



## Demystifying the Future in Africa's (Un)vanishing Past: A Study of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Novels

Gbemisola Adeoti\*

### Abstract

This article attempts a critical analysis of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's last two novels: *Matigari* and *Wizard of the Crow*. This is with a view to interrogating the novelist's dissection of problems confronting post-independence African nations and how these nations can be re-invented. The analysis is done against the backdrop of growing challenges of neo-liberalism and Westernisation, otherwise known as globalisation.

### Résumé

Le présent article est une analyse critique des deux derniers romans de Ngugi wa Thiong'o: *Matigari* et *Wizard of the Crow*. Il vise à interroger la manière dont l'auteur dissèque les problèmes auxquels sont confrontées les nations africaines après les indépendances et comment les États peuvent être réinventés. Cette analyse s'effectue dans le contexte des défis croissants du néolibéralisme et de l'occidentalisation, autrement dit la mondialisation.

Ngugi is an African writer who is also a scholar-activist and public intellectual. He is not only content with raising critical socio-political issues in his writings, but also, he takes practical steps to enlist popular support behind his political choices and ideological persuasions as evident in his collaboration with the Kamiriithu community which brought him and his colleagues into trouble with the Kenyan authorities in the late 1970s.

In his creative and critical works (*Weep Not, Child*, *The River Between*, *A Grain of Wheat*, *Petals of Blood*, *Devil on the Cross*, *I Will Marry When I Want*, *Mother*, *Sing for Me*, *Detained*, *Writers and Politics* and *Decolonising the Mind*, among others), Ngugi consistently engages issues of social injustice

---

\* Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, Nigeria.  
E-mail: remiade@oauife.edu.ng; ayinla80@yahoo.com

as well as the imperative of true liberation of African people from oppressive minority rule. The recurring spatio-temporal setting of his novels is Kenya before, during and after British colonialism, while his characters are drawn from the same society. However, their relevance to other African countries is not in doubt. This accounts for the purposive selection of two of his novels that raise universal issues about the conditions of being in Africa.

Both *Matigari* and *Wizard of the Crow* depict the author's postulations about Africa's developmental predicaments and how to effectively tackle them in order to end colonial and neo-colonial subjugation. The article, in its textual analyses, discusses the communitarian polemics and artistic devices employed by Ngugi to articulate his re-visioning of Africa. These include the use of allusion, irony, allegory, centring of the subalterns in characterisation in a way that lends the novels their epical grandeur, and detailed description of situations to achieve verisimilitude as well as structural repetition, typical of African myths and folktales.

In conclusion, the article contends that the task of re-defining Africa's past and present in Ngugi's novels is valuable and beneficial. It is indeed of essence, not only in achieving immediate socio-political transformation, but also in constructing a more auspicious future for the continent in the global arena.

## Introduction

As already well established in literature, slavery and colonialism are two defining factors in African history (Bennet 1963; Ajayi and Espie 1972; Anene and Brown 1972; Rodney 1982; Zeleza 2003). The passage of time notwithstanding, the emotional trauma and socio-cultural dislocation associated with the two events continue to evoke a sense of catharsis and restoration or what Ngugi wa Thiong'o would call 'remembering'. The latter is a project of rebuilding which is 'a quest for wholeness; connecting the diverse African peoples together – after they have been dispersed, sundered or dismembered by European slave traders and colonialists' (Ngugi 2006). Oppression, exploitation, inequality and other features of slavery and colonialism have also attracted attentions of scholars and artists, from Wole Soyinka to Ayi Kwei Armah, Olaudah Equiano, Ferdinand Oyono, Kofi Awoonor and so on. Unfortunately, the reality of neo-colonialism being experienced in many African nations after independence has done much to accentuate rather than alleviate the trauma of the past.

However, rather than bemoaning, in pessimistic tone, the betrayal of independence hope by the ruling elite of African ex-colonies, as found in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*, Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother* and Soyinka's *The Interpreters* among other texts, Ngugi wa Thiong'o

(formerly James Ngugi) consistently probes Africa's history in his works, with a strong conviction of a brighter future for the continent, given a genuine commitment to the project of decolonisation. According to Ngugi, the crises of nationhood and development facing most African nations after independence are man-made, sometimes self-induced, and not divinely scripted. They are, therefore, surmountable (see Ngugi 1986, 1993; Ngugi and Mugo 2009). While he rejects classical determinism, he advocates a materialist reading of African culture and history with a view to stimulating a strong will towards radical transformation of the postcolonial nation. An alternative society, based on social justice, equitable distribution of resources and equal access to opportunities, where no identity, (race, ethnicity, religion, gender, generation) will confer special advantages on its bearer to the exclusion of the 'other', is possible. The ideas and strategies to effect such auspicious transformation are encapsulated in the principles of socialism. According to him, 'Black power is impossible outside a socialist context' (Ngugi 1981:31). Noting that the countries of Europe such as Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, Germany and Poland also emerged from Roman colonialism with all its agenda of domination to assert their national selfhood, Africa need not be eternally encumbered by its past and present. The article, therefore, discusses how Ngugi addresses the fundamental problems confronting post-independence Africa and how the States can be re-invented against the backdrop of growing neo-liberalism and Westernisation embedded in globalisation.

### **Ngugi and the Politics of (Neo)colonialism**

The ideological vision articulated above runs through the corpus of Ngugi's creative works, especially the novels and plays. It is also trenchantly canvassed in his critical commentaries and scholarly essays. From a conviction that the anti-colonial struggles and political independence of the 1950s to the 1970s have not resulted in true liberation of the continent, Ngugi uses his narrative and performative aesthetics to address the subsisting issues of economic exploitation and political marginalisation of the working people by the minority bourgeois elite. For instance, in *Weep Not, Child*, he addresses the predicament of Africans under the state of emergency declared in colonial Kenya in 1953 in response to the violent struggle against settler colonialism led by Mau mau guerrilla fighters.

