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## The ashes of the revolution: Re-reading Matigari in Postcolonial Africa

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### Abstract:

This article aims at undertaking a comprehensive critical reading of the Kenyan novelist and theorist Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Matigari* (1986). The novel is situated within the expanded debates on post-independence disillusionment. It interprets the narrative as a sustained allegory of what this study terms "the ashes of the revolution;". The work advances three interconnected arguments. First, Ngugi systematically exposes the structural betrayal of anti-colonial liberation struggles through the dynamics of neo-colonial power; second, the novel mobilizes mythic, messianic, and satirical registers to articulate a critique that exceeds realist representation; and third, the composition of the novel in Gikuyu constitutes an integral dimension of its revolutionary program, enacting through its very medium the epistemic decolonization it theorizes. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, and Ngugi's own critical writings, the article argues that *Matigari* reframes revolution as an unfinished, ongoing cultural and epistemic project grounded in popular agency. The "ashes" of the title are simultaneously figures of destruction and potentiality, the residue of a failed liberation and the fertile ground from which a more radical emancipation may yet grow.

**Keywords:** *Matigari*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, postcolonial literature, neo-colonialism, African literature.

### *Les cendres de la révolution : relire Matigari dans l'Afrique postcoloniale*

#### Résumé :

Cet article propose une lecture critique approfondie de *Matigari* (1986), du romancier et théoricien kényan Ngugi wa Thiong'o, en situant le roman dans le cadre plus large des débats sur la désillusion postindépendance en Afrique. Interprétant le récit comme une allégorie soutenue de ce que cette étude nomme « les cendres de la révolution », l'article développe trois arguments interdépendants : premièrement, que

Ngugi expose de manière systématique la trahison structurelle des luttes de libération anticoloniales à travers les dynamiques du pouvoir néocolonial ; deuxièmement, que le roman mobilise des registres mythiques, messianiques et satiriques afin d'articuler une critique qui dépasse les limites de la représentation réaliste ; et troisièmement, que la composition du roman en gikuyu constitue une dimension essentielle de son programme révolutionnaire, mettant en acte, par son médium même, la décolonisation épistémique qu'il théorise. S'appuyant sur les cadres théoriques de Frantz Fanon, de Kwame Nkrumah et sur les écrits critiques de Ngugi lui-même, l'article soutient que *Matigari* reconfigure la révolution non pas comme un événement historique achevé, mais comme un projet culturel et épistémique inachevé, en cours, ancré dans l'agentivité populaire. Les « cendres » du titre sont à la fois figures de destruction et de potentialité, le résidu d'une libération manquée et le terreau fertile d'où une émancipation plus radicale peut encore émerger.

**Mots-clés** : *Matigari*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, littérature postcoloniale, néocolonialisme, littérature africaine

## Introduction

The history of African decolonization has frequently been narrated as a story of a triumphant rupture, the decisive and irreversible break from the structures of European colonial domination. In the optimistic decades that followed the wave of independence movements of the 1950s and 1960s, there prevailed in many quarters a belief that political sovereignty would, in fairly short order, translate into economic autonomy, social justice, and cultural renewal. The flags were raised, the anthems sung, the constitutions drafted. It was, for many participants and observers, a moment of veritable world-historical significance.

The theorists of decolonization who had most carefully analyzed the mechanisms of colonial power were also, almost simultaneously, the clearest observers of the obstacles that lay ahead. Frantz Fanon, writing during the height of the anti-colonial struggles, warned in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) that national liberation, if it remained the exclusive goal of a nationalist bourgeoisie, would just reproduce the colonial structures of exploitation instead of dismantling them (Fanon, 2004, p. 148). Fanon argued that the native elite would take over the administrative and economic roles

vacated by the departing colonizer, thereby maintaining the inequality under new management. Kwame Nkrumah, the Ghanaian leader and pan-Africanist thinker, coined the term "neo-colonialism" to accurately describe this situation where political independence appears complete, but African economies still depend structurally on Western capital and local intermediaries (Nkrumah, 1965, p. ix).

