

## Magical Realism for Revolutionary Didactic Purposes in Ngugi's *Matigari*

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### **Abstract :**

This paper attempts to explore the magical realist dimension of Ngugi's novel *Matigari*. The major contention held in this paper is that Ngugi has used Magical Realism for a twofold purpose: to drive home his revolutionary message to the *grassroots*, and to serve his cultural revival mission. Magical realism has often been used to call for revolutionary *praxis* by Latin American writers. Again, since this literary mode relies on the use of myths, folklore, fantasy, and other traditional lore, it appealed to Ngugi who attempts to work for the retrieval of Gikuyu oral culture. In *Matigari*, Ngugi draws from both African and biblical mythology. From the former he borrowed the fable on which the story of the novel is patterned, and from the latter he has borrowed the savior motif, a motif that serves the revolutionary didacticism of the novel. In the main, in this novel, Ngugi fuses two literary genres: African oral and Western written. He, however, contends that his novel belongs to African oral Literature.

**Key Words:** Biblical mythology, cultural revival, magical realism, revolutionary didacticism

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In *Matigari* (1987), Ngugi takes up the thread of his narrative where he left off in *Devil on the Cross* (1982). The prophesied return of the Mau Mau rebels, or “patriots” as he prefers to call them, takes place in *Matigari*. Stylistically this novel is a synthesis of both the socialist realism of *Petals of Blood* (1977) and the allegorical realism of *Devil on the Cross*, it, however, incorporates a new stylistic device: that of magical realism. The blending of these diverse literary genres is an attempt on Ngugi's part to give more attention to the aesthetic components of the novel, since he has often been indicted for privileging content at the expense of form, in his earlier novels.

Since Ngugi's prime concern is to incite the masses to revolutionary action, as it is the case in his two preceding novels, *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, he has had recourse to magical realism, a Western literary mode that often depicts the ordeals of the populace and that is often used for subversive purposes. As Zanora and Faris (1995) rightly observe: “Magical realist texts are subversive: their in-betweenness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures” (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p.6).

The phrase “Magical Realism” was first coined by Franz Roh, a German art critic in the mid-1920s. It was used to describe the new experimentations with forms in visual art that signalled post-expressionism. Its adaptation to literary art started in the 1930s, and it gained fame in the 1940s and 50s in Latin American fiction. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), is considered as the magical realist “par excellence”. It has been a major source of inspiration not only for Western writers, but for African ones as well. As regards African literature, despite the fact that some aspects of magical realism appeared in the works of Amos Tutuola, e.g., *The Palm-Wine Drunkard* (1952) and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), it is rather associated with the works of the young Nigerian writer Ben Okri, more particularly, his novel *The Famished Road* (1991).

Magical realism is a literary mode that has often appealed to Third World writers who have attempted to describe the realities of their countries through the use of the fantastic, the burlesque, or the comic. As Homi Bhabha (1990) remarks: “ ‘Magical realism’ after the Latin American “Boom”, becomes the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world. Amidst these exorbitant images of the nation-space in its transnational dimension there are those who have not yet found their nation: amongst them the Palestinians and the Black South Africans” (Bhabha, 1990, p. 7). It is, hence, a genre that is used to dramatize oppression and homelessness, and to make a plea for the building of a nation.

Consequently, it is while in search for a truly democratic Kenyan nation that Ngugi has come to adopt it in his later novels, notably in *Matigari* and *Wizard of a Crow* (2006). Yet, Ngugi does not seem to like his novels to be classified as magical realists. He deems that his novels lie within the traditional African oral literature, or “orature”. His resistance to the label “magical realism” is expressed in his book *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* (2012), where he states: “He does not call it orature, but Kamau Brathwaite's description of the properties of what he terms the magical realism within folktext captures the same web of interconnections: ‘enjambement of time/ place/ consciousness w/in continuums of these; the capacity of all created things to ‘become’ (bom-bam) one another –humanification of birds,

plants, animals, minerals & vice versa.....' (Ngugi, 2012, p.75). Ngugi prefers to assign the use of fantasy and the supernatural in African novels to orature. He remarks: "The dynamic inter-linkage of art forms in orature is thus seen as reflecting a *Weltanschauung* that assumes the normality of the connection between nature, nurture, supernatural a, and supernurtural". (Ngugi, 2012, p. 75). Similarly, Toni Morrison, whose novel *Beloved* (1987) is often labeled a magical realist novel, objects to this label and considers that her use of magic and the supernatural is due to her African-American cultural heritage. When asked by Christina Davis why she disliked her works to be described as magical realist, she replied:

I was once under the impression that that label 'magical realism' was another of those words that covered up what was going on [...] It was a way of no talking about the politics [...] My own use of enchantment simply comes because that's the way the world was for me and for the black people I knew [...] So I have become indifferent, I suppose, to the phrase 'magical realism' but I was very alert at the beginning when I heard it because when I would read the articles about it, it always seemed to me that it was just another evasive label. (Guthrie, 1994, p. 225-226).

