

**The Satirical Trope as a
Mode of African
Postcolonial Discursive
Strategies: The Example of
Ngugi's and Armah's
Novels**

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Abstract

The postcolonial African writers offer an alternative discourse which is oppositional and contestatory. By rewriting and redefining their culture and history, they subvert the dominant European discourse. In the postcolonial view, reality becomes complex and hybrid. The realist mode in African writing has been replaced by new stylistic features and literary tropes which transcend or disrupt the limits and perceptions of realism. Satire is one of these literary tropes. Before dealing with satire and the carnivalized discourse in some of Ngugi's and Armah's texts, I will first refer to some theoretical definitions of postcolonial satire along with Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of "grotesque realism" and folk laughter as a means of understanding the comic nature of the vision of both writers.

Against the African socio-economic and political disaster brought about by the "suns of independences", the peoples' hopes and aspirations were thwarted.¹ Within a still-born independence and a short-lived euphoria, most African writers accounted for the prevailing mood of disillusionment. They quickly began to perceive that that their "revolution" has been "derailed" and their hopes have been "punctured" (18), to borrow Lazarus's terminology, and "a rhetoric of disillusion began to replace the earlier utopian rhetoric in their work."² They confronted their realities with a mixture of guilt

Résumé

La satire, qui est l'objet de notre étude, est l'une des stratégies génériques, rhétoriques et politiques utilisées dans le discours postcolonial pour offrir une vision moins eurocentrique. Certains textes romanesques de Ngugi wa Thiong'o et de Ayi Kwei Armah réorientent quelques notions satiriques occidentales en offrant des exemples, de satire en termes d'hybridité, de syncrétisme, de multidirectionnalité et de protestation anticoloniale. Notre étude est en partie basée sur certains fondements théoriques puisés de l'oralité ainsi que de certains éléments du carnavalesque ou du réalisme grotesque Bakhtinien.

and a sense of betrayal. Most writers in the late 1960s responded to these harsh truths of independent society with disillusionment and a weary, 'post-political' cynicism. In the late 1970s, analysts of African literature have detected the beginnings of a more "forward-looking post-disillusionment trend."³ Writers began to understand that the roots of social contradictions were not racial but are rather class-bound. Some works representative of this period include Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*⁴ and *Devil on The Cross*⁵. Some other writers sought a regenerating myth which counteracted the people's alienation with blackness. The example is Armah in *Two Thousand Seasons*⁶, *The Healers and Osiris Rising* and even his latest novel *KMT: In the House of Life- An Epistemic Novel*⁷.

Post-independence African literature identifies itself with "the broad movement of resistance to, and transformation of, colonial societies."⁸ Many African novelists initiated an oppositional discourse wherein, by rewriting and redefining their culture and history, they countered the vision embedded in the colonial discourse. By subverting the dominant discourse, they offer an alternative discourse which is rather contestatory. One can hear voices which give agency to the African subjects and re-inscribe their own narrative on the Western narrative, thus re-interpreting history from their own perspective.⁹ John Erickson points out that postcolonial writers work "to subvert the reigning discourse" and offer another discourse that "calls in question the philosophical (logocentric, eurocentric) precepts upon which the narrative rests."¹⁰

In her discussion of literary styles and themes in resistance literature, Benita Parry underlines the importance of innovative styles in subverting colonial discourse. In this context, she echoes Frantz Fanon's view which claims that by borrowing the white man's aestheticism in writing an oppositional discourse, the post-colonial intellectual must create a literature of resistance which will disrupt literary styles and themes, construct a completely new audience and shape national consciousness.¹¹ Parry underlines that there are many textual procedures that can act as oppositional and subversive. Among the procedures she enumerates are: "the fantastic and the fabulous, the grotesque and the disorderly, the parodic reiteration or inversion of dominant codes, the deformation of master trope, the estrangement of received usage, the fracture of authorised syntax."¹²

In this article I will try to show through a comparative perspective how, like Parry and Fanon, both Armah and Ngugi, especially in their late period, call for the disruption of

