FEMALE DAEMONS: WOMEN AND REVOLUTION IN NGÜGI WA THIONG'O'S WIZARD OF THE CROW

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Abstract

Much of contemporary African fiction by male authors usually position men as the key actors in a national struggle and development, while assigning female characters the traditional roles expected of them in androcentric societies. This parochial attitude tends to de-emphasise women’s dynamic contributions towards nation building. However, Ngugi wa Thiong’o in his novel, Wizard of the Crow (2007), espouses a powerful feminist vision, in which female characters radiate rebellious tendencies necessary for championing democracy and destabilising dictatorial regimes. By analysing and prototyping the characters and roles of women in the novel within a feminist theoretical framework, this paper argues that female rebelliousness within the socio-political intersectional space engenders transformative possibilities required for the growth of democracy. The paper concludes that any discourse of change in postcolonial Africa must include women as a critical factor.

Keywords: postcolonial, nation, revolution, feminism. Wizard of the Crow, Ngugi wa Thiong'o

Introduction

African male authors are easily accused of representing female characters in stereotypes. These stereotypes usually operate along the tropes of the submissive woman, the prostitute, the whore, the temptress, and the witch. Even when the African woman is depicted in less negative stereotypes, she is not assigned subjectivity. In fact, she functions not as a subject but as an object of the male character, or as ‘appendages to men’ or ‘mere chattels recognisable only as mothers or wives to important men, and always in the background’ (Nnoli, 2010, p. 176). Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Maiṣẹl Segun, and other eminent female authors have criticised such representations in African literature. Nawal el-Saadawi, a leading Egyptian writer, has also highlighted the reductive images of the female in Arab literature (as cited in Olaniran & Quayson, 2007, p. 521). For projecting stereotypes of women in their works, Achebe, Soyinka, p'Bitek, Ekwensi, and others have suffered criticism.

Jill Leibham has cautioned against any representation that gives women ‘a version of feminity and womanhood that is perpetually limited and therefore limiting’ (as cited in Gamble, 2006, p. 103). Such a representation not only reinforces the stereotypical image of the African woman as devoid of agency, but also defines the essence of womanhood around the domestic space, as against the public space where much of what we deem meaningful and progressive is valorised. The danger of gender stereotypes cannot be underestimated because they colour perception and socialise people into patterns of behaviour that are far removed from reality. In short, gender stereotypes confine people to certain categories, therefore mediating social interactions.

In her essay entitled ‘Transcending the Margins: New Directions in Women’s Writing’, Uko (2006) highlights the various ways female writers are envisioning African womanhood and the changing roles they are expected to perform in modern socio-political configurations. She contests the (mis)representation of African womanhood in African literature and consequently advocates a “holistic redefinition of African womanhood” (p. 92). The need for African writers to feminise their literary vision, with a view to correcting the absurd
stereotypes of the female in African literature, cannot be over-emphasised.

Although Nnolim (2000, p.124) opines that much of the liberation of the female image in African literature lies in the hands of the female writers, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a celebrated male African author, has continued to portray women as formidable and relevant in the reconstruction of the society (Boehmer, 2009; Nicholls, 2010). In Wizard of the Crow, Ngũgĩ's feminist vision is powerful. He was neither concerned with disparaging the African women nor promoting images that debased womanhood. Rather, he created female characters that radiated rebellious tendencies necessary for disrupting and destabilising dictatorial regimes. In the novel, women play active role in the national struggle. Likewise, we find in the text the revolutionary female archetype in the person of Nyawira, the heroine - earlier foreshadowed in Ngũgĩ's previous works, Devil on the Cross (1982) (for instance).

