

THE USE OF ORATURE IN NGUGI WA THIONG'OS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS

Elizabeth Jumba Mukutu

Department of Literature, University of Nairobi, P. O. Box 30197, 00100, Nairobi, Kenya

ABSTRACT: *The background against which I attempt to situate formal choices in autobiographical writings from Kenya includes the definition, the place of autobiography, fiction and autobiography, history and autobiography, and orality. As will be demonstrated, autobiographical writings from Kenya not only narrate stories of the individual, but also the narrative of the nation. This paper engages three of Ngugi's autobiographical writings. It demonstrates how formal choices, because of their efficacy in illustrating complex situations, implicate history, politics, and culture to inscribe the self within the narrative of the nation. It investigates Ngugi's obedience to a perceived stylistic convention, and his manifest appropriation of a unique aesthetic. Ngugi writes his autobiographical writing after establishing himself as a novelist, whose style is of a political and hybrid nature. Ngugi's use of anecdotes, allegory, the grotesque, detailed descriptions, biblical allusions and references, figurative language and images, flashbacks, journey motif, the bildungsroman and orality, are manifest ways which typify his style of his autobiographical writing. This paper examines Ngugi's use of orality.*

KEYWORDS Diary, Memoir, Orature, autobiographical

INTRODUCTION

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's style in his autobiographical writings simultaneously imbricates the tenuous narrative of the nation. I use the phrase 'autobiographical writings' to define various versions of life writing such as memoirs, diaries, journals, letters, and autobiographies. Chris Baldick (1990) observes that critics usually refer to the structural design and patterning or sometimes to the style and manner of artistic work in a wider sense as distinct from its 'content' (134). In this study, "form" refers to how a work is organized, constructed and arranged, to effectively contribute to its aesthetics. Therefore, by formal choices I mean the genre or technique that contributes to the whole structure or even the 'unifying principle' that makes a work to be autobiographical.

The word autobiographical writings should be understood in the context of works which do not follow the fixed definition of the term autobiography and the debate of definition and contestations that surround it. Jennifer Wallack (1980) observes that autobiography is a peculiar genre which purports to be both literature and history but is not entirely one or the other. Auto/bio/graphy is a combination of 'auto' meaning self, 'bio' meaning life, and 'graph' meaning to write. This implies that autobiography operates within multiple registers. The most important aspect in the three registers for this study is the third aspect-- 'graph', write-- which involves form. The thesis investigates how artistic choices contribute to the way in which a life is shaped; how an individual is reproduced; how the collective experience is scripted in the self. For example, Georges Gusdorf's (1980) position that "every autobiography is a work of art, at the same time a work of enlightenment" (39) suggests that in autobiographical writings a historical self-located within a social context is also a creative self. This way, what separates

autobiographical writing from other social records is not only the individual voice of an autobiographical subject but also the unique artistic choices to put such lived experiences into a distinct interpretive perspective. This way, form becomes an agent of re-imagining a phenomenon. I use selected autobiographical texts from Kenya to interrogate textual construction as a reinvention and a reconstruction of a life as lived.

LITERATURE/THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

This study is informed by theories on autobiography by early critics that formed the theory of autobiography: Gusdorf (1954), Pascal (1960), Phillipe Lejeune (1973) and Sidonie Smith (2005). It also employs current scholarship on African Feminism on issues that affect identity and difference in the analysis of women's lives. The paper also reads different sociocultural and historical locations through Autobiographics as theorised by Leigh Gilmore. These three theories complement each other to address the multifaceted nature of autobiographical writing. I use these theories to explore various concepts that are related to life writing and show how they inform the focus of this study: to unravel how writers use narrative strategies to construct and present the self. The theories helped in reading the significances of form in autobiographical writings. Since there are distinct yet overlapping and complementary issues such as class, gender, and religion, theory becomes indispensable in dissecting autobiographical realities. This manifests in the contradictions inherent in women's location within various structures; in intersecting categories such as race, class, and gender.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a textual analysis approach with form as the focal point. I therefore selected and read autobiographical texts by Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981, 2010, 2011) These autobiographical writings engage in reconstructions of Ngugi's life at various stages. We looked at the way Ngugi deploys language strategies to articulate his visions. To address the variations in form of the reconstructed lives as evident in the memoir and diary, we drew insights from the principles of the theory of autobiography, Autobiographics and African Feminism. This eclectic approach was influenced by the understanding that categories such as gender class and race may determine writers' narrative strategies.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

