

Writing for Peace

by Ngugi Wa Thiong'O (from Kenya)

There are certain images in literature, especially children's literature, which live long in one's memory. The encounter between Sindbad and the old man of the sea, for instance, has always haunted me. You know the story. Sindbad finds an old man unable to cross the river, and he has pity on him. He carries him on his back. But the old man refuses to get off and instead plants his long nails even more deeply into Sindbad. The sailor grows thin even as the old man waxes fat and oozes comfort. For it is Sindbad who does everything: he carries and feeds the old man in sun and rain and wind.



THE OLD MAN OF THE SEA

I was born in a colonial situation, and I suppose the image of the parasitic old man sitting and feeding on Sindbad reflected a certain reality that I then only vaguely understood. Now I know. Sindbad is from the underdeveloped world politely referred to as the developing or the third world. The old man could come from anywhere—Europe, America, or Japan—but his contemporary home is the United States and he has the nuclear-

armed Ronald Reagan for a president. Can there ever be peace between the two, that is, as long as the old man of the sea has his bloodsucking nails deep into the other's veins?

The question is pertinent and there is no contemporary "third" world writer who can afford to be indifferent to it or to the issues of war and peace today. His historical memory would have to be too short for him not to remember that the last two world wars dragged

thousands and thousands of third world peoples into an ocean of blood man-made in Europe. The two wars were fought largely to determine which European ruling class would control the lion's share of the resources of Africa and Asia. The wars were fought to see which robber would have the monopoly of robbing Africa and Asia in peace. In other words, the third world peoples were the objects and subjects of a war whose origins, conduct, and outcome they were not in a position to control or influence. For then, most of Asia and Africa was under direct European economic exploitation, political oppression, and cultural domination.

The situation has not changed much today. Despite formal independence most Asian, African, and South American countries are still under foreign economic exploitation, political control, and cultural domination, and there is every reason to believe that World War III will be fought over who should control the resources of the third world. It is not an accident that most of the "trouble spots" in the world—South Korea, South Africa, the Middle East, Malvinas/Falklands to name but a few—are all within Asia, Africa, and South America.

What is the effect of this domination on the Sindbads of the developing world? On the international level, the imperialist nations continue robbing the countries they dominate. They wax fatter and fatter even as their victims grow thinner and thinner. The economic gap between the two grows bigger and bigger. The third world countries have not developed independent national economies; instead, they have become economic satellites of the imperialist nations. Economic satellites necessarily become political dependencies. The ruling regimes in places like Kenya and South Korea have, for instance, ceded their territories to the ruling authorities in America for military use. By ceding their territories for American military use, they put the entire population in the front line in any nuclear confrontation involving the USA. And yet these regimes which have sold their entire populations to America—their people will die so that Americans might live—have not the slightest influence on US policies. They will go along with the whimsies of whoever is placed in the White House by the dollar wielding

gnomes of Wall Street.

Culturally these dependencies become ridiculous imitations of the way of life of the ruling class of the exploiting nations. Prostitution, for instance, has become a way of life labeled tourism. The US military personnel must have their amusement parks and beaches and night clubs. Indeed these satellite states have put their entire womenfolk in the market for foreigners holding dollars, sterling, francs, marks, or yens.

Internally, that is within the independent nation, a corrupt regime wields power. This clique grows wealthy out of the handshake it gets for its services as an intermediary between the imperialist bourgeois and its people. Massive impoverishment of the peasantry and the working population becomes the hallmark of the nation. Hunger, disease, and ignorance become chronic. Politically the ruling regimes become even more detached from the people and they can only maintain power by jailing and murdering their democratic opponents; by ruthlessly suppressing any democratic dissent; and terrorizing through the military the entire population. Culturally the ruling regimes in these satellites see their mission as that of carefully preserving feudal backward traditions that enhance superstition, or else suppressing any progressive popular cultural expressions to the extent of actually destroying people's cultural centers.

It is important to stress that these regimes, completely anti-national and anti-people, derive their strength from the military and so-called economic "aid" they receive from Euro-American ruling circles. They are propped up from Bonn, Paris, London, and New York. The massive military aid they get is not for use against the enemies of the nation—for the enemy of the nation is the internal and external exploiter—but against internal democratic dissent. The military dictatorships in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are the creation of Euro-American and Japanese imperialism. Violence is inherent in the present unequal relationship between the third world and Japan and Euro-America. Their peace is enforced by the gun, nuclear weapons even, to create stability for the dollar to make more dollars out of the working population of the dependent nations.

So the third world peoples are doubly exploited and oppressed. They must over-feed, over-clothe, and over-house both the home and the foreign ruling classes. The erstwhile colony has become a neocolony and the same patterns of domination and oppression continue.

