

## On Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Political Theatre: An Artist's Conflict with the State over Performance Space

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### Abstract

The problem with Kenya as a post-colony was (and is) simply a problem of leadership. Censorship and oppression of native artists who criticize the government has continued to haunt us, even after Kenya's independence in 1963. Kenya's post-independence national leaders use state power to control and silence artistic voices that question and threaten their political ambitions. These leaders exert oppression and brutality to artistic voices that express dissatisfaction with their leadership. To this day, limitations of native artists' social, political, and economic rights are ghosts that continue to infest postcolonial Kenya. So, what should an artist do in such situations? What power does the artist have on (or over) the performance space? This article argues that Ngugi's conflict with postcolonial Kenyan regimes was a question of power and control of the performance space. The article interrogates how Ngugi's plays, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and *I Will Marry When I Want*, advocate for a socio-political and cultural change against the oppressive postcolonial native bourgeoisie, and the struggle of the peasantry for a new economic, cultural, and political order. The objective of this article is to examine Kenya's history on the performance space, how this history informs Ngugi's artistic works, and how it envisions the future.

**Keywords:** Kenyan literature, neocolonialism, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, performance space, politics, postcolonialism, theatre

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*"We believe that good theatre is that which is on the side of the people, that which, without making mistakes and weaknesses, give people courage and urges them to higher resolves in their struggle for total liberation"* (Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Michere Githae Mugo, *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi*)

*"Theatre is a weapon ... a weapon for liberation"* (Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*)

I begin this study with two quotations. The first is from Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan writer and academician, currently a Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine. The second is from Augusto Boal, a Brazilian theatre practitioner, drama theorist, political activist, and founder of the *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Both writers speak to the central argument of this article: Ngugi's use of dramaturgy to engage in aesthetics of resistance as a means for political freedom. He is an artist whose drama continues to play a major role in the fight against oppression and exploitation that the neocolonial Kenyan leaders exert on the populace. His works advocate for a political and social change against the neocolonial native bourgeoisie, and they encompass the struggle of workers and peasant farmers for a new economic, cultural, and political order in Kenya as a post-colony. Ngugi's political theatre is anchored on an

activist's postulation that for a socio-political and cultural change to occur in Kenya, there is a need for the workers and peasant farmers to participate actively in the call for that change. He sides with the peasants and workers in their class and political struggle. Ngugi's work is greatly influenced by Frantz Fanon's "analysis of the creation of a national bourgeoisie" in the post-colony as Robert Fox (2003) argues in "Engaging Ngugi" (p. 118). However, as I argue in this article, Ngugi's use of art to fight for political freedom engages Friedrich Schiller's (1794) theory of art, serving as a tool for political freedom and emancipation of the artist's society (p. 26). In two of his plays, which this article engages, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and *I Will Marry When I Want*, Ngugi grapples with the questions of socio-political courage, patriotism, heritage, and the return of the land grabbed by the native bourgeoisie who took over power after Kenya's independence in 1963. Due to the sensitivity of his call for socio-political and cultural change, Ngugi faced a lot of opposition from the government in the production and performance of the mentioned plays because of their activist nature; provocative and subversive language, and subject matter which called on the populace to participate in action and demand for their rights from the State. The State, therefore, stopped the performance of these plays in Kenya and banned Ngugi's own founded Kimiriithu Education and Cultural Centre for political reasons (Van der Smith, 2007, p. 92). Kimiriithu Education Center provided a stage on which Ngugi and the State enacted their power. According to Fox (2003), the "arrogant and repressive regime closed down the cultural center [as] people's theatre [to show] its power and threaten the collective efforts that Ngugi had inspired" (p. 118) among the peasant workers. Therefore, the questions that this article engages include: What power does Ngugi as an artist or a native intellectual have on (or over) Kenya's performance space? And how does he use artistic power to resist and engage in Kenya's oppressive neocolonial politics? My objective in this essay is to examine Ngugi's conflict with postcolonial Kenyan regimes and the tensions of power and control of the performance space. Additionally, I will interrogate Ngugi's art, especially in the production and the performance of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and *I Will Marry When I Want*, and his advocacy for a sociopolitical and cultural change against Kenya's oppressive postcolonial native bourgeoisie. Finally, I will examine Kenya's history on performance space, how this history informs Ngugi's artistic works, and its impact on the future. I argue that Ngugi's conflict with the postcolonial Kenyan regimes was a question of power and control of the performance space. Despite the dangers that come with such advances, Ngugi uses the artistic power that he holds over the performance space through his open-air theatre to call for socio-political and cultural change against the neocolonial native bourgeoisie. As Schiller argues in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, "political emancipation transcends the limitations set by the conditions of [the artist's] time" (Grossmann, 1968, p. 31–32). Hence, Ngugi had to overcome the political dangers and threats of the State to meaningfully and successfully use his art to engage in and inform Kenya's neocolonial politics. In other words, Ngugi had to "dissociate his intellect from the political feelings and intuitions of his time to arrive at a discursive understanding and knowledge [of the issues affecting the people] ..., surrender the wholeness of being, and pursue the truth" about the struggles of the Kenyan people (Schiller, 1794, p. 12).

