

## Identity, Politics and Gender Dimensions in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's, *Wizard of the Crow*

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### Abstract

This paper provides a critical overview of the treatment of the questions of identity, politics and gender in Kenyan novelist Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's work, *The Wizard of the Crow*. The issue of identity is explored against the backdrop of the experiences of slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism and globalization in Africa. The critical question raised in the novel is why the disease of contradicting identities continues to afflict the African.. The novel suggests that unless the African recaptures his identity, he/she would continue to exist in unredeemed state of alienation. The novel *Wizard of the Crow* is evaluated as a political Novel. We interrogate the political dispensation of Aburiria, a prototype African country immersed in a dictatorship that controls all aspects of the lives of the people. The paper discusses the author's emerging consciousness that indicate the new multi-party political dispensations as nothing but despotic mutations. Finally the paper explores the maturity of the novelist's feminist vision. In the presentation of the character of Nyawira, we have an articulate woman ready to confront the social, cultural and political challenges of postcolonial Africa in the 21st Century. The paper concludes that this novel, does not offer any explicit solutions to the problems facing Africa. Nevertheless, it suggests that the African renaissance can never be achieved under a condition of alienation. Africa should reach out to other countries in the East like India and China and learn about the possibilities of resisting domination and minimizing the effects of globalization.

### **Introduction**

Kenyan Novelist, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's latest work of fiction, *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), provides a continuum of the authors' literary career spanning over a period of 40 years. His novels, particularly, seem to present a consistent revision of thought, style, content and characterization all the way through *Weep Not Child* (1964), *The River*

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*Between* (1965), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Devil on the Cross* (1983) and *Matigari* (1986)

His other publications include a collection of short stories, *Secret Lives*, ( 1977 ) the plays; *The Black Hermit* (1963) *This Time Tomorrow* ( 1970), *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* - with Michere Mugo, (1976) and *I Will Marry When I Want*, - with Ngugi wa Mirii ( 1977). Ngugi has also authored several collections of essays and children's books. Recently he published a collection of essays, *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* (2009), in which he argues that indigenous African Languages can be used to bring about an African renaissance as a way out of the current alienation of the continent. In this publication, he accepts that African Languages may be limited, but a wider audience can always be reached through translation. His latest publications are the autobiographical works, *Dreams in as Time of War*, *A Childhood Memoir* (2011) and *In the House of Interpreters* (2012) which relieves his early childhood and his school days at Alliance High School.

*Wizard of the Crow*, first published in Kikuyu language as *Murogi wa Kagogo* (2004), is foremost a political novel. It decries impunity and the abuse of power by political leaders in Africa and addresses associated issues of corruption, poverty, environmental degradation, HIV/AIDS, unemployment, gender power relations and globalization among others.

The paper is aimed at presenting the novelist's treatment of the question of identity, politics and gender in this novel. Although the discussion treats the topics separately, in the novel they are integrated as part of the organic whole.

#### **IDENTITY:**

The question of Identity and the African personality runs deep into African history. It can be viewed against the backdrop of decade's slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism and now globalization. Throughout history, the aim has been uniform; to uproot or distort the cultural identity of the African people for ultimate economic gain of the Western World.

The continuum of subjugation of the African people through slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism and now globalization has led to the creation of a postcolonial personality who is trapped in a contradictory Western civilization. This process has been perfected through cultural imperialism over time. The dominant west has continued to impose their values on the African people and deliberately

contaminate their cultures. Cultural imperialism finds its refinement in globalization whose main motivating force is economics 'without borders'. Globalization continues to be a key instrument in the destruction of the cultural coherence of individual nation-states. Its aim is not different from slavery and colonialism (Campbell: 2002, Baran: 2006(1998)).