Thematic concerns in Wizard of the Crow

Wizard is set in Abunna, an imaginary African nation, which we can readily recognize as any postcolonial African country existing today. It is ruled by an unnamed president known simply as the Ruler, a dictator given to delusion and despotism, claiming to have power over everything, including time. He believes that he and the country are one and the same. Supported by a bunch of toadyish ministers, his excess and ruthlessness know no bounds; his 'madness' manifests in various grotesque forms. He imprisons his wife (and let her die) because she calls out his pedophilic cravings, kills his enemies and hang their skeletons in his special chamber in the State House, which he visits every morning once he has had his bath in the preserved blood of his enemies. On a whim, he could have whole villages destroyed, market women hanged to death by his agents, even cast anyone who attempts to defy him into the Red river, where crocodiles abound. He never hesitates in silencing anybody who dares challenge his authority. In short, he cuts the picture of the typical third-world tyrant.

His country, meanwhile, is an excellent example of the collapsed postcolonial African state, plagued by widespread poverty and stark unemployment. Yet, indifferent to the plight of his people, the teeming colony of beggars and outcasts everywhere, the Ruler goes about negotiating a loan from the Global Mission bank, a parody of the World Bank, to enable him complete his utopian 'Heavenscape'; a palace, otherwise named Marching to Heaven. It is this desire to have his own 'Tower of Babel' that intensifies the conflict between him and the antigovernment group known as the Movement for the Voice of the People. The group strongly opposes the whole idea of a project that will further impoverish the already-beggarly masses. In a bid to stop the Ruler from perfecting his crazy idea, Nyawira, a young woman brimming with revolutionary sentiments, accidentally teams up with Kamiti, an unemployed graduate who at first turns to begging to make ends meet, but eventually ends up becoming a powerful practitioner of witchcraft (called the Wizard of the Crow). Nyawira is the arrowhead of the Movement for the Voice of the People. Together, the young couple, despite all the threats throwing them, goes ahead to set off a chain of events that eventually leads to the Ruler losing his grip on power.

It is important to point out that Wizard thematises the postcolonial reality of many African nations, a regime of violence underpinned by terror and domination (Moembo, 2001, p. 102). It also thematises the power struggle between the ruling class and the ruled as well as amongst the ruling class itself. Other themes explored include self-sacrifice and love. Although Ngũgĩ effectively utilises humour, satire, parody and hyperbole to underscore the adverse implications of unbridled state power, he illuminates the redemptive agency of active female participation in national reconstruction.

Literature Review

Ngũgĩ first published Wizard of the Crow in Gikuyu as Mũrũgĩ wa Kaggogo in 2004; he later translated it in English in 2006. The novel has attracted a lot of reviews, but none so far has theorised on the revolutionary roles played by women in the novel. It is against this background that this paper finds relevance as it aims to cover the perceived gap in literary scholarship.


A Feminist Analysis

Scholars like Olubisi Aina, Akach Ezoigbo, Gloria Chukukere, Oyetoke Oyewumi, Asma Amin, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Patricia McFadden, and some other feminists espouse that African feminism is many-sided. Hence, they avoid attempts to frame the African woman's experience within a singular narrative, so that there is no 'Categorical African Feminism' that pigeonholes. The struggle, then, remains to lend the African woman a voice in the legacies of colonialism, particularly in an evolving continent where she is still steeped in the character of a duped oneness: the neo-colonised and preserved-suppressed.

This paper situates its analysis within the theoretical context of 'Stiwanism', which means Social Transformation in Africa including Women, as pronounced by Molara Ogundipe. In the introduction to her book, Adeayo (1998) quoting Ogundipe writes:

I wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is social transformation. It's not about warring with the man, the reversal of roles; or doing to man whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to have a harmonious society. The transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest. (p. 1)

Ogundipe's Stiwanism shares some similarity with womanism, a concept which Ogundipe sums up as accommodatist because unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand' (Nnaolim, 2010, pp.115-116). Both theories focus on the conditions and concerns of women in Africa.

The perspective Ogundipe raised in the book Re-creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations (1994) offers a window to visit the demystification of gender myths, and the nuances explored in the thematic mutation of the stereotypical woman character by Ngūgī in his novel, to project the status of the African woman as one who is not defined by sexualities, but wields her socio-political identities to inform transformation in her community. Indeed, this variant of African feminism can help us confront and appreciate the many dynamic roles women play in Ngūgī's Wizard of the Crow. The characters in the novel challenge the position of the contemporary African woman in the circle of status, recognition and agency, placing in perspective the neocolonial patriarchal structures. Stiwanism argues for the inclusion of African women in the contemporary social and political transformation of Africa' (p. 550).

