Parasites, Dogs, and Foxes: Examining Matigari and the Revolutionary Struggle in Post-Independence Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the symbolism of "parasites," "dogs," and "foxes" in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Matigari, using postcolonial literary theory to analyze the roles of these categories in the broader context of post-independence Kenya. In Matigari, the colonial powers, represented as vultures or parasites, exploit the land and labor of the Kenyan people for profit. The study critiques the continuity of colonial exploitation through the emergence of new imperialist figures, embodied by characters like Robert Williams, who symbolize a shift from overt colonialism to neocolonialism and imperialism. The "dogs" are the African collaborators-members of the educated elite, like John Boy and John Boy Junior who perpetuate the oppression of the masses. The "foxes" represent the common people, whose hopes for post-independence prosperity are dashed as they face even harsher conditions under a government led by their own elites. Through characters, imagery, and social critique, Ngũgĩ illustrates the persistence of exploitation and inequality in postcolonial societies, underscoring the need for a revolutionary awakening to reclaim justice.

Keywords: Post-colonialism, revolution, parasites, dogs, foxes

INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial Africa and the African experience have been shaped by certain historical realities such as slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and neocolonialism. These realities have created systems of subjugation that are not only visible in the socio-economic and political dynamics of contemporary society but also reflect the contradictions of the individual African, who is caught, as Gabriel Okara puts it in his poem Piano and Drums, as being "caught in the middle of a phrase at dagger point." The balkanization of Africa occurred in 1884 at the Berlin Conference, where fourteen European powers divided Africa among themselves like a piece of cake. The 1950s witnessed the birth of many independence movements in Africa. These movements led to the independence of many African states in the late 1950s and 1960s. In Kenya, the independence struggle championed by the Mau Mau culminated in the declaration of independence in 1963 and the establishment of the Republic of Kenya in 1964. Despite the fact that black Africans were now in control of the reins of government, there was no improvement in the economic condition of the citizenry because the new black elite had inherited the greed, arrogance, and corruption of the colonial masters that the revolutionaries had thrown out.

Matigari by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, which was originally published in Gikuyu in 1986, chronicles the economic and political history of not only Kenya but also Africa. It is a satire built around the mythical character of Matigari wa Njuruugu, which translates into English as "The Patriot Who Survived the Bullet." The protagonist, Matigari, returns from the forests, buries his gun, and girds himself with the belt of peace and justice, with a singular purpose: to gather his children scattered across the land and take them home. He realizes that his children are oppressed, hungry, and deprived of truth and justice. In his search for truth and justice, Matigari transforms into a mystical figure who ultimately understands that he must take up arms once

more to fight against the corrupt system perpetuated by Robert Williams, the son of Settler Williams, and the agents of the state.

Matigari realizes that independence did not bring economic freedom to the people, and that the colonial system has simply perpetuated itself, reemerging in new forms of oppression-more subtle but equally brutal-embodied by the "dogs" and "parasites." The colonialists, symbolized by Settler Williams, have maintained their control by grafting themselves onto a new class of African elites, represented by the Minister of Justice and Truth and John Boy. This study, therefore, seeks to identify the different actors in Kenya, the parasites and the dogs on one side, and the foxes on the other side. The study also seeks to examine the relationship between the parasites and the dogs and how they work together to create systems of poverty, corruption, and brutality in post-independence Kenya. The study also seeks to explain the revolutionary reaction of the oppressed people of the land, symbolized by Matigari, our protagonist, who realizes the need for a violent revolution against the new order.

Postcolonial Theory

The theory adopted for this study is postcolonial literary theory. In our attempt to define postcolonial theory, we must understand what the word "postcolonial" means. The word "postcolonial" not only captures the politics of decolonization that began in the late 20th century but also subsumes the "leftovers" of colonialism. Adigun writes, "As widely explained by its exponents, the post- in postcolonial does not necessarily mean 'after' (as to have the morphological denotation of after-colonial), but it is an arbitrary construct which expresses a continuum-nonetheless heavily semantically punctuated by the colonial as it serves as its prime essence" (Adigun 1).

