Writing Dictatorship, Rewriting African Writing: Mythology, Temporality and Power

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Declaration

I declare that this is my own unaided work submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand for the fulfilment of the Doctor of Philosophy degree. It has not been submitted before for examination in any other university.

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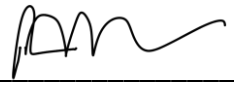
Signature  Date: 10 June 2020

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Dedication

To Gladys, Kudzai, Tafara, Kule Tamuka Shumba and Mbuya Gwaya. Your love, patience and understanding will always be cherished. To my late father, Cornius Dzingi Mapanzure, who held my hand on my first day to school, *makaita basa* Banzure.

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Abstract

This study explores the various representations of the dictator and the postcolonial condition in what can be termed the African dictator text. Adopting a panoramic approach that selects texts from several regions of Africa, the study critically examines the ambivalence and paradox of power, focusing on the various strategies devised and deployed by African writers to re-interpret and re-imagine postcolonial identities, time, space and authority in a globalised terrain, while arguing that the selected texts simultaneously entrench and destabilise content, form, views, attitudes, positions and meaning. The study also argues, in this respect, that the selected texts problematize representation of the performance of power as they reinforce, perpetuate and destabilise age-old but persistent stereo-typical notions of 'exoticism', 'backwardness' and the 'dark continent'. This comes out through what the study sees as the collusion, tension and entanglement of myths, power and temporality which places the African and the continent in a completely different time-frame. The conclusion reached is that the dictator text continues to be an arena where African experiences are vigorously interrogated, re-interpreted and re-imagined, and in the process, the genre continues to spawn new and innovative strategies of representing the perennially confounding African postcolonial condition.

Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Burying the 'Father of the Nation'

On the 6th of September 2019 Zimbabweans woke up to the news that their founding leader Robert Mugabe had died at a private hospital in Singapore. Although he died after he had been deposed back in November 2017, his death was a major topic, not only in Zimbabwe but it was a story also carried by some of the world's major news outlets. To some in the country and beyond he was an African hero, while others reviled him as a brutal tyrant. In his home country his death became a subject of intense debate, primarily over his legacy. To many Zimbabweans, there was curiosity over how and where he was to be interred after pronouncements had been made by some of his family members that Gushungo, as he was known, out of bitterness over how he had been removed from power, had insisted that he should not be buried at the Heroes Acre but at his rural home. As the news of his demise was confirmed, his successors in the party and government that he had led for decades sought to reclaim his name, legacy and, literally, his body, by quickly declaring him a national hero and insisting that he should be buried at the Heroes Acre.

Perched on a hill close to a once imposing National Sports Stadium just a few kilometres from the capital Harare, is the burial ground that the government of Zimbabwe named Heroes Acre. It is a piece of ground that Robert Mugabe and his ZANU (PF) party, the victors of the war of independence, *Chimurenga*, had carved out and set aside for the interment of 'national heroes', that is, those deemed to have played pivotal roles in the struggle for independence and the subsequent formation and consolidation of the nation of Zimbabwe. Over the years this 'sacred' national shrine had been the ground where memories of the national liberation struggle (*Chimurenga*) had been rekindled, re-enacted and re-lived as Robert Mugabe, the nation's founding leader, delivered fiery speeches presiding over the burial of the few accorded the national hero status. So, the occasions to bury a fallen national hero became moments for imagining and re-imagining Zimbabwean nationhood. This is an observation also made by Josephine Fisher (2010: 79). At the same time, however, being declared a national

hero and the subsequent interment at the Heroes Acre also became a source of acrimony and bickering as politicians squabbled over the definition and meaning of national hero and the whole process leading to interment at the national shrine. Opponents of the ruling party and government felt that the definition of national hero was deliberately designed to exclude those who had not participated in the national liberation struggle or had fallen foul with the Mugabe regime. When they voiced their concerns over this partisan notion of heroism, Robert Mugabe had famously lashed out at them declaring that the Heroes Acre was only for a few: "*ukatarisa mazita aripo akakosha, fata kana pope chaiye haapinde… ndepevarwi verusununguko*" (it is a place only for revered names, neither a priest nor even the Pope can be laid to rest there… it is a place for freedom fighters). [1]

After intense negotiations with the Mugabe family work started on the construction of Robert Mugabe's mausoleum at the Heroes Acre, a process which was to take about a month to complete. This was, however, not the end of this national drama. Three weeks after his death, while construction of the mausoleum was going on, the Mugabe family suddenly announced that they had decided to bury Robert Mugabe at his home village. So Mugabe's body was quickly ferried to Kutama village where it was buried a day after the sudden announcement.

The bitter squabble between the government and the party on one side and the Mugabe family on the other over how and where Robert Mugabe was to be buried brought under the spotlight a number of issues pertaining to African heroism and nationhood. More importantly, Robert Mugabe's contentious legacy brought to the fore the sad reality of how the African hero-cum-nationalist, more often than not, mutated into the archetypal authoritarian figure. In many ways the state that Robert Mugabe created and reluctantly bequeathed to his

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1. See "Heroes Acre Not for Sellouts". *The Herald* 21 February 2013. https://www.herald.co.zw/heroes-acre-not-for-sellouts-president/

successors resembled many African states across the continent and it was one whose template could easily be found. Like many other nation states across the continent, its origin was not far back in the past as it could be traced back to the 'ruins' of the colonial state which became the foundation upon which the independent state was constructed. Events in Zimbabwe from the moment of independence up to the overthrow of Mugabe in November 2017 and the subsequent tug of war over his place in Zimbabwean history bring back under the spotlight the nature of the performance of power in post-independence Africa. Of particular interest are the inherent contradictions of an inherited bureaucratic state where citizens have literally been reduced into anonymity, while at the same time power has become personalised and is concentrated in a single, all-powerful individual who, more often than not, is regarded as the founding-father of the nation. Central to these contradictions has been the postcolonial state's well-documented descent into dictatorship after the attainment of independence. According to Mahmood Mamdani (1996: 25) the states that emerge after colonialism were characterised by despotism. This is an observation that is also made by Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg (1982: 23) who argue that African politics is characterised by "personal rule":

> Personal rule is inherently authoritarian. By 'authoritarian' we mean an arbitrary and usually a personal government that uses law and the coercive instruments of the state to expedite its own purposes of monopolising power and denies the political rights and opportunities of all other groups to compete for that power.

This is an issue that can only be understood in a substantial way by re-winding to some of the actions and motivations that drove and guided the inheritors-cum-creators of the postcolonial African state. Significantly, these actions and motivations underline the relationship between nationalism and postcolonial dictatorship. The founders of the independent African nation state seemed to have been acutely aware of the new nation's shaky foundation. Being a creation of colonialism, what also gave it shape and some form of identity to the numerous peoples in it was paradoxically a common historical experience in the form of colonialism. This was a common experience that had literally given physical form to the country. The African nationalists therefore wondered and feared whether this common experience would be enough to hold the new nation together. It seems they were acutely aware of what they perceived as the fragility of the nation that would come into existence after attainment of independence. Something was therefore needed to bring the people

together in the fight for independence and more importantly in moulding a new and lasting nation. According to Tom Mboya (1963: 61) the struggle that would lead to the attainment of independence could only succeed if it was led by a strong nationalist movement that would mobilise the different groups in the country. Secondly, said Mboya, the nationalist movement would have unquestioned authority in directing the struggle. It is this same movement that obviously would take charge of the newly independent state. Significantly, after independence the quest for national cohesion which is driven by the fear of the disintegration of the nascent nation leads to the strong belief that the nation needs strong symbols that every citizen could identify with. Besides the all-powerful nationalist movement, the most visible symbol has been an even more powerful national leader whose task has been to lead the movement, the people and the nation:

> The people have to be organised so that they are like an army: they must have a general, they must have discipline, they must have a symbol. In many cases the symbol is the national leader himself, and it is necessary to have this kind of symbol of an heroic father-figure if you are to have unquestioning discipline among the different groups and personalities who should rally their followers behind him. (Mboya, 62).

Herein lie what I perceive to be the seeds of dictatorship in postcolonial Africa. What begins as a genuine quest for unity, cohesion and national identity quickly descends into dictatorship as difference and dissenting voices are perceived as a threat to nationhood and are hence marginalised or silenced. Thus, desperate to mould a nation from the hotchpotch of social groups or peoples cobbled together as a 'country' by the colonial power, a strong father-figure around which the nation would rally was deemed essential. For this to be possible it was therefore also necessary to create concomitant myths to not only legitimise the leader's rule, but to bind the nation's destiny to the ruler. Ali Mazrui (1963: 22) underlines the role of what he calls "heroic myths in nation-building" by pointing out that sometimes the idea of a nation can be too "abstract, and hence a little too cold, to command ready human allegiance"(24). More importantly, Mazrui adds that "To give the idea of a Nation warmth, it is often necessary either to personify it metaphorically or more effectively, to give it specific human form in national heroes" (24). Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2007: 74) also examines how African ruling elites invoke heroes for nation-formation and consolidation of power. Elie Kedourie (1966) describes nationalism as an ideology and argues that the ideologist looks upon the state and society as a "*tabula rasa*" or "canvas which has to be wiped clean" so that his vision

can be painted on it. Significantly, Kedourie highlights that ideological politics (nationalism) is "thus necessarily and inevitably caught up in a perpetual disastrous and self-destructive tension between ends and means" as the "attempt to wipe the canvas clean must entail arbitrariness, lawlessness and violence" (xiv). This is the context in which the emergence of Africa's big men should be read. These are men who have been tragic, fascinating and have been a subject of intense representational interest as will be seen in this study. These are largely strong-willed nationalists like Kwame Nkrumah, Abdel Gamal Nasser, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Jomo Kenyatta, Hastings Kamuzu Banda, Samora Machel, Gnassingbe Eyadema, Felix Houphouet-Boigny, Robert Mugabe and others whose political doppelgangers have been visible in almost every independent African country.

It is within this context that this study places itself and focuses on the representation of the African dictator and the African postcolonial condition in African literary texts.

1.2 Aim and Rationale of the Study

This study explores the representation of dictatorship in African writing, focusing on the ambivalence and paradox of power, and the various strategies devised and deployed by African writers to re-interpret and reimagine postcolonial identities, time, space and authority in a globalised terrain. It examines the myths surrounding dictators and how these have their source in history and how the collusion, tension and entanglement of myths, power and temporality place the African in a completely different time-frame. So, the study interrogates the intended and unintended effects and implications of the representation of the dictator figure and the postcolonial condition in African writing.

There is compelling evidence to justify a study of this nature. Firstly, one has to acknowledge that dictators or "lords of misrule have produced fertile material for African writers" (Robert Spencer, 2012: 146). This is largely due to the fact that dictatorship still remains a contemporary phenomenon in most of postcolonial Africa and beyond, which continues to have far reaching impact on the individual and state in Africa. The dictator text provides opportunities for re-engagement with notions of time, history, power, death, violence, subversion and resistance. It is a genre that largely relies on or taps from history but does not wholly rely on history's supposed "accuracy". It is this fidelity and infidelity to real life that

seems to give the dictator text its strength as it concretises the imagination while allowing fresh perspectives and new insights on reality to emerge at every turn. By so doing, this allows one to re-visit and re-interrogate the problematic relationship between literature and history (White, 1978; Green, 1997; Bennett, 1990). Consequently, a view such as that held by Ania Loomba (1998: 81) that literary texts like the dictator texts "have become more widely recognised as materials that are essential for historical study" inevitably calls for further interrogation. Natasha Ezrow and Erica Frantz justify their long-running interest in dictatorship by admitting that "the world of dictatorship is a colourful one and it is nearly impossible not to find it fascinating and engaging" (2011: xi). Backed by evidence from case studies that they have carried out, Ezrow and Frantz argue that "much of the world lives under dictatorships". More pertinent to this research, however, and an area that still calls for further study, is their observation that "misconceptions about dictatorships abound" (2011: xiii). However, Ezrow and Frantz write from a social science background and their study does not touch on the literary.

One of the most insightful studies on representations of African dictatorship is Cecile Bishop's *Postcolonial Criticism and Representations of African Dictatorship: The Aesthetics of Tyranny* (2014). Bishop argues that it is difficult to examine African dictatorship without encountering the challenge of reproducing stereotypes about the continent (2). Her study makes useful observations in this regard, but it largely restricts itself to the portrayal of Idi Amin. A much more comprehensive study is *Unmasking the African Dictator* (2014) which is a collection of twelve essays by ten contributors and was edited by Gichingiri Ndigirigi. The essays examine works by writers such as Nuruddin Farah, Henri Lopes, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ahmadou Kourouma, Wole Soyinka, Alain Mabanckou and others. The view that emerges in Ndigirigi's collection is that the dictator text is some form of resistance literature and writers are part of the process of challenging repression. Ndigirigi sums this up stating that "The writers may not have been able to overthrow dictatorship, but they have won the discursive war. The dictators met their match in the African writer who, like an anthill, survived to tell the story of last year's drought" (xxix). While Ndigirigi characterises dictator texts as acts of resistance by the writer, this is different from my study's approach whose focus is largely on ways or strategies of coming to terms with challenging postcolonial existence. Although some of the contributors in Ndigirigi's collection examine some of the strategies adopted by dictators to

retain power, this study does so at great length by examining the mythology in the literary field about the figure of the dictator. In my view, although myths abound in the media and literary texts about the figure of the dictator and the performance of power in the post-colony, this is an area that still requires scholarly attention. The study also seeks to problematize the dictator figure and the genre in general by interrogating its intended and unintended consequences, especially in relation to power, identity, race, culture, time, death and history. These gaps and silences will be some of the major entry points of the study. When one examines the flourishing literature of disillusionment in Africa, it is clear that dictatorship has been an enduring feature of this type of literature from the onset of the waning of the euphoria of independence and the collapse of the nationalist vision. It is because of this, says Cecile Bishop (2014: 82), that Achille Mbembe characterises and celebrates the Francophone African literary text as visionary since it alerts the world to postcolonial dictatorship, which he calls "the apparition on the horizon", long before other disciplines.[2] It is important to point out that Mbembe's observation equally applies to the Anglophone literary text as writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and others are also prophetic as they anticipate post-independence tyrannies in texts such as *A Man of the People* (1966) and *Kongi's Harvest* (1967) respectively.

Drawing on Foucault, Charlotte Baker (2009: 1) argues that the body occupies a central position in contemporary cultural theory but African representations of the body have not received much attention from cultural theorists. So she calls for placing focus on the portrayal of individual bodies and the body politic in the African text and image as this will in turn address issues of colour, race, identity, disability, colonialism and power. In this study the body will be examined within the context of myths in relation to violence, death, sexuality and the exercise of power in the post-colony. Thus, this study is significant in this respect through its interrogation of the representation of the body as a site of contestation in the performance of power.

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2. See "Achille Mbembe in Conversation with Isabel Hofmeyr" *South African Historical Journal,* 56 (2006), 177-187.

In interrogating the issue of dictatorship and in particular the significance of the dictator text, it is important to acknowledge some of the monumental changes that have occurred on the political landscape across the continent as a result of the end of the Cold War. In a triumphal mood, Francis Fukuyama (1992) described this moment in world affairs as "The end of history" implying that ideologies that had given rise to conflicts or political systems like dictatorships had been swept away by the end of the Cold War and therefore there was now in place a New World Order.[3] Indeed, the collapse of African dictatorships that had been backed by either of the world's superpowers, the adoption of multi-party politics or the irruption of the much more recent Arab Spring as from 2011 that swept away some of the dictatorial regimes across North Africa and parts of the Middle East created the impression that dictatorship was a thing of the past. This view has been challenged by a number of critics including Geeta Chowdhry and Sheila Nair (2002: 1) who described the "end of history" as a "facile notion" that "obscures the workings of power". What is beyond dispute, therefore, isthat the end of the Cold War has not really resulted in democratic dispensations as dictatorships or their after effects still persist. It is this unexpected reality that leads Kasahun Woldermariam (2009: 6) to declare that what is now in place in post-Cold War Africa is an "elective dictatorship". All these developments across Africa and beyond clearly make a study of the dictator text a worthwhile exercise, especially in interrogating issues related to power, fiction and history.

One serious challenge in carrying out a study of this nature lies in the very essence of the dictator text, that is, its largely dystopian nature. In other words, since it is essentially a text of disillusionment, focusing on this genre, creates the impression that Africa is all about debilitating wide-spread poverty, squalor, disease, fratricidal conflicts, misrule and general collapse. In light of this, therefore, the study also makes an attempt to directly or in passing interrogate new voices, especially among the younger generation, and put under the microscope their interpretation and response(s) in conditions of dystopian post-coloniality dominated by poverty, disease, squalor, conflict and despair. It is in this respect that the

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3. In his seminal paper "The end of history" in *The National Interest*, Summer 1989, Francis Fukuyama sees the resolution of the Cold War as the "triumph of the West, of the Western idea" and as evidence of "the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism".

dictator text also becomes a useful tool for exploring possibilities for alternative representations of the African post-colony.

Therefore, what makes a study of this nature worthwhile is dictatorship's persistent and enduring after effects and its subtle and sometimes blatant omnipresence on a continent where the postcolonial state largely remains fragile and susceptible to dictatorial tendencies to sustain itself. It is also significant to find out whether the dictator text makes room for alternative readings or interpretations of representations of the post-colony. At the same time, the phenomenon of dictatorship seems to encourage a rethink of writing as writers continue to seek alternative ways of representing African experiences.

In order to get a broader and plausible understanding of dictatorship and its representation in African literature, the study adopts a panoramic approach. It does not restrict itself to a single African author or region of Africa. It therefore uses six primary texts in the form of prose and drama by different writers from across the continent. The writers are Nigerian, Ethiopian, Kenyan, Congolese, Ivorian and Zimbabwean. The texts are Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* (1984), the short-story anthology *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and other stories* (1993) by Hama Tuma, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* (2007), *Life and a Half* (1979) by Marcel Ntsoni (Sony Labou Tansi), *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* (2004) by Ahmadou Kourouma and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2014). In all the selected titles writers deploy the dictator text in its various forms, clones and guises to interrogate, (re)imagine and (re)present a complex and sometimes confounding, and depressing post-colonial condition in quite illuminating ways. On one hand, these titles have been selected largely on the basis of their representation of the figure of the African dictator and the phenomenon of dictatorship in general. On the other hand, others have been chosen because of the freshness of their views and technical strategies in juxtaposition to the older, more established or conventional strategies or voices in African literature. More importantly, the texts open up new avenues to facilitate the process of re-imagining and re-reading the post-colonial condition which is a modest attempt to provide better understanding of the postcolonial world. As has also been noted already, the dictator text continues to problematize not just itself but a host of other issues related to race, identity, writing and culture. This is so in spite of the paradox and challenge presented by the choice of texts. In other words, the texts in question seem to reinforce that which they challenge. My contention

in this case is that these particular texts and others like them destabilise content and form, entrenched views, attitudes, positions and meaning in general, but they also destabilise themselves in the process, while arguably entrenching stereo-typical images of power and its practice on the continent.

Scholarship on the African dictator text links the genesis and evolution of the genre with African nationalism (Obiechina, 1992; Yewah, 2001; Ogunmola, 2014). Shatto Arthur Gakwandi (1977: 1) also notes that "Nationalism and African literature have followed closely parallel courses and derived reciprocal inspiration from one another, both being part of an awakening and a search for a new place in the world for the Africa." The nation is, however, quickly seen as "the originary site of post-colonial dystopia" (Simatei, 2001: 15). This then leads to a clear shift in the visions and strategies of some African writers. My argument is that this largely explains what one encounters in the selected texts, especially in terms of strategies or techniques later adopted by writers. The interest of the study in this respect is on the impact of the various strategies adopted by writers such as Sony Labou Tansi, Ahmadou Kourouma, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and others to make sense of the seemingly static but drastically changing post-colonial landscape. It is in such a context that the African dictator text takes shape.

One of the striking features of the African dictator text is that the figure of the dictator bears strong resemblance to actual figures from history. This partly guarantees the success and continued relevance of this type of fiction as the theatricality and seriousness or even lack of it in politics compete with that of fiction. Of particular interest to the study are the various representations of the African dictator figure in the selected texts. Christiane Ndiaye (2007) tackles what appears to be the problematic of Ahmadou Kourouma's work, especially in *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*. He argues that the writer seems to receive accolades primarily because of his representation of the dictator figure. This view has some merit as Kourouma's novel places on the centre stage an "ageing dinosaur" hailing from a tribe of naked mountain people. In addition, the dictator Koyaga is cast as a sex-maniac, murderer, cannibal and monster without equal. This emblematic figure of the dictator also dominates Wole Soyinka's dictator texts such as *Kongi's Harvest* (1967), *Opera Wonyosi* (1981), *A Play of the Giants* (1984) and *King Baabu* (2002). Although dictator texts are literary works, their impact seems to stem from the fact some of the characters are replicas of actual historical

figures. There is therefore need, in my view, to interrogate this blurring of the line between fiction and history. This problematic aspect, says Ndiaye (2007: 103), is highlighted by the fact that "the literary also conveys some truths". As has already been noted, a number of scholars (Hayden White, 1978; Michael Green, 1997; Tony Bennett, 1990) have interrogated the contentious relationship between literature and history.

Another dimension to the figure of the dictator which seems to be visible in a number of texts is the dictator's demonstration of the "machinations of power" (Ohaeto, 1991: 27), which essentially reveals an acute awareness and understanding of the workings of power. In the dictator text power is dramatized in spectacular fashion. In an analysis of the exercise of power in Bali, Indonesia, Clifford Geertz (1980) characterises the performance of power as spectacle and ceremony. This is part of the mythologisation, ritual and theatricality often satirised by fiction. This study seeks to argue that the performance of power as dramatized in the dictator text reinforces and perpetuates the age-old stereotypical notions of African "savagery" and "backwardness". Brian Street (1975: 12) implicates literature in the distortion of the image of the African:

> popular literature tended not to create 'rounded' characters but rather stereo-types, as it did with more domestic subject-matter. It was also directed at a mass audience and a big sale, so the exotic, exciting and savage side of 'primitive' life was emphasised at the expense of the everyday, commonplace and therefore dull.