*A Grain of Wheat* deals with socio-political, cultural, racial and gender dimensions of the war of independence, with special attention paid to the conditions of the people after the attainment of independence. In this novel and *Petals of Blood* that comes after it, Ngugi stresses the imperative of consciousness by the masses of their conditions of deprivation. There is,

therefore, the need to build a mass organisation to redress the prevailing social injustice. The virtues of unity and struggle painstakingly canvassed by Amilcar Cabral (1980) are also adumbrated in Ngugi's novels.

The condition of Ilmorog in the universe of *Petals of Blood* is that of neo-colonialism which is a subtle, indirect continuation of governing Africa by the West through the local ruling elite, multi-national corporations and international financial institutions. The novel depicts the rising of peasants, workers, unemployed citizens, women and other economically and politically marginalised group against their continuous exploitation by politicians and local business elite who are agents of foreign capital. In the march to the city, the great strength inherent in the unity of the oppressed is demonstrated.

The reality of wide disparities in class conditions in Kenya is given a satiric twist in *Devil on the Cross*. Originally written in Gikuyu as 'Caitaani Mutharaba-ini', the novel is dedicated to 'all Kenyans struggling against the neo-colonial stage of imperialism' (p. 5). Rooted in the indigenous storytelling tradition that blends reality with fantasy, the novel uses the framework of an imaginary grand meeting between the Devil and a band of villainous bourgeoisies. Ngugi's deep-seated contempt for the ruling political elite in Kenya (including other African countries) as 'local agents of Western imperialism' is evident in the trope of 'devil' and 'ogre' used to describe members of this class in *Devil on the Cross* as well as in subsequent works, especially *I will Marry When I Want*, *Matigari*<sup>1</sup> and *Wizard of the Crow*.

Kenya in history and in the contemporary era provides the spatial and temporal setting for most of Ngugi's works. The novels feature characters across class and gender boundaries who can be found in rural communities and urban centres in Kenya. However, their experiences are common across Africa. Obviously, the ideals of a Kenyan patriot and a pan-African commitment underline his artistic mission as demonstrated in the novels. Even when given a literary veil as exemplified in the anonymous setting of *Matigari* or the fabled postcolonial Free Republic of Aburiria in *Wizard of the Crow*, the central concern is Africa, especially how to bring about a re-birth of the continent after the dark era of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

The Kenyan society portrayed in Ngugi's works is that of a multi-ethnic and multi-racial nation of East Africa, colonised by the British from the late nineteenth century to 12 December 1963 when it won its independence with Jomo Kenyatta (Kamau Ngengi) as the Prime Minister. It became a republic a year later under a one-party democracy.

Before the British, the various ethnic groups had in the past come into contact with the Portuguese, Arabians, Indians, Chinese and Germans with impacts on the social, economic and political lives of the people. But by the beginning of the twentieth century, the people were brought together for

administration as a single political entity, being a colony of Britain. The establishment of the railway contributed to the settlement of a significant population of Europeans, Asians and Arabs in different parts of Kenya.

The British colonial policy was more oriented towards 'the advancement of European settlers' interests' with the aim of building 'a modern Western state and economy' (Rosenberg 2010:397). It altered the people's pattern of life through its systems of politics, agriculture, education, commerce and social life. For example, the agricultural system, hinged on growing coffee, tea and horticultural products, displaced indigenous subsistence farmers who were growing food crops. Many of them only found accommodation in the new dispensation serving as paid farm labourers on European coffee and tea plantations or as factory workers in the urban areas. Africans lost their land to European settlers who held the land under lease, an arrangement that made available about ninety per cent of the arable land to minority foreigners and confined the majority indigenous population to the remaining portion. Land became a central issue of social and economic justice to be violently protested against in the course of the independence struggle. The Mau Mau guerrilla movement was at the centre of that struggle in the 1950s. It was against the background of colonial subjugation and resistance by the colonised that Jomo Kenyatta emerged, when he, along with others, formed the Kenya African Union in 1944 to tackle the problems of racial domination, land appropriation and exclusion of the indigenous people from governance. Jailed under the state of emergency in 1953, he emerged in 1963 to lead the nation to independence.

In addressing the challenges of development, Kenyatta's government opted for a free enterprise capitalist economy, as against socialism which he earlier professed.<sup>2</sup> He also opened up the country to Britain, France and America for military assistance and foreign investment. The result was the domination of the economy by foreign companies in industries such as oil and gas, household items production, food and beverages, manufacturing and so on. Though it was supposed to be independent with the policy of 'Kenyanisation', the economy became hugely dependent on foreign capital which it was meant to serve right from the colonial era. The consequent rising unemployment and disparities in income, fuelled by ethnic suspicion, often brewed political crisis in the country.<sup>3</sup>

Under the one-party state structure, the constitution conferred a considerable amount of power on the President, a father figure that loomed large on the nation like a monarch. Kenyatta presided over a powerful personalised rule which, in the opinion of Ngugi, could not advance the course of decolonisation through inclusive and participatory democracy. It

was this structure that was inherited and sustained by Arap Moi who took over after Kenyatta's death in Mobassa on 22 August 1978.

With the fruits of independence continuously elusive in Kenya, Ngugi remains unrelenting in his quest for them through his arts. Worthy of note are some of the issues addressed in his writings, which form the basis of textual analyses of *Matigari* and *Wizard* in this article.

Quite pertinent is the role and responsibility of the postcolonial state in Africa. Whose interest is it supposed to serve – that of the minority who occupy governmental positions or that of the majority of the people, the sovereign from which the government derives its power and legitimacy? Or government agencies like the police, the military and other security/law enforcement organisations? Are they supposed to serve the interest of only the people in power who command them or the generality of the people, regardless of their social class? These questions are raised and addressed through conflicts and characterisation in the novels. Thus, Ngugi interrogates Western education *vis a vis* its role as an agency of empowerment and critical consciousness. In the contemporary African context, is Western education serving the purpose of liberation and development or is it contributing further to the cultural alienation of its products? In his submission, 'to make economic and political control the more complete, the colonizing power tries to control the cultural environment: education, religion, language, literature, songs...hoping in this way, to control a people's values and ultimately their outlook, their image and definition of self' (1981:12). He contends that the objective, philosophy and structure of education in Africa should be re-defined if it will be an instrument of liberation and self-reliance. It should not only be rooted in people's culture and daily living experience, but also be used for effective communication in indigenous languages of the people. To this end, he privileges literature in African languages because the drama of struggle is better performed in the language of the people. Language is central to the project of decolonisation and African renaissance. 'In all other societies', he contends, 'writers, keepers of memories, and carriers of national discourse use the language of their communities'. He condemns the tendency of postcolonial intellectuals who 'prefer to express communal memories in foreign languages' (1993:42).

