



GOMBE SAVANNAH

**JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND
COMMUNICATION STUDIES (GOSAJOLLCOS)**

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
GOMBE STATE UNIVERSITY

Volume 5 Number 2
December, 2024



Savannah Journal of Language, Literature and Communication Studies (SAJOLLCOS)
Vol. 5 No. 2 December, 2024 ISSN: 2787-0286 & 2811-2261 (Online & Print)

**SAVANNAH JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND COMMUNICATION
STUDIES (SAJOLLCOS)**

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH GOMBE STATE UNIVERSITY



VOLUME 5, NO. 2, DECEMBER 2024

ISSN: ONLINE: 2811-2261, PRINT: 2787-0286

A Publication of Department of English Gombe State University, Gombe State

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(SAJOLLCOS) Gombe State University, Gombe State. Volume 5, No. 2 December, 2024.





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ISSN: 2787-0286 Print & 2811-2261 Online

Printed in Nigeria @Six-Sweet Printers and Publishers

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Gombe Savannah Journal of Language, Literature and Communication Studies (GOSAJOLLCOS) is a peer-reviewed journal of the Department of English, Gombe State University. The journal is committed to the development of communication arts through researches in Language, Linguistics, Literature, Theatre Arts, Cultural Studies, Creative Arts, Media and Communication Studies. It has both print and online versions. The Editorial board hereby calls for thoroughly researched papers and articles on the subject areas already mentioned. Submissions of papers are accepted all year round but publication is expected to be done in May/June annually. All manuscripts should be accompanied with the sum of ten thousand (10,000) naira only. On acceptance of any manuscript, contributors will pay the sum of twenty five thousand (25,000) naira only as publication fee.



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The Artist and Leadership Failure in Africa: A Study of Ngugi Wa Thiong'O'S *Wizard of The Crow*

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Abstract

One of the major problems staring Africa in the face in the 21st century is that of failed leadership. This is occasioned by ineptitude, corruption and insecurity. Most African states are thrown into confusion and anarchy and are on the verge of total disintegration, resulting to loss of lives and properties. In the midst of these happenings, the literary artist has continued to lend his voice by criticizing, warning and advocating probable solutions even in the midst of these uncertainties. Adopting content analysis of the primary text, Wizard of the Crow. The paper makes use of the library and the internet for source materials, employing Literary Marxism as an interpretative ideology. This research takes a critical journey into Ngugi's exploration of the failure of African leaders to harness the wealth of the continent in developing their states. The paper examines the nature of corruption of African leaders and the political elites in squandering and looting their countries' wealth on useless projects that have no direct bearing on the citizens and the crisis situation perpetrated by these leaders. The paper examines Ngugi's stance on protest by the teaming masses of Africa as the only way of checking political excesses of their leaders. This paper therefore focuses on the two dominant themes of corruption and protest in the novel and x-rays the novelist agitation that Africa's problems can only be solved through African means from within.

Keywords: Leadership failure, Africa, Artist, Marxism, Corruption, Protest

Introduction

Leadership failure has plagued most African states where the masses go through horrifying

experiences in the hands of their leaders arising from dictatorial rule. This leads to morbid experiences of oppression, tyranny, human rights violations, terror, violence, poverty,



and extra-judicial killings, among others. Most of these leaders have no political ideology and the willpower to develop the economies of their nations, so they become authoritarians and dictators in order to prolong their stay in office.

The unfolding socio-political realities in Africa, especially, have continued to form the central message in most contemporary African literary works. As social crusaders, the strength and power of African writers depends on how skillful they deploy their style to depict the society in which they live. Literature and literary arts therefore, become important tools in the struggle for national liberation and the formation of a national consciousness. However, the specific realities and conditions that dictate a writer's response to such events differ from place to place. Ikechukwu Asika affirms that:

African writers struggle to write out people from the heaps of corruption, bad governance, violence, mediocrity, exploitation, bribery, and unjust killings, ethnic rivalry which rank among other socio-political, economic and religious injustices that militate against the desired growth of the continent (35).

