



Oppression in Ngugi's Short Story *A Meeting in the Dark*

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Abstract : This article examines the issue of oppression in African societies, of which the Kenyan village of Limuru is a microcosm. The arrival of the Europeans in Africa tore up the local communities into two opposing camps: the modernists (who followed the new ways of life brought by Europeans) and the traditionalists (who kept their traditional ways of living). This situation contributed to the increase of oppression in African societies. Traditionalists such as Wamuhu's parents grew more conservative as they deprived their daughter of education and had her circumcised, while modernists such as Stanley became so radical in their new position that they were feared by all.

Keywords: traditionalist, conservative, modernist, oppression, oppressor, oppressed, attitude.

*L'Oppression dans Une Rencontre dans le Noir, une Nouvelle de Ngugi*¹

Résumé : Cet article examine le problème d'oppression dans les sociétés africaines dont le village Kenyan de Limuru est un microcosme. L'arrivée des européens en Afrique avait divisé les communautés locales en deux camps opposés : les modernistes (qui avaient suivi les nouvelles manières de vivre apportées par les européens) et les traditionalistes ou conservateurs (qui étaient restés attachés à leur tradition). Cette situation avait contribué à la montée de l'oppression dans les sociétés africaines. Les traditionalistes tels que les parents de Wamuhu avaient développé une attitude plus conservatrice qu'ils ont privé leur fille d'éducation et l'ont fait exciser tandis que les modernistes tel que Stanley étaient devenus plus radicaux dans leur nouvelle position à tel point qu'ils étaient craints par tous.

Mots-clés : traditionaliste, conservateur, moderniste, oppression, oppresseur, opprimé.

¹ My translation

Introduction

This article investigates oppression in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's Short Story *A Meeting in the Dark*. It is first concerned with reading, understanding, analyzing, interpreting and appreciating this work in order to appreciate its artistic and literary values. It also explores the forms of oppression in this literary work. Accordingly, the discussion will focus on the origin and context of the work, the plot, the main problem and how it is resolved, the devices of the plot, the themes, the techniques used, the characters, the settings and a personal appreciation of the literary work itself.

Apart from the methodological framework, the paper will discuss oppression in general before pointing out how it is depicted in the short story and which roles different characters throughout the plot of the novel understudy.

The main objective of this paper is to point out the different forms and examples of oppression depicted in this work, so as to denounce and fight this anti-value.

The study hypothesis turns round for points. The high rate of oppression could be due to the oppressed's (1) lack of education, (2) courage, (3) adequate self-defense possibilities; and (4) the oppressor's failure to respect human rights.

1. Methodological considerations

For the purpose of data collection this paper is a documentary research since the data come essentially from the skim-reading of Ngugi's short story, *A Meeting in the Dark*, which. Besides, it can also be considered as a content analysis as it exclusively and intrinsically explores the above work.

Concerning data analysis, six literary approaches, namely sociological, psychological, discourse-comprehension, pragmatic, and feminist have been eclectically and selectively used for a thorough analysis of this short story. The comprehension approach will help in grasping comprehension factors such as time, effort on task, personal effort, familiarity with the text and background knowledge which are inevitable in a thorough literary study analysis (Ngwaba 2012:19). The sociological approach will help social situations having triggered the creation of the work under study (Buhendwa 2020). The pragmatic approach helps in capturing the incompleteness of the work understudy as it formally does not contain all the elements that are needed for its comprehension (Ngwaba 2019:58). Thus, understanding the work under consideration needs to be supplemented by background knowledge (Leech and Short 1981:259). The psychological approach facilitate the comprehension of the psychological motivations of the characters or of the author (Fard 2016: 334). The formalist approach helps in understanding the message as carried through a channel (i.e.

semiotic signs: language, paralanguage, etc). Which needs exploring for meanings (Ngwaba 2019:57). Finally, the feminist approach will facilitate the critical addressing of any social norms and beliefs that tend to oppress women (Ikupasa 2019: 24).