Ngugi is also concerned about the role of religion especially, Christianity, which is a predominant religion in Kenya. Religion is a complex human and cultural institution, even though it deals with the sacred and the transcendental. In the hands of the missionary arm of the colonialists and the ruling elite after independence, it is a weapon to blunt the people's consciousness of their condition of being. Its advocacy of meekness in the face of adversity on earth for the sake of abundance in the hereafter is

explored by the privileged class to persuade the oppressed to bear the burden of oppression with equanimity. Not only are the suffering poor expected to bear their condition as divinely given, they should do so without protesting. Religion is also a tool for driving home Africa's 'inferiority', registered in baptism and rechristening of Africans under different, usually European names. 'All European names are Christian, African ones are satanic' says Nyawira in *Wizard of the Crow* (p. 63). However, the religion as demonstrated in Ngugi's works can be an effective tool of social mobilisation. This is evident in the philosophy of 'Harambee' in *I Will Marry When I Want*.

In terms of governance, Ngugi is persuaded about the rightness of democracy and the wrongness of authoritarian rule, as the path to development in his envisioned reconstruction of the continent. However, that democracy must truly restore the *demos* (people) to their position of sovereign, preferably in a socialist order. Workers, peasants, youths, rural and urban women, and other hitherto disempowered groups would take the centre stage. That accounts for the emphasis on communitarian aesthetics from novel to novel. Here, the emphasis is on the group, rather than the self or the individual as evident in this recurring song:

Great love I saw there;  
Among the Women  
We shared even the single bean  
That fell upon the ground.

His worry, however, is that many regimes that claim to be democratic on the continent are in fact far from. For instance, how democratic was the one-party democracy in Kenya under Kenyatta and Moi or its 'reformation' in the crucible of multi-partyism under Mwai Kibaki?

The role of the West (Europe and America) in the affairs of Africa after colonialism is another constantly interrogated phenomenon in Ngugi's writings. To him, much of the crisis of development in the contemporary world or what makes Africa disadvantaged in the scheme of globalisation is traceable to uncritical Westernisation expressed in commerce, popular culture, education, and politics. Consequently, he advocates for 'decolonisation' (and by implication, 'de-westernisation') of thought process, language and culture toward Africa's renaissance (Ngugi 1993).

Besides, Ngugi believes in the imperative of a new order of gender relation in Africa. Apart from giving more recognition to the women, he affirms the futility of gender discrimination in a modern society. Hence, he celebrates courageous female characters who transcend socially constructed barriers in a patriarchal context. One of them is the Woman in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. Others are Nyakinyua in *Petals of Blood*, Guthera in *Matigari* and Nyawira in *Wizard of the Crow*.

Lastly, Ngugi urges a reconnection of Africa's present to its past to chart a new course for the future. Works of popular arts – music, dance, literature, and cinema – are significant in this direction. Hence, his direct involvement in the Kamiriithu Community Educational Theatre project as indicated earlier. History as a tool of inquiry into the past needs to be accorded greater attention in mapping the future of Africa. Africa's history, hitherto narrated from the privileged viewpoint of the colonisers (typified by the works of Hugh Trevor Roper) should be re-told in de-colonising voices. A memory of the past devoid of racial prejudice and inferiorising suppositions is necessary in order to build self-confidence that would overcome the limits of 'otherness' imposed by history. The foregoing are the salient thematic issues in the literary corpus of Ngugi. He creates appropriate characters and setting to articulate them, using simple language and accessible narrative style. This is with a view to creating works with enduring impact on the consciousness of the audience. Besides, he uses symbols, allegory, biblical and historical allusions as well as inter-textual references for artistic effects. These are further illuminated in the analyses of *Matigari* and *Wizard of the Crow*, two novels in which the author uniquely presents in an epic style, the intersection of the past and the present in the re-making of Africa.

### **The Ire of Revolutionary Fire from the Past in *Matigari***

Like *Devil on the Cross* before it and *Wizard* published after it, *Matigari* was originally written in Gikuyu and later translated into English by Wangui wa Goro. It is a story of travel and return, search and discovery, rooted in African folk narrative. At the centre of the novel's plot is the battle for the soul of post-colonial Africa between the forces of true liberation and those committed to upholding imperialism. Kenya (Africa) is symbolised by the house on the hill and the land on which it is built which is the object of fierce struggle between Matigari, the eponymous hero of the novel, and the new inheritors of his former boss, Settler Williams, that is, Robert Williams and John Boy Junior. Though the present struggle being waged in the novel is a carry-over from the past (colonial days), it is also a battle for the future as the resolution of the conflict has a wide implication for the parties –the powerful and the dispossessed. In its parable form, the author veils his message, but the anti-establishment references in the novel did not escape the authorities of Kenya, hence, when it was published in 1987, 'the police raided all the bookshops and seized every copy of the novel', writes Ngugi (1987: viii).

Though the conflict in the novel is posed in biblical terms as a confrontation between good and evil, Matigari represents the good while Settler Williams, John Boy and their sons represent evil. The story is imaginary just as its eponymous hero, Matigari, is elusive. Its anonymous setting, though

unmistakably post-colonial Africa, illustrates the timeless and universal relevance of the novel. The class war is a feature of that context.

