

Subaltern in Contemporary African Fiction in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*

By

Madu, Lovina Ihunanya
Division of General Studies
Federal University of Technology, Owerri
lovemaris46@gmail.com.

&

Ujowundu, Cornel Onyemauche
Department of English Language
Chukwiemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University,
Igbariam Campus
cornelujowundu@yahoo.com.

Abstract

This paper investigates oppression, exploitation, denigration and dehumanization of the poor masses (the proletariat) in a given Africa society as explored in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*. Writings regarding the situation of the masses and the challenges they go through due to bad governance have become alarming and worrisome issues that need urgent attention for redress. The novelist as a social crusader in this instance, wants to, inspire social positive changes through exposing the atrocities of the leaders in the form of oppression, suppression, dehumanization and neglect of the subaltern in African societies. This paper therefore, subjects the novel to textual analysis and highlights the cases of dominance, inequalities and authoritarian governance which reduces human dignity and survival in a society bereft of peaceful living and recognition of basic human rights. The theoretical anchor for this work is Marxism which helps to expose the struggles of the masses for a better society in their efforts to lighten the pains of victimization and denials. The novelist thus, advocates honesty, good governance and integrity in leadership.

Keywords: Subaltern, Victimization, Denigration, Corruption, Dehumanization

Introduction

Most nations on the continent are simply in the grip of cynical and extremely cruel people individuals who, absolutely, have no respect for basic human rights and the rule of law, who continue to subject the people of their different countries to unimaginable brutalities and oppression, who indulge in shamefaced corruption, and who, in short, perpetrate mindless authoritarianism and maintain a very frightening form of autocratic control on the citizenry. The history of the crisis dates far back in years and links up with colonial experience and the attitudes of those who took over the political leadership of the new African nations following independence.

The deployment of grotesque realism by such writers instantiates Philip Thomson's argument that the "grotesque mode in art and literature tends to be prevalent in societies and eras marked by strife, radical change or disorientation" (11). According to Wolfgang Iohannaas Kayser:

Ngũgĩ's commitment to exposing power abuse has continued to shine forth in his body of writing. Like his fellow writers, he makes use of grotesque aesthetics to portray a world that is upside down, already subject to dissolution and estrangement (43).

Kayser further says replete as it is with grotesque imagery, the novelist in *Moving the Centre*, a collection of essays and lectures first published in 1993, Ngũgĩ enunciates his thoughts on the politics of language, the vitality of African languages in literary productions, and the role of the African writer in a neocolonial state.

Ngũgĩ uses this narrative strategy to undermine state power, while illuminating the deformations symptomatic of the neocolonial nation. Ngũgĩ employs parody, exaggeration, degradation, scatological imagery and other grotesque elements to achieve this aim. Furthermore, Ngũgĩ advances a call for organized resistance against regimes of violence and domination, as the subversive actions of his young protagonists, Nyawira and Kamiti, demonstrate in the text. I suggest that the novel offers readers a way to understand leadership failure as consequent upon the elite's obsession with whiteness—or what Ngũgĩ calls “white-ache.” Using grotesque aesthetics, Ngũgĩ demonstrates how this obsession can have destructive psychological effects on the individual and national body. In fact, *Wizard* serves as a scathing commentary on post-independence African nations where misrule frames much of government vision.

The theoretical framework for the study is Marxism. It is the political and economic theory of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels that interpret history as a continuing economic class struggle and belief that eventual results would be the establishment of a classless society and communal ownership of wealth of the nation.

Marxism is summed up in Enearta Reference Library as a theory in which class struggle is a central element in the analysis of social change in western societies. According to Swingewood Allen in his book *The Novel and the Revolution*, Marxism maintains that a Marxist writer is one who is conscious and fully aware of his own responsibility in the society. No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distanced from the oppressed (23).

The Marxist, committed to human liberation does not become the prisoner of a circle of certainty within which he also imprisons reality. It is of paramount importance to note that since the modern society is a highly stratified one, any committed writer who is oriented towards Marxism

automatically sets himself against the political elites. The political elite who is bent on maintaining the status quo cannot imagine a likely push in the great change tendency towards modern literature. Marxist theory holds that conflict which leads to radical ideas for a change are borne out of the displacement of the strata in the society.

