

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

STYLE AND LANGUAGE AS VERITABLE TOOLS FOR NATIONAL
RE-ORIENTATION AND TRANSFORMATION: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF NGUGI WA
THIONG'O'S *WIZARD OF THE CROW*

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ABSTRACT

In *Wizard of the Crow*, Ngugi blends satire and polemic in his depiction of an African nation at crossroads in the aftermath of the white rule. Essentially a realist work, the author uses his peculiar style and language to sniff out the foul stench of complacency towards despotism, repression of women and ethnic minorities, widespread corruption and – under girding of all these – a neocolonial system in which today's lending banks and multinationals have supplanted yesterday's European overlords. References are made to Ngugi's skilful use of literary and linguistic approaches to x-ray the ideational, interpersonal and textual functions which the text fulfils as a realist literature. At the end, this paper's main contribution is to firmly situate stylistic and linguistic roles of Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* in an encompassing socio-political and economic framework so as to present innovative approaches that will shape national transformation blueprints into more achievable and sustainable development

Key Words: Transformation, Corruption, Neo-colonialism, Dictatorship, Realism.

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INTRODUCTION

The value of literature in national transformation cannot be under-estimated. It is evident that it has been used over the ages by gifted men and women, who subtly exploit language and style to send across their messages. These messages are not conveyed as stark history or mere article, but are presented in imaginative and entertaining stories, wrapped up in weighty symbolism.

The distinguishing feature of literature is imagination. This is not confined to that of fantasy or to the creation of characters and episodes that never had 'real' existence. It means, according to

Chapman (1983), "that the linguistic utterance which involves imagination has a quality beyond the use of words to convey referential meaning." A work of literature may indeed offer information and it will probably have a meaningful content, but it is the use of language in its most imaginative way that distinguishes literature from other forms of writing. A literary artist chooses and manipulates language with greater complexity than the average language user can or wishes to exercise.

It is this imaginative use of language for entertainment and social criticism that carves out a niche for Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow*. Ngugi wa

Thiong'o is a Kenyan novelist, playwright, poet, teacher, film maker and critic. He has become one of the most widely read African writers. His latest novel, *Wizard of the Crow* (2006) is a long novel of 768 pages. It is an attempt to sum up Africa of the 20th century in the context of 2000 years of world history. Though rooted in realism, the novel is influenced by Ngugi's exile in London in the 80s when he helped to campaign for the freedom of political prisoners from Kenyan and other post-colonial dungeons.

However some scholars have analyzed *Wizard of the Crow* in different ways to express their views. To literary critic James Gibbon, it is a meditation on theatricality, particularly the theatricality of politics. He equally sees it as an epic burlesque of a sick, lumbering state and a praise song to the manifold forms of African resilience. John Updike posits that in *Wizard of the Crow*, Ngugi offers more indignations than analysis in his portrayal of postcolonial Africa. Andrew Van der Vlies analyzes the novel as a satire on the betrayal of independence by corrupt governments in neo-colonial Africa. Gilbert Ndi Shang observes that the novel is an exposition of "disturbed movement" of historical "progression" in the post colony wherein the new era of hope often carries shades of the past and seeds of future disillusionment. But in this present study, explanations are made that the peculiar language and style as used by Ngugi are distinct linguistic thumb-prints which can be applied in many national transformational agenda in Africa so as to avert the impending collapse of instituted democratic settings which have done little or nothing to ameliorate the ugly trends of neo-colonialism, ineptitude leadership, lack-luster political system and enthroned injustice in many poverty stricken African nations.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to explain that linguistic and stylistic models can be used as prescient prisms through which social, cultural and political transformations on the African continent can be apprehended and awareness created on the need for a more representative government and egalitarian society.

Methodology

The methodologies employed are stylistic and textual analysis whereby the themes of the novel are examined in order to analyze what the novel has at its core – that is, the spirit of gentle resistance in defiance of everyday greed.

A SYNOPSIS OF THE NOVEL

In *Wizard of the Crow*, Ngugi blends satire and polemic in his depiction of an African nation at crossroads in the aftermath of white rule. The novel set in Free Republic of Aburiria is an allegory presented as a modern – day folktale, fraught with tricksters, magic, disguised lovers and daring escapes.

