

African Literature and Orality: A Reading of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* 2007

Mustapha Bala Ruma
Department of English and French
Umaru Musa Yar'adua University, Katsina, Nigeria
mbrumah@yahoo.com

Abstract- This paper explores the relationship between orality and written literature in Africa. The paper interrogates the transformation of oral narrative into written texts and vice-versa. The paper specifically focuses on how Ngugi appropriates oral-narrative techniques commonly employed in African traditional societies in shaping the narration of events in this monumental novel. In this regard, the paper focuses on how the oral tradition in Africa influences the plot structure of *Wizard of the Crow*. The paper also looks at how Ngugi uses multiple narrators some of whom are observers as well as participants in unfolding the drama in the novel. These narrators, some of whom are categorically defined and the not well-defined, recount and render events happening in the novel orally in the presence of a live audience and in the process also embellish the story as they deem fit thereby rendering different versions of the same event. The paper concludes with the observation that in spite of its being presented in the written medium of the novel, *Wizard of the Crow* indeed has generic resemblance to an extended oral narrative.

Keywords- Orality; Adaptation; Adoption; Embellishment; Performance; Trickster

1. INTRODUCTION

Even a slight acquaintance with African literature written in the European languages will reveal its oral antecedents. This is not surprising since the writers of these texts are important members of their respective traditional societies. Consequently, whenever they choose to communicate their experiences to the world through the medium of literature, there is the lingering possibility that they will fall back on the rich repertoire of oral tradition that exist in their societies. Consequently, the African culture becomes a rich source for themes and motifs with which to structure and give a coherent shape to their experiences in the form of poetry, drama, and most especially the novel.

There is no gainsaying that despite its European antecedents, the novel as a poetic medium has also come to occupy an important place in the African literary landscape. Indeed, the novel more than poetry and drama has, arguably, becomes a semiotic platform for interrogating African values, beliefs, and ideologies. It thus becomes a formidable tool for self-critique by many African writers that appropriate its performative dialectic especially in challenging social, political, and economic misdeeds of the people in general and tyrannical regimes in particular.

It is very significant to note that in their attempts to perform this important social function, African writers using European languages often resort to the use of folkloric elements and indigenous storytelling modes in

their texts. In some writers the appropriation of these oral elements invariably forms a sub-text of their narratives. Yet in other writers it is the main text, providing as it were, the momentum for propelling their narrative forward. One of the best example of writers that hinges their narratives on the African oral mode is the Kenyan writer and critic Ngugi wa Thiong'o. In virtually all his novels (*A Grain of Wheat*, 1967; *Petals of Blood*, 1977; *Devil on the Cross*, 1982; *Matigari*, 1989) orality is a visible textual presence, but nowhere is this more poignant than in his 2007 epic-novel *Wizard of the Crow*.

It is important to remember that for decades Ngugi was one of the groups of writers including among others the late Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek and the Nigerian critic Chinweizu that championed and assiduously campaigned for the existential immediacy of returning to the African languages as a medium for literary and poetic compositions. Today as always, the issue of language still remains the most contentious problem confronting modern African writers using European languages for their composition. On the one hand there is the irresistible desire to "decolonize" African literature by totally freeing it from what Ali Mazrui once described as "Euro-linguistic paradigm."¹ On the other hand, there is the pragmatic necessity of reaching a global audience achievable largely through the medium of the colonial languages. This makes the attempts by these Afro-centric writers to completely sever their umbilical attachment with the English language

¹ He says this in a 1999 lecture at Bayero University, Kano, Nigeria.

by writing works solely in the African languages to be very difficult because most often they are caught in a vexatious circularity, where circumstances have “forced” them to translate the same works into English. However, despite its ideological overlay, translation in itself is not a bad thing. On this view, then, it is at least arguable that the motivation to translate works originally written in African languages into English by these Afro-centric scholars is most probably the universal appeal of this colonial language on the one hand, and the fact that writing in European languages is largely seen as an “essential feature of modernization” (Griffith 1997:140). Still another factor might be their competence in the native languages as well as their mastery of the colonial languages as a result of their education. Consequently, this makes it easier for them to translate their works because as Ngugi himself (2009:8) has noted “Translation is the language...through which all languages can talk to one another.” Moreover as Irele (1990:57) also observes, this “dual competence” of the writers is a pointer to the situation of diglossia in which they are invariably immersed as a consequence of their colonial education. Seen in this way, there is double-bind relationship between indigenous African languages and colonial European languages. In the light of this I would like to suggest that the European languages are most often made the privileged semantic centers over the indigenous languages, thus making it imperative to translate works hitherto written in African languages into European languages.

