
A Marxist analysis of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Novel *Matigari*

Rauna Mwetulundila

English Lecturer in the Department of Languages and Communication at the International University of Management in Namibia

ABSTRACT

Africans have gone through inhuman conditions because of colonialism. African writers like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o have tackled the social issues with literary language to inform the fellow beings that what they are going through is totally not acceptable. In the novel *Matigari*, Ngugi has used Marxist ideology to tell the nation that there is no equality and justice in Kenya. Matigari, a hero, is viewed as a man who can bring changes because of his prophetic role and confidence to face the law enforcing agents of the capitalist system. Ngugi has also used children to show their plight and he tells us that what they are going through is not right through the character Matigari. Matigari wants to take all his people to the house he built with his own hands so that they will be out of this predicament. Workers are exploited and alienated from the products they have produced with their own hands. Girls have turned to prostitution to be able to feed their families because their parents have lost their lives in the war. The country is divided and there is a big gap between the bourgeoisie and proletariat.

INTRODUCTION

Like many African writers, Ngugi played an important role in socio-economic independence. Olutola (2013, p.2) says that African writers depicted how the colonisers exploited the masses and they also urged the Africans to be aware of the real intentions of the colonisers. After many years of colonialism and oppression of the Kenyans by Great Britain, Kenya gained independence. But despite this newfound independence from the oppressors, people were not yet free from the pain of war. People were still oppressed and robbed of their own home, their social and economic well being were similar to the days of colonialism. Ngugi sees no difference between pre colonial and post colonial era. Some of the colonised accepted that they were always the object of someone. It was precisely the project of *Matigari* to resist and reject this assumption; by telling the colonised, to change their attitude (Walder, 1998 p.7). It is by listening to this story, that readers may change their perspective, their sense of what counts in literature today.

RELATED LITERATURE

Marxism as an Ideology

Marxism is concerned with the issue of ideology in literature. Kerrey (2008) indicates that:

For scholars like Terry Eagleton it signifies the socially constructed ideas, images, values and norms that bind us to particular roles which underpin our relations as individual sexes or social classes. It constitutes all those beliefs and practices that you have acquired through your culture, religion or political convictions. Something that is socially constructed is that which is not natural or created by God but by human beings for the purpose of guiding human conduct. So ideology is a social construct. It is largely unconscious, we follow it blindly, we rarely question and this prevents us from changes. Marxists therefore argue that ideology creates blind spots in our vision. In a capitalist society, workers are being alienated from the products they work hard for (p. 34).

Alienation of Workers

King (1960, p.114) says that according to Marx human beings are alienated from the products of their work. What workers produce does not belong to them; it belongs to their employers. The employee puts his/her effort into the product, he/she has created it, but it belongs to another. Hands (2000, p.32) adds that workers are alienated and depersonalized by the factory system because of the way in which the factory obtains surplus value from their labour. The system tells them when to work, how to work

and they derive very little satisfaction from their labours. According to Marx (2010, p.90) the fact that labour is external to the worker for example it does not belong to his essential being; that he therefore not confirm to himself in his work but denies himself, feels miserable and not happy.

Exploitation of Workers

In a capitalist economy workers are being exploited. Gugelberger (1985) points out that exploitation in a very general sense, refers to taking unfair advantage of people. Marx and Engels thought of exploitation in a more specific term and describe it as any situation where some people work for others without suitable compensation. Raphael (1993) considers class exploitation as an unequal exchange between an employer and workers. Capitalists exploit workers by paying them low wages and make more profit on the workers’ expenses. Workers have a class interest in choosing a socialist system of property relations over a capitalist one. However, they do not have choice because of their economic power.

Under capitalism the land is just owned by the middle class. Schmitt (1997, p.91) the workers do not have plots of land that would support them and their families, so it is hard for them to refuse to work even if there are being exploited. The workers do not even own wealth that would support them so that they can turn down work that for whatever reason they do not like.