The ruler of this fictional African country has been in power and has ruled his people with an iron fist since independence. He is both the ruler and the lord of everyone and nobody dares question the exercise of his despotic powers. Within the period of his governance, the country is in such economic, social and political devastation that the majority of the masses are starving. But in the midst of the poverty and unemployment, he decides to build a testimony to his legacy, the world's tallest building, a massive skyscraper, christened Marching to Heaven, a perfect replica of the Biblical Tower of Babel. This represents the height of his quest for personal glorification at the expense of the wellbeing of the citizenry.

The plans to erect the building precipitate a nationwide mania that compels tens of thousands of Aburirians to gather in front of the office of the project's chairman. They form two lines: one filled with suit-clad businessmen seeking construction contracts and ready to pay whatever bribes; the other filled with poor men desperate for work. But all is dependent on the release of funds from the Global Bank, which according to James (2006) in his review of *Wizard of the Crow*, represents the neo-classical Santa Claus of strings-attached capital. Though, not backed by funds to carry out this project as he has run out of the country's Buri notes (which in Gikuyu language means "worthless"), the Ruler approaches the Global Bank (Symbolic of the IMF or World Bank) and asks for loan to finance the project.

Kamiti and Nyawira find themselves allied in opposition to the Ruler's despotic quest. Though Kamiti has a master's degree from a prestigious Indian University, he is unemployed and begging. He inadvertently joins a group of political activists that are protesting Marching to Heaven by pretending to be beggars. Police disperse the crowd, eventually chasing Kamiti to the house of Nyawira (who was leading the protest in the guise of a beggar) where he takes refuge. Trying to frighten the police from looking for them in Nyawira's house, Kamiti and Nyawira put a threatening sign outside, warning that anybody who touches the house does so at his/her own peril, since the house belongs to a wizard who has power to bring down hawks and crows from the sky.

Rather than chase away the police, the sign attracts Officer Arigaigai Gatherer, who wants the wizard to use his powers to help him advance in the police force. Kamiti (Wizard of the Crow) has no such powers. Rather he works his magic by getting people to discover, and then speak, what lies latent in their minds. Thus, the Wizard of the Crow helps many characters realize and renew themselves. According to Esposito (n.d.) he represents the realization of the quest for one's own true voice.

The leader is surrounded by a trio of preposterous ministers whose sycophancy culminates to grotesque body modifications in separate plastic surgeries. One volunteers to surgically enlarge his eyes to the size of an electric bulb in order to be in a vantage position to spot the Ruler's political enemies, another enlarges his ears to the size of a rabbit's in order to overhear the conspiracies against the Ruler, while the third enlarges his tongue in order to spread the Ruler's almighty word. Machokali, who enlarges his eyes, is rewarded with the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs (p. 13), while Sikiokuu, who enlarges his ears, is honoured with the post of Minister of State in charge of spying of the citizenry. He becomes the director of the secret police machine known as M5.

Each new development in Aburiria is twisted by Machokali and Sikiokuu to fit narratives meant to facilitate their lust for power and preserve them from the Ruler's wrath. They remain in high positions of power not by virtue of their credentials

in good governance but by their capacity for storytelling and twisting of facts. Soon they help to build the tower of babble. But this is a shaky edifice, haphazardly patched together with layer after layer of stories. It holds a top itself the whole of Aburiria. As the tower grows higher and higher it crumbles to the ground.

On the other hand, Marching to Heaven is no longer realizable as the funds from the Global Bank are not forthcoming. The Ruler goes on a diplomatic mission to America where he becomes absurdly pregnant. But when it looks like the ills in the society will bring the Ruler's reign to an end, he manages to give birth to "Baby D" democracy, a multiparty system in which the legislature is compliant and the Ruler automatically becomes head of whatever party that receives the most votes. Those who would forge a reformed Aburiria are back to square one. In a short coda, Ngugi takes his readers through the first days of the new "democracy" and implies that the Aburirians are well on their way to erecting a new tower, but unfortunately, not a more representative government.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that in many "democratic" governments in African nations, one may inspect the acutely pathological phenomena that appear in colonial and post-colonial dramas played out by men who have possessed the character and strength to seize power, but not the wisdom to control it. The character's insatiable appetite for absolute power and its fruits often lead to political self destruction, and the ancestral cultures of the African people saturate with plenty of abusive violence, injustice, untold hardships and inexplicable corruption.

