

## Postcolonial Ogres in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

Leadership failure in much of Africa creates an alienating experience for many citizens, such that events often assume an absurd, even bizarre, if not altogether morbid, quality. Human rights violations, oppression, terror, violence, and extra-judicial killings are only a few of the symptoms of leadership failure on the continent. It is no surprise, then, that Wole Soyinka, Sony Labou Tansi, and some other African writers<sup>2</sup> have attempted to represent the nature of state power through the narrative strategy of the grotesque in a bid to understand the currency of social crisis. This strategy demonstrates a version of *littérature engagée*—the writers' literary response to their individual society and their distinctive but committed efforts to illuminating the widespread frustration and disorientation that arise from political crisis.

The deployment of grotesque realism by such writers instantiates Philip Thomson's argument that the "grotesque mode in art and literature tends to be prevalent in societies and eras marked by strife, radical change or disorientation" (11). Radical changes in much of Africa have unsettled, if not disoriented, the lives of many citizens, even up to this moment. The ensuing disorientation or, more precisely, condition of alienation, in the postcolonial nation is what Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o explores in *Wizard of the Crow*, a 766-page novel. Ngũgĩ's commitment to exposing power abuse has continued to shine forth in his body of writing. Like his fellow writers, he makes use of grotesque aesthetics to portray a world that is upside down, already subject to dissolution and estrangement (Kayser 43). Replete as it is with grotesque imagery, *Wizard* dramatizes an African reality that oscillates between the familiar and the fantastic, the humorous and the horrible, defying definition and meaning. In *Moving the Centre*, a collection of essays and lectures first published in 1993, Ngũgĩ enunciates his thoughts on the politics of language, the vitality of African languages in literary productions, and the role of the African writer in a neocolonial state. He draws attention in particular to authoritarian leadership, which he describes as a repressive machine that silences democratic expression and resorts to dictatorship in order

to perpetuate itself in power (89). The repressive machine is portrayed in grotesque detail in *Wizard*—and we see instances of state power embodied in one single man: the fictional but archetypal Ruler. Drawing on various conceptualizations of the grotesque, I will examine the ways in which Ngũgĩ uses this narrative strategy to undermine state power, while illuminating the deformations symptomatic of the neocolonial nation. Ngũgĩ employs parody, exaggeration, degradation, scatological imagery and other grotesque elements to achieve this aim. Furthermore, Ngũgĩ advances a call for organized resistance against regimes of violence and domination, as the subversive actions of his young protagonists, Nyawira and Kamiti, demonstrate in the text. I argue that Ngũgĩ, beyond his parodic presentations of power, uses the grotesque to also undermine Euro-American ideologies. In so doing, he effects a critique of the neocolonial mindset of the political elite. I suggest that his text offers readers a way to understand leadership failure as consequent upon the elite’s obsession with whiteness—or what Ngũgĩ calls “white-ache.” Using grotesque aesthetics, Ngũgĩ demonstrates how this obsession can have destructive psychological effects on the individual and national body.

## Grotesque and the Postcolonial Nation

In his book *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe discusses some features of the grotesque. He argues that the grotesque provides a lens through which one can understand the weird social and political relationships between the dominated and the dominant in francophone West Africa, in particular. He describes how this relationship is enacted and negotiated within a regime of violence, fostering scenarios of vulgar rituals and mutual zombification. Zombification describes series of improvisational gestures and practices both parties engage in, in order to rob each other of their vitality and potency (5). Mbembe’s critique of the state and its carnivorous power reinforces Ngũgĩ’s representation of the neocolonial regime in his novel.