Marxism and Religion

What were the Marxists views of religion? Herman (2011) says that because the workers under the capitalist regimes were miserable, religious beliefs were sustained. Religion, according to Marx as cited by Herman (2011) is “the response to the pain of being alive, the response to the earthly suffering.” He continues saying that religion “is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of heartless world, and soul of soulless circumstances.” Breidlid (2005) says that as a prophet Matigari not only passes judgment on the present state of affairs, but also projects a vision of a New Jerusalem. As a prophet who tries to reinvigorate the spirit from the days of Mau Mau, Matigari represents these ideals of resistance against oppression.

Theoretical Framework

Literature being part of ideology of a particular society or group, therefore it is not free from ideological positions of the writer and the people. According to Abrams (1999, p.49) literature reflects class struggle and materialism; it emerges as a product of economic and ideological determinants specific to a certain era. Literature reflects the writer’ own class or the relations of other classes.

The article utilises Marxist theory of Karl Marx. According to Ogude (1999), Marx perceived human history to have contained of struggles between classes_ the oppressed and the oppressing. Trainer (2010) says that the most significant classes are the bourgeoisie; people who own land, resources, factories and other means of production and proletariat; people who work for wages. Marx believed that the system was unfair under capitalism; workers would became poorer and poorer and experience alienation. Reiss (1997) mentions that once workers are alienated from the products of their hands, they become powerless. He further says Marx believed that to end this problem capitalism has to be replaced by the socialist system that will make people equal and have their needs met. Abrams (1999) adds that in communism, alienation can be avoided universally and providing education to all means the future generation will have control of their own future, women will be empowered as workers, instead of being subject to domination by males.

DISCUSSIONS

Women and Children in *Matigari*

According to Marx, everybody should be treated equally: men, women and children. Hands (2000, p.51) says that Marx believes in a communist society without private property that ensures that women, men and children are equal. The exploitation of Guthera as a sexual object shows a sign of sufferings during the time the novel *Matigari* was written. We first meet Guthera as a young lady of a great beauty and sex appeal who is sticking to her virtue as a Christian and decent woman. Guthera comes from a family where their father views all children as equal because they are all God’s creatures. Guthera is a woman who believes in God. She served two masters; her heavenly father who gives her life and earthly father who brought her up with so much love. Her earthly father was arrested and the prison superintendent asked her to give him her purity in exchange with her father (p.35). This is an indication that women were used as sex objects by those above the law. Guthera’s

refusal to offer her purity shows that women can also stand up on their two feet to stuck on what is right. The other point that can emphasize the sexual exploitation of women is when the police officers set a dog on Guthera as a punishment because she refuses to go to bed with a policeman (p.37).

As a caring woman, Guthera’s siblings draw her into pity. They cry because of hunger and the fact that their father is not around to care and love them. Guthera decides to walk the street in order to quell the plight that they are going through but what she gets is not enough for anything else apart from providing them with what to put in their stomachs. So, she cannot send her siblings to school. Abrams (1999) says that providing education to all means the future generation will have control of their own future. According to Marx, there would be equality for all to education. Enough childcare facilities would mean that women would no longer have to be financially dependent on men. Caring for children and bringing women into the work place is the first step to equality. This also means that they involved in planning the economy and so changing the society. This would abolish prostitution which he sees as a by-product of capitalist system that viewed everything in financial terms (Raphael, 1993). This indicates that women have no choice but to turn to prostitution for financial gain. Guthera lost her honorable positions and standard in society. She is no longer honored but whored out because of the capitalist system that lacks equality and leaves her with no choice.