It is within this theoretical and historical context that Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Matigari* (1986, published in English and translated in 1987) demands to be read. The novel constitutes one of the most searching and formally inventive fictional interrogations of the post-independence predicament in African literature. As an alternative to celebrating independence as liberation, Ngugi offers a sobering meditation on what remains after the liberation struggle has been fought and formally concluded in ashes, betrayal, and the unresolved contradictions of a revolution that was never completed. Written first in Gikuyu and subsequently translated into English and numerous other languages, the novel was deemed sufficiently threatening by the Kenyan government that copies were reportedly seized by the authorities; a remarkable instance of the state's apprehension not of a fictional character but of the story itself.

This article is structured around five sections five stages. Section one examines the novel's central allegorical structure, focusing on the figure of Matigari's return and the dynamics of political continuity it exposes. Section two analyzes Ngugi's critique of neo-colonialism and the systematic betrayal of revolutionary ideals. Section three addresses the novel's mythic and messianic dimensions, exploring how Ngugi transcends the limits of social realism to articulate a more expansive vision of revolutionary consciousness. Section four turns to the question of language, examining how the choice to write in Gikuyu functions as a form of cultural and epistemic decolonization integral to the novel's political program. Section five considers the figure of youth and the novel's ambiguous vision of futurity.

## **1. The Return of the Freedom Fighter: Allegory and Political Continuity**

The novel opens with a gesture of deliberate symbolic weight. Matigari ma Njirũngi, whose name translates, with pointed precision, as "the patriots who survived the bullets," emerges from the forest in which he has waged an armed struggle against the colonial rule (Ngugi, 1987, p. 3). Convinced that the war has been won, that justice has been achieved with the departure of the colonizer, he buries his weapons beneath a sacred fig tree, performs a ritual of symbolic closure, and sets out to reclaim the house that he built and the land that he tended and the goods that were seized during the colonial period. It is an act charged with optimism, naivety, and historical pathos that Ngugi will systematically unravel.

What Matigari discovers on his journey through the fictional nation of "Truth and Justice", a name whose irony is anything but subtle, is an unsettling structural continuity. The colonial settler Williams and his African collaborator and property manager, John Boy, have been succeeded by their respective heirs in the persons of Robert Williams and John Boy Junior. The transition has been nominal; the house that Matigari built is now occupied by the son of the man who occupied it under the colonial system. The factory at which workers once labored for the benefit of foreign capital now operates under management that is partly Africanized but is no less extractive. Land dispossession persists. Workers remain exploited and organized into acquiescence. Children without families live in the streets and on rubbish dumps (Ngugi, 1987, p. 21–35).

The allegorical structure here is precise and relentless. In constructing a narrative world in which the names and faces have changed but the underlying arrangements of power, property, and exploitation have remained fundamentally intact, Ngugi dramatizes what might be called the illusion of independence, the formal replacement of colonial administrators by national ones, while the system of accumulation and dispossession that colonialism instituted continues to operate. This allegorical mode is not incidental to this project. In presenting his critique through an unmistakably fictional country and a protagonist who is simultaneously an individual and an archetype,

Ngugi gives his analysis a breadth and universality that would be difficult to achieve through strictly realist representation. *Matigari* is at once about post-independence Kenya, about the wider postcolonial African condition, and about the human cost of betrayed revolutions wherever they occur.

Ngugi's use of names reinforces this allegorical dimension. The characters are not individualized in the manner of the realist novel; they are representative types whose personal identities are less important than their structural positions. Robert Williams is not a fully rounded character; he is the continuation of colonial capital under postcolonial conditions. John Boy Junior is not a man so much as an institution, but the class of African compradors who mediate between the foreign capital and the African poor. *Matigari* himself, as it shall be seen, gradually comes to embody something larger than any individual; he embodies the accumulated historical experience and aspirations of those who fought for liberation and found themselves betrayed.