*Wizard* also reflects Daniel-Henri Pageaux’s conceptualization of “grotesque africain,” a concept Pageaux uses to explain the African grotesque, or any work that evinces an “aesthetic of a distant and divorced world translated in an expressionistic fashion” (qtd. in Boyd-Buggs *et al.* 96). In Ngũgĩ’s fictional postcolony, life is readily alienated, both for the dominant and the dominated, and routinely lapses into a Hobbesian state of nature, where morbidity and the macabre assume a commonplace reality. *Wizard* serves as a scathing commentary on post-independence African nations where misrule frames much of government vision. This commentary, which Ngũgĩ enunciates, exemplifies some of the techniques popularised by

François Rabelais, a major French writer of the Renaissance: a period of time from the fourteenth through the middle of the seventeenth centuries in Europe. Aside from being a writer, Rabelais was also a physician, priest, and humanist. But overall he was best known for his riotous narratives: *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*. He infuses his writing with a rich array of idioms, jokes, folklores, legends, songs, allusions, and farce, so that they all work together to project a resounding satire on the decadence in the French society of his time. Ngũgĩ's aesthetic shares similar affinities with Rabelais', especially in the deployment of hyperbole, fantasy, parody, humour, prolixity, fabulism, irreverent and scatological elements.

The grotesque, of course, is not a contemporary term. Although it has long taken on the form of an aesthetic category, with its own organising principle, its usage dates back to the fifteenth century. Derived from *grottesche* or *grotta*, an Italian word for caves, grotesque at first simply referred to murals discovered during the excavation of ancient caves in Rome and other parts of Italy. The Roman murals, possessed of an eerie monstrous quality, were of a particular kind, and combined heterogeneous elements such as plant, animal, human, and even architectural, motifs. In modern times, the grotesque has acquired a polysemic dimension, thereby lending itself to multiple interpretations. According to Geoffrey Halt Harpham, the term grotesque "is the slipperiest of aesthetic categories" and "almost as fluid as that of beauty" (461). This slipperiness arises from the fact that various artists have applied it to several idiosyncratic practices and media, and in different eras and circumstances, thus imbuing it with an indeterminate texture. Perhaps this explains why Harpham suggests that we not approach the grotesque as a fixed thing, given its peripatetic, almost mutable, form.

Wolfgang Kayser, James Goodwin, Arthur Clayborough, Frances Connelly, and other scholars have likewise acknowledged the variability of the concept. Kayser claims that the grotesque calls the natural order into question by pointing to the lurking contradictions that frame dominant notions about reality. The grotesque, by composing an unfamiliar world "where the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid" (21), requires of us to embrace other alternate ways of seeing the material universe. On his part, Goodwin notes that the grotesque functions as a method ultimately for disclosing a deep, shared structure among political, spiritual, and aesthetic domains (3). He argues that the grotesque can challenge our sense of order and search for meaning, since it retains tangible potentials for incongruity and disruption. Clayborough states that the grotesque is not "congruous with ordinary experience" (12), since it elicits mixed emotional responses from the reader. Connelly also comments on the problematic of the grotesque. However, she mentions that the grotesque "destabilizes certainties, pushes boundaries, shifts expectations, and calls current beliefs into question" (2, 5). For

Mikhail Bakhtin, the grotesque comprises various rhetorical, figurative, and stylistic elements. He argues:

The essence of the grotesque is precisely to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life. Negation and destruction (death of the old) are included as an essential phase, inseparable from affirmation, from the birth of something new and better. (62)

What is discernible in the above interpretations is that the grotesque is marked by co-presence of opposites, such as the old-new, top-bottom, abuse-praise, negative-positive, birth-death, high-low, and human-nonhuman. Kayser reports that the monstrous fusion of human and nonhuman elements is the most typical feature of the grotesque (24).

### Ngũgĩ's Grotesque Aesthetic

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o published *Wizard* in Gikuyu as *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* in 2004. He translated and published it in English in 2006. It is an epic work, which traverses genres, thus defying easy categorisation. Several reviewers and critics have labelled it as a parable, saga, magical realism, and phantasmagoria, for how it incorporates strong elements of orality, allusion, intertextuality, symbolism, and tragicomedy into its narrative structure. Others<sup>3</sup> have highlighted the presence of heteroglossia and polyphony in the text, mainly because it weaves an elaborate tapestry of folklore, biblical, and classical references, to depict the carnivalesque world of the African postcolony. In *Unmasking the African Dictatorship*, Gĩchingiri Ndĩgĩrĩgĩ examines the motif of the African dictator in several texts, including Ngũgĩ's. He categorises the texts under the African dictator novel, a budding genre, in view of the ways the authors have engaged with the recurrence of dictatorship in Africa (xxix)—or what Judith Butler, in her essay, *Mbembe's Extravagant Power*, calls, "spectacular excess" (68).