Rukundwa and Andreas G. van Aarde write that theorists take two different views of post-colonialism: an optimistic view, where post-colonialism is a means of defiance by which any exploitative and discriminative practice, regardless of time and space, can be challenged; and a pessimistic view, which sees the word "post-colonialism" as ambiguous, ironic, and superstitious (Rukundwa and van Aarde 1171). Postcolonial literary theory is a literary theory that deals with literature produced by countries that were once colonized by European or Western powers. Young saw postcolonial literary theory as not only concerned with the reading and writing of literature by people of colonized countries but also with literature written by people of colonizing countries, in which the subject matter is colonization or the realities of colonized people (Young 11). Post-colonial literary theory examines the lingering effect of colonialism on former colonies and their people. It critiques how colonial histories have shaped identities, cultures and power structures, as it seeks ways to reclaim suppressed voices and perspectives (Awala 2270). Young succinctly captures the aims of post-colonialism:

Post colonialism has embraced a number of aims, most fundamentally to reexamine the history of colonialism from the perspective of the colonized; to determine the economic, political, and cultural impact of colonialism on both the colonized peoples and the colonizing powers; to analyze the process of decolonization; and above all, to participate in the goals of political liberation, which includes equal access to material resources, the contestation of forms of domination, and the articulation of political and cultural identities (Young 11).

Peter Barry itemizes what literary critics who employ postcolonial theory do, showing how such literature is often evasively and crucially silent on matters concerned with colonization and imperialism:

1. They foreground questions of cultural difference and diversity and examine their treatment in relevant literary works.
2. They celebrate hybridity and "cultural polyvalency," that is, the situation whereby individuals and groups belong simultaneously to more than one culture (for instance, that of the colonizer, through a colonial school system, and that of the colonized, through local and oral traditions).
3. They develop a perspective, not just applicable to postcolonial literatures, whereby states of marginality, plurality, and perceived "Otherness" are seen as sources of energy and potential change (Barry 130).

Postcolonial Literature

Postcolonial literature emerged as a reaction to the long period of colonialism by European powers, beginning in the late 15th century and continuing to the mid-20th century, when most formerly colonized countries gained independence. This period is linked with the beginning of colonialism and imperialism, continuing into the 21st century (Patel 241). Postcolonial literature is the literature written by people who were formerly colonized by European powers, with works that capture colonialism and its effect on the colonized after independence. According to Dar, postcolonial literature, in theoretical parlance, is defined as the literature that belongs to countries that have gone through the bitter and painful phase of European colonialism (34). To be more precise and direct, postcolonial literature is the literature written in Third World countries like Africa, Somalia, South America, and other erstwhile colonized spaces, focusing on the themes of subjugation and resistance. Bhosale sees postcolonial literature as a direct reaction to colonialism, dealing with issues such as racism, the subaltern, ethnicity, political autonomy of the colonized countries, and concerns related to the cultural, political, and socio-economic aspects of the colonized nations (249). Bhosale also mentions that postcolonial literature captures the aftermath and effects of colonialism on the colonized:

The post-colonial literature is a cultural critique, and the effects and aftermaths of colonialism are clearly evident in its successive novels. Postcolonial literature is a literature of the subjugation of colonized people. It talks about slavery, poverty, and deceit. The colonizers try to suppress the colonized people's identity, self-respect, and their customs. The colonial powers like Britain, Spain, France, and other European countries exercised the practice of colonialism throughout the world. Postcolonial literature is an expression of exclusion, subjugation, injustice, and suppression by the colonizers (Bhosale 250).

Bill Ashcroft et al. define postcolonial literature in the context of the following countries: "Literatures of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, and Sri Lanka are all postcolonial literatures. What each of these literatures has in common, beyond their specific and distinct regional characteristics, is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power" (Ashcroft et al. 2). The aim of postcolonial literature is resistance, confrontation, rebellion, and rejection of Western ideology, canons, and stereotypes. Postcolonial literatures seek to reclaim self-representation from stereotypical portrayals in colonial literatures and colonial discourses, and to do so, they often use the 'writing back paradigm, or rewriting of Western master texts" (Cuddon 551).

Identifying Parasites (Vultures), Dogs, and Foxes

The use of the word "vulture" in African literature is not a new one. The poet David Diop uses the word to symbolize Western culture and values, especially in relation to the colonial experience in Africa. The word appears in *Matigari* and is sometimes replaced with a synonym: parasites. The parasites or vultures are the colonial masters who at the Berlin Conference of 1884/1885, shared Africa amongst themselves, with the main goal of colonizing the continent for profit. The images of these colonizers and their goals are aptly captured in the novel by the mural of wild animals on the wall of the restaurant:

On the wall were murals of wild animals. An elephant, a hyena, a buffalo, a snake, a leopard, and a zebra sat in a circle; all holding a bottle of beer, and in one hand, King Lion sat in the center of the circle collecting money. On the crown he wore were the words "King of the Jungle." On his belly was the word "tribute," and at his feet was a barrel with the words, "Drink it, Drink it. After all, it costs so little. Drink it! (Ngũgĩ 42).

