



TRACING THE ABSURD IN NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S *THE RIVER BETWEEN, PETALS OF BLOOD AND WIZARD OF THE CROW*

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ABSTRACT

The 20th century discourses on existentialism and literature were mainly restricted to works of those considered proponents of existentialism. This in essence had a flaw of excluding creative writings from other regions. Grounded on existentialism and psychoanalysis, the paper examines Ngugi wa Thiong'o's utilization of the absurd in existentialism to make critical commentaries on prevailing realities in colonial and post-colonial African countries. The paper's scrutiny of the absurd in *The River Between, Petals of Blood* and *Wizard of the Crow* reveals how Africans continue being enslaved culturally, economically and political due to overdependence on Western epistemological praxes.

Key words: Absurd, African countries, existentialism, psychoanalysis, praxes

Introduction

The notion of the absurd is a key strand of existentialism, a philosophical movement which emerged in Europe as a contestation over abstract thought. The term existentialism was coined by a Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, to denote a worldview which espoused a view that existence precedes essence. The philosophical movement argued that humans existed first before defining their essence. A key component of existentialism is absurdity which the paper examines in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's fiction. It explores palpable illogical silences prevailing in post-independent African countries.

Whereas independence promised a new dawn of social, economic and political fortunes, emerging new realities in Ngugi's fiction borders on existentialist absurdity. As More (2016) asserts, the acceptance of nothingness leads to the concept of the absurd which becomes a leitmotif in Sartre's opinion of existentialism. This scholar points out that absurd is basically a state of alienation from the world. Accordingly, to become fully aware of the absurdity of life is for Kierkegaard, a way of experiencing it most meaningfully (p. 17). I argue that failure of colonial and post-independent governments to be responsive to needs of their citizens give birth to absurd situations illuminated in Ngugi's *The River Between, Petals of Blood* and *Wizard of the Crow*.

Exploration of the Absurd in Ngugi's Novels

The paper's discussion on absurdity in Ngugi's novels centres on religion and African leadership. It exposes silences in faith and politics which render the novelist's treatment of the foregoing issues absurd. Camus

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(1955) posits that the absurd is born out the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. It is these illogical silences of the societies reflected in *The River Between*, *Petals of Blood* and *Wizard of the Crow* which the paper tracks in Ngugi's texts.

The logical contradictions with regard to religion are reflected in *The River Between*. For Camus (1955), 'life is painfully yet exultantly absurd because our 'wild longing for intellectual clarity is met only with the irrationality, the opacity of the world' (P.21). Joshua's practice of Christianity reveals religious incongruities. The central tenet of Christianity is the message of unconditional love and respect for people's culture. The prominent position religious rituals occupy in Christianity demonstrates centrality of tradition in the practice of any religion. The fact that Joshua disowns his two daughters because of falling in love and upholding their tribe's culture is irrational. Nyambura is renounced for falling in love with Waiyaki who was working towards a synthesis of tradition and Christianity. The denunciation of Nyambura is a negation of Christian love which embraces all people regardless of their social preferences.

Joshua's reaction towards traditionalists is also a manifestation of irrationality in the mode of practising his religion. The narrator says that 'Joshua believed circumcision to be so sinful that he devoted a prayer to ask God to forgive him for marrying a woman who had been circumcised' (p.30). Jung (1967) asserts that the personal unconscious includes repression of painful thoughts and feelings which comprise the past of an individual's personality. Being a stooge of the white missionaries, Joshua is haunted by his 'unchristian' past which includes marrying a circumcised woman. It is preposterous, however, for Joshua to claim that female circumcision is a sin yet there is no evidence to back the same in the Bible. Joshua's belief depicts a person with scanty knowledge on religious matters. Furthermore, his prayer to God to bring down fire and flood to annihilate those people who practised the ways of the tribe is illogical.

Nagel (2012) propounds that in ordinary life, a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretention or aspiration and reality. Joshua's exposition of basic tenets of Christianity is a negation of the same religion he purports to practise. From a Christian dimension, both Christians and traditionalists are children of God. No wonder Joshua's prayer is not answered since God embraces all people regardless of their religious affiliations. Through the exposure of Joshua's logical contradictions in his practice of Christianity, Ngugi is able to illuminate the hypocrisy and abuse of religion pervasive in the contemporary society.

