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Ngugi WaThiong'o's Pursuit of Ethical Politics in *Matigari* and *Wizard of the Crow*

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Abstract

Ngugi WaThiong'o's consideration of literature as medium for the expression of socio-political views is conspicuous throughout his literary production. His last two published novels, *Matigari*(1987) and *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), exhibit new modes of writing, which make the texts draw extensively on popular modes of narration and representation. In the two novels studied in this article, the point is made about Ngugi's constant pursuit to address the Kenyan people's needs and aspirations. This materializes in the writer's use of popular language structures, coupled with a widespread use of magical realism. While *Matigari* presents a dark allegory of a 'stolen' Kenyan revolution, *Wizard of the Crow* features grotesque situations befalling the infamous leaders by means of a caustic humor. The protagonists and their heroic associates exemplify the people's needs and aspirations, but also articulate positive actions to put an end to the status quo. Ngugi's militant stance is still highlighted and stylized in effective modes of narration to further his message of resistance, and appeal for a genuinely liberated Kenya and a regenerated African continent.

From his very first novels to his last published ones, and using various genres and styles in his writings, Ngugi WaThiong'o has kept to a militant stance in relation to the political situation in his country, Kenya. He has led an on-going struggle against what he considers the illegitimate heirs of the revolution, the present faction in power concerned exclusively with its own interests. His most recent novels, *Matigari*(1987) and *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), by means of an ethical construction drawing on folk knowledge and communal wisdom, carry the conviction that Kenya's independence was earned by the grassroots and should therefore benefit them in the first place.

In so doing, Ngugi approaches attitudes and actions by means of a Manichaean perspective, basing his creative writing on a socialist and populist platform. This is consistent with the thoroughgoing, unconditional commitment to the defense of the most underprivileged sections of African societies, as this commitment becomes more and more supported by his Marxist culture. His protagonists have a sense of purpose that makes them the heroes that have risen from the masses to champion their interests, to restore justice and equity in their country. They speak and act on behalf of the people, they embody their hopes and disillusion, and they take immanent authority to unmask the corrupt rulers. The heroic postures, previously embodied by Karega in *Petals of Blood* and Wariingain Devil on the

Cross, are now relayed by Matigari in the eponymous novel and Kamiti as well as Nyiawira in *Wizard of the Crow*, defending their people's rights. Through their agency, Ngugi relishes in making caricatures of the enemies of the people, so as to construct an ethical platform of eye-opening examples of misconduct as well as heroic actions to inspire his compatriots with. Ngugi is mostly concerned to expose mendacious leaders who have kept contact with the neocolonial masters. This has allowed them to help keep control over the country's wealth. The underlying query that is induced from the readers is: how possible is it that the legitimate aspirations of the people have so brazenly been scorned by those who promised an African renaissance after the colonizers' departure? How are the grassroots' interests been so arrogantly ignored by the political leaders?

In accordance with his agenda to signal the inappropriateness with which a number of African countries are being managed, Ngugi writes in *Matigari* a prose narrative that is close to the oral, fable-like mode of elocution, but also, as James Ogude suggests, which contains the "fantasy of the redeemer after the Christian tradition" (Ogude, 1999:106). Indeed, the Christian element is part of the allegorical mode attached to the narrative. And thus, the writer contrives a dramatic pattern of narration which is stylized by didactic features not totally alien to the myth of the savior and the martyr as they appear in the biblical tradition. The forest fighter Matigari, who has buried his weapons after independence, starts a ritual march towards his home only to discover en route that nothing has really changed, and that neocolonialism and an unlawful appropriation of the people's wealth have occurred. But unlike Christ's discourse of non-violence, Matigari's response to anomy is to argue for physical resistance. He is soon to unearth his weapons anew and to start a campaign to recover the property that has been wrenched from him by the impostors, namely the white Robert Williams, son to Settler Williams and his local accomplice, John Boy. When brutally arrested and put in jail after reclaiming his farm occupied by the latter, Matigari tells fellow prisoner,

I lived on a farm stolen from me by Settler Williams. I cleared the bush, tilled the soil, sowed the seeds and tended the crop. But what about the harvest? Everything went into Settler Williams' stores, and I the tiller Would be left looking for every grain that may have remained in the Chaff(...) I built the coffee factory and the tea processing industries (...).But who reaped the profits? Settler Williams, and what of me? A cent was flung in my direction (*Matigari*, 1987,p. 58).

