A Phenomenological Discourse of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Matigari*

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Abstract

This study moves away from the usual discourse on Ngugi wa Thiong'o which centers on colonialism, land issues, social and political position of Kenya's pre and post-colonial experience; to a new consciousness of phenomenology, as the investigation of our experience—how we experience things and interpret meaning. This study therefore, is a close survey of the approach Ngugi adopts in his novel, Matigari, to address issues of mythical interpretation, disillusionment, displacement and other rational concerns of the inquiry which critics have not paid close attention to. Using Edmund Husserl's strand of the phenomenology theory as the theoretical framework, the paper examines Ngugi's *Matigari* to reveal the accepted way of reality of occurrences of the East African novel to advance perceptions into lived experiences and consciousness. The methodology of the study is qualitative since it deals with an analytical survey of the novel. The significance of the study is to shows Ngugi's *Matigari* as a clarion call to African leaders to consciously develop the political will and new philosophical methods to curb catastrophe and restore order.

Keywords: East African, global consciousness, *Matigari*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Phenomenology,

Introduction

The several challenges of dislocation and dispossession of one's property and its resources underline the basic themes in East African narratives. East African novels, like others in the continent derive its themes from the socio-political, economic, cultural and religious events of society. The interruption of alien culture on African ideology affects the social order of events and the people's reaction to the prevailing circumstances are similar to the

rest of Africa. In fact, pre-colonial African nations disseminated information through the use of oral communication and it is for this reason that the storytelling technique becomes the antecedent to contemporary African literature. It shows the nexus between the present and past in African history.

Clearly, the issues of colonialism is not peculiar to African alone, it spans across other nations that experience the practice of foreign control. It is the domination of a people, country or state by foreigners mostly for economic reasons. During the early eighteenth up to the late nineteenth centuries, European nations scramble for the control of political powers over areas such as Africa and Asia. The colonialists took control over the land and resources not until the late nineteenth century that most African nations struggle for independence and unshackle the firm grip of colonialism. Frantz Fanon is one of the foremost advocates of black consciousness to investigate the issues of internalization of colonialism by the colonized, neocolonialism and the strategies of the colonizer to instill inferiority complex on the colonized (204-5). He writes credibly from the experiences of racism to have developed what is described as the "process of psychoanalytic deconstruction" and this has since gained widespread influence on writers like Ashis Nandy's *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (1983), Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) and other colonial theorists (205). Fanon highlights the demerits of using the colonizers' language to express the colonized thoughts in terms of writing.

It is worthy to note that, Ngugi is one of the critics that insist on the use of indigenous languages to tell the African story because of Eurocentric criticisms on African culture; thus, the need for the medium of communication to show the imagination of the people. It was Ngugi who first brought to our notice at a conference in 1962 at Makerere University College, Kampala, Uganda that African socio-political, economic and religious space is still dominated by Western ideologies and so "the choice of language and the use to which language is put to use is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe" (1126). Ngugi adds as a modifier that Portuguese, French and other literatures logically flows with the English language on a rescue mission of African writings (1128). Accordingly, the question of classification of African writings with Eurocentric judgment results in the conflict and tensions in Ngugi's narratives.

F.B. O. Akparobaro contends that Ngugi novels show variance and tension between African tradition and European values and the "tragic outcome express the poignancy of conflict" (127). An explicit example is his identity, Ngugi wa Thiongu was first known as

James Ngugi due to anti-colonial struggle he amends his name to Ngugi wa Thiongu and it literarily means the son of Ngugi. These are some of the challenges of colonization and its aftermath on African culture.