2. Analysis of Oppression in *A Meeting in the Dark*

2.1 The Main Problem and its implications

In this short story, *A Meeting in the Dark*, the main problem is John's feeling of despair and self-control due to the fact that he is caught between marrying Wamuhu who is pregnant of him and going for further studies in Makerere University. On the one hand, the reason why he has to marry Wamuhu is to maintain his family's honor within the community. On the other, this is impossible because Wamuhu is circumcised; and Stanley, his father who is a converted clergyman, cannot accept him to marry an unbeliever's daughter who in addition, is circumcised. Fortunately, John has won a scholarship for further studies in Makerere. This trip is the only way for him to get rid of this situation. But this is rather difficult because Wamuhu is aware of this plan as John's trip to Uganda has been mentioned in the local newspaper. He invites her at dark to settle the matter secretly. But, their discussion turns sour and John accidentally kills her, which gives way to different and important implications and interpretations: first, Stanley's home would be probably ravaged by the community members; second, John and Stanley would lose honor and respect within the community.

Third, Stanley would lose his position in the church; and John would lose his opportunity to go for further studies; fourth, the community members would probably beat or kill or send John to prison; fifth and finally, many people would lose faith in Christianity to go back to their traditional ways of life.

2.2. Justification for the Title

As it can be seen through the main problem, John struggles to get rid of his girlfriend at all costs. He arranges a meeting with her at dark as he avoids any suspicion from the community members. However, everything turns badly in this night meeting because John accidentally kills Wamuhu. Hence, the title is, *A Meeting in the Dark*.

The following table summarizes different characters along their description as well as their involvement in the act of oppression.

Table 2.1 Synopsis of Characters' Description and Involvement in the Acts of Oppression

	Characters	Characters' Description	Involved in the Acts of Oppression
1	John	He is Stanley's son who impregnates and later kills Wamuhu, his girlfriend.	Yes
2	Wamuhu	She is John's girlfriend who is impregnated and later killed by him.	No
3	Stanley	He is John's father and preacher who is intolerant and brutal towards unbelievers.	Yes
4	Susana	She is Stanley's wife and John's mother. She asks Stanley to stop persecuting John.	No
5	Wamuhu's father	Wamuhu's father who is a traditionalist. He tortured Wamuhu through circumcision.	Yes
6	Wamuhu's mother	Wamuhu's mother who is a traditionalist. She tortured Wamuhu through circumcision.	Yes
Total	6=100%	Yes=involved in the acts of oppression=4=66.6% No=not involved in the acts of oppression=2=33.3%	

The table above shows a total of 6 characters among which 4, that is, 66.6% are involved in the acts of oppression and 2, that is, 33.3% are not; which explains that the rate of oppression is high in this story.

2.3. *Forms of Oppression in: A Meeting in the Dark*

Oppression can be understood as the act of treating somebody in a cruel and unfair way; an oppressor can be viewed as a person or a group of people that treats somebody in a cruel and unfair way; and the oppressed as people who are treated in a cruel or unfair way (Hornby 2010).

Oppression has been classified into different types depending on the scholars. For the sake of consistency, Young's (2004) classification has been considered. In fact, he distinguishes five faces or types of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. Among these, four are portrayed in *A Meeting in the Dark*, the work under study,

viz.: marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. Each of these types will be discussed in the following lines with regards to the work being analyzed.

Marginalization, also known as a social exclusion; is the act of relegating or confining a group of people to a lower social standing or outer limit or edge of society (Young 2004). Differently put, it is used to refer to a person or group of people are less able to access services or opportunities.

Uneducated young women in this short story are marginalized because they are deprived of education, which is why young men do not want to marry them; as the following extract reads: Women's education was very low. Perhaps that was why many Africans went 'away' and came back married. He too wished he had gone with others, especially in the last giant student airlift to America (Achebe 1974: 55).

