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**Masses as the True Makers of History -  
Analysis of the Play *The Trial of Dedan Mimathi***

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**Colonial Rule and Modern African Literature**

Modern African Literature developed out of the experiences under colonial rule. A closer examination of some of the writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o reveals the above truth. His plays particularly show a political commitment that grew out of a historical experience as the basis for the creation of a work of art.

**Focus of the Struggle for Freedom**

Ngugi is concerned with "the struggle for freedom" in his writings. This struggle is at times against the colonial power or at times against bureaucracy in general. Getting freedom from alien rule was, however, not an easy task for the people of Africa. Thousands of people sacrificed their lives for the sake of their country.

**Use of Violence to Gain Freedom**

The Kenyan freedom struggle was different from that of the other countries that were under colonial rule. The Kenyans had to use violence to oust the British from their land. After the Second World War that Mau Mau Movement led by Dedan Kimathi and others unleashed a reign

of terror on the British and employed guerilla tactics to counter the alien power and liberate the land. The main objective of Mau Mau was to drive out the Europeans and give back the peasants of their country their stolen land and property.

Ngugi was a staunch advocate of Mau Mau and kept the movement alive in his works. Ngugi however believes that as writers, as historians, as Kenyan intellectuals they must be able to tell stories or histories\_ history of heroic resistance to foreign domination by the Kenyan people. Kenyan Literature until then had hardly depicted the people who changed their history.

### **Literature and Class Power Structures –Recording History for Future Generations**

According to Ngugi, ‘literature cannot escape from the class power structures that shape our everyday life. Here a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society...Every writer is a writer in politics’ (Preface, *Writers in Politics* ii).

It was felt that the deeds and history of those heroes who fought against the exploitation and domination of foreign forces should be recorded for children of future generations to read.

### **The Story of Dedan Kimathi**

Thus, both Ngugi and Micere Githae Mugo built a powerful and challenging play out of the trial of one of the most celebrated leaders of the Mau Mau revolution Dedan Kimathi. He was an important member of Kenya’s militant nationalist group, the Mau Mau. In 1950 he subscribed to the oath of the Mau Mau, the group demanding freedom and the return of Kenyan land from the British. In 1956, Kimathi was captured and was sentenced to death. He was hanged on February 18<sup>th</sup> 1957 at Nairobi Prison and was buried in a mass grave. Kimathi became a folk hero among the people of Kenya. Kamathi’s life inspired several literary and historical works.

### **The Process of Writing a Play**

Ngugi and Micere Githae Mugo decided to co-author this play and they visited the birth place of Kimathi with the aim of eliciting firsthand assessment of this leader. They discovered that he was still a hero of the Kenyan masses. The people there were proud of him and spoke a lot about him as a dedicated teacher, a committed organizer of a theatre group and above all as a man with a good sense of humour.

According to them, ‘Kimathi will never die, But, of course, if you people have killed him, go and show us his grave!’. These were the words of a woman who had once been the pupil of Kimathi. These words echoed when Ngugi and Micere Githae Mugo returned and they decided to recreate this character ‘the same great man of courage in the spirit of the woman who told them that he would never die’.

Kimathi in the play symbolizes the masses in the historical perspective as the true makers of history.

### **The Play**

The play opens in the courtroom with a white judge presiding. Africans are seen seated in rough benches, squeezed and the whites are seen occupying more comfortable seats. Dedan Kimathi is brought in charged for being found with a revolver without license on the night of October 21<sup>st</sup> 1956. Kimathi remains silent. The trial is shown in four parts.

While the Colonialists try to persuade Kimathi to surrender, on the other side a woman, on her part, tries to help Kimathi by supplying a gun in a loaf of bread that would be sent into the prison through a warder. She executes her plan carefully with the help of a boy and a girl whom she meets.

Unaware of the fact that the loaf of bread contains a gun, the two reach the court and as instructed by the woman look out for the fruit seller who is none other than the woman herself in disguise. When they come to know of the truth that the loaf of bread contains a gun, they decide to help Kimathi escape and are prepared to hand it over safely to the woman. At the court Kimathi is asked to plead for forgiveness by the white judge and he strongly refuses by saying:

By what right dare you, a colonial judge, sit in judgment over me?... a criminal judge, in a criminal court, set up by criminal law: the law of oppression. I have no words.

