

## Towards Spatio-Feminist Criticism: Construing Spatial Dynamics of Female Agency in *Petals of Blood*

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### Abstract

This paper undertakes a spatio-feminist critique of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* exploring the ways spatial configurations generate, endorse, regulate, and limit female agency in the text. Here, the term 'spatio-feminist criticism' is used to denote a form of critical approach which considers space as a dynamic force with socio-political bearings upon the lives of women and situates its feminist explorations within a well-defined spatial critical framework. First published in 1977, *Petals of Blood* by Ngugi is interwoven with a complex understanding of space in relation to femininity. Set in post-independence Kenya, the novel foregrounds strong female characters who embody the plight of women as doubly-colonized by the neocolonial forces, and by patriarchy at large. The methodology of this study is borrowed from the French Marxist thinker and key spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre whose seminal text *The Production of Space* (1991) theorizes space under a tripartite and intertwined schema, namely, "perceived" space or "spatial practices", "conceived" space or "representations of space", and "lived" space or "representational space". The major objectives of this study are threefold. Firstly, it seeks to foreground the necessity of bringing spatial concerns to the realm of feminist literary criticism. Secondly, it aims to introduce spatio-feminist criticism as a critical approach to literary texts which enables a more comprehensive analysis of the conditions that produce gender inequality, oppression and hierarchy. Finally, the paper exemplifies such a spatio-feminist approach by utilizing the Lefebvrian spatial theory to explore the nature of female agency in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*.

### Introduction

This paper undertakes a Lefebvrian approach in its critical evaluation of the ways spatial configurations shape the nature, range, and scope of female agency in Ngugi WaThiongo's *Petals of Blood* (1977). Female agency, in this study, refers to the extent to which females can act independently in relation to the "constraining and/or enabling" forces (Scott 3). On a secondary and broader level, this paper also aims to introduce 'spatio-feminist criticism' as an approach which invites feminist engagement with literary texts through a well-defined spatial perspective.

One of Ngugi WaThiongo's widely read and taught masterpieces, *Petals of Blood* captures the failure of postcolonial nation-states to uphold the hopes and dreams surrounding political decolonization. Handed down to a class of compradors and native bourgeois elites, the post-independence Kenya is shown in the grips of neo-colonial forces that continue to exploit the Kenyan people. Within this state apparatus, women retain their position as doubly-colonized by the neocolonial forces, and by patriarchy at large.

A significant portion of the erstwhile feminist criticisms have been pervaded by notions of temporality and history with the effect that one primarily hears of waves (temporal) rather than ways (spatial) of feminism. A great deal of feminist engagements with Ngugi's aforementioned novel—such as those by Gwaro (2005), Ochieng (2007) and

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Nicholls (2018)—have mostly focused on the social or historical conditions that subjugate women. *Petals of Blood* is a text richly interwoven with a complex understanding of femininity apropos of space, yet there remains a conspicuous lack of systematic feminist engagement to construe how spatial poetics and politics shape the lives of women in the text. Reworking the spatial theory propounded by the French Marxist thinker Henri Lefebvre in his pivotal text *The Production of Space* (1991), the paper explores the ways spatial circumstances significantly generate, endorse, regulate, and limit female agency in Ngugi's text. For Henry Lefebvre, space is necessarily a social space. To further explain this notion, he theorizes space under a tripartite, "trialectical" and intertwined schema, namely, "spatial practices", "representations of space", and "representational space", respectively corresponding to "perceived" space, "conceived" space, and "lived" space (Lefebvre 33; Rutanen 17; Wegner 182). Situating its feminist agenda within this highly influential spatial theory, the paper also serves a secondary and broader aim of conveying a spatio-feminist approach to explore other potential texts that underlie the impact of spatiality on the lives of women.

This paper is divided into three parts. The following sections, at first, share the objectives of this study. Next, the paper points out the methodology adapted for this study. After that, in two parts, the paper (i) elaborates how mainstream feminist criticism has engaged with the notion of space and the major drawbacks in this engagement, and (ii) gives a concise overview of Lefebvre's aforementioned spatial theory which addresses these drawbacks. The subsequent section incorporates critical comments of various scholars as it employs Lefebvre's spatial theory on Ngugi waThiong'o's *Petals of Blood* to examine how if and how space endorse and regulate the nature, range and scope of agency of its female characters. The final section provides findings and concluding remarks.