This study addresses the prominent features in East African narratives using Ngugi wa Thiongu's *Matigari* to explain the challenges of storytelling in post independent era. The dominant themes in East African novel are: colonialism, nationalism, liberation and rootlessness. This is not in any way insinuating that other parts of the continent experience entirely different challenges, but the point remains that East African narratives prominently features issues of postcolonial concerns. For instance, South Africa suffer apartheid regime and some other regions of the continent witness similar experience. The study discusses the issues under four distinct subheadings to show the characteristics of East African novel to global consciousness. The first section comprises the dialectics of colonialism in Ngugi wa Thiongu's *Matigari*. The second segment addresses the issues of nationalism in Ngugi wa Thiongu's *Matigari.* The penultimate subdivision highlights the struggle for liberation in Ngugi wa Thiongu's *Matigari* and the last part examines the trauma of rootlessness in Ngugi wa Thiongu's *Matigari*.

Primarily, Ngugi's *Matigari* narrates the ordeals of colonialism and post colonialism (the period after independence). Ngugi's *Matigari* is divided into three symbolic parts to show the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras of the transition when Ngaruro wa Kiriro's "Wiping Your Tears Away, Macaria ma na Kihooto's "Seeker of Truth and Justice" and Guthera na Muriuku's "The Pure and the Resurrected". It is an elegiac tale that displays the historical, imbalance tripartite relationship between the Europeans, Africans and rest of the world and it for these reasons that the story centres on a fictional character Matigari who survives a war in his country. After the war, the country gains independence and Matigari appears from the mountains in search of his displaced family and he sets out to make strange demands of seeking for truth and justice.

Theoretical Framework

In literary analysis theories are critical instruments because of the symbiotic connection between the real and the ideal in the representation of societal actions. In the words of Terry Eagleton "every literary theory presupposes a certain use of literature, even if what you get out of it is its utter uselessness" (182). It implies that the use of right theory in literary analysis is essential to explain certain ideologies. The question of what phenomenology actually means is not easy to define because of the different opinions of critics to the theory. For Terry Eagleton argues that phenomenology theory does not only

address the "very deep structures of the mind itself", but it is a system of universal essence that reveals the unchanging nature of imagination and the human consciousness (48-9).

J.A. Cuddon states that phenomenology is a theory propounded by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), a German philosopher, who maintains that the content of human consciousness is the actual object of philosophical analysis rather experiences judging from the common sense. He elucidates that it is a unique method of entry to the consciousness of the writer to determine meaning. M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey G. Harpham claim that phenomenology theory analyzes the human consciousness, which they describe as "intentional act" (directed to an object), independent of previous philosophical or common sense knowledge (289). In all, one thing is assured that the exceptional qualities of a work show the personality of the author. This paper, therefore adopts Edmund Husserl's strand of phenomenology theory to illustrate the primary essence and nature of the narrative in addressing philosophical issues. The major proponents of the phenomenological theory are Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty andHans-Georg Gadamer.

Textual Analysis

Dimensions of Colonialism in Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Matigari*

Ngugi is one of the foremost self-determined fighters to resist Eurocentric oppression and ideologies to clamour for sovereign nation for Africa. He participates fully with other African leaders to struggles for the decolonization of Africa, including the unnecessary imposition of foreign culture and language on the continent. Frantz Fanon argues that during colonial regime, the decrease in value of human relations compel people to do anything for food. Lifongo Vetinde opines that the power of food is indispensable to human survival and it shows the link between food and imperialism in Africa (233). It means that the consciousness of man depreciate detest any moral values a situation Fanon describes as "to live means to keep existing" because the survival for each passing day is a day of success not necessarily in achievement but "a victory felt as a triumph for life" (249). The period of colonialism shows actions of dehumanization and man's inhumanity to fellow man and it creates degeneration, hatred of one's self, society and the victim shows traits of low self esteem, reputation, appreciation and truthfulness.

Ngugi's *Matigari* commences with the wake from a catastrophic battle and the instrument of war still in the hands of the protagonist, Matigari, even after the fight:

> He held an AK47 in his right hand. His left hand was raised to shield his face while he looked across the river, as he had often done over the many years, across many hills and valleys, in the four corners of the globe. It was all over, but he knew he still had to be careful. (3)

Apart from the issues of alienation from one's domain it is an example of a narrative that opens with the striking features of the physical landscape, its rich natural resources and the changes over the period of the war.

