

# ***Petals of Blood:* Disenchantment and Utopia<sup>1</sup>**

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*Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity.<sup>2</sup>*

*May we not say then that imagination itself — through its utopian function — has a constitutive role in helping us rethink the nature of our social life?<sup>3</sup>*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's works are notorious for exploring particular effects of colonialist modernity, such as land expropriation, the commodification of natural resources and the imposition of discourses and social practices, that ultimately drive his characters into a state of confusion and desolation. In fact, the deleterious outcomes of colonialism in Kenya are evident in works such as *Secret Lives*, *The River Between* and *Petals of Blood*. What prevails in those texts is the violent imposition of a new mode of production that radically changes the characters' lives. *Petals of Blood* is strikingly significant in portraying those issues as it entangles the lives of its four main characters with the deep transformations undergone by the village of Ilmorog. Initially a prosperous region, by the end of the novel the village becomes an inhospitable place, overwhelmed by drought, lack of resources and a corrupted political system. As I argue in this essay, scientism, allied with the exploitation of Ilmorog's inhabitants and natural environment by those in power, plays a crucial role in defining its destiny. The scientific discourse brought by European formal education becomes a powerful tool of cultural domination and gradually modifies the way people relate to their environment in the novel. In fact, it resignifies their cultural practices to the point of creating a state of social and personal bewilderment. Enlightenment, as discussed by Adorno and Horkheimer, appears in the novel as an unfortunate phenomenon that detaches the characters from their social and cultural roots without giving a secure, understandable means of living in return. The violence of colonisation is thus depicted in terms of a fundamental cultural alienation and the ruin of a once affluent community.

But if the novel focuses, on the one hand, on the debilitating results of colonialism, it is also permeated by a series of events that contradict the new established relations of power and the dismaying consequences of European domination. As it seems to me, such elements appear as utopian motifs that redeem the community, in part, from a feeling of impotence, shedding light

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Peter Hulme and Natasha Himmelman for their valuable commentaries, the Department of

<sup>2</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical fragments*, Ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2002, p 1.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986, p 16.

on an otherwise bleak present. Utopia must be understood here not as an inaccessible future, but as a very specific way of looking into past, present and possible future realities. According to Ruth Levitas, 'utopian envisioning is necessarily provisional, reflexive and dialogic'.<sup>4</sup> That is, far from being a blueprint, utopia must be understood as a constantly changing project that aims at a better life for those who engage with it. My goal here is thus to discuss the slow and profound modifications in the relationship between the characters and the natural environment but also to detect the presence of utopian elements that counteract the effects of colonialist modernity and scientism. Interpreting some of the uses of the phrase 'petals of blood' throughout the novel will be instrumental to the proposed analysis.

### **'PETALS OF BLOOD:' SCIENTISM AND CULTURAL DOMINATION**

When Munira hears from his pupil that the color of a certain flower resembles the color of blood, he replies that:

There is no colour called blood. What you mean is that it is red. You see? You must learn the names of the seven colours of the rainbow. Flowers are of different kinds, different colours. Now I want each one of you to pick a flower ... count the number of petals and pistils and show me its pollen.<sup>5</sup>

The passage introduces a Cartesian notion of nature based on Munira's European formal education. The organic view of the natural world present in the student's comment, which relates the color of the flower and his own blood, is demurred and replaced by a concept of the plant as an object of analysis, minutely categorised by the precepts of Vegetal Anatomy. A sensorial perception of the flower is thus changed into a rational analysis that separates subject and object. The student's question disturbs the teacher precisely for extrapolating the limits of such rationality. After all, Munira recognises that, for years, he has been reproducing an unreflecting model of teaching, some 'ready-made stuff,' which works well inasmuch as he is not 'dragged into ... an area of darkness ... unknown, unknowable ... like the flowers with petals of blood.'<sup>6</sup> Munira can be seen, in fact, as an individual who has been alienated by the scientific discourses of colonialist modernity and who attempts to find in objective knowledge an escape for the fear of what he cannot entirely apprehend and dominate. Adorno and Horkheimer's problematisation of the concept of Enlightenment is useful here. For the authors, the attempt to overcome mythical world views through a violent process of rationalisation, impoverished and reified man's ability to think and relate to the world surrounding them, which became a mere object of speculation and experimentation. They also affirm that the rationalisation of all domains of life comes as a solution to men's insecurity and fear of the unknown. Therefore, 'nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the "outside" is the real source of fear,'<sup>7</sup> scientific knowledge being the ultimate path towards the end of mythologies, mysteries and superstitions. The major result, nevertheless, is a 'triumphant calamity,' as stated in the epigraph to this essay, which reveals the actual entrapment of those governed by the new paradigm.

