Satirical Magical Realism in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Wizard of the Crow*

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Abstract

This paper concerns itself with Ngugi Wa Thiongo's demonstration of his use of satiric magical realism to illuminate the political irregularities in his postcolonial Kenya. The depiction of the postcolonial African situation calls for this narrative style. This narrative style is used for the primary purpose of mockery, ridicule and humor. Ngugi is sickened by the political instabilities in his postcolonial Kenya. Ngugi exceeds the limits of the real in a bid to mock leadership in Africa. He manipulates the realistic mode, he uses characters who exceeds the limits of what is real. Ngugi uses magical realism as an effective platform for political discourse. It reaches into the essence of abusive governments. This study is hinged on the sociological approach.

Keywords: affinities, chimera, embedded, nucleus, phenomena

Introduction

Wizard of the Crow gives a satiric critique of postcolonial African regimes known for their economic mismanagement, nepotism, sycophancy, corruption, dictatorship, and subservience to foreign powers. *Wizard of the Crow* is an ambitious, magisterial, comic novel set in the fictional Free Republic of Aburiria. Ngugi demonstrates his use of satirical magical realism; here character representation exceeds the limits of conventional realism. Ngugi Wa Thiongo mocks leadership in Africa through manipulations of the realistic mode, which helps effectively in representing political issues in Africa. The work is critical, insightful and inspiring. Narrating the fictional town of Aburiria, Ngugi writes:

> In Aburiria, wild animals were becoming rare because of

> dwindling forests and poaching, and tourist pictures of beggars or children with kwashiorkor and flies massing around their runny noses and sore eye were prized for their authenticity. If there were no beggars in the streets, tourists might start doubting whether Aburiria was an authentic African country (35).

This is the state of most African countries today where the poor gets poorer and the rich gets richer. The streets are filthy and filled with beggars in rags. There is no doubt that Aburiria is Kenya and the "The Ruler" of Aburiria is Moi. Aburiria is an absurdly ministerial and oppressive post-colonial state. The protagonist of the novel is Kamiti, who apparently is the *Wizard of the Crow*. There is importantly, the magical love story of Kamiti and Nyawira, who unpremeditatedly become the oracle of hope amidst ongoing authoritarian oppression.

Wizard of the Crow tells the story of the Free Republic of Aburiria, a fictitious African country ruled by a dictator known as the Ruler and his sycophantic ministers who are engaged in a power struggle, and who enjoy plotting against each other in their desires to win his (the Ruler) utmost sympathy and love. In *Wizard of the Crow* various groups are battling for the protection of their individual interests, obviously their selfishness. This includes the Ruler who is engaged in a ferocious battle to cling to his declining power. There are the poverty stricken Aburirian masses who are battling for jobs and the women who are fighting against male domination, both groups led by Kamiti the wizard and his companion, Nyawira. There is also the Global Bank, the representative of the neocolonial forces who are battling for the control of the country's economy.

When asked about the present situation in Africa during an interview in September 2000, Ngugi exasperatedly declared that “Things are so bad I think the only way to write about it is utter fantasy, fable – it is so awful!" (Mills 1). Ngugi went a lot further than his fellow magic realist writers in his depiction of postcolonial Kenya. He stretches the usage of magical realism by making his setting mythical rather than real. This gives him the freedom akin to that of those who spin fairy tales.

Set in an imaginary African country of Aburiria, *Wizard of the Crow* opens with rumours about the unexplained illness of the Ruler. Because the Ruler's illness cannot be scientifically diagnosed, Aburirians have developed extraordinary theories about its causes. Amongst these theories, five have been on the lips of Aburirian citizens: the first theory blames the Ruler's illness on the anger he developed after being denied an interview by the *Global Network News* during a visit in New York; the second theory claims the illness was a curse from the cry of a wronged he-goat; the third blames it on the Ruler's long rule; the fourth traces it to the Ruler's legal wife, Rachael's refusal to shed tears after her fall from grace; and the fifth believes that the illness is the sole work of the daemons that the Ruler had housed in a special chamber in the State House, who had now turned their backs on him and withdrew their protective services (3-10). The Ruler's illness and Aburirians' theories about it are reflective of fables which are defined as stories with fantastic events and creatures having allegorical meaning. The Ruler's absolute power depends on sycophants like Sikiokuu, Machokali, and Big Ben, who have gone as far as surgically enlarging their ears, eyes, and tongue, respectively, in order to be his most loyal spies and spokespersons, in order to gain his love.