Ngugi demonstrates that a diarist character can be perceived through the narrative strategies, formal choices as well as functioning as a vehicle for ideology, culture and history. Ngugi also uses African mythology, songs, and imitates the spoken in his written works in ways that suggest that he borrows heavily from an African orature. His inclusion of stories that reflect the culture of the people, songs proverbs, myths and parables reflect the oral in his personal writing which gives authenticity to his experiences. This underscored the reading of a personal story as part of the cultural imagination in the postcolonial discourses

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Detained: a Writers Prison Diary

Although the use of the genre of the diary novel reflects that Ngugi conforms to well set traditional trends, his skilful use of techniques allows him to deviate from the very tradition he purports to follow. Ngugi's diary novel *Detained: a Writers Prison Diary* is written with hindsight and allows him to counter government reasons for his imprisonment and to offer his version on why he thinks he was imprisoned. Through presentations of various episodes and references to historical events, and through analysing political and social developments in the country, Ngugi presents incarceration as a common practice that is used by those in power, both colonialist and the neo-colonialist, to shut down voices of dissent. Ngugi (1981) refers to fellow writers in similar situation as "the modern Cassandras of the developing world" (191). Ngugi thus employs a rhetoric device that portrays the writer as a modern day incarcerated prophet who can never be believed. This comparison effectively introduces reading for literary meaning in his text. Reference is made to Ngugi's style of writing in the complex definitions of style offered by Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short's (2007) who conceive style "the style of Dickens, of Proust"; or "other times, it has been applied to the way language is used in a particular genre, period, or school of writing; one can talk of: "epistolary style", 'early eighteenth-century style', 'euphuistic style', 'the style of Victorian novels'" (27). This paper, focalises Ngugi's style of writing as a distinctive style related to the author, as a reading of his works' postcolonial inclinations, in reference to both conventions that go beyond the individual writer and to singular aspects of his individual writing. Kerstin W. Shands *et al* (2015) encourages reading a text by making assumptions about its generic affiliation and revising these assumptions as it is read.

Apart from rhetoric, Ngugi also includes other genres such as song and poetry. For example, he presents anti-colonial songs as part of his protest and rebellion. During the colonial times, the songs and dances were banned and many Muthirigu artists were imprisoned by the government. But even behind prison bars, they went on singing their patriotic poetry of protest and commitment to freedom, ending with the chorus:

Githaka, Githaka giiki

Githaka, Githaka giiki

Twatigiirwo ni Iregi.

Land oh this our land

Land oh this our land

Left to us by Iregi. (65)

In this song Ngugi is able to use orature to articulate issues of land alienation. Ngugi also embeds in his narrative songs in African folklore. Using direct address he writes: "In some African mythology, the dove plays an important role as the messenger of peace and hope. There is a beautiful Gikuyu story in which dove, after being fed with castor-oil seeds by a pregnant woman whose life and that of her baby are threatened by a man-eater, Irimu, agrees to undertake a journey to call her husband, a blacksmith, Muturi, in his smithy, far away. It sings to him:

Smith smithing away

Caangarara - ica!

Smith smith quickly

Caangarara - ica!

Your wife has given birth

Caangarara - ica!

With a man-eater for a mid-wife

Caangarara -ica! (153)

The dove sings so persistently and movingly that the smith at once goes back home and releases his wife from misery by killing the man eater. This particular song has been used to symbolically depict the ruinous nature of the post-independent state to the birth of a nation: Here, Ngugi and other political prisoners are the babies to be born; they are the hope of the nation by virtue of their revolutionary orientations; yet the Jomo Kenyatta regime is the Irimu, the man-eater. The blacksmith, whose vocation includes making weapons, is the liberator, the freedom fighter who will deliver the incarcerated from the jaws of death. There is another story in which dove puts together the bones of a dead girl and moulds back her flesh using mud, then breathes life into her, and she walks back to her joyous parents with her former beauty multiplied tenfold (153). Ngugi remembers this story when he and other political prisoners are haunted by the prospects of execution by a murderous regime. Yet, there seems to be hope that even in their death, their legacies will be powerfully transfigured as to greatly impact their communities.