In a text aptly titled *The Africa that Never Was* (1970: 14) Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow argue that

> In popular writing Africa is strangely homogeneous and static; differences between past and present and between one place and another are obliterated. Africans, limited to a few stock figures, are never completely human, and Africa exhibits few changes over time. It became and remains the Africa of H. Rider Haggard and Joseph Conrad. In short, the literary image of Africa is a fantasy of a continent and a people that never were and could never be.

In my view, this argument is given credence by the figure of the dictator sculpted by Soyinka, Tuma, Kourouma and other writers who is cast as a buffoon, monster, cannibal or sex-maniac and so on. In *The Case of the of the Socialist Witchdoctor*, Hama Tuma also makes a scathing attack on dictatorship through satire that James Ogude (2000: 89) says "works to lay bare , before our eyes , the monstrosity that is the essence of this regime: this political ogre". In this

respect, what emerges in Sony Labou Tansi's *Life and a Half* seems to defy logic. Although Lydie Moudileno says there has been a "problematic misreading of the novel" (2006: 28), she concedes that the novel echoes other "romans de la dictature" in that there is " the ubiquitous figure of the dictator", with a postcolonial nation "crushed" by his totalitarian power. Serigne Ndiaye (2003: 16) says the ruthlessness of the dictator is "conveyed through its association with blood". Besides the penchant for meat and blood, Mattiu Nnoruka (2000: 190) associates the dictator with "a kind of mental disorder; which depicts them as clowns and more importantly as anti-heroes. While some are temporarily mad. Others are clinically out of their senses."

Ali Erritouni (2010: 148) focuses on the dictator's violent actions on the body of his opponent. He argues that despotism is "infatuated with its own excesses and regards the bodies of its opponents as a site on which it may inscribe its unrestrained force, subduing, mortifying, and obliterating them". However, in my view, Tansi's *Life and a Half* counters this obsession to control the body as the butchered bodies of the Providential Guide's opponents literally refuse to die. There is persistent association of the dictator and the African in general with blood, cannibalism, sex, magic, barbarism and insanity which dovetail neatly with what Hammond and Jablow (1970: 14) describe as popular literature's images of "an Africa composed of the old notions of the Dark Continent inhabited by archetypal figures: howling savages, faithful servants, sinister half-breeds, white hunters, and gallant colonial officials". Thus, Tansi's resort to unusual imagery presents a dimension similar to Kourouma's and to some extent Ngugi's characters in *Wizard of the Crow*.

In his insightful "The Ghost of Idi Amin in Ugandan Literature", Abasi Kiyimba (1998: 124) highlights that Idi Amin is the most dominant single factor in Ugandan literature". More importantly, he takes issue with the Western writers as they dramatise what he says are well-circulated rumours about Amin. Kiyimba argues that some of the rumours about Amin that Western writers have used create stereotypical myths about Amin and Africans. Therefore, Kiyimba challenges the representation of the dictator figure especially by Eurocentric writers. However, Kiyimba notes that even African writers themselves have produced literature that denigrates and stereotypes Africans. He cites Alumidi Osinya's use of traditional Ugandan myths whereby Amin is presented as a hyena, an animal which is also associated with a particular tribe in Uganda: "But the approach has dangers; the most immediate of which is

the perpetuation of tribal characteristics" (130). It is for this reason that he is dismissive of Soyinka's *A Play of the Giants* which he says is "terribly exaggerated" and "does not add much to our appreciation of the Amin figure in literature" (1998: 137). This highlights the collision between history and fiction or the blurring of the boundary between the two. What Kiyimba takes issue with again highlights the need to interrogate the myth-making and performance of power in the African dictator text.

Scholarship on NoViolet Bulawayo is still growing but my reading of her novel tries to place it within the context of what can be termed new eyes and new voices. Though not part of this study, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's novel *Dust* (2014) whose setting is a crumbled Kenyan dictatorship can be very informative in reading a text such as *We Need New Names* in which the figure of the dictator is not visible but casts a heavy shadow on people's lives. While the figure to blame for the dystopia is not named and does not appear in the novel, his identity is strongly suggested throughout Bulawayo's text. *Dust* is problematic but refreshingly perceptive. The dictator figure has already fallen and what is left are individuals battling with the after effects of the remnants of dictatorship. It is unusually perceptive in that it is dominated by character interiority which takes the reader deep inside individual characters exploring inner pain, turmoil and self-discovery. The significance of a text such as *Dust* in reading *We Need New Names* lies in that both writers spurn the totalising views of the past while at the same resurrecting and privileging otherwise marginalised voices. Both writers go against the grain as they ignore or challenge the dominant narratives that eulogise the nation and its heroes.

The significance of images of the African dictator is that they call into question the whole process of representation in African literature. Hard and almost uncomfortable questions about the whole field of African literature are triggered by and through engagement with the dictator text. Bogumil Jewsiewicki (2008: 105) asks two thought-provoking questions in relation to how Africa should be viewed. These are questions, one has to add, which are directly at the core of what has pre-occupied African philosophers such as V.Y. Mudimbe and Kwame Anthony Appiah. The questions are essentially about defining Africa or figuring out what Africa is exactly. Thus, Jewsiewicki asks: "How then, should one represent Africa and Africans?" and "Who has the right to do so and in whose name?" More relevantly to the study, when Jewsiewicki goes further with his interrogation, one sees how the African dictator text

cannot escape being part of these soul-searching questions: “Can the social sciences, the arts, the media-all of which are conceptualised, produced , and put into planetary circulation by the West- produce a fair representation of the continent?” (105). Could the dictator text in its various guises not be guilty of marketing exoticism? These and other related issues which this study explores in detail with the aid of the selected texts are in line with what Eileen Julien (2006: 681) has termed ‘extroversion’ or “a particular type of narrative characterised above all by its intertextuality with hegemonic or global discourses and its appeal across borders”. By focusing on the dictator text, my study provides an opportunity for further engagement with such issues.

The major questions that this study addresses are: What is the impact of Wole Soyinka’s construction of the figure of the African dictator in *A Play of Giants*? In what ways does Hama Tuma explore the ambivalence and paradox of power in the anthology *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and Other Stories*? How effective is Sony Labou Tansi’s strategy of pushing, transgressing, blurring, re-drawing and re-defining representational boundaries in *Life and a Half*? How central is the process of mythologisation in the performance of power in *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*? In what ways does *Wizard of the Crow* encourage re-interpretation of postcolonial identities, time, space and authority in a globalised terrain? How does NoViolet Bulawayo simultaneously subvert and entrench stereotypical myths about power and the postcolonial condition in *We Need New Names*?

1.3 Repositioning the African Dictator Text

There is vast evidence that the African dictator text continues to fascinate writer, reader and critic in various ways, chief of which is that it has provided fodder and space for engagement with some of the continent’s most intractable issues. This fascination is borne out by the foothold and sway that the practitioners of this genre have across all the regions of Africa, especially in the English-speaking and French-speaking worlds. Power is inescapably the focus of the dictator text in its strictest sense as demonstrated and enunciated by some of its most well-known practitioners and critics from and beyond the continent such as Wole Soyinka, Nurrudin Farah, Okey Ndibe, Chinua Achebe, Sony Labou Tansi, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Robert Spencer and others. One of the most outstanding and enduring

features of African literature has been its preoccupation with what one may call the postcolonial condition. This is a condition that writers and commentators depict mainly through a motley of problems associated with the formerly colonized countries of Africa. In short, the texts mirror the nation or the national condition, a feature which led Fredric Jameson (1986) to (in) famously coin the heavily contested but somewhat credible view of Third World texts as "national allegory". This is a condition characterized by dictatorship or misrule, greed, corruption and a host of social ills associated with the modern African nation state. It is this depressing state of affairs that has given birth to attempts by writers from all over the postcolonial world to search for new strategies of re-interpreting and re-imagining the postcolonial state.

There is general consensus that the bulk of postcolonial African literature is dystopian in nature. This is a feature that cannot be divorced from the failure of independence, which led Fredric Jameson (1986: 81) to characterise African independence as a "poisoned gift". This preoccupation of African literature with the nation or national condition has largely resulted in the dominance of dystopian representation. In other words, notions of failure, poverty, squalor, disease, conflict, death and an overwhelming sense of despair persistently dominate representation of Africa by creative writers and the media. Dictatorship is a common trope in the depiction of post-independence dystopia. Keith Booker (1995) highlights this point in his selection of African dystopian fiction. Most of the works on his list feature the phenomenon of dictatorship. Although this view seems to paint all postcolonial African literature with the same brush by reducing it to dystopian experience, there is a clear link between African dystopian experience and the dictator text as it is postcolonial dystopia that has given birth to the dictator text. This is one of the complications that the study will be seized with.

There have been some attempts to give a refined definition of a dictator text. Robert Spencer (2012: 146) sees a distinction between the dictator text and texts about dictatorship. In his critique of Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow*, he argues that it is "a dictator novel rather than a novel about dictatorship because it performs dictatorial power". He elaborates that dictator novels "are directly concerned with the dictator and his rule" while others are texts "about or set in dictatorships". This is a distinction that is simplified by Magali Armillas-Tiseyra (2012: 10) who says that in a dictator text the emphasis is on the "centrality of the dictator as a character",

while others belong to a broader category whose setting is a dictatorship but the focus is on the lives of the characters with little or no link to the day to day politics. This study adopts both definitions as writing directly or indirectly about dictatorship are often strategies of coming to terms with challenging postcolonial conditions. Balasingham Skanthakumar's (1997: 1) definition of despotism underlines one of the recurring tropes encountered in the dictator text: "Despotism revolves around the force and character of the central figure – an individual who so fears any challenger that he weakens or eliminates alternative bases of power and concentrates authority within himself". Drawing on these definitions it is worth noting that a dictator text is one in which the focus is largely on powerful individual figures, their acolytes, and statecraft or system. In this case there may be concrete presence or visibility of the dictator figure(s) or effects of the rule as in texts such as Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* (1984), Giles Foden's *The Last King of Scotland* (1998), Chielo Zona Eze's *The Trial of Robert Mugabe* (2009), and a host of others. Poignantly, in texts in which the figure of the dictator is not really visible, his omniscience and omnipresence are undeniable. This is clearly the case with texts such as NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2014), Hama Tuma's *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor* (1993) or Nuruddin Farah's *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979). Natash Ezrow and Erica Franzt (2011: xv) provide an important dimension to the debate when they argue that "dictators are distinct from dictatorships. The overthrow of the dictator is not synonymous with the overthrow of the dictatorship". This brings to mind Yvonne Owuor's *Dust* (2014), Sembene Ousmane's *The Last of the Empire* (1980) and others where the dictator is completely absent in the foreground but his system outlives him by regenerating and mutating. This is an important distinction that will also determine and guide the focus and trajectory of the study. However, other critics make no such distinction in their reading of postcolonial dystopia in Africa (Ogunmola; 2014: 30).

If the dictator text allows us to reimagine the nation and postcolonial existence, it offers us the opportunity to do so from a temporal perspective. In other words, the dictator text offers us what Paul S. Goodman, Barbra S. Lawrence and Michael L. Tushman (2001: 645) call a "temporal lens" in research, which is an approach that "puts time and timing front and centre". If the dictator text is also about postcolonial power and its exercise, this means postcolonial existence, experience and perceptions of it also have a temporal dimension. Russel West-Pavlov (2013: 10) privileges literature in our comprehension of time since it is "a

fictive construct, an artifice which, in playful re-working of the putatively factual givens of reality, may point us to, indeed participate in the plethora of temporalities subsisting under the threshold of an all-embracing and coercive time". More importantly, West-Pavlov argues that since "we as human subjects mediate all our experience via language and narrative, time will always be narrated time".

This study finds useful Talcot Parsons' (1963: 232) characterisation of power as "the capacity of persons or collectives 'to get things done' effectively, in particular when their goals are obstructed by some kind of human resistance or opposition". A major component of this study is the relationship between power and mythology. According to the Meriam-Webster dictionary, mythology refers to "a popular belief or assumption that has grown up around someone or something". This study will draw on this and other related definitions to refer to narratives surrounding the dictator and the performance of power. These explanations of some of the key terms are deliberately scanty at this stage as they are fleshed out throughout the study.

At this point it is crucial to acknowledge that it is difficult to talk about the dictator text in Africa without acknowledging the influence of Latin American writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Mario Vargas Llosa and others (Gaylard, 2005). They have had a huge influence on the African dictator text and their works provide an important informative background in understanding the trajectory of the African dictator text, especially in terms of style. Clearly then, the proliferation of the genre highlights its significance in engaging a wide variety of contemporary issues related to the plight of the individual and societies in a fast-changing and highly confusing post-colonial world.

1.4 Re-reading African Dictator Texts: Theoretical Paths and Directions

The breadth and scope of the study in terms of texts selected and their style, geographical and historical contexts, call for the deployment of an eclectic approach. Since the study also interrogates aspects of myth, temporality and power, in this respect I will largely draw on scholars such as Johannes Fabian, Roland Barthes, Hayden White and Michel Foucault and others whose relevance and significance will be demonstrated in specific sections of the study. Of particular significance is what the study views as the collusion, tension and

entanglement of power, myth and temporality in the African dictator text. Fabian (2002:1)'s view that othering is a "temporal", "historical" and "political" act provides a valuable tool in unpacking some of the implications of the dictator text's representation of culture, identity, historiography and power. Worth examining will be Fabian's argument that time can be used "oppressively". The dictator text implicitly places the African in a completely different time-frame.Through the figure of the African dictator African writers create an African who fits the stereotypical images of a man-child failing to outgrow his "primitive" and "savage" ways. Fabian links choice of words and the ensuing images to what he calls "temporal distancing" and contends that words such as "primitive" or "savagery" are a "temporal concept". So, if the dictator text is implicated in the process of othering, it does so through its treatment of time which creates images of raw, brutal rulers who are out of step with modernity. The study also examines how dictators attempt to manipulate history or time for their own ends.

One of the striking features of the dictator text is the aspect of myths. Roland Barthes (1973) is particularly informative in this respect and goes to great length to outline his theory of myth in his famous text *Mythologies* (1973). In his analysis of myths, Barthes asserts that myths are a form of language designed to communicate a message. In addition, Barthes gives myths a temporal dimension by linking them to history when he says they can "only have a historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history" (1973: 110). Myths are also accorded the role of transforming and naturalising history: "myth has the task of giving a historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal" (142). More importantly, according to Barthes, "myth aims at causing an immediate impression – it does not matter if one is later allowed to see through the myth, its action is assumed to be stronger than the rational explanations which may later belie it" (130). In other words, this is why dictators tend to be spell-binding story-tellers. Their stories mesmerise all those who listen to them. The tale highlights adulation and love but is also intended to demonstrate the dictator's power by instilling and spreading fear. Clearly then, the dictator plays an active role in the construction and dissemination of some of the myths about himself and his power. Laurence Coupe (1997: 4) links literature and myths and says "literary works may be regarded as 'mythopoeic', tending to create or recreate certain narratives which human beings take to be crucial to their understanding of their world". What is highlighted here is the role that myths play in interpreting reality (Dillistone, 1966; Doty, 1986).

Hayden White's (1987) analysis of the relationship between myths, fiction and history also provides an informative tool in reading the African dictator text. White contends that history is nothing but a myth and that real life, which sometimes historiography purports to capture, can never be fully represented. To White, myths, story-telling and history serve the same function. Significantly, White centralises the aspect of form or story type to show its impact or effect. It is the form or story type that "endows" history or real events with meaning (44). The implication of this is that stories, myths or history are never neutral, which becomes pertinent in reading the dictator text as it is a genre also suffused with story-telling, myths and history.

In interrogating the issue of power which in the African dictator text is inter-twined with myths and temporality, Michel Foucault (1982)'s conception of power can offer a useful guiding tool. Foucault characterises his conception in terms of power relations which he says are brought to light by resistance. He adds that power is everywhere and that it circulates. More importantly Foucault argues that power cannot be understood outside the concept of freedom as "Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free" and the "relationship between power and freedom's refusal to submit cannot, therefore, be separated" (790). What is of significance to the study is the paradox of the simultaneous bureaucratisation, anonymisation and personalisation of power.

1.5 Chapter Breakdown

The function of this introductory chapter has been to lay the study's foundation by contextualising the African dictator text. It examined some of the important concepts associated with the dictator text and the study such as power, myths, temporality and extroversion. In this section the study's aim and justification are spelt out. The thesis is structured in a format that devotes a whole chapter to a text by a particular author. A total of six texts by six different authors from six different countries are examined in this study.

Chapter 2 focuses on the study's only play, *A Play of Giants* by Wole Soyinka. In this chapter I discuss the effect of satire in exposing, censuring and subverting dictatorship. Through the thinly disguised characters that are plucked from the pages of history, I also examine the contentious relationship between fiction and history.

In *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and Other Stories* by Hama Tuma which I analyse in Chapter 3 I examine how the writer also deploys devastating satire to critique the performance of power in Ethiopia during the reign of Colonel Mengistu. Because of the study's focus on dictatorship, the chapter restricts itself to the first section of the anthology which is made up of stories which really concern themselves with satirising the Mengistu dictatorship. The chapter focuses on the interaction between myth and reality while also examining the power relations between the dictator and his subjects.

Chapter 4 looks at *Life and a Half* by Sony Labou Tansi and the unusual but ground-breaking representation of the continent's woes at the centre of which is the African dictator. It discusses what I consider as the writer's experimentation with form. So the chapter examines how Tansi pushes and transgresses boundaries. I also discuss the intended and unintended consequences of Tansi's experimental approach.

Ahmadou Kourouma's critique of dictatorship in *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* is the focus of Chapter 5. This chapter is related to the preceding one in that to a large extent the discussion is also linked to the aspect of literary innovation and experimentation. The chapter's focus is on the notion of the African hero and the myths surrounding this figure. It also discusses Kourouma's adoption of the *donsomana* which is the template around which the novel is structured.

In Chapter 6 the focus is also on experimentation and innovation in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*. Both writer and character are put under the spotlight as they come across as victims of the winds of change stemming from the resolution of the Cold War. The Chapter discusses the crisis of representation that Ngugi faces as a result of his long stay in exile and the collapse of a political vision.

Chapter 7 focuses on a fairly fresh voice on the literary scene. This is NoViolet Bulawayo and her acclaimed novel *We Need New Names* which offers new perspectives on the Zimbabwean post-independence crises. This text is selected largely because of how it directly and indirectly links the crises to post-independence dictatorship at the centre of which is Robert Mugabe. The Chapter largely discusses the intended and unintended consequences of Bulawayo's representation of postcolonial dystopia and the construction and subversion of national myths.

Chapter 8 which is the conclusion sums up the study. More importantly, this final chapter asks questions about the future and relevance of the dictator text. It underlines this by pointing out how it is a vehicle for representation that is being embraced and adopted by fresh voices on the literary scene.

Chapter 2

Sculpting the Figure of the African Dictator in Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*

2.1 Introduction

Images of the African dictator and his power in African literature are largely a product of the entanglement of myth and history. In *A Play of Giants* (1984) Wole Soyinka creates powerful images of post-independence Africa. This chapter examines and problematizes Wole Soyinka's representation of the figure of the African dictator in *A Play of Giants*, interrogating the writer's construction of images of the African dictator. In the play, Soyinka creates four captivating characters whose representation of the African postcolonial world seems to be a confirmation of what has rightly or wrongly come to characterise everything that has gone wrong in post-independence Africa. The main argument of the chapter is that Soyinka's construction of the images of the African dictator are intended to chide, ridicule and indict the performance of power in post-independence Africa, but at the same time this implicates the writer in the creation, dissemination and reinforcement of myths and stereotypes, not only about the African dictator, but Africans in general.

This study raises questions surrounding the strategies employed by the author in sculpting what I regard as problematic images. More interestingly, the chapter also examines the extent to which the historical or the real life dictators and the literary ones consciously and unconsciously engage in myth-making. It will also attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of the genre (drama) adopted by Soyinka in representing postcolonial dystopia. These questions are explored within the context of power and myth largely drawing on some of Foucault's notions of power, Barthes' conception of myth and notions of the 'other'.

Akinwade Oluwole "Wole" Babatunde Soyinka (1934-) who is one of Africa's foremost writers, is well-known as a political commentator and activist, a writer who "has constantly and courageously championed the fight against oppression and injustice in whatever form" (Ebewo, 2002: 13). Soyinka has been a prolific playwright and it is primarily in this respect that he has made his mark, the culmination of which was the Nobel Prize for Literature that he was awarded in 1986. A hallmark of his works has been his unflinching engagement with burning social issues but without compromising his creative imagination and independence

by not leading himself into the kind of ideological cul de sac that some radical African writers found themselves in after the resolution of the Cold War.[1] Like most writers of his generation, Soyinka's writing has not shied away from expressing his disgust with what Neil Lazarus (1993: 11) has called "the general collapse of hopes and dreams" that "had attended the attainment of independence".

A Play of Giants opens when four African dictators, Benefacio Gunema, Emperor Kasco, Field-Marshal Kamini and General Barra Tuboum are gathered in the Bugaran Embassy in New York where a sculptor is busy making life-size statues of the tyrants. Soyinka makes it clear in his preface that his characters represent actual or real-life African dictators whose identities he makes no serious effort to conceal. The thinly disguised characters are the life president of Equatorial Guinea Macias Nguema (Gunema), Emperor Jean-Baptiste Bokassa (Emperor Kasco) of the Central African Republic, Field-Marshal El-Hadji Idi Amin (Kamini) of Uganda (Bugara) and President Mobutu Sese Seko (General Barra Tuboum) of Zaire. More importantly, these figures are supposed to be representatives of all the dictators or "monsters" of Africa as the playwright says "it is obvious that no single play should even attempt to contain such a gallery of supermen" (*A Play of Giants* p3).