Matigari is like the old man, Ndiiro, who in the traditional story that inspired the novel looms large in his simultaneous presence and absence as 'a force, a god, a destiny' (vii). But apart from the traditional source, Ngugi draws on the biblical framework of the second coming of Jesus Christ. According to the scripture, Jesus, after his death, resurrection and ascension to heaven is expected to come back to redeem the world. The triumphant return of Matigari from the forest, wearing the belt of peace, recreates in him a messianic figure; a prince of peace. The biblical allusion is central to the plot and characterisation in the novel as Matigari embodies hope and courage for the oppressed in his quest for truth and justice. He saves Muriuki from the molestation of older boys at the vehicle cemetery. He rescues Guthera from police harassment. Later, he offers wine and food to hungry prisoners who consist of the student activist, teacher, vagrant, drunkard, pickpocket and the unemployed. It is not surprising that he is full of lamentation for the new order in which 'a handful of people still profited from the suffering of the majority, the sorrow of many being the joy of the few' (p. 12).

When the story begins, Matigari, a former employee of Settler William, returns to the town after years in the forest, fighting Williams, a white man and his black ally, John Boy. The fight is over the ownership of the house on the hill. His attempt to drive away the settler and repossess his house is resisted by the duo, and that leads to years of struggle through valleys, mountains and forests of the country. Eventually, he kills both enemies (foreign and local oppressors). The death of the duo represents independence from colonial rule. He nurses a vision of himself and his children repossessing the house after the war:

The children would come out of the graveyard into which their  
lives had been condemned. They would build their lives anew  
in the unity of their common sweat. A new house. A paradise on the  
earth, why not? There is nothing that a people united cannot do  
...A new heaven on earth (p. 16).

But the new society to which he has just returned betrays his expectations as poverty, deprivation and oppression still continue. The builder is sleeping on the veranda, the tailor working without clothes (p. 38). The economy is still effectively under the control of foreigners with a few indigenous 'comprador tycoons' as fronts through business outfits such as Barclays Bank, American Life Insurance, British American Tobacco and Anglo-American Leather and Plastic Works. As he later remarks, 'our first independence has been sold back to imperialism by the servants they put in

power' (p. 172). It is indeed, an upside down world in which 'lies are decreed to be the truth, and the truth is decreed to be a lie' (p. 137).

Under the quest motif that sustains the plot of the novel, the search for his people brings Matigari into contact with different people: Muriuki and other homeless children who inhabit the graveyard for motor vehicles, factory workers led by Ngaruro, women trying to eke out a living from the fringe like Guthera, prisoners, law enforcement agents and so on. As he goes from place to place, circumstances thrust on him extra-ordinary actions that enhance his super-human image among the people. He is often found, like Jesus, among the poor, the 'wretched of the earth', and those considered to be enemies of the State. It is not surprising that within a short time, he runs into trouble with the State and lands in detention, in his bid to reclaim his house.

The mysterious jail break organised by Guthera and Muriuki sets him and other detainees free, a plus to his messianic profile, not only among the prisoners, but also in the whole nation, at markets, shopping centres, restaurants, cross roads, on farmlands, in courts and so on. Everyone talks of Matigari as one that wipes the tears of the oppressed away. He is the patriot, the liberator, the whip of the oppressed lashing the oppressor. He reminds us of Dedan Kimathi, the leader of the Mau Mau struggle who was denounced as a treacherous terrorist by the colonial establishment but regarded as a patriot by his people. Matigari reinforces this revolutionary Christ-like image with his actions, one of them, a parody of the last supper of Christ with his disciples below:

Matigari took the food, broke it and gave it to them (prisoners).  
They started eating. Then he took the bottle of beer, opened it with  
his teeth, poured a little of it on the floor in libation and gave them to  
drink and pass around (p. 57)

But to the regime in power and its agents, he is a 'terrorist walking about the country' (p. 83) and a confused 'lunatic' (p. 158).

The quest for his appropriated property crystallises into a quest for truth, justice and fairness. The search takes him to characters who represent social groups including the student, the teacher, the intellectual and the clergy. He comes across patriots who are up against the ruling party, Kiama Kria Kirathana (echoing America's Ku Klux Klan - KKK), and the democratic dictatorship of the president, His Excellency Ole Excellence.<sup>4</sup> He also comes across sell outs who collaborate with the government and foreign business concerns to exploit the people. He becomes more convinced and agrees with Ngaruro, the labour leader, that 'there were two camps in the country. There was that of the imperialists and their retinue of messengers, overseers,

police and military ... On the other hand, there was the camp of the working people with their values, their culture and their history' (p. 161).

A direct confrontation with the establishment sends Matigari back to detention, but he escapes again. Upon regaining his freedom, he concludes that reclaiming his land and house is a historical mission that must not be abandoned, judging from the sweat and blood of workers that had gone into its construction and the struggle for its reclamation from usurpers. A farmer whose seeds have not germinated does not give up planting, he reasons. Secondly, words and arms alone cannot win the battle. Rather, 'words of truth and justice, fully backed by armed power, will certainly drive the enemy out' (p. 138). Speaking in a voice that represents the whole of Kenyan workers and peasants, Matigari justifies the life and death struggle for the house which as earlier observed, represents the nation:

The house is mine because I built it. The land is mine too because  
I tilled it with these hands. The industries are mine because my  
labour built and worked them. I shall never stop struggling for all  
products of my sweat. I shed blood and I did not shed it in vain.  
One day the land will return to the tiller, and the wealth of our land  
to those who produce it. Poverty and sorrow shall be banished  
from our land! (p. 124).

In his final move, mustering uncommon courage, Matigari drives into the disputed house under a foggy identity in a forcefully seized Mercedes Benz car and sets the house on fire. This leads to looting of the house by jubilant workers. Other houses of the rich around the area are also consumed in the irate fire. Tension pervades the air as the regime orders Matigari's arrest with a sum of five thousand pounds put on his head as reward for information that will lead to his arrest. Having escaped the fire through the window, he re-unites with Guthera and Muriuki. They all head toward the Mogumo tree under which he had buried his weapons of war to unearth them for the final battle ahead. However, the recovery is frustrated by law enforcement agents who are trailing them. They plunge into a river and cross to the other side, again, escaping the onslaught of the State. Shortly, Muriuki at the Mogumo tree, having unearthed the weapons, puts them on, ready for combat. The novel ends on a note of optimism as Muriuki who represents the younger generation to whom the future belongs, is set to continue the struggle for self-recovery and liberation. With this symbolic act, Ngugi stresses the importance of youths in social transformation.