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<sup>4</sup> Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The imaginary reconstruction of society*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2013, p 218.

<sup>5</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood*. Penguin Books, New York, 1991, p 21.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pp 23-24.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p 11.

Munira's pistils, petals and colors represent precisely a known, controlled nature, ready to be dissected and labelled. His student's observation, on the other hand, makes him feel vulnerable for pointing both to the uncontrollable aspects of the natural environment and to the similarities between living beings in general. The relation between men and their environment based on the alleged sacredness of natural elements and ancestrality is, little by little, modified in the novel into a relation in which nature becomes an object of study and exploitation with the function of producing material richness to the colonisers and to African elites. A new regime of truth is therefore established in the villagers' rationale. As argued by Michel Foucault with respect to the construction of knowledge through historically situated discourses, '[w]e are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.'<sup>8</sup> In *Petals of Blood*, the new truth determines that nature must be apprehended only through the mediation of reason. This mediation supposedly distances the subject from the natural world and works as a support, in the intellectual plan, to the extractive policy implemented by the British government. That is, for nature and man to be completely dominated, it is fundamental that the characters conceive of nature no longer as a coherent whole, but as an object that can be manipulated and exploited. The novel is clear about this when it later shows deforestation and draught as major consequences of the progress and development brought by European Enlightenment. As one of the elders in the village testifies:

You forget that in those days the land was not for buying. It was for use. ... The land was also covered with forests. The trees called rain. They also cast a shadow on the land. But the forest was eaten by the railway. You remember they used to come for wood as far as here – to feed the iron thing. Aah, they only knew how to eat, how to take away everything.<sup>9</sup>

The production of a scientifically demythologising discourse opens the path for the damaging arrival of the capitalist mode of production, which creates unimaginable poverty and produces a sharp division between the local bourgeoisie and the newly constituted proletariat. For Patrick Williams, *Petals of Blood* enacts an eminently Marxist reading of post-independence Kenya, a reading that emphasises the formation of a dominant ideology, class struggle and the coming into being of a class consciousness in the midst of Kenyan society. He claims that the commodification of *Theng'eta*, a drink produced from the flower with petals of blood and used by the community in specific ceremonies, 'is a good illustration of the Marxist argument about the way in which capitalism turns use value ... into exchange value.'<sup>10</sup> By the end of the novel, the sacred drink is produced in large numbers and is sold in the market with the sole goal of generating profit to an industrial complex that recently had realised Ilmorog's precious natural resources. That is, *Theng'eta*, which was formerly an important symbol of unification for the community, utterly loses such meaning as it is reified by the new economic system. The spiritual and communal reach of it, as well as the history of its production and use by the villagers, disappears in the industrial production and in the mass consumption of a generic product.

In this context, it is possible to interpret the expression 'petals of blood' in terms, once more, of the contrast between the scientific rationality imposed by modernity and a culturally and socially based reading of the world. There are arguments, nonetheless, that point to other possible meanings. Laura Wright, for example, compares *Petals of Blood* and *Heart of Redness*,

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*, Ed. Colin Gordon. Trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham and Kate Soper, Pantheon Books, New York, 1980, pp 93-94.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p 82.