The parasites are the colonial masters symbolized by Settler Williams, who had colonized Africa, reaped unholy rewards by exploiting black land and labor without properly compensating the black people for their resources. This group grew rich by oppressing and enslaving Africans in their homeland. This explains the independence movement constantly repeated by the protagonist, Matigari, throughout the novel:

You see, I built this house with my own hands. But Settler Williams slept in it, and I would sleep outside on the veranda. I tended the estates that spread for miles. But it was Settler Williams who took home the harvest. I was left to pick anything he might have left behind. I worked all the machines and industries, but it was Settler

Williams who took the profits to the bank and I ended up with the cent he flung my way...What a world! A world in which the tailor wears rags, the tiller eats wild berries, the builder begs for shelter (Ngũgĩ 21).

The patriots, tired of the economic and political oppression, took the bull by the horns, asking the white man—the colonialists—to leave the land and return to their country. The colonialists refused, leading rise of the independence struggle in Kenya:

One morning I woke up from the deep sleep of many years, and I said to him: Settler Williams, you who eat what another has sown, hear now the sound of the trumpet and the sound of the horn of justice. The tailor demands his clothes, the tiller his land, the worker the produce of his sweat. The builder wants his house back. Get out of my house (Ngũgĩ 35).

A long conflict ensued between the colonialists and the patriots symbolized by our protagonist Matigari, culminating in the death of Settler Williams or the birth of an independent Kenya. However, the end of the vultures did not occur with the death of Settler Williams; they re-emerged as imperialists, symbolized by Settler Williams' son, Robert Williams. Robert Williams to the did not return to his homeland but stayed in Kenya to further colonial interests, albeit more subtly, by working in synchrony with sellouts like John Boy. The power of vultures in the independent country is clearly stated in John Boy's speech as he introduces Robert Williams to Matigari:

He is the first born of Williams. He is somebody. Yes, watch out, for he is not just anybody. He is a director of Anglo-American International Conglomerate of Insurance (AICI) and Agribusiness Co-ordinating International Organization (ACIO); and he is also a director of the local branch of Banker's International Union (BIU). We are both members of the board of governors of the leather and plastic factory" (Ngũgĩ 50).

Imperialism occurs in Africa because the former vultures, having been chased out during the independence struggle, manifest themselves as parasites attached to the educated African elite, who find themselves in the corridors of power and on the boards of industries, like His Excellency Ole Excellence, the Minister of Truth and Justice, and John Boy. It is this category of persons that the parasites attach themselves to, and we can readily identify them as dogs. Without the dogs—also referred to as sellouts in the novel—colonialism and imperialism would not have succeeded. This is because these individuals not only served as spies but also actively opposed the independence movement. This category of persons in the pre-colonial period is symbolized by John Boy:

Wonders will never cease! You wouldn't believe, would you, that it was John Boy, a black man, the settler's servant, who saved him? I have no idea where he suddenly emerged from. Perhaps he came from the kitchen. He jumped on my back screaming. The gun fell to the ground, and he and I started wrestling. I was determined to get the gun. Settler Williams was coming to join John Boy against me, and without the gun, I would be no match for the two of them. I drew up all my strength, broke free of John Boy's hold, and jumped out through the window (Ngũgĩ 22).

After independence, it is the children of John Boy and his kind who have emerged as the economic and political leaders of independent Kenya. By working closely with the children of the former colonial masters, they have become worse than the colonial masters, oppressing their own people and subverting justice. The Minister of Truth and Justice also belongs to this category.

And yet, we are left with a third category: the common people, who had expected a change in their fortunes with the realization of independence but are instead confronted with a paradoxical reality: they now fare worse under the government of the educated black elite than they did under the colonialists. This category of people are the foxes—the common people, the workers in the factory, the orphans, the prostitutes, the farmers, the university students, and the university teachers. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in Matigari captures not only the relationship between these three categories of actors in Kenya but also the truth that the colonialists succeeded because of the actions of their black collaborators:

"It reminded him of the horses that Settler Williams and his friends had often ridden as they went to hunt foxes accompanied by packs of well-fed dogs" (Ngũgĩ 44).