## 1.2 Objectives

The study has three major objectives to serve through its critical endeavor. Firstly, the paper intends to foreground the necessity of bringing spatial concerns to the realm of feminist literary studies so as to reveal, among others, the hitherto ignored socio-political bearings of gender's metaphoric extension to space. Secondly, it seeks to introduce 'spatio-feminist criticism' as a critical approach to literary texts for a better understanding of the spatial conditions that lead to gender inequality, oppression and hierarchy. Finally, the paper aims to demonstrate such a spatio-feminist approach by employing the spatial theory of Henri Lefebvre to construe the nature of female agency in Ngugi waThiong'o's *Petals of Blood*.

## 1.3 Methodology

This is a conceptual, qualitative, and analytical research. Scholarly resources for this study have been collected from various printed books and journals as well as online resources. In order to meet the aims of (a) conducting a spatio-feminist critique of Ngugi waThiong'o's *Petals of Blood*, and (b) formulating a spatio-feminist approach for studying other potential literary texts that touch upon feminist issues with spatial implications, the paper utilizes the French Marxist thinker Henri Lefebvre's ground-breaking theory of social space and the spatial triad that create this social space. The following section will elaborate his theory and its relevance/importance for a feminist critique.

### 2.1 Feminist Literary Criticism Conversing with Space

As Kim Savelson tells us, spatiality and its predicaments have been "at heart of the various projects of feminist literary theory" (537). From traditional feminist perspective,

space is “defined and identified by socio-cultural forces” that ultimately lead to exclusionary practices (537). Historically, certain spaces such as the “private” realm have been feminized and considered as the appropriate space for women, whereas “public” realm is heavily masculinized that privileges “(white) men” (537). Kim Savelson cites from a range of feminist theorist such as Daphne Spain, Dolores Hay, Catherine Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Virginia Woolf and so one who explored the bearings of “public” versus “private” division upon the lives of women. All of these critics have underscored the importance of exploring spatiality, and made significant contribution to the understanding of how spatial conditions shape our lives. However, it is crucial to note that these are more static views of space and rarely take into account that “private” and “public” are porous realms that both men and women are increasingly navigating through. Much of the existing feminist literary criticism focuses on the characters and their actions, that is, the temporal dimension of a literary text. However, the spatial circumstances in which the actors and their actions are situated get little to no systematic analysis. What is required then, is a comprehensive and dynamic understanding of space, and a framework to investigate how spatial dynamics continue to produce and reproduce the conditions of hierarchic gendered existence and the bearings spatiality has upon women’s everyday lives.

Critics point to a “spatial turn” that took place in the late 1960s ignited by theorists like Mitchel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, and Edward W. Soja among others (Wegner 180). Lefebvre’s spatial theory elaborated in his seminal *The Production of Space* is hailed by social theorists even today. Unfortunately, however, there has been little engagement between feminist literary theory and Lefebvrian conception of space.

## 2.2 Henri Lefebvre and *The Production of Space*

An understanding of Henri Lefebvre’s conception of space necessitates preceding remarks on how Lefebvre traces the genealogy of the concept of space from Western classical metaphysics to modern era. For the most part, space has been seen as an “empty container” where all of “history and human passions” unfold (Wegner 179). Philip Wegner points out that, even in literature, “[c]haracters are fundamentally temporal constructs that unfold in a space, ‘or setting’” that apparently has little or no interest to serve once established (180). However, Lefebvre shows us that space is never neutral since it is both (i) a product “shaped through a diverse range of social processes and human intervention” as well as (ii) a “force that, in turn, influences, directs and delimits possibilities of action” and ways of being in the world (Wegner 181).

Lefebvre’s formulations on space challenges both the “scientific understandings of space found in modern philosophy from Descartes to Kant”, and Marxism’s conventional understanding of the “teleological principle of history” (Elden 9). He points out that Cartesian dualism was “the decisive point in the working-out of the concept of space” (1). Descartes’ positioning of “Object opposed to Subject, as *res extensa* opposed to, and present to, *res cogitans*” (Lefebvre 1) established the view that “the fundamental ontological determination of substance, material being, is that it is extended in three dimension” (Elden 187). Lefebvre observes that the modern epistemological inquiry “adopted the notion that the status of space is that of a ‘mental thing’ or ‘mental place’” (Lefebvre 5). As a result, “the philosophico-epistemological notion is fetishized and the mental realm comes to envelop the social and physical ones” (Lefebvre 5). At best, discussions of space have remained limited to two opposing poles. It is considered either as “material conditions, mappable spatial forms, things in space” or as “mental or ideational imagery, representations, thoughts about space” (Soja 19). Lefebvre’s notion

of space marks a “fusion of the idealist and materialist notions, through the mechanism of the dialectic, that enable[s] an *idealist and materialist* approach to questions of life and lived experience” (Elden 17). Hence, his central proposition that “([s]ocial) space is a (social) product” (Lefebvre 26). According to him, “a social space is constituted neither by a collection of things or an aggregate of (sensory) data, nor by a void packed like a parcel with various contents, and that it is irreducible to a ‘form’ imposed upon phenomena, upon things, upon physical materiality” (27). Lefebvre’s endeavour to formulate a “unitary theory” thus unites all the three: the “physical”, the “mental”, the “social” (11).