The tragedy with Kenya as a post-colony was (and is) simply a failure of leadership. Censorship and oppression of native artists and intellectuals who criticize the government are ghosts that continue to haunt us even after Kenya's independence in 1963. Kenya's post-independence national leaders are often concerned with acquiring and retaining power than enhancing a conducive environment for building a national culture. These leaders use state power to control and silence artistic and intellectual voices that question and threaten their political agendas on the performance space. As Brown (2004) explains, "Ngugi's art was at war—in more

than a metaphorical way—with the ruling regimes” because of the anxieties of the regimes (p. 56). It is these anxieties that cause the State to exert oppression and brutality to artistic voices that express dissatisfaction with the ruling regimes. It is retrogressive that the limitations of anti-government artists’ social, political, and economic rights are ghosts that have continued to haunt postcolonial Kenya even after the country acquired its “freedom” from its colonial masters. While the State continues to victimize him and consider him as its political enemy, Ngugi has continued to use art to immerse himself in the struggles of “dispossessed” Kenyan peasant farmers (Magel, 1983, p. 239). As Schiller (1794) cautions that the artist should “live in their time but not be creatures and products of it” (p. 16); therefore, Ngugi has remained “true and faithful to the critical standards of his time” by using art to educate the populace and speak truth to power to restore the prevailing waves of oppression and exploitation (Schiller, 1794, p. 12).

On December 31, 1977, Ngugi was arrested and detained without trial by President Jomo Kenyatta’s government for his involvement in the production of the play *I Will Marry When I Want* (Lovesey, 2002, p. 148). Ngugi’s arrest and imprisonment without trial was an indirect consequence of his art that engaged with people’s theater—popular (and often protested) theatre that allowed the workers and peasants participation to strengthen solidarity and call for social-political freedom and change. He took theatre to the people, developed it with them, and made real-life theatre that merged the existing traditions with a new local theatre aesthetics by the people and for the people. The production and performance of this play portrayed the way of life in the post-colony where people made theatre vibrant and alive in their call for change.

*I Will Marry When I Want* was produced and performed by local peasant farmers and one of its main themes is the ridicule of the neocolonial ruling class for colluding with the former colonists to grab land from Kenyan peasants. The play was produced in Gikuyu—Ngugi’s native language—thus it was well-received by the local audience. This play achieved popularity among the people, prompting the State to stop its performance on claims that it was stirring hostility between sections of the community. In the play, Kiguunda, a farm laborer who works for a wealthy African landowner, Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru and his wife Jezebel, lives with his wife, Wangeci, and their daughter Gathoni, in a small shack. Kiguunda brings the news that his employer will be visiting them at home and Wangeci starts to cook for their important guests. While trying to come up with a reason for the visit, Wangeci concludes that John (Kioi and Jezebel’s son), who is currently taking Gathoni out, wants to marry her and his parents, therefore, are coming over to discuss the matter. Little do they know the agony that this dubious ‘love’ affair would cause. Their neighbors, Gicaamba and Njooki, come over for a visit, and Njooki observes that the idea of a wedding between Gathoni and John cannot materialize. Gicaamba becomes very vocal about the current system of economic and political oppression and exploitation of workers by the landlords and factory owners. His political views make a huge impression on Kiguunda.