Matigari's victimization is not to be considered in isolation, as shown by the other jailed people who are presented as victims rather than offenders. The prison seems to be a microcosmic representation of what incongruities have occurred. The mode of magical realism is efficiently employed by Ngugi to bring out a panoramic picture of the exploitation which caused Kenyans to rebel in the first place, i.e. in colonial times. In this way, we find Matigari a hero of the armed struggle during the Emergency, battling against Settler Williams, the generic colonizer, until the latter's defeat. This is clearly a symbolic representation of the historical covenant of the farmers to fight for the legitimate right to derive a decent income from their activities, and ultimately to retrieve their land from the hands of their exploiters. The formulaic expressions that frame the actions of the hero and his friends quite explicitly

involve the masses, just as Ngugi himself in this way addresses his fellow citizens. Ali Erritaoui writes:

Matigari suggests that the masses avail themselves of revolutionary violence. Ngugi does not believe that neocolonialism will collapse under the weight of its own contradictions. He holds that only radical collective action can liberate the wretched of the earth and set the stage for a more promising future. Recalling Fanon, he does not shy away from revolutionary violence (Erritaoui, in Lovesay, 2012, p. 218).

Unequivocally, the writer states that the poverty of the small farmers of Kenya which results from the colonial situation is willfully maintained by the new government as a form of oppression. His diagnosis of their ills and those of fellow farmers from other parts of Africa is straightforward and comprehensive. Phyllis Taoua writes:

The elusive identity that accompanies Matigari in his journey across the colonial landscape allows Ngugi to reflect on the circumstances that brought about the people's continued dispossession, which is the problematic at the heart of the novel. (Taoua, in Irele, 2009, p.17).

More than that, what has brought Matigari to prison, like other inmates whose 'crimes' were of no real social significance, or indeed fabricated as clearly reported by those in jail, was his insistence on recuperating his farm, that was built with his own hands. Actually, Matigari's concern is more about the principle to return the land seized by the colonizers to its rightful workers than to leave it prey to capitalistic and monopolistic enterprises, as well illustrated by Ngugi in *Petals of Blood*. For the writer's horizontal perspective of distribution of wealth, no member of society should suffer deprivation and exploitation. Instead, he or she should share in the potential wealth of the nation. Indeed, when Matigari reclaims his farm from the hands of John Boy, it is for the altruistic purpose of sharing it with others, including its present occupiers:

Come , my people, one and all, let us enter the house together; my heart has neither envy nor selfishness!"Matigari now said in a raised Voice as if addressing a huge crowd. "Yes, come all, and let us light a fire in the house together! Let us share the food together, and sing joyfully together! (*Matigari*, 1987, p. 51).

This is clearly a sign of Ngugi's permanent socialist conception of how goods and services should be distributed in independent African nations. The point made is that the spoliation and exploitation of the populations are still the common practice of authorities, while the use of force is the current method practiced by the self- appointed leaders to quell any action of justice. The author's implicit view is that neocolonialism is superseding the colonial system to keep control over the masses and the new governments in place as well. Ngugi thus comments on Daniel ArapMoi's presidency of Kenya in his *Moving the Centre*:

This was Moi's Kenya where facts are stranger than fiction, where State actions in the streets here induced more terror in its citizens than that of their nightmares, where the words of the head of state about himself, spoken in all seriousness, would more than match those of the cleverest satirists (Ngugi, 1993, p.175).

Much the same situation is dramatized by Ngugi in his last novel, *Wizard of the Crow*, an extended work of fiction which verges on the fantastic, and which features through the medium of magical realism the despotic attitude of the leader of Aburiria, an imaginary state. The leader's delirious exercise of power is shown as a parody of statesmanship, so incongruous being his quest for self-aggrandizement and self-enrichment with state funds, while the common people are left in dire need, and the queues of unemployed people in the capital city of Eldares keep extending. In parallel, the number of beggars in the city is alarmingly high. Titus Tajirika, a high official who serves under him as head of 'Eldares Modern Construction and Real Estate', complains about such people begging, who are "just too much...How dare they stretch out their hands at the very same place where their government was?" (p. 101). The offices where Tajirika operates are indeed an institution, with their head given the pompous title of manager of the 'Marching to Heaven Building Company', being entrusted with the project of the building of a tower to the glory of the Ruler.