Guthera wants to stand up for what is right when she decides that she has to follow and support Matigari in whatever he has to do. Guthera has realized that what she has been doing in her life has no meaning. Probably she wants to add a meaning to her life. She wants to do something to change whatever makes people live like animals, especially women. She wants to be one of the leaders of movement in the society. Schmitt (1997, p.186) says that when women are standing up like this, they are following a path to a change that will lead to equality. Ngugi has given this character to a woman to show that women cannot only be viewed as house keepers who are waiting for things to be changed by men but they can also advocate and lead to societal changes. There are many instances in the novel where women are referred to as corner stones of their homes. They set example for the children and are expected to look after them. But that is not what Marx suggests; he wants a communist society where all are equal. He thinks that this relation between parents and children was corrupted by wage labour and private properties (Schmitt, 1997, p.89). “Although Ngugi displays awareness that Kenyan women are subject to double oppression as women and as workers he tends to suggests that what is urgent is the liberation of women as workers rather than women,” (Ogude, 1999, p.124).

Children in the novel *Matigari* represent the people of Kenya. Matigari first meets the children when they were racing to the garbage yard. He cannot believe what is happening because in an independent country like Kenya, he believes that things would have changed for the better after independence. He cannot also believe that there are those who celebrate the suffering of the majority: two policemen, tractor driver and two men who are collecting money from children as a fee to enter the garbage yard. And even among the orphans themselves, the bigger bully steals from the weaker child. This is what the patriots do not want, and for this reason went to fight to liberate the country. These children do not have roofs to call home neither parents to take care of them. They live in the vehicle cemetery. To imagine children living like this, Matigari metaphorically wants to take them home where they can share the last bean. Matigari wants his people to be equal and share everything they have in the same portion (p.160). The house referred to here is used metaphorically because in literal sense it represents a country. Ngugi’s use of the character Matigari wants to highlight that there are people who are suffering and his wish is for the change that all the people will enjoy equally. These children do not even go to school and education is supposed to be for everyone: poor, rich, black and white. They are not educated because they do not want, but because the situation is forcing them to. Free education for all in public schools should be put in place in an equal society (Reiss, 1997, p.68).

When Matigari and the boy are walking to the children’s village, they passed by a yard where there are many cars parked outside. The boy surely comments that sometimes the yard is filled with Mercedes Benz for those who come to drink in New Sheraton hotel (p.14). There are those who can afford to buy flashy cars and eat in hotels but the poor children are eating food from the garbage yard where food is sniffed by dogs and perched on by vultures. This is the country where few are enjoying and the majority is living beyond the poverty line. Now the question that can be asked is where are these people getting all these riches that cannot be shared with their country mates in the same portion from? Ngugi then decides that is viable to let the fellow citizens know that what they are going through is not right; they must wake up from their deep sleep.

Exploitation and Alienation of Workers

As long as we are dealing with a class-divided society, human labour power is exploited. Reiss (1997, p.45) says that workers are exploited if they get the compensation which is not appropriate to the products they produce. Workers do not have control over their labour. Guthera tells Matigari to start the search on plantations because that is where most people are. These workers are physically and emotionally drained without getting intrinsic reward in return. They are used as hammers to create a product that belongs to someone else. The workers are not only paid less but also being tortured by the police “was not just the other day that the workers were badly beaten, and some of them have their legs broken?” (p.59). This happens to workers because they are on strike demanding what is rightful theirs.

The workers are being exploited by the bourgeoisie. They have worked hard all their life and make a lot of profit, but belongs to their bosses. The machines have sapped them of their strengths, now what are left are just bones. Even if they work hard, at the end of the day there is no reward. They don’t get pensions once they get retired; they get a thank-you clock for long and loyal service (p.59). What kind of work that does not award pension to employees once they get retired? Reiss (1997, p.96) comments that in a capitalist society proletarians have to work only to provide for their families. Generally, workers do more than necessary and are not rewarded for their work.

The workers are not allowed to register their complaints. The government is siding with the private owned companies instead of addressing the plight of its own people. When the workers go on strike the police and soldiers are called to beat and break the workers legs. The law enforcing agency is always trying to silence the workers when they want to voice out the truth. Arnold (1990, p. 91) comments that it is through the strikes that workers come together for the purpose of changing what is not right.

