

## **Editor's rant**

### **(PHD) Pull Him Down**

*Binyavanga Wainaina*

A couple of years back, a friend and I were having a conversation about Ngugi wa Thiongo after someone at Egerton University suggested that he (Ngugi) had 'invented' Mungiki. I said in passing that Kenyans were invested in him and pointed out how difficult it would get for him when he came back. It is our peculiar nature to let evil (Moi, Biwott, Pattni etcetera) go uncommented on, and to have those who achieve and transcend be the target of our most vicious malice.

Ever since the attacks on Njeeri and Ngugi, there has been a frenzy of email forwards and speculation on blogs where Kenyans all over the world congregate. The rumors began on Mashada.com – all of them improbable and vicious. Conspiracy theories dominated conversations in bars all over Nairobi. There was anger, mostly directed towards Njeeri and Ngugi instead of the criminals and rapists. Everyone was suddenly an expert - everyone seemed to understand the inner workings of the minds of the perpetrators with most maintaining that the attack had been staged.

PHD (Pull Him Down) is a common behaviour in middleclass Africa, evident amongst civil servants, politicians, academics and bureaucrats and born out of self-loathing. This is its fundamental principle: if we are all mediocre, if there isn't a single person in our department (for example) doing their job, then we are safe. Diligence and application becomes threatening and the only recourse is to attack.

People that PHD never deal with facts or attack issues; they attempt character assassination. I have been on the receiving end of strange, violent and bitter emails as well as newspaper articles that pretend to know who I am, never critically review the work Kwani? has produced and that are content to accuse us of elitism, exclusivity and self-importance

PHD negates intelligence as its intent is to ‘Stick a label, then, Bring ‘Em Down’.

In a number of interviews I have had in Kenya, I have been asked if I intend ‘to replace Ngugi’ and how I’m going to ‘topple him’. My response has been a simple ‘why?’. I was 17 years old when I first read ‘Decolonising the Mind’, and the book changed how I saw Kenya..

I have made my feelings clear: Kenya needs more writers, more writing; we need a varied, energetic literary scene, in 300 languages if possible, on any and every possible subject. We need to be able to go into a bookshop and choose; from a whole shop of titles what moves us. I thrive, as a writer, as a Kenyan reader, if Ngugi wa Thiongo and Meja Mwangi, and Thomas Asare, and Bingu Matata and Majorie Oludhe McGoye and Peter Kimani and Kitu Sewer and the late Wahome Mutahi and Terry Hirst and Rebecca Njau and Micere Mugo and David Maillu and MG Vassanji and Dayo Forster and Billy Kahora and Stanley Gazemba and the late Jonathan Kariara and John Kiriamiti and Carlos ( whose Sheng story I am waiting for) and Ukoo Fulani and Shabaan Roberts and Nyambane thrive.

Maybe some academics want to see literature as a line of succession. It isn’t. Maybe some journalists wish to create dramatic tension. I write, can only write from my own world-view, and experience, and as a writer I do not intend to replace anybody else’s view of the world, I simply seek to make mine readable. The River Between will not grow old, nor will Petals of Blood or Detained or Murogi wa Kagogo. Ngugi’s arrival in Kenya boosted the sales of Kwani?

We are not in competition.

One friend, upset at the frenzy of speculation around the Norfolk incident told me that she felt that those who spoke loudest are those have done least to participate in Kenya’s political change. She was very upset. I said to her, that I thought that in a way Moi won.

The attempts by Moi’s government to keep Ngugi’s books out of our lives worked; the seeds planted by government propaganda, and fuelled by sycophantic KIE types and academics while I was in school were very powerful. Until I was 17 – I looked on Ngugi’s works with fear; I expected I would self-destruct if read them. Ngugi’s return reminded many of us of the ugly 80s, when neighbors competed to report each other for being ‘dissidents’ or ‘Mwakenya’. When Kenyans saw grainy pictures of dreadlocked people in our newspapers, whom, we were told, were coming to shed blood.

All of Ngugi's work has simply asked us to open our minds; to challenge ourselves; to 'see' our country, our world. There is nothing wrong with disagreeing with his view of things; there is nothing wrong with supporting them.

I saw a Tanzanian proverb in a local paper recently: I pointed to you the stars and all you saw was the tip of my finger.'

It is a measure of the power of Ngugi's writing, and his politics, that people can take it so powerfully, so personally. For if so many are invoking their PHD status on him, he must truly be formidable.

Welcome home Ngugi. Njeeri. And your family.

We are happy that you refuse to let them win. We are proud of you all.

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