

Depiction of Women in Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow*

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Abstract

The condition of women in a nation is the real measure of its progress. This statement of Ngugi wa Thiong'o confirms the representation of female in male-authored works should be one of the contemporary features of discourse in African literature. In fact, Ngugi has successfully recorded the predicament, suffering, and racial discrimination in almost all his novels. In his writings, female characters, like male characters, occupy a significant place.

Ngugi's magnum opus *Wizard of the Crow* (2006) presents the woman in the post colony who are trapped in the patriarchal and the colonial past as well as by the emerging male elite in independent Aburiria. It demonstrates his portrayal of women characters in several ways. His principal woman character, Nyawira, meaning 'work,' is central to 'the 'Movement for the Voice of the People,' the organization that resists the retrogressive policies of the 'Ruler' of the 'Free Republic of Aburiria,' the fictitious African state used to satirize problematic governments in the South and elsewhere. Nyawira's relationship with the Wizard is framed against her progressive political awareness.

The aim of the present paper is to make a study on the women characters in *Wizard of the Crow*. It examines a set of wrongs that African women of all classes and social ranks are subjected to. It also attempts to prove Eko's claim that 'Ngugi is a groundbreaking example of modern African male author's shift from portraying women as objects to that of subjects.'

Key Words: Ngugi, Wizard, Nyawira, depiction of women, progressive

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Women form an integral part of any society and without her no country or society has neither achieved nor achieves an overall development. In spite of this fact, they have been the victims to male domination, oppression, suppression, and above all exploitation. They are often treated like objects that are used for pleasure. Their position remains the same irrespective of caste, race, and religion. Yet another popular view is that among the lower races the position of women is always abject slavery. This holds well in Africa where women were very much looked down upon based on race, class, and gender. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the greatest writer of the 20th century, is highly committed to rising the spirit of the Africans and the African women. His writings frequently depict how women are treated and subjected to suffering in the hands of African men and the hands of White men as well. They throw light on the "desperate condition of the black women who suffer physically and mentally because they are unable to resist the colonial suppression."¹

Born in 1938 in Kamiriithu, near Limuru in Kiambu district, Kenya, James wa Thiong'o Ngugi was brought up at the critical times when "his family was caught up in the Mau Mau Uprising, his half-brother Mwangi was actively involved in the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, and his mother was tortured at Kamiriithu home guard post."² He, after becoming a Professor of English, dropped his Western first name 'James' and adopted his current Bantu name 'Ngugi wa Thiong'o' to emphasize his cultural pride. He is an artist who "dreamed of a better world and risked everything to make it real."³

Ngugi pens novels, plays, short stories, critical essays, and children's books. Almost all his writings are highly political, dealing with the cultural and political legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism in contemporary Africa. His novels consistently present "women characters, from his early novels *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965) to his middle period works such as *Petals of*

Blood (1977) to his Gikuyu works translated into English, including *Caitanni Mutharaba-ini* (1980), translated as *Devil on the Cross* (1982); and *Matigari ma Njiruungi* (1986), translated by Wangui wa Goro as *Matigari* (1989).⁴

Ngugi's most recent novel *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), also written in Gikuyu, *Murogi wa Kagogo* (2004), is the culmination of his orature-based, satiric novelistic writings after twenty-years. It is allegory presented as a modern-day folk tale. It represents "Ngugi's attempt to scrutinize his homeland by borrowing the same postcolonial magnifying glass that writers like Salman Rushdie and Derek Walcott have trained on India and the Caribbean."⁵

The objective of the paper is to depict the condition of women in Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow*. It examines a set of wrongs that African women of all classes and social ranks are subjected to. An attempt is also made to prove Eko's claim that "Ngugi is a groundbreaking example of modern African male author's shift from portraying women as objects to that of subjects."⁶ Before the objective of the paper is discussed and analyzed, it is pertinent to write a brief summary of the novel.

The story is set in the imagery Free Republic of Aburiria, autocratically governed by one man, known only as the Ruler. It begins with rumours on the Ruler's strange illness and the five reasons that are on people's lips for his illness. The first is his failure to land a one minute interview on the Global Network News in America, the second is the cry of he-goat whose anus is cut and sowed and chased away from the land by some Aburirian elders while representing to the Ruler, the third is the Ruler's age and his madness for power, the fourth is his attitude towards his wife Rachael who is locked up in a mansion separating from the world, from her children, and hoping her cry for forgiveness, and the last is that the daemons have turned their backs on the Ruler's house withdrawing their protective powers. Machokali, the minister of foreign affairs, Sikiokuu, the minister of state and in-charge of spying on the citizenry, and Big Ben Mambo, the minister of information, appear on the Ruler's birthday enlarging eyes, ears, and tongue to represent symbolically the Ruler's eyes, the Ruler's ears, and Ruler's mouthpiece. They flatter the Ruler and propose to construct 'Marching to Heaven,' a modern tower of Babel, as a birthday gift so that

the Ruler can communicate with God. Machokali appoints his friend Tajirika, the proprietor of the Eldares Modern Construction and Real Estate Company, as the Chairman of the Project. Tajirika invites applicants from outside the company to finish the prestigious project.