Kamini, who is the central character, wants their statues to be mounted at a most visible position in the United Nations Headquarters building. The thinly disguised identities of Soyinka's characters are part of a naming process that the study examines in detail in the fifth section of this chapter. While posing for the sculptor the dictators exchange notes revealing in the process each dictator's conception of power and related issues. Each one consciously and unconsciously brings out into the open his own idiosyncratic and ludicrous persona as they compete to outdo each other in self-praise and graphic exposes of their megalomania. Towards the end, Kamini, who has lost a number of officials through desertion and elimination, is deposed through a military coup which is carried out in his absence.

1. Some writers had strongly believed in socialist revolutions in Africa but the resolution of the Cold War left them in a kind of ideological and existential crisis. If not, their work reflected some kind of crisis of representation as they sought to re-align their work with the new reality which in essence was the triumph of capitalism or the failure of socialism. In my view, this kind of crisis of representation is evident in some of Ngugi wa Thiongo's works. Works such as *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976), *Devil on the Cross* (1980), *I Will Marry When I Want* (1980) and *Matigari* (1987) carry a strong message of revolution but in *Wizard of the Crow* (2007) there is an absence of the previous commitment to such a cause.

Through the four representative figures Soyinka satirises the phenomenon of dictatorship on the African continent. He is able to sculpt dictator figures who become symbolic of some of the notions of identity and power on the continent. Although Soyinka now belongs to the older or foundational generation of African writers, the issues that he interrogates in the play in relation to the continent's postcolonial condition remain relevant even well after the resolution of the Cold War, which directly and indirectly had spawned and nurtured some of the dictators across the continent. This point is borne out by recent history in countries such as Zimbabwe, South Sudan, Sudan, Egypt, Angola and others where leadership contests and issues of governance in general have been a messy and to some extent, a bloody enterprise.

Although there have been numerous studies on Soyinka over the years, surprisingly, there has been little critical attention on *A Play of Giants,* especially in terms of the impact of the playwright's construction of images of the African dictator. This is borne out by a cross-section of some of the pertinent scholarship on Soyinka. It is mainly for this reason that *A Play of Giants* is part of the study. Over the years, a persistent feature of some of the scholarship on Soyinka has been its preoccupation with what has been seen as the esoteric nature of his language. One of the earliest critics of Soyinka in this respect was Bernth Lindfors (1976) who attacked the playwright for what he called "near total blackout of illumination", "obscure riddles", "semantic anarchy" and a host of other linguistic ills. To Lindfors, as "poet, playwright and prose writer, he too often offers nothing but scrambled messages, subtle verbal passages that scholars must labour to decode" (199). This was also echoed by Anthony Graham-Smith (1974: 117).[2] This is an issue that is also picked up around the same time by Stanley Macebuh (1975: 80) who described Soyinka's language as "difficult, harsh, sometimes tortured; his syntax is often archaic, his verbal structures sometimes impenetrable". This, however, appears not to be the case with *A Play of Giants* as the simple plot and accessible language paint images that make a lasting impression, whether reading the play or watching its performance.

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2. In his article entitled 'Wole Soyinka, When are you coming home?' Lindfors critiques the playwright's use of language arguing that he is basically unintelligible and is therefore "whispering his words to the wind" (p210). See also Anthony Graham-Smith (1974: 117) who calls Soyinka a "sophisticated" literary dramatist whose "sophistication is almost a limitation".

As mentioned earlier, although there are numerous studies on Soyinka's works including on his "power plays", scholarship on *A Play of Giants* is still limited. Diedre Badejo (1988) examines *A Dance of the Forests* (1965), *Opera Wonyosi* (1981) and *A Play of Giants* (1984) focusing on Soyinka's intention to unmask and demystify mortal gods. Badejo touches on Soyinka's characterisation, but does not really delve deep into the playwright's strategies in constructing images. More importantly, there is silence on some of the issues that this study is interested in such as the myths surrounding dictators and their entanglement with history and the performance of power. Of his "power plays" or the plays that explicitly deal with the theme of dictatorship, such as *Opera Wonyosi*, *Kongi's Harvest* (1965) and *A Play of Giants*, it is *Kongi's Harvest* which seems to have received more critical attention than the others. In Josef Gugler's view, "*Kongi's Harvest* is the most distinguished aesthetically" (1997: 33). He also adds that it is "the most instructive of Soyinka's plays in its analysis of the degeneration of personal rule" (34). Gugler is dismissive of a play such as *A Play of Giants*, aesthetically, that is. Clearly, this calls for more attention on *A Play of Giants* to put to test some of the claims. Gugler had earlier shown his interest in Soyinka's power plays observing that "Soyinka's plays detail repression: the informants; prison, detention, and exile; torture and murder" (1988: 173). However, there has been very little attention paid to Soyinka's construction of the dictator figure, especially how the images of these figures bring into focus issues of identity, race, history and power on the African continent. *A Play of Giants* clearly opens up avenues for interrogation of such issues. Olusegun Adekoya (2006: 13) makes an analysis of Soyinka's characters in *A Play of Giants* and links African dictators to some of the clichés about Africans: "The African dictators contribute immensely to the invention of the image of black Africa as an underdeveloped land of modern day cannibals and savages". This is an argument that requires to be pursued as there is little critical attention in this respect. Soyinka's play presents the African dictator and the African political landscape as anachronistic. This is a point which the playwright seems to allude to in his preface to the play where he describes dictators as "monsters" who are in "defiance of place, time and pundits" (3). Lemuel Johnson (1986: 357) also links the dictator to time and place by focusing on "elementary brutality that is calculatingly primitive (primal) and etiologically instructive".

2.2 The Question of Genre

Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* is a mind etching representation of African dictatorship due to the accessibility of its language through which it brings to life real-life figures and the issues surrounding them. This is so largely because of the writer's choice of genre - satirical drama. According to Patrick Ebewo (2002: 3) some of the operational tools or techniques of satire are irony, parody, burlesque, lampoon, invective, mockery, sarcasm and others. Some of these are seen at play in Soyinka's text. Each of the four leading characters in the play is an object of the devices. So ultimately, the devices are used to construct and at the same time destroy characters as they easily create images that evoke laughter whether the play is being read or performed. The accessibility of the satire is also enhanced by the thin disguise that the playwright adopts for his characters. This is a point also noted by Odun Balogun (1988: 514) in respect of Soyinka's plays in general: "The characters ridiculed are very thinly disguised, and they invariably reveal the most obnoxious habits and excesses of African political leaders". So Gunema, Kasco, Kamini and Tuboum are intended to be easily recognisable in order for the satire to come through.

However, one has to acknowledge the challenges that Soyinka faces by opting for the dramatic form. Stylan (1981) highlights some of the limitations of the dramatic form. While time and space are some of the essentials of dramatic illusion, they sometimes present enormous challenges to the playwright. Unlike the novelist who can rely on extended expositions, the playwright has very little time and space to work on as the characters and events literally remain fixed in one place. This means, as Stylan (1981: 1) argues, that drama is "always trying to find ways of breaking out of the temporal and spatial restrictions of its medium". This is a point also noted by Benjamin Bennet (1990: 17):

> A certain amount of time is required for performance; but the sharp formal boundedness of the scene, its containment between a beginning and an end beyond which it simply does not exist, fails to satisfy our notion of time as an unending and uninterruptible flow.

Bennett adds that "The scene, or the play as a whole, has the character of an interlude, a discrete segment of existence devoted to a ritual or vision or evoked reality that is recognised as different from the world in which we live the rest of our lives" (17). The playwright has to rely on symbolism so that the play becomes "a great deal more than a mirror reflecting life

and nature" (Stylan, 1981: 1) or put simply, a great deal more than what is seen and heard on the stage. In this way drama is not different from a painting on canvas as they both create "an illusion of unrestricted time" (p17). So, in this manner, space and time in *A Play of Giants* also become symbolic or representative of grander ideas or temporal frames. While the characters are easily recognisable and can be attached to specific geographical locations and time in history, at the same what they represent defies the restrictions of time and space. Gunema, Kasco, Kamini and Tuboum become symbols of the performance of power in the wider African postcolonial world.

A Play of Giants is a critique of African dictatorship. It is a piece of work in which Soyinka does not pull any punches. Satirical drama allows the playwright the latitude, directness, openness and freedom to place "the real-life actors who have served as models" for the play at the receiving end of his satire. It appears through thinly disguised characters, Soyinka is able to be direct and symbolic at the same time. However, one of the major challenges of his choice of genre is that "symbolism that is too specific may destroy one of its great virtues, its power to extend itself and multiply its references" (Stylan, 1981: 2). Soyinka tries to solve this through the use of some of the techniques of satire which inflate or exaggerate characters and their actions which, unfortunately, is a process which at the same time makes the characters unrealistic. This means then that the playwright has to a large extent rely on what Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1817) called suspension of disbelief.[3] Although the characters are exaggerated, the reader believes and accepts their abnormal presentation signalling that they are aware of the writer's intention.

This section also examines the role the choice of genre plays in Soyinka's construction of the dictator figure and its effectiveness in conveying authorial intentions. At this point it is

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3. According to Gary Martin, suspension of disbelief is "an essential element when experiencing any drama or fiction. We may know very well that we are watching an actor or looking at marks on paper but we wilfully accept them as real in order to fully experience what the artist is trying to convey". www. phrases.org.uk/meanings

important to acknowledge that Soyinka never hides his intention which is to ridicule and censure African leadership. The failures of African leadership and independence have been a subject of numerous critiques, both fictional and otherwise. It is this undisputed still-birth of the African state that has found expression in works by writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ayi Kwei Armah, Okey Ndibe and numerous others.

By choosing the dramatic form (*A Play of Giants*) Soyinka goes beyond the usual prose fictional narrative dealing with the aforementioned issues epitomised by the post-independence dystopian novel. As has been noted earlier on, through drama Soyinka attempts to bring history alive, a feat which historians seem to fail to achieve. Historians are to a large extent tied down by trying to stick to "factual details" or "objective facts" which they may not easily come by. This no doubt has a bearing on the topicality and integrity of historical narratives. On the other hand, a playwright can seize the moment to interrogate a topical issue with the latitude to exercise his imagination without the historian's constraints. There is little doubt that to a large extent the initial impact of Soyinka's play rested on the topicality of the deeds or misdeeds of actual dictator figures. In my view, the success of Soyinka's play rests on its enduring topicality in terms of the performance of power on the African continent. Caroline Nwanko (1987: 318) describes Soyinka as a successful socio-political critic largely because of his choice of subject matter and the fact that his characters are based on recognised personalities.

Soyinka's choice of genre (drama) clearly betrays his authorial intention. Through Gunema, Kasco, Kamini and Tuboum Soyinka makes African leaders subjects of ridicule. Thus, *A Play of Giants* should be viewed within the realm of social drama which, says Robert Brustein (1965: 23), is drama that "puts contemporary society on the stage" to subject it to "whipping and scourging". I therefore argue that in this respect Soyinka's play also has echoes of the playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) who regarded theatre as a courtroom and the "author as judge, jury, and prosecuting attorney". Like Brecht, Soyinka is (in Brunstein's words) able to shape opinions, manipulate action, select events, heighten, distort and exaggerate (259). Through drama's ability to bring events and characters back to life, Soyinka is able to not only excoriate the figure of the dictator, but to also demystify the tyrant's power (Balogun, 1988). Soyinka does not hide his disdain for all those who are like the four dictators. Satirical drama allows Soyinka to achieve this.

As a satirical play, *A Play of Giants* combines or juxtaposes both the serious and the comic, with either used to heighten the other at every step. The comic aspect comes out through Soyinka's cast of flat, buffoon-like characters whose actions result in a tragic situation in terms of the ensuing chaotic and bloody postcolonial conditions. Used by Soyinka in the construction of his characters, these are tools with which Soyinka responds to the "outrageous politics" encapsulated by dictatorship with "hilarious" but "bloody satire" (Beckman and Adeoti, 2006: 3). Thus, says Adekoya (2006: 23), through satire "Soyinka downgrades and ridicules the temporal powers that have inflated themselves to monstrous proportions". Dictators deploy myths and other signs to construct a façade of omnipotence, and one of the major effects of this action is that the dictator is elevated to a demi-god and very often the ordinary man comes to look at this image as natural and "refuses to have his belief system destabilised" (Kunderi, 2004). However, satire confronts, challenges and erodes the dictator's attempts at self-mythification since in "the hands of the playwright, space and time become symbolic rather than sacred" (Kunderi, 2004: 141). In this way Soyinka's play becomes a deliberate intervention which is part of a "demythification process" that strips the dictators naked by publicly exposing their flaws before the eyes of the common man (ibid, p160). Thus, Soyinka's play debunks the myths surrounding the post-colonial dictator.

Although the impact of dramatic satire in challenging dictatorship and some of the myths surrounding it has been noted, it is also important to point out what appear to be the unintended consequences of such an authorial approach. The seriousness of the issues that Soyinka deals with in the play is beyond doubt and this is heightened by the interplay between history and fiction in the play. In this case, history refers to documented "official" and "semi-official" narratives about political activities or events. At the same time the study contends in this section that this feature of the play is also part of its Achilles heel as an over-reliance on history or actual real-life events and personalities inevitably subjects the play to a kind of fact-check to verify or confirm what is on display. If the play or some of its parts fail to pass the fact-check test, its veracity and credibility become tenuous, especially to those with emotional attachments to some of the actual historical events. This is a point that is highlighted by Abasi Kiyimba (1998) in his critique of literature or material on the Ugandan dictator, Idi Amin. By raising this issue Kiyimba forces one to interrogate what this study sees as some kind of mutual erosion of faith. One wonders then whether when fiction purportedly

dealing with actual historical events or when fiction and history are consciously or unconsciously blended, and doubt, disbelief and even reproach are elicited, the whole literary project could lose some of its seriousness. Clearly, what Kiyimba takes issue with is what he views as deliberate distortions of Ugandan history. Does this mean then that suspension of disbelief is not always guaranteed? In other words, imaginative representation of historical events sometimes stretches the notion of suspension of disbelief to the limit. At the same time however, one cannot rule out the possibility that doubt and disbelief can be productive if they lead to even more interrogation of what is being represented or the representation iself.

More importantly, the form chosen by Soyinka is one that largely relies on exaggeration, caricature, lampooning or farce to evoke humour and ultimately censure or remedy. However, by so doing the impression created by the work is that of trivialising what are otherwise very serious societal short-comings (tyranny, brutality, terror, kleptocracy). This is a point emphasised by Abiola Irele (2008: 12): "*A Play of Giants* probably required a more contemplative treatment of its political theme, free of the distraction of the comic, treatment such as we find in , for example, Pedro Calderon de la Barca's *The Mayor of Zalamea*". In other words, through the kind of form chosen by Soyinka, human suffering is reduced to a laughing matter. My argument here is that human tragedies like the Jewish holocaust, the Rwandan genocide in the 1990s, or the well-documented atrocities committed by Amin, Nguema, Mobutu, Bokassa and other dictators require a sombre approach. Therefore, the playwright's approach seems to work against an otherwise serious intention. As a consequence of Soyinka's choice of genre, what dominates the play is laughter as a response to the caricature, parody and buffoonery. So what is remembered long after the play's reading or performance is the idiosyncratic and humorous behaviour of the dictators, not the pain, maiming or elimination of the dictator's victims. At the same time, however, it has to be conceded that there is always a danger that circumscribing and prescribing the limits of representation always presents the possibility of turning some events into taboo or sacred subjects that will always be offlimits. Therefore, Soyinka's approach can also be viewed in this light. Above all, it is this same approach that rescues historical events from remaining as nothing but dour and uninspiring experiences. This could be the reason why Ezrow and Franzt (2011: xiv) concede that dictatorships are shrouded by myths and misperceptions.

2.3 "Power is everywhere"

In *A Play of Giants* Soyinka interrogates the performance of power in the postcolony through the creation of dictator figures that are naïve and blind to the reality of power. This section examines the dictator's attempts to 'own' power in the light of Michel Foucault's notion of the "omnipresence of power" (1978: 93) whose basic premise is that the ruler and the ruled exist in power relations which make it possible for both of them to wield and exert power and influence on each other. Foucault's views on power are quite an informative tool in understanding the dictator's thinking and behaviour.

As an effect of the satire employed, there is a paradox in that in constructing his dictator character, it is not just Soyinka who theorises power but even the dictators demonstrate an uncanny, though twisted attempt, to philosophise and theorise power and its performance. Using satire, Soyinka pits himself against Africa's dictators as he makes it known from the outset that he too wrestles with the notion of power:

> The puzzle which persists is why some, but not others, actually enjoy, indeed relish the condition of power, why certain individuals would rather preside over a necropolis than not preside at all, why, like the monkey in the folktale, some would rather hold onto the booty of power through the gourd's narrow neck than unclench the fist and save themselves. (p5)

Power is a concept that even Michel Foucault appears hesitant to define (Gallagher, 2008) to such an extent that he even asks: "Do we really need a theory of power?" (Foucault, 1982: 778). Nevertheless over time he goes to great length to explain how it functions. What is surprising and which also seems to go against the practical reality demonstrated in and "outside literature", by the dictator, is what Gallagher says is Foucault's refusal to accept that power can be wielded by or concentrated in an individual or a group of people (399). One of Foucault's most famous descriptions of power which this study as a whole finds extremely informative and useful in unpacking the dictator text is his notion of the capillary action of power which leads him to declare that "Power is everywhere" (1978:93). He conceptualises power in the form of a net or chain which means that power flows through every level of society. In Foucault's words this means that

> Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands,

> never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. (1980: 98)

Two points worth noting in relation to this are that power, according to Foucault, is never owned or concentrated in the hands of an individual, and that power does not flow from top to bottom. This obviously flies against the reality demonstrated by Soyinka's dictators who do not just philosophise about power, but go on to demonstrate that they have the very lives of other human beings in their hands. What makes sense in studying images of the dictator drawing on Foucault is the idea that power is everywhere. By saying that power is everywhere, Foucault's main argument seems to suggest that absolute power is impossible as even the ruled exert some influence on the ruled. His idea is that whatever is done by the ruler in the exercise of power is often a reaction to the existence of the ruled, their actions or the potential to act. However, Soyinka's dictators attempt to create an aura of their omnipresence and omnipotence. They do this by spinning myths about their power and also by ruthless demonstration of what they can do to perceived opponents. They set themselves apart from the rest of the people in that they begin to believe that they are different and that it is part of their destiny to rule. The significance of Foucault's notion is that it points to the inherent weaknesses and insecurities of the powerful.

While Soyinka's personal notes, which are the play's preface, are intended to reinforce its historical dimension, this particular dramatic form allows the audience to witness a crime (dictatorship) being committed. In this way drama becomes a space or site where some of the postcolony's worst excesses are confronted. Power is subjected to public scrutiny as the four dictators are ridiculed by being turned into 'philosophers' trying to present to the world their twisted conception of power. The satire is unmistakable as African dictators are depicted as barely literate individuals with strange grasp of the intricacies of power. First is Gunema representing the Equatorial Guinea:

> GUNEMA: Beyond *la responsabilidad*, beyond politics lies – ah – power. When politics has become routine, organised, we who are gifted naturally with leadership, after a while we cease to govern, to lead: we exist, I think in a rare space which is – power. (p12)

He then adds that, to demonstrate that he is the state, "Power is indivisible" (p14). To Kasco, "Power is we. We have ze power" (p20) and significantly, trying to display a higher level of conceptualisation than his fellow-dictators he muses:

> Power only comes with the death of politics. That is why I choose to become emperor. At the moment of my coronation, I signal to the world that I transcend the intrigues and mundaneness of politics. Now I inhabit only the pure realm of power. I fear, *mes amis*, all three of you have chosen to remain in the territory of politics? But – is it choice? Or are you trapped? (p31)

Kasco also sees himself as somebody "born with the imperial sign" on his head (p21). Literally, examined against Foucault's notion, he believes that power should not be allowed to be everywhere in the sense that it should not be shared, which he says is a mistake that was made by the French revolutionaries:

> But they all make mistake. Too many people drink this power. Every riff-raff from *poubelle* – sans-cullottes, Girondists, Jacobins, Montagnards, bakers, tavern-keepers, even forgers and convicts. Opportunists. That is what destroy Robespierre. Power was debased. Power is indivisible. (p14)

Kamini, however, believes that power should be unambivalent. He thinks Gunema and Kasco are too sentimental about power. To him power is about concrete action:

> Only one thing to do to subversive – khrr! (*A meaningful gesture across the throat*.) I used to have subversives too. The Western press like to call them guerrillas. I say, I have no guerrillas in my country. Only bandits. We call them *kondo*. I catch any *kondo*, I make him smell his mother's cunt. (p12)

He then adds unequivocally that "All subversives bad people. Mostly imperialist agents. Better you kill them first" (13). The image of the Bugara Central Bank chairman falling on his knees in terror shows the reality of the dictator's power. In other words, Kamini's words are not just empty threats to impress his fellow dictators. However, true to Foucault's assertion that "power is everywhere", the existence of opposition to the dictators' rule is a sign that ordinary people or the ruled still wield power that unsettles and disrupts attempts at total control. The evidence is that each one of the dictators reveals and describes how he has had to deal with threats to his power. Tuboum even drags three rebels to exhibit before the United Nations

General Assembly (p29). Gunema reveals that he too faces threats to his power in the form of traitors who "breed like maggots" (p26). To counter this, he describes how he instils fear in his people so that "they are very careful how they plot against Benefacio Gunema" (p27). Kasco's power is also not immune to threats even though he lulls himself and boasts that "these are tiny thorns that trouble the head of crown" (p26). It is through the central character Kamini's overthrow that the precariousness of the dictator's power emerges. This no doubt dovetails with Foucault's notion which he spells out in detail:

> a power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it really is to be a power relationship: that 'the other' (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognised and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up. (1982: 789)

Kamini and Tuboum further reveal and illustrate what can be achieved through the exercise of power. In other words, those who exercise it, do it because they have it in their hands, though this may be temporary. The important point to note though, one that is highlighted by the dictator text in general, is that personal power does not last, which, according to Soyinka, is an elementary lesson that dictators seem to fail to grasp. The two dictators reveal how their exercise of power crushes their subjects into submission and sometimes into non-existence. Kamini does not dwell on past exploits only, which is unlike his colleagues. The terror and ruthlessness which are part of his exercise of power are immediate, real and are literally brought alive by the play. The Bugaran ambassador to the United Nations is a character whose presence serves to illustrate the effects of the exercise of power. She is a woman who lives in constant mortal fear of her boss. Other Bugaran officials are so petrified by what might happen to them to such an extent that they abandon their posts and flee, that is, if the dreaded security officials (Task Force Specials) somehow slip up. That fear is an instrument associated with the dictator's power is graphically revealed when the ambassador, stuttering and quaking in her boots, informs Kamini that the foreign minister and his delegation have defected. Thus, such defections are not prompted by a desire by the

concerned officials to make some kind of political statement, but simply to save one's life.[4] That the terror exhibited by the dictator's officials like the ambassador is not unfounded at all is demonstrated by the brutal torture of the Chairman of the Bugaran National Bank whose only crime is that he tells the dictator the truth about the sorry state of the Bugaran economy. For telling the truth, the Chairman's brutal punishment involves having his head stuffed into a toilet at Kamini's orders: "Push his head deep inside. I say deep inside. Put your bloody foot on his neck and press it down. (*Sounds of gurgling*)" (18). The sculptor also becomes a victim of Kamini's brutality as a consequence of making the fatal error of revealing his true feelings about Kamini and the bizarre project he has been commissioned to carry out: "Strictly between you and me, this one should go to the chamber of horrors – that's where it belongs" (39).

