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### **Wizard of the Crow.**

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. New York: Pantheon. 2006. 776 pp. ISBN: 978-0-375-42248-5; 0-375-42248-X.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's new novel *Wizard of the Crow* (2006) marks a new height in his accomplishments as an artist and social theorist, especially in the way he summons gender in his treatment of the theme of globalization. A satirical narrative that relies on African oral literature, *Wizard of the Crow* is set in the mythical country of Aburiria, where the Head of State (mockingly called "the Ruler," a moniker that suggests Jesus in the original) suffers a strange illness which causes his belly to bloat. Biased against all minorities such as women and the disabled, the Ruler feels particularly disadvantages because the illness renders him unsightly and threatens his notions of masculinity by making him appear like a pregnant woman to his subjects. As the novel describes the desperate global search for cure and the various theories doing the rounds about the Ruler's illness, it exposes the corruption, jealousy and political intrigue, religious hypocrisy, self-aggrandizement, gender insensitivity, and superstitions governing politics in the African postcolony. World financial organizations and "democratic" western nations are equally lampooned for their contribution to poor governance and poverty in the Global South.

The novel is significant in Ngũgĩ's oeuvre because it instantiates departures from his earlier positions. Not only did the novel come out after a two-decade hiatus in his novelistic production since *Matigari ma Njiirungi* (1986; translated as *Matigari* in 1988), it is also initially composed in Gikuyu as *Murogi wa Kagogo* twenty years since Ngũgĩ said his famed "farewell to English" in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986). Yet it demonstrates the discursive impossibility of implementing a complete epistemic break from English in postcolonial and di-

asporic Africa. The sprawling 776-page magnum opus (published in Gikuyu in three installments totaling 892 pages) is also the longest piece of prose in Sub-Saharan Africa to be composed and published in an indigenous African language, but its own textuality demonstrates the inevitable comingling of indigenous languages with other languages of the world.

While decrying the decrepitude in African postcolonies, Ngũgĩ retains his faith in the role of the arts in mobilizing the oppressed against an unjust regime. In the novel, as the state wastes national resources on phantasmagoric projects of self-glorification, the rest of the nation is steeped in poverty, chaos, and unemployment. It is from the ranks of the impoverished and the unemployed that Kamiti (the novel's "Wizard of the Crow") emerges to stage protests during a meeting of the Global Bank. The "Wizard of the Crow" eventually becomes a composite character that merges Kamiti with the principal female character Nyawira (and by extension the rest of the oppressed populations) to resolve the problems of the community theatrically by duping the rulers and in earnest by staging a revolutionary struggle against despotism and global exploitation of the South by developed economies. As a woman folk thespian who has rejected the privileges of her bourgeois upbringing, Nyawira manages to mobilize through participatory theatre and dance the Global South towards liberation from its despotic leaders and an oppressive Eurocentric capitalist system.

Like Ngũgĩ's other works since *Devil on the Cross* (first published in Gikuyu in 1980), *Wizard of the Crow* is intensely metafictional featuring artists as characters, citing other novels, and drawing attention to its own contested – textuality. Told by a hybrid and perhaps diasporic figure relying on rumors for the conflicting details he gives to the readers, at one point in the Gikuyu edition, its own

email address and webpage. The multiple voices that speak to the reader in the novel via an unreliable narrator undermine the impulse for a unifying monolithic power structure in which one group or individual claims to represent and articulate the desires of everyone in the nation or the globe. The readers are urged to take part in the organization and production of the narrative in a participatory process that signals the novel's own desire for more equitable and democratic spaces for marginalized individuals and groupings.

Even if *Wizard of the Crow* is set in an unnamed African nation to signal its relevance to different countries facing the problem of dictatorship, the novel relies heavily on Gikuyu mythology and popular discourse that may not be immediately accessible to non-Kenyan – indeed, non-Gikuyu readers. Like in other Ngũgĩ's works in Gikuyu, the characters' names in *Wizard of the Crow* have localized symbolic meanings tied to popular narratives within the Gikuyu community of central Kenya. For example, in this culture, *kagogo* (the diminutive form for the Gikuyu word for *crow*) is the equivalent of a Methuselah, albeit with negative connotations, as a person who lives too long. The Gikuyu figure the *kagogo* (crow) as very old and extremely hard to kill; it would require special skills in black magic to bring a predatory *kagogo* down. Thus, "Kagogo" of the title signifies the longevity of the destructive African dictators who have outstayed their terms in office. At the same time, compared to *nderi* (vultures) in Gikuyu popular discourse, a crow is not much of a threat. This signals that the dictatorships symbolized by the crow would be easy to bring down compared to the more tenacious colonial order. Within the Gikuyu traditions, magic and witchcraft are abominable but they would be forgiven if they are used to eliminate a predatory or destructive individual. The name "Kamiti" (sometimes in-

terchangeably used with 'Wizard of the Crow') suggests both the name of the Maximum Prison where Ngũgĩ was jailed without trial in between August 1977 and December 1978 and *miti* (magic skills). Nyawira's name puns on Ngũgĩ's own name (*ngugi* is the slang for *wira*, or work) while also referring to Ngũgĩ's favorite character Jacinta Waringa in *Devil on the Cross* who is described as "lady of toil" (*ngatha ya wira*). From the very names, we see *Wizard of the Crow* as a very personalized response to abuse of power in Africa. At the same time Ngũgĩ, still operating within socialist Marxism as he did since *Petals of Blood* (1977), registers his unflinching faith in the workers and the marginalized as the most viable force to bring the reign of the *crow* down.