The use of Orature in Retelling Childhood Memories in *Dreams in a Time of War*

In this section, I demonstrate how Ngugi appropriates oral tradition of the Gikuyu in telling his personal story which includes his people's communal experiences. I discuss the way Ngugi marks out his writing style by integrating specific aspects of the oral tradition such as myths, songs, story, especially how he manipulates these forms to inform a personal narrative. Evan Mwangi (2009) writes that Ugandan linguist Pio Zirimu (1988) coined the term orature in reference to the arts communicated and received orally in the early seventies of the last century to counter the tendency to see such arts as an inferior to written literature. Through Ngandi Njuguna, whose character stands out as a story teller, Ngugi includes forms of orature from a book that Ngandi gives Ngugi, he decides to incorporate two narratives that he finds exemplary: a parable and a prosaic description of a journey. The inclusion is not only aesthetic as it momentarily digresses from the narration of a personal story but the two narratives differ in style, as Ngandi's narrative reawakens Ngugi to the importance of ordinary issues: "the book taught me that one could write about commonplace and still make it interesting" (84). The writer presents Ngandi as a vast reservoir of general societal knowledge, as Ngandi always carried a newspaper, mostly *Mumemyereri*, the popular Gikuyu language weekly edited by Henry Muoria. He would read it to his listeners to make a point and mostly just refer to it. Ngugi also includes Ngandi's songs which the latter sang to his audience. He revises the songs in his memoir to reflect the history of the people with names like Waiyaki wa Hinga, Mbiyu Koinange, and Jomo Kenyatta being mentioned: "*Njamba iria nene Kenyatta, Kenyatta our great hero/he has now returned from Europe/ he came through the main gate (Mombasa)/Jomo has been our eyes*" (85). Through a song like this one, the public were informed of the political

happenings in the country. The inclusion of this song allows the author to comment, within the limits of the memoir, on what was going on in the country under the colonial resistance, that is, Kenyatta's return from Europe and its implications, but is skilfully presented as an example of the story teller Ngandi's ability to sing. Ngugi also narrates how Ngandi reconstructed to his audience the Lari Massacre and the killing of chief Luka and his family. Notably, these stories, in their different versions, mapped turning points in the nation's narrative on the Mau Mau. Ngandi represents those carriers of oral history who thrived in an atmosphere where there were a group of listeners around him. Through his insights he is able to tell them his perspective of the Lari massacre (114).

Ngugi demonstrates how Kenyatta becomes a vast oral performance narrated and directed by Mzee Ngandi with ease and authority of an eye witness. Through Ngandi, Ngugi situates Kenyatta's trial and the Mau Mau in the context of the official colonial narrative and the ordinary citizens' oral narratives. For instance, Ngandi reads between the lines of settler-owned newspapers and government owned radio and enriches what he has gleaned with his rich interpretation. For example, Ngandi uses rhetorical questions, a narrative device also common in orature that employs direct address, to point out the possibility of an alternative narrative: "they blame the killings on the Mau Mau Guerrillas. Why?" (114). The retelling of the Lari massacre with its contested narration shifts the space and place of narration to eye witness: In the memoir portrays Ngandi as a gifted oral artist by underscoring his ability to recreate places he has never been to, his ability to cast international and local characters that he has never seen, his ability to stage mock trials and take part as a character while still being able to comment on the current issues. However, Ngugi also points out Ngandi's unreliability when he exaggerates issues: "Wanjiku has been in the same school with me. Very nice. Very agreeable, and she does not seem like the daughter of the ogre emerging from Ngandi's narrative" (119). The figure of Ngandi as constructed in the memoir can be understood best in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watsons' (2010) observation: "In oral history the one who speaks is not the one who writes, and the one who writes is often an absent presence in the text who nonetheless controls the narrative" (275).