In *Wizard of the Crow*, this problematic is aptly captured in the reflections of the protagonist, Kamiti Wa Karimiri as he tells 'the story of his travels in time and space;'

I saw this: around the seventeenth century Europe impregnated some in Africa with its evil. These pregnancy gave birth to the slave driver of the slave plantation, who mutated into the colonial driver of the colonial plantation, who years later mutated into the neo-colonial pilots of the postcolonial plantation. Is he now mutating into the modern driver and pilot of a global plantation? (p.681)

The questions raised by Kamiti Wa Karimiri in his reflections, abstract the question of the African identity in the microcosmic of Aburiria, where one class has sold their African heritage and the other is struggling to rescue it.

The explication of this is best viewed in the character of Titus Tajirika who gives up his job as a teacher and joins the construction industry. Through the patronage of the minister for foreign affairs, Mr. Marcus Macho Kali, he is endorsed as the chairman of 'The Marching to Heaven Project.' The project is constructing a skyscraper in honour of the ruler's birthday. By the end of the day the appointment is announced, Tajirika has amassed three bags of Buri currency notes in bribes from prospective contractors (P.106). Unfortunately, his new found wealth triggers off a disease that had been dormant in him. He becomes afflicted with the 'demons of whiteness'. According to *The Wizard of the Crow*, Tajirika is suffering from a severe dose of 'White-ache.' (P. 180). This is after he realizes that with his new position he would end up being the richest man in Africa and the only thing missing to distinguish him from the other rich black people is a white skin (179-180).

Tajirika is sick with colonial brainwashing. He is held captive by the mirage created by a postcolonial sickness in which the African petty bourgeoisie has continuously sought to be refined slaves of the

West. In order for Tajirika to come to terms with his aspired white destiny, the Wizard of the Crow - Kamiti Wa Karimiri- suggest a number of options. He must begin by becoming a willing slave of the west and demonstrate this by giving up his name. Secondly he must loose his language and finally marry a white woman and become English.

But the only English identity that he can assume is that of 'a punk, a prostitute or at best a homeless ex-colonial' (P. 179-188). This final option shocks Tajirika and his wife Virginia into a temporary cure:

"No! No! Tajirika and Virginia shouted, opening their eyes in fright. "Black is beautiful. Give us back our blackness," they moaned as if the Wizard of the Crow had already shorn them of it (P.188).

Nevertheless Tajirika cannot wholly be cured of this disease. When his fortune turns round for the better and he becomes a minister in the government, the demons of whiteness becom him. He identifies a company in the United States, Genetica International, which specializes in genetic engeering, cloning, transplants and plastic surgery. Here a person can be changed to any identity they desire. Tajirika engages this company to give him a white identity. By the time the company is exposed as fake, Tajirikla has acquired a white arm and a white leg (P.741-742).

Through the character of Tajirika, Ngugi attempts to understand the problems of identity for the African especially for the African elite. They are presented as akin to Amos Tutuola's 'complete gentleman' in *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1958). The complete gentleman has no body of his own. In order to visit his fiancée, he borrows different body parts from different people but has to return them to the owners at some point (P. 240).

The critical question raised in the novel is why the disease of contradicting identities continues to afflict the African, especially 'the educated and the rich' (p.223). The African identity seems to be in a permanent state of transition. The African then continues to exist in an unredeemed state of alienation. In order to emerge from this state the novel suggests that the African must recapture his identity in the mirror of the Wizard of the Crow.

#### **POLITICS:**

The political landscape of Aburiuria is dominated by the ruler who began ruling the country 'before the world began and would end only after the world has ended' (P.6).

Essentially, the political theme of the wizards of the crow explores the politics of dictatorship and the effects of ruling oligarchies in Africa and other third World countries. State power is epitomised in the leader. (Ugwanyi: 2011) It is a country with no freedom, an authoritarian state that cannot tolerate any level of criticism or dissent (Lonsdale: 1992:13-14, 26).