I should hasten to say that reading through the works of Ngugi however, it is easy to notice a well developed pattern of writing tailored towards raising the consciousness of the African people to resist tyranny and authoritarianism of whatever kind. These attempts can be conveniently located within his attachment to the African cultural paradigm. Specifically, Ngugi never wavered in his fight for African languages and cultures to take the center-stage especially in literary compositions. Hence he never hides his displeasure with the African intelligentsia (himself included) that hold tenaciously to the Euro-linguistic tools in communicating important moral truths to the African people. He thus laments the waning power of African languages especially in literary compositions and warns of an impending disaster facing indigenous languages through what he calls “linguifam” [he describes it as ‘the linguistic equivalent of genocide’] (2009:17). More importantly, he never denies his complicity in promoting this ‘linguifam’ by writing in the European languages. However, what makes him unique in this regard is that he not only championed the use of African languages in literary compositions but had at various times put this demand into practice. For instance, he first composed his 1989 novel *Matigari* in Gikuyu language before translating it into English. Similarly, his latest novel *Wizard of the Crow* (2007) was also first composed in Gikuyu as *Murogi wa Kagogo*. Indeed, Ngugi was never free from this linguistic tension and anxiety as its presence is noticeably visible in all his writings. He is thus

ambivalently positioned between two equally hard choices: wholesome adoption of an African language for his composition or a total adoption of the English language for the same purpose. For him the choice between these two extreme positions is not an ‘either/or’ but an ‘either/and’ as demonstrated by his efforts to translate his works into English.

Yet, in spite of this obvious limitation, Ngugi has magnificently attempted to cross this threshold by remaining studiously faithful to the African cultural landscape by sourcing for themes and motifs as well as exploiting its oral narrative schema for his novels. This is poignantly demonstrated in *Wizard of the Crow* where the African oral narrative structure is employed to tell a gripping story of authoritarianism and oppression in the fictional Free African Republic of Aburiria.

2. WRITTEN LITERATURE & ORALITY IN AFRICA: ADOPTION AND ADAPTATION

The relationship between oral and written literature in Africa is that of adoption and adaptation. In this respect, it would perhaps be right to suggest that written literature in Africa adopted the oral; and the oral is in turn adapted and integrated in the written. Yet another way of understanding the connection between these two modes of expression is to see it as a relationship between a river and its tributaries. In this instance, the oral could be represented by the river and the tributaries are its various manifestations in the written medium of the novel, drama, and poetry. This relationship has what Irele (1990:61) calls a “double formal relation” in that “European conventions of literate expression” are used to accommodate “the indigenous tradition of orality.” This is further reinforced by the fact that African literature, whether written or oral, has become a “self-focused consciousness” (Irele 1990:53) for articulating the cultural tradition of the people in addition to being a bulwark for challenging tyrannical authorities. This makes African literature to be highly political in both appearance and orientation irrespective of the medium of its expression.

This process of adoption and adaptation can be seen on several levels in *Wizard of the Crow*. Firstly, the novel was initially written in the Gikuyu language following the Gikuyu oral narrative tradition. This makes the novel to rely heavily on Gikuyu mythology and what Mwangi (2006:255) calls the Gikuyu “popular discourse.” For example, Mwangi has argued that the names of characters in *Wizard of the Crow* have cultural and symbolic meanings closely associated with popular narratives within the Gikuyu community of central Kenya. He further explains that in this culture for instance, “*Kagogo* (the diminutive form of the Gikuyu word for “crow”) is the equivalent of a Methuselah, albeit with negative connotations as a person who lives too long.” In this regard, Mwangi sees the *Kagogo* as used in this novel as signifying “the longevity of the destructive African

dictators who have outstayed their terms in office” á la the Ruler in *Wizard of the Crow*.

Secondly, the discourse of *Wizard of the Crow* is interlaced with Gikuyu and Kiswahili proverbs and popular sayings. Sometimes the dialogue in the novel is structured around proverbs, popular sayings and songs thereby demonstrating the cultural rootedness of the characters. For example, in the story of the blacksmith, his wife, and the ogre, the bird that goes to inform the blacksmith about the condition of his wife couches the message in form of a song:

Blacksmith smelting iron
Make haste, make haste
Your wife has given birth
With the ogre as the midwife
With the ogre as the nurse
Make haste, make haste
Before it is too late

Ngugi has also used popular Gikuyu/African stories to propel the narrative forward. For example, he uses one of the central characters Nyawira to tell the story of the ogre, the blacksmith and his wife. The story is narrated to two little children, Gaciru and Gacigua whose appetite for stories is unending. In the story they are told that the ogres or the *marimu* are human like creatures who sometimes fed on humans including little children; they also have two mouths one in front and the other at the back of their heads concealed by the creatures' long hair, which fell over their shoulders. At the end of the story, the children whose father is Tajirika, a vicious and exploitative businessman, are able to see their parents as symbolizing the ogres because of their pretentious appearance and rapacious attitude. As the forgoing example demonstrates, these traditional stories are used by Ngugi to explain modern form of exploitation especially in the fictional world of *Wizard of the Crow* where the Tajirikas exploit people like Nyawira and Kamiti.