According to Ngara Emmanuel in his book *Art and Ideology in the African Novel*:

Social stratification and inequality are a historical part of our society and these are what Marxist writers are continually lighting against in our society. Through the change significant attention of social structures will be made. This will come in form of a revolution which is the displacement of one class by another (31).

Ngara says that every Marxist literary work is a protest against the deplorable human conditions against the unbridgeable gulf between what man professes of man when in the firm grip of fate. Man in all ramifications of life hardly gets optimal satisfaction and so protests against those situations and recommends most probable alternatives. The result of this line of thought is a Marxist literature, a proletariat literature that would eventually lead to a classless order. In quoting P.J. Brown's *The Proletariat Episode in Russian Literature*. Allen Swingewood states:

In a class society, literature serves the interest of a particular class and only through that class does it serve all humanity. Therefore, proletarian literature is such a literature organized by the psyche and the consciousness of the working class in the direction of the final talk of the proletariat as the creation of communist (classless) society (84).

The Marxist art, therefore, serves as a mirror with which the proletariats or the masses can see themselves and through which the social consciousness is developed. Ngara Emmanuel in his book

Art and Ideology in African Novel posits the term Marxist art to refer to "works which depict reality from a Marxist point of view. Works which reflect the social structure of society and which present social struggle from the point of view of a class and promote the ideals of socialism (17).

This kind of art is geared towards a change in basic mode of production and this change in the mode of production will result in a change in the structure of social classes: the eventual overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the establishment of proletarian dictatorship. It is pertinent to note that during the years of proletarian dictatorship, this working class-based literature took shape and evolved ideologically into a prominent position in world literature. Some have ascribed this form of literature to Marxist aesthetics and hereafter become popularly known as Marxist literature.

As a result of the endowment of the Marxist art, it has become unique and possesses some defining features. First, it must be faithful to life, that is, realistic to true life experiences and its simplicity is highly commendable. This simplicity of a Marxist literature is not just a question of coincidence but a deliberate one aimed at making it a commonplace interest of great effectiveness. Hence, it is devoid of experiments, individual, religious, mystic, sexual themes and most importantly every sort of formation.

Swingewood in his book also says that "Marxist writers pay less attention to form unlike realistic literature where much emphasis is laid not on what is said but on the way it is said" (17). Another feature of Marxist art is the positive hero. They must represent the so-called typical. This does not mean what is characteristic of the real state of reality but what would be desired for emulation, in all cases, these heroes are usually a manifestation of the ideal Marxist sense.

Marxist art calls for representation period which were in consonant with the communist theory. The implication of this is that it seems the results of deliberate limitation of the choice of subject

matter in the part of the writer. According to Ngara Emmanuel, Marxism, therefore, is a means of consolidating their existing ideology in the socialist world (31). Charles Nnoli in his book *The Critics of African Literature* talks about "art that contemplates society we expect, art that is propagandist, art that tends towards proletarian concerns and art that has Marxist undertones" (33).

Tragic Situations of the Subaltern in Ngugi Wa Thiong's *Wizard of the Crow*

The plot of *Wizard of the Crow* is based on an episodic outline, with virtually extraneous details. The protagonists, Kamiti, the Wizard of the Crow, and Nyawira, leader of the Movement of the Voice of the People, were used to explore the historical causes of poverty, suffering, diseases and death in a given African nation. Ngugi attributes Africa's poverty and suffering to the economic exploitation of Africans by their own brothers, who now pose as superpowers with the support of their colonial overlords. He links the pervasiveness of diseases and deaths in Africa to the unending impoverishment and starvation arising from Western capitalist, imperialist, and neo-colonialist oppressive exploitation and suppression of the masses.

In *Wizard of the Crow*, the novelist's radical focus seems to have become sharper, deeper and more defined than in the preceding novels, *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*. As usual with Ngugi, the thematic preoccupation in this recent novel revolves around exploitation, oppression, poverty, hunger, corruption, unemployment, bribery, sycophancy, stealing, suppression, hypocrisy, betrayal and, of course, freedom and revolution among others. As a radical-cum-Marxist writer, the novelist sees all these as the major evils of a class-divided society, where the bourgeois class uses the proletarian class unfairly for its own profit or advantage. In fact, economic exploitation, sycophancy, tyranny and suppression of women also run through the novel.