Through the character of Guthera, Ngugi attempts a review of gender idea in Africa and re-imaging of the African woman. He shows that inter-gender co-operation is necessary to advance the course of rebuilding the

continent. Gender equity is key to the idea of a new Africa now and in the future. In the words of Matigari who represents the authorial voice, 'Women are the ones who uphold the flame of continuity and change in the homestead' (p. 27). Guthera is complimentary to Matigari in his exploits and his success would not have been possible if not for the timely support and intervention of Guthera.

The name of the President, His Excellency Ole Excellence, is an irony that calls attention to the incongruity of the democratic one-party dictatorship that he leads. He is perhaps excellent only in repression. His regime is advertised as a democratic regime, yet it restricts freedom of association. It outlaws strike, a legitimate weapon available to workers, though it claims to be a workers' government. The regime arrests people and detains them without trial in the name of maintaining security. It denounces agitators as enemies of the state while it courts sycophants and pseudo-intellectuals such as the allegorical Permanent Professor of the History of Parrotology, the holder of PhD in Parrotology and the Editor of *Daily Parrots*. The Minister for Truth and Justice is neither truthful nor just in his conduct. Robert Williams and John Boy Junior who inherit their fathers' properties are symbols of neo-colonialism, as they perpetuate oppression of the people as obtained in the days of their fathers who represent colonialism. The two are described as being worse than those who were there during the colonial days. According to a worker, 'That inseparable pair have been oppressing us all this time. Every worker knows that Robert Williams and John Boy are like twins born out of the womb of the same ogre' (p. 65). Underlying these allegorical designations above is Ngugi's effort to interrogate the role of the ruling elites and intellectuals in the sustenance of authoritarian regimes across the continent.

*Matigari* is structured into three parts to give the novel a dramatic effect. Each part earns its title from the names of important characters in the novel. Ngaruro, the leader of the leather and plastic factory workers, is focused on in Part One. Matigari who is seeking for truth and justice is the centre of Part Two while Part Three celebrates Guthera and Muriuki, the representatives of women and youths who are the pillars of the emerging democratic social order. But the parts are brought into a coherent whole because the characters presented and their experiences are common to workers and peasants of the nation. They constitute the heroes of the story.

The aesthetics of the novel are enhanced by the use of multi-modal narration. The plot incorporates at strategic intervals, news, views and reports from the national radio station called Voice of the Truth. The station is the official propaganda outfit of the KKK regime. But rather than being a medium to achieve inclusion and participation of the citizens in a democratic

dispensation, it only serves the interest of the regime. Its designation as Voice of Truth is a curious irony because it is a medium of mendacity, used by the regime for the purpose of mis-informing the public through spurious statistics to boost its waning image among the people. The role of the media in re-inventing Africa is, therefore, subtly critiqued through this multi-modal narrative device.

In its exploration of the motif of the second coming of Christ, the novel reminds us of *Woza Albert!*, a documentary drama about the apartheid regime in South Africa, created by Percy Mtwa and Mbogeni Ngema in collaboration with Barney Simon.<sup>5</sup> Morena, the Christ figure in the play, like Matigari, serves as a conscientising force and a voice of hope for the oppressed blacks of South Africa. He is denounced by the apartheid regime as a terrorist agitator and a bloody communist. He is arrested, tried, convicted, jailed in Robben Island and bombed, but he escapes assassination. He 'resurrects' and begins to wake up the heroes of the apartheid struggle including Albert Luthuli, Robert Sobukwe, Steve Biko, Lillian Ngoya and so on.

In essence, Ngugi depicts the value of organisation and collective struggle in bringing about a truly liberated and democratic Africa in *Matigari*. It is an epical narrative that explores the oral tradition alongside other modes of popular expression like songs, anecdotes, and the radio. It is a story of recurring search and discovery animated by digression, allusion and suspense.

### **Ogres, Messiahs and the Putrid Polity in *Wizard of the Crow***

*Wizard of the Crow* (hereinafter referred to as *Wizard*) is an extended narrative that deals with issues of good governance, democracy and development in post-independence Africa. It satirises, in an acerbic tone, authoritarian rule that festered in many forms on the continent even after independence. The imaginary 'Free Republic of Aburiria' is an African nation that manifests all features of neo-colonialism – a dependent, consumerist economy, arbitrary rule, social inequality, inadequate infrastructure and so on. Aburiria, ironically, is neither free nor republican.

The grotesquery adopted in the narration to depict members of the ruling class as blood-thirsty ogres and daemons is to shock the readers into a greater awareness of the inadequacies and excesses of governance. The monstrosity of the Ruler in his decaying state recalls Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. The novel is voluminous, somewhat capturing the over-bloated physique of the Ruler around whom the story revolves and the absurd acts of his sycophantic cabinet officials. Machokali enlarges his eyes to more efficiently spy on the enemies of government. Sikiokuu widens his ears to eavesdrop for the same purpose. Kaniuru elongates his nose, while another official lengthens his tongue to better serve

and please the mighty Ruler. Members of the ruling class are depicted as ogres and daemons to mark them as dangerous foes of the people whose continuous existence in the corridors of power imperils the survival of the society.

The overall eerie and uncanny atmosphere evoked by Ngugi in the novel reaches back to the indigenous storytelling tradition. But in *Wizard*, there is a deliberate subversion of the grandeur that one finds in African myths and legends which ought to provide models for the grand Ruler with extraordinary feats. Notwithstanding the overriding fantasy, the novel pointedly addresses the menace of authoritarianism which threatens the realisation of meaningful development. The mystical reality is just a de-familiarising and distancing device used by the author to address relevant issues in the unfolding history of postcolonial Africa.

