

**THE AUDACITY OF ART IN THE INTERROGATION OF A CONTINENT
STRUGGLING WITH ITS MODERNITY: READING NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S
WIZARD OF THE CROW**

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ABSTRACT

Art with specific reference to literature is a saw-toothed weapon for the passing of social commentaries consequently; the place of art in the holding up to ridicule and correction of societal foibles cannot be disremembered in our global existence. This paper makes a literary incursion into how social behaviour affects political views and vice versa by using Aburiria as a metaphor for the economic and socio-political hypocrisies that constitute the ailing realities of African leadership and its modernity. Using the content-based methodology for gathering relevant data; this paper adopts the Marxist literary criticism to interrogate Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Wizard of the Crow*. It is adopted as a theoretical framework to examine the revolutionary aesthetics in Ngugi's novel under study with a view to reveal the place of the collective will of the common people in the struggle against existing bourgeoisie-induced forces that exploit their persons, labour and society. Our finding reveals that the solution to Africa's problem is in Africa and not in the hands of governments of other nationalities as African leadership thinks. And this is the ideological thrust which constitutes Ngugi's vision in his fictional art under study. This paper concludes that the African youth is essentially a force of hope for a better Africa.

INTRODUCTION

In the history of the literature of the human race, society has always provided the raw materials for the enrichment of literature. This, it does, through the lending of societal issues and conflicts to literature and literature in turn interrogates these conflicts via investigation. To this end, it becomes very glaring that there exist an indisputable ancestral chord that links

society to literature and literature to society. According to Charles Bressler, the Marxist literary school of thought strongly believe that “when we examine our society... We will discover that its structure is built on ongoing conflicts...” (19). However, it is this continuing clash or societal tension which Ngugi engages in his literary masterpiece entitled *Wizard of the Crow*. This is made possible through the critical lens of a subtle, yet exciting plausible revolutionary mechanism put in place to pull down existing social structures of othering evident in the nature of class and gender construction in Aburiria. *Wizard of the Crow*, though a book written by a Kenyan writer, is unique in its creative enigma, rich orality and pointed thematic vision and all these have a broad-spectrum identicalness of Africa’s past and present political, economic, religious and social histories with its concomitant callous realities.

NGUGI WA THIONG’O’S VISION IN *WIZARD OF THE CROW* AMIDST AFRICA’S STRUGGLE WITH ITS MODERNITY: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

According to F.B.O Akporobaro (2012), “The Nigerian or the African novel is vitally engaged in the creation of a new order, in the search for social values and stability, accountability, good governance, social liberation and the spiritualization of man” (31). Akporobaro’s view as stated above summarizes the most part if not the entire content of Ngugi wa Thiongo’s *Wizard of the Crow*. In this novel, we see an artist’s clarion call for true democracy that will obviate leadership paralyse to usher in a cleansing of the spirit and the mind of the state for productivity across sectors. Ngugi’s perception of the African society is that in which leadership is gone comatose; a continent crawling with its modernity which will take concerted group resilience streaming from the consciences of the masses to forestall all forms of leadership madness and corruption in the state. According to Jonas Akung “The way the literary artist perceives the society will determine the type of art form he produces” (275). This is true to Ngugi wa Thiongo’s perception of his African environment as recreated in *Wizard of the Crow*. Set in a fictional country of Aburiria, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s *Wizard of the Crow* offers sharp forays into the political, religious, cultural, economic and social insincerities that characterize the country of Aburiria and its attendant effects on the people of Aburiria and on the nation itself. Prominent among these insincerities and sycophancies is the political corruption that found comfortable abode in a dictatorial political head of Aburiria simply known as the “Ruler” in the novel.

The departure of the Colonialists from Aburiria ushers in self-government for the people of Aburiria. However, this self-government which is supposed to be the genesis of a brighter sun across Aburiria’s socio-political and economic landscapes turns out to be moment of dark days for the citizens. The Ruler rules high in despotic manner especially as he controls everything including time in Aburiria. He can turn a Saturday to a Monday and morning to evening if he so wishes and the people must succumb. The narrator acknowledges the above fact when he avers that “...in Aburiria, the Ruler controlled how months followed each other

– January for instance trading places with July – he therefore had the power to declare every month in the year the seventh month and any day within that seventh month the seventh day...same applied to time and any hour depending on the wishes of the Ruler” (12). This indeed is dictatorial leadership couched in administrative rascality.