The President's intention is to elicit respect, awe and adulation. To serve him well, his aides Machokali, Big Ben and Sikioku have had surgical operations to enlarge their organs of the senses for better surveillance, and to prevent any seditious movements in the country. The dictator's favorite tactic is manifested in his way of intimidating his own members of cabinet, and forcing them to perform awkward missions. He indeed asks his cabinet to find out about the mysterious queues of people in the streets who want government building contracts. He also asks who is the leader of the Voice of the People who is threatening his government's stability. On the other hand, and to mark the ridicule of the Ruler's design to have his tower built with a loan from the Global bank, Ngugi makes his sojourn in the USA become a nightmare. Indeed, following his request to obtain the loan, which is refused, the Ruler is affected by a strange illness, which appears in the form of a growing inflation of the body, up to incredible proportions. Although no rational explanation is given about this unknown--indeed weird-- phenomenon, this seems a trope to be connected with the magical powers vested in Kamiti in the novel to mete out a punishment for the corrupt leader. This young man, who has been denied a professional participation in his country's development by Titus Tajirika, despite his credentials, resorts to magical performances for a living. Nyawira, a young woman who gets to know the protagonist, is resolutely opposed to the Ruler's corrupt and unfair government. Kamiti discovers his divining and curing gifts also as a means to combat the régime, and, as said, to act in defense of the dispossessed. Thus, in the continuing mode of magical realism applied by Ngugi, the couple is made to take the lead of the opposition to the Head of state and his stooges.

Thus in this story where reality is juxtaposed to fantasy, Nyawira is also gifted by Ngugi with magical powers, as well as having a militant mindset enabling her to act upon events. She is presented as "a woman who could raise the male and the female daemons at once" and "was a dangerous menace to Aburiria" (p.269), because she is the astute leader of an

underground movement of popular resistance. Ngugi endows her with the extended title of “Chairperson of the Central Committee of the Voice of the People and Commander in Chief of the Aburirian People’s Resistance” (p.758). By making her a leader of this underground movement, Ngugi shows here that he “rejects gender stereotypes” (Waita, 2013, p. 49). Besides, even if Abiola Irele finds the plot “cumbersome”, he praises the didactic import of the novel, which is: “ a simple lesson: only through organized and effective resistance can women political dissidents bring about meaningful progress in Africa and anywhere else where entrenched dictatorship exists”(Irele, in Taoua, 2009,p. 218).

Indeed, the pursuit here is to find strategies of resistance which are first and foremost to raise social awareness of the need to take this “independent” country away from the hands of the comprador bourgeoisie. The role of Kamiti is important in the sense that he gradually comes to act in favor of the people’s interests, and for the toppling of the Ruler’s grotesque representation of this bourgeoisie, even if at times he loses faith and confidence in his ability to do so. It takes the agency of Nyawira to restore him in the conviction that he must take responsibility to act for the genuine liberation of his country. She prompts him to join in active underground militancy with the ‘Voice of the People’, for intellectuals like him are the potential agents for the establishment of a democratic sociopolitical order in Aburiria. Her agency manifests itself notably in her capacity to take the role of wizard in the absence of Kamiti, and actually to prompt Tajirika’s wife, Vinjina, to react on hearing that she is merchandized and victimized by her husband minister, like the rest of the people. Indeed, the greed and thirst for material assets is thus exemplified by Tajirika’s willingness to divorce his wife to keep his position if the Ruler requires him to do so. Sikioku’s and Kanyuru’s greed is likewise to exemplify the opportunism of politicians in embezzling money, here destined for the ‘Marching to Heaven’ project. As it happens, the latter has been able to extract money from the bank account opened in the former’s name (p. 537). Upon admitting their fraudulent dealings, the defense of the two ministers ironically is in stating to the Ruler that at least the unduly acquired money is not in dollars (as in the case of Tajirika), but in Aburirianburis the local currency of this imaginary state, as a mark of “patriotism”: “in short, we refused to be bribed in dollars” (p.537). This comic of the absurd is the hallmark of the caustic humor that Ngugi injects in his narrative to expose corrupt politicians all along.

Actually, the grotesque and ludicrous project of the Ruler to build his tower with foreign (i.e. American) aid is a typical way for Ngugi to refer to a great number of African rulers’ megalomania, corruption and illegitimate quest for popular recognition. In opposition to this attitude, the people’s demonstrations in town signify the gap widening between them and the Head of State, well organized by Nyawira’s militant action plan. The wizardry of Kamiti is assuredly derived from Ngugi’s need to delve in the roots of traditional story-telling to highlight a morality, a sense of communal wisdom along the lines of tradition, hence the recourse to magic features and to fantastic events and situations to expose the turpitude of ministers. We have seen the cynicism with which Tajirika has accumulated bags of money, paid to him by would-be contractors, and his embarrassment concerning his inability to conceal them from the Ruler’s informers, even if the ruler himself is not averse to embezzling money.

