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Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Matigari* (1987): A Narrative of Protest through Mythical Fantasy

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Abstract:

Ngugi is acclaimed by readers and critics for his provocative writings regarding the language, politics and literature. His publications whether fictional or non-fictional are entirely marked by the voice of protest. His provocative narratives underscore an aggressive retaliation against the overburden of English language and culture over the Kenya in particular and Afro-Asia in general. He protests via language replacement and narrative disorientations. He covertly rejects English as a language of his own expression of the society from which he belongs. It is noticeable that over the years Ngugi has transformed his direction of writings as per the demand of contemporary time. The present novel *Matigari* (1987) is written out of the urgency of heroic actions to bring expected changes in the social structure of his native land. *Matigari* a mythical character has been picked up to fulfill this hidden wish. The denigration of the country makes Ngugi upset and he relieves his unrest through the present fictional work. He aspires to revisit own culture and past to dig out the prosperous sources of cultural and literary conventions. Particularly in literary terrain he finds story-telling and myths as flourished storehouses to trace out the abundance of fictional narratives. He employs these narratives to establish a narrative alternative to interrogate the 'other' and the 'self'.

Keywords: Matigari, Disorientation, Self and Other, Myth, Fantasy, Narrative.

I

The fictional and non-fiction writings of Ngugi is entirely marked by the voice of protest. His provocative narratives underscore an aggressive retaliation against the overburden of English language and culture over the Kenya in particular and Afro-Asia in general. He protests via

language replacement and narrative disorientations. He covertly rejects English as a language of his own expression of the society from which he belongs. The protest Ngugi operates in his creative as well critical writings works at two levels; first is language and the second is content. He aspires to revisit own culture and past to dig out prosperous sources of cultural and literary conventions. Particularly in literary terrain he finds story-telling and myths as flourished storehouses to trace out the abundance of fictional narratives. He employs these narratives to establish an alternative to protest against the 'other' and the 'self'.

The binary 'self-other' plays the vital role in all narratives of Ngugi. The present research article questions the prevailed binary 'self'-other' by reversing it's so far understanding in the post-colonial writings. It means, the notion of 'self' has always been associated with white or European who consider themselves as superior, while 'other' is colour or non-European community vulnerable to the self. It is noticeable that after the post-independence conditions the existence of binary remained unchallenged yet signification the term got changed. The dominant self (white) and its role of exploitation shifted to local colour elite or capitalist class. The other (colour) remained at the same place which is now recognized as non-elite/ working class. The operation of the binary ceased to be native and non-native and became concentrated within the native space only. However, the indirect regulations of White culture are still managing its control through language and cultural insertions into Afro-Asian communities. The protest of Ngugi operates at two levels; against the self means his own failed democratic system of the country and second, against other means European influence on the Kenyan culture. However, the present select novel is entirely based on the former. The story of *Matigari*, a local Kenyan mythical heroic figure, is about the dissent of the person who is frustrated because he finds the present democratic politics is in vain. He wishes to bring about protest in the country to set true democratic political set up.

The story of the novel is straightforward. *Matigari* is a heroic rebellious character in the novel. He wanders through the countryside and sees the pathetic condition of the people. The children are quarreling on the road garbage heap to find out the food to it.

The children raced the tractor to the garbage yard, a huge hole fenced around with barbed wire. Some vultures perched on the barbed wire, while others sat on branches of trees nearby. Hawks hovered dangerously in the sky. A pack of stray dogs walked around,

sniffing here and there at the rubbish. Two men stood at the only entrance to the yard, arranging the children into queue.

I wonder what they are queuing for! The tractor drove into the yard, with the vultures now hovering over it and dogs running alongside, sniffing in anticipation. A terrible stench filled the air.

The driver tipped the rubbish in three heaps. No sooner had he finished than the dogs, the vultures and the children went scrambling for the heaps of rubbish. (11)

This picture disturbs him and he determine to fight against this. The journey he takes to visit the countrymen infuriates him because he witnesses the complete derangement of the country. The elite or educated class of the country makes him nervous as they have nothing to do with the unprivileged strata. He undertakes chivalric actions as the only alternative to confront this traumatic picture of his land. He becomes famous in the country as a fighter who is having a magical power. There are several rumors throughout the country like he can vanish wherever and whenever he wants, he can kill anyone at any time or anyplace so and so forth. At the end of the novel, he dies in a fight against the policemen. He trusts that only violence can replace the current corrupt government so hands over his weapons to his fellow boy and tells him to continue the war.