Aburiria, the setting, is a world in which illusions and reality are constantly mixed up. It is weighed down by an overwhelming air of putrescence, stench and odour. The physical decadence parallels the corruption and moral atrophy of the Ruler and his regime. It is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society (like Kenya and many other African countries). The author's description is noteworthy:

People differed as much in the languages they spoke as in the clothes they wore and how they eked out a living. Some fished, others herded cattle and goats, and others worked on the land...Everywhere people were hungry, thirsty, and in rags. In most towns, shelters made out of cardboard, scrap metal, old tires, and plastic were home of hundreds of children and adults. He found it ironic that...these shacks stood side by side with mansions of tile, stone, glass, and concrete. Similarly, in the environs of cities and towns huge plantations of coffee, tea, cocoa, cotton, sisal, and rubber shared borders with exhausted strips of and cultivated by peasants. Cows with udders full with milk grazed on lush lands as scrawny others ambled on thorny and stony grounds (p. 39).

It is a society defined by inequality as reflected above, not only among the humans, but also in the flora and fauna. Aburiria is a neo-colonial country in which independence has turned awry. It is offering 'a viper and a devil' in place of freedom (p. 25).

Right from the onset, the plot focuses on the crisis of credibility haunting the failing regime of the Ruler. He suffers from an improperly developed personality, just as his regime subverts well-known tenets of democratic governance. The regime has outlived its glory years and it is now totally alienated from the citizens. Its actions are wildly and widely at variance with the aspirations of the people. Not only is it failing to guarantee the wellbeing of the people, it violently represses dissenting opinions. It is a regime of 'family and friends', all bound together in corruption, nepotism,

perversion and obsequiousness. Thus, between the Ruler and the ruled in this totalitarian order, there is a loss of confidence which frequently breaks out in mass protest, subversive acts, sabotage and civil disobedience, coordinated by the Movement for the Voice of the People, a mass political organisation. The State responds with coercion, through overzealous and fawning officials.

The crisis with the regime is underscored by the strange ailment that suddenly strikes the Ruler. It defies logic and diagnosis as it affects his physique and speech. Foul stench oozes from his body. He is physically intolerable just as he is politically repulsive. But rather than abdicating, he stays on in power. He is sustained in power by grovelling aides. Notable among them are Machokali the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Benjamin Mambo, Silver Sikiokuu, Dr Luminous Karam Mbuya-Ituka, Dr Yunice Mgenzi and members of the M15 squad.

Notwithstanding the hunger, unemployment and poverty that pervade the land, the Ruler decides to celebrate his birthday in a public ceremony. It is well attended by local and foreign dignitaries, workers, peasants and beggars among others from the low class. The ceremony is abruptly terminated as a result of commotion caused by the cry of 'snake'. The 'rubber snake attack' is masterminded by the Movement for the Voice of the People, with Nyawira as its arrowhead. Before its disruption, however, the royal birthday ceremony has given birth to a novel project that would enhance the image of the country in the comity of nations and make the Ruler unrivalled among rulers all over the world. A tower is to be constructed to the gate of heaven to facilitate the Ruler's and the country's easy access to God.

The project, likened to the biblical Tower of Babel, is called the 'Marching to Heaven project'. The project is not only absurd in its conception but also weird in the mode of its implementation. It is to be financed through a bank loan from the Global Bank, the equivalent of the World Bank in reality. The Global Bank is invited to the country to assess the feasibility of the project as part of efforts to convince the bank officials to grant the loan. Again, the public ceremony organised to commemorate the visit and initiate the project is disrupted, this time, by a foul smell in the atmosphere and obscene dances by a group of women.

A tour of the city's religious centres to shore up the public image of the Ruler also ends in fiasco. He is to meet the citizens *incognito* like Vicentio, the Duke of Vienna in William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. In places where he visits, he leaves behind the trails of a Devil rather than coming across to the citizens as the messiah or the wise Solomon. Surprisingly, the project takes a new dimension. Its economic prospects spark off long queues in front of the office of its Chairman, Tajinika, firstly of contractors who

want to supply items for the construction project and secondly, of unemployed people seeking jobs in view of the increasing demand for manpower to cope with the pressure of administering the new project. The queues get the regime rather jittery as it bans public gatherings in Eldares, the nation's commercial capital and seat of power.

This sinister situation brings Kamiti, an unemployed graduate, into contact with Nyawira, a woman activist and key figure in the Movement for the Voice of the People (MVP). Their union thereafter changes the course of events in the plot. A sheer coincidence thrusts on Kamiti and also Nyawira the identity of the Wizard of the Crow which they both utilise to maximum advantage. The mysterious exploits of the Wizard are driven by coincidence on the one hand and by Kamiti's knowledge of society and his mastery of human psychology on the other. He uses these to psychologically heal the people and politically combat the Ruler's despotism. He becomes a Christ figure, performing wonders and miraculously solving people's existential problems. He means different things to different people: a healer to Tajinika and others, a miracle worker that facilitates promotion to the police officer, but a traitor and an enemy of the State to the failing regime.

To redeem his sagging image at home and abroad, the Ruler travels to America. He is also to use the visit to canvass more support for the Marching to Heaven project, especially strengthening the case for a loan from the Global Bank to fund it. His exit from home creates uncertainty at home and fuels intrigues and battle for power among his lieutenants such as Sikiokuu, Kaniuru, and Machokali. Caught in the web of these intrigues are Tajinika who is detained and tortured, his wife who is molested, Kamiti who is also detained as Wizard of the Crow and Nyawira who is declared wanted for treason. Coincidentally, the Ruler's illness worsens in the US. His expansion in size makes him 'a monstrous obesity'. It is called Self Induced Expansion (SIE) or hypertrophy. He becomes an uncanny sight as evident in the description below:

It seems the Ruler's body had started puffing up like a balloon, his whole body becoming more and more inflated, without losing the proportion of parts.... Not only did the Ruler seem to be on the verge of bursting, but he had also lost the power to speak. (pp. 469-70)

The situation is aggravated by the rejection of the loan application for the Marching to Heaven project by the Global Bank which deflated his ego. A quick return to Aburiria has to be arranged, more so, when there is a rumour of a *coup d'état* back home. The mighty Ruler is flown back home like an awkward luggage in the plane and arrives in the night, to conceal him from the public. The concealment of the Ruler from officials and the public fuels speculation about his death. It also strengthens agitation within the civil

society for change. In response to the agitation and pressure from foreign countries like America and France, the Ruler only makes cosmetic changes through a Cabinet reshuffle while the problems persist. Citizens are still being arrested, tortured and used to feed the crocodiles of the Red River. Perceived opponents of the Government like Machokali are disappearing mysteriously.