Soon thereafter, the Kioi’s arrive accompanied by their friends, the Ndugires (husband and wife, Samuel, and Helen). The visitors start an impromptu spiritual witnessing, which disturbs their hosts. Kioi asks Kiguunda and Wangeci to stop living in sin and get a Christian wedding. Consequently, Kiguunda chases them out of his house and Wangeci is upset because she feels that it prevented them from stating the real reason for their visit: the relationship between their daughter Gathoni and John, and the wedding. Ignoring the warnings of their neighbors, Kiguunda and Wangeci decide to have a proper Christian wedding for themselves in hopes that it would open the door for a wedding between John and Gathoni. The couple need money for their wedding and hence Kiguunda mortgages his farm, unaware that that was Kioi’s plan from the beginning; to get

their land. Gathoni becomes pregnant with John's baby, but he refuses to marry her and abandons her. This forces Kiguunda and Wangeci to call off their wedding. In a fury, Kiguunda threatens Kioi, and Jezebel shoots at Kiguunda. Kiguunda is unable to pay his mortgage because he lost his job at Kioi's farm, the bank thus forecloses Kiguunda's only valuable possession, the land. He, Wangeci, and Gathoni are left desolate, without a roof over their heads after Kioi gets their land. Kioi and his business partner, Ikuua Nditika, intend to erect an insecticide factory in collaboration with Western partners on the grabbed land. At the end of the play, Gicaamba calls for the community to unite against this imperial economic and political power.

This play offers an accurate representation of the sociopolitical reality that faced the peasantry in postcolonial Kenya. The play depicts the proletarianization of the workers and peasant farmers by the native bourgeoisie and it highlights the continuous need to resist the oppressive and exploitative neocolonial regimes. In this play, Ngugi shows how Kiguunda's family, poor peasants who have supplemented their lives on a one and a half-acre piece of land by selling their labor to a rich Kenyan bourgeoisie, is finally deprived of his small land by a collaboration between the native landlords or businessmen and the colonists. Through this play, Ngugi calls on the peasants to unite and stand together to fight for the right to own their lands. As Gicaamba calls out, "[d]evelopment will come from our unity. Unity is our strength and wealth." If workers and peasant farmers unite and demand their rights, "[a] day will come when, if a bean falls on the ground, it will be split equally among us" (Thiong'o & Mirii, 1982, p. 115). According to Nicholas Brown (1999), Ngugi's *I Will Marry When I Want* critiques Kenya's neocolonial present. He argues that "fifty years later [after the Mau Mau uprising] ... landless peasants were still a source of cheap labor [and this situation] remained as [a] powerful reminder of how little had changed with the end of direct European colonialism" (p. 64). It is this neocolonial situation that provides the setting for Ngugi to engage the peasant farmers in the aesthetics of resistance and call for change in the social and political fabric of Kenya's postcolonial society.

Ngugi uses this play to call for the economic and political freedom of Kenyan workers and peasant farmers. The play begins as a critique of the poor working conditions of peasant farmers on the grabbed lands owned by the new Kenyan ruling class in collaboration with their European counterparts. The Kenyan landowners were not any different from the colonists—they both exploited and oppressed peasant farmers who worked on the very lands grabbed from them. Kiguunda laments, "[o]ur family land has been given to homeguards. Today, I am just a labourer on farms owned by Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru" (p. 28–29). Gicaamba also expresses the plight and frustrations of the peasant farmers as he explains "[w]e are the people who cultivate and plant, [b]ut we are not the people who harvest! The owners of these companies are real scorpions. They only know...[t]o oppress workers, [t]o take away their rights, [and] to suck their blood" (p. 33). He adds that "week after week, [they make] shoes worth millions, [yet they] are given a mere two hundred shillings [as the] rest is sent to Europe" (p. 34). Because of the suffering that these workers go through, they organize a strike, but it does not come until everyone has taken an oath to fully participate in the call for change (p. 69).

In the play, Ngugi emphasizes the importance of unity and commitment to the success of the freedom of the workers by enacting an oath administered to the striking workers of the factories. Therefore, this play is a protest of the then-current conditions of the working class. It is a call for revolutionary action against the exploitation of the present moment as well as envisioning a future in which this condition will not repeat itself. Gicaamba comments at the end of the play that "[a] day will come when [i]f a bean falls on the ground, [i]t will be split equally among us.

For---...The trumpet [o]f all workers have been blown [t]o wake all the peasants [t]o wake all the poor [and] to wake all the masses” (p. 115). According to Brown (1999), the elision in the above passage illustrates a break between the colonial and postcolonial conditions of the peasant workers (p. 66). However, the ellipses could also be seen as Ngugi’s vision of the change that will come when and after the peasants unite and collectively demand change from the new ruling class.