The narrative told by Ngugi is relied on the above political groundings. The method of storytelling is mythical-fantastical entirely based on imaginative content. The realistic narrative has been left behind because Ngugi might be realizing the insufficiency of realistic narration to deal with these bizarre scenarios of the native land. Out of this urgency he has opted the mythical fantasy.

II

"This story is imaginary.

The actions are imaginary.

The characters are imaginary.

The country is imaginary-it has no name even.

Reader/listener: may the story take place in the country of your choice!

The story has no fixed time.

Yesterday, the day before yesterday, last week....

Last year....

Or ten years ago?

Reader/listener: may the action take place in the time of your choice!

And it has no fixed space.

Here or there.....

This or that village...

This or that region.

Reader/listener: may you place the action in the space of your choice!

And again, it does not demarcate time in terms of seconds

Or minutes

Or hours

Or days.

Reader/listener: may you allocate the duration of any of the actions according to your choice!

So say yes, and I'll tell you a story!

Once upon a time, in a country with no name....."

(Matigari. IX)

The first page of the present novel is conducive to anticipate the narrative approach of the novel. An invitation of the writer to listener/reader entails the multifaceted nature of the narrative. The direct address to the reader makes the role of the writer secondary while the role of the reader primary. Though the writer tells the story of a mythological hero Matigari, an involvement of the reader stimulates the possibility of heterogeneity of meanings. The liberation in terms of place, time, space, actions (story) offered by the writer to reader makes the narrative applicable to cross the cultures. Compared to other narratives of Ngugi, the present narrative is short in terms of length. The story is straightforward. As if it is told by a narrator to listener to entertain. But, the confession from the writer at the very beginning of the novel clears that the narrative imparts several issues. The transformation in nature of the narrative delimits the applicability of the narrative. Now, the writer has widened and open the narrative on the ground of imagination. An imaginary mythical figure has been chosen to reinforce the imaginative possibility of protest. The writer in the present narrative begins to take flights from a realistic approach to the fantastical

approach thereby he describes the dissent. This protest through narrative is at the center of the present novel.

The first aspect of the story is, it is a saga, one of the conventional ways of storytelling. The saga, a heroic tale told by Guthera a companion of Matigari, a mythical patriot. It is divided into three parts, which are as follows:

- 1) Wiping your Tears Away
- 2) Seeker of Truth and Justice
- 3) The Pure and Resurrected

Compared to other novels written by Ngugi, the present narrative follows the plain narrative without any stylistics and narrative experiments. The reading of the narrative gives the feeling of a heroic tale. The protagonist of the novel is a freedom fighter called Matigari. Matigari is a mythical figure considered to be a revolutionary who fights against injustice and exploitation. "Literally, 'the patriots who survived the bullets'- the patriots who survived the liberation war, and their political offspring" (20). The writer has used the mythical figure in the present context to craft the heroic urgency to deal with the political failures of the country. Matigari fights against the present government of the country. He fought in the freedom struggle movement against the white rulers in the hope of a better country. When the country becomes free from the clutches of alien forces, his fight does not cease but continues. His objections on the ruling government oblige him to continue the fight. He sees that nothing has changed. He interrogates himself: "What curse has befallen us that we should now be fighting one another? Those children and their parents should be fighting while our enemies watch with glee?" (18) still, he has to stay and hide in the forest. He realizes that nothing has changed. There has been only political transformation from non-native forces to native forces. He is disappointed, hence, continues his rebel. He has been declared as a traitor by the ruling government and prize is declared on his arrest. That is how he becomes a villain in the eyes of countrymen. Then he reinstates his fight with two companions. He comes out of the forest at the risk of his life. He meets various people in the country to seek help from them in his struggle but no one offers him any sort of assistance. Everyone has molded himself or herself as per the current circumstances. Matigari finds that no one cares of values and

welfare of the country. It seems to him that everybody has compromised with the current conditions. With this frustration, he stands firm and keeps his fight continue. He wanders every corner of the country trying to flame the rebel against the rulers. He takes the shelter in the forest and finally dies in fighting with policemen. At the time of his death, he hands over his weapons to his companion.

The first and paramount narrative aspect of the novel is its 'oral narrative performance' background. The address by the writer at the very beginning of the novel 'READER/LISTENER' (ix) reveals the history of composition. The novel was written in Gikuyu to be read to the listener. It is a blending of oral and written traditions as 'orature'. The mythical reference of the story attracted uneducated people. An uneducated people would listen to the story at workplaces, in bars, cars etc. The composition is intended to address the common strata who according to the writer is a true carrier of independence. The new elite class of the country has surrendered themselves to alien forces but it is the common class who strongly stick to the native culture. So, the narrative composition seems like oral performance designed to listen.