When this gets to Kamini the sculptor is justifiably terrified:

> *He looks up in the direction of the toilet from which very strange sounds are coming. He walks back to the statues and completes the task of covering them up in plastic sheets. He exits slowly. He is hardly half out through the door when his body is forcefully propelled from outside. His muffled scream is followed by blows and sound of stamping boots. Further groans and blows, then the sound of a body being dragged along the ground. Upstairs the toilet is flushed.* (p45)

When we meet the sculptor again the results of his ordeal cannot be hidden: "*He is swathed in bandages from head to toe. Only his arms appear uninjured. His eyes barely peep out through a mummified face."* (51)

This indeed demonstrates the practical realities of power in a dictatorship. Power is not just a myth to the victims. The dictator is aware of the existence of opposition to his rule and to counter it, he tries to ensure that his power is felt everywhere. At the same time one sees a

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4. Soyinka again uses a thinly disguised actual historical event and character. In 1975 Princess Elizabeth Bagaya who had been Uganda's foreign minister fled to Kenya after a fall out with Idi Amin. See Curtis Abraham's "Elizabeth Bagaya – The Princess Who Stole The Heart Of The West". *New African Magazine*, 14 November 2011.

figure deluding itself by believing and swallowing its own myths of immortality. So, through the use of satire Soyinka creates dictators who are also naïve and blind to this reality of power, individuals who strive to 'own' power.

I argue that Soyinka constructs dictator figures whose techniques and strategies of control involve tapping into local history, myth and religion to create an aura of invincibility. Soyinka's dictator figures attempt to immortalise themselves by creating and shaping national narratives revolving around their person. Brute force, violence and fear become a halo around the dictators. What this study also finds fascinating and illuminating in reading *A Play of Giants* is Foucault's concept of panopticism. Foucault adopts this concept to examine how societies keep their citizens under control through a method of surveillance. According to Foucault (1977: 154) through panopticism

> there is no need for weapons, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each person feeling its weight will end up by interiorising to the point of observing himself; thus each person will exercise this surveillance over and against himself

More importantly, this strategy is designed to prevent people "from doing wrong and indeed taking away their very will to do wrong" (O'Farrell, 2005: 104). Applied to *A Play of Giants*, one gets images of dictator figures whose methods literally and figuratively transform their respective societies into giant panopticons where citizens constantly feel the gaze and power of the dictator. The dictator uses violence, brutality, barbarity and other methods to prolong his stay in power.[5]

5. While the dictator's resort to brute force to elicit compliance is undeniable, the role of surveillance or spying in complementing violence has been demonstrated in history. Here I have in mind how, for example, the East Germany intelligence service (Stasi) "was notorious for its surveillance of East Germany citizens, many of whom were pressed into spying on each other". See "Stasi files: German plan to transfer files sparks concern". https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49847900

2.4 Inside and outside literature

> *Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer.*
>
> PIERRE NORA

Any study of Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* would not really make much sense to those not familiar with African affairs if no reference is ever made to matters "outside literature" (to borrow from Tony Bennett, 1990). Soyinka's play heavily relies on the dictator figure's implicit and explicit reference to the world outside the literary text. *A Play of Giants* inevitably brings into focus the question of the relationship between history and literature, and this is primarily because of the issues at stake. First and foremost is that Soyinka does not hide that he is dealing with a segment of 'concrete' African history. The setting and characters do not just bear some resemblance to the 'real' world of African and indeed world politics. The characters are not just ordinary individuals created by the imagination but are what Soyinka himself calls in the preface, without hiding the intentional barb, the "supermen", "miracle men", "Giants, Dwarfs, Zombies, the Incredible Anthropophagi, the Original Genus Survivanticus", or "THE HEROES OF OUR TIME". Mahadeva Kunderi (2004), sees the four dictators created by Soyinka as apt specimen of their kind. In addition, the coincidence that the dictators are all in one place is presented as an occurrence that is not that unthinkable as they are at a place and at a time when such a thing is possible – a United Nations meeting at the organisation's headquarters in New York. Thus, the setting and personalities involved present us not just with an enactment or dramatization of 'history' but Soyinka's intention seems to be that of offering us the chance to witness 'history' unfolding before our eyes, and also, the chance for its re-interpretation and development of fresh insights.

According to Egil Tornqvist and Birgitta Steene (2007) most successful dramatists write their plays for two kinds of recipients: readers and spectators. At this point I want to argue that the political nature of the subject of *A Play of Giants* and the substantial background information supplied by the playwright in the preface entitled "ON THE HEROES OF OUR TIME: SOME PERSONAL NOTES" (p4-9) suggest that Soyinka had in mind 'readers' of the play more than audience in a theatre. This clearly gives a hint of the difficulties playwrights have to contend

with in trying to overcome the tension between drama and theatre as the latter is not always a faithful reflection of the playwright's mind.

Before presenting the dictators before the court of public opinion for ridicule and censure, Soyinka infuses the charge and atmosphere with what is supposed to be irrefutable evidence in the form of historical information that the playwright is in possession of or privy to:

> Byron Kawadwa to whom this play is dedicated is representative of the many thousands whose contribution to the nation of their birth was brutally cut short by Idi Amin. He led his theatre troupe to the Festival of Black and African Arts (FESTAC) in Nigeria, 1977. Shortly after his return to Kampala, he was arrested – for reasons which are ultimately unimportant, dragged from rehearsals by the notorious State Research Bureau and later found murdered. His successor, Dan Kintu, met a similar fate, together with playwright John Male. (p6)

Soyinka then goes on to supply the reader with more evidence to solidify the case against the dictators by heightening the aura of 'reality' or by eroding and diminishing any notions of fictionality about the events in the play. He recounts the story of a friend of his, Robert Serumaga, who was, "to start with, one of the most ardent supporters of Idi Amin" (p7). The playwright narrates how Robert Serumanga eventually discovered the truth about Amin. Soyinka even reproduces part of the conversation that he had with his Ugandan friend:

> 'At the start,' he said, 'you more or less knew what to do and what to avoid if you wanted to stay alive. You knew when to speak, when to shut up and what to say or not say. Now there are no longer any rules. What saved you yesterday turns out to be your death warrant today. I have no friends, no colleagues left. They are all dead, or escaped. But mostly dead.' (p8)

While there seems to be a general confluence of history and fiction in Soyinka's image(s) of the dictator, where the fiction appears to overshadow the events and characters outside the text through exaggeration and inflation of actions or words, this appears to be a deliberate strategy by the playwright which is largely satire-driven. The effect of this imaginative recreation or deliberate manipulation of historical events is evocation of humour and ultimately, belittling the character, mind and rule of the dictator. Creating a Gunema (Nguema) that attempts to present himself before the audience philosophising and wrestling with the meaning of power is juxtaposed with the reality on the ground. A number of non-fictional sources describe the Equatorial Guinea dictator Nguema (Gunema) as a man of very

little intelligence who failed public service exams several times and as a man who hated intellectuals and everything associated with them.[6] Clearly then, there is a mismatch between the words and the person; a mismatch in the sense that the words are uttered by a character without the mental faculties to philosophise, theorise or cobble together what he is saying. While the intention of the playwright is to caricature Nguema, one wonders at the same time how this kind of 'unsophisticated' man is able not only to grab power but to hold onto it for several years. In my view, Soyinka seems to link the tragedy of misrule to the lack of sophistication even though a number of examples from 'history' dispute this. In other words, there are a number of dictators from outside literary texts who had more than modest education. So one should not lose track of what satire is also intended to do, which is what the bizarre attempt by Gunema at philosophising does. In a fairly informative analysis of satire in Soyinka's plays, Patrick Ebewo (2002: 7) says the "major mandate before Soyinka is to use satire as a chief artistic weapon to expose the crudities and sufferings of a society". Nevertheless, this bizarre attempt by Gunema at philosophising pales into insignificance as the dictator demonstrates a practical understanding of power that goes beyond mere idealism or bookish intelligence of intellectuals like Professor Batey, an African-American who in his misplaced idealism believes that he is serving Africa by working as an advisor even to despicable African rulers:

> GUNEMA: My subjects, they are careful how they plot against Benefacio Gunema. When I look at each one of my ministers, or army officer, he knows I am looking into the heart, into the very soul of his village. He knows that I see through his head into the head of his wife, his children, his father and mother and grandfather and uncles and all his dependents, all his kith and kin, living or dead… yes, including the dead ones. It is he who must choose whether they lie in peace in their graves because, *la culpabilidad* the – er – guilt, it extends beyond the grave. (p27)

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6. In an article by Anthony Daniels in the British newspaper, *The Telegraph*, 29 August 2004, Macias Nguema is described as a man who "was distinctly uneasy around educated people. Before long, he had killed everyone who wore spectacles, a sure sign, in his peculiar opinion, of superior educational accomplishment, and it was dangerous for any Guinean to own so much as a page of printed matter". While newspaper accounts are sometimes sensationalistic, non-journalistic sources such as Decalo (1989) have also documented some of Nguema's excesses.

At the same time one should hasten to point out how juxtaposing an 'educated' character such as Professor Batey and 'uneducated' dictators demonstrates how Soyinka's satire takes pot-shots at intellectuals who are represented by Batey for failing to read the practicalities of power. Gunema does not romanticise power and its effects here. His words are those of a man who has grown to understand the practical realities of power. The words are delivered in a calm but unsettling way, demonstrating that a dictator is a dictator because of the power that he has at his disposal and how he can exercise it with devastating effects.

While opposition to a dictator's rule or his eventual overthrow, as happens to Amin, Nguema, Bokassa, Mobutu and other dictators is evidence that power is slippery and does not last and, therefore cannot be 'owned', to some extent the dictator does 'own' power in the sense that the reality of its concentration in his hands is never doubted by the victims. If one reads the body of the dictator, it fuses or brings together the spatial and temporal dimensions of Africa through the creation of particular images. The present events in *A Play of Giants* extract the dictators from their space (Africa) and place them in a new space (New York). In blunt terms, through the setting of the play's events the dictators are hewn from their space and time into a different time-space as it were. This, in my view, heightens their anachronistic nature thereby evoking images of backwardness as the dictators literally and metaphorically place themselves on the world stage by their presence at the United Nations. So, the dictators' travel to New York creates the impression of a kind of time-travel dragging the dictators from a savage kind of present-present to another present-present in which they fail to fit in as demonstrated by the bizarre activities at the embassy such as the torture of the governor of the national bank of Bugara or the plan to mount the dictators' statues at the United Nations. If the dictators are literally and figuratively representatives of their respective African countries, can one be faulted for viewing African countries in the same manner?

The import of this time-place conflict in relation to Soyinka's play comes to the fore right from the start as the playwright makes it known that he is dealing with actual places and actual historical figures and events. This is evident again in his introductory "personal notes" to the play (p3-9) where he hammers home this point of 'reality', or 'actual historical events':

> No serious effort is made to hide the identities of the real-life actors who have served as models for A Play of Giants. They are none other than: President for Life Macias Nguema (late)

> of Equatorial Guinea; Emperor for Life (ex) Jean-Baptiste Bokassa of the Central African Republic; Life President Mobutu Sese Seko etc.' of Congo Kinshasa (just hanging on); and – the HERO OF HEROES in the person of Life President (ex) the Field- Marshal El-Haji Dr Idi Amin of Uganda. (p3)

The images of the African dictator in *A Play of Giants* are bound to a particular space and time. The names and places are no longer just names, they assume particular values that then condemn particular literary and actual space and time to another age altogether.

This re-creation of history to build an atmosphere of reality is also heightened by the visibility of or reference to seemingly actual or concrete space in the form of well-known landmarks such as the United Nations headquarters in New York or Madame Tussaud's eponymous wax museum. Space and time are further brought together as the play mentions several famous or infamous historical figures such as Papa Doc Duvalier, the Haitian dictator, "Papa de Gaulle, the Saviour of modern France", Robespierre, Napoleon Bonaparte and others. This heightens the play's illusion of 'reality' and contemporaneity. In my view, this strategy forces us to interrogate not just the phenomenon of dictatorship or performance of power on the African continent but also a number of issues, chief of which in this section of the study is the relationship between literature and history.

Soyinka clearly sculpts his dictator figures from history. At this point it is important to take note of some of the debates surrounding the relationship between literature and history or reality and fiction. Recalling Jameson's and Lukacs' views that "history functions as an interpretive device for deciphering the meaning of literary texts", Tony Bennett (1990: 41) takes issue with what he sees as the privileging of history since it is regarded as "both literature's source and ultimate referent" (42). More importantly, Bennett argues that there is no contradiction between history and literature: "I shall suggest that there can be no general solution to the question of the relations between literature and history because there is no problem to be addressed" (1990: 45). Nevertheless, one notices Bennett's allusion to the existence of unresolved problems surrounding the relationship between the two. While examining the African novel, Lewis Nkosi (1981: 32) says literature dramatizes history and, as a result, it is history that is the "hero" of the African novel. Like Nkosi, Green (1997: 15) also notes that there is a perception that there exists a line or demarcation between history and

fiction, and, significantly, he says the "general neglect or dismissal of historical fiction by historians, no less than the often rather cavalier deployment of historical material in fiction, suggests a clear demarcation between these two forms of discourse". However, Green hastens to point out that the line between history and fiction "has not only been challenged from a variety of perspectives by both literary theorists and historiographers, but, perhaps more fundamentally, is demonstrably a shifting one". At the same time, White (1978) sees similarities between history and literature, and, argues that the demarcation between the two is an "older distinction" which he says "must give place to the recognition that we can only know the actual by contrasting it with or likening it to the imaginable" (1978: 98). He then goes on to stress the similarities between the two:

> In point of fact, history – the real world as it evolves in time – is made sense of in the same way that the poet or novelist tries to make sense of it, i.e, by endowing what originally appears to be problematical and mysterious with the aspect of a recognisable, because it is a familiar, form. It does not matter whether the world is conceived to be real or only imagined; the matter of making sense of it is the same.

The issues raised by Bennet, Nkosi, Green and White call for a more nuanced reading of *A Play of Giants.* I therefore argue that the play is more about memory than history. This is in line with Pierre Nora's view that history is the "reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer", while memory is a "bond tying us to the eternal present" and is about installing remembrance. In this sense, Soyinka's play does more than history by serving as some form of monument to huge events, thereby tying or linking the living to the past by just sheer presence.

Although the foregoing highlights that Soyinka constructs his "dictators" by resorting to the strategy of quarrying from history, it is also pertinent to examine some of the reasons why he zeroes in on these four particular figures from history: Idi Amin, Jean-Baptiste Bokassa, Mobutu Sese Seko and Macias Nguema. It appears there is no dearth of material for artists to weave their stories and sculpt the dictator figures from. Kiyimba (1998: 124), for example, notes that there have been many full-length fictional and non-fictional works about "Amin the man and Amin the ruler". It is the nature of this literature that still calls for interrogation because of the enduring appeal and implications on African historiography and perceptions about African literature in general. More significantly, there should be an attempt at close

analysis of Soyinka's figures to get a better idea of the extent to which he relies on history and also the extent to which the play provides opportunity for interrogation of African post-coloniality.

Through the conversation that goes on between the dictators one is allowed a peek, not only into their psyche, but some of the nitty-gritties of the performance of power in the post-colony. Soyinka transforms the Bugaran Embassy in New York into a confessional and court of public of opinion where he allows the audience the chance to hear and witness a process that involves self-confession and self-incrimination. The self-incrimination is embedded within and also becomes the effect of the overall device of satire that the playwright deploys throughout the play. In other words, the self-confession and self-incrimination paints the dictators as naïve and ignorant with no inkling of the possibility of justice catching up with them. They never dream that their world will one day come tumbling down. This belief in their own immortality and that of their world is also shown by the wanton violence or disregard for human life.

Kamini, Ngunema, Tuboum and Kasco are all intended to be recognised. Soyinka uses the well-documented idiosyncratic character(s) of Amin, Nguema, Mobutu and Bokassa to recover and reconstruct a segment of African history. From appearance to actions and words Kamini and his fellow dictators become much more than characters on a page as they are made to come back to life to commit their crimes again before witnesses who are represented by the play's readers and viewers.

Soyinka's Tuboum, like the other three dictators is a parodic pastiche. In other words he is a composite figure reflective of the other dictators and their vices. Soyinka puts together his figures from bits and pieces of some known dictators. What he chooses is intended to advance his satirical intention. History and creative imagination produce a vile but plausible image of a dictator:

> He is dressed in a striped animal skin 'Mao' outfit with matching fez-style hat. He sports an ornately carved ebony walking stick. At his waist is strapped an ivory-handled side-arm stuck in a holster which is also made of zebra skin. (P28)

All this brings into focus the Western media's fascination with the "exotic", a fascination which Mobutu sought to satisfy through his *authenticite* creed. A cursory glance at some of the obituaries written feverishly following Mobutu Sese Seko's demise in 1997 demonstrates how Soyinka's dictator figure has strong resemblance with the picture painted by the obituaries. Writing in the United Kingdom's *Independent* newspaper (1997), Mary Anne Fitzgerald recalls the "trademark leopard skin", which the *Los Angeles Times* writers John Daniszewski and Ann M. Simmons also mention in their article (1997): " He strode the African and world stages in a trademark leopard skin hat and carrying an ebony, ivory-tipped walking stick". So in this case the Tuboum picture painted by Soyinka does not just trigger echoes of General Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire but it is the figure of Mobutu that the playwright brings to life in the play through Tuboum.

Through drama, history is recreated, re-lived, confronted and challenged. Power and history become intertwined, locked in a kind of game of thrones or life and death struggle in which there are clear human victims. The significance of *A Play of Giants*' historical dimension is that it is an attempt by the playwright at recovering a portion of the past. At the same time memory comes to the fore as the play becomes a tool against forgetting. Memory, history and fiction are witnessed in collusion against post-colonial performance of power.

2.5 Naming, Appearance and Myth-making in *A Play of Giants*

In his construction of the image of the dictator, Soyinka brings into focus the interplay between power and myth. There is lack of consensus in defining myth and this is a point noted by Ernst Cassirer (1946). Mircea Eliade (1963: 5) highlights that "myth is an extremely complex cultural reality which can be approached and interpreted from various and complementary view-points". In his analysis of myth, which will also be useful in this study, Henry Tudor (1972: 14) observes that "most theories are based on material drawn from very ancient or very primitive societies, that is, from societies with no significant political experience". At the same time, however, Tudor adds that some myths, especially political ones, are a "feature of advanced societies".

In this section of the study I examine what appears to be the congruency of myth and power. I argue that the construction of images of the dictator in African literature largely relies on a complex myth-making process involving naming, mysticism and story-telling. The first step in this process is that Soyinka creates thinly disguised characters who are by and large recognisable. So straight away the reader/ audience reads or views the play with some prior or assumed knowledge. Even where this is inadequate the audience may, out of curiosity, be prompted to search for more details about the playwright's four leading characters who are Benefacio Gunema, Emperor Kasco, Field-Marshal Kamini and General Barra Toboum, representing real-life dictators President Macias Nguema of Equatorial Guinea, Jean-Baptise Bokassa of the Central African Republic, President Idi Amin of Uganda and President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire respectively.

What is important to highlight here is the role played by the aspect of names or naming in the play. I examine it at authorial level and also from the historical point of view. The first matter to examine is why Soyinka uses pseudonyms (though thinly disguised) for his characters and why the 'historical' characters assume particular names and titles. In trying to answer these questions one is delving into the field of onomastics or the study of names. The focus of this study in this section is on what is sometimes called literary onomastics which is the study or analysis of how names are used in literary works (de Does et al 2017). According to Laszlo Toth (2014: 2), the term literary onomastics should be used for the "diverse" and "systematic examination of proper names in literary works" or the "relation between literature and proper names". There is general consensus that names play significant roles in literary texts. Following research carried out among the Kabre people in Togo, Atoma Batoma (2009: 217) observes that there are two ways in which one may explain the role of names in society. The first level is the semantic, denotative or literal meaning of a name. The second level explanation is considered as of paramount importance as it "is reached through a reconstruction of the motivations behind the name, that is, the reasons why a name has been bestowed on the bearer". Toth (2014: 7) identifies several roles of names in literary texts: identification, accentuation, perspectivizing, aestheticizing and mythicizing.