More so, the Rulers policies are not only dictatorial but his projects are self-centred as they are of no economic relevance to the people or the country. One of such projects is the “marching to heaven” project unveiled to a large crowd of the people of Aburiria on the Ruler’s birthday as a birthday gift. This gift entails erecting the tallest building in the world as the Ruler’s government house. The essence of the project is to “raise a building to the very gates of Heaven so that the Ruler could call on God daily to say...how was your day today, God?” (16). It is strange that a government could gather such a crowd of its citizenry only to unveil such a bizarre project of no economic significance. The crowd had come with the hopes that the Ruler’s birthday will feed their empty stomach only to be kept under the sun without water and food and at the end be grieved with the news of erecting for the Ruler the tallest building in the world at the expense of the hungry stomach of the masses. In the narrator’s voice “the sun-dried people’s throats. The Ruler, his ministers and the leaders of the Ruler’s party, all under a shade kept cooling their tongues with cold water. The citizens without shade or water distracted themselves from the hot darts of the sun by observing and commenting on ...the clothes the dignitaries wore, the way they walked, or even where each sat relatively to the seat of might” (13). From the above, it can deduce that the citizens are so blinded by the dictatorial rule of the Ruler to the degree that they could do nothing but accept the penury and lower status that the leadership has conferred on them. It is the case of accepting the abnormal as the norm as they believed that their predicaments voiced or silenced will mean nothing to the leadership nor provoke change. The almighty status which the Ruler assumes in matters of Aburiria’s economy, power, education, military etc did not only plunge the citizens into a state of helplessness but it built in their consciousness a distorted perception. This perception is constructed on the ailing mentality that despite the poverty, unemployment, torture and death that the Ruler’s government has brought on them and the land, there is nothing they can do to free themselves from such bondage.

According to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their book entitled *The Communist Manifesto*, “The bourgeoisie ... has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers” (5). This is evident in Aburiria where a few elites had in time past, unleashed heavy public criticisms on the Ruler’s despotic rule but unfortunately had had their consciences mortgaged by the Ruler’s juicy political appointments. Their consciences which used to vehemently voice the people’s concern now speak against the people. Dr. Yunique Immaculata Mgenzi and Dr. Luminous-Karamu-Mbuya-Ituika- the Ruler’s Deputy Ambassador to Washington and the Ruler’s biographer respectively are good examples of this category of elites.

Furthermore, the state of things in Aburiria is a synthesis of two sides – the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are in constant conflicts. However, the people's fear of the despotic leadership has built in them a mind of false consciousness of accepting an unfavourable social system without protesting or questioning the status quo thus, seeing societal aberrations as a logical way for things to be. The above mental position of Aburiria citizens did not only elongate their suffering days under the Ruler's government but it brought about two social evil. The first being a rapid growth of wide social, economic and political gap between the rich and the poor; the second being that the corrupt Ruler seized the people's false consciousness to direct his despotic rule. However, the introduction of the character of Nyawira and Kamiti becomes the beginning of a gradual but secretive social protest against the state of things in Aburiria as Nyawira tries chatting for the masses a new redemptive course to liberate the minds of the people from their earlier pre-conceived ideology of interpellation. Through her secret formation of a radical group called Movement for the Voice of the People, Nyawira scuttles every of the despotic Ruler's projects and policies.

Nyawira is employed by Tajirika – Chairman of the Eldares Building Construction in charge of the marching to Heaven's project as a secretary. From this office Nyawira fetches state information from the government house through an unsuspecting interaction with Tajirika and in turn, furnishes the movement with such information received. The essence is to keep the movement abreast with government plans and to determine their next course of action to scuttle such plans. Paramount among these government plans is the government's decision to apply for billions of U.S Dollars from the Global Bank in America to fund the Ruler's so called building projects of Marching to Heavens. In one of Nyawira's conversation with Kamiti after their narrow escape from the police net, she intimates Kamiti over one of the aims of her movement thus "we oppose the Ruler's birth cover and the Global Bank mission of putting us in a permanent debt trap. We must oppose this business of marching to Heaven" (86).