## **2. Neo-Colonialism and the Systematic Betrayal of Revolutionary Ideals**

The political diagnosis that Ngugi offers in *Matigari* is in many respects a fictional instantiation of the theoretical framework of neo-colonialism developed by Nkrumah and subsequently elaborated by a range of thinkers associated with dependency theory, African socialism, and Third World liberation movements. Nkrumah had argued, with a precision that subsequent history would confirm, that when a colonial power grants formal independence to one of its territories while retaining economic, financial, and military control, the result is a state that is nominally sovereign but actually remains subject to external domination (Nkrumah, 1965, p. ix–xx).

In the world of the novel, neo-colonial power operates through an interlocking set of institutions and ideological formations, each of which serves to naturalize and perpetuate the existing order while suppressing the articulation of alternatives. The police function as an instrument of social control; they arrest the poor, silence dissent, and

protect the property of those who have benefited from the post-independence settlement. The judiciary defends the rights of property over the rights of persons, providing a veneer of legality to what is in practice a system of organized dispossession. The religious institutions represented in the novel by the figure of the minister who preaches acceptance and submission to the existing order function like an ideological apparatus, displacing the energy of potential resistance into the register of the spiritual and the otherworldly.

The local media, too, plays its role in this ensemble of power; it ridicules Matigari's quest, portrays him as dangerous or delusional, and works to contain the spread of his symbolic influence. Consumerism and spectacle offer a further displacement, providing the semblance of social mobility and individual aspiration that diverts attention from structural inequality. What Ngugi depicts is not a corrupt or incompetent government but a sophisticated, multi-layered system of domination in which economic exploitation, political repression, and ideological manipulation work in concert as well as in the colonial era, if not better than it.

The "ashes of the revolution" as a conceptual framework incorporates several distinct but related dimensions of this betrayal. There is, first, the moral bankruptcy of postcolonial leadership in which the ruling class has not failed to deliver on the promises of independence but has actively leveraged political power for private accumulation, transforming the instruments of liberation into instruments of personal enrichment. There is, second, the erosion of collective ideals where the solidarity and shared aspiration that animated the liberation movement have been dissolved and replaced by a culture of individualism, competition, and clientelism. There is, third, the transformation of liberation into elite accumulation, whereas the revolutionary moment, instead of inaugurating a redistribution of resources and opportunities, has been captured by a fraction of the population that reproduces colonial structures of stratification with remarkable fidelity.

Matigari's disillusionment, his baffled, then outraged, then desperate confrontation with a world that has not honored its debts is thus more than personal but paradigmatic. He embodies the experience of the broad popular classes who participated in, and suffered for, the liberation struggle, and who discovered in its aftermath that independence has not been translated into emancipation.

### **3. Myth, Messianism, and the Renewal of Revolutionary Consciousness**

One of the most formally distinctive and thematically significant aspects of *Matigari* is its insistence on moving beyond the registers of social realism to draw upon a rich repertoire of mythic, biblical, and folkloric symbolism. This is not, as some critics have suggested, a retreat from political engagement but, as this section argues, a deepening of it. In investing his protagonist with mythic and messianic resonances, Ngugi achieves several effects that realism alone could not produce.

As the narrative proceeds, *Matigari* comes to be perceived not as an individual in search of justice but as a legendary, and potentially a supernatural figure. Rumors of his existence and his deeds spread among the people in ways that exceed the capacities of any single human actor. He appears in multiple places simultaneously, he seems to elude capture by forces that should easily overwhelm him, and his repeated same questions, "Is there anyone here who can tell me where justice can be found?" Take on a prophetic, almost ritual character (Ngugi, 1987, p.85). The population begins to construct him as a messiah, a figure of salvation who has returned from beyond to redress the wrongs of history. This messianic dimension serves several important functions within the novel's political project. It universalizes *Matigari*'s struggle, connecting it to a larger human experience of suffering, hope, and the desire for justice that transcends any particular historical moment. It grounds the narrative in the traditions of African oral culture, in which figures of legendary resistance and redemption are familiar and powerful presences,

thereby claiming for the novel a cultural inheritance that colonialism had attempted to deprecate. And it challenges the state's monopoly on narrative authority. If the ruling class controls the media, the judiciary, the police, and the official story, the counter-narrative circulating in rumor, song, and popular imagination represents a form of resistance that operates below the threshold of direct suppression.