Ngugi personifies the liberation songs that he hears in his childhood. This can be glimpsed in his reflections:

Even when not reading it, you can hear the music. The choice and arrangement of the words, the cadence. I can't pick any one thing that makes it so beautiful and long lived in my memory. I realize that even written words can carry the music I loved in stories, particularly choric melody. And yet this is not a story; it is descriptive statement. It does not carry an illustration. It is a picture in itself and yet more than a picture and a description. It is music. Written words can also sing. (*Dreams* 40)

For instance, Ngugi records songs that were sung during the colonial period which reflected loss of land and desire to learn. Songs also play a role in Ngugi's style. To describe himself with regard to songs, Ngugi writes: "I did not know that I would soon become a travelling troubadour" (77). At this point, he engages in a rather complex personal writing that enables him to include the songs he heard and those that he had added into his repertoire. Importantly, Ngugi, in *Dreams*, writes that he took the lyrics and melody personally: he felt as if they were expressing the fate of his father's herd, especially in the lyrics below:

Our herd of bulls is gone/ our He goats depleted/ I will not ask you for a banquet/ my father all I ask for is education (78).

Through the inclusion of such songs, Ngugi's artistry features as it enables him comment on the pathetic colonial situation in he witnessed in his childhood.

In the next section, I analyze *In the House of the Interpreter*.

The use of Orality in, *In the House of the Interpreter*

In this section, we examine how Ngugi incorporates orality in, *In the House of the Interpreter*. Ngugi writes orality in ways that contravene and complement laws of autobiographical genre. Aspects of orality that Ngugi uses includes use of hyperbole, use of storytelling, metaphor and songs including painting a rural setting. These techniques of presentation help Ngugi in realizing a message that links the nation's problems to its colonial history and lends autobiographical writing the nature of oral testimony, Ngugi adopts this performativity and manipulates multi-layered perspectives on orality as manifests in *In the House of The Interpreter*. Eileen Julien (1992), who sees orality as a mode of speech, suggests its importance lies in the fact that "voice has been and continues to be the more available medium of expression."(24)

Ngugi's artistry which results in aesthetic appeal and unity of his memoir is presented in the narratives that Ngugi embeds in his story. For instance, in his portrayal of his school holidays Ngugi talks about the stories that he hears when working with his mother and brother in the fields. Apart from telling us of the circumstances of their production, Ngugi engages forms of narratives in the genre of trickster narratives, myths and legends into his work. For instance, Ngugi includes in his narrative a story about Mr. Body Parts in a style that enacts orality. Disappointed for not appearing in court after being rearrested, Ngugi records Mr. Body Parts', named so because of the stories he usually narrates to inmates, version of how Mau Mau cut up and buried different body parts of loyalists in different places. Ngugi participates in conveying narratives that are passed down and which share the narrative of self and nation. Such narratives of the Mau Mau that provided alternative narrative to the official story. However, it is notable that such a story meant to depict Mau Mau's heroism may just reinforce the negative image that it may try to escape from; that of painting the Mau Mau as a negative force. Telling stories in prison is a way in which performativity would be enacted.

The conversation that Ngugi has with Mr. Body parts is recorded in ways that enact a story telling session in oral literature. This is pointed Kabir Ahmed (1992) out as one of the oral aspects that Ngugi uses in *Devil on the Cross*. The inclusion of this story in the memoir deviates from the conventions of memoir writing. This is because it reflects on others and in this case, fictional characters from aetiological, trickster narratives and myths in traditional folklore. The story of characters like Hyena and antelope, shifts our attention from focusing on a particular event to depicting a story whose feature is characterised by timelessness and community memory where everybody becomes a participatory audience. The narration, draws all the other inmates into a participatory audience in the story telling session. This explanatory tale; why chameleon changes his colour, is also told and also how the Chameleon challenged hare to a race brought stories serve to calm their nerves and bring the inmates closer together. At this moment he recalls what his mother tells him about stories under the Mugumo tree. By embedding these oral tales into his narrative Ngugi contextualizes incarceration as a site of creative production. This contrasts with the domestic scene by the fireplace or at the garden

that Ngugi paints in his early chapters these narratives shift to prison. In which they were told, Ngugi shows the extent to which orality influences autobiographical writing. Essentially, what he should have been describing is what happens in prison when, he falls victim to the forces of colonialism in the person of a police officer encountered on a bus journey, and he is thrown into jail for six days, that he has structured his chapters to reflect.