During the meeting with the workers, the minister of Truth and Justice begins with his rhetoric when he identifies himself with John Boy. When the minister sides himself with John Boy it is clear that the government does not stand with the workers at all. The minister highlights that it is only the loyalists who are on power today. They have abided by the law that is why they are where they are today. In this way the minister is indirectly convincing the workers to abide by the law of their employers, he does not care whether they are exploited or not. The truth and justice that Matigari has been looking for in Kenya is nowhere to be found. A white lie is even being told by the minister when he says that according to the professors who conducted a research on who brought independence found out that those who joined hands with the colonialists are protecting the law (p.103).

The minister of Truth and Justice is against communism because he does not want the workers to be treated fairly. He is hiding the truth that the workers want to unfold. Instead of discussing the wellbeing of the workers and wages, he gives John Boy and Robert Williams a chance to hand over a cheque to him in front of the heart broken workers. A cheque is donated towards the special presidential fund for handicapped children. Boy and Williams want to plead to the workers that they care for the wellbeing of the nation. They also want to bribe the government top officials to side with them (p.104).

Ngugi shows us that these workers are exploited and there is no one to protect their rights. After receiving a cheque the minister tells the workers that there will be no strike ever against the company. “From now onwards, anyone who goes on strike against this company will actually be striking against the government,” (p.108). The minister on behalf of the government gives the verdict on the dispute that all the workers must go back to work and end the strike as soon as possible. The workers are informed that the strikes are banned in the country. The minister does not care whether the workers are happy or sad in work places.

The workers are working on Saturdays and are not compensated for that. The workers are alienated from the society they live in when they are doing this boredom and meaningless work that is controlled and under skilled. When the government is protecting the capitalist, workers do not have a say on their plight. When the workers defy their employers the one to act first against them is the government. There is an instance when the minister of Truth and Justice shows that he is in support of the capitalist. When Ngaruro stands up to voice the workers problems and needs; the minister replies that Ngaruro has broken the law before everyone. The minister states clearly that workers do not have a say about anything “how can industries run if the workers are the ones to decide who is to be employed and what wages to be paid?”(p.109). According to the minister’s statements, the workers

cannot partake in decision making of their work and so they have to work according to their employers’ commands without questions. Schmitt (1997, p.161) is against this idea of forced work. Schmitt says that if workers go on strikes to compel the capitalist to reduce working hours, wage increment is the right of the workers to express their dissatisfactions. Ngaruro is arrested because of his voice. Other workers who want to voice out their dissatisfactions are threatened not to do it now or in the future (p.110). Reiss (1997, p.68) argues that if workers are put on the position of the ruling class they will win the battle of democracy. This means that they will be able to voice their views freely without any fear of being arrested.

During the meeting with the workers, the Minister of Truth and Justice mentions that there are visitors from western countries and he wants them to see “African socialism” at work. He further says that Kenya is guided by democracy and the rule of law. One would say that unless they do not know what democracy is, if they believe what the minister says. How democratic is Kenya if workers are denied the right of expression? “May be he is the one of those who is preaching the teachings of Karl Marx in this country” (p.110). Where is democracy and socialism then, if not in the teachings of Karl Marx?

Raphael (1993) says that Marx and Engels pointed out that the power of the capitalist must be replaced by the power of all people; democracy is not possible under the capitalist system. When Matigari stands up to question the minister of Truth and Justice, everyone cannot believe if there is someone as brave as him. People are even trapped in the hall by armed police and soldiers as if their intentions are to fight their superiors. Matigari’s braveness threatens the superiors, one of them is even planning to shot him and it is just a minute ago when the minister of Truth and Justice spoke about Kenya as a democratic country (p.112). Matigari specifically mentions that he does all the works but he does not benefit from the works of his own hands; it is the colonisers and those who believe in them to take all the products that he produced. Arnold (1997, p.215) points out that it is important to speak the truth to those in power, to insist over and over that capitalism is unjust because it exploits, that it is bad for people because it alienates and disfigures democracy. Instead of addressing the problem at hand, the Minister of Truth and Justice keeps on boasting about the type of class to which he belongs. He tells the crowd about the house he lives in and clothes he is wearing. The minister does not care about the workers who are being exploited; if it is so, he should have tackled the problem that brings them into the gathering.