It was because of this play’s call for the workers’ unity that the ruling regime under President Jomo Kenyatta and Vice President Daniel arap Moi came up with a law that forbade people to sing and dance in public in a gathering of over five people. The law stated that “more than five people were deemed to constitute a public gathering that needed a license” (Brown, 1999, p. 66). This same license was withdrawn from Ngugi’s Kamiriithu people’s theatre by the government in 1977 to end public performances of *I Will Marry When I Want* on grounds of “public security.” Since the play was produced and performed by peasant farmers in an “open-air theatre,” the rehearsals were public, and when the play was finally performed in October 1977, its large audience attracted so much attention that threatened the KANU government to shut it down and withdrew its license after only seven performances to bring back what the government termed as “public order” (Van der Smith, 2007, p. 111). Ngugi himself was arrested that night and detained for a year without trial in Kamiti Maximum Prison. He was detained because he had written and enacted certain truths about Kenya’s neocolonial political class on the performance space. His aesthetics engaged the welfare of the Kenyan populace who had painfully fought for independence only to end up politically, culturally, and economically bound by new chains of imperialism. *I Will Marry When I Want*—which was written in Gikuyu language, Ngugi’s vernacular—was an attempt to awaken the masses regarding the imperialism of the then ruling regime. However, the government was threatened by an awakened populace participating in the performance space. The real power of performance lies where the people reside (people’s theatre), and this space is where real politics of performance space occurs between the State and the artist. This space is where the artist’s power of performance lies, and which the repressive machine of the State often targets.

Ngugi explains that “his imprisonment is not a personal affair. It’s part of a wider history of attempts to bring 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” (Van der Smith, 2007, p. 110). He sees his arrest and detainment as a conflict between him and the State over the performance space. While the State enacts its power by articulating laws that regulate the citizen’s action on the performance space, the artist’s power of performance serves to give the citizens power. Ngugi uses art to call on the masses to use their power on stage to collectively demand change and freedom from the oppression and exploitation of the ruling class. In *I Will Marry When I Want*, Gicaamba voices that “[w]ithout workers, [t]here is no property, there is no wealth. The labor of our hands is the real wealth of the country. The blood of the worker ... [i]s the true creator of the wealth of the nation” (p. 38). It is this self-consciousness activism that the play engages with peasant farmers and workers who are also the target audience of the State’s regulatory power.

The State often tries to regulate the artist on the performance space by controlling the content of the artist through censorship. As the artist tries to use the stage for human action, the State wants to use this space to control human action. The State fears that the artist’s work, like Ngugi’s if allowed to get to the audience, will create tension and disorder and, therefore, tries (if possible) to control the artist’s access to the performance space and his work from getting into the citizen’s hands—the artist’s audience. Ngugi argues that censorship is a State’s attempt to starve

the artist's imagination. He adds that the State "don't want you to imagine the possibilities of a different future. They want you to think this is the best possible world" (Inani, 2018, Interview Question 1). However, the artist must remain steadfast in resisting every attempt by the State to woo him. Yielding to these pressures is a pathway for the artist to join the State in starving the imagination of many of the masses for a completely liberated nation. The artist must continue using art to offer hope and call on the people to actively participate in resistance to the State's oppression and exploitation. As Schiller (1794) argues, even in hostile environments, the artist should use art to harmonize the reason and imagination of the populace for an optimistic future; thus, the artist's work should enlighten the masses and act as the voice of reason on the political scene (p. 13). Imprisoning an artist is a means of controlling what happens in the performance space. The government wants to initiate fear in the artist and the audience against expressing any dissatisfaction with the ruling regime. Furthermore, the imprisonment of an artist is geared towards converting the artist into a passive onlooker to the State's injustices by inculcating in him (or her) the fear of speaking against the State.

Ngugi was detained by the Kenyan regimes for unmasking the evils of the neocolonial ruling class. He uses art to speak to (and about) Kenyan workers and peasant farmers and engages in their struggle for social-political, and economic freedom. By detaining him, the State machinery aims to control the artist's mind and create in him a docile body that can be regulated by its power. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault (1995) argues that the State uses social institutions like the prison as administrative and political spaces to discipline and monitor the subject's body for physical and psychological control as well as manipulating it to self-regulate (p. 137). Therefore, the State denies the artist the performance space by preventing their contact with the masses and tries to coax the artist, through threats and fear, to abandon the course. However, in most cases, the artist resists such advances from the State and continues to write even to a wider national audience. This kind of resistance frustrates the State, and it often reacts with the brutal treatment of the artist. Consequently, the artist may be imprisoned or tortured by the State. At this point, the artist must make a choice, either to abandon truth and liberate themselves by bowing to the State's threats and intimidation or continue the struggles for the people. For Ngugi, as Oliver Lovesey (2002) postulates, his experience with the people's theatre hardened him to a point of no return (p. 141). Although his detention was devastating, it was a transforming experience that authorized him as people's spokesperson against the injustices of the neocolonial regime. Ngugi's detention was a moment of realization that he is part of the living history of struggle and that his life in Kamiti Maximum prison was "a crash course in State terror" and as Foucault puts it, an allegory of the State's "panoptic gaze" on the work of the artist (pp. 219–222).