The state's reaction to *Matigari*, its anxiety, its paranoia, its attempts to capture or discredit him mirrors, with documentary precision, the reaction of the Kenyan government to the novel itself. It is reported that Daniel Arap Moi, hearing that people in Kenya were speaking of a man named *Matigari* who was going from place to place demanding justice, initially issued an order for the character's arrest, before being informed that *Matigari* was a fictional creation. The arrest order was redirected to the novel. This real-world episode, which has become something of a legend in discussions of African literary censorship, powerfully illustrates the political stakes of Ngugi's narrative choice; the mythic figure had escaped the confines of the text and was beginning to function as a living symbol of popular aspiration and resistance.

Through allegory and satire, then, Ngugi implies that revolutionary consciousness must be continuously renewed and re-grounded. The first revolution failed not solely because of the corruption of individual leaders or the power of external capital, but because it did not sufficiently transform the social relations, the cultural frameworks, and the epistemic conditions within which any political life is organized. A revolution requires not only new rulers but new structures of imagination.

#### **4. Language, Decolonization, and the Politics of Literary Form**

The decision to write *Matigari* originally in Gikuyu in preference to English is not a peripheral or biographical detail; it is, a sort of a constitutive dimension of the novel's political and aesthetic project, and must be understood in the context of Ngugi's theoretical

argument as developed in *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), published in the same year as the original Gikuyu text.

In *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngũgĩ develops a sustained argument about the relationship between language and colonial domination. The imposition of European languages in African educational and cultural institutions was not, he contends, a neutral or entirely administrative act but a profound act of epistemic violence, one that produced a systematic alienation of Africans from their own intellectual and cultural traditions (Ngũgĩ, 1987, p.16). To think, imagine, dream, and create in the colonizer's language is to be structurally oriented toward the cultural frameworks and values that the language carries. The African intellectual who writes in English or French inhabits, to a significant extent, a European episteme, and the literature she or he produces, however critical of colonialism its content may be, is produced within and for a framework that colonialism itself established.

To write in Gikuyu is, on this account, a political act of the first order. It is to refuse the epistemic framework of colonialism and to reclaim for African languages and cultural forms the dignity, complexity, and creative power that colonial discourse systematically denied them. It is to address, first and foremost, an African audience in its own tongue, a way to restore the connection between intellectual production and popular political life that colonialism severed by educating elites in European languages and creating a cultural gap between them and the masses.

The formal consequences of this choice are visible throughout the novel. The narrative voice incorporates the rhythms, the images, the proverbs, and the storytelling conventions of Gikuyu oral tradition in ways that give the text a quality of communal address. Songs punctuate the narrative at key moments, functioning as sites of collective consciousness and cultural memory. The oral cadences of the prose, the repetitions, the formulaic phrasing, and the call-and-response structures are not purely decorative but are expressions of

a cultural identity and a set of epistemic commitments that the novel is simultaneously performing and arguing for.

The revolution in *Matigari* is therefore multi-dimensional in a way that the political and economic analysis alone cannot account for. It demands, simultaneously, economic restructuring, political transformation, cultural reclamation, linguistic sovereignty, and psychological emancipation from the internalized structures of colonial subjectivity. The novel enacts this multi-dimensionality in its very form, making the medium and the message mutually reinforcing in a manner that is itself a significant artistic achievement.

### **5. Youth, Futurity, and the Ambiguity of Revolutionary Possibility**

While *Matigari* himself represents the generation of armed struggle, those who fought in the forest and who carry the scars and the memories of direct colonial confrontation (The Mau Mau revolution), the novel devotes considerable attention to the figure of Muriuki, the young street child who attaches himself to *Matigari* and who gradually becomes his chosen successor and heir. This relationship between the veteran of the first revolution and the child of the post-independence crisis is one of the novel's most carefully constructed and significant narrative elements.