In *Petals of Blood*, religion is portrayed as an agent of oppression. During the epic journey to the city, Rev. Jerrod Brown does not extend help to the suffering delegation from Ilmorog. Instead, he offers prayers which neither help them to nurse their sick child nor mitigate their severe hunger. Similarly, Ezekiel uses his preacher to subjugate his workers on his vast plantations. The preacher makes the workers to accept their station in life and stop asking for an increment on their pay. These two instances expose the silences of mainstream religions in Kenya to the suffering and exploitation of the poor in the society. I declare that the complicity of Jerrod Brown and Ezekiel's pastor is absurd.

Furthermore, manifestation of absurdity in religion is elucidated by Karega's harsh condemnation of religion in post-independence Kenya: 'They used the Bible to steal the souls and minds of ever-grinning Africans, caps folded at the back, saying prayers of gratitude for small crumbs labelled aid, loans, famine relief while big companies are busy collecting gold, silver and diamonds, and while we fight among ourselves saying I am a Kuke, I am Luo, I am Luyia, I am a Somali...' (P.238). Through Karega, Ngugi reveals how religion is used to aid plundering of African resources and engendering international capitalism in post-independence African countries. Its role in enslaving Africans not to comprehend ills of capitalism is exposed. The paper contends that the collusion of

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religion to ills of capitalism and tribalism pervasive in post-independence Kenya reveals the absurd in the way religion is practised in developing countries.

As Camus (1955) observes, the absurd is born out the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. The human need in Ngugi's novel is the need for a just society which does not exploit the poor, a need that is not expressed in the preaching of the religious leaders who act as conduits to siphon the wealth of African countries to Western countries. The writer deplores the behaviour of Africans who accept to be duped by hand-outs from the West in form of aid, famine relief or loans. The absurdity of this dependency relationship is that the meagre aid does not match the gold, silver and church offerings the West takes from African countries.

The universe, according to Sartre (1947), will never truly care for humanity the way we seem to want it to. This atheistic view presupposes that people create stories or gods which in their minds transcend reality to fill this void and attempt to satisfy their need. The Sartrean view holds that religion resides in the province of irrationality. The actions of Christians in *Wizard of the Crow* exemplify this stance. It is illogical for a Christian to go to a witch doctor for a cure. Vinjina is aware of this when she says: 'I am a faithful member of All Saints Cathedral, and I know what they would think of me if they suspected or found out that I have had dealings with witch doctors' (p.194). Afterwards, Vinjina agrees to Nyawira's suggestion due her desire to have her husband cured. Vinjina's decision to seek help from a witch doctor exemplifies Camus' proposition because it springs from the presumed silence of the church and her friends to address her psychological problems without being judgmental. Hence, Vinjina's decision points to a world that is not likely to solve Tajirika's strange problem.

Camus (1955) maintains in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the absurd arises because the world fails to meet our demands for meaning. Moreover, Vinjina's acceptance to take her husband to the Wizard of the Crow can be read as her tacit approval of confluence of Christianity and African religious beliefs. In agonizing over this decision, Vinjina is anguished to the extent that she pleads with Nyawira not to disclose the information to anybody. This is an act of bad faith. The involvement of the Wizard in the curing of Tajirika's malady of words is suggestive of the writer's view that religion may not always provide solutions to all challenges facing human beings.

In regard to leadership, the paper examines *Wizard of the Crow* to expose absurdity in African leadership. In *Wizard of the Crow*, the theories put forward to explain the Ruler's strange illness border on the absurd. In the first theory, the illness is attributed to anger that once welled up inside him. Conscious of the danger that the ire posed to his well-being, he tried to rid himself of it by belching after every meal and sometimes counting one to ten or chanting ka ke ki ko ku. The anger finally consumed his heart and soul. It is inconceivable for one to be alive without one's soul but the soul in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel is a metaphor of the Ruler's lack of humanity. Having been rendered soulless, the Ruler's callous acts can be understood. It is irrational that a leader would go to an extent of trying to perpetuate his omnipresence by forcing the TV to broadcast intimate aspects of his life such as sneezing, yawning, shitting, eating and even blowing his house in public. This points to a leader suffering from an inflated megalomania.