Sometimes, instead of torture, the State tries to entice the artist to come to its side. This can be achieved by the State promising the artist a lucrative government position or even through monetary bribery. The artist can be given money and forever silenced from speaking against the State's injustices. Instead of keeping the artist outside the State's surveillance, the regime wants to bring them closer where their action is controlled and monitored more easily. Nevertheless, before they are released, the State asks the artist to disregard whatever they said before to annul it. If they agree to this scheme, the artist will be released, but, if not, he/she is tortured in attempts to subjugate their mind. As noted earlier, Foucault emphasizes that the State uses coercion and manipulation to attain the docility of the subject's body and mind (p. 135) because these two are the reservoirs of the artist's power and knowledge. Once the State has control of the artist's body and mind, it bends his/her will into submission to its power. But would it? Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* could help to contextualize this question.

*The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* centers around a legendary Mau-Mau leader, general Dedan Kimathi, and his leading role in the revolutionary struggle for Kenya's liberation. Kimathi is portrayed as a compassionate man. The play is a courtroom drama that realigns the Kenyan history of 1956, a time when Kenya was fighting for its independence from the British. According to Okunoye (2001), Ngugi was compelled to liberate Kimathi from political and literary interment to ensure that he and his heroism as a martyr of Kenyan nationalism will live forever in the collective psyche of his people (pp. 225–226). Therefore, through the play, Kimathi becomes a metaphor for the history of the struggle of Kenya's oppressed people. Ngugi and Mugo use this play to refashion and reconstruct the historical distortions, the biased and deliberate misconceptions, and the misrepresentations of Kenyan history by the colonist's earlier narratives. In this play, Ngugi and Mugo reconstruct the Kenyan people's heritage by establishing Kimathi's centrality to the Mau-Mau liberation movement and his influence in Kenya's struggle for independence. Furthermore, they abandon realistic and poetic descriptions for allegory, symbolism, metaphors, and biblical allusions to transmit their radical message: the increased radicalization of their aesthetic practice, anti-colonial political and cultural resistance, as well as aesthetics of resistance (Fox, 2003, p. 117). As Magel (1983) argues, in "Symbolism, and Regeneration in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's and Micere Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*," Ngugi and Mugo establish Kimathi as the "armed resistance of the movement [and] hence embodying the peasants' armed resistance to British colonial oppression" (pp. 241–42). Through this play, Ngugi and Mugo incorporate the people's hope for political and cultural freedom as well as profound respect and love for a fearless and indomitable leader—one with the physical and intellectual strength, and the ability to endure pain and suffering in the struggle for freedom.

Ngugi and Mugo posit that the struggle of the people against oppression will continue until total freedom has been achieved. Kimathi tells his enemies that the Kenyan people will never surrender to oppression and exploitation: "For four hundred years the oppressor [h]as exploited and tortured our people. For four hundred years we have risen and fought against oppression, against humiliation, against the enslavement of body, mind, and soul. Our people will never surrender" (p. 58). For Ngugi and Mugo, the frustration of the hopes held by Kenyan independence generated a nostalgic reflection on the heroism of Dedan Kimathi. The fruits of independence were only being enjoyed by a few in the government while the masses who fought selflessly for freedom were left languishing in poverty (Okunoye, 2001, p. 233). As the leaders kept enriching themselves, the working class and the peasants continued to live in poverty. These frustrations created in the peasants' solidarity are an aftermath of their exposure to oppression and exploitation, which threatens the State most.