In Aburiria, nepotism and corruption are the basic actions of the state, the main interest of the elite who frequent the Ruler is self-preservation, and they know what to do to remain in the good book of the dictator whose only criterion for cabinet appointments is the candidate’s loyalty to him. Thus, when the Ruler learns that Machokali, the sycophant-in-chief, has gone to England to surgically remove his eyes to serve him better, he was very pleased.

This is indeed a satire on African leaders who surround themselves with sycophants who weave self-seeking flatteries that the leaders often seem to rely on. The free republic of Aburiria is neither free nor a republic and its very name is an irony. The Ruler announces a new kind of democracy in which he is the head of every party. Crooks are appointed as upholders of the law and their criminality

praised as a virtue. One is exposed to characters like Machokali who went to a London hospital:

> Not because he was ill but because he wanted to have his eyes enlarged, to make them ferociously sharp... so that they would be able to spot the enemies of the Ruler no matter how far their hiding places. Enlarged the size of electric bulbs his eyes were now the most prominent feature of his face, dwarfing his nose, cheeks and forehead. The Ruler so touched by his devotion and public expression of loyalty that even before the MP returned home from England the Ruler had given him the Ministry of Foreign Affairs... (12) … so that Machokali would be his representative eye wherever, in whatever corner of the globe lay the Ruler's interest…(13).

What makes Ngugi's magical realism unique is the fairy-like narration of events. The once-upon-a-time narrative technique allows for satire and humor as well as a depiction of the horror and injustice of life under the Ruler. Indeed, this is what drives all the characters and their actions in the novel.

The Ruler's positive response vis-a-vis Machokali's act of devotion spurs so many body modifications by other sycophants. Thus, in the Ruler's entourage, another back-bencher MP decides to follow the footsteps of Machokali. Nothing can stop this particular cabinet member, for he goes as far as secretly selling his father's plot and borrowing money to buy a ticket to France in order to serve the Ruler.

He did not have much money, so he secretly sold his father's plot and borrowed the rest to buy himself a flight to France and a hospital bed in Paris, where he had his ears enlarged so that, as he also put it in his press statement, he would be able to hear better and therefore be privy to the most private of conversations between husband and wife, children and their parents, students and teachers... All in service of the Ruler. His ears were larger than a rabbit's and always primed to detect danger at any time from any direction (14).

When Sikiokuu comes back with his new look, the Ruler is pleased with what he sees and decides to upgrade the former's position in

the cabinet:

> His ears were larger than a rabbit's and always primed to detect danger at any time and from any direction. His devotion did not go unnoticed, and he was made Minister of State in charge of spying on the citizenry. The secret police machine known as M5 was now under his direction. And so Silver Sikiokuu he became, jettisoning his earlier names. (14)

Obviously these extreme cases of loyalty are found in postcolonial African countries; for example, in Togo, Colonel Assila of the Togolese Armed Forces offered to sacrifice himself in order to persuade General Eyadema to stay in power. Like other postcolonial dictators, the Ruler of Aburiria adores flattery, praises, and glorification. The Sikiokuus of postcolonial African countries know how to play this game well. In order to continue to enjoy the dictator's favours, these shameless sycophants' quotidian preoccupation is how to please the dictators and rally the people behind them in order to give the impression that the dictators are loved. They make sure that all the actions of the dictators are disseminated to the citizens. In Aburiria, any action of the Ruler is in the news. "His every moment – eating, shitting, sneezing, or blowing his nose is captured on camera. Even his yawns were news because, whether triggered by boredom, fatigue, or thirst, they were often followed by some nation drama…." (3). In Aburiria the ridiculous does not kill; we learn that an MP, Benjamin Mambo, has been inspired by the fortune of Machokali and Sikiokuu that he had his tongue elongated so he can effectively echo the Ruler's commands to soldiers in the country and threats to his enemies before they reach the Aburirian borders. This earned him the Information Minister portfolio; but he later learned at his own expense that he also needed to enlarge his mouth to retain the ability to speak.