The implication of the foregoing then is that one should not ignore the naming in *Soyinka's A Play of Giants* as the playwright's "choice of name may serve to show, or may remind us of the author's feeling" about particular characters (Kyallo Wamitila, 1999: 40). The names of

Soyinka's four protagonists in the play should be read within the context of the overall genre chosen by the playwright – satirical drama. Soyinka thinly disguises the names to leave no doubt as to who the real referents are. More importantly, this process of thinly disguising the characters involves altering the names, which is a kind of mutilation or disparagement of the names. The playwright deforms, mangles or corrupts the names, which therefore becomes an important tool of the satire he deploys. As a result, this process of naming becomes the playwright's first step in ridiculing, lampooning or parodying the African dictator.

In working out Soyinka's naming intention one has to look also at the play's referents. These are alluded to throughout the play. In other words, one should not lose track of the fact that Soyinka, like the sculptor in his play, sculpts his dictator figures from the real life dictators who go to great lengths to create particular images of themselves, an exercise which is part and parcel of the exercise of power and the mythicization surrounding their person. The names and the accompanying accoutrement create an aura of secrecy, mystery and mysticism which are intended to pluck the dictator from the ordinary to another realm altogether. In most cases, dictators name and re-name themselves, have their names altered or have titles bestowed upon them. The naming process is also accompanied, in some cases, by a process of further re-invention involving aspects such as dress and other insignia, with the dictator setting the pace for all the citizens. The first case in point is Ngunema's referent, Francisco Macias Nguema, also known as Macias Nguema Biyogo Masie who, besides being called "President for Life, The Tireless and the Sole Miracle of Equatorial Guinea" (Liniger-Goumaz, 1989), is also nicknamed "*El Tigre*" (Decalo, 1989: 79). Associating himself with the tiger is no doubt intended to imbue the figure of the dictator with an aura of fear and dread. Like Nguema, Idi Amin of Uganda and Jean-Bedel Bokassa of the Central African Republic are also laden with names, titles and all sorts of paraphernalia designed to project a particular image to their people and those beyond. Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire deserves special mention because of the extent he goes in mythologizing. He was born Joseph-Désiré Mobutu but he re-named himself Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga as part of an ideology (*authenticite*) aimed at Africanising himself and the whole country. Besides re-naming himself, he re-names the country and orders his people to drop their non-African names replacing them with African ones. In line with this, Mobutu also altered his appearance in terms of dress as he began wearing a leopard skin hat and the abacost. He even ordered his

people to also discard Western-style suits and wear the abacost (Lamb, 1982). According to Filip De Boeck (1996: 80) *authenticite* "was partly structured around a whole reality of more deeply rooted ideological and symbolical references that drew from a pool of pre-colonial metaphors and images". De Boeck further argues that the traditional symbols and values such as

> royal paraphernalia (the leopard skin, the staff, the flywhisk, the throne, the praise name) or notions of kinship, lineage, family, power, authority and legitimacy, have been selectively manipulated and subverted in order to give form to the aims of the Mobutist regime, to legitimise the Guide's status as 'Father of the Nation', and to manifest his right to power as an ancestral right. (p80)

What should be highlighted here is that by so doing dictators like Mobutu place themselves at the centre of new national narratives that they create through self-mythicisation. This process, both in the text and outside, is also enhanced through association with wizardry or mysticism. While the study is hesitant to use the term 'witchcraft', there is little attempt to refrain from its use by many writers and critics. The problematic nature of the word or the practice of the phenomenon largely has to do with connotations in relation to Africa. The word 'witchcraft' evokes images of savagery and backwardness. It is important at this stage to point out that the role of sorcery, wizardry, the occult or mysticism in African statecraft has been acknowledged for a long time. According to Diane Ciekawy (1998: 120), knowledge and understanding of the worlds of this phenomenon and the magical harm associated with it are "embedded in local, regional, and national political processes". More importantly, Ciekawy regards the phenomenon as a discourse of power (121). This association of the practice with power is also noted by Tim Kelsall (2008: 7) who views it as a source of power in that "leaders based their claims to power on privileged access to a supernatural realm". The reality of witchcraft in African society, especially in relation to Mobutu, is amply illustrated in Thierry Michel and Yoka Lye Mudaba's documentary, *Mobutu, King of Zaire* (1999) when a Congolese mathematician recalls how ordinary people believed that they would literally drop dead if they criticised Mobutu. Ciekawy argues that all states (including those outside Africa) rely on images of magical power and secrecy and therefore there is nothing untoward, "novel" or "unique" about such manifestations in Africa. Ciekawy seems to have in mind here the propensity of states all over the world to control image-making and

the creation, directly and indirectly, of national narratives through processes or institutions such as education and the media. It is not therefore surprising that governments across the world employ pools of spin doctors, to carry out the task of managing information. Nevertheless, by linking all governments with this kind of behaviour, Ciekawy's intention seems to be that of sanitising her next argument that "what is distinctive about many political processes in Africa is the construction of the state through 'witchcraft technologies of power'" (123). In this case Ciekawy seems to remove African politics from the realm of rationality. Surprisingly, she agrees that the "concept of witchcraft is part of a larger discourse of othering Africa" (121) but her mere use of the term conjures up negative images of the continent. Soyinka's characters dabble in sorcery or at least believe in it in one way or another. More importantly, the dictators see it as a source of power or control as will be seen later in this section and other parts of the study. However, by associating sorcery with the performance of power in Africa, Soyinka is also guilty of perpetuating the stereo-typical images of the continent. Nevertheless, if one considers what the playwright's overall intention is, it becomes clear that associating the dictators with sorcery contributes to the play's satirical nature as it caricatures Amin, Nguema, Bokassa and Mobutu.

Tuboum's entry brings together what are supposed to be representatives of the whole continent. More importantly, Soyinka's play reveals how the four figures strive to retain and go beyond their current perches in relation to power. By design or as a result of resistance to his rule at home, Tuboum arrives late and is the last to join the group of "supermen" gathered at the Bugaran embassy. If his late arrival is by design, it is intended to signal and mark his difference by making his arrival the grand finale of the occasion. It appears each of the four dictators already has myths associated with his name, power and rule in general. In my view, these myths, in terms of their origins and functions constitute an important aspect of the phenomenon of dictatorship. If one draws on Barthes (1973: 109) that "myth is a system of communication", a "form" or a "type of speech", one begins to see a pattern or a method in the images painted by the stories surrounding the power of the dictator. Here one can only concur with Tudor (1972: 42) that "myths are coherent and meaningful". There is little doubt that Tuboum has not only choreographed, but he has also carefully cultivated the image he projects to his people and to the world.

The dictator's dress and overall appearance should be viewed within the context of image-making. The dictator deliberately seeks to project a particular image by setting himself apart and at the same time linking himself to fabricated African roots through dress and appearance. The playwright seizes the images and uses them against the dictator as part of his overall satirical technique. The media, represented by the Western press focus on the same aspects but project an exoticising view. So, image-making becomes part of the contestation in myth-making.

Though dress or outward appearance appears superficial, to the dictator it is part of image construction, mythicisation and reinforcement of power. In this respect the images are part of the narratives that surround the dictator, images and narratives that he constantly strives to keep under his control. In this way, the narratives and images (myths) become some of the cornerstones of the dictator's power. The narratives and images are intended to set the dictator apart from the ordinary people and other leaders, thus placing him on a pedestal. One notes that in referring to him, this seemingly superficial aspect of dress or physical appearance is what is noted by the media in their descriptions of General Mobutu of Zaire.[6] One has to hasten to point out here the fascination of the media both local and outside with the myths surrounding the dictator. The irony is that the myths have an effect that goes beyond their intended victims or boundaries. This then, in my view, is one of the first steps taken by the dictator in self-mythification and entrenchment of power. Part of this process of self-mythification, as has already been seen, in addition to the accoutrement made up of "striped animal skin 'Mao' out-fit", "fez-style hat", "ebony walking stick" and "zebra skin holster", is adoption of indigenous names and lofty titles.

Clearly, in the play Soyinka is not just trashing the dictator's name, appearance or actions, but it is the whole concept of *authenticite* that becomes the butt of his satire. So *authenticite* or Africanisation becomes part of the dictator's attempt to place himself at the centre of national narratives through this kind of myth-making that attributes even a nation's identity to him. However, satire reduces the myth-making to a joke.

Kamini and Kasco also go to great lengths in cultivating images of themselves that tell a particular story about their power. Indeed, the myths that are spun by the dictators are intended to communicate particular messages about their power. Kamini is thus described as

a huge man in "military dress uniform, its frontage covered in medals", while Kasco also has the same costume as Kamini, "down to the last medals" (p11).[7] Even Gunema, who lacks a military background and is described as just a "tall, thin man" (p11), tries to enhance his physical presence with "tails of immaculate cut" and "a red sash and blue rosette, plus a medal or two". (p11) In the process of transforming themselves beyond the level of ordinary humans, the dictators also bestow upon themselves grandiloquent titles. So Kamini addresses himself and demands to be addressed as "Life President Dr El Haji Kamini, DSO, VC, PhD many times over" (p58). Kasco bestows upon himself the title "Emperor", while beyond the pages Equatorial Guinea's Nguema (Gunema) called himself "President for Life and the Unique Miracle"[8]. What gives some of the names and titles significance is their attachment and allusion to names of historical figures of some immense proportions such as "Papa Doc Duvalier", "Papa de Gaulle, the saviour of modern France" (p20), Napoleon Bonaparte and Chaka (p22). In this case, history once again becomes a source of inspiration for the dictator's mythification. So names, titles, medals and uniforms are no longer just mere colourful accoutrement or appendages, but become part of the myth-making process that is entangled with the power game.

What heightens the process of mythification are the narratives spun about the dictators by the dictators themselves or by others like the media or ordinary citizens. The link between power and myth is concretised by Tuboum when he narrates to his fellow dictators how he has crushed a rebellion in his country. Embellishing his story with animal imagery, Tuboum

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7. Obituaries in various newspapers across the globe such as the *L.A. Times*, *New York Times* and the United Kingdom's *Independent* all mention the images that Mobutu Sese Seko had deliberately constructed and put across to the world.

8. An obituary by Brian Cathcart in the U.K's *Independent* on 5 November 1996 begins by recalling the physical image projected by Bokassa: "When Jean-Bedel Bokassa met Idi Amin for the first time, he wore his decorations. The jacket of his Field Marshal's uniform, especially lengthened and strengthened for the purpose, glittered from neck to knee with every medal he had ever received and every order he had ever dreamt to present himself". The article goes on to describe how Amin was so infuriated by being upstaged by Bokassa and therefore, "it was said, immediately set his jewellers to work on a comparable display for himself".

tells his colleagues after his victory against rebels that the name Tuboum "is a name that no one will ever forget. I led my forces in person, the famed striped leopards of Mbagi-Gwela" (p29). The leopard is supposed to be a symbol of or a warning about the perils of going against the leader. The dictator's leopard skin hat is obviously designed to be a constant reminder of this fact. To the Western journalist it is just one of the silly but fascinating items reminding the West of the strangeness of Africa and confirming that this is the "other" side of the world. Tuboum therefore shows conscious awareness of the role of the story or myth in reinforcing and perpetuating his power. This emerges when an almost incredulous Gunema questions the adoption of the emblem of the leopard by Tuboum and his foot soldiers. Tuboum's telling response is:

> A chimera perhaps. A phantom, a sphinx. But it is a fearsome part of our lore, a mystery creature which stalks at night. Nobody sees it and returns to tell the tale. Yet the tale is there, terrifying. My elite troops must be fearless and mysterious. Do they exist? They appear. They complete their task, they vanish – back to their camp at Lake Gwanza. They do not mix with the populace. In action they eat with their leader, the only being whose orders they understand. They know they are the elite, they bathe in the same ambiance of power, terribly invincible. They train in secret, far from the prying eyes of the common herd. Their secrecy is their power, like the hair of Samson; the eye of any stranger at the mysteries of their self-preparation is a corrosion of that power. They kill such strangers and eat them. (p29)

Tuboum clearly exaggerates the exploits of his forces but in doing so he demonstrates the ability to mythologise which overall is designed to reinforce his power. Tuboum's tale has such an impact on Kasco that he wonders at the exploits of his colleague's feared elite troops. The effect of the tale is beyond doubt, a point that Chinua Achebe also highlights in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987: 128) when the old man from Abazon tells the story of the fight between the tortoise and the leopard to emphasise that what will endure long after the battle and everything else is the story itself. In this case Tuboum's observation about the power of the story dove-tails with Tudor's sentiments that what marks the myth-maker's account or tale "as being myth is not the content, but its dramatic form and the fact that it serves as a practical argument" (1972: 138). Although mythification may suggest embellishment, exaggeration, distortion (Barthes, 1973), fantasy, fictionality, falsehood (Lucente, 1979), or illusion (Cassirer, 1946), the historical dimension of a text such as *A Play of Giants* will always intervene to back up and lend credence to the myth. While the other dictators project an aura

of brute and brusque brawn, Gunema who admits that he is not a man of physical action or a warrior like his "*amigos"* (p31), still manages to imbue himself and his power with frightening mysticism. He is a man who strives to literally "taste" power on his tongue and to "seize it *a la boca*, roll and roll it in the mouth and let it trickle inwards, like an infusion" (p31). So, to him, power is a mythical object but at the same time it is also attainable. So, Gunema's quest to find the taste of power transforms him into a mythical figure. The myths surrounding Gunema are even frightening to his "*amigos*", the fellow dictators and in a more extreme way, to his subjects, because of his reputation of or stories about practising witchcraft (voodoo). Without the gift of natural brawn or a military background, it seems it is largely myth-making that is the source of Gunema's power. To this end he relies on the mysteries surrounding witchcraft which he appropriates: "Is why I like voodoo. That is also secret power. *Misteoso, pero amigo, tambien –muy peligroso.* For those who are not chosen, very dangerous. Is not suddenly that it manifest itself…" (p14). Gunema goes on in his myth-making to associate himself with the stories of voodoo surrounding the Haitian dictator, Papa Doc Duvalier:

> GUNEMA: I think first you meant the strong man of Haiti. Now that was *un hombre*! The power! *Misterioso*. He was Franco of the Caribbean. But I don't think he make good *Secretario*, oh no!
>
> KAMINI: Why?
>
> GUNEMA: Voodoo. Too much voodoo. It give him too much power over all the delegates and make them zombie.
>
> KAMINI: Even you my brother? Oh you are making a joke. Everybody knows you are a man of voodoo yourself.
>
> GUNEMA: Not like Papa Doc. He was *maestro. El uno, y unico*. He turn nearly half of Haiti into zombie and the rest – *(He makes a slashing gesture across his throat.)* he sent his Ton Ton Macoutes. Even the Ton Ton are Zombie. Papa Doc can give them order from anywhere. He can be one end of island and think to them – do this or do that. And they do it. Distance no importance. Now that is power. (p20-21)

In a paper detailing what appears to be biographical accounts of Amin, Bokassa and Nguema, Samuel Decalo (1985: 225) reveals the power and enduring effects of some of the myths surrounding the dictators. He describes how Nguema was perceived by his countrymen:

> the incarnation of the tiger – an animal not found in Africa - the fear of his omnipotence and immortality was so prevalent that foreign troops had to be assigned to guard him after his overthrow. Indeed the fear of his vengeance after reincarnation meant that only a foreign (Moroccan) firing squad could be reliably charged with his execution.

While spinning and propagating myths about themselves, it appears the dictators reach a level where the myths become reality to them. In plain terms, the dictators swallow their own myths and begin to believe the myth of their own omnipotence:

> GUNEMA: impossible! *Jamas*, never! My friend, you are not *un hombre ordinario*. Like me and our *camarade* the Emperor, Kasco, we are not *ordinario*. Why you think we rule our people? Some people are born to power. Others are cattle. They need ring in their nose for us to lead.
>
> KASCO: *Oui oui*. There are persons, individuals who are born with the imperial sign here *(He taps his forehead)*. (p21)

What emerges from this is that the dictator is a creation of myths promoted by the dictator himself through signs, symbols and deeds. So, the hat, dress, medal, walking stick, fly-whisk, title or name become part of elaborate efforts in what one may call self-construction. In this way, the dictator also becomes a sculptor or an artist engaged in image-making. The beginning then is that the dictator makes himself the canvas, the rough clay or stone on which he commences the task of transforming himself into a different shape and image. Ironically, it is a task that he ultimately loses control of as the painting or sculpting of images of this figure draws the participation of all, that is, from the official spin-doctors, local and foreign media, writers, to the ordinary citizen.

In deploying myth to the service of power, the dictator again seems to vindicate Foucault's assertion that power is everywhere and that it can permeate every layer of society. So it becomes laughable when Gunema beats his chest and says:

> From here I am surveillancing everything at home. Everyone of my subjects, I see. The ones who are plotting, who think they can overthrow Benefacio Gunema, I see them. And the plots of my supercilious aristocracy, the mestizos, I see… Fools! They do not understand yet that I am born to rule. It is there, in the signs since I am born. I am different from everybody else. (p36)

In other words, the paradox is that herein lies the seeds of the dictator's demise – myths. The dictator loses track of reality as he becomes a victim of his own myths. He begins to believe that power is his eternally. This could explain why dictators in general get right to the moment of their demise failing to accept the reality staring them in the face. In the Mobutu documentary, *Mobutu, King of Zaire*, one of the most sombre moments is when a cancer-stricken Mobutu is alone in Gbadolite and seems to come to terms with his mortality. Still, one would be forgiven for being sceptical of this 'introspection' which is in the presence of cameras.

It is with respect to images that Soyinka's play problematizes issues of representation within a postcolonial context. In interrogating this issue of representation some aspects of postcolonial theory become very useful, especially those related to Edward Said's (1985) notion of "imaginary geographies" which involves constructions of the "other" in opposition to the self. A large chunk of post-colonialism can in fact be traced back to Said's "seminal work *Orientalism*, where he demonstrated how during colonial times, the Western binary way of thinking (like-unlike, themselves-us, rich-poor) was the basis for how colonisers made sense of what they encountered"(Martin and Griffiths, 2012: 910). According to Kaspin (2002: 324), "For well over a millennium, the world in European imagination was divisible into realm of light and dark, Christendom and heathendom, civilisation and wilderness". Kaspin further argues that images of Africa are standardised and are still part of Western public culture. It is therefore important to examine whether *A Play of Giants* unconsciously plays a role in reinforcing notions of the 'other'.

What is of major interest here and also elsewhere in the study is the nature of the images and their implication(s). One of the most provocative dimensions of the dictator text is the recurring images of a continent that is remote, unusually different and impenetrable. These are images that reduce Africa to what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) has cautioned against: "The danger of a single story" in the form of "Afro-pessimism" which is an obsession with negative representations of Africa (Janis, 2008). In other words, there is a strong perception that there is never a fair representation of the continent. To what extent then could Soyinka's play and the genre of the dictator text be read as "Afro-pessimism"? A number of writers and critics take issue with what they see as this persistent negative representation of Africa (Huggan, 2001; Landau and Kaspin, 2002; Christensen, 2005; Julien,

2006; Jewsiewicki, 2008; Bishop, 2014). *A Play of Giants* is replete with images that place the four dictators in a completely different world. Kamini is associated with savagery and sadism which mark him and others like him as freaks of nature that exist in a world that is temporally backward. This is also the image that one gets through Gunema who is said to dabble in voodoo (something that Kamini seems to admire him for). Gunema's template, Nguema, is reputed to have had a "large personal collection of human skulls in his home village"and is described as a "master of traditional witchcraft, preoccupied with 'centralising' all magic in his own hands" (Decalo, 1985: 224). Kamini, with little education, emerges as a simpleton or a man-child who cannot be expected to muster the basics and intricacies of running a country. This emerges through his failure to understand and accept the explanations and advice of the chairman of his country's national bank:

> Kamini: I said go back and get cracking with government mint. When I return I want to see brand-new currency in circulation, not hearing all this grumble of shortage of money and so on and so forth. (P16)

All four dictators come across as individuals who are not only blood-thirsty, but are odd specimens, and above all, symbols of the African race. For example, Kamini's savagery and brutality are shown by how he punishes the bank chairman for telling him the truth. Gunema is associated with voodoo, which, puts him in the same league with the "*maestro*" of such practices, Papa Doc, who incidentally has roots that can be traced back to Africa. Kasco believes he was born to be emperor. Whether true or not, Tuboum brags about how his special forces, the "famed striped leopards" (p29) kill and eat any strangers who spy on them. The four figures, with no trace of any redeeming feature, become symbols of the performance of power in post-colonial Africa. This is a point that Cecile Bishop (2014) puts across strongly in her hard-hitting critique of the stereotyping of the continent through portrayals of the African dictator text referred to earlier in the study. However, her argument fails to fully appreciate the culpability of the African dictator in the persistence and endurance of the stereo-typical image of the African as the 'other'. In my view, while the play appears to be guilty of portraying, promoting and reinforcing stereo-types, its strength stems from its ability to demonstrate who is also to blame for the persistent "single story". The writer, the dictator, the media and even ordinary people, all play a part in the telling of a particular story, not only about the dictator but about Africa and Africans in general. The question that emerges in

relation to this is why equally or more infamous dictators in other parts of the world have not really resulted in enduring profiling and stereotyping of their respective peoples or regions. Here one has in mind dictators such as Adolf Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Pol Pot and others. In other words, although a dictator such as Hitler has inspired caricatures of Germans, this has not been extended to a whole continent and its people. Could this be because some parts of Africa have not really gotten rid of big-men or if the big-men have gone, the effects of their chaos and mayhem still persist?

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined Soyinka's construction of images of the African dictator in *A Play of Giants.* Soyinka uses thinly disguised characters to critique the performance of power in post-colonial Africa. What emerges is that images of the figure of the dictator are largely an entanglement of myth and history. The dictator is presented as a myth-maker but he is at the same time also a subject and victim of his own myths. Names, titles and different sorts of signs are deployed in the construction of myths and images at the centre of which is the figure of the dictator. By deploying some of Foucault's notions of power, the African dictator's delusions of 'owning' and projecting power 'everywhere' are exposed. His power is precarious as there is also power from 'everywhere' acting against him. While Soyinka's satire condemns and indicts the dictator through images that belittle, lampoon and chide, the play is also replete with images that seem to reinforce notions of 'otherness'. In this way, representation of the dictator figure partly colours *A Play of Giants* with a tinge of exoticism and Afro-pessimism. Overall, Soyinka selects, discards and cobbles together personalities and events to create a play that does much more than condemn and indict. The play becomes a site and vehicle for and against memory and forgetting.