The head of state is also expected to protect lives of his subjects, maintain peace in the country and ensure that his people coexist peacefully with each other. But the Ruler does the contrary: It is said that he was especially skilful in creating and nursing conflicts in Aburiria families, for scenes of sorrow were what assuaged him...his enemies were lashed in the public square with a *sjambok*, whole villages were blown to bits or people were pierced to death by a bows-and arrows squad, their carcasses left in the open as food for hyenas and vultures (p.4). The Ruler's reasoning defies logic. That he glories in the deaths of his people and scenes of sorrow

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in Aburirian families is absurd. These happenings reveal the Ruler's callous nature towards Aburirian citizens. The consequence of the Ruler's inhuman acts is that citizens lead an anguished existence that renders their lives meaningless due to uncertainties that emanate from the Ruler's dastardly acts.

The second theory of the Ruler's illness is attributed to a wronged he-goat. Once the Ruler learns about the curse embodied by the he-goat, he orders that it gets killed together with his barber, the elders, the medicine man and even the soldiers who are sent to kill. The victims are fed to the crocodiles of the Red River to ensure eternal silence. It is absurd that the Ruler orders the picture of the Red River where the victims are killed to be used in the Buri notes alongside his. This glorification of shedding of innocent blood symbolized by the Red River portrays the Ruler as an insensitive leader. The inclusion of the Red River in the Buri notes could also be the Ruler's way of intimidating his citizens against opposing his lengthy regime. The Ruler's absurd deeds can only make sense in the realm of irrationality. It is also absurd that the Ruler who is expected to uphold high moral values is at the forefront of having affairs with people's wives and sleeping even with school girls who represent the future of the country. Having sex with school girls is tantamount to denying the youth of the country a future yet the leaders are supposed to nurture young people to take over reins of power from the ageing population. It is disheartening to note that Rachael's castigation of the Ruler's bizarre amorous inclinations makes her to be ostracized from the society.

According to the fifth theory, put forward by rumour mongers in Aburiria, the illness was the sole work of the daemons that the Ruler had once housed in a special chamber in the State House, who had now turned their backs on him and withdrew their protective services. The absurdity of the Ruler's use of daemons to sustain his aging rule lies in the fact that in most developing countries, tyrannical leaders rarely have their citizens' mandate to rule them. The only way they can stay in power is by using powers of darkness as the Ruler does: 'The chamber was across a museum and a temple, and every morning the Ruler, after bathing in the preserved blood of his enemies, would enter, carrying a staff and a fly whisk, and walk about quietly, looking at the various exhibits one by one; then, about to leave, he would suddenly stop at the door and glance once more at the chamber and, with mocking gestures of triumphant content, at the dark holes and grinning teeth where once eyes and mouths had been' (p.11). Just like Sisyphus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, who found meaning in rolling the rock uphill only for it to roll down to the bottom of the mountain, Kamiti and Wariara found meaning in their daily review of the encounters in the city and the job hunts. Once Wariara is out of Kamiti's life, life becomes meaningless which makes him to leave Kiambuigi for Eldares: 'Kamiti never saw Wariara in Kiambuigi again. He continued staying in the village, but without Wariara, life was no longer the same. Although in the last days of their friendship their review of their encounters in the city had become rarer, he still missed their occasional review of the day's hunt for jobs' (p.61). This reeks of existential nothingness in Kamiti's life.

Another manifestation of absurdity in the political arena stems from Sikiokuu's scheme to implicate his colleague in a coup. The casualty of Sikiokuu's sycophancy is Tajirika who gets arrested. To reclaim his freedom, Tajirika uses a bucket of shit to blackmail the prison warders. It is illogical that an ordinary remand prisoner can order the police officers of a dictatorial regime to handcuff him and demand to be taken to the Minister of State in the Office of the Ruler. It is also inconceivable that a whole Chairman of Marching to Heaven can carry a bucket of his own shit to blackmail the prison warders to separate him from the Wizard of the Crow. Despite the tool for his freedom being unorthodox, Tajirika secures audience with the minister: 'Tajirika stepped forward, but as he put the pail of shit on the table, the better to extend his hands for the handcuffs to be removed, he suddenly tripped over a chair and fell, splashing the contents of the bucket all over the office. Some of it found its way onto Sikiokuu's face and clothes; some on Kahiga, Njoya, and the two police officers, and some on the

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Ruler's portrait on the table' (p.390). The act of Tajirika's faeces finding its way into Sikiokuu's office and being sprinkled on the minister, Tajirika and the police officers is ridiculous.

