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BOOK REVIEWS

Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. (African Writers Ser.: No. 240), 1982, 232 pp. (Orig.) 1981, pap. text ed. \$6.00. Heinemann, London.

Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary is a strong, incisive and many-faceted work. There is much more here than what one would expect from the title, for although the book is a prison diary, it is also a vehicle for Ngugi to express his thoughts on the subjects that motivate his actions and help determine the course of his life.

The book has a short preface and is then divided into three sections. It begins with "Prison Notes" which comprises three-fourths of the book and is quite clearly the most important section. Section Two is "Letters From Prison" which is the only section that was entirely written from the prison. Section Three is called "Prison Aftermaths" and contains the documentation of the writer's attempt to regain his position as Chair of the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi.

Background

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o has always been a writer influenced directly by politics, if not a political writer per se. Of course, all writers have a certain point-of-view that permeates their work; it is just that some may falsely deny its relevance. But Ngugi's politics have been explicit since his first work, *The Black Hermit* (1968), a play written and produced as part of Uganda's independence celebrations in 1962. Its theme is based on the problem of ethnic rivalries. At the time, Ngugi was a student at Makerere University College in Uganda. When the book was published six years later, Ngugi's preface noted:

I thought that tribalism was the biggest problem besetting the new East African countries. I, along with my fellow undergraduates, had much faith in the post-colonial governments. (p. viii)

It may be said that Ngugi's writings have progressed from being implicit to acquiring an explicit form. This change is tied to his continuing study of Kenyan history and politics and the development of his ideas on the revolutionary role of language and culture in society. Ngugi has developed a clear class analysis of contemporary Kenya and the world as a whole. In that Ngugi is the foremost East African author, the relevance of his world-view extends far beyond literary circles. Because he has learned from the Kenyan peasants and workers, his views are also partly a mirror of growing political trends within his society.

Although the author has written plays, novels and essays, he is perhaps best known internationally for his novels, *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), *A Grain of Wheat* (1968) and *Petals of Blood* (1977). Perhaps his most important play (with Micere Mugo) published before 1980 was *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1977).

The year 1977 was a turning point in his literary career and his life. Publishing *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* seems to be a bold attempt to jar Kenya's literate-in-English elite with the memory of one of the country's most revered revolutionary heroes. Kimathi was a guerrilla leader in the Mau Mau Rebellion of the 1950s that led to Kenya's independence from Great Britain in 1963. In order to understand the significance of this play, it is necessary to know that the post-independence government of President Jomo Kenyatta had consistently played down the importance of that struggle and the issues voiced during this mass revolutionary uprising. In *Detained*, Ngugi gives us an analysis of the changing roles that Kenyatta played during his career. He compares President Kenyatta to Prime Minister Muzowera, former so-called leader of neo-colonial Zimbabwe-Rhodesia. When he wrote about Kimathi and gave us a fictionalized version of what his trial might have been, Ngugi was himself confronting the neo-colonial nature of the Kenyan state.

The novel, *Petals of Blood*, was his first set in contemporary Kenya, the independent country ruled by the government of President Kenyatta. Its scathing attack on the developmental policies of the neo-colonial government and business elite was unprecedented. Nevertheless, the writer's stature made it possible for the book to be launched by the Minister of Finance at Nairobi City Hall. Up to this point, Ngugi had always written in the English language, a medium inaccessible to the peasants and many of the workers. His books were read by the national elite and sold in the international market. So when Ngugi switched to his first language, Gikuyu, and produced a play* (with Ngugi wa Mirii) with and for the peasants of his home town, he was testing new waters. This was too much for the authorities. From a respected academic and author he had become a real political threat and was quickly detained.

"Prison Notes"

Ngugi was detained from 31 December 1977 to 12 December 1978 in Kamiti Maximum Security Prison near Nairobi. Section One of *Detained*, entitled "Prison Notes," tells us the story of his detention, what life was like in prison, and quite a lot of the

**Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)*: African Writers Series, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1982. First pub. in Gikuyu by the same publisher, East Africa, 1980. (Ed. K.M.)

author's views on Kenyan history, language and culture, and contemporary politics.

His description of prison conditions is graphic. The food was meager, worm-infested and rotten. He was locked in his cell alone from between thirteen and twenty-three hours per day. A 100-Watt light bulb burned continuously in his cell, often depriving him of sleep. For most of his time in detention, no contact with the outside world was allowed, except for an occasional censored letter from his family. Ngugi describes the psychological torture of being given an indefinite term. Some of his fellow detainees (all writers and composers) had been there for up to ten years! No end was in sight, yet there was usually a desperate hope that freedom could come soon. Disease was used as physical torture. Medical care was given only in extreme cases and only after much delay. Furthermore, people were often not treated for the correct ailments. When Ngugi developed a tooth problem that was very painful, he was finally given permission to go to the hospital for treatment. But when he was told that he would have to be chained for the trip, he flatly refused. The tooth was never treated. Permission was also granted for rare family visits, also on condition of being chained. He refused again and had no visitors. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's strength was never broken. He made the point that he was not a criminal and had never been convicted of any crime. He would therefore not suffer the additional indignity of voluntarily allowing himself to be chained.