In the sections that follow, I will attempt to demonstrate what makes *Wizard of the Crow* to be an extended oral narrative. I will do this by examining this novel as an extended oral narrative under the following criteria:

3. WIZARD OF THE CROW AS PERFORMANCE

In modern African literature written in the European languages there is a close textual relationship between orality and the written word. In this regard, the relation is most often dual because the oral can be recovered into the written and the written can also be textually realized as a verbal performance. This makes language and its use to be at the center of textual compositions because whether oral or written, a literary text is invariably nothing but “language intensified” (Irele 1990:55). Moreover the recovery of the written into the oral also hinges on the principle of “the voice as [the] realizing agency” (Irele 1990:58). As a corollary, the voice

became the most important medium for the recovery of the written into the oral and this is often achieved through performance. On this view, performance becomes a process of socio-verbal interaction between people in traditional African societies. Ngugi himself (1988:11) has defined performance as “...representation of being---the coming to be and the ceasing to be of processes in nature, human society and thought...” This makes performance to be a pervasive presence in the life of especially the African people in that it is the medium through which the community propagates “its moral codes and aesthetic judgment through narratives...” (ibid). Consequently, narratives, whether written or oral, are composed and addressed to the people as a whole, thereby making stories to be communal property in the African context. This makes the *narrator* of stories in the African context to be a *performer* in that he must by necessity demonstrate some parts of the story being narrated through the use of both linguistic(e.g. voice) and paralinguistic, nonverbal elements(e.g. gestures, body movement, dance, etc.). In addition to having a well defined narrator who doubles as a performer in every oral narrative, there is also the presence of an *audience*. This also implies that the narrator/performer and the audience must meet at a particular *location* or *place* and at a particular *time* with a particular *goal* or *aim* (instruction, pleasure, amusement or a combination of both).

Another very important element in oral narratives is the freedom enjoyed by the performer to modify stories as s/he deems fit so long as the plot structure remains intact. This makes *embellishment* to be one of the basic ingredients of a good performance in oral narratives. As aptly observed by Ahmad (1989:113) in oral tales the performer/narrator is not obliged to “reproduce the narrative verbatim” but, “[s]he is expected to add, subtract and elaborate the details as long as [s]he sticks to the basic plot.”

There are three categories of narrators in *Wizard of the Crow*. Firstly, there is the semi-omniscient narrator that relies on rumors for the conflicting details he furnishes to the reader. Throughout the text, this voice compete for dominance and supremacy with that of Arigaigai Gatherer, otherwise known as A.G., a witness and participant in the events happening in the text. Lastly, the story also unfolds through the voices of other multiple and faceless narrators who are themselves either witnesses to the events or are downright rumor mongers that transform a story heard from someone who had probably never witness the events narrated. A natural result of this is the reproduction of multiple versions of the same events reported by different people. This makes the story in *Wizard of the Crow* to be a cacophony of voices competing for authenticity. A good illustration of this is how the text itself opens with “five” conflicting “theories”, explaining the cause of the sickness of the Ruler of the Free Republic of Aburiria. In their struggle to establish the cause of the Ruler's sickness, each theory offers a divergent but plausible reason for the cause and origin of the sickness later described as “Self-induced-

expansion” or SID, to the extent that both postulations became *theorem sui generis*. For example, Ngugi uses the voice of the semi-omniscient narrator to explain these theories. The narrator begins by saying, “There were many theories about the strange illness of the Second Ruler of the Free Republic of Aburiria, but the most frequent on people’s lips were five”(W.O.C. 3). Having introduced the discourse in this manner, he then goes on in a typical oral narrative fashion to explain these conflicting theories. He starts with the first thus:

The illness, so claimed the first, was born of anger that once welled up inside him; and he was so conscious of the danger it posed to his well-being that he tried all he could to rid himself of it by belching after every meal, sometimes counting from one to ten, and other times chanting *ka,ke,ki,ko,ku* aloud.(3)

The second theory explains that:

The illness was a curse from the cry of a wronged he-goat. It is said that some elders, deeply troubled by the sight of blood flooding the land, decided to treat this evil as they had epidemics that threatened the survival of the community in the olden days: but instead of burying the evil inside the belly of a beast by inserting flies, standing for the epidemic, into its anus, they would insert the Ruler’s hair, standing for the evil, into the belly of a he-goat through its mouth. The evil-carrying goat, standing for the Ruler, would then become an outcast in the land, to be driven out of any region where its cry announced its evil presence. (4)

The third theory however counters that:

The illness had something to do with the ageing of his rule: he had sat on the throne so long that even he could not remember when his reign began. His reign had no beginning and no end; and judging from the facts one may well believe the claim. (5)

The fourth theory however traces the cause of the sickness to the molestation meted out to the Ruler’s wife Rachael, whom he punishes for complaining about his unrestrained sexual promiscuity. In this regard, the theory proposes that, “His illness had its origin in all the tears, unshed, that Rachael, his legal wife, had locked up inside her soul after her fall from his grace” (6).