When one considers the punning on the Kenyan indigenous terms and citation of proverbs that are directly acknowledged in the text as Swahili aphorisms, one sees at once that "the Ruler" is a thinly veiled reference to Daniel arap Moi who presided over a corrupt regime in Kenya from 1979 to 2002 (the Ruler, like Moi, is the second President of the republic, wears custom-made dapper suits, carries an ivory staff, and has banned his wife from appearing in public events). However, the dictator figure is fleshed out with details that also suggest an amalgamation of Mobutu, Pinochet, Abacha, Suharto, Marcos and other world dictators. The anger Ngũgĩ has towards Moi, who sent him to exile in 1982 with death threats for the writer's criticism of abuse of power in Kenya, is disguised with humor, hyperbole, farce, and self-deprecation alongside folkloric and allegorical affectations. Ironically, the more the narrative affects not to be about Moi, his family, and his henchmen, the more it would draw its suspicious readers to recuperate the novel's specificity as an aesthetic presentation of a rank and gritty moment in Kenyan history. The scatological novel does not seem to see any possibility of redemption in the flat characters who mis-

govern the nation, but Ngũgĩ manages to soften his infuriation by making the narrators and characters describing the leaders suspect of exaggerating and rumor-mongering.

Readers will note that Ngũgĩ uses the novel to reposition himself on his pet issue of the language of African literature. Despite his spirited campaign to conserve African languages from the hegemony of English, Ngũgĩ's original is so much haunted by English that his Gikuyu readers would have to be competent in English to comprehend the novel in their own mother tongue. By borrowing words directly from English, even when there are equivalents from other African languages, and by reproducing long sentences in English without translation, Ngũgĩ may be backtracking in the novelistic form from his hard-line 1986 position against Europhone literature, a position he has gradually abandoned in his essays and teaching practices as a professor in the West, where he has to have had to conduct his duties in English. The characters' discursive fields, and perhaps Ngũgĩ's own, demand that the indigenous language in the novel be interlaced with English to express a more globalized world order. *Wizard of the Crow*, in the original and translation, also assumes that its readers understand Sheng, a macaronic patois in East African urban centers, which it reproduces – albeit sarcastically – without translation. While it criticizes the Ruler for wasting resources by constructing a skyscraper called the "Tower of Babel" to mark his birthday, the novel deconstructs its own narrative as a monumental tower in which different languages blend and crash. Further the novel approvingly cites texts by women writers originally written in English and French – including Meena Alexander's *Faultlines*, which Ngũgĩ has praised in a preface to a later edition of the feminist memoir, in the very Achebean terms he dismisses as fatalistic in *Decolonising the Mind*, for its use of English to express a local sensibility even if

Alexander does not write in Malayalam, the language of her childhood in Asia, or in Arabic, her adopted language in Africa. Indeed, *Wizard of the Crow* appears to have been initially mentally translated from English into Gikuyu and back into English, but Ngũgĩ had to write it in Gikuyu to demonstrate that indigenous languages are capable of expressing postmodern phenomena.

All in all, *Wizard of the Crow* signifies a regenerative repositioning of Ngũgĩ's ideas regarding globalization, women and the diaspora. The novel suggests the need to forge a transnational front against global oppression where gender is to play an important role in liberation politics.

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#### **middelman.**

Rudolph Willemse. Northcliff (Posbus 3907): Toga. 2006 (?). ISBN 0-620-34140-8.

Rudolph Willemse (1958-) publiseer aanvanklik in die "little magazines" soos *Ensovoort* en debuteer met die bundel *Kweekskool* (Perskor, 1982), waarvan enkele verse in *Groot verseboek 2000* en ander bloemlesings opgeneem word. Vyf-en-twintig jaar later, met die verskyning van sy tweede bundel, bevind die digter hom in 'n veranderde literêre landskap wat die verweefdheid van sisteme op ooglopende wyse illustreer. Binne hierdie konteks lewer Willemse 'n bydrae om eietydse perspektiewe op menswees te bied wat klaarspeel met isolasie en marginalisering van watter aard ook al.

Die bundeltitel leen hom tot 'n spel met verskeie interpretasies, waarvan "man te midde van" die sterkste in die verse gerealiseer word. 'n Manlike spreker bevind hom