Style and Language in *Wizard of the Crow*

Style and language are interlaced. Language is the vehicle of style. All literary artists have peculiar style with which they address realities of their time and this is made possible only through language. Lodge, quoted in Fowler (1971) explains that the novelist's medium is language. Whatever he does as a novelist, he does in and through language. The language used in literature is an embellishing device, working to define other elements in fiction. Various elements of literature such as content,

theme, point of view, tone, plot and characterization are realized and given form through the medium of language.

Traditionally, style is associated with manner of expression rather than matter or content of discussion. It is a way of writing or a mode of expression. Each writer has a linguistic “thumb print”, an individual combination of linguistic habits which somehow betrays him in all that he writes. According to Fellini, cited in Nweze (2012, p. 15)

What is important is the way we say it. Art is all about craftsmanship. Others can interpret craftsmanship as style if they wish. Style is what unites memory or recollection, ideology, sentiment, nostalgia, presentiment to the way we express all that. It is not what we say but how we say it that matters.

Leech and Short (2007) summarize the use of the term style thus:

1. Style is a way in which language is used. That is, it belongs to parole rather than to language.
2. Style consists in choices made from the repertoire of the language.
3. Style is defined in terms of a domain of language use (for example, what choices are made by a particular author, in a particular genre, or in a particular text).

From the foregoing, it is evident that style derives from the distinction made between language and parole by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand Saussure. According to him “langue is the code or system of rules common to the users of a language; parole, on the other hand, is the particular selections from the system that individuals make on any one occasion,” like the choice people make in conversation, official communication or legal procedure. In this regard, style pertains to parole as this is basically the way a writer or speaker employs or selects his/her words, phrases and sentences to achieve desired effect in any given context.

In Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow*, language is intricately used and designed to achieve stylistic effect. The style of the novel heightens its value as a lampoon on vicious, venial, iron-fisted exercise of power. It also helps it realize its interpersonal, ideational and textual functions as a literary

masterpiece. The major aspects of style in *Wizard of the Crow* are the skilful use of linguistic parallelism, hyperbole, symbolism, parody, irony, among others, to make its message crystal.

The use of parallel structures from the scene where one of the businessmen in search of magical powers visits the Wizard of the Crow (Kamiti) is remarkable:

But believe me, sir, Wizard, my enemies are many, they are everywhere, they are ruthless, and they want what I want.... I want you to add firmness to my hands, smoothness to my tongue, and power to my eyes.... I want to mesmerize his eyes with mine, soften his heart with my tongue, and seal the deal of friendship with a warm handshake. At the same time, I want you to take away all powers of persuasion from my competitors. Make their hands limp and wet with sweat so that when they shake those of Chairman Titus, they will only piss him off; roughen their tongues so that when they roll them out to sing his praises, they will produce rasping noises worse than the screeching of metal on metal; cause their eyes to run with filth so that when they try to make his captive to their wishes they will only disgust and repel him. (*Wizard of the Crow*, 149-150).

Parallelism adds to the readability of the novel. It also enhances the rhythm and musicality of the structures. Parallelism, according to Leech, cited in Yankson (1987, p 17) “sets up a relationship of equivalence between linguistic items and strongly urges a connection between them”.

Another aspect of style is the use of ordinary speech and dialect. These are employed to register the citizen's dissatisfaction and discontentment with the visionless leadership of the Ruler. The old man that is beckoned to comment on the Ruler's birthday gift deliberately insults him using his vernacular. In his native Gikuyu language, he addresses the Ruler as *Mtukutu Rahisi*, meaning Cheap Excellency. The policeman that has helped the old man to the microphone tells him that the correct phrase is *Mtukufu Rais* or *Rais Mtukufu*. However, the man coughing and clearing his throat

to still himself, calls out into the microphone: *Rahisi Mkundu*, which means Cheap Arsehole.

The other policeman whispers in the old man's ear that it is His Holy Mightiness, *Mtukufu Mtakatifu*. This does not help matters because the old man, now gesturing to the Ruler says: *Mkundu Takatifu*, meaning His Holy Arsehole. At the mention of "His Holy Arsehole" the multitude that have gathered unwillingly for the birthday celebration break out into hilarious laughter which disrupts the event to the discomfiture of the Ruler, his sycophantic ministers and praise singers. The old man uses his dialect to deliberately bring to the attention of the Ruler the meaninglessness of the project, Marching to Heaven.