The fifth theory on the other hand debunks the other four theories as implausible and instead comes up with a metaphysical explanation for the cause of the sickness. In this respect, the fifth theory explains that:

The sickness was the sole work of the daemons that the Ruler had housed in a special chamber in the State House, who had now turned their backs on him and withdrew their protective services. (10)

However, even the fifth theory is disputed by the semi-omniscient narrator himself with the following disclaimer: Let me say as the narrator that I cannot confirm the truth or falsity of the existence of the chamber, it may turn into a mere rumor or a tale out of the mouth of Askari Arigaigai Gather. (11)

It would be stretching the point, however, to say that there is no mistaking the well-known contours of orality in the

forgoing five theories. Firstly, they are reported to us by the semi-omniscient narrator as conflicting views of the people about the possible cause of the Ruler’s illness. A natural follow up to this is that each of these five theories had its origin in the rumor-mill of the Aburirian society thereby turning the story in *Wizard of the Crow* into a communal lore where every member’s voice is allowed to be heard. Secondly, the story about the possible cause of the Ruler’s sickness is clearly addressed to the whole community thereby making every person a willing audience. As a matter of fact the story in *Wizard of the Crow* is premised on oral narration rather than written composition. In this regard, the story invites the reader to be a ‘listener’ rather than simply a reader. Indeed, the story opens with the following proclamation:

In the spirit of the dead, the living, and the unborn,
Empty your ears of all impurities, o listener,
That you may hear my story.

As can be noted, there is no denying the evidential oral location of the above passage. Its invocation of the ancestors, the living as well as the unborn is a typical opening line for many African folktales. In addition to this the narrator also summons what Derrida (1985) aptly calls “the ear of the other” by addressing the reader as “listener”. He then invites the reader to hear rather than read the story. By prefacing the novel in this manner, Ngugi is privileging the oral quality of the story over and above its graphological characteristics. In the same vein he is also rhetorically recruiting readers of the story as audience.

Yet another important observation about these five theories is their epistemological and ontological character. In this regard, each of the theories has sought to epistemologically explain the ontology of the Ruler’s sickness using folkloric elements. It is fairly clear that each of these theories harbors at least one element of an African folklore in its text. Take for instance, the attempt by the Ruler to rid himself of the anger that swells up inside him by belching and chanting the ideophonic words *ka,ke,ki,ko,ku* aloud; or the turning of the Ruler into a scapegoat for cleansing the land of evil; or the fear induced into the Ruler by the grim reality of his mortality; or even the theory that attributes the sickness to the daemons. Each of these explanations has an echo of folklore. Moreover, the motifs in these theories are part of the daily staple of African folklore. Hence, it stands to reason that these theories exemplify the oral tradition packaged and presented in the written medium. Indeed, a fascinating observation is that in spite of their mode of presentation, their orality is still deftly delineated. In addition, even the disclaimer offered by the narrator is an important feature of African oral narratives. Hence, in spite of the manner of their presentation (i.e. in writing) the fact still remains that these theories are folkloric and oral in character. Indeed Robin Law (1997:165) has aptly observed that “Oral tradition does not cease to be Oral tradition merely by being recorded in writing.” This is amply demonstrated in this novel through a direct appeal to the reader to be a

willing listener/audience. As Mumia Geoffrey Osaji has aptly noted (2013:3), “The narrator” in *Wizard of the Crow*, “regularly implicates the implied audience in the narration” through direct exhortations and encouragement to participate in the penetrating drama of the story. Through this technique the reader is hailed and converted into a listener as well as a participant in the events before him.

Another important oral element that is highly observable in *Wizard of the Crow* is that of the voice as the realizing agency. It is my contention that the employment of multiple narrators to tell the tale in this novel by Ngugi has produced what Innes and Rooney (1997:209-10) have called “a spoken writing” whereby we are “invited not only to read but almost to hear or to listen” to what is being presented in the text. As they further noted, this is a common feature of texts that transcribes “Orature into written forms in Africa especially by writers writing in European languages (ibid).”

There is no doubt that *Wizard of the Crow* is an example of “a spoken writing” because of the strong presence of the voice of the narrators in realizing the text as a “mentifact”(Brunvand 1978:2) i.e. as an oral and verbal artifact. For instance, in several places in the text, the semi-omniscient narrator and A.G. have variously addresses the reader in a voice that connotes the presence of a live audience and at the same time attempts to recruit the reader to be part of that audience. One of the rhetorical strategies deftly employed by Ngugi to achieve this is by addressing the reader as well as the real audience in the novel through a direct locution. For example, in one place in the novel he addresses the audience through the voice of A.G. in the following manner:

---- You who are listening to my tale... I say that
I have no idea how the next words came into my
mouth, believe me----. (116)

Here the reader is turned into a spectator by the tone of the voice and the manner of the address. The passage also suggests the presence of a live audience to whom the locutor is directly addressing the message. This pattern of address is repeated in several places in the novel.