Furthermore, Tajirika's use of the bucket of shit as weapon of his emancipation is driven by anxiety, fear of death since he believes that the wizard is sent by Sikiokuu to kill him in his cell. Secondly, once the wizard reminds Tajirika of the pain he had subjected him to by conducting a fake interview, his conscience is pricked. Instead of owning up to his callous nature towards prospective job seekers, he opts to denounce the truth by running away from the Wizard instead of being repentant. The shit in the bucket is symbolic. It signifies corruption and all evils being perpetrated on the citizens of Aburiria. The fact that the contents of the bucket land on Sikiokuu, Tajirika and the police officers, demonstrates that the political leadership in Aburiria, the business community that Tajirika represents and the police force are corrupt and in dire need of cleansing. It is also significant to note that even after a thorough cleaning of the office and the Ruler's portrait, the office still stunk which points to high levels of corruption at all levels of government.

People engage in economic activities with a view to improve their lives. One of the ladders used to get to economic prosperity is education. In most developing countries, education is viewed as a ticket to a better life. It, therefore, becomes absurd when academic qualifications are trashed in Aburiria. Nyawira's lamentations on the worthlessness of academic qualifications point to a country that thrives on disorder. It is chilling when Nyawira equates her BA degree with a goat's droppings to underscore the worthlessness of academic certificates in Aburiria. It is absurd that that even PhD holders are unemployed which portrays the insignificance of academic qualifications in Aburiria. The act of going to State House or giving bribes to secure employment is indicative of a malfunctioning society devoid of structures. The futility of academics is further reinforced by Kamiti's economic status after returning with two degrees from abroad. It is ridiculous that a Second Degree holder has to eke out a living by begging in the streets. The treatment meted out to the intellectuals in Aburiria demonstrates lack of visionary leadership in the formulation of economic policies geared towards job creation in the third world countries.

The presence of long queues which emerge after Tajirika's illness also reflects the absurdity of economic policies in developing countries. Due to Tajirika's mysterious illness, Nyawira and Vinjina post a notice to the effect that those queuing should return the following day. However, the job seekers guided by skepticism stay put with even those who had earlier left in silence returning. What is absurd, for Camus (1955) is that the human appeal, the human cry is met with silence. He holds that absurdity is born in the chasm between expectant cry and unexpected silence, much as the subjective creative world of the child is both made possible and made vulnerable when the cries for the parent are unheeded. The endless queues embody the citizens' cries emanating from joblessness. Indeed, the queues at Tajirika's office and later in the whole country may be interpreted as symbols of the vicious cycles of the problems facing Africa. They are symptomatic of high levels of unemployment in the country.

The notion of queues without an end is absurd but it seems in the absence of Tajirika, queuing gives meaning and a sense of hope to the people. Underlying the queuing mania is the Sisyphus feeling that at least they hold hope for the people's existence. In this sense, then, life becomes meaningless if one is not in a queue in search of something. Through the endless queues, Ngugi satirizes the economic priorities of governments in third world countries. According to Big Ben, the endless countrywide queues epitomize the citizens' support for the Ruler's grandiose project. Big Ben's proposal is absurd because the cabinet refuses to acknowledge endemic levels of unemployment. The supposition that the endless queues signify the citizens' support for the irrational project of Marching to Heaven is absurd because the project is likely to impoverish the country. The cabinet being a top policy making organ of any government is expected to be alarmed with unsustainable levels of

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joblessness in the country. Instead, driven by sycophancy and vested interests, the government ignores Sikiokuu's suggestion of containing the queues. This points to lack of foresight on the part of the cabinet.