He also gives us the story of how he came to write his latest novel, his first in the Gikuyu language, and quotes from it to illustrate his points. He later translated the book into the English language and it appeared as *Devil on the Cross* (1982). He tells us how the activity of writing maintained his sanity and sustained him, even though all he had to write on was rationed toilet paper. The following quote is illustrative of how he felt about his plight, his view of present-day Kenya and his hope for creating a revolutionary culture and society in the future. (Wariinga is the heroine and Njooki is his new daughter, whom he had not yet even seen at the time of writing.)

*But Wariinga and Njooki also keep on reminding me that my detention is not a personal affair. It's part of the wider history of attempts to bring up the Kenyan people in a reactionary culture of silence and fear, and of the Kenyan people's fierce struggle against them to create a people's revolutionary culture of outspoken courage and patriotic heroism. (p. 28)**

An ironic twist sparked the beginning of the novel. His unknowing and normally intimidated prison guard approached him one day

*Page numbers refer to *Detained*, unless otherwise indicated.

and began lecturing him on the troubles with educated Kenyans. They despise their own languages, do not like to talk with ordinary people and even adopt European names. These are the very issues, seen as revolutionary by the governing elite, that brought Ngugi to detention. He tells us how he and Ngugi Wa Mirii wrote *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (translated by the authors as *I Will Marry When I Want*). The peasants and workers of Ngugi's home area formed Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre in Limuru. Ngugi Wa Mirii was the coordinator at the Centre. The local people gave the two authors the job of writing a working script. Then over a two-month period, the peasants and workers altered the script as they wished until the play became a communal effort. Ngugi saw the members of the community "seize more and more initiative" and in the process develop incredible social discipline. Ngugi notes that the village of Kamiriithu was previously known for its drunken brawls, but not one such incident was recorded over the six months that they rehearsed the play. When ordinary people began to travel long distances to attend the play, the government took notice. Ngugi had concretely thrown his energy into helping to liberate the creative energy of the peasants and workers through this radical play. Furthermore, it was developed and performed by the victims of the neo-colonial state. The government's response was to stop the play and detain Ngugi. Here is what Ngugi had to say about the response.

In its official submission to the UNESCO general assembly in Nairobi in 1976, the KANU government had made a very strong case for integrated rural development with culture, including rural village theatres as a central core, and this had been accepted. Indeed a senior cabinet minister in the KANU government was then the current president of UNESCO. Now a popular people's play had been refused further performances by the government which had hosted UNESCO and endorsed its cultural policies, and no satisfactory reason was forthcoming! (p. 80)

This throws tremendous light on recent political developments in Kenya. We will come back to this later.

But first, let us go back to Wariinga. Ngugi informs us why he created this heroine.

Because the women are the most exploited and oppressed section of the entire working class, I would create a picture of a strong determined woman with a will to resist and to struggle against the conditions of her present being. (p. 10)

She is modelled on the great revolutionary women who fought in the Mau Mau Rebellion like Me Kitilili, Muraa Wa Ngiti, and Mary

Muthoni Nyanjiru. Ngugi is clearly countering the pervading sexism that continues to handicap Kenyan women, but furthermore he is giving us a picture of the revolutionary history of Kenya in the twentieth century that was first suppressed by the colonial government and is now suppressed by the new elite. (This is reminiscent of how United States' administrations have treated the protest movement against the war in Southeast Asia. Ngugi's history is from a Marxist perspective and runs from the initial resistance to the British at the turn of this century to the Mau Mau Rebellion, and even up to the death of President Kenyatta (the event that precipitated his release from detention). Unfortunately, he leaves out the various attempts to form long-lasting opposition parties since independence. These have met strong government resistance. Oginda Odinga was reported to have been trying once again to form an opposition party in early 1982 before he was stopped by the government's decision to make Kenya officially a one-party state. At the time of writing this essay, Odinga is reported to be under house arrest and his son to have been charged with treason. In addition, several well-known people were detained.

Perphas Ngugi's largest omission is a failure to discuss the issue of land alienation which has played a crucial role in most contemporary revolutionary movements.* One must remember that colonial Kenya reserved the 'White Highlands', the best agricultural land, for the settlers, much like the South African regime apportioned its land today. This was a central issue in the Mau Mau Rebellion. But in any case, he refers us back to two primary sources to get the real story of 'Mau Mau' (Bildad Kaggia, *Roots of Freedom, 1912-1963*, East African Publishing House, Nairobi, 1975; and J. M. Kariuki, *'Mau Mau' Detainee*, Oxford University Press, London, 1963). Kaggia and Kariuki were freedom fighters and leaders who spent long years in detention. Kaggia tells the story of Kenyatta's surprise at not recognizing many of the members of the Mau Mau Central Committee when he was first called before them in late 1952. Kariuki makes a similar point, Kenyatta was not involved in underground activities; he was a leader of the legal movement. Kariuki's continued principled effort in fighting for the goals developed during the Mau Mau movement finally resulted in his assassination in 1975. This is more evidence of the repressive nature of the current regime and it is no accident that Ngugi wrote the postscript when the book was republished immediately after Kariuki's death.