More so, the combinatorial radicalism of Nyawira and Kimati though encouraged healthy emotional attachment between them but most importantly, their joint participation in the attempt to crush the social evil in the land through their various staging and display of protest is to be celebrated. Through the revolutionary ideologies of these duo, the movement is able to use the fast-growing queue of Aburiria's citizen in major point such as Eldares Modern Constructive and Real Estate and later around the Government House and parliamentary building for the movement's advantage. The queuing Mania fueled by the secret ideological radicalism and hallucinatory magical realism of Kimati (Wizard of the Crow) truncated the granting of the loan to Aburiria. This is because the Global Bank believes that things have gone amiss in Aburiria. One of the Bank's officials boldly said "Mr. President, everything is upside down in your country" (499). The above is made obvious as the leadership of the movement for the people had Tajirika flogged secretly for assaulting his wife. A second proof that things

are amiss in Aburiria is the fact that the queuing mania intensified despite Minister Silver Sikiokuu's attempt to stop the queuing at the Ruler's command.

Though the Ruler who had come to America with some members of his cabinet to see the U.S.A President and the officials of the Global Bank for the loan was kept in the dark by his political loyalists over these social tensions building up strongly in Aburiria, however, news of this social unrest upon the land has reached the ears of the west in general and the bank in particular. Consequently, the American government sees no reason to receive the Ruler and his entourage neither does the Global Bank see any socio-economic prospect in funding a project of such financial magnitude in a country where poverty, unemployment and unpopular government reign supreme.

A country where its citizens laments over social injustice, political corruption and dictatorial government leading to some sort of societal fiasco between the government and the governed cannot be a fertile ground for foreign investment. The report from one of the officials of the Global Bank below confirms the projects frustration "After receiving the entire project, the Global Bank did not see any economic benefits of marching to Heaven. To argue that the Marching to Heaven project would create jobs, as the Aburirian government had claimed, was a case of out-dated Keynesian economics, The Global Bank cannot release funds on the basis of the current representation" (485). From the foregoing, it is evident that though the act of a people voicing their concerns may drag some of them into state prisons but again, it can be a catalyst for the creation of desired change. Kamiti known as wizard of the crow and Nyawira the leader of the movement for the voice of the people though suffered gross inhumane treatments in the hands of the dictatorial government but their volition in their collective expression through the revolutionary engagement of the home-grown rottenness of the system truncated the government's plan to get foreign loan. In addition, it becomes the real cause of the Ruler's sickness as the rejection of this project by the Global Bank wells-up enormous anger in the Ruler to the point that his body witnesses the expansion that Dr. Furvk diagnosed to be SIE (Self Induced Expansion).

It is worthy to state very clearly here that Kamiti and Nyawira decision to secretly attack the incumbency as well as cure politically corrupt minds like Tajirika, Silver Sikiokuu, the Ruler etc through wizardry display of mirror does not mean that wizardry is the solution to Africa's problems. It is rather a reference to the fact that the solution to Africa's problems can only come from within not from outside. Roger Kaplan in his comments on *Wizard of the Crow* in *The Wall Street Journal* avers that "*Wizard of the Crow* is not a nostalgic celebration of folk-wizardry, as if quaint belief will solve the trouble brought on by Africa's encounter with the modern world. It is though, a reminder that people can find themselves redemptive resources". This implies that the African continent though bedeviled by chronic and gross political leadership paralyses can still find for itself a redemptive strategy resident in their collective

volition of group determination and expression to dislodge corrupt home-grown politics and resist corrupt leadership.

It is pertinent to highlight that outside the mastermind of the queue mania by the movement for the voice of the people as a revolutionary mechanism of exposing the dictatorial policies of the Ruler, the composition and performance of songs during political gathering by the movement is also a veritable weapon in the hands of the movement. The composition and performance of songs and dance gestures play the provocative role of cajoling the government. And to a great deal, it distracted the government from successfully carrying out its selfish plan. When the Ruler invited Aburirians to attend a public gathering with officials of the Global Bank as invited guests to make his guests watch the people's confidence in his government, the women honoured the Ruler's invitation no doubt. However, they moved to the centre of the crowd that faithful day as if they will impress the leader only to bend high and raise their shirts to expose their butts while backing the high table as they publicly advocate for democracy and stridently rejects dictatorship in broad day light. They sang "MARCHING TO HEAVEN IS A PILE OF SHIT! MARCHING TO HEAVEN IS A PILE OF SHIT! (250).