### **Four Trials**

The courage and determination to resist is well-brought out. All the four trials, where Kimathi is tested and tempted, takes place in cell. During the first trial, Henderson, the judge, asks Kimathi to plead guilty and he would be spared his life, to which Kimathi replies:

Life. My Life. Give up my life for your life. Who are you, imperialist cannibal, to guarantee my life? My life is our People.

In the second trial, a banker and an Indian arrive to ask Kimathi to confess, repent and plead guilty for which the banker would finance for Big Hotels, seaside resorts, night clubs, etc. But for the people, they would continue remaining servants to their masters. Kimathi dismisses them with utter contempt and calls them *Judas*.

In the third trial, Kimathi is visited by an African Business Executive, a politician and a priest. The three try to persuade Kimathi to surrender. They are happy about the two announcements

made by the oppressors—No more racialism. No more colour bar. Excited with these two announcements, they proclaim that they have won the war. To them Independence is not their immediate expectation. It can be got province by province, they say. Kimathi is annoyed and tells them, “Kenya is one indivisible whole. The causes we fight for is larger than provinces; it shatters ethnic barriers. It is a whole people’s cause”. Kimathi chases them out saying that he will answer the next day in court and then they can hear what he has to say.

The fourth trial shows Kimathi seated in a corner of his cell and Henderson entering the cell arrogantly. After another heated argument between the two, they force Kimathi to surrender and tell them about the others hidden in the forest. They then ask him to sign a paper which he refuses. Kimathi is taken to the torture chamber and whipped. Only the groaning can be heard from the audience, and after sometime Kimathi emerges from the chamber blood-stained, shirt torn and falling on his hands and feet, even then he resists and refuses to sign the paper saying:

For four hundred years the oppressor has exploited  
And tortured our people.  
For four hundred years we have risen  
And fought against oppression, against  
Humiliation, enslavement of body, mind and soul  
[tearing the piece of paper]:  
Our people will never surrender!

### **Last Day in the Court**

At the court the next day, Kimathi is reminded of his offence and is asked to plead guilty. But he calls them all ‘**Judases and Tailors**’. (*Tailor as thief* is a cultural expression in English in the past, similar to *poRkollan* reference in the celebrated Tamil epic *Cilappatikaaram* and such accusations against trades is, unfortunately, in common parlance in Tamil and other Indian languages. Such biased expressions are, fortunately, being avoided in modern times. Note that Colonial English in countries all over the world, including India, abounds in such expressions even today.) The woman then enters with the boy and the girl.

Kimathi looks at the woman and the suspicious police take the woman out, who leaves the courtroom singing the freedom song triumphantly. The Judge once again reminds Kimathi of his guilt to which he replies that

... our people will never surrender  
Internal and external foes  
will be demolished  
And Kenya shall be free.

## Final Address

Such was his faith and hope on his people. His final address to the people was to organize and fight to weaken the ones who create ethnic divisions. The Judge then sentences against him to be hanged until death. At that moment the girl breaks the bread and holds the gun at the guards saying 'Not dead!' With a loud shot, the crowd of workers and peasants are seen singing a thunderous freedom song.

## Playwrights' Goal

The audience is invited to identify with the blameless protagonist victim of an imperialism which he struggles to counteract. He refuses to be influenced by the attempts to seduce him. Kimathi incarnates the struggle for national liberation and the political values associated with it. Kimathi's torture by the white colonialists and their allies stirs the audience but the betrayal of his own men arouses the strongest emotions of the audience.

The play, however, incarnates the struggle for national liberation and political values associated with it. Kimathi, thus, is a powerful character, whose qualities stand for right in opposition to the antagonists who embody wrong. The play clearly brings out the vision of Ngugi and Mugo as both are concerned with the indigenous social order and the brutal alien forces of colonialism. It is a call to renew the struggle for a genuine national liberation. The purpose of writing such a play is far from being just an ideological consolation. It is, in fact, the dream of the writers who envisioned a free Kenya and recognize the workers and peasants as true patriots.

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