Ngugi also questions the rationale behind the superpowers' "aids and reliefs to African?" and points out that the superpowers "blow hot and cold at once," siphoning Africa's wealth with one hand and sending belated aids and reliefs to Africa with the other hand. And these aids, according to Kwame Nkrumah in *The Class Struggle in Africa*, invariably serve "mainly to improve the economic position of the donor countries" (72).

The novelist thus contends that the assumed love of these Western capitalists to Africa is for their own economic gains, hence we should be very cautious in dealing with them in any guise. At 766 pages, arranged in six books, the novel is a satire written with a fictitious African state dictatorship in mind, which turns out to be based on Kenya of the early 1980s. The dialogue portrays all the facets of character relationships both political and social, personal and private. The scenes are usually discrete and the actions move back and forth with time. In fact, the plot unfolds, turns, twists, and develops often surprisingly and unpredictably but time flowed by effortlessly. As Ngugi also said about *Devil on the Cross*, "the story is too disgraceful, too shameful, that it should be concealed in the depths of everlasting darkness."

"The novel," according to Elizabeth Ouver in *The Christian Science Monitor*, "is rich in metaphor, symbolism, and biblical allusions, and Ngugi employs his razor-sharp wit throughout the book to contrast two parallel worlds—that of the powerful and that of the powerless" (89).

Wizard of the Crow is set in the fictional Free Republic of Aburiria governed by the second Ruler. There is little concern at the government level about actually governing: maintaining power and for those serving under the Ruler jockeying for position are the highest priority and that largely only because that might make wealth accumulation even easier. The people are largely an annoyance and irrelevancy - except, of course, that they can be a source of cash.

The Ruler is your typical self-obsessed African tyrant; rumour has it that he bathes "in the preserved blood of his enemies," but while he will order the use of brute force when necessary for most of the novel his main concern is getting the Global Bank to fund his new project. Marching to Heaven. A huge structure, a sort of modern Tower of Babel, it would be: "the first and only super wonder of the world (233)." superseding all previous so-called wonders of the world. The project may not be the best use of resources in a developing nation, but a proper monument to the Ruler.

Among the Ruler's trusted advisers are Machokali, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Sikiokuu, the Minister of State—who must constantly try to prove their devotion to the Ruler, even as they try to position themselves to accumulate more power. Machokali was called into the Cabinet after having had plastic surgery on his eyes, having them "enlarged to the size of electric bulbs" (the better to see the Ruler's enemies)—leading Sikiokuu to follow suit and have his ears enlarged, so that he would be able to hear even the most private conversations of citizens, in order to, of course, protect the Ruler. The fad of body-augmentation of this sort—which had given career boosts to these two—fortunately fell out of fashion when the next fellow had his tongue elongated, a misguided attempt to be able to convey the Ruler's commands throughout the land.

The other character, Kamiti wa Karimiri, is not a typical Aburirian, he has even studied abroad, in India, but he is living proof of the country's failures: well educated, at great sacrifice by his parents, he cannot find any sort of job back in Aburiria. A particularly humiliating job interview at Titus Tajirika's Eldares Modern Construction and Real Estate Company really gets to him—but at least there he meets Nyawira, Tajirika's secretary. The two find themselves thrown together again shortly afterwards, chased by the police—and only escape through some quick thinking: hiding in a house and putting a sign out front, warning people away in the name of "Wizard of the Crow."

When they forgot to take the sign down, they find they have to play the role of the Wizard of the Crow (Kamiti first, but they both get in on the act, a mix of sorcerer, healer and wise man.

Meanwhile, the "Marching to Heaven" project is only advancing slowly, as Global Bank has not committed any funds yet. Nevertheless, Machokali suggests Titus Tajirika should be named first chairman of the Marching to Heaven Building Committee—and once word of that get out, Tajirika finds his officer overrun by those looking for a piece of the pie, who leave behind envelopes stuffed with cash as well as job-seekers and the first immense queues in what becomes a nation-wide queuing epidemic. Tajirika finds himself quickly overwhelmed, suffocating from "white-ache," which was diagnosed and then cured by none other than the Wizard of the Crow, but as the only one who actually has made any money out of the Marching to Heaven project. He finds himself in a sort of trouble later: the higher-ups, all the way up to the Ruler, want to be in on this as well.

