

NOO SARO-WIWA

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o
BIRTH OF A DREAM WEAVER

A writer's awakening
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SECURE THE BASE
Making Africa visible in the globe

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The awarding of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Bob Dylan stunned the literary world. Among several strong alternatives, there was Ngugi wa Thiong'o. One of Africa's most eminent writer-intellectuals and the author of the seminal work *Decolonizing the Mind*, Wa Thiong'o is the person many believe should have won.

The Kenyan author became the first East African to publish a novel in English, and from the 1960s onwards, he has made his name as a journalist, playwright, essayist as well as novelist. Now aged eighty-five, Wa Thiong'o has published *Birth of a Dream Weaver*, an enjoyable memoir that chronicles his evolution as a writer. For the most part, the book focuses on his formative years at Makerere University in Uganda from the late 1950s to the early 60s. It was a transformative era. Wa Thiong'o – then known as James Ngugi – morphed from village boy to member of a cosmopolitan educated elite. His fellow students included Milton Obote and Julius Nyerere, the future prime ministers of Uganda and Tanzania, respectively; Indira Gandhi and Golda Meir of Israel gave talks on campus. Makerere's rarefied world of ballroom dances, literary salons and productions of Shakespeare took place under the backdrop of African decolonization and Cold War proxy battles in the Congo.

This intertwining of personal and political development was crucial to Wa Thiong'o's awakening as an author. But his literary journey did not begin so high-mindedly: he admits here that his first shot at storytelling was motivated by the prize money on offer in a writing competition. However, as history unfolded around him, a less mercenary desire to tell stories took hold. Central to Wa Thiong'o's consciousness was a search for truth to counter colonial myths about British moral superiority. He had grown up amid racial tensions in colonial Kenya and bore witness to the atrocities committed by the white settler elite, such as the Hola Massacre in which eleven "Mau Mau" prisoners were bludgeoned to death in a concentration camp.

In light of such history, Wa Thiong'o was furious when his play *The Wound in the Heart* (about a British district officer raping the wife of a Mau Mau soldier) was denied an airing at Uganda's national theatre because it was deemed unrealistic: "A British officer cannot do a thing like that".

Wa Thiong'o's anger at the British moral hypocrisy is conveyed through characteristically elegant and restrained prose. He cites the anti-African pseudoscience of Dr J. C. Carothers, a psychiatrist who was hired by the Kenyan colonial government to write *The Psychology of Mau Mau*, in which he diagnosed Mau Mau as a mass mania manifesting itself in violence and witchcraft. But Wa

Thiong'o is not a blind critic of all things Western, and his judgement of his British university lecturers is nuanced. A certain Revd Welbourne receives praise for his attempts to include African religious studies in the curriculum (they were ultimately discounted for being "demonic"). Another British lecturer admirably helped students to read Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* – which featured Australian penal colonies – in terms of empire and exclusion. However, Wa Thiong'o disdains Makerere's Protestant priest who, after dismissing his questions about whether monarchs should head the Church, suggested that Wa Thiong'o switch to another course.

Wa Thiong'o disdained such intellectual intolerance and narrow-mindedness. By ignoring Enlightenment intellectual values, Europeans in Africa were once again preaching values that they weren't practising. When wa Thiong'o's economic history lecturer disparaged the inferiority of African tertiary education, the young Kenyan began trying to get published, driven by a "commitment to truth". During his time at Makerere, Wa Thiong'o went on to edit the university literary magazine; he published short stories and garnered prizes. In 1963 he also staged the first ever play in East Africa: *The Black Hermit*, in which he allowed a non-African to play one of the central African characters. While still a student, he became a newspaper columnist. Inspired by the demands that modernization put on Africans caught between two cultures, Wa Thiong'o wrote about issues such as the wrongs of female circumcision. The British had banned it in conjunction with a ban on support for the Kenyan freedom fighter Jomo Kenyatta. In hindsight, Wa Thiong'o says he was naive for not recognizing the British tactic of using "legitimate medical concerns to suppress legitimate political demands". Nevertheless, this episode was the starting point of his fictional explorations, and led to his novel, *The River Between* (1965), a tale of two Kenyan neighbouring villages bitterly divided by religion.

Other real-life experiences inspired his fiction, including his summer job working in a library. He clashed with a black assistant whose obsequiousness towards his white superiors was matched by his disdain for his black subordinates. When the assistant reprimanded Wa Thiong'o for using the "whites-only" bathroom, Wa Thiong'o retorted that there was no official sign on the door. All this was grist to the young author's mill and inspired characters in his 1967 novel *A Grain of Wheat*, a story about villagers whose relationships and loyalties are tested during the Mau Mau rebellion.

The library incident (combined with the negritude poems of Senegal's Léopold Sédar Senghor and the songs of the Land Freedom Army) pushed Wa Thiong'o further along his path of black consciousness. And necessarily so: in his early drafts of *The Black Hermit*, Wa Thiong'o had to be reminded by Gerald Moore, his British tutor, that the "beautiful" black female character need not have blue eyes. It is these frank admissions that make *Birth of a Dream Weaver* refreshing and intriguing, made all the more compelling by its mixture of social history, politics and literature.