*Wizard* explores other themes, aside from the trope of dictatorship. These include love, self-sacrifice, revolution; but its most definitive theme is the power struggle between oppressed and oppressors. The action is organised in six books of different sections. The story is set in Aburĩria, a fictional African nation, ruled by an unnamed dictator simply known as the Ruler or the "Father of the Nation." Aided by a coterie of sycophantic and scheming ministers, he cuts the picture of a god and claims to have power over everything, including time and mortality. The Ruler is both a parody and pastiche of African leaders, past and present; his regime of terror recalls those of Omar al-Bashir (Sudan), Sani Abacha (Nigeria), Idi Amin Dada (Uganda), Mobutu Sese Seko (Democratic Republic of Congo), Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe), Charles Taylor (Liberia), and Teodoro Obiang Mbasogo (Equatorial Guinea). Like any dictator, Ngũgĩ's fictional ruler suffers

from a perverse sense of reality and paranoia; the government he runs might have seemed comical were it not altogether gruesome, as the text depicts.

On a whim, the Ruler could have whole villages razed, people pierced to death by a special squad of archers, and have dissenters fed to crocodiles. He preys on other men's wives and schoolgirls. Anyone who is bold or brash enough to defy him ends up in his special chamber made from the skeletons of his most hated enemies. But his regime is undermined by Nyawiri, the female protagonist and leader of the underground revolutionary group known as the Movement of the Voice of the People. By accident, she teams up with Kamiti, aka the Wizard of the Crow, an unemployed graduate who at first turns to begging to survive, but ends up becoming a powerful practitioner of black magic. Together, the young couple stages a series of subversions, causing the eventual collapse of the regime. Although the novel ends on a glimmer of hope for the oppressed citizens, the political space is taken over by one of the Ruler's minions, who transforms himself into an Emperor. The ending somewhat evokes Elisheva Rosen's view of the grotesque as articulating "both a promise of freedom and a foreshadowing of chaos" (127). Such an ending points to the paradox of the grotesque. In what follows I will focus on the characters and their actions, with a view to arguing that Ngũgĩ articulates a grotesque narrative to effect a critique of white ideology and the neocolonial proclivities of the African elite.

### White-ache: Daemons of Whiteness

White ideology manifests itself as neocolonialism in the characters' lives and actions. Accordingly, two characters stand out as grotesque archetypes: the Ruler and Titus Tajirika, the chairman of the Marching to Heaven Building Committee. Both are afflicted with a strange disease known as the "malady of words" in different circumstances. Particularly telling is the scene where Tajirika is taken to see the Wizard of the Crow for deliverance. Tajirika contracts the disease from his encounter with sudden wealth arising from his political appointment and begins muttering *ifs* and *if onlys*. There is something significant about this moment when he finds himself separated from the sphere of language and slides into the mirror stage. The speech defect infantilizes him and excludes him from the symbolic stage, where language operates. His fascination with the mirror reflects his entrapment in the imaginary stage by providing him with false wholeness, a coherence at odds with the ontological reality of his blackness. Indeed, the mirror presents only an ideal self, or the ideal-I, to him, and this explains his "lust for mirror" (*Wizard* 179), since it enables him to behold a specular image of whiteness. In the mirror,

Tajirika recognizes himself as incomplete and refuses to identify with blackness. Rather, he expresses a desire to identify with whiteness since it seems the only means open to him to acquire fullness. Thus, the mirror plays a double function, both reiterating his blackness as lack and promising wholeness in whiteness. But this desire alienates him, in that whiteness remains an absence, phantasm, and so he finds himself stuttering. The following lines capture the scenario clearly: “Tajirika’s (eyes) seemed to beg for the return of the mirror ... Tajirika nodded impatiently as if he was ready to do anything just to see the mirror once more” (178). However, the Wizard of the Crow keeps the mirror and prompts him to speak, and he continues to stutter:

If only...

...

My skin...