Lefebvre’s “unitary theory” of space proposes a “conceptual triad”, namely, “perceived space”, “conceived space” and “lived space”, which may be rendered in “spatial terms” as “spatial practice”, “representations of space” and “representational spaces” respectively (38-39). Spatial practice (i.e. perceived space) involves the material sphere, the “empirically observable” and physical “projection” of space, but it is more than simply a “collection of things” or “contents” (Lefebvre 27, 413). As Christian Schmid explains the term, spatial practice “designates the material dimension of social activity and interaction” (36). It serves to “regulate life” and entails “a projection onto a (spatial) field of all aspects, elements and moments of social practice” (Lefebvre 8, 358). Spatial practice thus “embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation... [It] ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion” (33, 358). The second term of the spatial triad, representations of space (i.e. conceived space), refers to “conceptualized space” that incorporates “a system of verbal (and therefore intellectually worked out) signs” (Lefebvre 38-39). They have a “practical impact, [in] that they intervene in and modify spatial textures which are informed by effective knowledge and ideology” (42). This conceived space designates “logical and formal abstraction” (Lefebvre 11), the realm of “plans and elevation, geometries and quantitative ordering” (Miles 27). The final term of the spatial triad, representational spaces (i.e. lived space), refers to space as “directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’” (Lefebvre 39). These are understood as “the realm of desire and mythification” (Traganou 34); they are “modified in everyday life” (Stanek 129) just as they escape its “prescription, utility and discipline” (Traganou 34). In modern societies, the experiences of lived space are “crushed, vanquished by what is ‘conceived of’” so that “[h]istory is experienced as nostalgia, and nature as regret”, as gradually declining (Lefebvre 51). Hence, one can postulate that “space is produced not only by material and economic practices but also on the level of conceptual, aesthetic, symbolic, and phantasmic appropriation” (Stanek 149).

### 3. Towards a Spatio-Feminist Critique of *Petals of Blood*

An analysis of how the spatial configuration depicted in Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood* affects the agency of its female characters requires a closer look at the very poetics of “perceived space”, “conceived space” and “lived space” (Lefebvre 37-38). To begin with the first point, the novel is mainly set in a postcolonial “fictional” Kenyan village named Ilmorog (Amoko 69) and captures its rapid growth from a “traditional village” to a “sprawling modern industrial town” (Stringer 528). The novel comes to foreground “the contradictions of modernity in the postcolony, highlighting the presence of unequal economic arrangements, coercive politics, and a fetishized national culture” (Gikandi 129). The postcolonial Old Ilmorog is portrayed as a land of farmers and herdsmen that earlier had an exchange based economic system, however, was

introduced to a currency-based economy only during the colonial period (Ngugi 21, 83). Its existing spatial sets encompass merely impoverished huts, lands that yield ever poorer harvest each year, a small shop with bar services owned by Abdulla, a barely running school with a single male teacher Munira, and the place of the spiritual guide Mwachwa Mugo. While the “young men and women” have left this draught-stricken, isolated and impoverished rural area for the cities in search of a better life, the old women and the left behind wives are seen “scratching the earth because they seemed at one with the green land”, hence, contributing to the area’s mode of production through farming (Ngugi 9, 29). Along with this, the fact that the villagers seek advice on serious matters from Nyakinyua, the old woman, shows that there is a certain degree of agency endowed to women. However, such agencies are visibly limited in scope. The urban areas, in contrast, have literally reduced females from a proletarian class to mere sex objects so that the options available to them lead either to kitchen or to the bedroom (Ngugi 44). In its capitalist economic system, better job opportunities were limited to the females of few bourgeoisie families as is evident in Munira’s case. For example, his “first two sisters had successfully completed their high schools: one was in England’s training as a nurse: the other was at Goddard College, Vermont, USA, taking a BA in Business Administration” (16).