Finally, there is also Kaniuru, who was once married to Nyawira, and who rises from teacher to increasingly more powerful positions, ready to betray anyone or do anything for advancement. Besides her part as Wizard of the Crow, Nyawira is also part of a democratic underground movement for the Voice of the People, and responsible for embarrassing the regime several times; Kaniuru's relationship with her both helps and harms him as he strives for greater power.

The Ruler heads to America, to try to get the necessary funds from Global Bank, but while there also comes down with a mystifying ailment, dubbed SIE (self-induced expansion)—eventually leading to rumours that the Ruler is pregnant. Even the American doctors do not know what to do about the disease. But in a nice touch one of them wains off Kamiti: "The patient is mine and I will patent the patient, the name of the illness and any cure," and they actually fly the Wizard of the Crow over to help heal the Ruler.

In the Ruler's long absence, Aburiria muddles along as usual, but there are a few disturbing things going on. There is that backlash against traditional wife-beating, and that annoying queuing phenomenon. For a while, the Ruler thought it might be useful, but then he imposed a ban:

Queues were a Marxist invention, according to the Ruler, having nothing to do with African culture, which is characterized by the spirit of spontaneity. Mass disorganization—pushing and shoving—was to be the order of the day (86).

Here, as elsewhere, the Ruler's interpretations and orders do not always have the desired results. His style of leadership—barking some orders, and then getting back to worrying about his own concerns—rarely helps improve any situation.

Of course, the Ruler is not helped by the changing face of the West. The clear rules of the Cold War made everything so simple, but now everything has changed, and he is completely stymied when, for example, he talks to the American ambassador.

In the days of the Cold War, they used to shower him with praises for dispatching thousands of his own people to eternal silence. And now, even after he had assured them that he was read} to repeat what he had done for them, they were lecturing him about restraint and the new global order (392).

As the narrator says, at this instance, some who have risen in the government ranks have some suggestions:

We should volunteer Aburiria to be the first to be wholly managed by private capital, to become the first voluntary corporate colony, a Corporon, the first in the new global order. With privatization of Aburiria, and with the NGOs relieving us of social services, the country becomes your real estate (402).

So, *Wizard of the Crow* is a wicked satire on Africa and the West. Here, the self-interest of individuals completely dominates all decision-making. Essentially all the authority figures and people in power—including the American doctors—are only looking out for themselves. The only push for positive change comes from the largely anonymous masses, with Nyawira one of the few characters who are shown being consistently politically and socially active, and trying to achieve change. Kamiti is a more spiritual figure, and though he acts when thrust into the limelight or when he cannot do otherwise, he seems to prefer being a passive actor in the course of events.

Wizard of the Crow does not cover some huge expanse of time, not even one particular lifetime, and concentrates on a relatively small circle of characters—but in refraining from too broad a sweep, and its comic approach, the novel is an appealing and no less penetrating look at contemporary Africa. There are parts that are too simplistic and obvious, or where Ngugi tries too hard to be didactically correct, such as when Kamiti and Nyawira want to have sex for the first time and realize they cannot because they do not have a condom, but for the most part, this is quite the rollicking adventure. It is not as obvious as one might expect, either, with the Ruler off-stage in America for much of the novel, and the *Wizard of the Crow* not an ever-growing presence, and while the basic story is fairly simple, Ngugi does offer quite a few very imaginative turns.

Wizard of the Crow is also exceptionally generous in spirit, not reveling in the misery of the conditions caused by the local mis-rulers as so many books like *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* about similar circumstances do, or pointing fingers at a single cause. Ngugi condemns a great deal in the novel, from everyday greed to Western paternalism, but there is a good deal of optimism throughout, too. There is no single answer, no easy happy end, but there is, always, hope.

However, Wizard of the Crow is more than a mere feminist novel. The novel is an ambitious portrayal of the revolutionary struggle of the oppressed in society against all forms of political repression. The female gender here, therefore, connotes all those who had hitherto been considered incapable of political leadership, but who somehow rattles the powers that be to listen and attend to their needs and expectations. So it is not surprising that opposition to the Ruler's reign comes from both men and women who are determined in their efforts to break the yokes of decadence, tyranny, hunger, bribery, exploitation, suppression, betrayal, lying, etc. and to create the awareness of social change in the society.