Ngugi, Kaggia and Kariuki all debunk the British colonial myth that Mau Mau was based on a kind of brainwashing induced by "primitive" oaths. In the preface to Kariuki's book, Margery Perham puts the colonial position this way.

*This point was also made by Kikaya Chadaka in his review. See "Africa: An International Business," *Economic and Political Monthly* (London), No. 124 (December 1981), pp. 83-84.

The movement was fostered and bound together by secret and graded oaths, and the bestiality of the more advanced of these was so revolting to Europeans, and not only to them, that it seemed to many that those who used such methods ceased to be normal human beings. (p. xii)

But Ngugi asserts the cultural legitimacy and revolutionary unity and affectiveness of the oaths. In fact it is Perham and the other colonial apologists who have turned things around. Kariuki noted how the colonial government promoted tribalism in order to divide and rule. When he was detained at Three Day Hills Camp near Lake Rudolf in the Kenyan desert, the District Commissioner told the local people (Turkana and Samburu ethnic groups) that the Gikuyu detainees "were very disgusting people whose custom it was to eat the breasts of...women and even the embryos of children in the womb." (Kariuki, p. 46)

"Letters From Prison"

When Ngugi tried to write to his wife about his problems, his letters were not allowed through the prison censors. The first letter in Section Two is one such letter. In it, the author describes his lack of medical care and family visits because he will not allow himself to be chained. All the other letters are addressed to various officials and demand an end to various aspects of the horrendous prison conditions. All are by Ngugi except the last which was written by Adam Mathenge, a fellow detainee who was denied necessary X-ray and electro-therapy for a severe back problem. Some of Ngugi's letters also go into detail about his views on reviving a national Kenyan culture and literature. Some even contain clever parables to dramatize his points.

"Prison Aftermaths"

Section Three contains the documentation of the writer's attempt to regain his old position at the University of Nairobi, where he was Chair of the Department of Literature. Under the terms of his contract, the university had no right to dismiss him, even though he was in detention. The political ramifications of continuing his contract would have been profound and more than the present government could live with. Ngugi reminds us that he was instrumental in changing the name of his department from the "Department of English" to the "Department of Literature" and that a new department named the "Department of Linguistics and African Languages" was established. The university is now closed* while a review committee determines what changes are necessary to repress further academic anti-regime

*At the time of going to press, there are unconfirmed reports about its imminent opening. (Ed. K.M.)

political activities. The academic community had supported Ngugi strongly and was particularly active against the move to make Kenya officially a one-party state. There were demonstrations calling for a referendum on the matter. Finally, when the Air Force attempted a coup on 1 August 1982, many students hailed the supposed overthrow of the government. Titus Adungosi Oloo, Chair of SONU (Student Organisation of Nairobi University) is now serving ten years in prison for "sedition" resulting from the demonstrations, and two other student leaders were arrested. Police raided the two university campuses and beat-up, raped and murdered students, in the process of arresting hundreds. According to the 24 August 1982 issue of *Index on Censorship* (London), eye witnesses reported two bus-loads of bodies taken to the city mortuary. In addition, the police raided the libraries and removed left-wing books as well as made a list of the staff responsible for ordering them. At least six faculty members are now in detention and Maina Wa Kinyati is serving six years for possession of "seditious literature." These are the events foreshadowed by Ngugi's detention, itself part of a continuing pattern since Kenya's independence. It is interesting and relevant to note that Ngugi's detention order, presented at the very beginning of the book for our inspection, was signed by Daniel Arap Moi, then Minister for Home Affairs and Vice-President. Of course, now he is the President.

The New York Times of 21 March 1982 (p. 19) reported that while refurbishing the open-air theater in Kamiirithu, the theater group was officially banned. Truck loads of police came and completely destroyed the theater that had taken so much community effort to construct. Victoria Brittain, writing in the *London Review of Books* (3-16 June 1982), reported that the two Ngugis' latest play, *Maitu Njugira (Mother, Cry for Me)* was refused a license after being sold out far in advance for a scheduled run at the National Theatre. The Theatre had not even advertised the performance. In April 1982, the cast was invited to tour Zimbabwe, perform and explain the work of their community center in connection with their adult literacy program. The government of Kenya refused the players passports.

Although Ngugi has no outlet to present his work in the arts with his people, he can at least keep writing, on toilet paper if need be. His ideas of reviving the creative spirit unleashed by the Mau Mau Rebellion and rejuvenating Kenyan culture in the context of a class analysis of Kenya society reflect growing trends in the country. *Detained* is a powerful book; it will not fail to have an important progressive impact on Kenya and beyond.

Various groups are working to try to ease the present repression of the Moi government. Academic bodies such as the African Studies Association and the Teachers of Caribbean and African Literature have passed resolutions at their 1982 meetings which

have resulted in cables and letters to President Moi. The Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners in Kenya (c/o 76 Stroud Green Road, Finsbury Park, London N4 3EN) and the International Committee for Academic and Artistic Freedom in Kenya -- ICAAFIK (c/o Black Students Alliance, Kerkhoff Hall, University of California, 405 Hilgard Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90024) are both active.

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