Muriuki's generation inherits not victory but contradiction. They have grown up in the aftermath of independence, with the formal rights and rhetorical promises of national sovereignty, but without the material conditions that would give those promises content. Education is not translated into employment; citizenship is not translated into dignity; the nation-state is not translated into community. Muriuki and the children like him, scavenging in rubbish dumps, existing outside the institutions of family, school, and work, are the human evidence of the distance between what the revolution promised and what neo-colonialism delivered.

Therefore, Ngugi refuses to render this generation only as victims. In Muriuki's growing understanding of his situation, in his capacity to

learn from Matigari's example and to begin to formulate his own analysis of the contradictions he inhabits, the novel gestures toward a different kind of possibility. The younger generation may not have the idealism of those who fought the first revolution, but they have a clarity about the failures of independence that the earlier generation, blinded by its own optimism, could not achieve. They are also, crucially, free of the specific compromises and accommodations that the first generation made in the course of a long struggle.

The novel's conclusion refuses the consolations of a narrative closure. Matigari's final confrontation with the forces of state power ends in his disappearance, consumed, perhaps, by the river in which he drowns, , perhaps, into legend and myth. It is Muriuki who returns to the sacred fig tree, retrieves the buried weapons, and prepares to continue the struggle (Ngugi, 1987, p. 175). This image of him digging up weapons that had been buried in a gesture of premature confidence is among the most powerful in the novel. The ashes of the revolution may represent destruction and defeat, but in the economy of the novel's symbolism, they also represent the possibility of regeneration: from the ashes, something may grow.

## **Conclusion**

*Matigari* stands, more than three decades after its composition, as one of the most powerful and formally inventive critiques of post-independence Africa in the literary tradition. By dramatizing the betrayal of nationalist ideals through the figure of a returning freedom fighter who finds that the world he fought to change remains fundamentally unchanged, Ngugi challenges the triumphalist narratives of liberation that have too often served the interests of postcolonial ruling classes at the expense of historical honesty.

The "ashes of the revolution" as a conceptual metaphor captures something essential about this condition, the residue of a struggle that achieved much less than it promised; the material evidence of hopes that were extinguished before they could be realized; the ground simultaneously infertile and potentially fecund, on which the

future must be built. Independence without a structural transformation produces only symbolic change, and that symbolic change, as Matigari's journey makes devastatingly clear, cannot substitute for the material transformation of the conditions of life.

The novel is emphatically not a work of despair. In its insistence on cultural authenticity, in its theorization and enactment of linguistic decolonization, in its investment of popular agency with both historical dignity and continuing revolutionary potential, *Matigari* reimagines revolution as an unfinished, open-ended, and fundamentally a popular project. The first revolution failed. After all, it was incomplete because it addressed the political surface of colonial domination without penetrating to the cultural, epistemic, and economic depths at which that domination was reproduced. The second revolution, the novel implies, must be more total, it must transform not only governments but the mentalities, not only structures of ownership but structures of imagination.

In a contemporary moment in which the structures of neo-colonial dependency that Ngugi analyzed in the 1980s have, in many respects, intensified, in which the promises of independence remain unfulfilled for the majority of Africa's populations, and in which new forms of resource extraction and financial dependency reproduce colonial patterns under different names, the questions that *Matigari* poses retain their urgency. What does it mean to have a revolution? What conditions must a revolution fulfill if it is to constitute genuine emancipation in place of the mere replacement of one set of managers with another? What role can literature, language, and culture play in the ongoing project of decolonization?

To these questions, Ngugi does not provide easy answers. What he does provide, through the formal and thematic resources of this novel of remarkable complexity and power, is a model for asking them with the requisite seriousness and the necessary refusal of consolation. The ashes of the first struggle are not the end of history. They are, as the image of Muriuki retrieving the buried weapons

insists, the ground from which a more profound and more complete emancipation may yet emerge.

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