“literary styles and themes.” I will also try to show that they both move away from unilateral ways of thinking and develop subversive and contestatory modes of writing which surpass the realism of the literature of resistance. In the postcolonial view, reality becomes complex and hybrid. The mimetic, realist mode of narration in African writing is replaced by new stylistic features and literary tropes which transcend or rather disrupt the limits and perceptions of realism. Their carnivalized discourse is seen through satire as one of these literary tropes. But before dealing with some illustrations from Ngugi’s and Armah’s texts, I will refer to some theoretical definitions of postcolonial satire along with Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of “grotesque realism” and folk laughter as a means of understanding the comic nature of the vision of both writers. Both writers use folk laughter and the grotesque in their texts to convey their political themes. I will attempt to shed light on some of the aspects of the carnivalesque relying on some examples from both writers’ novels. I will put much more focus on the satirical undertones, showing the instances of comedy, carnival laughter, the language of the people, and the grotesque-exaggerations, hyperbole, degradations, scatological and bodily references .

Armah, in his late period, starting with *TTS* till his latest production, *KMT: In the House of Life- An Epistemic Novel* (2002), has gradually withdrawn from the Western generic conventions and, through “abrogation and reconstruction”, he has adopted new forms drawn from orature and the language of scribes and griots. As for Ngugi, besides giving his narratives the flavor of orature and colloquiality, his radical decision to bid farewell to English in his two latest novels is part of this disruption. In *Matigari*¹³ he moves away from the obtrusive Marxist discourse and materialist didacticism of *POB* and adopts a non-materialist discourse wherein the narrative mode draws largely on magic realism. The latter is among the textual strategies that Ngugi uses to subvert the dominant European discourses and challenge the established mode of perception and rationalism. The strategy of using the supernatural helps him transcend the strict ideological space of materialism and broaden the scope of combat peripheral strategies against the dominant centre.

Indeed, in their late novels, Ngugi's and Armah's narrative experiments match the postcolonial literary project because they both subvert and appropriate the dominant European discourse. They resort to some modes of discourse such as the carnivalesque and other satirical disruptive strategies which, with their subversive potential, further enhance the idea of resistance in their novels. Most Armah's and Ngugi's novels satirize contemporary power elites for betraying the promise of independence. They both use folk culture, laughter, and a carnival utopian spirit to oppose the "comprador" and "imperialist" bourgeois neocolonial authorities in Ngugi's case and to denounce ostentation in Armah's. These satiric representations, in which politicians become caricatures and grotesques, often imply that the horrors of neo-colonialism can be attributed in part to lessons learned and examples followed during colonial rule, particularly by collaborators. Ngugi's successful artistic achievement in such a discourse is partly due to his reliance on orature and more specifically on some traits of the giccandi text. Likewise, Armah's major successful artistic achievement is his deliberate conflation of the novel genre with other modes of historical narration from the African oral tradition.

Through his reliance on allegory and fantasy, Ngugi's *DOC* and later *Matigari*, move away from models of the traditional European realist novel. Whereas his early fiction has focused on objectifying the cruelties of the post-colonial situation with an underlying aspiration for revolution, in *Matigari*, despite its underlying revolutionary spirit, he seems to realise the historical limitations of Marxism and its resultant rigidity and inadequacy to the Kenyan context. Ngugi drops the blatant Marxist discourse of *POB* and resorts to a rather non-materialist discourse through the use of supernatural elements. On the one hand, the strategy of using the supernatural enables him to cast aside the reiterated and almost crabbed Marxist jargon used so far to challenge the present order. On the other hand, the supernatural device helps him transcend the strict ideological space of materialism and broaden the scope of combat strategies in confrontation with dominant ideology.