To be sure, anyone familiar with the African oral tradition will attest to the bond that exists between the storyteller/narrator and his/her audience. In this respect, it is important to remember that the relationship is most of the time cordial, with each party according the other mutual respect. This mutual respect however does not prevent the audience from questioning and even disputing the claims of the narrator. The questions asked by the audience could also acts as prompts for the narrators to continue with a story if the audience observed that they are flagging. Sometimes, as seen with A.G. in *Wizard of the Crow*, the audience will even supply the narrator with drinks to “wet his throat.” For example, when A.G. is narrating a story about the mystery of the “dollar bearing trees” they are asked to uproot and bring to the State House, he abruptly stops, and the audience fearing that he may not continue with the narrative, quickly prompted him

with the question: “What happened?” Thereafter he picks up a new momentum and continues with the narrative.

In yet another place in the text, the semi-omniscient narrator urges those who went to the USA together with the Ruler to come forward and narrate what transpires there for all to know. He thus in a typical oral-narrative fashion appeals to them in the following manner:

Come, all you who were there, and help us tell the story of what followed the Ruler’s visit to the USA. (273)

He reinforces this request by appealing to the communal bond of the people by proclaiming that, “This tale needs many tongues to lighten the sense, for none of us was at once in Aburiria and America” (273).

It is important to also note that within the discursive matrix of *Wizard of the Crow* every member of the audience is a potential future storyteller. As a matter of fact, people will gather around A.G. either in the open space of a market or the enclosure of a church or a bar, and listen to his narrative with rapt attention, only to later transform the tales heard from him into new stories that are completely different from the original. In effect, the stories are carried far and wide by this mode of transmission. By embellishing the stories with their own addition and subtraction, these numerous storytellers end up producing new tales totally different from the first source. For instance, consider the story of the Ruler’s pregnancy. It all started as a result of the misinterpretation of the content of a letter that Kamiti, the eponymous character in the story, writes to the foreign minister Machokali while they are in America, explaining his intention to return to Aburiria. In the short note to the minister, he writes that, “The country is pregnant. What it give birth to, nobody knows” (504).

However, as the narrative progresses, the content of this simple letter to the Honourable Minister undergoes several semantic transformations one of which is that “the Ruler is pregnant.” As the semi-omniscient narrator explains in the text:

The ceaseless transformations of the stories soon resulted in rumors throughout Aburiria that the Ruler was pregnant and had a secret garden with dollar producing plants. (570)

As mentioned earlier, embellishment is one of the basic ingredients of a good performance especially in oral narratives. This is clearly demonstrated in several places in *Wizard of the Crow*. The numerous storytellers in the novel embellish their stories with every “teller of tales insisting on his own authority” (585). Consequently, many of the stories in the text were “dissected, reinvented, reinterpreted, many times over” to produce narratives that are at a remove from the “original” (693).

Another important ingredient of narrative performance that features prominently in *Wizard of the Crow* is ‘Repetition.’ As noted by Ahmad (1989:118), “Repetition is an important element in oral tradition.” It is a rhetorical strategy employed by narrators to draw the attention of the audience to important things in their narratives. For example, this strategy is employed in *Wizard of the Crow* to a good effect. In several places in the novel narrators such as A.G. use this important element

to underscore the importance as well as the authenticity of their tales. In this regard, one of the key stylistic devices that A.G. employs is his mode of punctuating his narrative by swearing in a phrase that is a combination of English and Kiswahili. In several places where his voice is heard, A.G. will punctuate his narratives by swearing with the words, “True, Haki ya Mungu,” as a way of sustaining the interest of his listeners as well as conferring authenticity on his narrative. More importantly, the enunciation of these words is usually done through a combination of tone of voice and body movement in order to portray the seriousness of the events being narrated. For example, when he narrates the story of the “dollar bearing trees” A.G. would at first lower his voice to a whisper, and then as if on impulse, suddenly raise it to a crescendo level in order to underscore the importance of what he is about to say. This fact is captured in the following passage: “People, how shall I put what happened next? If I had not been there and seen it with my own eyes, I myself would not believe it.” A.G. would whisper and then shout, “True, Haki ya Mungu! so suddenly and unexpectedly that he would startle his listener, stopping even those about to leave dead in their tracks, now convinced that it was better to hear the story from the horse’s own mouth than second-hand. (551)

As can be gleaned from the preceding passage, in addition to conferring authenticity and authority, the repetition of the formula “True, Haki ya Mungu” is also a manipulative device used to grab and sustained the interest of the listener in the narrative. It is worth remembering that this is also an important strategy in African oral narratives where the storyteller is always keen on keeping her audience transfixed by devising means of sustaining their interests. This further underscores the complementary roles of the storyteller and her audience in realizing texts as performance. In addition to Performance, another important oral narrative element that features prominently in *Wizard of the Crow* is the trickster characteristics of the two major characters of Kamiti and Nyawira.