In the middle of the confusion, a symbolic explosion of the Ruler's hyper inflated body brings an anti-climax to the conflict. The MVP organises a People's Assembly, a public forum. It also calls for a one-day strike. The Ruler uses the same day to celebrate his birthday and tags it a day of National Rebirth. It is aimed at taking the wind out of the sail of MVP's agitation. He announces reforms which merely sustain the *status quo* of exploitation and repression. The public event ends up as usual in chaos. Kaniuru shoots Kamiti, but he is rescued by the people along with Nyawira who is also under threat. Official report has it that they are both killed in the attack. The struggle for survival and power sees the Ruler planning the elimination of Tajinika and the latter plotting to overthrow the Ruler. Tajinika succeeds through a coup but a new order remains elusive.

In their putative state of 'resurrection', Kamiti becomes persuaded in the end that he has to join the MVP as there is no alternative to a mass action under a mass movement if the totalitarian regime must be brought down and a people's government enthroned in its place. As Nyawira puts it, 'organization was the only way by which people could effect meaningful changes. Agonize less; organize more!' (p. 427).

Nyawira (also Kamiti by extension) represents the antithesis of the Ruler. Nyawira is a lady who defies all the stereotypes often associated with the female in a patriarchal society. She leads other women to contest patriarchy at the public level by organising acts of sabotage and disobedience. At the domestic level, she organises the women to resist domestic violence suffered by one of them, Virginia, in the hands of her husband, Tajinika. The latter is beaten and tormented by the women, in a laughable 'reversal of fortune'. In this way, Nyawira underscores the benefit of organisation as a path to social re-engineering.

The Ruler is like the long-reigning King Louis XIV of France who was nicknamed the Sun King. King Louis believed that he owned France and its entire citizenry, hence, his famous saying: 'I am the State'. With the Ruler's absolute powers, all checks in democratic rule have disappeared. He is the country and its constitution. The currency of the country carries his picture alongside that of the Red River, a symbolic reference to the bloodletting that characterises his ascension to and sustenance in power. His picture is the symbol of the ruling party. In actual fact, he is the party. He controls

everything in Aburiria including proverbs, songs, riddles, and wise sayings of the people. His obsession with seven as a figure underscores his mystique conception of power; hence, he constantly seeks to own the country and its people. But to ridicule him, the Ruler is publicly referred to in a sarcastic Freudian slip as 'a cheap and holy arse hole', 'a cheap Excellency'. As Ngugi puts it:

He had sat on the throne so long that even he could not remember when his reign began. His rule had no beginning and no end; and judging from the facts one may well believe the claim. Children had been born and had given birth to others and those others to others and so on, and his rule had survived all generations (p. 5).

This is a veiled reference to the phenomenon of president for life or self-perpetuation in power as exemplified in the politics of Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Cameroun, Burundi and Rwanda.

The cover page picture illustrates the author's message further. It bears a shiny black bird, crow, perched with an army General's cap on its head. On its wing is a seven-colour flag of the nation. Directly opposite the crow is a smaller crow with a civilian cap made of leopard skin, in the fashion of Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire. There is, therefore, a deliberate attempt by Ngugi to blend history and reality with literary fabrications.

The overwhelming ambience of putrescence which symbolises the moral rot of the state is an inter-textual reference to Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Using shit as a trope to devalue the mighty Ruler, the shit spilled in the office of the Ruler by Tajinika defies all efforts by Sikiokuu to clean it up. The author writes:

He had certainly tried to wipe off the mess from his own shirt, but the soiled spots could still be seen. Now he started working on the portrait of the Ruler, trying to clean the spots, but every time he thought he had finished another seemed to emerge as if from inside the portrait and in the end he gave up and covered it with a towel (pp. 391-92).

This symbolically points at the irredeemable nature of the Ruler's regime and where peaceful removal is impossible, violent change becomes an inevitable option.

In terms of techniques, allegory and irony are crucial elements in the novel. These elements, evident in its setting and characterisation, lend the novel its universal relevance. The Ruler is simply the Ruler, referring to any dictator in contemporary African history.

In summary, though fictive, the novel echoes actual events and situations in post-colonial Kenya (from Kenyatta to Moi) in particular and Africa in general. Besides, the misrule of the Ruler reminds one of some heads of

State in contemporary African history especially Idi Amin of Uganda, Siad Barre of Somalia, Emperor Bokassa of the Central African Republic, Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, and Sanni Abacha of Nigeria among others. One sees a correlation between the character of the Ruler of Aburiria and that of Kamini in *A Play of Giants* and Basha Bash in *King Baabu*, both written by Soyinka.<sup>6</sup> His despotic acts bring him close to Lagata in Akinwumi Isola's *Saworo Ide* and Kumrhan the Black in Mohammed ben-Abdallah's *The Trial of Mallam Ilya*.

### Conclusion

This article has, through its study of the novels of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, highlighted his salient ideas about Africa's travails of history and the prospects for a brighter future for the continent in the unfolding global reality. In his dissection of the challenges of development facing most African nations in the post-independence era, while recognising the continuous influence of the West on African culture, politics, economy, education, religion and so on, Ngugi has an abiding faith in the possibility of the continent to overcome its past encumbrances so that it can take a significant place in the global arena. This will be a departure from its present marginality or 'otherness', in which it is constructed in Western epistemology.