In each culture, the tradition of oral literature has influenced the literary legacy. But it is also true that under the influence of English literary tradition, some writers have arranged oral stories logically and technically. The present narrative, though is a form of oral tradition, it has been arranged reasonably. More specifically, it follows the novelistic form. The mythical story of a fictional hero has been written in a logical form. The narrative has been detached systematically from pure oral tale by composing is meant to be read. The blending of reading and listening abilities of the textual composition makes *Matigari* different from oral tale. However, Ngugi does not cut himself from the retaliation. The pro-European narrative of the present novel carries forward the fundamental intention of protest against either 'self' or 'other'.

III

The characterization is the first aspect of the present narrative which opens the possibility of textual analysis in terms of resistance zeal of the writer. The central character is Matigari who is depicted as a hero rather than the protagonist. The entire narrative revolves around this extraordinary character because in protests there is a need of heroic figure. The writer has depicted Matigari as: "The courage of truth had once again transformed him. It seemed to have wiped age

off his face, making him look extremely youthful" (31). He is a seeker of 'truth and justice'. The task assigned him to find truth and justice by which to rehabilitate the country. The project itself is heroic. He visits various places in the country and finds nothing is in order. The meaning of the word Matigari is 'patriotic'. His ideology is very clear about the revolution he wants to make happen. He asserts: "There are two types of believer, 'Matigari said, breaking the silence that followed the end of Guthera's narrative. 'Those who love their country, and those who sell it. There are also two types of soldiers. Some are there to protect the people, others to attack them" (37).

Matigari has been credited with many heroic traits. The most striking feature is his mystical nature and appearance. He wanders from one place to another in search of truth and justice and argues with people like a prophet. He inspires people by talking to them about slavery (46), intellectuals (49), ignorance (48) etc. He assures people of the country that our enemies are whites and their followers from our own country. His categorical view regarding the enemies of the country is very clear. He names two types of enemies: one is Settler William, a white man and the second one is John Boy, a cook of William (47). The second enemy John-Boy is called as 'feeding on the left-overs from the settler's table-?' (47). Along with his ideological apparatus, the appearance and existence of Matigari is shown as a mystical figure. The news of his secretly running from the jail creates curiosity amongst the citizen of the country (66). His different appearances have been depicted by the writer as: "Age crept back on his face; the wrinkles seemed to have increased and deepened. "How everything had changed. What was this world coming to?" (p.29).

The appearance, actions and ideologies of Matigari have three central aspects around which the entire narrative moves. From the very beginning of the narrative, these three elements are interwoven to develop the narrative. In the race of plot and character, the plot has been put at the back. Though the story is linear, goes in a very conventional manner having well-knit structure beginning-middle and end, but the character Matigari overtakes the story. While reading the narrative the reader gets a sense of character reading. The story of Marigari is a story of a person who is mythical, mysterious, hero like etc. Even, other characters like Gutheria are not given enough space to deliver their stories. The narrative is shrunk and character has been flourished. It means the writer does not spend words on lengthy deliberation on certain issues. It means, instead of contextualizing the character and his opinions and judgments on conditions around him are

pushed at back. These issues are presented in a disguised manner. The prominence to Matigari as a character marks the narrative as a character portrayal. There are no long paragraphs devoted to certain issues. The story being short in length moves very fast towards the end. The action rushes behind the character. It is Matigari, a character, who drags the story. He speaks to others, thinks about issues and passes the messages to others. An inner and outer psychology of the character makes the story possible. He is the only character who enjoys the freedom of narration. He has, as if, an authority to express on any issue. For instance, he talks about imperialism as a powerful orator and listeners are completely haunted.

IV

There are many examples in the narrative where only Matigari enjoys an authority to speak. The narration seems like the mouthpiece of Matigari. The writer sometimes uses stylistic language through Matigari's speech. For example: "The murderer calls the murdered *murderer*, and wicked calls righteous *evil*" (150). The language of Matigari is full of enthusiasm and aggression. The action owned by the character rather than action regulates characters. It is a character who makes the story happen. The story of Matigari told by the narrator as it is an autobiographical account of him. Though the story is readable because it has heroic and mythical characteristics, it creates an illusion of character portrayal. The point to be noted here is that the bringing heroic figure at the front indicates the narrative which not only takes the reader to oral and mythological tradition but also attempts to project the requirement of hero-like figure to resist against the self and other.

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