Ngūgī is looking towards the social transformation of Africa, a place where autocracy, despotism—which appears to have a historical affiliation with men who believe they can do all by themselves. Like Ogundipe, the novel Wizard propagates a united effort to transform Africa in layers of family, community, and state; an effort that aims to bring the woman and man together in a wholesome collaboration for the actualisation of national ends. A contrary effort, of course, would imply a shaming of either gender—male or female. In essence, the issues of gender inequality is not about making an enemy of the man, rather it is about confronting the subordination and oppression of women. It might be pertinent to mention that an instance of Stiwanism plays out in a passage where the heroine charges her partner to learn to listen to the voices of women because 'women [will always] bear the brunt of poverty' (Wizard, p. 83).

Though, more importantly, Ogundipe reiterates that men are not the enemy, but that the subordination and the oppression of women is. Men only become enemies when they seek to prevent changes when they cling to 'culture and heritage' as an excuse and by arguing that change is unnecessary. Like Ngūgī, Ogundipe does not see women as victims, she claims it is inherited. The actions of the Ruler, is projected as a result of cultural coupling of women, influenced by
colonialism, and a conjured memory of pre-colonial Africa. The social transformation is evinced by characters like Vinjina whose metamorphosis questions the rooted male dominance in Africa’s phallocentric society.

Renegades: Female Political Agency

In his critique of Wizard of the Crow, Njogu Waita (2013) remarks that Ngũgĩ presents a mature feminine vision of a woman ready to confront the social, cultural and political challenges of postcolonial Africa in the 21st Century (p.49). This section surveys key female characters in the text, with the aim of emphasising Ngũgĩ’s feminist vision.

Nyawira

Nyawira is the heroine of the text; she sees life as a ‘theatre of politics’. Though a secretary, she is described as dangerous: a terrorist; disease and virus; a menace to Aburra; a woman who could raise female and male demons at once. She is the chairperson of the Movement for the Voice of the People; otherwise known as the Snake People since they are fond of leaving behind snakes as their signatures anywhere they stage a ‘rebellion’. Nyawira embodies what Ngũgĩ refers to as ‘resistance heroine’ (Detained, p.11), for she believes that her mission is to attend to the ‘ministry of wounded bodies’ (Wizard, p.212) and to ‘champion democracy and denounce dictatorship’ (p.246). It is ironic nonetheless that Nyawira who initially resisted the two leading political activists hounded into exile by the Ruler would become public enemy number one in Aburra (p.683).

For Nyawira, life is a ‘theatre of politics’ (p.86), and her mission aside from attending to the ‘ministry of wounded bodies’ (212) is to ‘champion democracy and denounce dictatorship’ (246). In her discussion with Kamiti, she expresses her revolutionary sentiments and charges him to ‘change the world. Give it a soul’ (62). In spite of her intimacy with Kamiti, she rejects his impassioned plea to her to turn her back on her people (211-212). It is her commitment towards challenging authoritarian structures that causes a rupture in her relationship with Kamiti at one point (80).

Rachel

Rachel is the wife of the Ruler, whom he locks up in a seven-acre prison because she denounces him for sexually abusing girls young enough to be their children – schoolgirls, mainly. She would be forgiven and freed only if she shed tears for all the girls she had accused the Ruler of abusing. Rachel, aware of his sadistic intentions, resolves not to cry. Although Rachel dies in the novel, she inspires a couple of the insurgency led by the Movement for the Voice of the People. Her life is not animated by the ‘individual-survivalist option’ (Fatundu, 2004, p.73), which defines some aspects of extreme European feminism. This is because Ngũgĩ constructs her as selfless, a woman willing to sacrifice her ‘mountaintop of power’ in defence of the female cause. Meanwhile, this theme of sacrifice is illustrative of Waringa’s act in Devil on the Cross (1982), where she had to give up her life by shooting the Rich Old Man, so that she could ‘save many other people’ (p.253).