Besides, Ngugi uses grotesque hyperbole to satirize sycophancy, which is the bane of African politics, including that of Nigeria. Sycophants surround the Ruler. One minister undergoes plastic surgery to enlarge his eyes to the size of electric bulb, another enlarges his ears to the size of a rabbit's while the third enlarges his tongue. In other words, praise singers and sycophants can go to any length to keep themselves in power. Esposito (n.d.) states that the novel is rife with other exaggerated feats – black men try to literally turn themselves into whites, the dictator uncontrollably inflates like a balloon, and a pond made out of tears stops time.

The high point of Ngugi's style is the use of symbolism. Every major action in the novel has its symbolic import. Marching to Heaven symbolizes African leaders' white elephant projects, the pointless extravagance in the face of poverty. It is ironically symbolic that though the country's currency (Buri) is worthless in the international market, the Ruler wants to erect an edifice that is the tallest in the world, reaching to high heavens with no money to finance it. Its reminder of the Tower of Babel indicates that it is billed for failure.

The Global Bank is symbolic of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which most African nations run to for financial assistance. With their long list of conditions, most African nations find themselves in perilous conditions more than they were before they took the loans.

The Ruler's ministers and their supporters build a Tower of Babble. The Marching to Heaven could not be erected because of lack of funds, but they have conjured up enough stories and lies which when piled up is as tall as the Tower of Babel. Just as the Tower of Babel collapsed, the Tower of Babble which they erected also collapses since it is not founded on truth.

A special chamber in the State House is built with the bones of the many citizens the Ruler has killed, which is a symbolic reminder that the system is founded on oppression and violence. The Ruler is also said to be absurdly pregnant and eventually gives birth to "Baby D" democracy. The pregnancy and birth of a new baby symbolize the change in policy or programmes that do not fundamentally depart from the previous ones. New nomenclatures may be given to new policies and programmes, yet the same crop of corrupt politicians are at the helm to implement them.

In all, the novel is a parody. It shows how African leaders collude with foreign economic corporations to loot the nation. In the famous parody in the novel, the Aburirian state and foreign corporations "were all united in one slogan: 'A loot-a continua' " (201), a parody of the motto of FRELIMO's struggle against Portuguese colonialism in Mozambique: *A luta continua* (the struggle continues). Thus, as McLaren (2008, p 152) observes, the novel "shows that the West and global capital are implicated in the dilemmas of African leadership".

Shaping Nigeria's Transformation Blueprints: Lessons from *Wizard of the Crow*

Most African countries have suffered from one form of dictatorship or the other since their independence from the West. Spencer (2012) asserts that dictators have regrettably been among the few things that Africa has been proficient at manufacturing since independence. Africa has also remained prey to the interference of external powers' intent on perpetuating their subordination and, therefore, on nurturing pliant and authoritarian regimes. This is not to exempt African leaders from blame. Spencer (2012) argues that a large part of the blame for Africa's reverses must be shouldered by Africans themselves, especially by their leaders,

for their cupidity, unimaginable plans for development, and inability and often unwillingness to establish democratic links with the dispossessed.

These vested interests of African leaders and neo-colonial overlords have produced fertile material for Africa's writers. Commenting on the role of the literary artist in national transformation, Ngugi, in Sander & Lindfors (2006) avers thus:

Literature is indeed a powerful weapon. I believe that we in Africa or anywhere else for that matter have to use literature deliberately or consciously as a weapon of struggle in two ways: (a) first by trying as much as possible to correctly reflect the world of struggle in all its stark reality, and (b) secondly, by weighting our sympathies on the side of those forces struggling against national and class oppression, exploitation say, against the entire system of imperialisms in the world today. I believe that the more conscious a writer is about the social forces at work in his society and in the world, the more effective he or she is likely to be as a writer (p. 28).

Ngugi has in *Wizard of the Crow* painted a picture of the nature of leadership in Kenya under Arap Moi's government. However, there are dozens of African states and governments, including Nigeria, that fit into the model. Ngugi has detected and tugged on this common loose tread of poor leadership, sycophancy and imperialism that characterize most African post-colonial nations. Poor leadership is especially noted in the areas of repression of freedom, women and ethnic minorities, violence, deaf ear to the affliction of the downtrodden, corruption and misplaced priorities.