Ngugi uses his literary works to reflect, expose, and decry the socio-political and economic realities in Kenya and Africa in general, from the colonial to neo-colonial eras. His quest, like many other writers, is to liberate the people of Kenya and

Africa socially, politically, and economically and to teach them about the path they took to independence in order to learn lessons from the past to shape the future. This stance confirms Chinua Achebe's assertion in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* that, "The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front. For he is, after all... the sensitive point of his community" (45). From this statement, therefore, Ngugi's tone in most of his literary works and particularly *Wizard of the Crow*, is certainly influenced by the collapse of the dreams of independence in Kenya, an experience that is considered a betrayal of the promises of independence in Africa generally. His reactions and criticisms are thus directed to the immediate forces shaping these events—the ruling class. Salman Rushdie attests to this in *Imaginary Homelands*, where he said that "writers and politicians are national rivals. Both groups try to make the world in their own image. They fight for the same territory. And the novel is one way of denying the official politician's version of truth"(14). It is therefore clear that *Wizard of the Crow* is one novel through which Ngugi attempts to rival politicians' versions of the truth in Africa and other developing countries.

Methodology/Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes the qualitative research design. The primary source of the study is the primary text which is Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*. The



secondary data for the study are published work on the author and the text of study. The method of data analysis is the content analysis.

The literary theory applied in this paper is literary Marxism. As a social and political theory, Marxism seeks to explain the course of human history and the structure of past, present, and future societies. When this theory is brought to bear on the literary works of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, it helps in understanding the artistic process of re-inventing social realities from historical antecedents, which are hallmarks of Ngugi's literary ouevres. Many adherents of this theory concern themselves with the power of literary culture to intervene and transform existing economic and political arrangements and activities in their various societies. Prominent proponents of literary Marxism and Marxist ideology are Karl Marx and his fellow thinker, Fredrich Engels. Others include Terry Eagleton, Edward Said, Frank Fanon, and a host of others. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o has deployed this theory in his literary endeavours by presenting colonial and post colonial insights into Africa's problems from this ideological standpoint, especially as it relates to poor leadership in Africa. This paper, therefore, examines leadership failure in Africa and the nature of protest or resistance along Marxist lines to such leadership as explored by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, his agitations and message in the context of *Wizard of the Crow*.

Dictatorship And Corruption In *Wizard Of The Crow*

Ngugi in *Wizard of the Crow* presents the political problem in Africa as genetically arising from the continent's history, whereby the imaginary Free Republic of Aburiria is dominated by the Ruler who began to rule the country "before the world began and would end only after the world has ended" (6). The story is set in Aburiria, where the Ruler, as he is popularly called is down with a strange illness. This illness has generated various rumours. The two strongest rumours have it that the Ruler's illness is the result of a curse involving a wronged he-goat and the Ruler's hair stolen by his barber (4). The second strongest rumour has it that his illness is the handiwork of demons housed in one special chamber in state house (10).

All the projects embarked upon by the Ruler, especially "Marching to Heaven", aimed at giving him unequalled popularity and fame in the whole world have come to nothing. This is because he is surrounded by political sycophants. The Ruler is a dictator who seized power with the help of some Western countries. He is typical of most post-colonial African leaders who have become stooges in the hands of the West. Ngugi describes them thus:

The African bourgeoisie that inherited the flag from the departing colonial powers was created within the cultural womb of imperialism. That is, it was a bourgeoisie with a mentality, and outlook which was in harmony with the outlook of



the bourgeoisie in the colonizing countries... They saw things through eyeglasses given to them by their European bourgeois mentors (Lindfors, 10).

Their leadership failed woefully because of corruption, lack of political ideology, ineptitude, and so on.