Ngugi is telling us that not only those who work in plantations and factories are being exploited. Through Ngaruro, he tells us that “security forces are being used by the government of capitalist, landlords and imperialists as watchdogs” (p.136).

In the novel *Matigari*, Ngugi employs religious beliefs. The gaolers refer to the words in the Bible when Jesus had his last supper with his disciples on earth “I want you to share this last supper with me, to remind us that we shall not be able to eat together again unless our kingdom comes” (p.57). They are implying that their kingdom is the freedom that every one of them is hoping for. “Religious is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of the heartless world and the souls of the soulless conditions,” (Trainer, 2010).

According to Hands (2000, p.49), religion helps to unite people with nature. He believes that religion may not exist when certain classes are no longer oppressed and everybody becomes equal. There is an instance in the book where the workers say the God of workers will come back. They are so frustrated by the attitudes of John Boy and Robert Williams. Matigari is referred to as the son of God. “Don’t just rejoice because you have thrown me in this hell, you will see me again after three days” (p.79). The citizens really believe that Matigari is a saviour whom the Bible says will come back again. They believe that if the son of man fled to Africa when he was a baby, he can definitely come back to save his people from the yoke of the capitalist.

Even though there are those who believe that God exists and Jesus comes back to save them, the government of the imperialists does not believe that it is true. The warning is issued by the government’s spokesman that nobody should believe false rumours that angel Gabriel releases the prisoners and one of the prisoners is Jesus Christ. The spokesman believes that there is no way Jesus could return without paying a visit to the president. Hands (2000, p.49) believes that the abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. Marx wants to mean that religion is meant to create illusory fantasies for the poor. Economic realities prevent them from finding their happiness in this life, so religion tells them it is okay because they will find true happiness in the next life.

The protagonist, Matigari, has been preaching about the house he built, the land he tilled, the harvest he has produced and the profit that Settler Williams takes to the bank. He has been in this predicament for years until one day when he wakes up from a deep sleep and decides to end this plight. Matigari keeps on repeating his life story of how he cleared the bush, cultivated and sowed the seeds. He later builds the house but all this time Settler Williams takes everything that he worked hard for. The same thing happened in the factories, Settler Williams was just there standing with his hands in his pockets and giving orders here and there but he takes the profit home. Why does he have to work hard for things that he does not benefit from? In this case Matigari represents his country as a whole while Settler Williams represents the British colonisers. The workers worked hard for long hours but they are distant from the products of their own hands and sweat. They are not only distanced from their products that they produce but from their families, friends and other things that they like. They work for long hours and become alienated from their families, friends and other things that they enjoy doing. They do not have time for anything including themselves because they spend long hours at work. Schmitt (1997, p.120) says that “we are accustomed to calling a person free who, individually, can do as he or she pleases.” This was in fact good to Settler Williams because by alienating people from everything means he is in control of them. Hands (2000, p.32) emphasises that the worker is not aware of the fact that he is being exploited. He believes that the employer has a right to the surplus value that is produced because he believes is just the way things are or part of human nature. Thus, Matigari says “one morning I woke up from the deep sleep of many years, and I said to him: Settler Williams, you who eat what another has sown, hear now the sound of trumpet and the sound of horn of justice” (p.21). Matigari wants to claim what he is alienated from for a long time.