By 1962 Wa Thiong'o's burgeoning reputation as a writer earned him an invitation to the first international conference of African writ-

ers. Still only a second-year undergraduate, he was amazed to find himself among literary heavyweights such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Rebecka Njau. Like them, Wa Thiong'o was part of the vanguard of African authors tasked with interpreting a continent to the world. These were exciting times.

After graduating, Wa Thiong'o became a columnist for *The Nation* newspaper. He felt uncomfortable in this role. Conflicted by his colonial education and anti-colonial resistance, he says his "inadequate grasp of the global character of imperialism" caused him to make errors in his analysis of events such as the Vietnam War. Fictional writing was where he felt most comfortable and grounded. It landed him in prison under Kenya's then vice president, Daniel arap Moi, who later orchestrated marches with the slogan *Karamu chini* ("Down with the pen"). For Wa Thiong'o, exile as an academic at the University of Leeds soon followed.

Wa Thiong'o's colonial scars are evident in another, less impressive recent publication: *Secure the Base*, a short collection of speeches and essays outlining Africa's path to a better future.

He is a fan of the radical Pan-African and Marxist Frantz Fanon and shares his belief that today's inequitable, capitalist world order has been built off the back of Africa's exploitation. The continent must transform itself into an equal player by shaking the very foundations of the modern political economy, he says. Enough of the "mindless mimicry" of Western civilization: Europe is not an inspiration but a failure from which Africa can learn lessons. Wa Thiong'o is eloquent and passionate in his critique of what he calls "capitalist fundamentalism". Drawing parallels between globalized finance and religion, he describes aid agencies as "secular missionaries" who support a system in which capital moves freely yet erects barriers to movement of labour; it is a system in which African economies sacrifice themselves to serve the needs of their former colonizers.

The concept of the nation state is also called into question, with its intrinsic inequalities and hostile borders. Wa Thiong'o envisages a borderless Pan-Africanism – an idea he says was derided by some Westerners in the 1960s but later made flesh in the form of the European Union. Wa Thiong'o describes a utopian vision of a united and egalitarian Africa, run at the grass roots by ordinary folk and intellectuals who have wrested power from corrupt post-colonial elites. Such societies would be based on the kind of pre-colonial institutions that traditionally enjoyed participatory democracy, as with the Agikuyu people in Kenya. This African utopia would build on its pre-modern foundations to create a better form of modernity. This means indigenous languages would dominate. Wa Thiong'o – who has famously chosen to write his novels in his native Gikuyu dialect – believes that Africans must learn and think in their indigenous languages if the continent is to control its destiny. He also believes fervently in the centrality of African languages in arts, sciences and technology as a means of escaping Western intellectual hegemony and reconnecting with the "buried alluvium of African memory". He rejects the idea that African languages are incompatible with modernity, citing a Cornell University student who, in 2003, defended his thesis on bio-intensive agriculture entirely in Gikuyu.

Scattered liberally throughout wa Thiong'o's treatise are terms such as "social justice", "equality", "nuclear disarmament", "Pan Africanism", "liberation" and "class struggle". It all sounds rather retro. The author bemoans the absence of such terminology in today's lexicon. But is it surprising? In our post-Communist world, diagnostic rhetoric has proved to be a cheque that is not easily cashed. What the world seeks now are credible and detailed pathways to Utopia. Wa Thiong'o, for all his fervour and eloquence, doesn't offer much in the way of this.

His African utopia has the material trappings of today's brand of capitalism yet is based on an alternative-yet-unspecified mode of production. His suggestion that all African and diaspora works be translated into local indigenous language also overlooks some impracticalities – many African schools struggle to afford enough reading material of any kind, regardless of language. And surely the author does Africans a disservice by assuming that reading in a foreign tongue inhibits critical thinking? Didn't he himself absorb Fanon's ideas via a European language?

As for Pan-African unity: precisely how would we go about dismantling nation states? Financial and natural resources are not dispersed evenly across Africa, either. There is no guarantee that free movement of people would be a frictionless process. And a shared African identity sounds great in a global context but at a local level our social, ethnic, gender and religious divisions become amplified and hard to dissolve.

Despite these and other weaknesses, wa Thiong'o's vision is beautiful and inspiring. He is absolutely right in calling for Africa to think differently. Languishing at the raw end of the globalization deal has given the continent serious cause to find alternatives to the status quo (some commentators have suggested tearing up all those unfair trade treaties). It must be noted that wa Thiong'o himself has no illusions about the difficulty of attaining his vision for Africa. But, he argues, ambitions first have to be visualized before they can ever be realized. By way of example, he points to the American plantation slaves whose hopes of freedom were once considered delusional. "Our present-day world owes a lot to those who dared to dream", he says. One can't argue with that.