The Ruler is seeking a loan from Global Bank to finance a worthless project that has no direct benefit to the masses. He silences any dissenting voices and uses their skeletons to build chambers, as stated by Ngugi in *Wizard of the Crow*: "The walls and ceiling of the chamber were made from the skeletons of the students, teachers, workers, and small farmers he had killed in all the regions of the country" (10) to keep himself in power. The Ruler of Aburiria is comparable to failed dictatorships like Idi Amin of Uganda, Mobutu Sese Seko, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Charles Taylor of Liberia, Omar Al Bashir of Sudan, the present Nigerian experience and others. The ruler preys on people's spouses and schoolgirls. He sets community against community just to create chaos and perpetrate himself in power. This is true Portrayal of most African states.

Kamiti (the Wizard) and Nyawira, leader of the Movement for the Voice of the People, find themselves allied in opposition to the Ruler's dictatorial rule and personal glorification. The Ruler's quest is to acquire loans from Global Bank to build the world's tallest building in the midst of poverty, unemployment, hunger and corruption. Njogu Waita

in his article "Identity, Politics and Gender Dimensions in Ngugi wa Thiong'o *Wizard of the Crow*" marvels at the "extent to which African leaders can go in order to immortalise themselves" (47). He asserts that "*Wizard of the Crow*... Is foremost a political novel," arguing "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, and globalization, among others" (45).

Ngugi's stiff resistance to dictatorship confirms Chinua Achebe's assertion in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* that:

A writer or an artist
lives on the fringe of society ...
He is in revolt against society
which in turn looks on him
with suspicion if not hostility...
No self-respecting writer will
take dictation from his
audience. He must remain free
to disagree with his society and
go into rebellion against it if
need be (42-43).

The above statement indicates that the artist is an ordinary member of his society whose obligation is primarily to serve that community. All these efforts are geared towards achieving a better future for that society. Therefore, the artist uses his imaginative art to portray his intentions and so conveniently criticizes, instructs, and entertains where necessary. He is an artist, a teacher, and a historian who chronicles his people's past as he projects the future. Such creative art



does not fail to embody experiences that are already lived or ongoing in his society. This is what one finds Ngugi wa Thiong'o, doing in almost all his literary works.

When it looks like hope is coming, because of Kamiti and Nyawira's series of protests and subversions against the dictator, the political arena of Aburiria is taken over by one of his sycophants, Joseph Tajirika, who changes his name to Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasianus Whitehead, thereby continuing a cycle of political incompetence.

Ngugi is committed to exposing power abuse by African leaders in diverse ways and is always charting new ways of resistance to such leaders as portrayed in *Wizard of the Crow*. Most countries in Africa today are mere names. In the likes of Somalia, Sudan, Rwanda and recently Nigeria where anarchy has become a common phenomenon, Ngugi describes such leadership as a repressive machine that silences all forms of democratic expressions. He expresses this succinctly in *Moving the Centre* that:

A neo-colonial regime is by its very character, a repressive machine. Its very being, in its refusal to break with the international and national structure of exploitation, inequality, and oppression, gradually isolates it from the people. Its real power resides not in the people but in imperialism and in the police and army (89).

Ngugi creates this picture in the Free Republic of Aburiria where the Ruler is equated with God and he is the

"Father of the Nation". Anything he says holds for the masses, and any dissenting voice is crushed by the police and the army. Here, Ngugi presents Big Ben Mambo, the minister of defence who enlarged his tongue to be able to shout the ruler's orders throughout Aburiria. "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 his threats to his enemies before they could reach the Aburirian borders" (15).

Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* portrays the level of corruption by the Ruler and his cabinet ministers in subjecting Aburiria to constant domination and suppression through corrupt schemes to prolong their stay in the corridors of power. Corruption and protest therefore become dominant themes in the novel, whereby the Ruler intentionally plants discord among ministers and between communities. Ngugi states this in the novel thus:

The dictator's reputation for making ministers plot against ministers, regions rise against regions and community fights against community was now a matter of legend. He would side with one warring faction, which also rejoice at its alliance with power only to wake up one morning to find that the dictator has sided with its adversary...(231).

The above illustration is a typical portrayal of African politics,



especially in a dictatorial regime. Nigeria has experienced this and is currently experiencing the same at the moment. This is also true for many other African countries today. Many are on the verge of collapse. This apparent aloofness of politicians blinds those in the corridors of power to the problems of the common man.