It was the workers who worked hard but the colonisers take all the products. Imagine the tiller dying for hunger, the builder sleeping on a veranda, the tailor walking about without clothes and the driver has to go for miles on foot (p.38). The workers have to work even if they do not want to. They have to support their families because if they do not work, their wives, children and husbands will go hungry. Schmitt (1997, p.116) says that the workers work whether they want or not in order to survive. Their labour is therefore not voluntary but forced labour. The workers who work hard and run away from strikes are giving hegemonic power to the oppressors. They have been working with the machines that have sucked all their strength but once they retire they do not get pensions, instead they get a thank you clock for long and loyal service. “I spend all these years opposed to strikes. I kept on saying if I go on strikes and lose my job what will my children eat tomorrow? (pp.59-60).” It does not make any difference whether you partake in strikes or not, all workers are being treated the same way. They have worked hard, refused to partake in strikes but at the end the profit goes to Settler Williams.

When Matigari is asking for the keys of his house, he is not literally asking for the keys for that specific house but he means the freedom of his country. He has been wandering around for far too long. He builds the tea plantations and roads for so many years and see who is entitled to them now (p.45). John Boy Junior and Robert Williams represent the capitalists who have taken away what belongs to society. Ngugi is now using the character Matigari to voice out the truth. Matigari tells the capitalist that the builder demands back his house and the tiller his land. “The builder refuses to beg for a place where he can lay his head, the tiller refuses to starve and the tailor refuses to go without clothes” (p.46). From this point, it can be concluded that these people have been alienated from their land for such a long time because Matigari has even pointed out that he has been there at the time of the Portuguese, Arabs and British. All these times people were working hard but all they have worked hard for was taken by the colonisers. Ngugi also voices his voice through Ngaruro waKiriro who when addressing the workers says that the foreigner exploiters and their servants must pack their bags and go because they are tired to work and produce products they don’t benefit from.

Ngugi has also tackled the issue of individuality in his novel *Matigari*. Ngugi wants to show us that there are those people who behave like white colonisers. John Boy Junior tells Matigari about the word individual. Boy says that Kenya remains in darkness because people do not know the concept ‘individual’ what they know is just the masses. Boy also says that the whites are advanced because they respect the individuality of the person. The whites do not care about the wellbeing of other people. Thus, John Boy Junior is against the blacks because they depend on masses and he does care about the nonsense of sharing the last bean (p.49). Hands (2000, p.53) confirms that on the issue of individuality, Marx saw individuals as products of society to which they belong. Each society has its own view on individuality because each society has its own ideology.

On the other hand, there are those fighting against individuality. In prison, the accused do not care about individuality because they are ready to share a portion of bread and a bottle of beer that

Matigari has. “Our people let us share this bean and this drop of wine.” Matigari’s voice evoked a sad note and his words remind them of a dream they had long before (p.56). These are the people who are ready for a change that will better the whole society. Raphael (1993) emphasises that in communism society the rights of a group are seen as more important than the rights of the individuals. According to Raphael, Marx believes that the capitalist society hinders the individuals to reach their full potentials; he felt that the change to the communist society would allow full rights to all people.

CONCLUSION

This paper analysed that Ngugi depicted the way the colonisers exploited the masses and natural resources. He urges the Kenyans to act against the acts of the bourgeoisie who are exploiting them for personal benefits. He is calling for all people to be equal before the law, education to be for all, democratic system and women to be independent. The Kenyans have gone through painful experiences even when their own people were ruling them. Ngugi thinks that it’s Matigari’s obligation to fight the oppression that he and his people face. The selfish and corrupt government must at least give people what belongs to them.

The novel *Matigari* reflects that the imperialists are enemies to the wellbeing of people of Kenya. In the capitalist system bribery, corruption and nepotism become the order of the day. They need the system that ensures that everybody enjoys independence by enjoying the fruits that the country has to offer.

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AUTHORS’ BIOGRAPHY

Rauna Mwetulundila holds a Master of Arts in English degree obtained from the University of Namibia. She is currently an English Lecturer in the Department of Languages and Communication at The International University of Management in Namibia. She taught English at secondary school level in Namibia for a number of years. Her research interests are in literature, linguistics and rhetoric studies.