Sycophancy, on the other hand, is especially seen among politicians who work closely with the government. They weave lies on daily basis and carry out baseless propaganda to keep the government in power. They sniff out dissenting voices to be hacked down. The *Wizard of the Crow* preaches for Africa's true authentic voice and the need to evolve true democracies.

At present, Nigeria is working for national re-orientation and transformation. Transformation involves total or complete change usually from

undesirable state to an enviable one. It entails fundamental reappraisal of the basic assumptions that underlie reforms and developmental efforts which will alter the essence and substance of national life (Osisioma, 2012). Nigeria's transformation agenda hinges on the policy of 3Cs: continuity, consistency and commitment. Government believes that the disregard for these 3Cs has resulted in rising unemployment, inequality and poverty and is convinced to come out with a holistic transformation policy that would recognize these 3Cs (Usigbe, 2011).

The transformation agenda is anchored on vision 20:2020 and it highlights key priority areas of government such as: macroeconomic framework and economic direction, job creation, education, power sector reforms, the rule of law, health sector reforms, information and technology transformation, infrastructural programme, Niger Delta, transportation, among others. The prime target of government is to achieve the vision 20:2020 which stipulates that Nigeria would become at least one of the 20 strongest economies in the world by the year 2020.

As Nigeria pursues this objective, the lessons from Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* that will help make these transformation blueprints snowball into more achievable and sustainable development are as follows:

1. Imperialism is one major variable that shapes the destiny of most African nations. Spencer (2012) states that Western powers have enduring interests in African politics and economy and therefore they go a long way in discouraging and, where necessary, actively forestalling democratization. Nigeria must therefore show wisdom in its dealings with the West.
2. Many African countries rely on the export of a single commodity. In Nigeria, for example, crude oil is the single major export. This makes even the most prosperous countries vulnerable to fluctuation in global commodity prices. African economies are largely owned and controlled by foreign corporations and are almost wholly dependent on foreign markets and capital. Nigeria must, therefore,

- seek diversification of export products and seek viable options for trans-African trade and relations.
3. One of the drawbacks of Nigeria's prospects for transformation may be connected with international lending banks (Global Bank in *Wizard of the Crow*). Spencer (2012) argues that the most damaging of all prospects of democratization and development has been the imposition since the 1970s of so-called structural adjustment programmes and stabilization agreements by the World Bank and the IMF. Essential loans are made conditional on cuts in government spending and social provision, the removal of subsidies and tariff barriers, wholesale privatization and the removal of restrictions on foreign investment. This is what Saul (2001) refers to as the neo-colonization of Africa. Thus, Nigeria should limit gigantic and, especially, misdirected projects (like Marching to Heaven) that it cannot finance, and critically examine the urge to obtain loans from these bodies with their cut-throat conditions.
 4. There is need for government to think of programmes that touch the lives of the people. Many Nigerians are unemployed and hungry. In the face of the precarious economic and political circumstances, many Nigerians will find an alternative. In *Wizard of the Crow*, Kamiti, a masters degree jobless graduate metamorphoses to the Wizard of the Crow. In Nigeria many of such certificate-wielding graduates turn to kidnapping and other crimes and constitute menace to the society.
 5. Linguistic imperialism is at work in Nigeria. Many drop their family names and bear names divesting them of Africanness. Names such as John David, Harry Mark, David Mark, Mary Spencer, etc are borne by many Nigerians, even by the elite. The psychological feeling of inferiority which this does in the life of Nigerians can only be imagined.
 6. Leaders must shun sycophants who sing their praises for personal aggrandizement. Appointment to higher positions of authority

must be on the basis of proven ability at governance, not on ability to create and maintain propaganda that will keep the incumbent in power.

7. Nigerian leaders must be faithful to the ideals of democracy and ensure that all traits of despotism and dictatorial rule must be kept at bay.
8. Nigerian writers must see their roles as the watch dog of the society and, like Ngugi, create stories that are aimed at educating and redirecting Nigerians, leaders and the led, without compromising the entertainment function of literature.

Conclusion

In the foregoing it has been shown that Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* draws its mimetic power from the Kenyan political experiences, though it has great relevance to Nigeria's socio-political situation. Ngugi has succeeded in satirizing dictatorships, sycophancy, imperialism, corruption, violence and other ills prevalent in post-colonial Africa through his delicate blending of language and style. It is hoped that the lessons from this epic burlesque of a sick lumbering state will help shape Nigeria's and other African States national transformation blueprints into more achievable and sustainable development.

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