The above postulations, no doubt, find constant expressions in creative writings, literary criticism and scholarly essays. The article however, uses two epical novels, which happen to be the most recent – *Matigari* and *Wizard of the Crow*, for illustrations. Apart from dramatizing the import of solidarity and unity among those who bear the brunt of neo-colonialism – workers, peasants, unemployed youths, women, urban poor and so on, Ngugi criticises the hegemonic influence of Europe, America and Asia on the economy of Africa even several decades after African countries have gained political independence. This domination is assured through the local ruling elite who use their access to political power for material accumulation. He denounces the perpetuation of minority rule (which colonialism imposed) in the form of one-party rule which was obtained in Kenya under Jomo Kenyatta and Arap Moi or outright military rule in Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, Togo and so on. As a way out, he advocates for greater participation and inclusion of women and youths in the struggle for a new Africa. Cooperation across gender and generational divide is a *sine qua non* for the continent to achieve true liberation from external domination in the twenty-first century. The most important step in this regard is for Africans to conquer fear and rebuild their self-confidence. After all, many nations of Europe being regarded as developed today were once colonies of other nations. They, however, struggled to overcome the scars of domination.

From the patterns of conflicts in the two novels, which feature conflicts between the forces of oppression and the dispossessed, Ngugi contends that to effectively tackle the problems of economic injustice and political instability, there is the need to re-define the nature, structure and function of the State in a way that will guarantee access of the majority to its resources. Here, Ngugi laments the continuous dependence of African nations on their colonisers and those institutions designed to ensure their incorporation into the 'global market', though as perpetual margins. Globalisation has its own limitations and imperfections, however pleasantly it is packaged (see Kagarlitsky 2000). He, however, believes that Africa can come out of the troubled woods through a decolonised system of education, rightly rooted in people's tradition and modernity. He also advocates for an economic system that is equitable in the distribution of communal resources and a political order that entrenches sovereignty in the people from whom power is derived and for whom it is meant to be exercised.

In conclusion, it is our contention that Ngugi's art is a politically engaged and culturally conscious art, marked by a measured blend of themes with aesthetics. He enlists his novels in the task of re-defining Africa's past and present with a view to creating a better deal for the continent in the future. The interrogation of the 'peculiar mess' in Africa's history provided in the novels and analysed in this article is a valuable effort. The works offer inexorable insights that will be of essence in negotiating a better deal and ensuring an auspicious future for the African continent in the global arena.

## Notes

1. *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Mother Sing for Me* were products of Ngugi's collaboration with his colleagues at the University of Nairobi and the people of Kamiriithu community. The popularity of the plays and their anti-government messages got the playwright into trouble with the State authorities. He was arrested and detained for over a year between 1977 and 1978. The community theatre was also destroyed.
2. Herein lies the source of Ngugi's disappointment with Kenyatta's regime and that of Arap Moi who succeeded him. One can also understand when he creates satiric characters in his novels who are ideological turncoats like Dr. Luminous Karamu-Mbuya-Ituika in *Wizard*. According to the Ruler, Luminous used to edit *Eternal Patriot*, an underground leaflet, which is against his regime. 'In the *Eternal Patriot*..., he used to denounce me as a creator of a nation of sheep. Now in the *Daily Patriot*, he helps me shepherd the sheep with his literary lashes' (p. 21). Perhaps that also informs his remarks that 'There are two types of people in this country. There are those who sell out and those who are patriots' (*Matigari*, p. 126).

3. Tom Mboya the Minister of Economic Development was assassinated in 1969 while Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, a Member of Parliament, was also killed in 1975.
4. *Ole* in Yoruba language means 'thief'. This name accords with the allegorical schema of Ngugi in the novel. However, *Ole* in Kenya means 'son of'.
5. *Woza Albert!* derives its title from the name of Albert Luthuli, the first president of the African National Congress. It depicts the condition of abject poverty and dehumanisation under which the blacks lived in apartheid South Africa.
6. *A Play of Giants* satirises Field Marshal Idi Amin of Uganda, along with other African heads of State such as Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, Macias Nguema of Equatorial Guinea and Emperor Jean-Baptiste Bokassa of the Central African Republic. On the other hand, *King Baabu* focuses on General Sanni Abacha of Nigeria, with reference to other military rulers including Generals Olusegun Obasanjo, Muhammadu Buhari and Ibrahim Babangida.

## References

- Ajayi, Ade J.F., and Espie, I., (eds.), 1972, *A Thousand Years of West African History*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Anene, J. and Brown, G., 1972, *Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Bennett, G., 1963, *Kenya: A Political History – The Colonial Period*, Oxford: University Press.
- Cabral, A., 1980, *Unity and Struggle*, London: Heinemann Educational Books Limited.
- Kagarlitsky, B., 2000, *The Twilight of Globalization: Property, State and Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Ngugi, wa Thiong'o and M.G. Mugo, 1977, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, London: Heinemann Educational Books Limited.
- Ngugi, wa Thiong'o, 1977, *Petals of Blood*, London: Heinemann Educational Books Limited.
- Ngugi, wa Thiong'o, 1981, *Writers in Politics: Essays*, London: Heinemann Educational Books Limited.
- Ngugi, wa Thiong'o and Ngugi, wa Mirii, 1981, *I will Marry When I want and Other Plays*, London: Heinemann Educational Books Limited.
- Ngugi, wa Thiong'o, 1986, *Devil on the Cross*, London: Heinemann Educational Books Limited.
- Ngugi, wa Thiong'o, 1986, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literatures*, London: James Currey.
- Ngugi, wa Thiong'o, 1987, *Matigari*, London: Heinemann Educational Books Limited.
- Ngugi, wa Thiong'o, 1993, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Ngugi, wa Thiong'o, 2007, *Wizard of the Crow*, Lagos: Farafina.
- Ngugi, wa Thiong'o and M.G. Mugo, 2009, *Remembering Africa*, Nairobi: East African Publishers Limited.

- Rodney, W., 1982, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Washington DC: Howard University Press.
- Rosenberg, C.G., 2010, 'Kenya' in *Encyclopaedia Americana*, Danbury Connecticut: Scholastic Library Publishers Inc.
- Zezeza, P.T., 2003, *Rethinking Africa's Globalization*, Trenton NJ: Africa World Press.