Thus, Ngugi and Mugo present Kimathi as a political prisoner in pre-independent Kenya. During his temptations and trial, Kimathi is forced to undergo humiliations as the State attempts to divert him from his duty of leading the Mau-Mau movement, which championed the struggle for Kenya's freedom from the British (p. 230). Additionally, Ngugi and Mugo celebrate Kimathi as a martyred redeemer who should be remembered as a cultural and political symbol of freedom. In the first section, the play presents the story of how a nameless female peasant activist, Woman, attempts to help the imprisoned Dedan Kimathi. In the process, two youths are won over to join the movement in the fight for freedom. In the final scene, they make their brave act by committing to the objectives of the movement. In the second section, the play contains Kimathi's temptations. He is tempted with bribes by various characters including natives who collaborated with the colonists. They all try to lure Kimathi into betraying the struggle. The temptations show how the colonists, the native bourgeoisie, and the collaborators—businessmen, politicians, and religious

leaders betray Kenyan people. Kimathi resists all these temptations, and the perpetrators of his imprisonment are left with no option other than assassinating him. In this play, Ngugi and Mugo highlight the responsibilities which the leader of the revolution faced towards his duty of leading the people in the fight for freedom; such is the work of the artist. He resists the State's plot to make him succumb to its power.

Arguably, Kimathi's resistance refutes the manipulative advances of colonialist sympathizers and collaborators while in prison who promise him lucrative prizes if he agrees to side with the government. The bankers, businessmen, clergy, and Kenyan politicians attempt to compromise his standby extending to him the benefits they received from their collaboration with the State. He calls them "Lawyers, Liars, Bankers, Owners of property" and tells them "Time is money, [m]oney is justice, [j]ustice is money, [m]oneyed justice, [t]hirty pieces of silver. Judases. Traitors" (pp. 32–33). Kimathi's refusal to yield to the temptations of the neocolonial compromisers alludes to the artist's refusal to join the State regime in exploiting and oppressing the masses. The neocolonial regime under the leadership of President Kenyatta often told the masses to forgive and forget the past. However, according to Simatei (1999), Ngugi believes that building the nation in independent Kenya was never to involve repression of that historical consciousness, which had given rise to the very idea of the nation in the first place. He thinks that "writing details" about the contributions and tribulations of individual fighters is very necessary "so that later generations may think about them and honor them" (p. 157).

Ngugi and Mugo advocate for national rebirth and refashioning in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. These playwrights call for a cultural and political liberation of the people of Kenya as they emphasize the need for the deconstruction of colonial and neocolonial systems of oppression and exploitation in the post-colony. To attain this end, they call for the organization of Kenyan peasants and workers. In the first movement of the play, the masses are led to sing, "Away with oppression, [u]nchain the people! Away with exploitation, [u]nchain the people!" a rant that is directed towards the oppressive regime that is in power (p. 5). In the third movement, Ngugi and Mugo reiterate Kimathi's loathing for the oppressors, as he calls upon his people to unite. Kimathi urges the people in the struggle that "We must kill the lie/ That black people never invented anything/ Lay forever to rest that inferiority complex/ Implanted in our minds by centuries of oppression./ Rise, Rise workers, and peasants of Kenya ..." (p. 68). He commits himself to the struggle and tells the colonist:

My life is our people/ Struggling/ Fighting/ Not like you to maintain/ Slavery/ Oppression/ Exploitation/ But/ To end slavery, exploitation,/ Modern cannibalism .../ Go back to your masters/ and tell them:/ Kimathi will never sell Kenya/ to the British or to any other Breed of man-eaters, now or in the years to come. (pp. 35–36)

Ngugi and Mugo do not offer a quick and easy solution to the oppression and exploitation that the masses were going through. However, through this play, they stir up the people's consciousness to seek freedom and demand justice and accountability.

Even when the artist is imprisoned, the performance space is never left empty. As the State continues to use its power to control the artist's mind and body on the performance space through the prison surveillance system, the artist continues to engage the masses through the aesthetics of resistance. As Schiller (1794) reasons:

The political legislator may place their empire under an interdict, but he cannot reign there. He can proscribe the friend of truth, but truth subsists; he can degrade the artist, but he



cannot change art. [A]rtists show themselves occupied in letting down the truth. They are swallowed up in it; but, thanks to their essential vigor and indestructible life, the true and the beautiful make a victorious fight and issue triumphant from the abyss. (p. 15)

The artist may continue to write prison narratives while incarcerated for an anxious and eager audience outside the prison walls. Once the narratives are released to the outside audience, readers get to understand the pains and struggles of the artist behind the prison walls because of their collective fight for freedom. The artist also explains the deplorable living conditions and the inhumane torture individuals face in a State regulated prison. The artist, therefore, gets sympathy from the audience. Sometimes, the artist's detention and torture attract both national and international attention. The citizens who form the artist's audience begin to demonstrate for the release of the prisoner artist. Through this, the artist uses art to engage in both national and international politics. His artistic voice joins that of the masses and collectively channels a path for political and cultural freedom of the people.