The bodily changes of these three sycophants are also followed by name changes. Marcus became Machokali, Silver became Sikiokuu, and Mambo became Big Ben; the latter is believed to have been inspired by the clock at the British Parliament. Their extraordinarily distorted bodies make them look more like cartoonish characters than humans; this creates a comic

atmosphere throughout the novel. What makes Ngugi's magical realism different from the other two writers examined in the last chapter is that he grounded his use of the concept of magical realism in satire, humor, and sarcasm. This is, no doubt, what the exaggerated depictions of the physical appearance of characters aim at. Ngugi's is satirical magical realism at its finest. At the heart of satirical magical realism is mockery for mockery sake. Benjamin Mambo equally toed the footsteps of Machokali and Sikiokuu. As a young man, Mambo had failed to get into the army because he was smallish; the only avenue that will earn him the minister of defense was elongating his tongue:

> "He chose to have his tongue elongated so that in echoing the Ruler's command his words would reach every soldier in the country...and the tongue, like a dog's now hung out way beyond his lips rendering speech impossible" (14-15).

These body modifications symbolises the distortion of human values. The ascription of these grotesque and surrealistic features serves stylistic and didactic function. These characters' realities exist only in the limit of the reality of the narrative. This is an express instance of the postmodern metaphor and a direct denial of verisimilitude.

Ngugi's distinctive depiction of The Ruler and his devotees makes his critique against them very powerful; by demoting them to the cartoonish characters, he shows how worthless they are – such as the episode where the Ruler is diagnosed with Self-Induced Expansion (SIE). "It seems that 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" (469). This ultimately leads to the rumors that the Ruler was pregnant. By ridiculing the Ruler, he is demystified and left at the mercy of the world. In the opening pages, one is exposed to the insatiability of African leaders. They cling to power as if it were their birthright. Hear Ngugi in page five:

> "He sat on the throne so long that even he could not remember when his reign began. His rule had no beginning and no end... children had been born and had given birth to others and those others to other and so on, and his rule had survived all the

> generation" (5).

Here Ngugi distorts time, which is one of the major characteristics of magical realism. This is done to show that African leaders see leadership as a birthright. They impose themselves on the masses. They become life presidents and dictators. This is a very sad development. One can imagine a rule that has no beginning and no end.

Again, Ngugi defies time by telling the reader that the date of the Ruler's birthday was a subject of a heated debate in parliament. "The date of his birth and the manner of its celebration had been subject of a heated debate in the parliament that went on for seven months, seven days, seven hours and seven minutes..." (12).

One can imagine debating a birthday date and celebration for seven months. Are there no better things to talk about, such as the level of poverty in Aburiria? Devoting so much time to a birthday date and celebration is unpatriotic. Today in Africa the legislative houses devote so much time to looking into things that will be of no benefit to the masses. They sit for hours discussing irrelevant matters. The reader is opened to the paragraph where the Ruler is presented with a special birthday cake which the entire country had made:

> That particular year the stadium was almost full because the curiosity of the citizens had been aroused by a special announcement, repeated over and over in the media, that there would be a special birthday cake, which the entire country had made for the Ruler and which he might make multiply and feed the multitude the way Jesus Christ once did with just five loaves and two fishes. The prospects of cakes for the multitude may explain the more than usual presence of victims of kwashiorkor (12).

It is said that an individual can cook for a community but a community cannot cook for an individual. The national presentation of the cake to the Ruler is an interesting metaphor for what the Nigerian musical maestro, Fela Kuti, had called “suffering and smiling” – a situation where the suppressed people make pretensions about being happy. The cake incident brings to

light the fact that the citizens are hungry and poor. No wonder the glaring image of "victims of kwashiorkor". In the pages that follow, an amazing project is announced on the occasion of the Ruler's birthday. Aburiria is launching the "Heaven Scrape program" or "marching to heaven" as it is informally called, a construction project based on the biblical Tower of Babel. The aim is to reach heaven and allow the Ruler converse directly with God:

> The whole country, the minister of foreign affairs was saying that the entire Aburirian populace, had decided unanimously to erect a building such as had never been attempted in the history except once by the children of Israel, and even they had failed miserably to complete the house of Babel. Aburiria would now do what the Israelites could not do: raise a building to the very gates of heaven so that the Ruler could call on God daily to say good morning and good evening or simply how was your day today, God? (6).

One begins to wonder how the Ruler will ascend such a large tower. Fortunately, a sycophantic minister has a solution. Aburiria will build a personal spaceship so that the ruler can reach the heavenly gates:

> He suggested that another committee under his chairmanship be set up to explore the possibilities for the construction of a space luxury liner called the Ruler's Angel... something simpler bigger than the one the Americans had once launched to Mars, to be called Star Rover or simply Rock Rover in Heaven. Armed with personal spaceship, the only leader in the whole world to possess one, Ruler would make pleasure trips wherever and whenever he fancied, hopping from planet to planet... (18-19).