Another feature of the oral technique that Ngugi employs in *the House of The Interpreter* is story-telling. Embedded in the very act of autobiographical writing, this feature allows Ngugi to present the story of the Mau Mau repressions. Presented in an atmosphere resembling the traditional set up for telling stories, Ngugi uses story telling technique to create variety on his monotone. In his narration, an inmate tells a major story. He used to work in Nairobi. He names it Saturday: he starts the story with the formulaic opening “Once a very cruel area Assistant Chief, who had killed many patriots with his own hands, was captured and sentenced to death by people’s court.” (132) Ngugi goes on to say that the people had body parts in buckets to bury and captures the irony that although “The package oozed blood but the police were more interested in those who did not have their papers in order.” (132) the use of storytelling demonstrates, however, how orality can permeate the personal narrative and signal the continuation of historical events. One such narrative is that of the Mau Mau. By highlighting the excesses of the screening process, Ngugi uses story telling as a means of inserting other views. In this storytelling as conversation the writer employs the rhetorical question, direct address, and irony presented not from the story tellers point of view but also Ngugi’s as narrator.

Walter Ong (1982) traces the ways that orality is a technology he says: “Valuable cultural information is available only in sound, in bodies and performances, and in fixed, formulaic oral phrasings that aid memory. The knowledge stored in bodies was passed on, generation to generation, through performance—face-to-face, participatory, immediate, and empathetic” in another instance he uses hyperbole also regarded as a feature of oral tradition. The story of Body Parts is a good example. Although it can be corroborated with Caroline Elkins research on the atrocities committed by the British against the Mau Mau which were not recorded (2005) It could be argued that this narration by Mr. Body Parts, and other similar short narrative forms like anecdotes that Ngugi embeds in his personal narrative are inserted into ongoing oral discourse and myths constructed on colonialism. The question addressed in this section is concerned with what happens when orature, which seems to imply a collective, appears to be used as illustrative of individual world? What is the effect of this deviation from written, especially its role in establishing a reader writer relationship and calls upon a collective audience. The technique is also used to characterize the narrator persona. This confirms Jan Blommaert (2005) observation that discourses generate, transmit and perpetuate ideologies and interpellate readers, in a way to use Ong’s words orality generates a “strong group sense.” (137)

Ngugi also uses foregrounding. For instance, on reporting to Alliance High School on Thursday, January 20th, 1955, Ngugi uses a metaphor of hounds when he says that: “I felt as if I had narrowly eluded pursuing bloodhounds in what seemed to be a never-ending nightmare.” (4) Ngugi writes that “Since the declaration of the state of emergency in 1952, I lived in constant fear of falling victim of gun-toting British forces that were everywhere, hunting down anticolonial Mau Mau guerrillas, real or imagined. Now I was inside a sanctuary, but the hounds remained outside the gates, crouching, panting, waiting, biding their time. (4) By referring to his school as sanctuary Ngugi paints a picture the same as the one in ogre stories in oral literature milieu that depicts danger that lurks beyond the safety of home. This idea is

revisited in the chapter titled: “A Tale of the Hounds at the Gate.” In this chapter, Ngugi refers to as “the saga of the hounds.” (118) the trauma that he goes through. The two related episodes that Ngugi exploits which include, the school holidays where he is looking forward to meeting his mother only to find his home destroyed. The second when after completing school and being admitted to college he looks forward to going home and gifting his mother only for him to get arrested. Ngugi gives the dates of the beginning of this saga as April 1959. He uses the form of testimony or eye witness account to tell of his imprisonment. Ndingiriri Gichingiri (2016) says that the “bloodhound trope effectively concretizes the existential terror Ngugi faced, while the destruction of his home explains the melancholia that characterizes the second memoir particularly.” (92) The story becomes a good illustration of the use of orality in an autobiographical text to imagine the effects of colonialism. It also takes the structure of a diary with subsection titled after days of the week. Significantly, this brief prison experience that runs through six days prepares Ngugi for later incarceration. This in a way confirms Pascal’s notion that in autobiographical writings, hindsight plays a great role in the presentation of style of an individual. This event is significant as looking back as seen when Ngugi says: “Little did I know that this ordeal would turn out to be a rehearsal for others ahead. That is another story another place another time.” (151) Ngugi has come to cherish and value the quest for freedom.