In the story of the project, 'Marching to Heaven', the novel explores the extent to which African leaders can go in order to immortalize themselves. 'The ruler is the voice of the people' (P.24). Power and politics centre on the ruler who controls the country through a system of brutal political patronage revolving around the plundering of public funds. Those in political favour have access to public funds through which they can consolidate personal wealth and political power. The social-political corruption in Africa is typified in the characterization of the ruler and those who surround him. The ruler's key sycophants are Machokali, Sikiokuu and Bigben. They all have been abroad to have their eyes, ears and tongue respectively elongated to be the perfect ears, eyes and the mouthpiece of the ruler. The current order has flourished with the support of the West and international capital. The novel opens with the country that is in a sorry state, petrified in a postcolonial state symbolized by the sickness of the ruler (Ugwanyi:2011). There many theories as to the causes of the illness of the ruler (P.3). But at the symbolic level, the ruler's sickness could have been caused by the changing global order. The world has gone through the stages of slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism and the cold war which now has to give way to globalization. The ruler is no longer relevant to the new global order. Dictatorship in African countries is no longer serving the interest of international capital and the bloated pregnancy of the ruler has to give birth to Baby D- Baby Democracy (P.698-699) heralding the birth of multi-party politics in Aburiria.

The candid and prophetic question that Wizard of the Crow raises is the whether the new political dispensation brings about any genuine changes and gains for the people of Aburiria. Apparently it is simply part of the global system of guided freedoms and openness which recycles the same old faces.

The novel rejects the multi-party system as a weak and recycled system that will further destroy the country. And this comes to pass when Titus Tajirika who has now found favour with the ruler and has been appointed minister eventually stages a palace coup and becomes Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasianus Whitehead (P. 753).

The novel presents the political problematic in Africa as genetically arising from the continent's history of subjugation (P.681). Africa has been in a state of loss, transition and crises since the Seventeenth Century. But will the 'Wizard of the Crow' be able to treat this postcolonial malady that has afflicted the continent for so long?

From the characterization of Nyawira and Kamiti Wa Karimiri who are 'the Wizard of the Crow', the novel seems to lay its hope and faith in the intellectuals, the youth and the artists as people who can forge meaningful change in the continent. Change can only be possible if the people deliberately seek to understand the African condition and then lay concrete strategies to change the social-political landscape. In the intellectual, the youth and the artists we have people who can deconstruct the postcolonial reality and provide the much needed leadership.

In the character of Kamiti wa Karimiri the novel also proposes the embracing of a broader consciousness in seeking solutions to the problems facing the African continent. We find the pointer to this in Karimiri's abstractions on and acceptance of prophets and thinkers ranging from Confucius, Buddha, Moses, John the Baptist, to the Kikuyu seer, Mugo Wa Kibiro (P210-211).

In the emerging consciousness, we have an expansion of the visions of Matigari in the author's earlier novel, *Matigari*. Matigari feels that the old house that belonged to the slave master and now occupied by the new political class has to be destroyed. A new, bigger house, that can accommodate all Kenyans need to be erected. It has to be a bigger house, with a proper foundation. A house that would provide equity and justice for all. (Ngugi; 1986:157)

#### **GENDER:**

*Wizard of the Crow* presents the woman in the post colony is a person who is trapped in many ways. She is trapped in the patriarchal and the colonial past as well as by the emerging male elite in independent Aburiria. The novel captures the position of African woman as complicated by a composite of oppressive forces, making her condition unique and different from that of woman from the Western world.

Apart from patriarchy, the struggles of the African Woman and her sister in the African Diaspora have also been in the context of realities of slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism (Verba:1996). In

the discarded 'political catechism' of Nyawira, the black woman is presented as the most oppressed woman:

She is oppressed on account of her colour like all black people in the world; she is oppressed on account of her gender like all women in the world; and she is exploited and oppressed on account of her class like all workers and peasants in the world (P.428).