These surrealistic incidents are salient features of postmodernism. Indeed, Ngugi uses magical realism as an effective platform for political discourse. It reaches into the essence of abusive governments, which are based in every case on an imposed fantasy, on a subjugation of reality in favour of the Ruler's imagination. In the novel, there is not much difference between the lies published every day in the newspapers and the attempt to build a Tower of Babel. In the midst of this turmoil, a mysterious figure arises – a sorcerer known as the wizard of the crow. He is a

primary metaphor in the novel. He is an embodiment of the writer in a postcolonial neoimperial state. His act of mirroring is akin to the writer who reflects the evils of those in power, and also helps the society voice its most obscene thoughts and desires. His real name is Kamiti Wa Karimiri. He struggled as an unsuccessful job seeker, reduced to beggary but in his new guise, he gradually gains acclaim as one of the most powerful and respected people in the country. But it is not a fraud, the wizard of the crow discovers, even to his own surprise that he has genuine divine powers. He can cure ailments, predict the future and even transfer his spirit to the body of a bird:

> He could not tell whether he was in a temporary coma or deep sleep, but when a slight breeze blew it lifted him out of himself to the sky where he now floated... This is really funny, he said to himself when he saw that he looked like a bird and floated like a bird; he enjoyed the rush of cold air against his wings (38).

Like a magic realist Ngugi refused to explain to us this mystery of a man leaving his body and becoming a bird. Ngugi carries on his story as if it was a normal happening. This flight is a reconnaissance of the African diaspora: from the pyramids of Egypt to the Caribbean islands. It is a spiritual journey that helps him come to terms with his immediate predicament. Kamiti sets up a shrine where he is assisted by Nyawira, a leader of an underground movement seeking change and stirring up protests. For Kamiti, individual transformation through spirit reality is very important while Nyawira aims for widespread social change through group action. But this is perhaps the kind of union required to transform Aburiria. Over the course of the novel, the two rebels move close together, both ideological and emotionally, and manage to shake the foundations of the regime. Much of the novel is given over to political intrigue, and Ngugi shows endless enthusiasm in charting the rise and fall of various ministers. The superstitious beliefs of Aburirians are ridiculed through magic, especially as they concern their readiness to believe everything the wizard tells them through divination. Even though the wizard does not perform any miracle per se, his patients are of the firm belief

he can change their conditions through his sorcery. The wizard is aware that his patients do not need any magical intervention in order to better their condition; what they need is self-empowerment, which enables them to exteriorize their suppressed desires without fear. Under the autocratic regime of the Ruler, Aburirians have repressed their most cherished desires because they do not want to antagonize the former. Through this parody of magic, Ngugi tells Aburirians that the miracle is in their own hands, and that only their courage and actions will determine their success. Ngugi's magical realism is satirical because he does not share the superstitious beliefs of his characters; rather, he looks at them with irony and sarcasm.

Joseph McLaren observes that "satirical magical realism refers to the use of this literary style for the primary purpose of mockery, ridicule, and humor, rather than its use in the portrayal of characters and events simply in terms that stretch the boundaries of so-called normative reality" (151). Critics have questioned the effectiveness of the polemic of this novel, given its heavy reliance on satire. Thus, for McLaren, 'the more problematic question is whether the extensive use of satirical magical realism results in distance from the actualities happening on the ground. He goes on to quote the *Sunday Times* review of the novel, which argues that:

> Given the facts on the ground, the real-life Big Men now ruling in Africa and the global machinations of American finance, this satire linking the two still has an important point to make, but is Ngugi's critique less-effective because of high degree of satire, some of which could be considered "burlesque"?, (155)