4. THE TRICKSTER AS HERO AND HEROINE IN *Wizard of the Crow*

According to Doty and Hynes (1997:14) the term trickster was first used in the eighteenth century to “designate morally one who deceives or cheats.” They also observe that trickster stories provide a “fertile source of cultural reflection and critical reflexivity” for societies (4). Ellen Basso (cited in Doty and Hynes 8) see the tricksters as “inventive heroes and clownish fools” that perform very important social functions. In this regards the trickster had variously been used to inculcate desirable behaviours as well as to warn against indulging in destructive ones. In addition to this, the trickster figure is most often used to radically interrogate social beliefs and behaviours especially in rigid traditional societies. This is the import of Mary Douglas’ observation (cited in Doty and Hynes 21) that the trickster has a social function of undermining

the belief that any “given social order is absolute and objective”. Hence as noted by Tolkien and Scott (1981); and Levi-Strauss (1963) [cited in Doty and Hynes 4; 19-20] the trickster is a bundle of contradictions as well as an embodiment of all possibilities. Indeed the trickster is a composite figure that harbors positive as well as negative values in almost equal proportion. They are flexible characters that can perform multiple functions in any given situation. Similarly, Robert Pelton (cited in Haynes 35) has observed that one central function of the trickster figure is that it “pulverizes the univocal” and symbolizes the multivalence of life. In fact, tricksters are famous for breaking social borders erected by socially stratified societies. They could thus artfully challenge the myopic selfishness and insidious viciousness of totalitarian authorities. In fact, it would not be a mendacious exaggeration to say that the trickster figure is found in all cultures that have folk narratives.

The trickster in most African oral tales is a stock character associated with smartness, cunning, wit, and sophistry. It is an extremely clever character that can assume many forms and shapes as the situation demands; hence disguise is one of its major characteristics. In most narratives, the trickster-figure exists mainly in a situation of a lopsided power-relation. Most often, it is the exploitative character of the society that produces tricksters. In traditional African societies, for instance, the relationship between the rulers and their followers is mostly skewed in favor of the former. Consequently, they exploit the weakness of the teeming majority of their followers by (mis)appropriating the “surplus value” created out of the sweat of the people. An example that readily comes to mind in Hausaland (in Northern Nigeria) was the exploitation of the masses mostly through forced labor by the traditional institutions in the 19th century (this is a representative example only). It is my contention that this pattern of exploitation could be found in most pre-colonial societies in Africa. Consequently, in societies such as this, the trickster figure features prominently in the resistance narratives of the people often encapsulated in their folktales. Indeed its grammatical form expresses an intense desire to challenge tyrannical authorities. Moreover, the affective and teleological role of the trickster-figure is to compellingly demonstrate how ordinary citizens can overcome the totalizing and suffocating violence of the African ruling class. This further makes the trickster to be a subversive character that is all out to contest and undermine the authority of the rulers through cunning, deception, and trickery. These trenchant characteristics further make the trickster figure to be an important character in modern African literature written in the European languages.

In principle the appropriation of the trickster motif in modern African literature is most pervasive in the works of writers with Marxist leanings. This is probably because the trickster motif can easily supply them with a platform on which to project their struggles against tyrannical regimes and systems. It also gives them the

freedom to fictionally create characters that can challenge the exploitation as well as the hegemony of the ruling elites in their respective societies through the employment of canny imaginative conceits in their liberationist narratives. One typical examples of this coterie of writers is Ngugi wa Thiong'o. In works such as *A Grain of Wheat*; *The River Between*; *Petals of Blood*; *Matigari*; *Devil on the Cross*; and *"I Will Marry When I Want,"* he relentlessly create characters that struggle against the tyranny of the powerful. These characters (heroes and heroines) though weak and powerless as a result of their economic and political status, yet survive and sometimes even triumph over tyrannical systems as seen in *A Grain of Wheat*, *Matigari*, and *"I Will Marry When I Want."*

This pattern of characterization is also repeated by Ngugi in *Wizard of the Crow*. In this novel, the central character Kamiti alias the Wizard of the Crow, is an M.B.A. holder that walks the streets of Eldares, the capital of the Free African Republic of Aburiria, searching for an apparently non-existent job. It is in the course of this daily routine that he stumbles into the premises of the Eldares Modern Construction and Real Estate Company where he is subjected to a mock interview of humiliation by the owner Tajirika. It is also at the same place that he meets his future girlfriend and comrade Grace Nyawira the dreaded leader of the "Movement for the Voice of the People". Having lost all hope of securing a decent employment, Kamiti decides to take to begging as a matter of survival. In order to achieve this, Kamiti has to disguise himself by dressing in rags he always carries in a bag together with his certificates. It is in the course of plying his trade in the "Buddha way" as he calls it, that he and others like Nyawira run afoul of the law by disturbing the peace of the Global Bank Mission that is meeting with the officials of the Aburirian Government at the prestigious Paradise Hotel.