Kamiti’s magical powers are also used as an extended trope for the demise of the head of State. They appear to be the cause for the Ruler’s strange illness that has made his body inflate gradually without any possible reprieve. Indeed, during his visit to the USA, upon

receiving news that the American government is not prepared to finance his tower project, the Ruler's physical change is witnessed by his entourage, and comically presented as follows:

Suddenly his cheeks and stomach began to expand. No, not just the cheeks and the tummy but the whole body. They looked at one another in dismay. They had never seen anything like this. The Ruler gestured with his hands that he wanted pen and paper, but he could not even hold the pen properly, his fingers fattening by the second. The official biographer tried to give him his thick pen, and the Ruler waved him away. Then the Ruler indicated that the gathering was over (p. 486).

It takes also Kamiti's powers to free the Ruler from his illness, a fact which can symbolically demonstrate the people's open options to act upon authoritarian and unjust political régimes. As a man equally ill-treated by his government, and despite his apparent 'innocence' regarding political matters, Matigari is a protagonist that has the capacity to learn and assess situations, notably by listening to people who describe their sufferings under the present neo-colonial authority. During his imprisonment, an inmate tells him of his hard and unrewarded work in a factory. He informs the protagonist as follows:

I have been a servant to these machines (in factory) all my life. Look at how the machines have sapped me of all strength. What is left of me? Just bones. My skin withered even as I kept on assuring myself: a fortune for him who works hard finally comes; a person who endures finally overcomes(...) My fortune? Old age without a pension. Do you know something else? I spent all these years opposed to strikes. I kept on saying: if I go on strike and lose my job, what will my children eat tomorrow? But look at me. Here I am in prison for no reason whatsoever (*Matigari*, 1987, pp.59-60).

As a first step towards the resistance, much of Ngugi's text is destined to 'record' and denounce what he considers the abnormalities of political leadership in Africa, even if the purported intentions of the leaders in power are to address the people's needs. Quite the opposite, the grassroots are further stripped of all wealth and subjected to fierce repression, and the imprisoned worker exemplifies the practices of a government that would not tolerate any complaint or critical statements concerning its dealings with the country's affairs.

Expropriation has been previously dramatized by Ngugi in his *Petals of Blood*, who reveals what happens to many farmers, when their town Ilmorog is overnight promoted a centre of capitalist enterprise, with the construction of the Trans-Africa Highway that cuts it down the middle. The same type of expropriation is evoked in relation to Matigari's inmates, which is the reason for the hero's decision to rise against the corrupt and unjust régime of John Boy and his white acolytes. Even if the characters are symbolized and simplified for didactic purposes, the direct style enables the writer to denounce unjust positions, like that of John Boy Junior, who not only refuses to return the farm to Matigari, its rightful owner, but appears as a betrayer of the nation that sent him abroad for his education for all to benefit.

John Boy's declaration to Matigari is that one should celebrate individualism and dismiss the communal principle of sharing and caring:

You walk about fettered to your families, clans, nationalities, people, masses. If the individual decides to move ahead, he is pulled back by the others. What's the meaning of the word "masses"? Mzee, let me tell you that what belongs to the masses is carried in a bottomless pail (Matigari, 1987, p. 49).

This of course is far off the communalist stance celebrated by Jomo Kenyatta, in his book *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), and more in line with the same man's later acceptance- as head of state- of the neo-colonial exploitation of Kenya, followed for that matter by Daniel Arap Moi, the next president. Ngugi writes in his book of essays *Moving the Centre*: "as the ruling party under Kenyatta, and later under Moi, continued cementing the neo-colonialist links to the West, the Kenya régime became more and more intolerant of any views that questioned neo-colonialism" (Ngugi, 1993:71). The writer indeed mentions the absence of any democratic debate as of the early seventies, including in academic surroundings like universities (ibid: 71), a situation that lingered on into the nineties. Still, sound criticism and proposals for changes in policies, as Ngugi suggests, should be the realm of academic circles.

And thus, for the writer, the neo-colonial mentality, coupled with a dependence on the Western world for every matter, is a cause for concern and resentment. A case in point is that the foreign aid destined for economic development is often misused by leaders. As said, in *Wizard of the Crow*, the Ruler's extravagant intention to secure a loan from the World Bank would be to build a tower tall enough to make him establish direct communication with 'Heaven'. This project is encouraged by the sycophantic ministers Machokali and Sikioku, even as they show no particular sympathy with Tajirika's mission to carry out this project, hence his temporary imprisonment upon a malignantly suggested suspicion that his wife Vinjinya is colluding with the opposition to the government. Thus, although Ngugi derides the turpitude of corrupt politicians in different ways in his country, Kenya, given here the imaginary name of Abururia, his indefatigable purpose is to usher in fundamental changes in governance. This comes alongside his public lectures and ideological essays published all along in his creative and academic activities. The fact is that in his last two novels, as in the previous ones, the issues at stake are still unresolved, and the phase of resistance is still in progress, pending the long-wished for victory of the grassroots.

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