Still, though Ngugi maintains that *Matigari* was his most personal attempt at experimenting with oral narrative techniques, it is, however, less in line with the oral tradition than is *Devil on the Cross* (1982), despite the fact that it takes at times the *Gicandi Player's* narrative style. The use of magical realism and of modernist techniques, e.g., the stream of consciousness technique, make the definition of the literary genre of the novel quite complex. Lovesey contends that *Matigari* is "not a post-neo-colonial allegory" (Lovesey, 2002, p. 156). But, by embodying myth as a major aesthetic component, *Matigari* can certainly be classified within the Jamesian category of "National Allegory", for as Jameson argues "All third world texts are necessarily [...] allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what [he] will call *national allegories*" (Jameson, 1986, p. 69). Lewis Nkosi considers it as "an oral narrative performance" (See Back cover of the American edition of *Matigari*). In fact, due to Ngugi's blending of so many narrative genres, oral/written, Gikuyu *Gicandi Player/* Western magical realist, *Matigari* has been classified by different critics in different narrative registers. Steven Tobias classifies it among postcolonial fiction. He remarks: "Matigari can be considered a definitive postcolonial novel, as it sets a traditional Gikuyu folktale in the context of an unnamed contemporary African country". Odun Balogun, on the other hand, considers *Matigari* as a "multigenre performance" (Balogun, 1997). Among the genres he identifies are: traditional oral mythology, hagiography, post-modernism and realism. He, however, gives precedence to the realist dimension of the novel. He, thus, considers *Matigari* as a landmark in African literature, on account of its "new realism". He notes: "*Matigari* is one important novel of the late twentieth century which emphatically denies the verities of the old realism at the same time that it establishes unambiguously new norms for the new realism" (Balogun, 1995, p. 350). Yet, the phantasmal dimension of the novel and its mythopoeia bring it closer to romance than to realism. At best, the novel could be classified in the magical realist tradition.

The blending of two narrative styles: Magic and realism, the former from indigenous orature and the latter from Western written tradition, results into a culturally hybridized genre that reflects the postmodernist dimension of Ngugi's novel, a dimension that is in line with Ngugi's ideological concern for post-colonialism. The two aesthetic theories share much in common, though motivated by different preoccupations as demonstrated by Tiffin who remarks:

A number of strategies, such as the move away from realist representation, the refusal of closure, the exposure of the politics of metaphor, the interrogation of forms, the rehabilitation of allegory and the attach on binary structuration of concept and language, are characteristics of both the generally postcolonial and the European postmodern, but they are energised by different theoretical assumptions and by vastly different political motivations. (Tiffin, 1993, p. 172).

Magical realism is often considered as a post-colonial discourse. As Slemon notes: “Read as a post-colonial discourse, then magic realism can be seen as a positive and liberating response to the codes of imperial history and its legacy of fragmentation and discontinuity” (Slemon, 1988, p. 21). As all post-colonial discourses, the magical realist text focuses on binary oppositions. These oppositions are highlighted by Brenda Cooper who maintains: “Magical realism strives, with greater or lesser success, to capture the paradox of the unity of opposites; it contests polarities such as history versus magic, the pre-colonial past versus the post-industrial present and life versus death” (Cooper, 1998, p. 1).

Magical realism often reflects the “collective unconscious”, to use Jungian phraseology, of the people depicted in the novel. In other words, it mirrors the dreams, day dreams, or fantasies that are entertained by the common people. Henceforth, it makes an extensive use of folklore. It, consequently, becomes the genre that is most fit for the representation of the populace’s world view. This is, particularly, why it has appealed to Ngugi, who has endeavoured to present Kenyan reality from the standpoint of the peasants and workers and who has set himself the task of writing according to the paradigm of African orature, as a means to uphold it. In fact, Ngugi’s dedication of the novel is an indication of his concern for the advocacy of orature. The use of Gikuyu oral culture reflects Ngugi’s attempt at cultural revival. This is done with the purpose of rehabilitating his native culture in his people’s eyes and in those of the Westerners who denigrated it. It is also meant as an attempt at “decolonizing the mind” of his fellow countrymen. Ngugi’s major concern for the rehabilitation of African orature in this novel is first evidenced in his dedication “to all those who research and write on orature”.