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Williams, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1999, p 83.

by South-African Zakes Mda, and asserts that '[b]oth novels deal very explicitly with the potentially devastating effects of capitalist-driven development of the land.'<sup>11</sup> For Wright, the expression 'petals of blood' metaphorically refers to the violence consecrated in a postcolonial Kenya that only pointlessly tries to return to a past forever lost. She explains: 'the image of the bleeding flower ... is an image of the corruption and the devastation of nature as a result of deforestation and the construction of Trans-Africa highway.'<sup>12</sup> Wright also emphasises the ignorance of the youngsters, now influenced by British formal education, in relation to the elders' knowledge, since the flower noticed by Munira's student has a fundamental role in the community as it is the primal substance of *Theng'eta*. This 'illustrates that Munira and his student — as well as the other characters — have distanced themselves and been distanced, particularly by Western education, from the natural world as it had been implicated in their precolonial traditions.'<sup>13</sup> As discussed before, the novel clearly states how the subject-object split is taught and gradually normalised by the new generations. It is also fair to say that transformation of local culture, deforestation of the region and the Kenyan elite's political negligence constitute brutal forms of violence thematised in the novel. However, the expression 'petals of blood' should be understood, I believe, not so much in terms of violence but as a metaphor that points to the contrast between what allows itself to be known and the unknown or, more specifically, to the power of an uncontrollable nature that somehow resists the enlightened thought. It is not by chance that the expression is employed at the end of the novel to represent the fire that consumes Wanja's house.<sup>14</sup> More importantly, Munira's lesson about the constitutive parts of the flower contradicts the epigraph that introduces the novel, an excerpt of Derek Walcott's *The Swamp*, as discussed below.

### **'PETALS OF BLOOD' AS A UTOPIAN MOTIF**

The phrase 'petals of blood' appears a few times in the novel, but it is the epigraph that seems to set the tone for the understanding of its weight:

Fearful, original sinuosities! Each mangrove sapling  
Serpentlike, its roots obscene  
As a six-fingered hand,  
Conceals within its clutch the mossbacked toad,  
Toadstools, the potent ginger-lily,  
Petals of blood,  
The speckled vulva of the tiger-orchid;  
Outlandish phalloi  
Haunting the travellers of its one road.<sup>15</sup>

Nature is treated in the poem as an entity which is incorruptible in its manifestations, capable of seducing and terrifying — a powerful, indomitable and attractive nature, into which the traveler, frightened and excited, loses her/himself. Returning to Foucault, nature is depicted in the poem

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<sup>11</sup> Laura Wright, *Wilderness into Civilized Shapes: Reading the postcolonial environment*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, 2010, p 22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p 38.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood*. Penguin Books, New York, 1991, p 333.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p iii.

as something which cannot be dominated by knowledge. In other words, nature is here a phenomenon that will not let itself be known or possessed. Munira's flower, on the other hand, with its pollens, pistils and petals, a representation of a nature that has been chained and impoverished by Enlightenment, sadly contrasts with Walcott's 'petals of blood.' If the commodification of the environment appears as one of the most shocking consequences of colonialism and neo-colonialism in the novel, the expression 'petals of blood' points, alternatively, to that which cannot be colonised, i.e. to that which somehow resists the capitalist mode of production and modernity's scientism. From this perspective, although the novel presents a reality horribly modified by the arrival of the coloniser, the title signals a possible way out or, at least, to an indeterminate future founded on the symbolic forces of the present.

The fates of the main characters, although uncertain, also deserve attention: Munira is arrested and awaits trial; Abdulla is aware of his condition as a 'petty fruit-seller on the verge of ruin'.<sup>16</sup> Wanja survives the accident but is not sure about how to lead her life; Karega is in jail. However, in spite of their sorrowful realities, the novel presents sparks of hope for the characters and Ilmorog as a whole. For starters, Wanja is pregnant, signaling potential redemption from her guilt of abandoning her child. She is visited by her mother and a sense of warm family reunion is established. Abdulla meets his adoptee, Joseph, who is now a very dedicated student and holds high expectations for the future of Kenya. In prison, Karega is visited by a militant that says Ilmorog's workers, small farmers, traders and even the unemployed will march together and strike, if necessary, to fight for better working and living conditions.<sup>17</sup> A movement timidly begun by Karega is now stronger than ever and warms his heart as he considers the atrocious nature of capitalism:

[a] system that bred hordes of round-bellied jiggers and bedbugs with parasitism and cannibalism as the highest goal in society ... parasites [that] would always demand the sacrifice of blood from the working masses ... [and] who had prostituted the whole land turning it over to foreigners for thorough exploitation.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the odds, the novel ends in an optimistic tone as the characters move on with their lives and keep fighting for change. Indeed, the resilience of the community is demonstrated earlier in the novel. In 'The Journey,' men, women and children travel through the desert to demand nourishment and political support in Nairobi after one year of drought. Without basic resources, the travelers foresee their deaths as the excerpt below indicates:

But in the next three days, they increasingly became quiet, listless. ... they were now without food and without water. At one stage their thirst became so intolerable it almost threatened their will to proceed: Abdulla led them to a place where once flowed a stream and they dug up some stones, turned over some rocks and put their tongues on the sides hidden from the sun to cool the fire in their tongues. ... and they continued their journey, with Hawks and vultures flying high above them, maybe hoping...<sup>19</sup>

The signs of eminent death are not capable of stopping them or softening their determination. The journey, which would be impracticable in reality, appears in the novel as a solution to an incontestable social contradiction: on the one hand, the promise of welfare and progress brought by modernity, on the other, the mass destruction of the community. A lesson remains after the journey, which was, after all, partly successful:

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p 340.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p 343.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p 344.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p 143.

The true lesson of history was this: that the so-called victims, the poor, the downtrodden, the masses, had always struggled with spears and arrows, with their hands and songs of courage and hope, to end their oppression and exploitation: that they would continue struggling until a human kingdom came: a world in which goodness and beauty and strength and courage would be seen not in how cunning one can be, not in how much power to oppress one possessed, but only in one's contribution in creating a more humane world in which the inherited inventive genius of man in culture and science from all ages and climes would be not the monopoly of a few, but for the use of all, so that all flowers in all their different colours would ground and they would once again sprout and flower in the rain and sunshine.<sup>20</sup>

That is to say, the reality of a dry and cadaverous Africa is juxtaposed against an image of flourishing, colourful life, conquered by human agency and will. A utopian future is therefore disclosed to the inhabitants of Ilmorog, a future that implies the construction of solidary relationships among the excluded and the underprivileged, who unite to form a collectivity against a dominant group. As I mentioned before, the notion of utopia is useful here as long as it is understood as a continuous process, an open-ended future. According to Paul Ricoeur:

Development of new, alternative perspectives defines utopia's most basic function. May we not say then that imagination itself — through its utopian function — has a constitutive role in helping us *rethink* the nature of our social life? Is not utopia — this leap outside — the way in which we radically rethink what is family, what is consumption, what is religion, and so on? Does not the fantasy of an alternative society and its exteriorisation 'nowhere' work as one of the most formidable contestations of what is?<sup>21</sup>

Paul Ricoeur sees utopia in terms of its potential to subvert constituted discourses and ideologies and to trace the paths for a possibly different future reality. Utopia happens in the present, but is projected into the future as an alternative to a desolate, disenchanting living condition. I believe utopia to be one of *Petals of Blood's* central themes precisely for its essential capacity for offering alternative futures for a tragic present. The novel depicts a world torn apart by social and cultural violence — which leads the inhabitants of Ilmorog to a kind of mental confusion and loss of identity, but it also presents utopian motifs related to new forms of solidarity and the envisioning of a classless society. Finally, the emphasis on the phrase 'petals of blood' as that which one cannot contain and control — the unknown and unknowable that so frightens Munira — can be seen as a powerful utopian element as it points to a non-reified world, one that might escape the disenchantment produced by Enlightenment. 'Petals of blood' becomes a powerful symbol of hope that Ilmorog, a microcosm of postcolonial Africa, still hides its mysteries and haunts 'the travelers of its one road.'

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p 303.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986, p 16.