Despite polemical debates among theorists about what satire is or does, it is commonly agreed that it is meant to target "an object of attack"¹⁴ which has either a general or specific existence in the historical, material world of "social reality"¹⁵ outside the satiric text

itself. It is also “ameliorative in its intention”¹⁶ and that the satiric discourse as a “multi-pronged tool of resistance” requires a concept of multi-directionality of satiric critique. In the African context, Ngugi advises that “when discussing any satirist . . . we must see him in his social and political setting.”¹⁷

As for the carnivalesque discourse, its major feature of a hybrid consciousness is syncretism, a mixing of styles and cultural traditions. In the history of art and of religion, it was considered as the impure, the deviation from the canon, the anti-hierarchical. In recent literary theories, however, syncretism has been revalorised: it can be related to what Mikhail Bakhtin called the carnivalesque element in literature. ‘Carnival,’ according to Bakhtin, is a syncretic form which turns the world upside-down. The carnivalized discourse is based on the reversal of hierarchies, exaggeration, laughter, the fusion of negative and positive characteristics, parody, the levelling of the sacred and the profane, the fusion of the body with the world and the mixing of categories in general. Folk culture, laughter, and a carnival utopian spirit are used to oppose the “comprador” and “imperialist” bourgeois neo-colonial authorities in his later works. Degradation, according to Bakhtin, is the essential principle of carnivalesque discourse:

The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract: it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity.¹⁸

For Bakhtin, the novel’s dialogic nature dramatizes the encounter of official languages with unofficial “lower” languages, and the struggle of “authoritative discourse” with “internally persuasive discourse in ideological consciousness. (*Dialogic*, 273)

Therefore, carnival in literature means the grotesque and the hybrid, satire and parody, polyphony and ambiguity. The emphasis is on the bodily, baser instincts, eccentric, abnormal and indecent behaviour and the violation of good manners and social rules. While Bakhtin discusses medieval and Renaissance folk humour, both Ngugi and Armah write about a post-colonial African society suffering from imperialism and neo-colonialism. Still, there is a striking similarity between Bakhtin’s description of medieval culture and the situation of the contemporary African intellectual and novelist. For example, he emphasizes that “the men of the Middle Ages participated in two lives: the official and the carnival life.”¹⁹ Similarly, many African

intellectuals are men of two worlds- the European and the African. Or, addressing the “language problem” of the Middle Ages, Bakhtin notes that “the line of demarcation between two cultures- the official and the popular- was drawn along the line dividing Latin from the vernacular” (*Dialogic*, 465). Similarly, the writers under study, especially Ngugi, have been caught up between an official language (the colonial) and a popular one (the indigenous African language). As Bakhtin comments, “The vernacular ...brought new forms ... the ‘lowly,’ mostly humorous genres, the free speech of marketplace.”(*Dialogic*, 465-66). As for Ngugi and Armah, the use of songs, proverbs, folk-storytelling, excremental images, scatological references, and the like represents their attempt to incorporate the vernacular.

Bakhtin’s carnival spirit is seen through what he calls “grotesque realism”. The latter focuses primarily on the body- on images of bodily life in relation to the earth (which is in essence also a body):

In “grotesque realism. . . the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private , egoistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. . . it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthly, or independence of the earth and the body “(*Dialogic* ,19).

“Grotesque realism” involves exaggeration, wild hyperbole, the immeasurable - all of which have “a positive, assertive character.”(*Dialogic* ,19) “The leading themes of these images of bodily life are fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance. . . [And]. . . The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation.” (*Dialogic*,219)

In Armah’s fiction the way false consciousness, ostentation and corruption are attacked almost inevitably takes the form of satire: the narrative technique reflects the ideological content. The satirical mode can be a healing recourse for Armah’s endemic society. Satire often goes together with utopian thinking. The one is a critique of the real world in the name of something better, the other is a hopeful construct of a world that might be. Northrop Frye considers satire as one of the four major myths. He suggests a description of the genre which aptly applies to Armah’s work: “Satire demands at least a token fantasy, a content which the reader, recognizes as grotesque, and at least an implicit moral standard, the latter being essential in a militant attitude

to experience.” (*Anatomy*, 224) Armah’s “militant attitude to experience” is evident in the absence of compromise in his portrayal of the grotesque. His satire is basically the examination of a failed promise, particularly the discrepancies between appearance and reality which he seems to see as a characteristic of life in post-colonial African societies.

