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You must read Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s Devil on the Cross

We are writers and for us writers, it is common to read a great range of books. Usually, there is one book that stands out and captures us. I, too, have read a lot of books written by many writers. There is one writer, though, that fascinates me the most - Ngugi Wa Thiong’o. Of all the books he has written, his work Devil on the Cross had the most impact on me.

When I started reading this book, I realized that there was something very special I needed to know more about – my Africanity; who I am, my origins and, my orientation. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o is one of the most wonderful and famous writers in Africa. He is born in Limuru, Kenya in 1938. He wrote Devil on the Cross while he was detained. This is one of the things that makes this novel more special.

It was the first book that made me fall in love crazily. Not just with African literature but also deeply with women, African women. Of course, I was in love – I had a girlfriend back then. But she banged the door, broke through, and made her way out of my heart. But this book, Devil on the Cross – that gave me a taste of literate and writing, that made me who I have become today, a writer – stayed.

I used to say, “I will write one day”, while reading this book. Of course, I didn’t know what to write back then. I didn’t know about the content nor the characters I would write about. Would I write about men, women, children, ghosts? What kind of writer would I become? A feminist, an anti-feminist? What title would I give that book? I couldn’t tell. All I could tell was: I will write one day! All because of the taste of literature and writing Devil on the Cross would give me.

Then one night, just after midnight, when the blanket of darkness moved the whole compound into its vast and infinite belly when father, mother, sisters, and brother were about to finish the first round of sleep when the incessant chants of crickets invaded the courtyard and my ears, sleep refused to come and carry me away in its softness. It was then that I rose from my bed and walked towards my laptop. I sat down, turned to my laptop, and started writing. This was the beginning of an amazing adventure, a new area of literature making me a new-born.

Devil on the Cross is a powerful fictional critique of capitalism. It tells the tragic story of Waringa, the protagonist, a young African woman moving from a rural Kenyan town to the capital, Nairobi, only to be exploited by her boss and later by a corrupt businessman. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o wrote several other novels such as Weep not, Child; Petals of Blood; A Grain of Wheat; and other books. But Devil on the Cross is unique.

In Devil on the Cross, Ngugi depicts the love he has for his people, the marginalized ones, and the love he has for his country. He depicts the originality of African culture, its traditions in general and, Kenya’s in particular. This is the reason why this book was originally written in one of the Kenyan local languages,
Gikuyu, raising the issue of decolonizing African minds, putting particular stress on African languages. It drew my attention to reading this book as it was originally written in an African language, Gikuyu, Ngugi’s mother tongue, before being translated into English. To me it says: never forget who you are, your origins, and where you are from. He depicts his characters in this book as the largest population brought under the control of a small group of people thirsty for money and wealth, putting a blind eye on the needs of those. Ngugi narrates the trauma of a woman, Wariinga, the protagonist, in a quest for self-sufficiency before being given the power of rebellion and revolution. A female revolution. The novel, though dealing with a diverse range of literary conventions and themes, focuses on politically challenging the role of international money and culture in Kenya.

Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s Devil on the Cross made me the writer I have become today. I think, for my part, that I would not be here if this book were not among the numerous books that I have read. It has played a significant role in my debut writing career. This is the reason why You Must Read, this novel, Devil on the Cross.