Outside prison walls, the public exerts pressure on the State to release the imprisoned artist. Similarly, human rights organizations, both locally and internationally, will pressure the State for the artist's release. Therefore, the State may succumb to both national and international pressure to release the artist from detention. Such is the case in Ngugi's *The Prison Memoirs* (2018) in which he explains that he wrote the memoir as a letter to the friends of Kenya and democracy who fought tirelessly for his release. He states that he received overwhelming support from ordinary people, peasants, workers, and students who often filled the streets demonstrating for his release. He also received support from writers, humanistic organizations, progressive intellectuals, and democratic-minded individuals across the globe. The State, therefore, released him in December 1978. However, the State never wants the artist to continue causing tension in its territorial space. When Ngugi was released from prison in 1978, his contract to teach in the English department at the University of Nairobi was terminated (Lacey, 2004). He continued with his involvement with the peasant villagers who ceaselessly engaged with his work before and during his detention. In June 1982, he launched the English versions of *I Will Marry When I Want*. This play made the State organize a plan to force him outside the Kenyan territorial space. The State initiated difficult living conditions for him within national boundaries. For a long time, Ngugi lived under constant fear, threat of arrest, or detention for refusing to collaborate with the government. While he had gone to London to give a public lecture, he received news that the State was planning to arrest him upon his return. He, therefore, decided to stay in exile in London where he continued with his writing and teaching. He routinely used public lectures, interviews, and symposiums to tell the world about the neocolonial dictatorship in Kenya as it was in most neo-colonies. In 1987, he moved to the U.S. and settled at the University of New York as a professor of Comparative Literature and Performance Studies.

When the artist realizes that his life is in danger and the State is never going to give him peace of mind to continue educating the masses and rallying them against the State's injustice, the artist runs away to exile. In *Detained*, Ngugi notes, "[o]ne of the terrible things in the modern world is that writers have to emigrate to another nation to be able to comment on what is going on in their own country of origin" (Brown, 2004, p. 139). So, for Ngugi to talk freely about the injustices, oppression, and exploitations going on in Kenya, he had to flee the country. As an artist, Ngugi hopes that the conditions in exile will allow him to keep writing works that help to fight State injustices in his motherland. Perhaps, the artist understands that it is better to keep the fight while alive and away from the motherland than dying during the revolution. That is why the artist

continues fighting the injustices in the mother country while outside his national territorial space.

However, exile becomes another prison for the artist, like Ngugi, because of being locked outside the territorial performance space. In this case, Ngugi cannot fully interact with the peasant workers at home for whom he is fighting, and they cannot interact with him either. That lack of interaction makes it difficult for the artist to connect with his audience. In an interview about the artist's status in exile, Ngugi states that the artist needs contact with the place of his imagination (Rodrigues, 2004, p. 163). He claims he misses out a lot on his language and content by not interacting with locals in Kenya who speak the Gikuyu language. Rodrigues (2004) also explains that foreign memory often keeps the artist in dilemma about the language and content to use in his works (p. 163). Despite this alienation, Ngugi holds that he has no bitterness or desire for vengeance despite his forceful ejection to exile. In an interview with the *Nation Newspaper* in Kenya in April 2018, Ngugi stated that in the situation of Kenya as a post-colony, the only vengeance is to strive for a positive change against the negative forces of yesterday. According to Schiller, the suffering of the artist at a distant place outside his national territory only makes him stronger. Exile gives the artist an "ennobling character" which provides the necessity for the artist "to seek for this end an instrument that the State does not furnish and to open sources that would have preserved themselves pure amid political corruption" (p. 14) Schiller further ascertains that outside the national territory, the artist continues "to come to the maturity of his age and when he has become a man, he returns as a stranger of his own century, not, gladden it by his appearance but rather, to cleanse and to purify it" (p. 14) He in fact explains:

[L]et it nourish him ..., and suffer him to grow up and arrive at virility ... When he has attained manhood, let him come back, presenting a face strange to his own age; let him come, not to delight it with his apparition, but rather to purify it ... He will, indeed, receive his matter from the present time, but he will borrow the form from a nobler time and even beyond all time, from the essential, absolute, immutable unity. There, issuing from the pure ether of its heavenly nature flows the source of all [art], which was never tainted by the corruption of generations or of ages, which roll along far beneath it in dark eddies. (p. 15)