But lest those who come from the dominating countries rest complacent, they should remember that neocolonial relations can be developed even between states that used to own colonies or were formerly independent. A good example is the way Western Europe is gradually becoming a virtual satellite of America, putting their entire population and territories at the service of a trigger happy nuclear armed authority in Washington. America is prepared to fight a nuclear war to the last European and the last man in the third world.

There are at least three possible responses to the possibilities of peace in the situation of a Sindbad and the old man of the sea—that is in the situation of the exploiter and the exploited, the oppressor and the oppressed, the dominating and the dominated.

There is the conservative approach—peace through the preservation of the status quo. This is "peace" erected on slavery and it is peace only to the oppressing class or nation. It is peace or stability of the rider and the horse, and I guess that this is not the kind of peace that this gathering of writers is advocating. But it is the position held by the US. Hence the support that the Reagan regime gives to all the brutal ruling regimes in the world. South Africa and Israel, to give just two examples, are two of the most oppressive regimes in history. They are, as you know, the only two countries in the world whose constitutions are openly and explicitly based on racism.

There is the liberal response. This position was best articulated by Tolstoy when he talked of the man who is carried on another's back and who will vehemently protest his willingness to do anything to help his victim, everything that is, except getting off his back. The advocates of mere aid-giving are in this category. The basic question is not that of aid or lack of aid to the underdeveloped world, but that of getting off their backs so they can develop national economies and hence an independent political line and culture.

There is finally the radical response. This calls for a total transformation of the systems of inequality and oppression in every nation and between nations. Modern industry, science and technology were they not directed toward maintaining inequalities (imagine the billions spent on nuclear and conventional arms!) could transform the lives of millions on earth. This response involves, at the very least, an uncompromising opposition to US led imperialism which is today the cause of both internal inequalities in the third world and between the third world as a whole and imperialist nations.

I myself do not believe that peace is possible in an imperialist dominated world. Countries struggling for their independence like Namibia; nations struggling for their liberation as in South Africa and Palestine; people struggling for a revolutionary transformation of their lives—these have no alternative but to use any means at their disposal to bring about change; and they should be supported by all those who would like to see peace as the social basis and climate for a truly human community. Here, it seems to me, the European writer has a special responsibility. He must expose to his European audience the naked reality of the relationship between Europe and the third world. He has to show to his European reader that, to paraphrase Brecht (Bertolt Brecht), the water he drinks is often taken from the mouths of the thirsty in the third world, and the food he eats is snatched from the mouths of the hungry in Asia, Africa, and South America.

But the responsibility also belongs to the writer from the third world. From Kenya to South Korea to South America the third world is ringed round by US nuclear and conventional military bases. The United States supports the most repressive regimes in the third world. Uncle Sam sits on the backs of millions in the third world and loudly calls for stability. The third world writer must be on the side of the struggles of those sat upon.

Now I cannot remember in detail how Sindbad solved his predicament, but I think he eventually managed to give the old man of the sea some intoxicating drink and the man slid off Sindbad's back. But would his solution been so simple if the old man of the sea

had been armed with nuclear weaponry? Probably not, but the necessity to struggle and make the old man get off his back would not have been diminished by his knowledge of the destructive might of his oppressor.

Literature provides us with images of the world in which we live. Through these images, it shapes our consciousness to look at the world in a certain way. Our propensity to action or inaction or to a certain kind of action or inaction can be profoundly affected by the way we look at the world.

Writing for peace should at the very least mean raising human consciousness to an uncompromising hatred of all exploitative parasitic relations between nations and between peoples within each nation. In our world today, this would mean continued exposure and opposition to imperialism currently led by the US. "Get off our back!" should be the unanimous cry of all the democratic forces of peace. For we must all struggle for a world in which one's cleanliness is not dependent on another's dirt, one's health on another's ill-health, and one's welfare on another's misery.

Peace is only possible in a world in which the condition of the development of any one nation is the development of all

-----End of Chapter, *Writing for Peace*-----

*This paper was given at The International Literature Conference in Cologne, West Germany, in August 1982. (Ngugi Wa. Thiong'O read *Writing for Peace* at this conference.)

Thiong'o, Ngugi Wa. "Writing for Peace." *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-Colonial Kenya*. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1983. 71-75.

UPDATE: September 2006 Ngugi wa Thiong'o publishes new book, [Wizard of the Crow](#). The original Washington Post article is available [HERE](#). A mirror copy is at <http://eslbee.com/ngugi_wa_thiongo_update.htm>.

Distinguished Professor Ngugi wa Thiong'o at University of California, Irvine CA, has given permission to publish *Writing for Peace* here. Professor Ngugi's website is at <http://ngugiwathiongo.com>.