On the contrary, satirical magical realism makes Ngugi's critique of the postcolonial African autocratic regime more effective because political realities in postcolonial Africa are themselves satirical in nature. For instance; the bodily transformations of Machokali, Sikiokuu, and Big Ben, ministers of Foreign Affairs, State, and Information, respectively, points directly to postcolonial African dictators and their obsession with the control of information. In fact, what guarantees them longevity in power is their ability to control information, which enables them to keep

their citizens in permanent ignorance. They understand that their ability to withhold information to their citizens perpetuates the myths they created around themselves. The Ruler of Aburiria has been able to maintain his grip on power for such a long time through his ministers, who serve as his eyes, ears, and tongue. Aburiria is a police state where the truth of any event must come from the mouth of the Ruler. This is why when the Global Bank officials leaked to the media the information that they were no longer interested in funding Marching to Heaven Project, the Ruler felt betrayed and was angry to the point that he went through a bizarre bodily metamorphosis that turned him into an inflated balloon. The bizarre, even funny actions of the Ruler only highlight the plan of disinformation and terror that he exerts on his own people. It is a serious explication of the dangers of absolute power. According to the narrator, the Global Bank's news had hit the Ruler hard, especially because the Bank had not followed the diplomatic protocol that obligates it to inform the Ruler via diplomatic channels or a special envoy. When Tajirika, his closest advisor finds him swinging in the air, the Ruler pointed at the newspapers scattered on the floor:

> Look around you. Look at those papers. Look at all the headlines. Is there a soul in the whole wide world who is not reading this? Where have diplomatic nicety gone? Imagine how my enemies must be rejoicing, believing that their agitation was responsible for halting our plans for Marching to Heaven! (650-651)

Tajirika is immersed in confusion and astonishment and could not comprehend what is going on with the Ruler, the only one to explain the causes of his physical transformation. However, as soon as his personal doctor arrives, the latter lays bare his mind. In the narrator's words:

> The Ruler was quite candid with the doctor. He explained that when he read the news from the Global Bank, he had become so angry that his body started to expand even more. He had called his special advisor to have somebody to talk to in the hope that this would ease the anger within. While waiting for Tajirika, he had read some more newspapers, only to feel his anger mount until it almost choke him, and that was when he

> felt himself lifted uncontrollably. He could not exactly tell when it started, but it was definitely when he was already in the air that his tummy began to ache. At first the pain was manageable, but now it had become unbearable. (652)

It is clear that it is not the rejection of the request for funding that makes the Ruler angry; rather, it is the Bank's decision to release the information to the media in New York. Had the information been directly communicated to the Ruler, he and his cabinet as usual would have devised an extraordinary explanation that may have even led to new celebrations. The whole political structure in Aburiria is hinged on lies, and whoever gives a version contradictory to those lies is accused of treason. This is why it is not surprising that the Ruler's most hated prisoners are journalists, historians, and professors. He refers to them as terrorists and rumormongers. Obviously, one can relate this with almost all the African countries. The Ruler is a demagogue, who uses emotionally charged language to manipulate and control his people in order to win their sympathy and turn them against those who dare tell the truth. Thus, when the Ruler finally comes to the podium to grant parole to political prisoners, to citizens of Aburiria who proposed the Marching to Heaven, the Aburirian Tower of Babel, as birthday gift, he gets another chance to denigrate journalists and professors among them:

> ...This terrorist of intellect has spent ten years in jail, said the Ruler, but because of this historic occasion, I have let him out early. But professor Materu would not be allowed to grow his beard a length more than half an inch, and if he transgressed, he would be re-imprisoned... All the other dissidents had to swear that never again would they collect and pass on rumors as history, literature, or journalism.... (20)

Here fiction seems to imitate life because Ngugi himself was imprisoned by the government. Many commentators point at this as the target of the satire in *Wizard of the Crow.* In 1977, during the time Arap Moi was serving as Kenya's vice-president, he ordered the imprisonment of Ngugi for writing a play in his native language Gikuyu. *Ngaahika Ndeda,* later translated as *I Will Marry When I Want,* which was considered too critical of neocolonial Kenya, and therefore too rabble rousing for the masses it was

written for. After his one - year imprisonment without trial, he lost his professorship at Nairobi University. So, professor Materu may be Ngugi, which also confirms the parallel between Aburiria and Kenya under Arap Moi. The plight of journalists and elites have already been discussed in the previous chapters, but the fact that postcolonial African writers discuss this theme in many of their artistic work is proof that it is widespread across the continent. In Aburiria, fantasies and realities are so indistinguishable that their depiction requires a concentrated dose of satire as Ngugi does in this novel.

Conclusion

This paper bears testimony to the fact that reality is not enough to represent the absurd realities of the world we find ourselves in; a writer should seek new ways to represent the harsh realities of the society we find ourselves in. Ngugi uses satirical magical realism to bring to light the idiocy, greed and corrupt tendencies of manipulative leaders in Kenya.

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