Chapter 3

The Ambivalence and Paradox of Power in Hama Tuma's *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and Other Stories*

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter focused on Soyinka's construction of the dictator figure in the study's only play, *A Play of Giants*. It argued that Soyinka's construction of the images of the African dictator is intended to chide, ridicule and indict the performance of power in post-independence Africa, but at the same time this implicates the writer in the creation, dissemination and reinforcement of myths and stereotypes, not only about the African dictator, but Africans in general.

What is of particular interest in this chapter is how the Ethiopian writer Hama Tuma uses satire to show how power is constructed and deconstructed through processes of mythologisation and demythologisation. The chapter investigates how in a state of huge mismatch in power relations between the dictator and his subjects, or the citizen and dictatorship, the dictator becomes both the target and source of mythologisation and demythologisation. It still finds useful in any analysis of Tuma's stories some of the notions of victimhood, resistance and subversion in a dictatorship. Here the study draws on Michel Foucault (1990; 1982)'s and James Scott (1990)'s notions of power and resistance to bring under scrutiny Tuma's representation of the Ethiopian dictatorship. Major questions to be addressed in this chapter are: What is the significance of image-making in the performance of power and how does Tuma use writing to construct and deconstruct the figure of the dictator? How are myths, illusion and reality constructed and subverted in the dictator's world? In what ways does Tuma explore the ambivalence and paradox of power?

Hama Tuma's *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and Other Stories* (1993) is the study's only anthology of short stories. The strength of an anthology of short stories is that it allows the author to present a variety of experiences concisely. According to Dominic Head (1992: 22) the short story has an "enduring ability to capture" life's "episodic nature", which in my view is a feature that makes short stories suitable for representing contemporary reality. Tuma's anthology is strategically located in the study, that is, immediately after Wole

Soyinka's play in order to juxtapose the two writers and the genres they opt for in their treatment of the theme of dictatorship. Besides this common over-arching theme of dictatorship, the two texts also bear similarities in that they are based on clearly identifiable historical situations in Africa's recent past. In addition, in both texts there are dominant, over-bearing individuals or dictators who, directly or indirectly, determine the lives or fate of their respective nations. There are also other similarities and differences that will be referred to or examined in the course of the chapter.

Since the representation of the figure of the dictator forms the back-bone of the study, the stories in the first section of Tuma's anthology, which is made up of eleven stories, will be the focus as they are the ones where Tuma unequivocally interrogates the Ethiopian dictatorship during the reign of Mengistu Haille Mariam from 1974 to 1991. It is also these stories, which include the title story, that encapsulate Tuma's preoccupations.

Although Tuma states at the beginning of the anthology that the characters in the stories "are all fictitious" (pvii), there is abundant evidence that real historical events play a huge role in spurring the writer's imaginative creativity. Even Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his introductory words to the anthology seems to lend credence to the reality of the events or at least the illusion of reality that they manufacture:

> A reading of the stories by Hama Tuma, collected under the title, *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor*, wakes one from whatever images one has had of Ethiopia to a reality which at the same time seems unreal. The Ethiopia of these stories is full of words like white terror, red terror, anarchists, Bolsheviks, capitalists, fascists, kings, gunmen on highways, AK-47, revolution, reaction, organisation, guerrillas, words and concepts that sit uneasily on any visions of a peasant community constantly struggling with the elements. The trouble is that all this is true and Hama Tuma brilliantly captures the contradictions that make up the real Ethiopia of the twentieth century. The stories open a window into the soul of a nation…a people who are real victims of ruthless cold-war politics only interested in the Ethiopian prize both for its strategic location and for its symbolism. (pix - x)

Just as in Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*, one cannot ignore the imprints of history in Tuma's stories, imprints that one should be constantly aware of for a full appreciation of the writer's work. As noted in the previous chapter, history can indeed function as a device that enhances the interpretation of historical texts. The first eleven stories which are the subject of this study dramatise aspects of the Ethiopian Revolution which began in earnest with the over-throw of

Emperor Haile Sellassie on 12 September 1974 (Sheleman, 1994; Legum, 1977). After a vicious power struggle, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam emerged as the new all-powerful ruler of Ethiopia.

The study selects Hama Tuma's stories because of their unusual representation of the theme of dictatorship. More importantly, the stories present a stark difference to Soyinka's blunt, raw brutality that is perpetrated by an ever-present domineering figure of the dictator who wields enormous control over the fate of all citizens. In fact, in Soyinka's play ordinary victims of the dictators are not really visible but are only mentioned in the blood-chilling accounts given by the dictators. The victims that one witnesses in the play are the dictator's functionaries who fall out of favour with him such as the chairman of Kamini's national bank whose only crime is telling the dictator the truth about the state of the nation's economy or the sculptor who is savagely beaten up for inadvertently saying out the truth about Kamini. In Tuma's stories the dictator is barely visible but his presence is always felt. While *A Play of Giants* focuses on the ever-present towering dictator figures with little or no sign of the ordinary victims of the dictators' brutal rule, Tuma presents the reader with an opportunity to witness the day to day existence of those living under dictatorial rule. The ordinary nature of the dictator's victims is evident in most of the selected stories. For example, in 'The case of the illiterate saboteur' (p7-22) the accused is an ordinary man who we are told cannot read or write. In 'The case of the valiant torturer' (p23-33) the accused is a low-level functionary whose job is to do some of the dirty, grisly work for the regime. Then there is Alemnesh Kebede who is introduced in court as a typist in the Ministry of Coffee and Tea or the next accused Tigist Belete who was "a middle-aged woman, slim, with the worn-out face of poor mothers" (p67). This ordinary nature of the dictator's victims is again evident through another accused called Docho Melke who was

> a thin man somewhere in his fifties, apparently a man who never had to bother about *woz* or cholesterol or fat or abundance of any good thing. As it was to be revealed later, he had spent more than thirty years of his miserable life as a worker in the main printing press run by the government. (P75)

Another accused "was an owl-eyed, very short, small man with an almost totally bald head. In other words, an ugly, little, elderly man" (p109). This is the nature of all the other accused that are hauled before the courts. Clearly, Tuma's focus is on the victims of the dictator.

While the demise of the Ethiopian dictatorship and others of similar ilk at the end of the Cold War seemed to render the subject of dictatorship archaic, irrelevant and not worthy of study in today's world, there are reminders that "one of the most enduring archetypes of the twentieth century, the ruthless dictator, had persisted into the twenty first" (Robertson, 2011: 1). What comes to mind are the political upheavals in parts of Africa, the Middle East, South America and others where at the centre is always some form of caudillo, strongman or dictator.

However, scholarship on Tuma and Ethiopian literature in general is still sparse. Reidulf Molvaer (1997: x) observes that "Amharic and other Ethiopian literature is relatively unknown outside Ethiopia because of the language 'barrier', and because few works have been translated". Christina Matzke (2008: 220) adds that "There exists a small, but growing corpus of English language writing from the Horn of Africa, both on the continent and abroad, that continues to be neglected in literary circles". Roger Kurtz (2007; 2010) also takes note of the dominance of Amharic literature in Ethiopia. He cites just a few works that have appeared in English such as Daniachew Worku's *The Thirteenth Sun* (1973) which he says is the second title by an Ethiopian in the Heinemann African Writers Series. The other titles in the African Writers Series that he cites are *Afersata* (1969) and *Warrior King* (1974) by Sahle Sellassie, and *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and Other* Stories (1993) by Hama Tuma.

Very little seems to be known about Hama Tuma who appears to have gone to great lengths to hide his real identity. This, in my view, is largely because of the way the writer's life and work are complicated by their inextricable links with Ethiopian politics[1]. What one takes time to discover about the writer is that the name Hama Tuma is in fact a pseudonym that the writer adopted. According to Gikandi and Mwangi (2007) his real name is Iyassu

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1. In a 2008 article entiltled "Finding Hama" in the Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, Ayelet Dekel reveals the great difficulty encountered in tracking down Hama Tuma and eventually persuading him to accept sitting down for an interview. Dekel reveals that during Tuma's "years of exile, clandestine organisational work and guerrilla warfare, he used many pseudonyms, perfecting the art of remaining invisible while never stopping his activist efforts". In the interview, Tuma says: "I'm not very attached to my real name, I haven't used it for 30 years". See *Haaretz*, 21 August 2008.

Allemayehu, an Ethiopian lawyer born in Addis Ababa in 1950. What seems to have led the writer to adopt the pseudonym Hama Tuma is his documented involvement in political activities. According to Annie Gagiano (2014: 10), Hama Tuma "was considered a thorn in the flesh by three succeeding Ethiopian regimes for opposing injustice – necessitating his departure for France, where he still lives". Elena Di Giovanni (2013**:** 87) describes Tuma as a writer, intellectual and political activist with "a strong political stance", who "fled the country as persona non grata" and "adopted the fictional name which has successfully disguised his true identity". Ayelet Dekel (2008) describes Tuma as an "elusive writer" and seems to link this to his political activism. Hama Tuma has written several works that include *Of Spades and Ethiopians* (1991)*, African Absurdities: Politically Incorrect Articles* (2002), *Give me a Dog's Life Any Day African Absurdities 2* (2004), *The Case of the Criminal Walk and Other Stories* (2006) and *Democratic Cannibalism: African Absurdities 3* (2007). Writing mainly essays and short stories, Tuma is largely preoccupied with burning issues of the day as is suggested by titles of some of his works. Tuma's works generally highlight the writer's persistent preoccupation with injustice. Therefore, establishing the links between the writer's work, life and political activities again highlights the interaction between fiction and history noted in the preceding chapter. Eyob Gebremariam (2016: 153) also acknowledges that the strength of Tuma's stories lies in that they are an imaginative recreation of reality.

Both Gagiano and Giovanni give straight-forward synopses of the stories in Tuma's anthology but are silent in terms of interrogating and problematizing the representation of dictatorship and the figure of the dictator. Nevertheless, Gagiano (2014: 1-2) makes an important observation that this study finds worth pursuing:

> Together the stories form a mosaic that builds up a powerfully affecting and highly detailed image of Ethiopia at this time. The narratives do what historical narratives cannot do in providing a diversity of experiential activities; authenticating a people's sufferings during a terrible time; showing us how some people cope somehow, while others do not, and many lose their lives or those that they love. Even after so many years, the stories have lost none of their impact, serving to remind us of one of Africa's insufficiently documented calamities caused by human agency.

As will be seen in this chapter, Tuma therefore not only takes advantage of the short story's ability to compress a wide variety of experiences but makes the characters and experiences representative of Mengistu's Ethiopia.

Hama Tuma's anthology is one of those texts in which context plays an important role in getting a fuller understanding of the issues and the writer's overall intention. As has been noted already, although the author states that all the "characters in this book are fictitious" and that "names of organisations and institutions appearing in these stories have only coincidental resemblance to actual existing ones" (pvii), there is little doubt that the stories are set in Ethiopia during the reign of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam from 1974 to 1991. Before 1974 Ethiopia was a feudal state ruled by Emperor Haile Sellassie. The Ethiopian Revolution began on 12 September 1974 with the overthrow of Emperor Sellassie by a group of army officers led by Colonel Mengistu with the ultimate goal of establishing a socialist society. The group of army officers who carried out the coup constituted what was called the Derg (Dergue) which was a committee determined to erase all traces of the old order and replace it with socialism. Colonel Mengistu emerged as the ultimate ruler and leader of the revolution through brutal elimination or suppression of all opposition. From 1976 Mengistu carried out a campaign called the Red Terror which targeted what were considered enemies of the Ethiopian Revolution. According to a BBC (2016) profile of Mengistu, thousands of innocent intellectuals, professionals and perceived opponents were killed during the campaign. In a report entitled "Ethipoian Dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam" (1999), Human Rights Watch describes the Red Terror as campaign in which

> Thousands of young men and women turned up dead in the streets of the capital and other cities in the following two years. They were systematically eliminated mainly by militia attached to the 'Kebeles,' the neighbourhood watch committees which served during the Dergue period as the lowest level local government and security surveillance units.

The systematic gross violations of human rights during the reign of Mengistu are now a matter of public record. Human Rights Watch characterises the activities of the Mengistu regime as a "killing enterprise" that "left mountains of documentary evidence of its crimes". Hama Tuma's anthology which was written way before the overthrow of Mengistu and the Derg in 1991, though fictional, is no doubt informed by the events of the Mengistu years which are the target of the author's scathing satire.

3.2 Synopsis

The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and Other Stories is an anthology made up of twenty-two stories divided into two sections, Part 1 and Part 2. Part 1 of the anthology is made up of eleven stories and Part 2 also has eleven stories. It is the first part of the collection which also carries the title of the anthology which is of interest to the proposed study as all stories in this section satirise the Mengistu dictatorship. Although the eleven stories in the first section are different and each can in fact stand alone, they all form one compact unit that is deliberately designed to give a peek into life under dictatorship. What primarily unifies or binds the stories together is the common or over-arching theme of dictatorship. Another unifying feature is the historical context, that is, the stories all take place in Ethiopia during the Mengistu era. In addition, all the stories are narrated by the same narrator who goes to court every morning to be part of onlookers who bear witness to the travesty of justice perpetrated in a court of law by a regime that is shown to be obsessed with absolute control of the individual and the whole society. The stories are also bound together to form a single whole by the common technique adopted by the author – satire.

In the stories Hama makes use of devastating satire to critique the brutality, absurdity and tyranny perpetrated by the Derg. Through a number of court cases the rabid mind-set of a regime bent on crushing all real, potential or imaginary opponents is exposed. All sorts of innocent citizens are hauled to court to go through a process that represents a perversion of justice. It is the theatricality of it all that makes dictatorship look foolish, silly and ridiculous in the eyes of society and the whole world at large. All this brings into focus Hama Tuma's overall satiric approach in relation to the figure of the dictator.

In 'The case of the illiterate Saboteur' the caricaturing of the dictator begins with the state's court officials who are also cast as drunk with power, thereby foregrounding the regime's endemic abuse of power. The judge Major Aytenfisu Muchie is depicted as "a pot-bellied, baby-faced man in his mid-forties" (p7). Ridiculously significant is that he "had a Charlie Chaplin-type moustache which somehow brought to mind not the Little Tramp but the cruel man who authored 'Mein Kampf'". The intended effect of the inter-textuality hits home straight away as the notoriety of the German dictator is literally brought into the court-room. At the same time this opens a chink for one to peep into the inner workings of the regime.

Although the immediate setting is a court-room, one is constantly reminded of who the big boss is: “Above the judge’s chair hung the photo of the Great Chairman of our country” (p8). His omnipresence beyond the court-room is solidified by the law which forces “every office and institution in the country” to display the Great Chairman’s portrait. However, Tuma takes pot-shots at the dictator even through these portraits as they are described as “pass-port-size ones” (p8), obviously to belittle the figure of the dictator. If the foregoing belittles the official, the nature of the “crimes’ for which citizens are punished by the courts makes dictatorship a laughing stock. Even the punishment is equally ridiculous, thereby characterising the regime as also ridiculous. All this comes out in stories such as ‘The Case of the Illiterate Saboteur’ where the accused is sentenced to “fifteen years of corrective labour in a state farm” during which period he “will also be taught to read and write” (22). The accused’s crime is that he urinates near one of the offices of the regime’s urban dwellers association. ‘The Case of the Valiant Torturer’ brings out into the open the brutality of the regime. The brutality comes out, not through the punishment meted out, but through the revelations about Corporal Yimer Yared’s ‘services’ to the state as a torturer of the regime’s opponents. One learns that he is in court for chiding his superiors who fail to supply him with enough victims to torture. In one instance he is said to have declared that “a revolution and a state which let torturers go idle deserve to be changed” (p25). The case is comic but the confessions of the systematic torture by the corporal, nick-named ‘The Carpenter’ because of what he could do to the bodies of prisoners are shocking. He believed that the “the human body is like wood, weak and strong, hard and soft, yet in all cases breakable” (25).

The above is basically the nature of all the cases that are brought before the court. What is of particular interest to the study is the significance of Hama Tuma’s interrogation of political repression and the extent to which dictatorship goes to entrench itself.

3.2 Myth, Illusion and Reality in the Dictator's Courtroom

In this section I focus on the relationship between power and image-making in HamaTuma's writing. The stories constitute an interesting dimension in the representation of dictatorship. In the stories dictatorship is both a person and a vast array of functionaries who display both fanatical zeal and a penchant for self-preservation in the discharge of their duties. More importantly, the dictator is deliberately elided or side-lined by the writer in order to bring to the fore the subjects of his power. In doing so Tuma highlights the ambivalence of signs or myths. In this section the study adopts Lauri Honko's view that myths are not just narratives but can also be symbols or representations (1984: 43). In other words, symbols such as statues, photographs or the staged trials are all designed to convey a particular message or messages which are also part of the process of projecting power.

The courtroom setting of the stories which are of interest to this study deliberately elide the figure of the dictator in order to deny the dictator a voice and physical presence. While symbolically it is the dictator that is on trial in the courtroom (Ogude, 2009: 89), the centre stage is given to the ordinary people that the dictator and his regime seek to emasculate. The question that arises here then is how does Tuma construct and represent a figure that he seeks to confine to the periphery of his stories or erase from prominence and omnipresence? In this respect Tuma's approach is unlike Soyinka's in *A Play of Giants* where Kamini, Nguema, Kasco and Tuboum are "giants" that strut across the stage with a presence designed to spread and reinforce the myths surrounding their power. At the same time, however, Soyinka successfully turns upside down that visibility and ubiquity to debunk the myths of the dictators' omnipotence.

In the anthology Tuma seems to deliberately deny the dictator space and voice. Although the courtroom is designed by the dictator as a stage to display and sanitise his power, it ironically becomes an arena where the limits of his power are laid bare for all to witness. Soyinka's dictators in *A Play of Giants* are constructed and elevated onto pedestals to create what Robert Muponde calls "the Man-Nation" (2015: 138) which I read to mean the conflation of state and the leader (the dictator). However, in Tuma's stories the writer denies the dictator this prominence and dominance of space by privileging the voice and physical presence of the subjects or supposed victims such as the illiterate saboteur Yishak Nasser, or Almenesh Kebede the clerk on trial for her smile.

The dictator and his system are first and foremost surrounded by a whirlpool of myths. There is an attempt to create an illusion and concrete reality of the dictator's presence through various signs and symbols or myths. The dictator and his system become a deliberate construction through official and unofficial efforts to ensure survival. This is done in a number of ways that include the creation and use of names, titles, portraits, words, slogans or sayings associated with the leader. In 'The Case of the Illiterate Saboteur' the narrator mocks the proliferation of slogans and portraits: "Slogans and portraits, you ask? What regime could call itself Socialist without an abundance of these? Above the judge's chair hung the photo of the Great Chairman of our country" (8). Clearly, the aim of the regime is to create both an illusion and reality of omnipresence of the dictator and his power. The portrait of the dictator that hangs above the judge's chair symbolically brings the dictator into the courtroom as if for him to over-see the proceedings there. Indeed, everyone in the courtroom from the judge, court officials, down to the accused and on-lookers are all reminded by the portrait that this is a "Man-Nation". To the regime, the portrait serves the function of enhancing the myth of the Chairman's omnipresence and prominence; the latter is reinforced by its position in the courtroom. Placing the portrait in the courtroom and also above the judge's head not only dwarfs the judge and the court but creates and solidifies the impression that even justice emanates from him.

The dictator's image(s), the court and by extension Ethiopia itself are transformed into highly visible signs of dominance, subjugation and victimhood. In the prologue the narrator reveals how criticism from Amnesty International and the United States had forced the regime to come up with the idea of 'public' trials. The courtroom and the trials serve two important purposes for the dictator. What is important to note is that the court trials are primarily designed as show trials to hoodwink outsiders or external critics of the regime by creating an illusion of dispensing justice as "the courts opened and the prisoners started to flock in" (6). In this respect the trials are designed to legitimise the Ethiopian Revolution and ultimately the dictator himself as the illusion is created that Ethiopia is a land of justice where nobody is imprisoned without trial. Secondly, the trials are also directed at the dictator's subjects in order to demonstrate what is likely to befall those who go against the Great Chairman. It is also important to point out the external dimension along which the trials are modelled. Through the stories, Tuma does not make it a secret that he is poking fun at the dictator's

imitations of communist dictatorships which were also notorious for sham trials. This comes out through constant reference to Eastern Bloc countries or models. The charges, the penal code(s) that the accused are alleged to have violated and the punishment meted out are all reminiscent of Josef Stalin's show trials. [2]

The dominant symbol that is designed to represent the omnipresence of the dictator is his official portrait which obviously through official directives is supposed to be hung in very prominent public space. The visibility of the portrait is a constant reminder to all and sundry of the long reach of the Great Chairman's power. More importantly, the portrait's presence alone, without any other figures, suggests or alludes to the indivisibility of power and by implication, the supposed unchallenged position of the dictator or his sole 'ownership' of the reins of power. Is the dictator's power an illusion? As has already been noted, the court trials suggest that there are serious external threats to the dictator and the Ethiopian Revolution in general. This is highlighted by the narrator in the anthology's prologue where he reveals that Amnesty International has been "pointing its accusing finger at our determined leaders" (p3). If the public trials are triggered by an international outcry over human rights abuses in Ethiopia, it means that there is an onslaught on the dictator's public image and power. Thus, the court trials become a kind of public relations exercise to rehabilitate and sanitise the dictator's image with the overall intention of legitimising the dictator's power. The dictator seeks to project himself as the benevolent father figure of the nation from whom justice derives. At the same time the dictator seeks to give a warning to his subjects of the dire consequences of any form of dissent.