Kamiti, one of the main characters who pursued his studies in India, a job-seeking vagabond whose family mortgaged their future to get him a useless university degree, attends the interview. But Tajirika not only rejects his application but also humiliates him. Nyawira, Tajirika's secretary, showers sympathy on Kamiti and surreptitiously consoles him. Later, Kamiti decides on a career in begging and works outside the Paradise Hotel. Machokali chooses the Paradise Hotel for his meeting with investors. He invites the Officials from the Global Bank. On the other hand, Nyawira too assembles 'The Movement for the Voice of the People,' a dissident group at the Paradise Hotel to protest against the vainglorious project of constructing 'Marching to Heaven.' As the news reaches, the Ruler sends the policemen to chase the beggars and protesters as they are an ugly look for potential investors. Nyawira and Kamiti escape from the place when two tenacious officers chase them. They hide in Nyawira's house hanging the chicken bones with a sign that reads, 'Enter at Your Own Risk,' and signed 'Wizard of the Crow' to threaten the officers. The policemen run away from the house believing that it is the threat of witchcraft.

On the next day, one of the policemen returns to Nyawira's house thinking that the wizard may help him in career advancement. Kamiti practices some hocus-pocus with mirrors, convinces him that he has destroyed his enemies, and, coincidentally, when the policeman returns to his work, he realizes that he has been promoted. Due to this incident, Kamiti becomes a sorcerer sensation in an overnight. The following morning, Kamiti finds a long queue of policemen lining up at the door. Tajirika, who rejected Kamiti once, too appears in front of the house to consult the Wizard to cure his 'White Ache' disease.

Soon Kamiti and Nyawari become prosperous masquerading as the 'Wizard of the Crow.' They build a shrine to provide occult service to the needy people. Meanwhile, Nyawari continues her protest against the celebration of 'Marching to

Heaven' and directs a group of women protestors to flash their naked bottoms. The incident outrages the Ruler who brands Nyawari as Aburiria's most-wanted criminal and passes the order to capture her. On the other side, Nyawari's ex-husband Kaniuru takes advantage of intending to get a government job and reveals the identity of Nyawari to Sikiokuu. Then Sikiokuu tries to capture Nyawari but his attempts go in vain. In frustration, he arrests Vinjina, Tajirika's wife as a proxy for Nyawari and inflicts pain on her. Tajirika too beats her for alleged activities though fabricated they are. She goes to Nyawari, who is acting as the Wizard, for help. When Nyawari hears Vinjina's story, she rushes a group of rebel women to beat up Tajirika.

Preoccupied with building his tower, the Ruler goes to America to engage in talks with possible investors. He's never encountered objections, so when the bankers express doubts about the proposal, the Ruler falls ill with 'Self-Induced Expansion.' He swells like a balloon and chokes on his words. The Wizard of the Crow is called to America to heal the Ruler. Kamiti successfully restores the Ruler's speech, and for seven days he speaks nonstop, during which Kamiti sleeps and dreams of being a bird flying over Africa.

The Ruler, still swollen, returns to Aburiria hearing the speculations of pregnancy. Kamiti returns to find the shrine but learns that it has been burned down. The Ruler orders the Wizard to publicly address the pregnancy rumours. Kamiti, disguised as the Wizard, takes the stage and describes his dream. As he flew over Africa, he explains, he saw evil. The country is pregnant with possibilities for change, and the people will determine whether they deliver evil or good. Kamiti then professes his love for Nyawira. Her ex-husband is in the audience and shoots Kamiti, but he recovers and joins Nyawira's underground rebel movement. Political jockeying ensues, and after ousting the Ruler and announcing the death of Baby Democracy, Tajirika appoints himself Emperor of Aburiria.

Though there are many characters in *Wizard of the Crow*, it is the women characters who draw the attention of the readers as the novel records an unprecedented advance in its advocacy of women's issues and concerns. It also explicitly deals with

pernicious social diseases such as wife-beating and the gendering of poverty. Sayed Sadek aptly says thus:

It is mainly in this novel that women begin to have full independence and to overcome all kinds of obstacles put in their way by men and society. The novel also introduces the concept of sisterhood-women working together for their collective good as well as that of the society. It is the work that most represents Ngugi as a lifetime crusader for the empowerment of African women.⁷

Rachel, a woman who hails from high-class family, is humiliated by the Ruler of Aburiria himself for having dared to question his sexual violations with the school girls. As a result of her 'crime,' the Ruler banishes her "to a mansion built on seven acres of land where the ruler attempts to freeze her life in time and space"⁸ and imprisons forever. One of the popular theories advanced for the strange illness of the Ruler is "the tears, unshed, that Rachael, his legal wife, had locked up inside her soul after her fall from his grace" (*Wizard*, 6).