The major components of orature that the novel encompasses are: the Gikuyu fairy-tale, the recurrence of oral story-telling style and that of the songs that cut the narrative flow and which give the story a rhythmic dimension. African orature also shows in the Gikuyu and Kiswahili terminology that is purposefully embedded into the English version of the novel. Another major component of African oral culture that often recurs in the novel is the use of the Gikuyu proverbs and the repetition of certain stock phrases. As regards story-telling, besides the fact that the story of the novel is told by a narrator who adopts the stance of a *Gicaandi Player*, directly addressing the readers (p. IX), there are other stories told by the protagonists in similar fashion. This story-within-story technique has already been used by Ngugi in *A Grain of Wheat* and *Devil on the Cross*. This technique reflects the traditional speech pattern of the Kenyans. Thus, when one is relating his story; another one may interrupt him, at any moment, to relate her own story on the same subject.

The story of the novel has been mostly inspired by a Gikuyu fable. In his note to the English edition, Ngugi point out that the story has been “based partly on an oral story about a man looking for a cure for an illness [...] who undertakes a journey of search” (p. VII). Again in his book,

*Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa* (1998), he points out that his sister used to tell his children such a story (Ngugi, 1998, p. 124). Yet, though Ngugi maintains that the story of the novel was inspired by Gikuyu folklore, it has some features that are reminiscent of Western films. This is the case of the story of Rip Van Winkle. Ngugi himself makes a direct reference to this story and draws the parallel between this protagonist's predicament and Matigari's (p.118).

The story of the novel has a quest motif. It revolves around the plight of Matigari, an ex-Mau Mau fighter, whose name means 'the patriot who was spared by the bullets'. He comes out of the forest some years after Kenya's independence, with the resolve to recover his house and family, symbolising respectively his nation and his people, through peaceful means. He, thus, buries his arms; an AK 47 rifle, a sword and a gun, under the *Mugumo* tree, a sacred tree in Kikuyu mythology, and wears a "belt of peace". He then starts his journey asking different people where to find peace and justice in his country. To his amazement, he gradually realizes that the situation has not changed much since he left and that the ideals he fought for were betrayed, since the offspring of the Loyalists were enjoying "the fruits of independence" with their ex-Masters. This is the case of John Boy Junior and the son of settler Williams.

The first people who attempt to help him in his search for his home are Muriuki, a destitute child, and Guthera, a prostitute. After many ordeals, Matigari reaches his house to find out that it is inhabited by John Boy. The latter beats him when he attempts to enter the house and summons the police. Matigari is taken to prison, from which he escapes with the help of Muriuki and Guthera. Matigari, then resumes his quest and goes to people from different walks of life, asking the same repetitive question about where to find truth and justice. He first goes to a rural area, where a woman suggests to him to go the learned ones. He, then, goes to a student, a teacher, and a priest, who each in turn send him to the other. All fail to provide him with an appropriate answer and betraying a fear of repression. Finally, following the advice of the priest, he goes to the Minister of Truth and Justice. After challenging the latter in public with embarrassing questions about the socio-economic oppression of the masses, Matigari is tried and sent to a mental hospital. Once again, he escapes with the help of the child and the prostitute. He then gets rid of his "peace belt", thus renouncing his passive resistance, and vows to recover his arms to undertake a violent insurrection against the people's exploiters. He steals the Mercedes of the Minister's wife and heads towards John Boy's house, which he sets on fire.

The masses who come to witness the event engage in a riot, burning down the properties of the well-off people in the area. Matigari, miraculously escapes the fire and goes with Muriuki and Guthera to get the buried arms. Both Guthera and Matigari are wounded by the soldiers who chase them. Matigari carries the woman till they reach the river, where they both probably drown. The novel closes on an enigmatic note as regards the fate of Matigari. Even the soldiers who chase him wonder whether if he is dead or alive, since darkness and heavy rain prevents them from chasing him any further. Muriuki reaches the *Mugumo* tree, takes the buried arms and puts them around his waist and shoulders. This last picture in the novel is clearly meant to suggest that another "Mau Mau" struggle against the new rulers and their neo-colonialist partners will be instigated by the new generation of the downtrodden.