The second aspect of Lefebvre’s space or, “representation of space (conceived)”, requires one to examine how space is conceptualized by the characters and narrators in *Petals of Blood*. Nicholls writes, “[t]he gendering of the landscape is one of the most obvious ways in which female agency is silenced or contained in *Petals of Blood*” (123). Indeed, regardless of the “ideological and class positions of Ngugi’s male protagonists”, the novel manifests gendered representations of space since “women’s sexual and reproductive potentials are associated with the generative agricultural potential of the land, which at one point is described as wearing ‘a floral cloth’” (Nicholls 123). It is noteworthy here that, the central character Wanja has been compared with Kenyan landscape throughout the novel through the imageries of “harvesting” and “flowering” (Nicholls 124). Nicholls has argued how the debasement of Wanja, a sex worker, “corresponds with the novel’s sense that the neocolonial forces and the indigenous comprador elite are defiling the Kenyan national economy” (16). In part four of the novel, Wanja is compared with the vastness and promises of landscape: “a woman was truly the other world: with its own contours, valleys, rivers, streams, hills... above all, movement of secret spring of life” (Ngugi 374). Similar ideas may be traced in Munira’s case when he thinks “Wanja! give me another night of the big moon in a hut and through you, buried in you, I will be reborn into history, a player, an actor, a creator, not this, this disconnection” (253). Such gendered conceptions of space, borrowing Lefebvre’s words, “intervene in and modify spatial textures” (42), as manifested in the material conditions and spatial practices discussed above. It provides the ideological framework that constructs females as both commodities and exploitable, hence, put limits onto their agency.

The third aspect of Lefebvre’s space, that is, “representational spaces (lived)”, necessitates a focused discussion of the lived experiences of the “‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’” (39). How space is lived and experienced by the characters of the novel, therefore, is the focus here. Throughout the novel, we come across female characters like Wanja, Nyakinyua or Wanja’s old grandmother, Mariamu, the women of Ilmorog village, Munira’s wife, his three sisters and many others. Kanneh writes, females, in *Petals of Blood*, are “represented as powerful women who, rather than become sexually and psychologically flattened by the African cultures in which they live, choose to

redefine their roles in supportive and mutual relations with African men and families” (115). When it comes to the central character Wanja, Kanneh notes the many roles of Wanja as a woman, a granddaughter, an echo of her clan’s history, an “exploited city barmaid, a powerful woman in love, a fighter and mother” (115-116). Regardless of her multiple roles, she finds herself situated in “multiple masquerades, suffering and choices” (115-116). Another character Mariamu, a poor peasant farmer, exemplifies the “triple duties” of a woman—as a mother, as a wife and as a peasant at her landlord’s farm—yet she never received “a cent from her produce” (69). Lefebvre’s lived space, thus, is a site of struggle for the women who seek to “change and appropriate” the space they inhabit, a space that is differentiated by gender roles. However, not necessarily every woman is at struggle with their gendered spheres. Many seem comfortable, even defend the limits of their spaces. For example, Munira’s wife and mother are apparently accepting of their spatial realm with its gendered norms rather than wanting to change its conditions.

The lived space of the women in *Petals of Blood* has an impact on their interpersonal relationships as well. The space lived and experienced by women in general leads either “to the kitchen” or “to the bedroom”, and their fates are hardly any different in either case. For example, Wanja wishes to be with someone “in whom she could be involved, somebody for whom she could care and be proud to carry his child” (Ngugi 67). However, throughout her life, men have “triumphed and walked over her body” and sought her company for emotionally detached sexual pleasure only (67). From the very first meeting with Wanja, Munira’s narrative in the novel portrays his sexual attraction towards her rather than any deeper emotional involvement. Wanja’s math teacher and the rich old friend of her father practically ruin her hopes of becoming an engineer someday (Ngugi 46-47). Many of the married women depicted in the novel are also constantly faced with betrayal and oppression from their husbands. For example, Mariamu’s husband used to beat her up whenever she demanded the rights to the sale of the goods she produced (Ngugi 69); Ramjeeh Ramlagoon Dharamashah brought home a wife young enough to be his daughter and later impregnated Njogu’s daughter who used to work for them (Ngugi 83); Wanja’s cousin used to be severely beaten up by her husband and eventually fled to the city becoming a sex worker to fend for herself (Ngugi 76). In the precolonial setting, the daughters were considered as assets to the family as it received goats from the grooms who married them. This shows an acknowledgement of the hard work and contribution the wife would make to the groom’s (mostly farmers and cattle owners) household. However, in the postcolonial Kenya where lands have been destroyed through deforestation and exploitation, daughters seem to have no “use” in draught stricken impoverished villages like Ilmorog (Ngugi 11). While these instances show us some of the fault lines in interpersonal relationships between women and men, one should not reach an oversimplified conclusion that men are present only as oppressors to women in the text. For instance, Abdulla looks at Wanja with eyes that are “kindly and mellow with intense pity” (Ngugi 92); the grandmother Nyakinyua participates in the Mau Mau rebellion alongside her husband; the men and women alike at Ilmorog appreciate how Wanja has been helping out her grandmother and everyone else in the village, and they do not stigmatize her for her past life as a sex worker. The women of Ilmorog, on the other hand, seem to share a bond of solidarity and unity. They share their joys and hardships with each other as they fetch water or work in the farms together (Ngugi 88). They are very much vocal and can unite against injustice, for example, they drove away Fat Stomach and his fellow companions who came with a new scheme to exploit the