Circumcised girls are also marginalized by the members of the church who can neither marry nor let their sons marry them. This is the case of Wamuhu who is rejected by John mainly because she is circumcised; as the following extract reads:

John was shaky. Why! Why could he not defy all expectations, all prospects of a future, and marry the girl? No. No. It was impossible. She was circumcised and he knew his father and the church would not consent to such a marriage (Ngugi 1974:55).

As it can be inferred through this extract that, though John loved the girl, the main reason why he could not marry her is because she was circumcised.

The second form of oppression found in the work under discussion is powerlessness. It could be defined as a person's inhibition to develop one's capacities, lacks of decision-making power, and is exposed to disrespectful treatment because of the lowered status (Young 2004).

In this work, John is powerless. He is not satisfied with his father's brutal attitude towards him but is unable to revolt against him to avoid the worsening of his situation; as the following extract reads:

They reached home and John was thinking that all was well when his father called him... 'John.' 'Yes, father.' ... 'Where were you?'...Why do you ask me? What right have you to know where I was? One day I am going to revolt against you. But, immediately, John knew that this act of rebellion was something beyond him - unless something happened to push him into it. It needed someone with something he lacked (Ngugi 1974:68) .

It can be understood from the above extract that John is fed up with his father's attitude against him. However, he is unable to rebel because of his immoral act.

Wamuhu's father suspects a love affair between John and Wamuhu during his visit at their house but he lacks the power of decision making to tell

him that. Instead, they welcome him warmly and tell him where Wamuhu has gone; as the following extract reads:

John pulled down his hat before he entered... They recognized him and made themselves busy on his account... 'Where is Wamuhu?' ... 'She has gone out to get some tea leaves. Please sit down. She will cook you some tea when she comes.' ... 'I am afraid... He muttered some inaudible words and went out... 'Didn't I tell you? Trust' ... 'You don't know these young men.' 'But you see John is different... he is a clergyman's son. 'A clergyman's son! You forget your daughter is circumcised.' (Ngugi 1974:61-62)

The third type of oppression identified is the one made through cultural imperialism. Imperialism describes the ways that one nation asserts its power over another, and cultural imperialism involves taking the culture of the ruling class and establishing it as the norm (Young 2004:3). In this story, many young people, are influenced by the new ways of life as they prefer, for marriage, white women to black ones. All they want with black women is to have sex with them. In addition, if these illiterate black women fall pregnant, they abandon them and travel abroad. The following extract illustrates this situation:

All the girls had been virgins, it being a taboo to touch a girl in that way, even if you slept in the same bed, as indeed so many young men and girls did. Then the white men had come, preaching a strange religion, strange ways, which all men followed. The tribe's code of behavior was broken... The men who followed the new faith would not let the girls be circumcised... They could not let their sons marry circumcised girls... Their young men went away to the land of the white men. What did they bring? White women. They made unmarried women their wives and then left them with fatherless children (Ngugi 1974: 62).

As it can be seen in the extract above, young people of the Limuru village conformed to their traditional code of conduct until the arrival of the British colonizers. The fourth and final form of oppression is achieved through violence. Violence refers to random, unprovoked attacks on a person (i.e. a victim) or on their property (Young 2004). In this short story, Wamuhu is violently oppressed by John who even kills her as he realizes that his attempts to kindly get rid of her fail. The following extract supports this view:

He violently shaking Wamuhu, while his mind is telling him that he is patting her gently. Yes, he is out of his mind... But he is shaking her, shake, shake, her - he tries to hug her by the neck, presses... She lets out one horrible scream and then falls on the ground... Soon everyone will know that he has created and then killed (Ngugi 1974:70).

To give his son good education, Stanley resorts to violence. He is stern and brutal towards his son. He uses the same attitude with the church members; as the following extract highlights :

And all day long, John wondered why he feared his father so much. He had grown up fearing him, trembling whenever he spoke or gave commands. John was not alone in this. Stanley was feared by all (Ngugi 1974: 67).