In *TTS*, Armah has coined the phrase “ostentatious cripples” to portray those who create high images of themselves through their extravagant clothing, oversize gestures, huge accumulations of goods and titles or praise names, and vast pretentious devotion to dress, social ceremony, fashionable exchange and the like. In moral terms such self-seeking infatuation can only lead to corrupt and worthless conduct. To depict the self-inflating ways of the “ostentatious cripples” Armah uses the magnifying tendency as a satiric technique which renders in the largest terms the ludicrous pretensions to greatness of men and women completely lacking in that quality.

Likewise, in *The Beautiful Ones*, Koomson seeks to magnify his worth and further amplify his image by surrounding himself with many expensive objects. Also, Estella Koomson speaks with the air of a sophisticated cosmopolitan lady one far above the likes of the man and his wife. In *Fragments*²⁰, Brempong and the other government officials also show this air of greatness, which is in sharp contrast with their low moral stature. One of the most memorable portraits is that of the stooge Kamuzu in *TTS*, whose ego is so bloated that in his blind quest for greatness he becomes a source of amusement to the people around him.

In *The Beautiful Ones*, magnification is used to reinforce ridicule. Koomson is described in terms of his love for material possessions and luxury; at no point does Armah dwell on any positive attributes he may have. Nor is anything said about Estella Koomson to make her a more rounded figure: like her husband she is portrayed in a manner deigned to make us despise her. The same is true of the man’s mother-in-law, who we never quite see but whose negative influence prevails in the man’s household.

The negative or positive attributes of Armah’s characters are often brought out in the way they are described when they first make their appearance. The lack of authorial sympathy for Amankwa, the timber merchant, is evident when he arrives in the man’s office looking for someone to bribe:

In through the door came a belly swathed in kente cloth. The feet beneath the belly dragged themselves and the mass above in little arcs, getting caught in angular ends of heavy cloth.. . The visitor's mouth was a wolf shape. . . His wolf mouth was agape in a gesture that must have been meant for a smile, a thing that was totally unnecessary and irritating. (*The Beautiful*, 27)

Amankwa's undesirable character and evil intentions are proclaimed by his very appearance, and from the rather unkind reference to his teeth (at one point he is referred to simply as "the teeth,") we know that he embodies the grotesque values prevailing in Ghanaian society, a conclusion subtly suggested by the implied relationship between the teeth and the whole man.

In *Osiris Rising* the exaggerated physical attributes function as indexes of the characters' inner perversion or moral bankruptcy- a narrative strategy which gives monstrous negative characteristics to the villain of the piece and other villainous characters, while the protagonist and her associates are endowed with the positive values of the society. Seth, the villain par excellence is described in the following terms:

The man had been fleshy as an undergraduate. But now a new dimension had been added to his mass, filling him out, as if a study of his body had been conducted, then tight wads of meat forced into all areas under the skin. The result looked monstrously solid. . . the smile on his face looked far from uncomfortable, connecting overdeveloped jaws with the heavy muscles on his huge , short neck. (*Osiris*, 27)

Obscene obesity of the kind is a physical attribute which Armah has used as an index of a sumptuous parasitic life- style achievable only by Africa's leaders and their hangers-on.