Also, during Kamiti's endless search for a job, the foul stench in the Eldares environs as a result of the city's political corruption suffocates Kimati. The rush of this offensive smell is a metaphor for the socio-political and economic rottenness breathing gladly in Africa where this foul stench makes Kamit's soul leaves his body only for him to find comfort in a Christian song he has once heard;

I will fly and leave this earth

I will float in the sky and witness

Wonders never seen before

Being down with the earth below (38).

To Kamita (a holder of B.A Economics and MBA), death is preferred to the frustrating condition of his insignificant and unproductive living as orchestrated by the corrupt political leadership in modern Aburiria. In his words "what use am I in Aburiria" (40). In one of the political opening ceremonies by Minister Silver Sikiokuu, the movement through songs made a public ridicule of the government ministers to make a clarion call for peace and unity in the land. It is in the same opening ceremony that the movement made Virginia (wife of the imprisoned Tajirika) protest before the crowd over the unlawful kidnap of her husband by the government. Virginia "Demanded to know where the government had buried the body of her husband" (308). The above action and resolve by Virginia is encouraged by the Movement and this is calculated to expose the government's injustice and oppression of the masses.

Nyawira's doggedness in her advocacy for justice is what has placed this novel on the pedestal of ardent revolution. To speak for the people's course, she disguises herself on different forms as a begger, as a crippled as a man, as witch, as a dancer and even as a singer. To Nyawira

Marching to Heaven will swallow our land...
It will snatch water from the mouth of
the thirsty and food from the mouth
of the hungry. Skeletons will people
our country (209)

In one of her revolutionary conversation with Kamiti when the duo took refuge in the forest, she did not only make labourious attempt to convince Kamiti to use his gift in the collective deliverance of the people but she also made the point that if they are to "get back the body, the mind and the soul of the nation" (209) then, Kamiti's suggestion for them to "abandon human community for the wilderness" (208) will bring about no change in the society. August Strinberg is quoted by Emma Goldman in his essay "Forward to the Social Significance of Modern Drama thus: "The Modern artist in the words of August Strinberg is 'a lay preacher popularizing the pressing question of his time'".(131). Ngugi asks a pressing question through his character Nyawira "If you found a grown man taking food from a child by force, would you just stand there and watch the drama" (209). The above question is not only directed to Kamiti or Aburiria; it is also a question for Africa and the African people. And until Africa and Africans honestly ponder on the above question and allow truth to guide their answer, democracy will continue to remain a hazy practice or illusory reality in African nation states.

In the words of Imoh Abang Emenyi, "The artist is a social visioner whose responsibility is to express the nature of human life by recreating his or her experiences in the society." (18). Though Aburiria is a fictional setting but the writer as well as the readers know that this Aburiria is not different from Africa. Chinyere Nwahunanya's assertion that "creative works of literature are products of the society's libido" (38) becomes quite ideologically obtrusive or blatant in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*. The birth of "Baby D" (747) by the pregnant Ruler is not different from that birth by the more pregnant African-contemporary leaders; the widening gap between the poor and the rich in Aburiria is nothing different from the case in Africa; the political corruption and unemployment, environmental squalor and religious hypocrisy in Aburiria is not different from those breathing gladly across Africa's landscape. Aburiria is Africa. Today African leaders go abroad in search of solutions to African's problems when the solution to the continents problem resides in the continent.

How could we have thought that independence and democracy can be attained in the land where we run to America and Europe for solution to state challenges that can be tackled within if only we would allow truth within us to voice words of wisdom?