Clearly then, justice is both an illusion and a reality. It is an illusion in the sense that the whole exercise of show trials is designed to create a façade of justice. The dictator is worried about the image that he projects to the world. The show trials are therefore part of an elaborate plan to hoodwink the world or to manipulate international opinion. In this way the courtroom

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2. The Soviet Union's Article 58 of the Penal Code which was approved in 1928 was the principal law that was used against those perceived to be opponents of the regime. See David Hosford, Pamela Kachurin and Thomas Lamont (2006).

becomes an arena where the struggle between illusion and reality are played out. While the dictator's regime is preoccupied with the construction and maintenance of a particular image for consumption by the outside world, it is also worried about the "reality" of the dissent at home. At the same time it is the fear of this "reality" that forces the regime to use the courtroom as space to demonstrate the "reality" of the existence of the dictator's power.

The dictator also seeks to place himself at the centre of the Ethiopian polity. Not only is he presented as the sole creator and giver of socialist justice, but he is the god-like figure who is always present to ensure that justice is dispensed. So the dictator's justice is both an illusion and a reality as it seeks to legitimise a mirage and concretise in unequivocal terms the edifice of the dictator's authority.

While the dictators in Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* project images of brute physical strength, blood, pain and violence, Tuma's dictator seeks to project a 'soft image' through allowing opponents a semblance of justice in his courts. In this way the dictator attempts to present a squeaky clean image of himself by casting his victims as citizens who deserve due process before the law. This attempt by the dictator to sanitise his power loses credibility during the court trials as the truth comes out through the nature of the offenses for which the victims are dragged to court. More importantly, although no physical violence is witnessed as is the case in Soyinka's play, the court symbolically becomes a public confessional where supposedly hidden acts of violence and brutality are dragged out into the open. A case in point is the trial of the "valiant torturer", which becomes a graphic expose in self-incrimination, not only by the perpetrator on trial but by the regime itself.

The image of benevolence is brutally shattered by the court cases which reveal the lies behind the dictator's "justice". The contrived image of justice reveals the reality of the violence and injustice surrounding the dictator's power. So, while image-making and projection by Tuma's dictator is an attempt at deploying 'soft power', the court trials dredge the gutters of Ethiopian dictatorship to uncover the blood and tears of its ordinary citizens who the dictator seeks to use in sanitising and legitimising his otherwise violent rule. So the dictator's benevolence and justice are, through the court cases, proved to be a sham or an elaborate myth that the international community is being hoodwinked into swallowing hook, line and sinker. The court cases therefore shatter the myth of the benevolent father figure who is

symbolically present in court to over-see the dispensing of justice. In this way, the portrait of the dictator becomes a parody of the supposed benevolence.

The image-making by the dictator through his portrait brings to the fore the issue of personality cult. In the stories there is a proliferation of the dictator's image(s) through the apparently mandatory rule that his portrait be hung in public places. The greatest myth spun around the figure of the dictator is intended to create an aura of omnipresence and omnipotence. To this end, there are sustained efforts to praise, exalt, deify and worship the dictator in various ways which result in the creation of a personality cult. Tuma's stories in the first half of the collection offer an interesting dimension of power and the personality cult. Anthony Hamilton Kirk-Greene (1991: 163) pointed out the proliferation of African leaders who personalised power across the continent. He associated African leadership with what he called "Eternity", "Eccentricity" and "Exemplarity". In his view,

> The behaviour of independent Africa's heads of state, be they President or Prime Minister, General or once-upon-a-time Sergeant, exercises an unusual level of fascination on a no less unusually widespread range of readership. Their characteristics and their ideologies, their excesses, their eccentricities and their example, their often conspicuous way of living and the frequently brutal manner of their dying, have provided data for scholarly analysis and intellectual typologizing.

Although the adoption of multi-party politics after the resolution of the Cold War now make such a claim difficult to hold onto, vestiges of dictatorial tendencies are still visible in some parts of Africa.

Hama Tuma's stories are directly and indirectly a fascinating though tragic critique of personalisation of power or the personality cult in Ethiopia. Melanie Koeneke (2010: 2) says "A cult of personality or cult of the individual is a fanatical devotion to a specific person, usually a person of power". This trait (fanatical devotion to a specific person) is evident in the various organs and functionaries of the Mengistu dictatorship that is depicted in the stories. Through the court cases it becomes clear that the dictator, who is constantly referred to as "Our Great Chairman", has become a figure that all are supposed to worship.

In my view, the construction of the cult has to be understood also within the context of the myths surrounding the dictator. In an analysis of the cult of personality surrounding the figure of Josef Stalin in the Soviet Union, Yves Cohen (2004: 616) argues that the vast majority of

ordinary citizens in the Soviet Union were also complicit in the promotion of the Stalin personality cult as they "received and consumed the cult". If the cult of personality is part of the myths constructed about the leader, one cannot therefore ignore Tuma's representation of the dictator in the stories. Again, what is fascinating about Tuma's approach is that one never sees the dictator in flesh, unlike Soyinka's "giants" who are seen and heard from beginning to end.

The stories seem to demonstrate Xavier Marquez's view that "cults of personality are not constituted by one or a few events, but are composed of *chains of rituals* where leader-related symbols circulate in a variety of media" (2013: 5). Marquez understands a cult of personality "as a set of interaction rituals, linked in chains, focused on symbols that refer to a political leader, and saturating a significant part of the public space of a polity". This no doubt confirms that the construction of a cult is not an accidental phenomenon but is part of a deliberate strategy in a wider programme of ensuring that power is retained at all cost and by all means possible. In practical terms this might involve attempts at creating the myth or illusion that the leader is everywhere at all times. This illusion or myth of omnipresence is designed to ensure that there is no one to dispute where power lies. This omnipresence or saturation of the public space with the cult begins by linking everything to the leader. Because symbols of the leader "command attention in a cult of personality" (Marquez, 2013: 6), production, dissemination and consumption of the symbols become evident at every level of the society. In this respect, in Tuma's stories the dictator's portrait becomes a powerful instrument in the construction of a personality cult. Although these are different stories, the writer uses the same or a fixed setting of the trials with same court officials and paraphernalia which includes the Chairman's portrait perched above the judge for all to see. This in my view becomes important in terms of form, as the genre of the short story reinforces the sense of "eternity" in relation to the dictator's power. While different victims come and go as they are disposed of by the court, the court itself, the court officials, the paraphernalia, and above all, the ever present dictator symbolised by the portrait, remain the same:

> Above the judge's chair hung the photo of the Great Chairman of our country. Rumour has it that some over-zealous cadres who had the gall to suggest that the portraits of Marx, Engels and Lenin had to be hung along with that of the Chairman were executed for the crime of misguided internationalism and stunted revolutionary nationalism. However, it is said that the Wise Chairman, in order to placate the Russians (who as you know have extra-sharp ears), built

> monuments for Lenin and Marx. (Poor Engels is still waiting for his!) Anyway, the portrait/photo-space belonged to the Chairman alone. (p8)

It is as if the dictator has even taken control of time itself as he symbolically tinkers with history by overshadowing the names, portraits and legacies of Marx, Engels and Lenin by trying to transform himself into the foremost revolutionary. This serves to remind the audience, onlookers and survivors of the reality of the dictator's power, his grip or control, not only of the proceedings in the courtroom but of all space. However, as will be seen later in this chapter, Tuma uses his stories to subvert the cult, which no doubt is one of the major goals of the stories.

Directly connected to the portrait in the construction, distribution and consumption of cult is the unusual behaviour of attributing every development or event with significant positive features to the leader. According to Cristina Fica (2011: 109) a cult of personality arises when the mass media, propaganda and other methods are used to create "an idealised and heroic public image". In other words, the regime appropriates any such event or occurrence and clothes it with the name of the dictator to literally transform him into a kind of creator or god from or through whom everything is possible. This process may involve constantly mentioning or invoking the leader's name at every opportune moment. In this respect flattery becomes a tool that is used to elevate the dictator to a position no other citizen is allowed to attain or occupy. More importantly, an impression is created that there is no one else but only this particular leader who should occupy and is capable of occupying this position. This is why, therefore, every national 'achievement' is heralded and praised as directly a result of the leader's 'wise' leadership. So we are told in the first case, 'The case of the illiterate saboteur', that

> Under the photo of the Chairman there were two banners carrying quotations from (who else?) our Great Chairman:
>
> 'Revolutionary Justice is Swift and Firm!'
>
> 'No damage to the Revolution is slight and no punishment against offenders can be too severe!' (p9)

The leader then is not just a leader and is no longer an ordinary human being. He is persistently depicted as the fountain of all the wisdom that the ordinary citizen, the court and

nation at large cannot do without. Thus, in this situation the cult of personality becomes so pervasive that the dictator becomes literally present in his absence in both private and public space. In addition, in this particular setting (courtroom), the Chairman's 'wise' words are emblazoned on two huge banners that are strategically located for all to see and also to dwarf or drown all other ideas. The banners become significant to the cult in that they are a reminder and a warning that the leader is the embodiment of the revolution, and, therefore, there should never be anyone to ever contemplate holding contrary views. In 'The Case of the Illiterate Saboteur' the omnipresence of Chairman is concretised through the Kebeles[3]:

> Our Kebeles are one of our sacred institutions, they are the eyes and ears of our Great Chairman and All- Knowing Party. During the early days of the Revolution, it was the Kebeles who defended the Revolution from the attacks of anarchist counter-revolutionaries. Kebeles *symbolise* our Revolution. (p11)

So the existence of the Kebeles transforms the power of the dictator into reality even at the basic level of society. In this way the dictator becomes a mythical figure who is all-seeing and all-knowing. This is how he assumes some of his god-like qualities. At the same time, in this way power is more than an illusion as the trials become a living testimony to what befalls those who transgress or are even perceived to do so in any way imaginable and unimaginable. Still, the regime is shocked that Ato Yishak, the illiterate saboteur, would do what he did – relieving himself in front of a Kebele office! The regime's dumbfoundment and outrage that a citizen would do such a thing is expressed through the prosecutor:

> And now, after all this ...' The prosecutor paused for effect and glared at the accused, 'Ato Yishak, who stands here trying to look harmless, goes to the Kebele office, takes out his ... eh ... excuse me ... and pisses in broad daylight! And right under a sign which says urinating in public places is forbidden! Can we imagine a more anarchistic crime? Do priests piss on the walls of a church? Does a devout Moslem urinate on the mosque? Does a worthy citizen of Socialist Ethiopia urinate on a Kebele? Never!' (p11)

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3. The Kebele system was a ward-based or neighbourhood-based administrative system that was put into place by the Derg or military council that took over power in Ethiopia after the overthrow of the monarchy. Kebeles served the practical function of ensuring that government control was felt at that very basic level of the ward or neighbourhood. According to Edmond J. Keller (1988: 196) Kebeles were "instruments of state power" which also had "the responsibility for neighbourhood development and security".

The regime considers Ato Yishak as having committed sacrilege. This attempt to turn a seemingly innocuous secular offense into a religious one is part of what I see as the ambivalence and paradox of power. If one takes into account that this is a regime that comes into power after overthrowing the monarchy, the contradiction becomes apparent through how the new republic's leader is elevated to the position of a deity. Power and the leaders are now again literally worshipped just like in the deposed feudal system which is supposed to be a thing of the past. Significantly, this seems to bring out the aspect of myth, illusion and image-making as the reality on the ground is such that the circumstance of the ordinary citizen has not really changed in any positive way. In other words, the regime seems to believe its own propaganda on the success of its own policies and therefore finds it hard to believe that there are illiterate Ethiopians, one of whom could be Ato. What is important to note here is the irony of the strong religious bent of the African socialists in general who, according to Ayi Kwei Armah (1967: 10) "were so busy condemning the motivational gimmicks of Christian religion (as so much opium) that they failed to see that they were themselves creating a religious system *par excellence*".

As already noted, flattery or exalting the Great Chairman seems to play a great role in the mythicisation of the leader. The court officials are constantly aware of whom they owe their positions to. They therefore go to great lengths to ensure that they are seen or heard doing the correct thing, which is glorifying the Chairman. There is no doubt that the power that the officials wield and display derives from the leader that they exalt. Thus, it is in their interest to ensure that the source of their power remains intact. This explains the zeal and 'conviction' with which they execute their duties. One also senses that the praise singing or flattery by the dictator's officials is also part of their strategies for survival. In other words, public display of loyalty to the leader is part and parcel of a personality cult. This is why the prosecutor makes it a point to mention the Great Chairman or quote him extensively. For example, in the case against Ato Yishak, the illiterate saboteur, the prosecutor's emphasis is on loyalty to the leader and more importantly, the leader's words are reproduced verbatim in court. By doing this, the prosecutor highlights his own loyalty to and reverence for the leader by demonstrating acceptance and acknowledgement of his words. In addition, it is again intended to highlight the exceptional or superhuman character of the ruler whom everybody is supposed to worship. The incongruity of all this is brought to the fore by the apparent puny

and harmless nature of the accused against whom the fawning officials and the Great Chairman are pitted. It is this incongruity that shatters the mythologisation.

The extent of the personality cult is further demonstrated by the sheer number of times the court officials mention the leader's title or refer to him in the stories.[4] In the case against Ato Yishak, the illiterate saboteur, this happens more than ten times. Invoking the leader's title in court and juxtaposing it with Ato Yshak's 'crime' of urinating in front of the Kebele office becomes much more than just that. In fact, it becomes a crime against the cult itself. This is why in spite of his apparent illiteracy, ignorance, innocence and "advanced age", the court sentences him to "fifteen years of corrective labour in a state farm" (p22).

Loyalty to the leader and his exaltation are witnessed again in the 'The case of the valiant torturer' (p23-33). The accused, Corporal Yimer Yared, is employed by the state to torture opponents of the regime to make them confess their crimes. Through Yimer Yared, Hama Tuma demonstrates that a personality cult can indeed create bands of fanatical followers prepared to follow the leader all the way. Fanatical followers such as the Valiant Torturer are prepared to inflict pain, hack off limb, maim or kill in the name of the leader. Yimer Yared's fanatical zeal or blind loyalty is revealed by the fact that he is unable to empathise with any of his victims. To him, it appears it is the revolution or the leader that is the victim of those that he tortures. The pervasiveness of the injustice is such that at every level of the system, every official does what he does for and in the name of the leader or for the preservation and furtherance of his vision. The irony is that the torturer, like the court officials, is able to deploy the figure or person of the dictator in an attempt to justify his actions. This, as will be demonstrated later in the chapter, becomes dictatorship's Achilles heel as ultimately every crime can be traced to his doorstep. Every official justifies his behaviour by invoking the name of the leader at every opportunity.

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4. In an article that induces a sense of despair, newspaper columnist Nqaba Matshazi examines the creation of a personality cult in Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe. The Zimbabwen reality is so familiar as it echoes what has been ecountered elsewhere. He puts this process into perspective by juxtaposing Mugabe with past dictators from history. One almost gets the feeling that the events in Zimbabwe are a replay of what one witnesses in texts such as that of Hama Tuma and other writers. See "Cult of personality: Mugabe legacy at risk of being farcical". *Newsday* 21 September 2017.

3.4 "Is it a Twitch or a Wink?"[5]

This section focuses on the debate on the ambivalence and paradox of power examining how Tuma's stories encourage re-thinking notions of subversion and resistance. As already noted, the anthology is largely about dictatorship, power and the citizen. Tuma deliberately uses his writing to demonstrate how the ordinary citizen who is weak, powerless and victimised is able to subvert dictatorship by laying bare its numerous transgressions and opening it up to ridicule and condemnation. His stories are turned into an instrument to unmask the hypocrisy, victimisation and wide-spread injustice. This section examines in detail Tuma's approach, style or technique largely drawing on Foucault's and James Scott's notions of power and resistance.

In the stories there is abundant evidence of the reality of the dictator's power, his omnipresence and omnipotence, with a glaring impression of a huge mismatch in the power relations between the state and the citizens being created. This study argues here that Tuma's intention is not only to present the dictator's subject as a helpless victim, but to depict this ordinary citizen as a wily opponent capable of subversion and resistance. The stories demonstrate the undeniable power of the dictator and his regime over the citizens. All the accused from the 'illiterate saboteur' to the 'incurable hedonist' are dragged to court, tried and summarily sentenced to lengthy prison sentences or undergo ridiculous but dehumanising punishment. All this creates an illusion of helplessness on the part of the 'offenders' while at the same time heightening the dictator's absolute power which enables him to arrest, accuse, condemn and punish suspected or alleged opponents for ridiculous offences. However, focusing on the apparent victimhood of the dictator's subjects does not adequately address Hama Tuma's intention in the stories.

While this study does not intend to dwell on the hackneyed notions of combat literature, instrumentalisation or commitment in literature, which prescribe the role of writing or the writer as that of fighting injustice and effecting social change, it recognises and acknowledges

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5. Scott (1990) examines how difficult it sometimes is to read or interpret the actions of subordinate classes in society. He argues that the relationship between the powerful and the subordinate groups is one of duplicity whereby each group always masks its true feelings or intentions. According to him the weak and the powerful always have "obvious and compelling reasons to seek refuge behind a mask" when in the presence of the other (1990: 10).

Hama Tuma's overall intention of unmasking the grotesque nature of the Ethiopian dictator and his regime. In doing so, the principal strategy adopted by Tuma is the deployment of satire in the stories. It is this device that works as the link or glue that binds the stories. Satire, as will be demonstrated later in this section, also serves the function of transforming the dictator's victim into a new being capable of attracting the suspicious and insecure glare of a ruler anxious about losing his grip on power.

To appreciate and understand Tuma's strategy of deploying satire, it is important for one to be constantly aware that the writer's overall concern revolves around power and its performance in Mengistu's Ethiopia. At this point some of Foucault's views on power become very informative in the analysis of Tuma's thrust. What this study finds fascinating and worth applying in the reading of Tuma's stories in relation to dictatorship is Foucault's view that:

> a power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it really is to be a power relationship: that 'the other' (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognised and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up. (1982: 789)

My reading of Foucault in this respect is that power or its exercise can be understood within the context of a relationship between the ruler and the ruled or even in the context of two parties that are more or less equal. Here the paradox and emphasis seem to be that each of the two elements cannot function or exist without the other. In my view this demonstrates what should be regarded as the ambivalence and paradox of power. The implication of this at first glance is that the dictator's power is only possible through the existence of the subjects. The ruler's power only becomes concrete or real because there are subjects over which it is exercised. More importantly, Foucault's assertion that both the ruler and the ruled recognise the existence of the other implies that each of them has some amount of power over the other in one way or another. This dispersion of power which Foucault (1978: 93) famously put as "power is everywhere", has huge implications on unmasking and reading the power relationship between the dictator and his subject in Tuma's stories.

If indeed "power is everywhere" one begins to see the logic in some of the actions of the dictator and the subjects. First, one sees a realisation by the dictator that the subject is and will always be a threat to his power. So, to the dictator, exercising power or the act of ruling,

means always trying to ensure that the subject remains just that: a subject under him. In other words, the ruler will always act to forestall any potential threats to his position. When one reads Tuma's stories in light of this, the logic of setting up the courts begins to make sense. While the act of setting up the courts and carrying out the trials is a demonstration of the power that the dictator wields, that act can also be read as an acknowledgement of the power that the subject has, that is, the potential to act in a manner that threatens the dictator. It is this power which is in the form of the potential to act that forces the dictator to perform the act of setting up the courts and carrying out the trials. If the power relationship is looked at from such a perspective, each of the accused begins to assume a new persona whose existence the dictator and his regime suspect, recognise and seek to thwart. So Yishak Nasser, Yimer Yared, Almenesh Kebede, Tigist Belede, Docho Melke and other ordinary citizens dragged to court begin to loom so large and menacing to the dictator that he has to act on them.

One other relevant facet of this application of Foucault's conception of power as being everywhere is his assertion that:

> Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always "inside" power, there is no "escaping" it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned, because one is subject to the law in any case? Or that, history being the ruse of reason, power is the ruse of history, always emerging the winner? This would be to misunderstand the strictly relational character of power relationships. Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. (1978: 95-96)

The watchword in this lengthy quotation is "resistance". Put bluntly, Foucault's view is that wherever there is power there is bound to be resistance. In other words, power will always spawn resistance or there are always forces in opposition to the existing authority. In the context of Tuma's stories, Foucault's view can be read as alluding to the reality of the entanglement of the ruler and the ruled in a relationship which either acknowledges in one way or the other. Interestingly, this a relationship that remains even if roles of ruler and ruled are reversed. Reading this against Tuma's stories, one begins to make sense of some of the actions taken by the dictator or his subjects.

The foregoing becomes more convincing despite the tragedy of it all when one factors in James Scott's (1990) notions of resistance and weapons of the weak. Like Foucault, Scott views the ruler's subject not just as a helpless victim of power but one with also the potential to act. In fact, the crux of Scott's argument is that although there is a massive mismatch in the power relationship between the ruler and the ruled, the ruled or the "weak" (as he puts it) have a vast array of weapons at their disposal that they can deploy against the edifice of power. He identifies foot dragging, gossip, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and others (1990: 29). While Scott cautions against romanticising the "weapons of the weak", he underlines their impact:

> The overall impact on the structure of power of this nibbling away is not very appreciable. But it is one of the few means available to a subordinate class to clothe the practice of resistance with the safe disguise of outward compliance. (p283)

If this is the case, one sees the validity of what Scott says in relation to Foucault's assertion that power is everywhere and that wherever there is power there is also some form of resistance.

As hinted at earlier in the section, the picture that now emerges when reading Tuma's stories drawing on Foucault and Scott is that all the accused in the cases that are being tried become more than just victims or subjects of the dictator's power. Each one of the accused characters can now be read as an adversary to the dictator. While on the surface each of the stories is clearly about the injustices perpetrated by the Mengistu dictatorship, this study argues that each one of the accused, the alleged crime and his or her actions in court should be read as much more than that. At this point it is important to recall and examine the conventional reading of Tuma's stories that focuses on Tuma's use of satire to expose and censure some of the excesses of the Mengistu dictatorship. Tuma presents the dictator and his system as a huge edifice of power pitted against a puny subject who is depicted as a helpless victim. Accordingly, throughout the stories the power relationship is enormously skewed against the ordinary citizen who has to survive life under a dictator who literally behaves as he wishes and gets away with it. One of the few credible analyses of the stories is that by James Ogude (2000: 89), but it also centralises Tuma's satirical approach which is directed at the dictator's power:

> Hama Tuma makes a remarkable departure from the realist tradition and draws on one of the greatest vehicles for assailing political dictatorship: political satire. I use satire here simply to mean a vehicle for derision and laughter which is aimed at eliciting our moral indignation towards the subject of ridicule and scorn.' The power of Hama Tuma's satire lies precisely in its superb humour that underpins the absurd reality that he dramatises before our eyes.