The Ruler is bent on wasting public funds by way of loans from the Global Bank in a project schemed by his ministers as a birthday gift to build an edifice that has no benefit to the masses of Aburiria:

Aburiria will 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 or good evening or simply how was your day today, God? The Ruler would be a daily recipient of God's advice, resulting in a rapid growth of Aburiria to heights never before dreamt by humans (16).

It is this waste of money in the midst of poverty and mass unemployment under dictatorial regimes that Ngugi advocates the theme of political resistance, emphasizing that Africa has a good history of resistance. First, it was against colonialism, and now, such resistance should be directed against neo-colonialism promoted by African leaders.

The Ruler is surrounded by ministers who go to the extent of elongating their body parts in order to please the Ruler, thereby alienating themselves from the masses they

claim to serve. The likes of Machokali, Tarjirika, Big Ben Mambo and so on are typical examples. This ironically is a true portrayal of politics in Africa where the leadership distances itself from the people in pursuing vain glory. Today, many African countries are indebted to the west over loans that have been largely misappropriated. China has become a major actor in most African states through different projects that will continually tie Africa in debt for quite a long time. All tiers of government have failed to address the yearnings and aspirations of the people as they watch their nations' endowed natural resources being plundered by foreign nationals in cohort with their leaders.

Even when the Ruler's illness persisted, he is taken abroad for treatment after a series of attempts by importing foreign doctors who could not cure him. When the services of the Wizard are finally needed, he has to be flown abroad to attend to the Ruler. The mirrors that the wizard (Kamiti) is to use for divination are all imported from countries like China, India, and others. All these attempts are aimed at wasting Aburirian resources. African leaders and politicians are known for flying abroad for treatment while the mass majority of their citizens die at home because of poor health care and the insensitivity of their leaders.

Mode of Resistance and Protest in *Wizard of The Crow*

Ngugi feels at all times that the workers and peasants of Africa can change their situation against insensitive and corrupt leadership. It is to such regimes that Ngugi calls for



an organized and sustained resistance. This call is for the workers and peasants of Africa, who are the sole producers of their nations' wealth. It is a struggle that involves Africans of all ages and genders. He re-enacts the nature of this resistance in *Wizard of the Crow* through the combined efforts of Kamiti (the wizard) and Nyawira (the leader of the "Movement for the Voice of the People") in their calculated attempts to disrupt any gathering organized by the Ruler and his ministers. This is demonstrated in the novel by this confrontation:

He (Ruler) stopped, for suddenly near the centre of the multitude, issued a bloodcurdling scream. A snake! A snake! Came the cry taken up by others. Soon there was pandemonium. People shouted in every direction to escape the snake unseen by many... The head of the secret police woke up from a stupor and whispered to the Ruler. This might be the beginning of a coup d'état (22).

Ngugi has continuously extolled the heroic struggle of Kenyans through the colonial era, and he is of the opinion that since colonial tentacles have continued to spread in Africa through neo-colonialism by bad leaders, the masses should also devise new ways of countering such experiences. David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe in *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: An Exploration of His Writing*, argue that "Another of Ngugi's developing ideas

concerned the role of violence and revolt in the struggle for liberty and social justice" (24). They go on to quote Ngugi for advocating violence as a means for change, especially political change thus: "violence in order to change an intolerable, unjust social order is not savagery: it purifies man. Violence to protect and preserve an unjust, oppressive social order is criminal, and diminishes man" (24).

This resistance is what the reader constantly finds on the pages of *Wizard of the Crow* where the masses keep resisting the Ruler's useless aspirations and wasting of public resources on irrelevant projects. Ngugi portrays this in the novel in hilarious ways. Ikechukwu Asika asserts that Ngugi "urges people to realize the level of their suffering and the impact the revolution will achieve in their lives... the writer encourages the people to become Nyawira to fight" (38).