While in exile, the artist keeps challenging the State's absolute power by writing works that attack the injustices going on back home. Lovesey (2002) writes in her article that "[i]n exile since 1982, Ngugi has agitated for the release of political prisoners, and in the late eighties, he chaired Umoja, an umbrella group of radical Kenyan organizations" (p. 141). Accordingly, Fredrick Schiller explains that the artist must continue "direct[ing] his gaze upwards, to the dignity of calling and the universal law, not downwards towards fortune and the needs of daily life" (p. 16). While the artist continues to produce the ideal out of what is possible and necessary, the global audience gets to know more of what is happening within the territorial space of the artist's country, and the global audience continues to contest against the artist's mother State leadership. In an interview in India, while attending the international conference on the Nationality Question, Ngugi puts it that the struggle should always continue, and the artist should not be made to accept and believe that things will never change (Rao, 1999, p. 162). The State also continues with the attempts to control the artist's work even while in exile to bring him back into its panoptic gaze. In 1984, when Ngugi directed the production of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* at the African Centre and the Commonwealth Institute in London, the Kenyan government under the leadership of President Moi sought to have the performances stopped through the British government, but it failed. At the same time, efforts by Ngugi's son, Ngugi wa Mirii to create another community center in Zimbabwe where he was exiled, too, was threatened by the State through the Zimbabwean

government. President Moi wanted to bring Ngugi back under the State's surveillance, but he refused. This refusal angered the State and the artist was banned from ever returning to the motherland; however, it was not until 2004, after President Moi was out of power, that he returned to give public lectures. Ngugi holds that Kenya is his country of origin, for better or worse, and that it is for him and everybody else to make it the Kenya that it can be.

Sometimes, the State may even plot to assassinate the artist whether in exile or within its territory. Often, the State might want to get rid of an artist for a continued activist's works that the State views as "a thorn in its flesh." While explaining the possible reasons for his detention, Ngugi states that other people requested his permanent silencing, but it was quashed for 'national stability. The State views assassination as a permanent solution to the artist's threat to its power. However, Ngugi asserts that this is a terrorist act that can only lead to the psychological siege of the whole nation. In 2004, when Ngugi and his wife returned to Kenya, he was attacked while at a hotel by unknown people. His wife was raped and the money and other properties in his possession were taken away (Lacey, 2004). Although president Moi was out of power, this attack was linked to Ngugi's works and the motive behind it could have been to eliminate him. Schiller alludes that during such a time of the assault, the artist should continue expressing "the truth and silently project it into the infinity of time [and space] ... with steadfast courage." He comments that by "notwithstanding the resistance of time, the artist can satisfy the noble longing of his heart...[and] prove to the people that it is not through cowardice that submits to [the] sufferings." As he continues to participate in the freedom struggles with the people back home, Schiller asks the artist to:

See them in thought such as they ought to be when must act upon them; but see them as they are when tempted to act for them ... to owe their suffrage to their dignity; but to make them happy keep an account of their unworthiness. Thus, on the one hand, the nobleness of heart will kindle theirs, and, on the other, the end will not be reduced to nothingness by their unworthiness. The gravity of principles will keep them ... but in play, they will still endure. (pp. 16–17)

In conclusion, Ngugi's conflict with the postcolonial Kenyan regimes was a political conflict on and over the performance space. Ngugi's art was a threat to the State's power and, hence, it tried all it could to control his performance power. Ngugi's decision to take theatre to the people, by writing in the Gikuyu language and involving the peasant farmers in the production of some of his plays, made him a great political enemy of the State. He used political theatre to sensitize the masses about the injustices of the neocolonial regimes and this placed him at loggerheads with the State. His artistic political attack of the colonialists, who were great allies to the Kenyan bourgeoisie and took over power after independence, made Ngugi an even greater enemy. The State, therefore, tried to censor his work, but these attempts failed. His detention at Kamiti Maximum prison was a way of using the State's political power to control his artistic power on the performance space. The State wanted to show him that it has more political power than his performance power and that there was no way it would leave him to continue tarnishing its name to the local and global audience. The State continued making Ngugi's living conditions unbearable and forced him into exile, but he has continued to engage in poetics of resistance, rallying the masses to keep the struggle on until Kenya gets liberated completely from the shackles of colonialism and neocolonialism. Therefore, it is not lost on us, as native intellectuals and artists, to continue using our work, research, and knowledge to bring about positive social, economic, and political conditions for people in our motherland regardless of the setbacks we experience along the way.

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