Vinjina

Vinjina is a housekeeper (Wizard, p.140) and a devout Christian wife. Initially she is apathetic to politics and business, since she sees nothing wrong with oppression. However, when her husband falls ill, she relies on Nyawira who raises her feminist consciousness. As a result, Vinjina begins to challenge the familiar practice of domestic violence against women. Feminist consciousness-raising is an important strategy against sexist ideological practices. According to Bell Hooks (2000) it makes us appreciate, ‘...how [patriarchy as a system of domination] became institutionalised and how it is perpetuated and maintained’ (p.7). However, Vinjina becomes a conflicted character towards the end of the novel.

Roithi

Roithi is the mother of Nyawira and wife of Wangehu. She shows that she cannot be swayed by political overtures or intimidated, especially when it has anything to do with her family. Her rebelliousness plays out in the passage where Kamiti, their former son-in-law who has turned an informer for the government, threatens to report her and her husband to the Ruler should they fail to hand over their daughter Nyawira. Even as her husband appears cowed, Roithi declares that, ‘Even if Nyawira were dragged to the scaffold, I would still claim her as my daughter’ (Wizard, p.290). Roithi’s characterisation approximates the ‘bionic woman’, a concept Bochmer (2009, p.43) has used to define the heroine whom Ngũgĩ invests with power.
Jane Kanyori
Kanyori is described as over-faithful by her lover Kanuru because she fits the picture of the submissive woman. She never questions him about the source of the money he gives her for laundering at the bank where she works. But she shows him that she could outsmart him, by blackmailing him into marrying her – if he does not wish to have all his secrets and savings disclosed to the Ruler. Even when Kanuru decides to call her bluff and threatens her, she proves beyond doubt that she has not only stored all the incriminating evidence against him in a safe but has also ensured that he would never go scot-free even if he kills her one way or another. Her shrewdness gets the Ruler to appoint her the comptroller of the Central Bank. Kanyori’s characterisation may be summarised in the following quote by Kolawole (1997), which equally reflects the characterisation of the other female characters in the text: ‘The African woman seeks self-fulfilment within [the] plural cultural context... She desires self-respect, an active role, dynamic participation in all areas of social development, and dignity alongside the men’ (qtd in Nwajaku, 2004, p. 56).

Women Power: Collective Deliverance
From the above profiling, we can tell that the female characters in Ngugi’s Wizard possess certain essential qualities associated with heroines – fearlessness, resilience; a strong sense of selfhood. Not only that, they appear very willing to resist any forms of oppression that threaten their identity. This of course validates Ngugi’s original artistic vision, as outlined in his prison memoir, Detained: A Writer’s Prison Diary (1981), in which he declares that he ‘would create a picture of a strong, determined woman with a will to resist and to struggle against the conditions of her present being’ (p.10). This part will therefore examine Nyawira, the heroine of the text and the central position she occupies in ‘the people’s struggle’ (Boehmer, 2009, p.43).

Nyawira’s first act of subversion took place at the Ruler’s birthday event, in which she was to be presented with a special national gift by the Birthday Committee. The significance of the event is described thus: ‘The birthday celebrations would always start at the seventh hour of the seventh day of the seventh month, seven being the Ruler’s sacred number’ (Wizard, p.22). A special announcement had gone on air repeatedly that there would be a special birthday cake, so the stadium was packed full. While the Ruler was busy addressing his audience, Nyawira threw a plastic snake in the midst of the crowd, thereby causing chaos and ruining the Ruler’s grand occasion. The event: so unsettled the Ruler that he ‘did not utter a word’ for a number of days. When he finally came to, he not only outlawed the Nyawira’s movement but also set up a counter-movement named His Mighty Youthwing.