Vinjinia, Tajirika's wife, is a traditional woman who is trapped in the postcolonial structures of the political elite. Though she is living in the modern age, her husband Tajirika, one of the persons who occupied a leading position in the country, views her "as a lesser being rather than an equal partner."⁹ She believes in the holy bond of marriage, remains as a dutiful wife, as a wise and organized woman, and manages the domestic and business affairs skillfully when her husband is confined. She also exerts exceptional efforts in treating her husband when he suffers from 'whiteache,' a disease which was unable to be cured by Tajirika's doctor. However, in return for her limitless services and favors to her husband, she is rewarded with a blow every now and then.

Nyawira, the heroine of the novel, is born into the middle class but as her consciousness develops, she rejects her father's attempts to control her. She marries a poor artist, Kaniuru, against her father's wishes. When she realizes that Kaniuru married her for wealth but not for love, she divorces him at once. In fact, Nyawira is

the most successful female character in Ngugi's fiction. She is presented as an astute organizer not only of women but of the larger Movement for the Voice of the People. She represents a fresh consciousness of a new woman who can provide meaningful political leadership in a collective endeavor to save the homeland. (Waita, p. 49) Nyawira takes it upon herself to free all women in Aburiria by holding campaigns to fight patriarchal oppression.

In Nyawira, Ngugi creates a character who is at the centre striving to create a new identity and who is ready to reconsider the cultural map of the African continent. Nyawira questions the position of African woman as she is trebly oppressed "on account of her color like all black people in the world ... on account of her gender like all women in the world; ... on account of her class like all workers and peasants in the world" (*Wizard*, 428). Due to this, she is regarded as a socialist feminist who believes in consciousness-raising as a strategy of sharing experiences and hidden fears resulting from the suppression of women in the neo-colonial African society.

Nyawira is also a pioneer in providing social and moral education to other characters in the novel. Her schooling with the members of the revolutionary Movement for the Voice of the People has resulted in notable and positive female interaction which gave the Ruler and his sycophant Ministers' sleepless nights. Her sisterly feeling is reflected in defending Rachael. She and her group of women protesters shout at the Ruler to "set Rachael free" (*Wizard*, 250) during the dedication for Marching to Heaven. She repeatedly tries to expose his evil practices to the whole world. In this way, an issue that is consigned to the domestic arena is made public and also brought to the attention of global audience. The women protesters kept repeating "You imprison a woman and you have imprisoned a nation" (*Wizard*, 253). The concept of sisterhood is also emphasized when Nyawira recruits Vinjinia though the latter is married to one of the leading figures in the country.

The novel also sarcastically satirizes the Ruler's pseudo-philosophical tract, which argues that women should be suppressed and "must get circumcised and show submission by always walking a few steps behind their men" (*Wizard*, 621). Also the beating that Tajirika, Chairman of 'Marching to Heaven,' received from members of

the People's Court on account of beating his wife is situated within the principle that "what happens in a home is the business of the nation and the other way around" (*Wizard*, 435). Nyawira, the mastermind of the Movement, insists on the need to intensify "struggle against all gender-based inequalities and therefore fight for the rights of women in the home, the family, the nation, and the world" (*Wizard*, 428).

Vinjinia kept the Movement in touch with the latest news and by doing so she proves her loyalty to the women's cause more than to her husband. She also reports the incident of her husband's insulting and beating her to the Wizard of the Crow who in turn organizes a women's court that punishes Tajirika and disgraces him all over the country (*Wizard*, 431). To sustain powerful resistance calls for continuous re-strategizing, creative applications and the ability to be many steps ahead of the oppressor. During the ceremonies, sometimes members of the Movement, captained by Nyawira, enact an ancient and obscene dance of women as a protest against the project. Machokali, ashamed before the Global Bank messengers, had to tell them that the shameful acts they saw in Eldares represent "a sacred Aburirian dance performed only before most honored guests" (*Wizard*, 242).

Nyawira, disguised in various shapes and identities; as a limping witch, a beggar, a wizard, a dancer, or a garbage collector, among others, many a time escapes death only with the skin of her teeth, renewing the world's hope in a better tomorrow. Even when the Ruler instructs his policemen and orders them "to use all means, necessary and unnecessary, to capture dissidents dead or alive and put a stop to leaflets and plastic snakes" (*Wizard*, 136), Nyawira never feels terrified though she has been described by the regime as "terrorist" (*Wizard*, 317) "disease and virus" (*Wizard*, 369) and "public enemy number one of the Aburirian State" (*Wizard*, 683). The fighting spirit displayed by Nyawira reminds one of the brave Mau Mau women as the fearless lady can be related to the tireless and courageous freedom fighters in many parts of the world. The final triumph of Nyawira's characterization is that she assumes Kamiti's duties as the Wizard of the Crow when he is imprisoned.

To conclude, one may tune with Eko and say that Ngugi committedly depicts the position of African women in his writings. Nyawira is his most truly feminist

female character. He, through Nyawira, provides insights into an emerging feminine consciousness that rejects traditional gender roles and moves beyond the traditional male/female dichotomy in gender analysis. Nyawira is indeed a “revision of the author’s earlier female characters all the way from Nyambura (*The River Between*) Mwhaki (*Weep Not, Child*), Mumbi (*A Grain of Wheat*), Wanja (*Petals of Blood*), Waringa (*Devil on the Cross*) and Guthera in *Matigari*.”¹⁰

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