As the police chase away the beggars from the premises of the hotel, three policemen took special interest in Kamiti and Nyawira because of the bag he is holding. One of the policemen in particular gives them a relentless chase with the sole intention of dislodging them of the content of the bag that he thinks contains "Buri Notes." Consequently, the chase takes them to the poorest quarters of Santalucia and Santamaria. With the policeman hot on their heels, the duo of Nyawira and Kamiti decide to burst into an empty building with the intention of evading arrest. But, the man will not relent. He goes about knocking door by door. It is when he draws closer to the door of the building they are in that an idea springs to the mind of Kamiti. He quickly decides to use trickery to scare away this relentless policeman. He thus ties some bones, dry cobs of corn, a dead lizard, and a dead frog with a rag and:

He then took a felt pen from his bag and wrote on the cardboard in big letters: WARNING! THIS PROPERTY BELONGS TO WIZARD WHOSE POWER BRINGS DOWN HAWKS AND CROWS FROM THE SKY. TOUCH THIS HOUSE AT YOUR PERIL. SGD. WIZARD OF THE CROW. (bold original 77)

He then carefully hangs this notice on the door of their hiding place. When the policeman reaches their door and sees the amulet hanging on the door together with the warning, he quickly takes to his heels murmuring:

I knew they were not thieves; they were devils, djinns of the prairie, sent by the Wizard of the Crow to trick me to death. Woe unto me!

I am now bewitched. Woe unto me! I am going to die! Actually, I am dead man walking! (77)

As the narrative progresses in the novel, what started as a prophylactic joke and a survival strategy soon becomes a Nietzschean nightmare because the policeman leaves only to return after a short period of time. For, having thoroughly reviews the facts of his existential condition, Constable Arigaigai Gatherer decides there and then to come back to the "Wizard" to seek for help. He specifically wants the Wizard to attenuate and or chase away all the enemies that stand between him and promotion. He tells the Wizard that he has been in the police for many years, but no matter how hard he works he has never been promoted. He states the matter more bluntly by saying, "Wizard of the Crow, I am sure I have enemies who are hindering me through magic" (114). He therefore wants the Wizard to rid him of these faceless enemies.

When the news of the Wizard later spreads around Eldares, people started forming long queues in front of the building. Thus, both the rich and the poor become willing clients of the Wizard. This is hardly surprising considering the gloomy spiritual nature of African people. Needless to say it is common for people in both traditional as well as modern African societies to seek for spiritual explanations for the ups and downs in their lives. In this regard, Mbiti (1969:197) has cogently observed that, "The whole psychic atmosphere of African village [and urban] life is filled with belief in...mystical power." We can see this clearly in the novel when people of different backgrounds find solace in the healing powers of the Wizard of Crow. It is worthy of note that as the narrative in the novel progresses to a climax, the fame of this Wizard reaches even the ears of the Supreme Ruler of the Free Republic of Aburiria, who also seeks for his help in unknitting certain matters of importance to the State. It is also worth mentioning that it is the Wizard that is summoned by the Foreign Minister Machokali to come to America and help in finding a cure for the Ruler when his body started expanding disproportionately. Interestingly, in spite of his explanations that he is a healer of the souls rather than the body, his expertise is still sought by the people in all matters.

As demonstrated so far, Kimati is a quintessential trickster character. Like Ngugi's other emblematic character Matigari, Kimati or the Wizard of the Crow is also a representational character fashioned after characters commonly found in African oral narratives. One common example of this trend in folktales is the use of animals such as the tortoise, the spider, and the hyena to portray some human attitudes/attributes. In broader terms as these

figures are not just animals but human representations in oral narratives, so are characters in written literature modeled after them representatives of their associated traits. In this respect, we come to see Kimati as a composite trickster character that clearly survives the political intrigues in the novel through cunning and trickery.

Kamiti's companion Grace Nyawira is also a trickster. Thus when Kamiti is arrested and detained in the State House by the Ruler she rescues him by disguising as a "Limping witch", a truly terrible sight to behold. She is thus described as the "crippled witch" with a "repulsive face". As the omniscient narrator tell us:

The Limping Witch, as they now called the crippled witch, had a repulsive face. One of her eyes oozed, and when not talking her lips twitched; when talking to her, people felt compelled to look away. But she also cut a laughable figure. She had no divining charms, only a walking stick and an ungainly wrap. (626)