Nyawira’s second act of subversion was at Paradise, where the Minister for Foreign Affairs was hosting a dinner for the Global Bank visitors. While the occasion was going on, Nyawira organised a group of rebellious beggars who began shouting anti-government slogans such as ‘Marching to Heaven is Marching to Hell... The March to Heaven is Led by Dangerous Snakes’ (Wizard, p.74). As expected, the act incited another round of chaos, in which the riot police attacked the crowd, thereby worsening the much-battered image of calm and stability the Ruler had been trying all along to sell convincingly to the foreign investors. This act by Nyawira was not only disruptive but rebellious and reasonable because it happened at the only hotel that was famous for the seven statues of the Ruler all in watchful silence, as seven fountains from the mouth of seven cherubs performed a kind of water dance in obeisance to the sculptures’ (p.72).

Nyawira staged her third subversion against the government, which almost got her killed, though it ended up turning her into a fugitive (p.216). The act occurred at the hallowed site where the Marching to Heaven project was to be dedicated in the presence of national and international dignitaries. Such a momentous gathering offered her underground movement close to a perfect setting – so historic and symbolic – to destabilise authoritarian hierarchies. Unbeknownst to Minister Machokali, the troupe of women that he had contracted to entertain the Ruler and his august guests with songs and dances was part of Nyawira’s movement (p.249). But to the shock of the Ruler and of everybody else seated on the platform the women stopped dancing and stood facing him. Then, pointing their fingers at him, they shouted in unison: ‘Set Rachel free! Set Rachel free!’ (p.250). The humiliation of the Ruler was far from complete; in fact, it was just the beginning. After shouting for the release of the Ruler’s imprisoned wife, the women turned their backs to the people; all together they lifted their skirts, exposing their buttocks to the VIPs on the platform and ‘squatted
as if about to shit en masse in the arena", while
their collaborators were shouting: "MARCHING TO
HEAVEN IS A PILE OF SHIT! MARCHING TO HEAVEN
IS A MOUNTAIN OF SHIT!" (p.250). Incidentally, no
sooner had the woman troupe disgraced the Ruler
than the entire platform caved in and half-drowned in a
bag of urine and shit, due to the collapse of the
derelict infrastructure in Aburina. One cannot even
begin to imagine how scandalised the Ruler must
have looked in the company of dignitaries, an
object of utter scorn and disgrace, no doubt. What
other public denunciation could be worse for a ruler
than to be told by his own citizens to 'lack their
shitholes'? In the traditional African context this
implies that the ruler has been declared unfit to rule
his people. This act was indeed triumphant, a
milestone, for Nyawira and her movement because
they were able to send the Ruler and his entourage
fleeing at a highly publicised event - without any
use of force or violence.

Overjoyed by the success of this bloodless
revolutionary act, Nyawira declared to Kamiti:

'When I went home that night I felt as
if I had sprouted wings. All the
sleepless nights, all the days running
here and there, had been worth it.
Driven away by Women Power, we
had said,' Nyawira told Kamiti, her
eyes still flashing with pride at
the memory of the women's courage
and their well-earned victory. 'And
that night I kept on repeating the
words, 'Women Power did it!' (Wizard, p.253).

Nyawira's political agency is not in doubt; she is
indeed a revolutionary, and in her we find an
embodiment of unselfishness and courage, even in
the face of terror.

Nyawira's fourth act of defiance against the
government happened at the opening ceremony
of her ex-husband's offices in Santamaria. After
Vinjina tried to Nyawira that her husband was
missing, Nyawira assured her that she would help
uncover his whereabouts and the person behind his
abduction. Once Nyawira knew that Kamuru was
searching for women dancers to grace the event,
she disguised herself and approached him at his
home with a message from a group of dancers. On
the day of the event, Vinjina interrupted the going-
on (as instructed by Nyawira) by walking straight to
the front row where Minister Sikoku and Kamuru
were seated. This interruption so infuriated Kamuru
because he had been looking forward to this day. In
a bid to ignore Vinjina, he instructed the dancers
to start their performance. But they defied him and
began a loud song cooly indicating him of cruelty.
Afraid the situation might get out of hand, Minister
Sikoku assured Vinjina that her husband was
alive but 'in the hands of security forces' (p.309),
helping the government on security matters. Much
to Vinjina's surprise, the Minister invited her to sit
with him and the other guests at the podium. What
Nyawira did here was very significant because
political disappearances were so commonplace in
Aburina that any missing person was as good as
dead. So what Nyawira did was to force the
government to acknowledge that it was holding
Vinjina's husband and had not been killed, as was
the norm. It is important to mention that it was
Nyawira who led the women in song and dance,
even at the cost of being captured by the State
forces.