In *The Beautiful Ones*, there is a strong link between scatology and political satire. In his grotesque vision excrement and its attendant corporeal elements such as phlegm, vomit, sweat, and blood are shown as "an index of moral and political outrage"²¹ in the new bureaucratic and corrupt Ghana. Ugliness, excrement and decay are chosen as the metaphors by which Armah renders vivid and pungent his statement of the moral corruption of Ghana. In his Ghana the details are grotesque. Thus for instance, the timber contractor who appears in the novel characteristically to offer a bribe is singularly

grotesque; the walls of the latrine at the Railways are encrusted with bits of excrement; we are given a brief but sickening glimpse of a mother sucking mucus from her child's nostrils; the conductor of singularly decrepit bus clears his throat and eats the phlegm. At the primary level these sordid details serve to provide a heightened portrait of the physical squalor in which the average Ghanaian finds himself and from which he finds it necessary to escape by whatever foul means. It is from this accursed place where everything stinks and nothing works that the politicians run in obscene haste. In this novel, excrement assumes a variety of figurative meanings: shit acts as a material sign of underdevelopment; as a symbol of excessive consumption; and as an image of wasted political energies. It is no surprise to associate satire with excremental language because as Irvin Ehrenpreis notes, "satire is traditionally associated with filth, and the satirist is described as throwing turds and urine on those whom he ridicules."²²

Along with the magnifying tendency Armah also frequently uses parody and ridicule to express his indignation. In *TTS* the "utterers" are particularly vicious in their use of invective and ridicule, as in this merciless outpouring about one of the kings :

Which shall we now choose to remember of the many idiocies our tolerance has supported ? Shall we remember Ziblim the heavy one, heavy not like a living elephant but like infirm mud, he who wanted every new bride's hymen as his boasting prize, but turning the tears of women into laughter when they found this massive would-be king had not the blood in him for entering the widest open door ?(*TTS* ,63)

The unnatural behaviour of African leaders are mimicked by Etse, the skilful impersonator. Etse, we are told, has seen much that is funny in the country's new leaders, and he has made a habit out of dramatizing their folly for his friends' entertainment:

First, he has the governor getting ready to see his servants, taking up a helmet with feathers taller than himself and marching under it. Then, when the governor sat down, this joker Etse would pause to play another part. Like a penitent thief he would come smiling up to the governor's seat and stammer , 'Massa, I have some news for you, sah.' (African leader's smile.) Turning

quickly and sitting down as the governor, Etse would ask
'Yes, what is it boy ?'

'Sah ! our leader would say, 'mah contrey people no happy.'

'What ! After everything we've done for them ?'

'Yessah.'

'The ungrateful devils !'

'yessah.'

'Now, boy, tell me. What is it they want ?'

The leadership smile expands. 'Massa, if you make me head man, mah contrey people go happy again.' Wider. Bow. Look of affection and gratitude. (*TTS* 83)

Indeed, this is not a realistic dialogue; it is hard to think of even the most servile African leader speaking in this way to a colonial governor. However, this is the way an African servant or cook would speak to his European master in the colonial days, and through Etse's mimicking act Armah is suggesting that the relationship between the new African leaders and the colonial rulers was no different. By treating an elevated subject in a trivializing and contemptuous manner Armah deflates his satiric target and reveals the truth through subtle comparison.

Armah also uses the device of reduction whenever he has an opportunity to describe his favourite targets, the Senior Service men. In *The Beautiful Ones* two such gentlemen are the subject of one of Armah's most derisive descriptions as they strut around on a golf field :

Five white men and three white women came down the road. Hidden in the group, in stiff white uniform, were two Ghanaian men with prosperous –looking bellies. Four little boys struggled behind them all, carrying their bags and sticks. As they went past, one of the black men laughed in a forced Senior Service way and, smiling into the face of one of the white men, kept saying, 'Jolly good shot, Himmy. Jolly good.'

He was trying to speak like a white man, and the sound that came out of his mouth reminded the listener of a constipated man , straining in his first minute on top of the lavatory seat. The white man grimaced and made a reply in steward boy English : 'Ha, too good eh?' The black men both laughed out loud, and the one who had spoken put both hands to his paunch. (*The Beautiful Ones*, 125)

In the above quote Armah uses disparaging similes for comic satiric effect. In *Fragments* we are told that Brempong's smile is "like something learned from the advertisements for beer or whisky or cigarettes made especially for the new Africans." (60) Such comparisons, as well as being part of the reducing scheme, also serve to advance the satiric project of reminding the audience that people are often not as they appear.