Men and women who are attached to traditions oppress their daughters through violence by imposing them circumcision; as the following extract illustrates:

'Y-e-e-s! A clergyman's son! You forgot your daughter is circumcised.' The old man was remembering his own day. He had found for himself a good virtuous woman, initiated in all the tribe's ways...Then the white man had come, preaching a strange religion, strange ways which all men followed. The tribe's code of behavior was broken. The new faith could not keep the tribe together (Ngugi 1974:62).

2.4. Characters Involved in the Acts of Oppression

In this short story, one character is exclusively an oppressor while three are both oppressors and victims of oppression. The only character exclusively involved in the acts of oppression is Stanley, John's father. His involvement in the acts of oppression can be explained by his cruel attitudes towards John. He often addresses John in a brutal way; as Susana tells him in the following quote, 'Why do you persecute the boy so much?' Susana spoke for the first time'. Stanley's stern and brutal behavior causes many young men and women to be hypocrites towards him. The following extract sheds light:

Above all, Stanley was known for his great strict and moral observances - a bit too strict, rather pharisaical in nature. None noticed...Young men and women, seen standing together 'in a manner prejudicial to the church and God's morality' they were one anyway) were liable to be excommunicated. And so, young men tried to serve two masters by seeing their girls at night and seeing their girls by day. The alternative was to give up the church altogether (Ngugi 1974: 67).

The characters that are both oppressors and victims of oppression in this short story are John, Wamuhu's father and mother. John is both an oppressor because he violently squeezes and kills Wamuhu, his girlfriend; as the following extract reads:

But he is shaking her, shake, shake, her - he tries to hug her by the neck, presses... She lets out one horrible scream and then falls on the ground... Soon everyone will know that he has created and then killed (Ngugi 1974: 70).

He is oppressed because he is treated brutally and cruelly by Stanley, his father. John is even so tired of his father's attitude that he complains within himself. The following passage illustrates:

Why do you ask me? What right have you to know where I was? One day I am going to revolt against you. But, immediately John knew that this act of rebellion was something beyond him... It needed someone with something he lacked (Ngugi 1974:68).

Wamuhu's parents also act as oppressors and victims of oppression. They are oppressors because they firmly believe in some backward practices of their

traditions and customs such as girls' circumcision. Another reason why they are oppressors is that they deprive Wamuhu, their daughter of school education. Because they have Wamuhu circumcised and illiterate, John who educated and a son of a converted clergyman refuses to marry her. This situation heightens the conflict between lovers and causes Wamuhu's death. The following extract supports:

His imagination and thought took flight. He was trying to explain his actions before an accusing world... The girl had attracted him. She was graceful and her smile had been very bewitching... If only Wamuhu had learning... and she was uncircumcised... then he might probably rebel (Ngugi 1974:65)

They are victims of oppression because they are illiterate, from a low social class and Wamuhu's mother is circumcised; as the following extract reads:

The old man was remembering his own day. He had found for himself a good virtuous woman, initiated in all the tribe's ways... He had married her... Then the white man had come, preaching a strange religion, strange ways which all men followed. The tribe's code of behavior was broken. (Ngugi 1974:62).

Table 2 below presents the synopsis of all the characters involved in oppression.

Table 2.2 Synopsis of characters involved in the acts of oppression

N°	Title of the work	N°	Characters	Sex (S), Education background (E/B) & Attitude (A)			Characters' involvement in oppression	
				S	E/B	A	Exclusively Oppressors	Oppressors and victims of oppression
1	A Meeting in the Dark	1	John	M	E	Rg	No	Yes
		2	Stanley	M	E	Rg	Yes	No
		3	Wamuhu's father	M	U	Fl	No	Yes
		4	Wamuhu's mother	F	U	Fl	No	Yes
Total=1		4=100%		M=4=75%	E=2=50%	Rg=2=50%	EO=1=25% OVO=3=75%	