...

Were white...like a...white man’s...skin, Tajirika said, enunciating each word like one learning to read. (179)

The wizard describes Tajirika’s desire as a “treacherous thought.” He explains to Vinjina, Tajirika’s wife, that this thought has taken the form of demons. He says: “Daemons of whiteness that took possession of your husband the night he brought home these three bags of money” (179). The wizard not only associates whiteness with treachery, but also with avarice, a similar impulse, which, no doubt, motivated imperialist ventures in Africa and elsewhere, as spaces to be despoiled of their resources. It is revealing that the wizard says that “the only thing missing to distinguish him [Tajirika] from all the other black rich was white skin. He saw his skin as standing between him and the heaven of his desire” (180). The wizard calls this desire “white-ache”—a condition that alienates the black subject from his blackness and urges him “to break ranks with blackness” so he can “enter into union with whiteness” (180). Therefore, it implies that Tajirika’s wealth would make little sense to him unless he turns white.

Vinjina, on her part, seems to nurse a similar desire. Curious to learn more about the disease, she asks: “And what is the cure for white-ache?” To which the wizard replies: “Use the disease against itself! Become white!” Tajirika suddenly becomes ecstatic and cries, “If...my skin...were...not...black! Oh, if only my skin were white!” (179). Tajirika renames himself Mr. Clement Clarence Whitehead but realizes that he cannot perfect his English tongue. He discovers that “the whiteness of [his] dreams” is altogether unattainable (182-83). When his wife insists on attaining whiteness, too, the wizard tells the couple to close their eyes and imagine themselves as an English colonial couple. What they see in their imagination is “a homeless ex-service couple living solely on the memories of what used to be ...” and they cry out “Black is beautiful. Give us our blackness” (185-88).

Frantz Fanon's rumination on the "fact of blackness" elucidates this scene precisely.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon narrates the ways in which the black subject, due to the disastrous psychological effects of colonialism, comes to internalise an inferiority complex. Blackness becomes an abjection and alienating experience, while whiteness is the lens through which the black subject apprehends meaning. Because whiteness comes to shape the black subject's perception of himself and the white man, he thus suffers from conflicted and warped notions of identity. In place of self- or black pride, he is stricken with self-contempt. The black skin becomes a "corporeal malediction" (Fanon 84). He develops a pathological orientation to whiteness, which causes him to manifest self-hate for anything associated with blackness. This is the condition that Tajirika, in Ngũgĩ's text, finds himself in. In this instance, money makes him regard blackness as a lack and associate whiteness with power. This is why he remains unfulfilled, despite the wealth he has accumulated. Blackness fills him with affective insecurity and distorts his identity. His conversation with Sikiokuu aptly illustrates it. When queried by the Minister of State, Tajirika says that he "longed for the power of whiteness" because it "would distinguish [him] from all other blacks" (*Wizard* 349). It is only whiteness that can validate his self-image. And yet, as Fanon explains, whiteness is an illusion, a fiction.

One could argue that Tajirika is suffering from an "immanent decomposition" (Fuss qtd. in Laurynas 14), for the desire for whiteness demonstrates how his body slowly begins to decompose later in the narrative. In a different scene, he lapses into another bout of white-ache and realizes that the cure for it is embodied in the "white *American male*"—the "desirable ideal." He then aspires to be one (*Wizard* 741). Fanon coined the word "denegrification" to explain the black subject's desire "to whiten himself and thus to throw off the burden of that corporeal malediction" (111). Certain laboratories in the past have attempted to produce serum for transforming the black into a white body. The condition is replayed in *Wizard*. To fulfil his aspiration, Tajirika travels to the United States to seek the help of Genetica Inc., but because the cloning and genetic engineering clinic soon shuts down, the surgery that he undergoes only turns him into half white, half black. His left leg and right arm become white (*Wizard* 752). His obsession with whiteness simply changes him into an ogre. This grotesque transformation, which seems both comical and ghastly, turns his children away from him. In one illuminating scene, the daughter Gaciru pleads with her mother to hide her from her father, because she has seen "what he now looks like" (739). It is clear that Tajirika suffers from self-hate born of the alienating conditions of neocolonialism. This self-hate corresponds to his earlier desire to become an ex-colonial type of Englishman. Nyawira, the female protagonist, explains "these traditions of self-hate" as "rooted in