To ridicule his targets Armah sometimes uses another satiric device : the fools' carnival, a gathering of dunces whose stupidity is the source of the reader's laughter. In *The Beautiful Ones* the spectacle is presented indirectly through the story told by Koomson after he has had a few beers at the man's home. The story is about the time the government invited a foreign expert to talk to the ministers and party officials about economic development; a common practice in many of the so-called developing nations. Koomson confesses that he was unimpressed because, among other things, the man "was dressed like a poor man." (132) He goes on to tell his story "They say he was telling us how to make poor countries rich....Left this country." (*The Beautiful Ones*, 132-134) What Armah is in effect doing here is using Koomson to satirize him and the ruling class he represents. In fact, this is the "multidirectionality" of satire. As Frank Palmeri explains:

The more complex and subversive narrative satires incorporate more than a single instance of parodic energy: after parodying a prevailing perspective, these satires go on to parody their own parodic inversion.²³

The politicians laugh at the Professor, and we in turn laugh at the politicians, and the story teller who sees in this demonstration of collective stupidity and irresponsible levity a source of amusement.

As for Ngugi, he develops a comic vision through a language of the grotesque in order to achieve a more thorough critique of Kenyan society. It is to be underlined that Ngugi's late novels shift from the bildungsroman to the post-modern carnival. There is a shift in focus from the individual's social integration and spiritual healing to the community's economic and cultural alienation.

In *DOC*, Ngugi has intended to break the formalistic barriers that would destroy his content. This is clearly stated in *Detained: A Writers Prison Diary*, as he says:

... I would use any and everything I had ever learnt about the craft of fiction –allegory, parable, satire, narrative, description,

reminiscence, flash-back, interior monologue, stream of consciousness, dialogue and drama- provided it came naturally in the development of character, theme and story. (*Detained*,8)

Like Armah, Ngugi's satiric methods in *DOC* are very varied. They range from visual symbolism of the seven representatives of neo-colonial power, each wearing suits made out of paper money of their respective homelands, to the self-exposure of the contestants through their speeches on the methods and motives with which they manipulate the Kenyan economy. These 'apostles' of neo-colonialism are often caricatured. (See *DOC*, 99-186)

Contemporary Kenya is depicted as an almost Kafkaesque nightmare in which even Mwieri, the nationalist businessman, who is told that "freedom" is the "freedom . . . to rob and steal according to one's abilities" (*DOC*, 173), is assassinated for advocating a Kenyan, not an international, capitalist future ; and Ngugi's novel outlines the sides for a political struggle according to traditional Marxist paradigms. Still, Ngugi's comic vision is at the heart of his political message, and that comic vision relies on the grotesque for its effectiveness.

In the Devil's cave, "the finest of houses" (*DOC*, 92), Wariinga witnesses the competition to see who will be hired by foreign companies. Contestants try to prove their prowess as robbers and thieves: not petty thieves, but on an "international" scale, "those who steal because their bellies are full" (95). They are rapacious exploiters, cunning and unrepentant. They are also buffoons -ludicrous, black "Europeans", given to gluttony and lust thinly veiled by a pretended respectability. They measure their worth in houses, cars, mistresses, and conspicuous consumption of food and alcohol. Their rise to wealth has been smoothed by the manoeuvring of their fathers before and after independence. They used the methods of the whites and sold themselves for white businessmen who need black faces to continue to exploit the people of Kenya. Cunning slaves, they willingly sell to foreigners the resources of their country and the best interests of its people. As a group, they cooperate in sharing bribery and favours, all of which are necessary, according to them, for commerce and justice in Kenya. They are the personification of evil and the agents of neo-colonial exploitation. Thus, the comprador bourgeoisie is the primary subject of *DOC*, presented in satirical caricatures against the backdrop

of the struggle of one of their innocent victims for some measure of human dignity.