Except the Ruler and his cabinet of sycophants who have imbibed the oppressive ideas of the ruling class, champion the ideology of conservation and exploitation, rejecting the people's winds of change, the masses, especially the progressive ones understand the course of history and decide to pitch camp with the new forces of change. The people later realized the dialectical historical process and decided to align with any political movement that will change their situation and unseat the exploiting class.

The novel's radical form emanates from the rapidity and alternation of actions. *The novel is in six episodes (books), each of which emphasizes the novelist's attachment to the issues narrated, the content and immediacy of actions. The transition from one episode to another is remarkable and sustaining. The use of minute details in the narration in each episode is revealing and well structured. The shattered expectations of the masses over the leadership style of the ruler reveal their naivety in political manoeuvres of power mongers. The novel also shows how men underestimate the forces of female leadership, and by this strategy, the novelist succeeded in casting his vote for feminism.

In the first book entitled "Power Daemons," the wickedness and tyrannical nature of the Ruler was vividly portrayed from his actions against the wife to his subjects. The silenced and fear-stricken citizens now resort to rumours in their daily quest for information on the workings of the government. The Ruler's punishment to the wife, Rachael, is to make her understand "that he has power, real power over everything including . . . yes . . . time" (7).

The Ruler's pride and arrogance was further shown in his statement to the wife thus:

I am your beginning and your end. What were you before I made you my wife? He asked and answered himself, a primary school teacher. I am the past and the present you have been and I am your tomorrow, take it or leave it. . ." (8-9)

All these because the wife cautioned on his promiscuous lifestyle and moral decadence. This book further affirms his despotic hold on the citizens on the date of his birthday celebration which is set in the national calendar. The date was even a subject of heated debate in the Parliament which the novelist says:

Went on for seven months, seven days, seven hours, and seven minutes, and even then the honourable members could not arrive at a consensus mainly because nobody knew for sure the actual date of the Ruler's birth, and when they failed to break the impasse, the honourable members sent a formal delegation to the very seat of power to seek wise guidance, after which they passed a motion of gratitude to the Ruler for helping the chamber find a solution to a problem that had completely defeated their combined knowledge and experience (12).

Thus, it is established that "the birthday celebrations would always start the seventh hour of the seventh day of the seventh month, seven being the Ruler's sacred number" (12). The Ruler's influence is such that in Aburiria,

... the Ruler controlled how the months followed each other— January, for instance, trading places with July—he, therefore, had the power to declare any month in the year the seventh month, and any day within that seventh month the seventh day and therefore, the Ruler's birthday. The same applied to time, and any hour, depending on the wishes of the Ruler, could be the seventh hour (12).

Class consciousness also manifests on any day chosen for the Ruler's birthday as could be seen in the seating arrangements and services rendered to those present. Sycophancy also manifests in the people's efforts to seek the Ruler's attention and patronage as they engage in several heartrending actions to win favours. Three cabinet ministers—Machokali, Minister of Foreign Affairs; Silver Sikiokuu, Minister of State; and Benjamin Mambo, Minister of Information, had to undergo plastic surgery abroad to enlarge their eyes, ears and tongues respectively, the better to see, hear and denounce dissent among the citizens. These actions became the source of rivalry among the ministers as they strive to outdo one another to win the Ruler's favour. For his birthday, one of the ministers, Machokali, suggests building a tower so tall that the Ruler will be able pop in on God, and so the Marching to Heaven project is born. As the narrator says:

Minister Machokali was waxing ecstatic about how the benefits of the project could trickle down to all citizens. Once the project was completed, no historian would ever again talk about any other wonders in the world, for the fame of this modern House of Babel would dwarf the Hanging

Gardens of Babylon, the Egyptian Pyramids, the Aztec Tenochtitlan, or the Great Wall of China ... the Taj Mahal (17).

Machokali called Marching to Heaven a special birthday cake the citizens had decided to bake for their one and only leader, the eternal Ruler of the Free Republic of Aburiria (17). It is also to be seen as the first and only super wonder in the history of the world.