Another word that is readily used to capture another category of oppressors is "dogs." The African has to battle against vultures and dogs with devastating consequences. Ngũgĩ portrays the shenanigans of these categories of people through his use of irony. Like in George Orwell's 1984, the words and institutions in the novel stand opposite to their literal meaning. The name of the president is His Excellency Ole Excellence, but we find that in the text, he is actually a corrupt leader who is very far from the needs and cries of the ordinary people. He stands in direct opposition to the word "excellence." We also see words like "democracy" and "workers-centered government," but the government is neither democratic nor workers-centered. The Minister of Truth and Justice subverts justice and oppresses the ordinary people. The wife of the Minister of Justice campaigns against adultery:

Madam the minister's wife, addressing the women, told them that adultery and drunkenness were the principal evils behind the destruction of many homes in the country. Madam the minister's wife urged all women to take refuge in the safety of the church and to stop competing with their husbands in drinking and adultery. Women were the cornerstones of the home. She said (Ngũgĩ 27).

She is, however, involved in adultery herself in the most bizarre locale: the back seat of a Mercedes car. Guthera captures the hypocrisy of the minister's wife:

She is a fine one to talk! She tells people how women should live in the home: women are the cornerstones of the home. This is her favorite tune. She even once said that all barmaids and all prostitutes should be locked up in prison because they are the ones causing many homes to break up. And now there she is—stark naked in the wilderness! She never fails to go to church! She goes to the cathedrals; she always burns a candle...(Ngũgĩ 150).

There is no difference between the colonial government and the government of the black people in the new democracies. Roads named after colonial governors were renamed after the new black leaders. In the novel, there is confusion about why His Excellency Ole Excellence is not a king. This is because his deeds and demeanor are nothing short of those of a king or dictator.

Africa's incapacitation, poverty, corruption, and the ineptitude of the ruling elite are based on two principal sources: the colonialists and now neocolonialists or imperialists symbolized by Settler Williams and his son Robert Williams, and the African collaborators such as John Boy and his son. This is foregrounded by the continuous telling of the battle between Matigari and Settler Williams and John Boy. The worst of these two actors in the furtherance of neocolonialism in Africa is John Boy, a sad indictment of the educated African who emphasizes capitalism and individualism at the expense of the masses.

The Europeans and their African collaborators are supported by the agents of state and socialization, such as government executives, members of the legislature, the church, media, and education. All these agents work together to perpetuate imperialism in Africa. This is aptly captured by the author in the event of the minister's visit:

"John Boy and Robert Williams sat on his right-hand side, and the church minister, the provincial commissioner, and the Member of Parliament for the area sat on his left. District commissioners and district officers sat on either side of these guests. In the rows immediately behind the minister, there sat some white, brown, and black men, dressed in judicial robes. Next to them were three others. One was the editor of the newspaper The Daily Parrotry. Another was a professor of the History of Parrotology, and the third a university lecturer who had a B.Ed., an MA, and a Ph.D. in the philosophy of parrotology" (Ngũgĩ 108).

Role of Agents of Socialization in Promoting Imperialism

Matigari by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is an indictment of the agents of socialization as willing tools in the hands of the West to not only stratify society but also further the economic interests of the West and the educated African elite. The ordinary people in the pre-independence period had prioritized the importance of education as a tool for emancipating themselves from the shackles of colonialism, cleaning the country, and driving it toward an upward trajectory. In this light, they contributed money to send boys like John Boy to school:

"Stop...just stop there!" Matigari said, trembling with new excitement. "Are you the boy we sent abroad? The boy the cost of whose education we all contributed to, singing with pride: Here is one of our own and not a foreigner's child over whom I was once insulted? The boy for whom we sang: He shall come back and clean up our cities, our country, and deliver us from slavery? The boy we sent off to study, saying that a child belongs to all; that a nation's beauty was borne in a child, a future patriot?" (Ngugi 48).

