their potential are dashed when they are made pregnant by wealthy and deceitful old men who deny any responsibility. In desperation Wanja kills her baby, while Wariinga tries to commit suicide. She hates everything about herself: her dark complexion, teeth, and even her manner of walking.

Henceforth, Wanja drifts in and out of prostitution, while Wariinga experiences sexual harassment in every job she applies for or gets. Women working in factories and offices, Wariinga suggests, are treated no differently from prostitutes for their “arms,” “brains,” “humanity,” and “thighs” are exploited by their male employers. Wanja discovers that even the three men who become her friends in Ilmorog—Munira, Karega, and Abdulla—seek to dominate and control her. The develop-
ment of the tourist industry simply reinforces the sexual exploitation of women.

Building on the resistance tradition of the older women in their lives or whom they come across, who have histories of participation in the independence struggle behind them, the two younger women try to reconstruct their lives on their own terms. Wanja becomes a high-priced prostitute, while Wariinga breaks into the male world of engineering. Men, including her close friends Munira, Karega, and Abdulla, fear and seek to control Wanja’s sexuality. The two women regain their self-confidence, which is ultimately augmented by killing the men who sexually exploited and abandoned them when they were young. This signifies not only personal revenge and reaffirmation but also the force of communal retribution and justice.

Ngugi’s women, more so than those in Head’s three novels, achieve their gradual sense of empowerment through collective class actions, rather than purely through gender solidarity. The narrator mentions, but only in passing, that “Wanja and the other women on the ridge had formed” a farming cooperative (PB, 200), and “the women dancers formed themselves into a Tourist Dancers’ Union and demanded more money for their art” (PB, 305). In the garage cooperative where Wariinga works part-time she is the only female. The women’s dependence on male-led class movements becomes troubling in Matigari. Guthera, a prostitute reminiscent of Mary Magdalene, follows and submits herself to Matigari, the godly patriarch.

The traditional patriarchal controls that Head’s women confront have some similarities to those in Ngugi’s and Farah’s fiction. They range from economic powerlessness to sexual objectification. A major difference is on the issue of racism. These women are not destroyed, as Katrak (1985) claims. At the beginning of Rain Clouds, Gilbert, the English agronomist, tells Makhaya of the anomaly that although it is the women who farm, “when it [comes] to programs for improved techniques in agriculture . . . the lecture rooms [are] open to men only” (WRGC, 34–35). The rest of the novel chronicles the women’s cooperative efforts to improve their farming and control the fruits of their labor. When drought strikes and the men have to return from the cattle posts with their emaciated livestock they are “flushed with pride” to find what the women have been doing in their absence (WRGC, 173). Ashamed, they agree to pool their labor and build a long fence for a cattle-holding ground. The seeds of change in the power relationship between men and women have been sown.

In Maru and A Question of Power the links between patriarchal and racial domination, freedom for women, and national liberation are
drawn quite sharply. Both Elizabeth and Margaret suffer from a double sense of powerlessness, as women and as outsiders in a traditional society. Margaret, the artist, survives through sheer endurance and her art, which evokes visionary, realistic images of ordinary women and loudly proclaims: “We are the people who have the strength to build a new world!” (Maru, 108). Elizabeth experiences the full horrors of sexual objectification. She is so insecure that she is initially even attracted to Dan’s sadistic and promiscuous masculinity. He is a walking phallus, always parading his women before her, which negates her own sexuality and further silences her; all of which is done to debase and eventually destroy her. But in the end she does heal herself of the hallucinatory Dan and Sello.

Both Elizabeth and Margaret are ultimately saved through the solidarity of other women. Head contrasts the warm, sharing, and fulfilling friendship of Elizabeth and the peasant woman, Kenosi, and that of Margaret and the royal woman, Dikeledi, with the competitive and manipulative relations between Sello and Dan over Elizabeth, and Maru and Moleka over Margaret. This feminist solidarity not only helps empower the women but is also, Head believes, central to the transformation of society as a whole, to the dismantling of the hierarchies of power and the dualities of experience that fragment and victimize women and ordinary people.

Conclusion

These readings suggest that the struggles for democracy have to be accompanied by a profound and constant questioning, and in some cases even dismantling, of the old totalizing constructions and binary oppositions between nationality and ethnicity, collective and individual rights, and tradition and modernity. What is at stake at this juncture of democratic struggle in Africa, and around the world, is the construction of new ways of living and imagining, new visions of being fully human in this complex, diverse world, where nobody ever realizes his or herself as an individual outside the affirmative ties of social relations and identities.

Thus these are not narratives that celebrate the ambivalences, contingencies, and hybridities of postcoloniality; they are not immersed in postmodernist fantasies and reactionary fulminations against history and humanist values. As Appiah (1992, 66) has observed, their messages of protest against “the Western imperium” and the “nationalist project of the postcolonial nationalist bourgeoisie . . . are grounded in an appeal to an ethical universal.” These novels affirm
the emancipatory possibilities of the decolonization project;\textsuperscript{10} of nationalist struggles firmly tethered to struggles for gender, class, and ethnic equality; of struggles inspired by new and generous visions of community and citizenship, visions that imagine and seek to create a Pan-African Commonwealth that transcends the dangerous and endangered fictions of the nation-state.

\textbf{NOTES}

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2. Also see the debate between Thandika Mkandawire and Peter Anyang’Nyong’o in \textit{Codesria Bulletin} 1, no. 2 (1991); and the papers by Nyong’o (1992) and Hamid (1992).

3. For a report of the debates on this and other issues in Africa’s current transformations at the Codesria Eighth General Assembly, see Paul Tiyambe Zeleza and Coumba Momar Diop (1995), and for an edited collection of the papers see Zeleza and Diop (forthcoming).

4. The first collection of her correspondence contains letters she wrote to Randolph Vigne (Head, 1991).

5. My interpretation extends Roger A. Berger’s (1990) tantalizing but limited analysis that Elizabeth’s madness reflects, in Fanonist terms, her internalization of colonial psychopathology. Oladele Taiwo (1984) also locates her madness in “the iniquitous system of apartheid,” as does Adetokunbo Pearse (1983).

6. I think Cecil Abrahams (1990, 10) is exaggerating when he argues that Head “opposed vehemently organized class action and sought solutions on the personal level.”

7. For example, orality features at the levels of inspiration, composition, and narration in her collection of short stories (Head, 1977); see Femi Ojo-Ade (1990) and Nigel Thomas (1990). In \textit{Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind} (Head, 1981), she celebrates the history of this community and offers a eulogistic portrait of Khama in \textit{A Bewitched Crossroad} (1984).

8. Simon Gikandi (1991), who read the original Kikuyu version, has suggested that the apparent narrative simplicity of the English version of \textit{Matigari} is a product of the problems in translation.

9. For a fascinating analysis of the psychiatric veracity of Elizabeth’s healing process see Elizabeth N. Evasdaughter (1989).

10. In much postmodernist and postcolonialist theorizing Third World
nationalisms are disparaged and misread as simple derivative discourses of outmoded European nationalism. For arguments that nationalism still matters, that its mission to destabilize imperialism is far from over, see Aijaz Ahmad (1995), Neil Lazarus (1994), Benita Parry (1994), and Renato Rosaldo (1994).

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