> He went down to the river and then bent to wash his face and hands. So chilly! It reminded him of the other waters in the past which had been just cold. He remembered how, then, they had sung throughout the night in the open air. (4)

It is a recall of the communal life but the environment has changed to his surprise "the water had numbed their skin, so that none of them felt the pain as the knife cut into the flesh" (4). Timi Oyabara avows that in the first instance, it is the "beautiful and idealized environment with stunning scenery of gaunt hills that attracted the Europeans to East Africa, especially Kenya" (459). The environment is green and very comfortable because of the warm temperature different from the West makes the Europeans to refuse to return to their land.

Things have fallen apart, "… before this moment, they were mere boys, but the time they unclenched their fist they were men" (4). The youths are now adults ready to fight for freedom.

It means that Matigari is conscious that the physical battle has ended and the people need to return to their homes; but however, the emotional battle has just begun, yet Matigari buries his gun in a fig tree after killing his oppressor, Howard Williams, the colonial leader who oppress the citizens of the country and he declares to make peace with all.

Dialectics of Nationalism in Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Matigari*

Ngugi's *Matigari* also devote some time to explore ideology of nationalism and it is the advocacy, support and identification with one's nation in other to gain independence from oppressors. Benedict Binebai asserts that nationalism is the pride, love and protection of one's nation and it provides both an identity and a sense of belonging in terms of access to basic amenities, security and other rights. David E. Udoinwang maintains that the issues addressed "represent the flourishing generic trope of emotion-packed, despairing and moving non-fictional political narrative from the colonized territories of Africa that re-enact the trajectory of national liberation struggles." (29). It shows that that issues affecting the continent are represented in the new story telling technique. Amitayu Chakraborty cites James Ogude's words that:

> In the early 1960's, when Ngugi was writing, the relationship between ethnicity and nationalism was clearly a vexed on. For one, the site for

> constituting the nation lay in reconstructing the past. But if one turn to history it had of necessity to be ethnic, an area of experience at which many writers tend to look with disdain. (15)

Nationalism makes a community look like a state and vice versa yet, both are based on groupings that are not static. It shows the features of nationalism as characterized by identification and restrictions to differentiate the insiders from the intruders and in Ngugi's *Matigari*, a boy named Muruiku, who was always being bullied was rescued from his oppressors by Matigari. Muruiku takes Matigari to the scrap yard, where other children hide in old cars and on sighting an outsider, the children stoned Matigari until he faints.

The struggle for liberation in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Matigari*

The struggle for freedom is one of the dominant features in African novels and Chinweizu *et al* outline the works of earlier writers such as Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa, Ngugi wa Thinog'o, Amos tutuola, Ama Ata Aidoo, Efua Sunderland, Peter Abraham Okot p'Bitek and others that face serious Eurocentric criticisms (8). In their explanation, African novels should be judged based on the content, context, purpose, audience and not the medium of communication or by what they describe as "well-made or pure novels" and it shows Western "imperialist arrogance" (126). The troika also state similar Eurocentric attitudes stating that African novels ever-emphasize on areas of characterization and excessive shifting of moral and emotional challenges in Ngugi's stories (127). The characters in Ngugi's novel under study displays what David I. Ker refers to as "a dramatic partnership" and it shows the intimate connection between the characters in the community (76). It shows the mutual relationship among people because most of the stories are based on experience.

Ngugi's *Matigari* in searching for his displaced family members because of the devastation of the war begins the quest for peace and justice to fight the anxiety, corruption and hopelessness facing society. Like the savior Jesus Christ, Matigari he explores some supernatural powers to assist in the struggle for truth and justice. In fact, Matigari was likened to Christ.

Trauma and Rootlessness in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Matigari*

Matigari narrates the story of Mr. Williams's death and the implication to the oppressed people. Mr. Williams tries to kill an old man in his house and Mr. Williams' servant stopped him. The man ran away and Mr. Williams pursues him to the mountains. It is at the mountains that Mr. Williams was killed by Matigari. The factory where Matigari is telling the story to the boy is owned by one Mr. Williams, and the Boy listening to the story

is his assistant and Matigari thinks it is not a coincidence to be at that particular location and at that period.