John Boy immediately schooled Matigari that what collectively educating the child by the community culminates in a contrary result the rise of the individual as opposed to the community or rather the indoctrination of capitalistic ideals on the newly educated African. This betrays not only the reason for which they are sent but also the destruction of society. In fact, John Boy asserts that it is individualism borne out of Western education that is the path to progress. The Minister of Truth and Justice also corroborates John Boy by claiming that Western education and obeying the colonial masters and their laws were what defined everybody that was successful in the country. He further states what he has achieved by being individualistic. Education and individualism create a class system in Kenya, as the Minister of Truth and Justice recounts his personal achievements:

I have a seven-storyed house here. I have three swimming pools...yes, three...one for the children, one for the guests, and one for me and my wife! I have also got saunas modeled on those in Finland! The house is decorated with marble, from Italy. Imported Italian Marble! I have what the English lords call a Family Coat of Arms, in other words, the emblem of the house. My coat of arms is a picture of a coffee-bush, guarded over by two whips (Ngugi 102-103).

The educated elite are not only responsible for corruption, oppression, and the impoverishment of the citizenry, they also distort history and support the draconian anti-worker policies of the company directors and the government. Represented by the Permanent Professor in the History of Parrotology, the Ph.D. in Parrotology, and the editor of the Daily Parrotry, they provide an intellectual justification for the wicked acts of John Boy, Robert Williams, His Excellency Ole Excellence, and the Minister of Truth. These sell-outs were promised that they would appear on the following year's honor list and receive decorations such as "GKM (The President's Ears)" or "MMT (Eyes of the State)."

Another agent of socialization that promotes imperialism and serves as an anti-revolutionary element is religion. This is symbolized by the presence of the church minister in the meeting called by the Minister of Truth and Justice to settle the workers' dispute. By closely referencing the Bible, they seek to dampen the revolutionary spirit that rose with the appearance of Matigari:

I shall read a passage from the gospel according to the book of Matthew, chapter 24, verse 23: Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there, believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders insomuch that if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect. Behold, I have told you before (Ngugi 105).

The hypocrisy of the church is better seen in Guthera's story. She was rejected by the Church because of her father's role in the revolution, despite the fact that she had refused to sell herself to the police officer to get her father released because it went against the Ten Commandments. Her estrangement from the church underscores the role of the church as a support base for colonialism and imperialism.As in Orwell's 1984, the state media, which is named The Voice of Truth, reels out false information and lies, informing the people of what the government needs them to hear rather than the news as it exists. There is a concerted attempt by the state media, The Voice of Truth, to misinform the public.

Matigari as a Symbol of Anti-Imperialism

Matigari, the protagonist of the novel, is more of a symbol, an idea, or an ideal rather than a person. Like the man in Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, or Okolo in Gabriel Okara's The Voice, Matigari is the essence of that missing ingredient that society needs, not just to fight imperialists, corrupt politicians, and their collaborators in academics and the church but also to create an egalitarian society. The difference, however, between the "man" in Ayi Kwei Armah's social satire and Matigari is the temporality of

the characters. The "man" in The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born is planted in post-independence Ghana, while Matigari is characterized by plurality:

Who really was Matigari ma Njiruungu? A patriot? Angel Gabriel? Jesus Christ? Was he a human being or a spirit? A true or false prophet? A savior or simply a lunatic? Was Matigari a man or was he a woman? A child or an adult? Or was he only an idea, an image, in people's minds? Who was he? (Ngugi 158).

Matigari is also characterized by timelessness. He refers to himself as being "as old as the country." Matigari becomes a symbol, a testament, and a witness of Africa's contact with Western and non-Western colonizers and the singleness of purpose of all Western and non-Western actors in Africa. He becomes timeless, like a historical text documenting Africa's rape for profit. Matigari metamorphoses into an anti-imperialist in the novel. In the beginning of the novel, he buries his weapons and girdles himself with the belt of peace, but as the text progresses toward its climax, he realizes that colonialism has re-emerged as imperialism, the struggle for independence has not yielded the expected fruits, and there has been no difference between what was obtainable during the colonial period and what is obtainable in the present system. He comes to the realization that another revolution is needed to chase the parasites and their dogs out.

In this revolutionary venture, the novel shows that there is a need to awaken the sensibilities of the masses, to kill fear, and to mobilize the people for confrontation with their oppressors. With the support of Guthera, a woman whom he rescues from police brutality, Muriuki, a boy, and Ngaruro wa Kiriro, the trade unionist, Matigari achieves his promise to Boy that he will not sleep in his house by burning down the house and beginning a people-centered anti-imperialist revolution against the parasites and dogs that had reaped the benefits of the workers.

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