Moreover, the pressure from the people's Assembly and the movement for the voice of the people compelled the Ruler to usher in democracy. Unfortunately, this democracy carries with it spuriousness especially as the government remains dictatorial. But the fact that Kamiti survived the bullet shot at him by John; the fact that both Nyawira and Kamiti have expressed their decisions to keep the course of the movement moving are all prophetic pointers to Africa's brilliant future. Interestingly, this future resides in the bones of Nyawira and Kamiti who are representatives of the African youths. Old age and lethargy will not be barriers to the realization of this onus that destiny places on the shoulder of the African youth but rather, when the disease of seattism, gerontocracy, ethnocracy, gender deference, greed and despotism that ailed the leadership prospect of our fathers rise to infiltrate the blood of the African youths, such disease will be forestalled by the flaming fire of doggedness resident in the blood and bones of the African youths.

As African Youths, we owe ourselves the sincere honour of developing our minds on the right foundation and planting our talents on fertile soil to yield good harvest. The old in the land represented by the Ruler and his Ministers and Ambassadors have failed mother Africa and they must understand that it is only in the hands of the African youth that Africa will rise again to prominence to practice good leadership that will checkmate class divide and a leadership that will function to serve the masses for this is the nub of democracy. According to Tyson Lois (1999), "Few Marxists today believe, as Marx did, that the proletariat will one day spontaneously develop the class consciousness needed to rise up in violent revolution against their oppressors and create a classless society" (51). The fact that this movement headed by pro-active youths has erected and organized underground power structure in the caves of Eldares mountain are all prudent signifiers that Aburiria has a future to look up to with smiles. Critiquing the distinct nature of Marxist criticism, Edith Wharton avers that "In fact, however, there is no reason why Marxist criticism should weaken, let alone disappear. It is. After all, a distinct phenomenon..., not as a form of communist propaganda but as a form of critique, a discuss for interrogating all societies and their texts in terms of certain specific issues" (359). From the quotation above, one can see the significance of Marxist ideology and its undying legacy in the critique of society.

Though, the Ruler government is toppled by Tajirika and Aburiria is made into state of imperial democracy with the heralding of it concept of "Corporony" (746) which will see Aburiria privatized and its economy managed by private capital and western domination, the confidence, doggedness, vision and political serration of comrades of the movement as captured in page 758 to 760 of the novel under study is enough confidence that soon, the

people's will and dream will prevail over that of the imperial state of Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasianus Whitehead. The end will be 'change'. Again, the tours through Eldares Mountains and the headquarters of the movement as arranged by comrades of the movement dig deep messages into the readers' mind. It makes the readers to see areas in which the incumbency has failed. It also highlights the political blue print of the movement with the African Youth in the forefront. This blue print carries with it democracy, Agriculture, military might, Education, Healthcare, cultural and environmental preservation.

In one of Kamiti and Nyawira's walk through the street of Eldares (Aburiria's state capital), she caught sight of a reference to Aburiri's Joint Military Exercise with Europe and America but she is not scared that such will pose a problem to the movement. She believes that even if such Joint Military Exercise should raid the headquarters of the movement in the caves of Eldares Mountain, they will seek redemption measures in the people. She asserts "the people provide the best hideouts to their joint military exercise. We respond with joint political exercise with the people" (762). The implication of this revolutionary statement above by this female revolutionary radical is that no matter what happens, the movement will always gather an increasingly momentum of continuity in the struggle to bring about desired justice and change in Aburiria.

CONCLUSION

Ngugi' wa Thiongo's handling of the social issues in Aburiria which is indisputably recognized as modern Africa struggling with its modernity is perfect. Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* has indeed mirrored the happenings and tensions of Africa's post-colonial frustration and the political corruption that characterize its crawling modernity through the eyes of Africa's political history and this implicates people, economy and other variables. Most importantly, the author has shown that Africa needs fearless idealist youths like Nyawira and Kamiti to conquer the bitterness of contemporary politics and all other societal dysfunctions that have clogged the wheel of Africa's development, self-government and democratic effervescence. Contemporary African states should learn from its history and liberate the continent from its age-long dwarfed growth. The governed in Africa should rise to existing challenges by crushing selfish interests that will further plunge the continent in to economic delusion, political oppression and democratic dwarfism through a highly diplomatic and well evaluated revolutionary mechanism; not necessarily through bloodshed. The governed in Africa do not need to carry clubs and pull-down government property to express their desire for a change; calculated ideas and constructive criticism devoid of violence and bloodshed are the fastest catalyst for bringing about desired change.

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