Among the features of magical realist literature that the novel embodies is the magic that surrounds the characters of Matigari. He seems to be protected by some supernatural powers. This is the case, for instance, when the children of Trampville start stoning him, for they fear for their safety and small property. He miraculously remains unharmed. As the narrator remarks: “he seemed to be protected by a powerful charm, because not a single stone touched him” (p. 17). Ngugi provides his protagonist with a magical invisible shield to suggest that revolutionaries should be fearless of danger and should advance towards their goal, i.e., revolutionary change. Here, Ngugi seems to suggest that willpower helps revolutionaries overcome the harshest ordeals.

Magical protection is again at work when Matigari is arrested and sent to prison. There, the warders fail to search him and this has been interpreted by his inmates as a manifestation of magic or a sign of his magical powers. One of them asks Matigari: “Who are you? Because I have never heard of anyone ever being allowed to carry food or beer into the cell. I have been to prison countless times, and I swear that there’s never been a time when they don’t give us a thorough search ...” (p. 57). Then he interprets the magic that surrounds Matigari as a clue about his identity, that of Christ, for he remarks: “Tell us the word! Give us the good tidings!” (p. 57). Here, Ngugi uses magical realism for revolutionary didactic purposes. It is quite unrealistic that an old man, such as Matigari, could have the strength to defeat his opponents, notably the corrupt ruling class. The magical powers that surround him extend their protection to those who accompany him, as it is the case for the people who are arrested at the same time as he is, since they, as well, are not searched by the warders and they keep their knives and other properties (p. 64). It is as if Matigari has hypnotized the prison warders. Magic is also at work when the soldiers are chasing Matigari and Guthera. Whereas she gets shot, he remains unharmed despite the fact that gun fire is coming from all around them. Here again, the narrator remarks: “Matigari seemed to be protected by some magical power, for the bullets did not hit him ... It was as if on reaching him they turned into water” (p. 173). The fact that he was spared by the bullets suggests that he had, like Christ, some supernatural powers. It, however, also justifies his name which means: “the patriot who survived the bullets”. Here, the implication is clear: as he was spared by the bullets during the liberation war, he is likewise spared by the bullets during the new war against neo-colonialism, socio-economic injustice and political repression.

Another element of magical realism that is apparent in the novel is that of the physical transformation of Matigari. He is a middle-aged man but at times his facial features turn into those of a young one. Once, Ngaruro and Miriuki witness this transformation while Matigari was talking to them: “[they] looked at each other, wordlessly asking the same question. What had happened to the man’s wrinkles?” (p. 20). This also occurs when Miriuki and Guthera are with him: “All the creases on his face had gone and youth had once again returned to him” (p. 43). Another trait of his personality that has a magical dimension is his ability to appear in places at times when people are talking about him. This telepathic propensity is at work, for instance, when Matigari suddenly appears when a person is telling another about her wish to see him there and then saying: “I’d be happy if I could see him with my own eyes, this very minute, so that I can shake his hand ...” (p. 73). This again occurs when two women, in a different place, are exchanging information about Matigari’s exploit when he saved Guthera and “just then Matigari stopped on the other side of the road and greeted them” (p. 77). Another instance of Matigari’s sudden appearance when people are talking about him is that of the man who suddenly turns to find that he is facing him: “Matigari just arrived, only to find a man speaking and pointing a finger in his direction” (p.82). Again, Magic is

at work to help Matigari find his way to the places where dwell the people he is in search of, such as the student's and the teacher's house. Through such examples, Ngugi suggests that Matigari has, like Christ, miraculous powers, as for instance self-transposition. He suddenly finds himself facing the student who has locked himself in his study. When he saw Matigari, "he trembled so much that the book he was holding fell on the floor" (p. 89). This is also the case of the teacher who was at home and "when he saw Matigari, he felt suddenly weak" (p. 91).

There are, however, in the novel some other characteristics of magical realism that do not relate to Matigari's character or personality. There are, for instance, some coincidences of occurrences such as that of the answer provided to one of the workers' questions about their fate if the factory closes, by the juke box song: "That's your problem" (p. 25). This may be considered as pure chance if such coincidences were not to be repeated. Thus, there is the case of one of the prisoners who tells his mates that "Only Gabriel the angel of God can get you out of here. Amen" (p. 65). Just then, Guthera and Muriuki come to release them. These coincidences serve plot development and help Ngugi to bring the threads of the story together. They also serve the archetypal figure of his protagonist, i.e., the Christ figure pattern. This figure reflects the Kenyan people's sensibility and mentality, for they often spread rumours about Christ's Second Coming and other related miracles. Magic and miracles are strongly embedded in their folktales. The archetypal Christ figure is, however, often used in magical realist fiction. Magical realism draws heavily from mythology both native and universal. Ngugi relies on both Kikuyu and biblical mythology.