Ngugi's presentation of direct confrontation between the political leadership and the suffering masses of Africa been a continuous encouragement for the masses to regain their muffled voices. He argues through this confrontation that there is power in the unity of the exploited masses of Africa. They can achieve political change through a unified and constant revolt against the centre. He portrays this elsewhere in *Petals of Blood* in the confrontation between the people of Ilmorog and their MP (Member of Parliament) Nderi wa Riera, who neglected his constituency after being voted into office as their MP thus:

Somebody in the crowd shouted: these are the people



who are misusing our freedom; and this was greeted with a general murmur of protesting assent. Suddenly, a stone flew and hit Nderi on the nose. This was followed by a hailstorm of orange peels, stones, sticks, anything. For a few seconds, Nderi tried to maintain his dignity and ignore the miscellaneous missiles which flew about him. Then a bit of mud hit him on the mouth. It was too late to make a dignified exit. He suddenly took to his heels... He ran across Jeevanjee gardens towards the central police station with a few pursuing him and shouting Mshike! Mshike! Huyuu! (182).

Ngugi is constantly experimenting new ways of resistance as neo-colonial tentacles also continue to change in Africa. The baring of buttocks by women in *Wizard of the Crow* is hilariously presented. Ngugi has a way with his characters. His presentation of Nyawira, the female protagonist, is commendable. Ngugi in this context, is emphasizing that the fight for justice and equity is for all people of all colour, genders, and ages. Venkatewarlu K. in "Depiction of women in Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow*" commends Ngugi's presentation of resistance as he extols Nyawira's untiring efforts in contending with the Ruler.

Nyawira continues her protest against the celebration of "Marching to Heaven" and directs a group of women protesters to flash their

naked bottoms. The incident outrages the Ruler who brands Nyawira as Aburiria's most-wanted criminal and passes the order to capture her (136).

No matter what mode of resistance Ngugi adopts in his numerous novels, the message is still the same and the agitation is stronger. Uchechukwu Umezurike asserts that:

Ngugi advances a call for organized resistance against regime of violence and domination, as the subversive actions of his young protagonists, Nyawira and Kamiti demonstrate in the text... in so doing, he effects a critique of the neo-colonial mindset of the political elite ... His text offers readers a way to understand leadership failure as consequent upon the elite's obsession with "whiteness" (2).

The continued struggle and resistance against unjust African leadership is a clear message to Ngugi's reading public that constant revolt by African masses against their neo-colonial leaders will surely enshrine a just, peaceful, and conducive African society for the good of all. This explains why Nyawira's "Movement for the Voice of the People" in *Wizard of the Crow* constantly stands in the way of the Ruler in making sure that all his plans for self-glorification and corrupt practices come to nothing. They do this without fear of the police and the army. This is illustrative:



A group of beggars started shouting slogans beyond the decorum of begging. Marching to Heaven is Marching to Hell. Your strings of loans are chains of slavery. Your loans are the cause of Begging. We Beggars Beg the End of Begging. The March to Heaven is Led by Dangerous Snakes. This slogan was chanted over and over (74).

Such is the strength of a unified people fighting for a common cause, because power lies with the people. Ngugi understands this and is always encouraging the masses to stand up to the challenges that confront them, just as in the days of old.

Conclusion

Ngugi feels that the socio-political turmoil in Africa today is a social problem that should be fought bravely if Africa must achieve the pre-colonial communal spirit of brotherliness and oneness that existed before colonialism stepped in to disrupt that serene society. He, therefore, commits his writings to this enlightenment. That is why Ngugi is always advocating protest against any insensitive and oppressive leadership. He feels that this is the only means of effecting a progressive change in a humane society. His interest in the downtrodden masses of Africa and his positive references to socialism and collectivism clearly show the influence of Marxist criticism, because Marxists strongly believe that history is made by the peasants, who are the lowest in society, and not by heroes or generals. Therefore, the issue of protest becomes strong in

Marxist oriented writings. In performing this task, Ngugi has justified the role of the writer as being both a historian and a creative artist combined into one. His concern for the down-trodden masses of Africa has singled him out as the most unrepentant, radical, and vocal critic of neo-colonial African leaders.

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