Notes

M=male=3=75%

F=female=1=25%

E=educated=2=50%

U=uneducated=2=50%

Rg=characters with a rigid attitude =2=50%

Fl=characters with a flexible attitude =2=50%

EO=exclusively oppressors=these are characters that are exclusively involved in the acts of oppression =1=25%

OVO=Oppressors and victims of oppression =these are characters that start as oppressors and end up being oppressed; or those that appear simultaneously to be oppressors and victims of oppression, depending on the context=3=75%

Table 2.2 shows 4 characters involved in the acts of oppression spotted in the story and classified according to their sex, education background and attitude towards oppression among whom 1 character that is 25%, is exclusively oppressor and 3 that is 75% act as oppressors and victims of oppression.

As far as their gender is concerned, 3 characters, that is 75%, are male and 1, that is 25% is female. Considering the characters' education background, 2 characters that is 50% are educated while only 2 others that is 50% are uneducated. As for the characters' attitude towards oppression, 2 characters that is 50% are rigid, 2 others that is 50% are flexible.

2.5. Characters Not Involved in the Acts of Oppression

In this short story, the characters that are not involved in the acts of oppression are Susana and Wamuhu. Both of them are victims of oppression.

Susana is a victim because she is obliged to change her attitude under her husband's pressure. This explains why she keeps on telling John stories in the absence of Stanley, her husband and stops when the latter arrives. The following extract reads: 'She would say to him, 'Now, don't ask for any more stories. Your father may come' (Ngugi 1974:55).

As a victim of oppression, Wamuhu is illiterate and circumcised. She is also brutally killed by John, as the following extract sheds light:

If only Wamuhu had learning... and she was uncircumcised... he might probably rebel ...But he is shaking her, shake, shake, her - he tries to hug her by the neck, presses... She lets out one horrible scream and then falls on the ground... Soon everyone will know that he has created and then killed (Ngugi 1974:70).

The following table presents the synopsis of different characters not involved in the acts of oppression.

Table 2.3 Synopsis of characters not involved in the acts of oppression

N°	Title of the work	N°	Characters	Sex, education background & attitude			Characters not involved in oppression	
				S	E/B	A	Victims of oppression	Non-victims of oppression
	<i>A Meeting in the Dark</i>	1	Wamuhu	F	U	Co	Yes	No
		2	Susana	F	U	Co	Yes	No
Total	1		2=100%	M=0=0% F=2=100%	E=0=0% U=2=100%	Fe=0=0% Co=1=100%	Victims of oppression=2=100%	Non-victims of oppression=0=0%

Note:

M=male=0%

F=female=2=100%

E=educated=0=0%

U=uneducated=2=100%

Fe=characters with a fearful attitude=0=0%

Co=characters with a courageous attitude=2=100%

VO=Victims of oppression=these are characters undergoing oppression =2=100%

NVO=Non-victims of oppression =these are characters not undergoing oppression=0=0%

Table 2.3 shows 2 characters that are not involved in the acts of oppression spotted in the story ranged according to their sex, education background and attitude towards oppression. As it can be noticed, both characters are female, uneducated and possess a courageous attitude towards oppression. Besides, both of them are victims of the acts oppression.

Conclusion

This paper dealt essentially with reading, understanding, analyzing, interpreting and appreciating Ngugi's short story *A Meeting in the Dark* with a special emphasis on oppression in order to gain a thorough understanding of it. The analysis included the main problem and its implications, the justifications of the title, the forms of oppression and the characters involved in the acts of

oppression or not. Five approaches helped in the discussion, viz. the discourse comprehension approach, the sociological, the psychological, the pragmatic and the literary approaches.

Following Young's typology of oppression, four types of oppression have been spotted in Ngugi's short story, *A Meeting in the Dark* such as marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence.

In sum, there is a high rate of oppression in Ngugi's short story *A Meeting in the Dark*. All these forms of oppression could be reduced if the oppressed is endowed with a good quality education in addition to self-defense possibilities and the oppressor is forced to respect human rights.

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