As in *Devil on the Cross*, in *Matigari*, Ngugi makes an extensive use of biblical mythology. Unlike Maughan Brown who sees the use of this mythology as a rehabilitation of the Christian religion, I consider it as an attempt to appeal to the religious allegiances of the masses. My contention is that, after his onslaughts on the Christian religion in *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi has come to realize that his revolutionary didacticism could be impaired by a mental resistance of the masses to whom his message is addressed, and who are considered by Ngugi as the major agents of revolutionary change in Kenya. Being deeply Christian at heart, these people could but resist Ngugi's appeals on account of his onslaughts on the Christian religion. An instance of such a counter-effect, or rather a resistance to Ngugi's discourse against Christianity is best illustrated through the incident of the old man who threatened him with his stick and accused him of blasphemy, during his speech about his renouncing the Christian religion (Ikiddeh, foreword, *Homecoming*). Again since a language is a carrier of a world view and since Ngugi uses Kikuyu to write *Matigari*, he had to take into account the Kenyan grassroots' mentality in all its facets, incorporating both traditional myth and Christian mythology. In his essays, Ngugi often points to the importance of the representation of people's worldview in his fictional works, as when he states: "I believe that if the novel is to be meaningful, it must reflect the totality of the forces affecting the lives of the people" (Ngugi, 1980, p. 23).

As regards Ngugi's use of the Christian religion in the novel, Brown contends that it is "a new departure" (Brown, 1991, p. 174), and that it hints to Ngugi's finding a "possible usefulness of Christ to his project" (Brown, 1991, p. 174). Yet, he does not explain how this is the case. He merely points out the aspects of Christian mythology that the novel embodies. He considers *Matigari* as a novel that has "positive values by reference to its Christian teachings" (Maughan Brown, 1991, p. 176). However, what Brown fails to see is that the Christian principles encompassed in the novel, e.g., the resurrection, sacrifice and redemption, are used as metaphors for

the Mau Mau motif of the novel, a motif used for revolutionary didactic purposes. The Christian principles are grafted onto the Kikuyu legends of sacrifice for a nation's salvation. This is clearly indicated in Matigari's denial that he is Christ resurrected, and his metaphorical reference to Kenyan nationalism as being the 'God within' his people.

The biblical saviour motif has already been used as a metaphor for revolutionary activism in *A Grain of Wheat* (1967). This metaphor is first expressed through the title of the novel. The Christian motif of martyrdom is clearly expressed through Kihika who says: "in Kenya we want a death. Kenya is Christ". (Ngugi, 1967, p. 83). In *Matigari*, martyrdom is symbolized through Guthera's and Matigari's death. They die so that the revolutionary spirit they embodied be transmitted to younger generations, e.g., that of Muriuki, as it is suggested at the close of the novel through the image of the latter carrying arms. Matigari's spirit is hence, resurrected through that of the child. In the river, Matigari and Guthera's blood flows to water other "grain[s] of wheat". Yet, the Mau Mau spirit rather than the Christian one is outstanding in Ngugi's novel. In the *Historical Survey of the Origins and Growth of Mau Mau* (1960), the Secretary of State for the Colonies, maintains that Mau Mau fighters were not devout Christians. (Secretary of State, 1960, p. 2). Unlike Maugham Brown who considers Matigari as strongly indebted to Christian mythology, Simon Gikandi, an "insider", maintains that Matigari "draws heavily upon Kenyan popular culture" (Gikandi, 1991, p. 163), and that it has been inspired by the legend of the return of Mau Mau which it "transforms into a political force" (Gikandi, 1991, p. 163).

To sum up, though the novel has a certain aesthetic appeal, mostly on account of the use of magical realism and the suspense it upholds, it is, like *Petals of Blood* (1977) and *Devil on the Cross*, marred by Ngugi's sermonings. It has, however, served its didactic purpose since it has contributed to the spreading of rumours, in 1987 (Ngugi's note to the English edition, p. VIII), about the return of Mau Mau fighters to wage a new war to establish peace and justice. As Gikandi remarks: "It is important to note that Matigari (the character and the novel) had acquired political agency in the process of being read. It was through the interpretative strategies they applied to the novel, that readers came to determine its political practice" (Gikandi, 2000, p. 291). Besides, as Ngugi himself remarks in the Note to the English Edition "Matigari the fictional hero of the novel was himself resurrected as a subversive character" (p. VIII). And the Kenyan authorities anecdotic reaction, since they sent the police searching for Matigari, to find out that he was a mere fictional character, is yet another victory of Ngugi over his persecutors, despite the banning of the novel.

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