colonial times” (759). The character of Nyawira provides Ngũgĩ a means to critique white ideology as well as to re-imagine a future where black identity is not denigrated (760). Ngũgĩ’s characterization of Titus Tajirika also enables him to decry whiteness personified by African neocolonial political elites, while espousing self-pride in blackness. In one scene—the instant he seizes power from the Ruler—Tajirika names himself Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasianus Whitehead. His desire for whiteness is total; in renaming himself after the ninth Roman emperor and founder of the Flavian dynasty, he believes he has erased the fact of his blackness.

In *Black Looks*, bell hooks comments:

As long as black folks are taught that the only way we can gain any degree of economic self-sufficiency or be materially privileged is by first rejecting blackness, our history and culture, then there will always be a crisis in black identity. (18)

Likewise, the Ruler’s life in *Wizard* reflects the crisis in black identity. Ngũgĩ portrays him as infected with white ideology that causes him to associate whiteness with glory. When his wife Rachel reprimands him for taking advantage of young girls, likening him to the proverbial aging white man, the Ruler takes offense at being regarded as “aging” but we are told that he is pleased with the “white man comparison” (6). His desire for whiteness is activated in another scene where he grows speechless and suffers from the same malady of words as Tajirika (490), having found out that the Global Bank has refused to grant him loans for his Babel-like project. Prior to this climatic moment, he had been honoured for too long by the West, rising to power through the support of his western allies (233-34). Unlike his fellow African rulers, he always favours Western-style suits over local attire, thus projecting pseudo-whiteness. However, to cure him of this affliction, the wizard voices the Ruler’s treacherous thoughts: “IF I had been white, would they have done what they did to me? Or, IF I had been white would they have treated me the way they just did in the presence of my ministers?” (491). The Ruler’s lament hints that the black subject attracts indignity in his relation to whiteness. He is not acknowledged and recognized. Fanon accounts for this situation:

As long as he [the black man] has not been effectively recognized by the other [the white subject], that other will remain the bane of his actions. It is in that other being, on recognition by that other being, that his own human worth and reality depend. It is that other being in whom the meaning of his life is condensed. (217)

The Ruler and Tajirika want to be recognized as equals of the white man, and their belief is that whiteness will afford them self-worth. Yet, they are not only discriminated against, but also subjected to denigration. Contempt for anything black underpins their affective insecurity and deprives them both of the power of speech. The Ruler



has earlier experienced a speech defect in the beginning of the narrative. In an important scene, Nyawira argues that “speech is the beginning of knowledge” (*Wizard* 626). However, the first instance of the grotesque is captured in the scene where the Ruler tries to get rid of the anger long welled up inside him by belching after every meal or by “counting from one to ten, and other times chanting *ka ke ki ko ku*” (*Wizard* 3). The action, reflective of the inarticulacy of government vision, makes the ludicrous and disgusting coexist. It comes across as laughable, though appalling. Thomson explains this paradox thus: “One’s perception of the comic is countered and balanced by perception of something incompatible with this. One may not know whether to laugh or not...” (54).

Ngũgĩ further employs the motif of bodily degradation and excrement to criticize neocolonialism. This motif is portrayed in the scene about a muddy pool of shit under the platform (*Wizard* 252). Shit is an essential element of grotesque realism. As Bakhtin points out, “The images of faeces and urine are ambivalent, as are all. The images of the material bodily lower stratum; they debase, destroy, regenerate, and renew simultaneously. They are blessing and humiliating at the same time” (151). Faecal imagery in the text serves to degrade authority. Another scatological moment occurs when Tajirika is seen holding a bucket containing his seven-day shit and urine as a weapon against the prison wardens. But even more degrading is the image of the Ruler puffing up “like a balloon” (*Wizard* 469). The grotesque body, Bakhtin argues, is always in a state of becoming. In *Wizard*, the Ruler’s body lends itself to exaggeration and degradation. It suffers from a rare disorder named Self-Induced Expansion, or SIE (491). The image of a pregnant man conjures laughter and at the same time horror. The body becomes a begetting body that contains “a seed of becoming” (680). Soon we find the Ruler’s body exhibiting contractions and spasms. There is a particularly comic but ghastly scene in which the body explodes and gives birth to multiparty democracy or what he jokingly names “Baby D” (690).