The ruthlessness of patriarchal oppression is epitomized in the treatment of Rachael by her husband the ruler of Aburiria. When she questions his sexual transgressions against school girls, she is banished to a mansion built on seven acres of land where the ruler attempts to freeze her life in time and space (P 6-10). Virginia, the wife of Tajirika on the other hand represents the woman who is trapped in postcolonial structures of the political elite. Although living in the modern age, her husband views her as a lesser being rather than an equal partner. She is continuously in dire need for domestication and her husband views beating her as his male prerogative (P. 126).

The novelist however rejects the gender stereotypes. He presents Virginia firstly as an astute and organized woman who manages the domestic and the business spheres excellently when her husband is incarcerated. Secondly when her husband metes violence against her, she overcomes her fears and demands to be treated humanely by her male partner. She reports the incident to the Wizard of the Crow who in turn organizes a women's court that punishes Tajirika (P. 431). Nevertheless, in spite of her rising consciousness, Virginia is unable to transcend the glass box of her current middle class status. To the very end of the novel, she still clings to her status as the wife of the political elite and savours the benefits of that position by having a face- and breast- lift for herself as her husband is partly transformed into a white man. (P.743).

She apparently has been unable to transcend what De Beauvoir refers to the woman's 'otherness' and become 'self.' She is unable to overcome the definitions, labels and essences that limit her existence. (Tong: 1992(1989) P. 208-211)

In the character of Grace Nyawira, Wizard of the Crow provides insights to an emerging feminine consciousness that rejects traditional gender roles and moves beyond the traditional male/female dichotomy in gender analysis. The novel promotes a positive image of women,

decries transgressions against women and projects what Learner refers to as 'a feminine vision and consciousness of society' (Learner: 1986:238). Nyawira is indeed a revision of the author's earlier female characters all the way from Nyambura (River Between) Mwihaki (Weep Not Child), Mumbi (A Gain of Wheat), Wanja (Petals of Blood), Waringa (Devil on the Cross) and Guthera in Matigari. In Nyawira, Ngugi creates a character who is at the centre striving to create a new identity. He presents a mature feminine vision of a woman ready to confront the social, cultural and political challenges of postcolonial Africa in the 21st Century.

Nyawira is born into the middle class but as her consciousness develops, she rejects her father's empty materialism. She marries the poor artist, Kaniuru against her father's wishes. When she realizes that Kaniuru married her with his nose and eyes on her father's property, she divorces him and strikes out on her own. In the novel the author presents her as an astute organizer not only of women but for the larger Movement for the Voice of the People. She represents a new consciousness of a woman who can provide meaningful political leadership in a collective effort to heal the land.

In her union with Kamiti Wa Karimiri, Nyawira is also 'the Wizard of the Crow' and in the pair is the symbol of the indomitable human spirit. A spirit that can never die. A spirit that can consistently resist the constant cycles of repression and exploitation in postcolonial Africa. As the character, Constable Arigagai Gatherer puts it; "let nobody lie to you, the Wizard of the Crow will never die. True, Haki ya Mungu" (P.766).

#### CONCLUSION:

In the Wizard of the Crow, the novelist does not pretend to offer explicit solutions to the problems facing Africa or even Kenya. However through the multiple voices and eclectic visions in the novel it is clear that African people should not expect any progress as long as their dreams of development are tied to global capital which puts them in 'a permanent debt trap' (P.86) and dictates unworkable political systems.

The novel further suggests that the African renaissance can never emerge in a condition of alienation. The educated members of the middle class symbolised by character of Tajirika, should stop cheating themselves and accept that they are sick. They suffer from brainwashing and acculturation arising out of cultural imperialism. They prefer the foreign over their own. Wizard of the Crow seems to



suggest African people should learn from the experiences of other countries like India and China and learn that it is possible to resist cultural domination and the effects of globalization. For the African people to make any meaningful development, they have to be healed from the current postcolonial indisposition and recapture their identity in the mirror of the Wizard of the Crow.

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