To show the effect of incarceration on the state of mind and the fear he experiences. Ngugi uses songs. Song like *My Lord what a morning* songs like *Swing low, sweet chariot* to *Freedom oh freedom* sung in his dreams. Ngugi shows that creativity momentarily alleviates the pain of freedom embedded in autobiographical writing it shows the writers desire to connect what goes on in the mind and the experiences in prison. Ironically he is jolted back to reality by: “the noise of shit and piss jolts me back to reality. The choristers are simply my fellow inmates queuing to visit the hole.”(134) here again Ngugi uses the significance of dreams as an oral feature to contrast the dreams to the reality of the prison is a way of highlighting the discomfort that he faces in prison. The intimacy and privacy that is lost in prison is show. For instance, adults relief themselves in the presence of others save for the blanket cover is also seen. While the song projects a collective experience, the dream can only be experienced by an individual. Whereas the adaptation of oral technique disrupts the memoir Ngugi’s inclusion of the oral aesthetic influences the shape of the autobiographical form.

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IMPLICATION TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Their interest was to see how the same approach can be applied to comics written by women artist with an autobiographical root this drew my interest as it provokes questions on the conventions of autobiography while pointing to the fluidity of the autobiographical form

CONCLUSION

To sum up, Ngugi's autobiographical writings: *Detained a Writer's Prison Diary*, *Dreams in a Time of war* and *In the House of the Interpreter* taken together, delineate Ngugi's style of writing. As a literary writer, Ngugi does what Pascal observes about the autobiography of the poet who employs literary dexterity with "unusual skill in the evocation of scenes and characters and more delicate self-observation, especially in respect to obscure inner urges, imaginings, to modes of perception and apprehension" (133). However, what is outstanding is the way Ngugi turns autobiography into a revolutionary tool when this artistry intersects with his ideological standpoint. Thus, his diary goes beyond artistry as it privileges both history and culture and their relation to the freedom of the individual. Ngugi demonstrates that a diarist character can be perceived through the narrative strategies, formal choices as well as functioning as a vehicle for ideology, culture and history. Ngugi also uses African mythology, songs, and imitates the spoken in his written works in ways that suggest that he borrows heavily from an African orature. His inclusion of stories that reflect the culture of the people, songs proverbs, myths and parables reflect the oral in his personal writing which gives authenticity to his experiences. This underscored the reading of a personal story as part of the cultural imagination in the postcolonial discourses. In *Dreams in a Time of War*, Ngugi utilizes memory not only as a means of remembering the past, but also as a trope in narrating the story of the self as well as that of the postcolonial Kenyan nation. As demonstrated by this study, the writer's formal choices of genre and style in the three texts are illustrative of life of an individual's and nation's formation in the 50's 70's and 80's. Nostalgic remembrance of the past and a perspective on the role of colonialist and neo-colonialist shape Ngugi's style. Ngugi deploys flashback, orality, and metaphors to characterize the complex, dialectical narrative of his life which captures the polarity of his position: Ngugi's artistry shows an awareness of a genre that requires an expression of, disclosure and expressiveness, at the same time concealment. Ngugi's style of writing is an interplay of individuality and otherness and embraces conventionality at the same time uniqueness. The context of the use of imagery in Ngugi's writing generally can be traced to problems facing the country he writes such as colonialism, land alienation and dislocation neo-colonialism. Ngugi's style of writing is peculiar as it is enriched by his ability to imagine and syncretize the narratives of himself, others as well as the nation. Ngugi's explicit self- provides the reader with plenty of information about himself, unwittingly exposing many of his personal shortcomings: this context influences the process of writing the synthesized memory

FUTURE RESEARCH

This research instigates researchers to explore how the same approach can be applied to other art platforms such as comics, poetry, with an autobiographical root as it provokes questions on the conventions of autobiography while pointing to the fluidity of the autobiographical form.

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