villagers. What is noteworthy is that, the text captures a change of attitude in postcolonial spatial setting where human relations are pervaded by notions of material gains. What unites the women in such a setting is, perhaps, their shared sufferings.

#### 4. Findings and Conclusion

A spatial reading of *Petals of Blood* with feminist concerns not only gives a broader view of the conditions that produce and reproduce oppressive gender hierarchies in the Kenyan society, but also provides a wider insight to the lives of the characters and the forces responsible for that. Political decolonization in Kenya has certainly not led to a change in the colonial spatial matrix and hence, women continue to be oppressed in the neocolonial Kenya. From the discussions above, one may conclude that the expression of female agency in the text is wide and varied with regard to the age and spatial positioning of a female character. For example, the discussion on “perceived space” reveals that the major reason behind the plight of women in the postcolonial Old Ilmorog is the acute shortage of resources due to colonial exploitations and shows women who are actively participating in the mode of production as well as in the village affairs. While it is apparent that the husbands of many of these women never return from the cities, these women have managed to survive on their own despite the inhuman hardship they have to endure every day. The extreme poverty might have led the fathers think of their daughters in economic terms here, but community bond is still strong at this stage. Wanja finds more dignity and mobility as a barmaid during her stay at Ilmorog than she did in the large cities where she worked. Her old grandmother Nyakinyua is like a village head whom everyone respects. The scenario changes when we consider Mukami, the younger sister of Munira. A girl with a free spirit who helped the workers on her father’s land and played with their children. Unlike the women of Ilmorog who scrape together whatever they produce to survive, Mukami has no such autonomy as she is confined to the wealthy family she was born into. Her elder sisters obeyed their father without question and were able to go study abroad while Mukami questioned the corrupt ways of her father, and this spirit of questioning ultimately led to her suicide. The discussion on “conceived space” shows us that thinking about lands and nature in feminine terms limits the agency a woman may have in a society because she is reduced to her body. The colonial perspective of nature as exploitable and merely a source of material goods persists in postcolonial Kenya as well, and the association of women with nature and land further limits women’s agency in the text. Hence, the two spatial realms that society offers them lead either to the kitchen or the bedroom. Finally, the discussion on lived space shows us that female agency is not something endowed by the spatial circumstances, it is an active choice as well. Women such as Munira’s wife, mother and two elder sisters blend into the social space offered to them without question whereas women like Mariamu, Mukami, and Wanja are in constant struggle with their space and re-route their agency in different ways. For example, Mariamu, who is a poor peasant living as squatter at Brother Ezekiel’s land, is feared by him for her strength of character and a strong voice against injustices towards the workers in the farm. Mukami is restrained from navigating the social space as she hoped to, and her choice to commit suicide becomes the only available expression of autonomy and freedom for her. Wanja, a sex worker, turns her very body into an instrument to gain greater mobility and agency in the society. One may conclude by saying that while these expressions of agency in the Kenyan society are diverse, the text also portrays a contrast between the agency of the village women and the agency of the women who live in big cities. The women in villages may be impoverished but their participation in the mode of production gives them more agency than those living in the cities.

The paper sought to explore female agency in Lefebvrian term in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, with the broader objective of highlighting a spatio-feminist approach that situates its feminist agenda within a well-defined spatial framework. Incorporating spatial concerns to the realms of feminist literary criticism can open up the scope for further and more informed readings of the conditions that produce gender hierarchy and oppression. Moreover, since spatial criticism is a growing and emerging critical field, a spatio-feminist approach can utilize perspectives from other spatial thinkers like Edward Soja and Benedict Anderson as well, enabling scholars with feminist concerns to research into a relatively unexplored field in feminist literary criticism.

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