Another form of degradation of authority, verbal in tone, is worth mentioning. It occurs in the passage where the Ruler has invited everyone to his birthday party at the stadium. There is an old man who, supposedly interpellated by the Ruler’s presence, is expected to revere state authority. However, the man brings his eminence to travesty. Instead of calling him, *Mtukufu Rais*, as is tradition, the man calls out *Mtukutu Rahisi*—a Cheap Excellency. Even when a policeman tells him to say, *Mtukufu Rais*, he says instead, *Rahisi Mkundu*—Cheap Arsehole. Another policeman instructs him to say, “His Holy Mightiness”—*Mtukufu Mtakatifu*, but the old man insists: *Mkundu Takatifu*—His Holy Arsehole (18). The references to the orifices (anus) generate collective laughter from the multitude at the event—laughter that degrades the authoritarian order. This scene exemplifies the carnivalesque elements of the grotesque and illustrates what Mbembe

meant by “mutual zombification,” a situation whereby the political elite and the masses stage acts and gestures that work to undermine and degrade the other, thus rendering each other powerless (5). Finally, another important scene of degradation in *Wizard*—theatrical in dimension—is enacted by the troupe of women invited to perform for the Ruler and his dignitaries. It is at the occasion of the commissioning of the Marching to Heaven building project. In a scene much typical of the grotesque, the women together lift their skirts and expose their “butts to those on the platform, and squatted as if about to shit en masse in the arena” (250). The spectacle is not only dramatic but subversive as well.<sup>4</sup> It appears gross and humiliating to the established order of hegemony, but the foreign visitors simply laugh it off (250). To them, there is an element of humour in its shock value. The foregoing scenarios clearly represent expressions of grotesque realism, reflecting the impact of leadership failure and its relationship with neocolonialism.

## Conclusion

Harpham comments that, “[o]ne of the most frequent ways for an artist to use the grotesque...is through the creation of grotesque characters” (465). Ngũgĩ appropriates this aesthetic to show how neocolonialism enunciates and enacts white ideology through the political elite, a group that lends itself to grotesque characterization. The Ruler and his ministers, all grotesque characters, underwrite the carnivalesque world of the grotesque through their actions and bodies. Ngũgĩ’s grotesque expresses the alienation people suffer in such a morbid society, while focusing unblinkingly on the white ideology that frames the vision of the neocolonial state. Although the state may deploy its repressive machine to engineer a regime of violence and domination so that citizens are rendered impotent and incapable of challenging authoritarian power, Ngũgĩ demonstrates the limits of such repression. In *Wizard of the Crow*, he articulates strong nationalist feelings, counter-narratives of power and ideology, and poetics of resistance, therefore offering readers a new outlook on Africa, charged with revolutionary potentials. This outlook reiterates his commitment towards decolonising the African mind.<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

1. I would like to thank the Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship programme for funding my research.

2. Examples of grotesque aesthetics appear in the following African novels: Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*, Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, Alain Mabanckou’s *Broken Glass*, Sony Labou Tansi’s *La Vie*

*et demie*, Dambuzo Marechera's *Black Sunlight*, and Igoni Barrett's *Black Ass*, to mention a few.

3. Youssoupha Mane, Amitayu Chakraborty, Julius Akani, and Issifou Moussa have studied different thematics of *Wizard of the Crow* (see works cited below).

4. This form of female display of nudity and of pending defecation is on a par with what Laura Grillo calls "Female Genital Power," which can be observed in times of political crises such as civil wars. See Laura Grillo, *An Intimate Rebuke: Female Genital Power in Ritual and Politics in Côte d'Ivoire* (Duke University Press, forthcoming).

5. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o articulated his critique of Western epistemologies in his book, *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature*, 1986.

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