Nyawira's role evinces a key tenet of feminist
consciousness: sisterhood. In her seminal book
Feminist Theory: from Margin to Centre (1984), bell
hooks underscores the significance of sisterhood or
political solidarity between women based on shared
interests and beliefs and a united struggle against
sexist oppression, or a sense of 'common
oppression' (p.44). Her feminist solidarity with
Vinjina helped to stop her from suffering male
violence. When she saw that Vinjina had been
beaten up by her husband, Nyawira arranged for his
abduction and trial by the elders of justice. The all-
female jury found him guilty of wife beating and
sentenced him to receive as many blows as he had
dealt his wife (p.433-4). This act of justice carried
out by Nyawira helped to reconcile the couple's
marriage. The theme of domestic violence recalls
bell hooks's statement about the role contemporary
feminism has played in conservative societies by
making it possible for our society to face the
problem of male violence against women and

Although Nyawira was regarded as an outlaw, a
terrorist by the Ruler and his minions, her
subversive activities grew into the hearts of the people (444). As bell hooks (1984) rationalises, "Rebellion is a stage in the development of revolution, but it is not revolution...Rebellion informs both the oppressed and everybody else that
a situation has become intolerable" (p.159). Thus,
Nyawira's fifth act of rebellion was instigated by the
arrest of Kamiti. To rescue him from the State
House where he was being held, she disguised as a crippled sorcerer known as the Limping Witch (Wizard, p.627). With cunning, she was able to secure his release and they both escaped far. This angered the Ruler and led to a series of chaotic events in Aburina. It was this particularly singular act enacted at the Ruler's State House that made him declare her the public enemy number one of the country.

Nyawira's sixth act of defiance is in the setting up of the People's Assembly, a branchchild of the Movement of the Voice of the People. Because of their presence, the Ruler unwittingly decreed that all citizens could join the people's Assembly, ignorant of the brain behind the civil mass gathering. Nyawira consummated her acts of defiance at the People's Assembly when Kamal called her up. She stood up and every other women and men at the gathering stood up too, thereby confusing the Ruler about her true identity. This heightened the solidarity of the Aburan people against the Ruler. This act leads to mass defiance and ultimately a revolution. With the eventual overthrow of the Ruler and the ascension of Titus Tajirika to power, Nyawira proposes a new army to confront the 'new orges' and latest threat to democracy in Aburina.

It cannot be argued that Ngũgĩ has not exhibited strong feminist consciousness in the construction of the female characters in his novel. The foregoing analysis has so far demonstrated that Ngũgĩ espouses a distinctive feminist vision that links transformation to the active participation of women in the liberatory struggle of their nation. As Nicholls notes, 'Ngũgĩ has done more than any other male African writer to revise and reconsider his female representations, perhaps because his politics is so deeply invested in them. (2010, p.4). Nicholls's statement finds resonance in Carole Boyce Davies's (2007) statement on Ngũgĩ, in which she esteems him as one of the few African writers who through their writing do not assign women a subaltern position in national discourse. In her words, 'Ngũgĩ is probably the most brilliant example, seeing the women's struggle as inextricably intertwined with the total struggle' (p. 566)."}

**Conclusion**

This study attempted to examine the centrality of the female character in *Wizard of the Crow*, by underscoring the dynamic contributions of women to national transformation and democracy. The novel eloquently challenges the prevailing anachronistic notions that women lack the strength of character to engage in revolution. Ngũgĩ's consistent portrayal of strong, determined African women in his novels is a most welcome development for African literature, as it undermines the stock representations of the African woman in much of male-authored fiction. This study hopes that other African writers, particularly the up-coming ones, will promote a similar revolutionary feminist ethos of social inclusion in the democratic struggle.

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