Ngugi uses the Bakhtinian notion of the grotesque and obscenity by turning the rulers of post-colony into objects of ridicule. In the process, he transcends the limitations Bakhtin imposes on the two terms by suggesting that the grotesque and the obscene are not simply confined to the province of the ruled, but could be extended to the rulers. It is to the local comprador bourgeoisie, who boast about their cleverness and their cunning on how to steal from the people as well as how to bow to foreign control, that the grotesque is restricted. In the Devil's feast each participant demonstrates in a blunt testimony that the post-colony has been turned into a stage for bizarre self-gratification; an absurd display of buffoons, fools and clowns in the feast of 'modern robbery and theft'. This is very reminiscent of the fools' carnival and the spectacle of laughter offered in Armah's novels. The feast becomes the privileged language through which power speaks, acts and coerces. The speech by the leader of the foreign delegation of thieves and robbers, in which he arrogantly admonishes the local delegates "to drink the blood of [their] people and to eat their flesh, then to retreat a step,"(89) signifies greed and power magnified to their full and logical extremes.

There are striking forms of deformity which characterize Ngugi's thieves. His portrayal of the local thieves at the cave displays the grotesque image of the body in which the belly and the mouth stand out. One striking example is that of Gitutu. Ngugi's satire on the comprador class, his laughter at their borrowed power, is best seen in the narrator's description of Gitutu's body:

Gitutu had a belly that protruded so far that it would have touched the ground had it not been supported by the braces that held up his trousers. It seemed as if his belly had absorbed all his limbs and all the other organs of his body. Gitutu had no neck- at least, his neck was not visible. His arms and legs were short stumps. His head had shrunk to the size of a fist. (*DOC*,99)

Gitutu's body becomes monstrous- a typical grotesque hyperbole. His belly threatens to detach itself from the body and lead an independent life. His neck, arms, legs and head have been transformed into grotesque animal subject. Ngugi's use of the grotesque image of the body is very much grounded in the politics of postcolonial Kenya.

It is the kind of politics whose primary objective is to acquire power as the ultimate vehicle for economic success.

Through the burlesque tone of many of the novel's episodes, Ngugi paints a portrait of modern Kenya. For instance, the master of ceremonies is grotesquely described as:

. . . a well-fed body: his cheeks were round, like two melons; his eyes were big and red, like two plums; and his neck was huge, like the stem of a baobab tree. His stomach was slightly larger than his neck. He had two gold teeth in his lower jaw, and, when talking, he opened his lips wide that the gold teeth would be seen. He had on a silk suit which shone in the light, changing colour according to the intensity of the light and the angle of the beam. (*DOC*,87)

For Ngugi, then, the grotesque at its best exaggerates and caricatures the negative, the inappropriate, and the antihuman that the comprador class has come to symbolise in his works. Another example of the grotesque is portrayed in the following:

Nditika wa Nguunji was very fat. His head was huge, like a mountain. His belly hung over his belt, big and arrogant. His eyes were the size of two large red electric bulbs, and it looked as if they had been placed in his face by a Creator impatient to get on with another job. His hair was parted in the middle, so that the hair on either side of the parting looked like two ridges facing each other on either side of a tarmac road. He had on a black suit. The jacket had tails cut in the shape of the wings of the big green and blue flies that are normally found in pit latrines or among rotting rubbish. His shirt had frills all down the front. He was wearing a black bow tie. His eyes rolled in time to his words. His hands rested on his stomach and he patted it gently, as if beseeching it not to stick out towards the people with such arrogance (*DOC*,176)