Ngaruro takes Matigari to a bar, where he met Guthera, the prostitute, who hates the police for killing her father, a freedom-fighter. When she realize Matigari's mission she decides to help him get back home and arrived a mansion owned by William but occupied by his children. Due to the fact that Matigari refuses to produce a deed and refuse to cooperate, he was denied access and arrested. He stays in the cell with other inmates, whom he shares food and reminded them of the Last Supper. He also explains the reasons for his arrest and they decided to support him. Matigari's legend undoubtedly becomes stronger. The story of Matigari spread and makes him a mythical figure. The Priest advice Matigari to meet with the Minister of Truth and Justice and it turns out to be a trap because other inmates that escape prison with him were re-arrested and convicted, but for one of them that works as a betrayer.

The point to be observed is that end of the novel shows how powerful and tragic the search for truth and justice can be thus; Matigari states that "… We have to learn to fight fear. We must wage war on the fear that has descended on this land" (170-1) and it shows the resistance in spite of the different forms of intimidation from the police. The story seeks to find meaning and Matigari takes Guthera and Muriuki to the tree where the weapons are buried and at dawn they notice that the police is after their arrest, Matigari inspires them with these words: "Cast away your fears, be prepared, for this is the beginning of many hardship ahead … trying to instill hope in them … Are you ready? Ok, let go" (171-2). It shows the collective decision for emancipation then suddenly:

> Guthera screamed and fell to the ground. Matigari and Muriuku threw themselves on to the ground too, but were not hurt … Muruiku, cross the river, and bring me my AK47 … The dogs leaped on Matigari and Guthera .. Matigari and Guthera fell into the river Matigari and Guthera . (173-74)

Following these tragic events, Guthera and Matigari bodies fell into the river and people believe they both survived. The Police are disappointment by this incident because of their reward of 5000 and they lament:

> They were very angry, really bitter with fate; the reward of 5,000 was drifting away somewhere in the swirling river. They walk along the river bank, hoping to see the bodies of Guthera and Matigari floating on the water or else lying somewhere on the banks. Were they dead or alive? Who was Matigari? (174).

These questions from the disenchanted Policemen show the rootlessness in the relationship among Africans, but it also explore the themes of conspiracy. For the fact that Muriuki obey Matigari instruction that he should swim across the river to the fig tree the former escaped the tragedies that befall Guthera and Matigari, thus the narrative intimates us:

> Under the *mugumo* tree, Muriuku dug up all the things that Matigari had hidden. He took out the pistol and the cartridge belt. He counted the bullets. Then he took the AK47 and gazed at it. He dug up the sword and laid it to one side … Finally, he picked up the AK47 and slung it over his shoulder. He stood for a while under the *mugumo* tree … He looked over the across the river and beyond … (21).

Muriuku recalls Matigari's struggle for freedom, the devastation and dreadful incidents that cause the collapse of the people's dream for a nation devoid of foreign interferences thus:

> He recalled the night of the workers' strike. And suddenly he seemed to hear the workers' voices, the voices of the peasants, the voices of the students and other patriots of all the different nationalities of the land… (21)

At this point, Muriuku joins to sound the song of victory early initiated by Matigari during the search for truth and justice.

Conclusion

From the forgoing, this paper examined the prominent features of African literature at large and East Africa in particular. The paper highlighted the approach Ngugi adopts in his novel, Matigari, to address issues and challenges of storytelling in post independent era. Employing Edmund Husserl's strand of the phenomenology theory as the theoretical framework, the paper examines Ngugi's Matigari to disclose the accustomed way of interpreting meaning and to advance perceptions into lived experiences and consciousness. The implication of the study shows Ngugi's *Matigari* as an exemplarily work to call the attention of Africans to consciously develop the political will and new philosophical methods to control Africa's misfortune and reinstate her dignity among the committee of nations.

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