Thus, disguise in the above manner Nyawira is able to outwit the tight security of the Ruler's State House by tricking them into believing that she is a witch. Having established a meaningful eye contact with Kamiti, she tells his captors that she can only cure him of his "ifs" malady in her shrine (628). It is in the process of going to her "shrine" that she and Kamiti manage to escape from the Ruler's security agents (631). As a matter of fact, the escapades of Nyawira in the novel are pointers to her trickster qualities. She is thus able to evade arrest in the novel through a combination of wit and trickery. Her character is a demonstration of the fact that women too can be very good trickster figures in African narratives. It is thus the case that the combinatorial powers of the trickster figures of the "Wizard of the Crow" and the "Limping Witch" ably overwhelmed the powerful security apparatus of the Ruler. As shown in the novel the fact that they "were on the loose made the Ruler feel like a cornered, toothless animal" (639). To be sure, the violence in the Ruler's Aburiria requires a proportionately rigorous, vigorous and penetrating response in form of subversion and trickery. Indeed Kamiti and Nyawira are able to survive the violence that permeates the tapestry of the novel through the employment of sophisticated techniques of wit and trickery. However, beyond this, we can impute that their trickery is a radical questioning of all that is wrong with a rapacious, greedy and exploitative ruling class typified by the Ruler, Emperor Tajirika, and their minions. For this reason, I shall argue that their trenchant struggle is deeply rooted in the desire to be free from all kind of exploitation.

5. CHARACTER PORTRAITURE IN

Wizard of the Crow

Another important area where Ngugi exploits oral narrative resource in the novel can be seen in the area of character portraiture. It is a commonplace assumption that in traditional African folklore (especially in folktales) the

monsters and the ogres are usually cast in a grotesque imagery that reflects their bad and evil character. Because they are the oppressors of the weak and the vulnerable, they are depicted in physically deformed shapes. It is my contention that there is a clear transposition of this style by Ngugi in *Wizard of the Crow*. For example, whereas all the good characters in the novel such as Kamiti, Nyawira, Vinjinia and her children; Maritha and Mariko, the Soldiers of Christ, etc. are cast in the mould of perfect human figures in order to reflect their innocence and goodness, bad characters, on the other hand, such as the Ruler, Ministers Sikiokuu, Machokali, Big Ben Mambo; and Emperor Tajirika are physically deformed and disfigured to reflect their evil and wickedness. These characters who are embodiments of evil are cast in the mould of monsters and ogres.

The Ruler is thus portrayed as an over-bloated figure that is perpetually ballooning at the slightest provocation. At a point in the narrative we are told that "he has conquered gravity" (651) because he is suspended above the surface with his head touching the ceiling. Consider also Minister Sikiokuu who has "rabbit ears" so as to eavesdrop on the conversation of the citizenry (111,136,634); or Minister Machokali whose eyes are enlarged to the size of "electric bulbs" so that he can spot the enemies of the Ruler from a far distance (644); or the enlarged tongue of Minister Big Ben Mambo who is in charge of propaganda in the Ruler's government (644). Other characters depicted in this monstrous fashion are Central Bank Governor and later Emperor Titus Tajirika who is so passionate about becoming white that he decides to have a transplant of his body parts. In fact we are told that his right hand and left leg are white, whereas all the other parts of his body remain black. He cuts such a frightening figure that when his daughter chances upon him naked she runs out of the house shouting she has seen a monster. Up till the end of the novel, Tajirika remains in a state of racial-transition between a black man and a Whiteman. Thus within the melodramatic dialectic of the novel there is a clear distinction between good and evil as shown above. It is my contention that Ngugi efficaciously employ this folkloric character portraiture in order to underscore the insatiable greed and avarice of the inner circle of the Ruler's government. Also as the story in the novel climaxed to an end we have seen how all of the bad characters with the exception of Titus Tajirika are destroyed by greed and infighting among themselves. Needless to say, this is also a typical ending format for traditional African folktales where good always triumphs over evil.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper discusses the oral narrative elements in Ngugi's novel *Wizard of the Crow*. It began by discussing the chiasmic relationship between oral tradition and written literature in Africa. In this regard it shows that the relationship between the two is double-jointed in that the

oral can be recovered in the written whereas the written can be actualized or realized as performance. The paper further demonstrates that this relationship could also be regarded as that of adoption and adaptation. Furthermore, the paper also focuses on elements such as Performance and the use of the Voice as a realizing agency; the use of the motif of the trickster as hero as well as the appropriation of repetition in sustaining the interest of the audience. The paper also shows how the text becomes a performance in front of a live audience by the use of multiple narrators some of whom are themselves participants in the drama unfolding in the novel. The paper also dwells on the complementary relationship between the narrator and the audience and in the process demonstrated that the same techniques of questioning and hailing used in traditional oral narratives are also at work in the novel. The paper has also looked at how Ngugi creates his characters in this novel by comparing it to the characterization in traditional African folktales. In this regards, there is an apparent symmetry between the manner of character portraiture in the novel and those in folktales. Hence, from the foregoing it would not be an unwarranted extrapolation to conclude that *Wizard of the Crow* is an extended oral narrative presented in the semiotic medium of writing.

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Author Biography

Mustapha Bala Ruma is currently a Ph.D. student with the Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. His research interests include postcolonial literature, modern drama, and Life writings. He is a staff of Umaru Musa Yar'adua University, Katsina, Nigeria.