Ngugi employs this language, first, to demystify such a figure and makes him an object of abuse and, second, to remove whatever residual fear his readers might have of this kind of character by subjecting him to ridicule through the use of organic, grotesque imagery. Nditika's "jacket tails" seem like the wings of flies "normally found in pit latrines or among rubbish." The Devil's belly sags, "as if it were about to give birth." The Bakhtinian grotesque, is closely connected to images of death and rebirth, dying and new life,

and decay and renewal. Bakhtin tells us that “one of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born”(*Dialogic*, 26). He claims that unlike the romantics, who “present the devil as terrifying, melancholy, and tragic,” the medieval and Renaissance grotesque conceives “ devils and hell...as comic monsters”(*Dialogic* ,41). Ngugi’s devil is Kenyan capitalism which is ambivalently described as a comical monster. His comic characterization of an “impatient” God serves to demystify what is normally thought of as sacrosanct. Therefore, his narrative mode draws on the oral folk tale and the incorporation of indigenous mythologies. In *DOC*, the characters who met with ogres are derived from Kenyan popular folk tales and the “human shaped rocks” of Ikdakho in Western Kenya (*Decolonising the Mind*,81). Ngugi’s use of this local mythology draws the reader into the world of fantasy and magic realism with its subversive tendencies. Linda Hutcheon argues that magic realism is a genre which encodes ‘resistance.’²⁴ With this intertextual diversity, Ngugi’s narrative experiments belong to the postcolonial literary project that, in Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin’s formulation, involves a “subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses.”²⁵ Such cultural practices create a “hybridised” art, enabling a dialogical relationship between European and local culture.

In *Matigari* the historians are caricatured as parrots of the neo-colonial regime. They are part of the party functionaries who move around with the Minister of Justice and Truth so as to provide instant validation to whatever historical untruths the former may choose to deliver to the crowd. While sycophancy such as that satirised by Ngugi in *Matigari* is a common phenomenon in Kenyan politics, the portrayal of historians as parrots singing to the tune of the party leadership is certainly over-inscribed. There is no doubt that Ngugi is referring to his own experiences and attitudes towards the historians into the question of the Mau Mau historiography.

As in Armah’s novels, scatological satire starts getting proportion in Ngugi’s late works, including *POB*. It is a discursive strategy which is extensively used by postcolonial writers who distrust nationalism and disrupt realism. Writers like Armah and Soyinka are examples of these writers who invest in the language of excrement. For instance, in Ngugi’s *POB*, the predominant image of excrement and filth marks

his disillusionment and, at the same time, his protest against the putrescent state of the society. This reminds us of the moral squalor Armah tried to convey in *The Beautiful Ones*. Early on in the novel when Munira is eating the kei-apple, he sneezes and some of his mucus flies onto a woman's face:

[Munira] plucked a ripened yellow kei-apple and crushed it between his fingers: isn't there a safe corner in which to hide and do some work, plant a seed whose fruit one can see? The smell from the rotting fermenting kei-apple hit into his nostrils. He felt a sudden nausea, Lord deliver use from our past, and frantically fumbled in his pockets for a handkerchief to cover the sneeze. It was too late. A bit of mucus flew onto the woman's furrowed face. She shrieked out, auuu-u, Nduri ici mutiuke muone, and fled in fright. He returned his face aside to hold back another sneeze. When a second later he looked to the path, he could not find a trace of her behind the kei-apple bush or anywhere. She had vanished. (*POB*, 7)

Thus, both Armah and Ngugi, especially in the latter's late period, resort to some modes of discourse such as the carnivalesque and other satirical disruptive strategies which, with their subversive potential, further enhance the idea of resistance in their novels. In his book *De la Postcolonie: Essai sur l'imagination Politique dans l'Afrique Contemporaine* (2000), Achille Mbembe has analysed the burlesque and carnivalesque elements of popular culture, and for him the "grotesque" and the "obscene" are characteristic of the post-colony. He situates his argument in relation to Mikhail Bakhtin's writings, for whom these factors constitute "a means of resistance to the dominant culture, and as a refuge from it, obscenity and the grotesque are parodies that undermine officialdom ... by turning it all into an object of ridicule."²⁶ Certainly, Armah's and Ngugi's artistic achievement in such a discourse is partly due to their reliance on orature through the use of some oral technical devices. A popular discourse, teeming with praise songs, prophecies, exaggeration and fantastic stories would surely appeal to their readers and would make them the quintessence examples of postcolonial writers experimenting with the language and transgressing the referential.

Notes and References

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