In addition to implying meaninglessness of human existence embodied in the queuing mania, 'absurdism also denotes lack of order and structure in the world' (Sartre, 1946:74). The government's penchant for disorganization is fuelled by the state's lethargy to instill discipline in the transport sector. It is ridiculous that a government encourages chaos by decreeing that passengers should rush and climb on each other as they board trains, matatus and buses. To aggravate the chaotic situation in the country, the Ruler's government halts plans of adding to the railway system built by the colonial regime and restrict licensing of new passenger vehicles to create artificial shortages. The motive behind entertaining disorder and chaos in the society is the assumption that if the people were to organize themselves, they would pose a threat the government's authority as reflected in the narrator's words: 'Disorder reigned supreme, for any attempt on the part of the people to organize themselves was deemed by the Ruler's government as a challenge to its authority' (p.576). This could not be further from the truth because disorder and chaos make it difficult for the citizens to reflect on the failings of the government in power.

Apart from disorganization in the transport sector, the writer also focuses on the notion of productivity in the public service. It is totally absurd for one to celebrate somebody's illness leave alone absconding duty. Machokali's reaction towards Tajirika's illness portrays senior government officials in a bad light. The Minister for Foreign Affairs is expected to reprimand Tajirika for his prolonged absence from his work station. The long queues symbolize endemic levels of unemployment and abject poverty; therefore, associating the queues with mass support for the Marching to Heaven project is being insensitive to the economic plight of such people. However, it could be argued that the author uses such queues to depict absence of logic in most decisions leaders of the developing countries make and also demonstrates how Aburiria leaders, who symbolize the African leadership, use their impoverished citizens to secure loans from global financial institutions such as the Global Bank.

Logically, the queues point to a country that is ailing economically and a citizenry that is discontented. The only positive strand of the queues from an existential perspective is that they are a beacon of hope for they give the job seekers a sense of optimism even if they are made to wait for Tajirika indefinitely. The queues may also be interpreted as the citizens' revolt against authority. As Camus (1955) argues, the absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself. The absurd, therefore, is his extreme tension which he maintains constantly by solitary effort because he knows that in that 'consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt, he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance' (p.55). As emblems of defiance, the queues represent the people's revolt against the Ruler's authoritarian tendencies in *Wizard of the Crow*.

Not only is absurdism revealed in the mismanagement of the public service, but also in the economic relationships between developing countries and the West. Kamiti's rhetorical questions (p.681) which are meant to provoke the people, reveal the absurdity of the dependency relationship that characterize the relationship between the West and Africa. The questions remind the Aburirian citizens of millions carted away due to slavery to different parts of the world such as the Caribbean, Europe and America, a factor that robbed Africa of its productive manpower since only the best were taken. The Wizard of the Crow further reminds the people of the wealth Africa gives to Europe in form of raw materials and possibly human resource only to return to Europe and the USA to borrow a tiny share of the same wealth it had let go at a throw away price. It is ridiculous that the best leader in Africa is one who is an expert in begging for a share of what he had already sold at a throw away price. The writer, through the Wizard of the Crow, depicts the absurd situation that emanates from the dependency syndrome which informs the relationship between the West and Africa to reveal bankruptcy of

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ideas on the part of the African leadership. In addition to highlighting the African leaders' modicum intelligence and crippled vision in their dealings with developed countries, Kamiti's rhetorical questions implicitly provoke the African citizens to think about their future and maybe replace the brand of leaders that the Ruler represents with those that will not be gullible to cunning leaders from the West.

Conclusion

The paper has explored absurdity in Ngugi's literary works from religious, economic and political standpoints. In regard to religion, the paper has revealed in *The River Between* and *Petals of Blood* that silences of religious systems to needs of their adherents engender continued cultural imperialism and human suffering. The so called leaning to the West and condemnation of aspects of African culture give rise to inauthentic Africans.

At the political and economic levels, I have shown that Ngugi suggests a reconfiguration of such structures in the milieu reflected in his novels as the only way to initiate meaningful economic reforms and achieve political freedoms. Moribund economic and economic policies are satirized. Notwithstanding endemic levels of cynicism and despondency illuminated in the selected novels, Ngugi wa Thiong'o calls for undying citizenry optimism to aspire for societal transformation amidst prevailing post-colonial realities mired in absurdism.

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