Of course, the Ruler accepted with passion the project that will keep him above all humanity and as well immortalize his name. In his response, distortion of information became the order of the day. The Ruler reeled out his attack on radicals "who used to breathe fire and brimstone at imperialism, capitalism, colonization, neo-colonialism, the whole lot" (21). He proclaimed his aversion to agitation, revolution and communism. As he says, "There was even a time when some of our neighbours, drunk with the foolishness of African socialism, had hired the services of radical writers calling for class struggle in Africa" (21). This clearly portrays the Ruler's tyrannical approach to leadership.

Conclusion

The novel, Wizard of the Crow, reveals humanity in all its endlessly surprising complexity. Ngugi writes simply and unaffectedly about his characters and the troubles in which they usually land in. And one of the novel's key characters is the impoverished Kamiti wa Karimiri, who accidentally gains a reputation as a powerful sorcerer and becomes famous as the terrifyingly powerful Wizard of the Crow. By working with Grace Nyawira, a radical political activist and feminist, he uses his notoriety to help the poor and trick the rich, partly through curing the various sicknesses with his magic mirror.

Kamiti is a young man, educated postgraduate in India, who has been homeless and unemployed for several years after graduating—no one in Aburiria will-hire him. He falls into his role as the Wizard of the Crow after pulling a prank to get a cop off his tail. He does not believe the mumbo jumbo he speaks, but everyone around hears of his powers and believes he is a healer and incredible sorcerer. Nyawira is a young woman he meets and the two of them develop an intense bond. She is tough, secretly being one of the top members of an underground movement that is against the Ruler and his barbaric administration. She also, interestingly, comes to wear the mantle of the Wizard of the Crow.

Both characters met by chance in Titus Tajirika's office, where Nyawira is the secretary and the latter came for employment. So in the section entitled "Queuing Daemons" Kamiti's search for a nonexistent job took him to Tajirika's Eldares Modern Construction and Real Estate where, to his chagrin, he discovered that "there is no difference between Tajirika's abuse and what rich Indians dole out to black Aburirians" (57). Glaring cases of joblessness among graduates attract little or no attention from the powers that be. At the end of his impromptu interview with Tajirika and despite his degrees, Kamiti was humiliated when he was forced to read out for himself loudly what was written on the signboard, "No Vacancy, For Jobs, Come Tomorrow" (59). So, Kamiti, the son of a peasant, with his BA in Economics and MBA in Management all from a foreign university was humiliated by a fellow countryman who became rich through corruption.

The section entitled "Queuing Daemons" is the central portion of the novel which exposes the bone of contention in the entire story. It is in this second book that the novelist explored the major causes of the conflicts in the Aburirian society as well as the heart of the struggle but with special reference to such themes as corruption, unemployment, tyranny and oppression, planlessness,

intrigues, governmental indifference to the plight of the masses, poverty, magic, betrayal, the struggle for emancipation and an egalitarian society by the women, among others. Incidentally, this section is the longest in the entire narrative as the novelist in a subtle language but with minute.

Works Cited

Amuta, Chidi. "Marxist Aesthetics: An Open Ended Legacy" In Olaniyan, T. & Quayson, A. Ed.

African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory. Blackwell Pub. 2007

Kayser, Wolfgang Johannes. The Grotesque in Art and Literature. Indiana University Press, 2003.

Ngara Emmanuel. Art and Idiolo in the African Novel: A Study of the Influence of Marxism on

African Writing. Heinemann, 1985.

Nkwinah Kwame. The Class Struggle in Africa. Panaf Books, 1980

Nnolim, Charles .E. The Critics of African Literature Sacross Int. Publishers, 2012.

Over, Elizabeth. The Christian Science Monitor. Blackwell Pub. 2017.

Swingewood, Allen. The Novel and the Revolution. Macmillan, 2015.

Thomas, Phiip .J. The Grotesque. Methuen, 1972

Wa Thiongo, Ngugi. Wizard of the Crow. Anchor Books, 2007.

.... Moving the Center: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms EAEP. 2009.

... Devil on the Cross. Heinemann, 1982.

... Petals of Blood: Heinemann, 1978