My observation in this respect is that while there is occasional reference to the "plight of the ordinary Ethiopian populace who suffer at the hands of the state" (Ogude, 88), there is silence among the "people", "populace" or "victims" in terms of their potential to act.

However, the effect of satire in terms of Tuma's approach should not be underestimated. Satire has been defined in various but essentially similar ways. Ngugi (1972: 55) says

> Satire takes for its province a whole society, and for its purpose, criticism. The satirist sets himself certain standards and criticizes society when and where it departs from these norms. He invites us to assume his standards and share the moral indignation which moves him to pour derision and ridicule on society's failings. He corrects through painful, sometimes malicious, laughter.

The import of all this is that where there is a mismatch in power relationships, satire can be deployed to bring down the leviathan to an almost ordinary level by exposing the injustice on the playing field. Significantly, this conventional reading of satire and Tuma's stories gives satire or the writer power in relation to the miscarriage of justice. This section, however, seeks to refocus the reading of Tuma's stories. It argues that re-reading Tuma's stories within the context of Foucault's and Scott's notions of resistance and weapons of the weak can be illuminating in terms of interrogating power and the myths surrounding it. If power and resistance are everywhere, can the ordinary citizen be implicated in the image-making in terms of their submissiveness, listlessness and hero-worship? Can Scott's argument hold water in light of the almost always predictable outcome of the clash between power and the citizen? If one draws on Scott's notion, the significance of the citizen's new role or persona begins to take shape in the courtroom when one witnesses the overt and covert subversion of the dictator within his prescribed official space. In this sense the trials become a dramatization of the dictator-subject contestation for power. In other words, the court trials become a symbol of the power play, not only in the courtroom but the whole society. Each of the accused characters can therefore be read, not only in terms of what Tuma intends to achieve with his satirical approach. Running under the surface of each case or trial are images

of intransigent individuals playing the regime and toying with it. As each case plays out before the full glare of the public what is demonstrated is what this study views as the ambivalence and paradox of power. The court trials ultimately work against the dictator and his system as they bring out into the open the dictator's desperate attempt to secure legitimacy before the eyes of the world. More importantly, the trials open a window for one to witness the covert world that the dictator seeks to suppress, brutalise and cow into silence. This is a world where the power of the dictator feels threatened, primarily by being unacknowledged. From another perspective, the predictable outcome of the conflict between the citizen and power in a dictatorship puts under the spotlight the notion of weapons of the weak and specifically, the deployment of parody or satire.

Since the power of the dictator and his system rests on visibility and omnipresence, it attempts to invade even the private space of the citizens by flooding it with symbols of the cult. There is shock and near disbelief, however, on the part of the dictator and his system to realise that there is a whole world underground where there is indifference, disinterest, enigmatic smiles and bemusement which translate into a lack of acknowledgement of the illusion and myths about the dictator's power. This unwittingly comes out through the public trials. Read in this way, each of the stories reveals an undercurrent of subversive activities. Behaviour or actions of ordinary people become double-layered, ambivalent and ambiguous. The question here is whether the behaviour or actions are deliberate and calculated. This is a question that the courts and the regime are anxious about. As a result, there is a ubiquitous atmosphere of suspicion within the system about the meaning(s) of every gesture, word, or lack of it by the subject.

In 'The Case of the illiterate saboteur', Yishak Nasser the accused becomes much more than he says he is. The narrator describes him as "a man in his fifties, Ethiopian – thin, with almost totally white hair" and as "the perfect Ethiopian" who "stood comfortably in the middle of the cage, his handcuffed hands covering his crotch as if he were naked"(p10). The defence lawyer calls him "A loyal citizen indeed" (p11). The picture of the accused that emerges here is one of innocence, bewilderment and harmlessness. This image is also reinforced and heightened by what appears to be the lack of any ulterior motive in the answers that he gives when he is cross-examined in court. However, through the questions and responses one begins to get a new picture of the accused Yishak Nasser as he is grilled in court. To the regime,

his innocence, ignorance, bewilderment and inability to recognise the enormity or implications of his actions in front of the Kebele office are all contrived. So, the regime sees a picture of subterfuge. In this way the 'illiterate saboteur' becomes the symbol or representative of the vast majority like him who are in similar plight. The dictator and the regime are suspicious and aware of the implications of Yishak Nasser's actions. What is more worrying to the regime is that the ignorance and innocence displayed by the accused are contrived or a pretence that could inspire real opposition. The humour lies in that an all-powerful regime is baffled by the meaning of hapless Yishak Nasser's piss! What this case draws attention to is the regime's level of paranoia. This is shown by the countless laws of whose existence ordinary citizens are unaware and how as a result, they violate the laws without intending to.

To read into the actions of the accused and their implications in Tuma's stories requires a close examination of the court 'transcripts' as presented through the eyes of the narrator. Here once again one recalls Foucault's observations in the essay entitled 'Subject and Power' where he zeroes in on power relations: "in order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations" (1982: 780). How then does one read into the actions of the accused in terms of the crimes they are accused of committing and more tellingly, in terms of their demeanour and responses during the trials, if the intention of Tuma's overall satirical approach is largely to represent the accused as the victim of a ruthless dictatorship? This section argues that the actions of all the accused in the stories should be viewed within the context of the power play or contestation between the dictator and a seemingly powerless accused. In other words, images painted in the trials are ones that can be read along-side Scott's notions of the weak.

In 'The case of the valiant torturer' (23-33) Tuma uses satire just like in other stories to censure the Ethiopian regime's brutal methods of clinging onto power. Above all, this particular case is used to expose to society and the world beyond the extent of the human rights abuses and political repression. In this case the trial of Yimer Yared becomes an unexpected public confession of state sanctioned torture as the regime's torture chambers are flung wide open for all to witness the horror that goes on in the state dungeons. Tuma's satire is no doubt designed to chide, ridicule and condemn the dictator and his system.

Corporal Yared presents to the court and to the world the gory details from an insider's experiences:

> 'The effective methods which have helped guard the Revolution are many but I shall mention a few of them. Pushing a bottle into the vagina and snap-kicking it upward, a hot iron rod into the anus, peeling the skin slowly and layer after layer from the arm or thigh and force- feeding the bastard his own flesh, submersion in boiling oil to be alternated with immersion in ice cold water (what we call the Hell and Hell Trip), using pincers to rip off the nose (called plastic surgery in our trade), cutting the penis and forcing the prisoner's mother to eat it in front of him (this has proved to be so effective that the mothers themselves have often gone crazy), putting salt and pissing into a festering wound ...' (p29)

His confessions unwittingly become the confessions of the state. The confession shows the state turning against one of its own or the court tussle becomes the state against the state. Significantly, corporal Yared's words become a revelation of how he has transformed from a loyal and patriotic state functionary into an avowed opponent whom the state now seeks to punish. We are told by the prosecutor that the corporal had served the revolution with distinction "as a torturer in the famous Third Police Station" (p25). This trial demonstrates how quickly one can turn from being a loyal, obedient citizen into an unlikely opponent of the state. Unlike most of the accused brought before the courts, Yimer Yared insults and condemns the state before the eyes of the people. Again, the irony is that he insults the state or the revolution, all in the name of the revolution as shown by the charge sheet read out in court by the prosecutor:

> The witnesses attest that Corporal Yimer entered into an argument with the said officers during which he not only called them liberal cowards (imagine high officers of the Revolution being accused of such incredible crimes!) but went on to declare that a revolution and a state which let torturers go idle deserve to be changed. (p25)

Yared's professed loyalty to the state and his honest fanaticism in serving the regime become a devastating weapon to subvert dictatorship publicly. He feels that offenders are no longer being punished adequately. He even goes on to suggest what the state should do in order to bring the revolution back on track, which in reality means more arrests and brutalisation of perceived opponents.

If Corporal Yared's weapon against the regime is his loyalty and honesty, his greatest act of subversion is when he belittles and ridicules the torture inflicted upon him by the famous "torture hero of the Revolution", Sergeant Teshome. The prosecutor reveals how Corporal Yared frustrates and subverts the state, not by attempting to flee but by painting its methods of torture as child's play. The prosecutor reveals all this to an astonished audience in court:

> And when Sergeant Teshome interrogated him vigorously he harassed him unceasingly, taunting him to refine his methods, bombarding him with morale-destroying statements like 'Your days are finished, better retire!', 'You are still using the Israeli method?!', 'Is this all you know of the East German techniques?!' The patient sergeant almost had a nervous breakdown due to the insensitive corporal who refused to get broken as he should. (p24)

The significance of this case is that it parodies those responsible for gross human rights violations. By presenting himself to the court as a victim of a regime "callous' to his "feelings", "work ethics" and "desire to serve the Revolution unceasingly" (31), Yared juxtaposes himself with the real victims of dictatorship who have gone through his hands and those of other torturers like him. The significance that is lost to Yared and the regime is that real victims are not seen or heard in this case, it is the perpetrator who presents himself as the victim. More importantly, Yared is not on trial, nor is he punished for his crimes against humanity, but for a triviality, which creates the impression that the dignity and lives of the real victims are nothing.

In the story 'The case of the socialist witchdoctor' Tuma again forces one to acknowledge how unexpected and unusual opposition to dictatorship can be. More importantly, the story explodes and lays bare the myths and hypocrisy surrounding the Ethiopian dictatorship. The accused, Yibabe Yitbarek, seems harmless and an unlikely source of headaches to the regime. Even the narrator is initially hoodwinked by his appearance: "His face was round, cherubic describes it best - the kind of face that arouses the protective mothering instinct in any female" (p36). Unlike most of the accused in the anthology Yitbarek is young and educated, and therefore becomes the perfect intellectual weapon used by the writer to rebut state propaganda. This accused seems to be fully aware of the potential significance of being allowed to speak in court, and therefore grabs this opportunity to reveal the hollowness of the state's incessant messages of deifying the Great Chairman and the Revolution, while condemning thousands to hunger, prison and death. Unlike the other accused, Yitbarek is not

ignorant of the reality of his 'crimes', and neither does he pretend to be. Through him, Hama Tuma reveals that the edifice of dictatorship is built on a foundation of hypocrisy, lies, fear and selfishness.

The crux of the argument in this section is that the actions of each of the accused in all the cases should be read as iconoclasm or iconoclastic acts. Alexey Tikhomorov (2012: 49) defines iconoclastic acts as

> spontaneous, unsanctioned incidents of individual or collective violence inflicted on symbols of power and the official iconography by those who want to delegitimise, harm or cleanse the symbolic body of the leader, which personifies the power regime as a whole.

From this one can read each of the accused's actions in court and in committing the crime as acts that consciously and unconsciously subvert the authority of the dictator and his regime. This is done, not necessarily by directly confronting the dictator and his regime, but committing acts aimed at the symbols of the personality cult. A simple act of disobedience or violation of the law becomes part of the numerous acts that transform the victim/subject into an unexpected opponent of the dictator. So, this is the image one gets through the 'illiterate saboteur', the torturer who taunts the regime for not inflicting enough pain on him, or Yibabe Yitbarek the 'witchdoctor' who cons even state officials and dumbfounds the prosecutor and the judge when he calmly accepts everything thrown at him by the court, including the punishment that the prosecutor calls for. Another iconoclastic act that Yitbarek carries out directed at the personality cult is his abuse of the revered portrait of the Chairman. According to the prosecutor, Yitbarek violated "Articles which forbid the hanging of the Great Chairman's portraits in unworthy places, which make it a serious crime to make fun of our Revolution and leaders" (p36-37). Yitbarek further trashes this symbol of the revolution in court by making fun of its ubiquity:

> I did hang the picture of our Chairman on the wall and though the police interrogators tried to ascribe evil to this act, I meant no harm. His picture hangs everywhere, even in the toilets and bars and it was proper it should hang where social work was being done. (p41)

The sacrilege is that he turns the ubiquity into a weapon that demeans the person of the leader and thereby ultimately eroding his authority before the eyes of everyone. The effect of his action is reinforced by publicly associating the portrait with "toilets and bars" or his con job, as if to send the message that the Chairman approves of it all. Yitbarek's greatest

act is in the form of his responses in court. He shows neither fear nor deference as he jostles with the prosecutor and the state in court. In fact the state versus Yitbarek, the socialist witchdoctor, becomes a memorable showdown which adds not just to the image of a brutal regime bent on crushing all suspected dissent, but a showdown in which the giant apparatus of dictatorship is reduced to helplessness and exasperation by a youthful unemployed con artist. In the showdown Yitbarek becomes the voice of ordinary citizens who exist in the gutters and sewers of society. On the stand, Yitbarek is transformed into the accuser/prosecutor and the dictator and his regime become the accused. Yitbarek becomes what has been termed an iconophobe who, says W.J.T. Mitchell, is a person who "believes that the image is a site of a special power that must either be contained or exploited" (Finnegan & Kang, 2004: 381). As a con artist, Yitbarek clearly chooses to do the latter. Read in this light, the accused in the other cases such as the queue breaker, Docho Melke in 'The Case of the Traitorous Alphabet' and others are not just victims of a vicious dictatorship anymore. While the power of the dictator is demonstrated by the ability to create an illusion of what Matte Rolfe describes as "Making things and people move without moving oneself" (Cohen, 2004: 614), each of the accused displays what Tikhomirov (2012: 51) calls "multiple identities of a subject who, living under a dictatorship, could obey and adapt, negotiate with the regime and resist simultaneously".

Although each of the little acts of the accused looks insignificant, inconsequential and harmless, the regime's response is merciless and designed to send a strong warning message to the whole society. This is demonstrated by the always harsh sentences passed by the court which depict a regime wary of any inkling of dissent: Ato Yishak Nasser the illiterate saboteur is sentenced to fifteen years of corrective labour, Yibabe Yitbarek the socialist witchdoctor life-long hard labour and Miss Almenesh hard labour for life. While some of the accused appear genuinely ignorant of the regime's endless array of penal codes that can be violated, others appear to be wily opponents dressed in sheep's clothing as they use the persona of innocence, honesty and ignorance to violate the battery of penal codes and above all, to embarrass or humiliate the dictator and his regime. Whether it is deliberate, wilful and calculated or just blundering ignorance on the part of the accused, being hauled to court and the ensuing trials become a public spectacle that allow the accused ordinary citizen to speak out in public and, more importantly, an opportunity to stare the regime in the eye. In this

respect, Docho Melke's case and those of others are memorable examples of how the weak can suddenly acquire a subversive persona that seems to frighten even a grossly powerful dictatorship out of its wits.

Besides the dictator's portrait, one of the most powerful and also highly revered icons of the dictator and his regime is the national slogan or motto "Ethiopia Tikdem" (Ethiopia First). This is an icon that is supposed to symbolise the regime's envisaged revolutionary change. At the same time "Ethiopia Tikdem" is a strong tool in the mythicisation of the nation's leader as it is logically attributed to his 'wisdom' and supposed far-seeing eye. The crime of gigantic proportions that Docho Melke commits is that he mangles this national icon by incorrectly spelling it in the process of carrying out his duties as a type-setter at the regime's propaganda mouth-piece, the daily newspaper called 'RALLY!' The prosecutor dramatizes the enormity of Docho Melke's act when he outlines the state's case against him:

> The accused,' the prosecutor continued, 'knows *Ethiopia Tikdem*, he has printed it thousands of times. He also knows quite well the bitter struggle we have waged against anarchists and the letters of the alphabet allied to them. Yet, he had the traitorous madness lurking in him. On that day of shame which led to his immediate arrest, 'RALLY!' came out with the motto Ethiopia Tidkem rather than Ethiopia Tikdem: 'Let Ethiopia get weak' rather than 'Ethiopia First'. Is this not treason of the highest level? Can anyone state boldly that Docho, a qualified printer, knows not the revolutionary difference between tikdem and tidkem? Doesn't he, an experienced printer, know that when 'k' follows 'd', a country can be lost? Without doubt he knew. Those who say ' *Ethiopia Tidkem* ' are anarchists and secessionists because they want to see our country weakened. (P75-76)

In this instance again an ordinary citizen literally accomplishes what a violent struggle against the regime would have taken years to accomplish. His spelling error transformed the national motto "Ethiopia Tikdem" to 'Ethiopia Tidkem' or "Ethiopia First" to "Let Ethiopia get weak" (p76). The error symbolically smashes into smithereens one of the illusions or myths propping up the dictator and his regime. In the process it becomes immaterial to the regime and the public whether or not Docho Melke did what he did innocently or deliberately. In fact, it is unimaginable to the regime that Melke genuinely made a mechanical error. What seems to frighten the regime is the thought that Melke's act was deliberate and pre-meditated.

3.5 Conclusion

The chapter has examined how the dictator and his regime create an aura, illusion and myth of omnipresence and omnipotence through various signs and symbols which include the dictator's portrait, his words, writings, slogans and sayings. These are ubiquitous as they flood and saturate both private and public space. They are constantly invoked thereby building and reinforcing a pervasive personality cult. In such a political landscape there is an enormous mismatch in power relations where the ordinary citizen becomes a puny actor on a stage where there is always one main actor whose figure and voice dominate, marginalise and silence all the actors.

The chapter also demonstrated that Hama Tuma's stories can productively be read within the context of Foucault's and James Scott's notions of resistance and weapons of the weak respectively. As a political activist, this could be Tuma's way of drawing attention to his own role and that of writing in general in the fight against injustice. Read this way images that are painted are no longer those of victimised, voiceless or helpless citizens. The dictator's supposed victim assumes a new persona through multiple identities as he negotiates and navigates his way through dictatorship. More importantly, his obedience and disobedience baffle and confuse a regime that is tragically paranoid. This in my view highlights the ambivalence and paradox of power as the regime's attempts to demonstrate its power only unmasks its fear and insecurity.

Tuma's work presents us with a chance to re-visit arguably one of the ugliest periods in Ethiopian history. While there is little doubt that Ethiopia was one of the numerous pawns in the Cold War tug-of-war between the East and the West with the Mengistu regime firmly choosing the former, one cannot absolve the regime from the litany of abuses, repression and wide-spread injustice perpetrated during that time. While Tuma deploys satire laden with humour to censure and ridicule Ethiopian dictatorship, this does not lessen the seriousness of the transgressions of the regime. The writer adopts a smart approach where the gory details of the political repression are not witnessed. The only occasion when he comes close to giving the reader a dose of shock treatment is in 'The case of the valiant torturer' in which one of the enforcers of the regime's repression graphically reveals to the court and the whole world how opponents of the regime are violently and brutally dealt with in the state torture chambers.

Hama Tuma's work is similar to that of many other African writers in that it is an attempt at re-writing, recovering or re-interpreting the past. In this respect one recalls the works of Ngugi, Achebe, Soyinka, Malawi's Jack Mapanje, Nuruddin Farah and may others cross the continent who use their writing to bring back into focus particular periods of their countries' history. The stories in Tuma's anthology present one with another chance to interrogate the perennial issue of power and its performance in post-independence Africa. Through the genre of the short story the writer is able to bring out into the open a motley of individual experiences that become representative of the larger society. In other words, the different cases with different accused citizens mean that the focus is not on one protagonist or 'victim'. In this way Tuma creates an illusion and impression that what is being revealed are not isolated events, thereby heightening the atmosphere of repression and injustice.

The resolution of the Cold War led to Francis Fukuyama's notion of the 'end of history' after the world witnessed momentous events such as the coming down of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communist dictatorships across Eastern Europe. The domino effect of such events did not leave Africa unscathed. The Mengistu regime was one of the notable casualties of these geo-political upheavals. Hama Tuma's stories are therefore an act of forcing society to remember or keep memories fresh and alive to what would otherwise be a long-forgotten episode in history.

Overall, in this chapter I have emphasised the significance of image-making in the performance of power, exploring concepts such as myths and illusion in order to highlight the inherent weaknesses of dictatorship.

Chapter 4

Boundaries and Transgressions in *Life and a Half*

4.1 Introduction

This chapter examines what it considers to be Sony Labou Tansi's peculiar but ground-breaking representation of the continent's seemingly unending woes at the centre of which, in African literature, is the ubiquitous African dictator. It interrogates Tansi's aesthetic experimentation focusing on the motivation behind the writer's break from the established forms of representation that had hitherto characterised African literature. The chapter explores how Tansi pushes, transgresses and re-draws boundaries, all of which are areas that have not received adequate critical attention.

The African postcolonial condition continues to be a subject of intense literary activity. The evolution of African writing reveals shifts, changes, abandonment of form and vision, and adoption of new strategies of representing the postcolony. At the height of the anti-colonial nationalist struggles the dominant mode of representation in the African novel had been the realist mode. Realist novels through their selection of facts and details from everyday life are supposed to produce the 'illusion of reality' by creating a picture of the world that closely resembles what is on the ground (Gakwandi, 1977: 26).

There is an ambivalent attitude towards realism among African writers. First, it is acknowledged that realism played a prominent role in the foundational writing such as that of Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Archibald Campbell Jordan, Chinua Achebe, Camara Laye, Ousmane Sembene, Wole Soyinka, Mariama Ba, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Peter Abrahams, Ama Ata Aidoo and others in their attempts to recover the African past or to correct what this generation saw as the distortion of the African image by colonialism. Here one has in mind texts in the mould of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) which confirm the intention to recover and recast the past. By adopting realism as the preferred mode of representing the African world, the goals of African writers at this point in time converged with those of the African nationalists as they could use their writing to articulate black people's plight. In fact, realism became a legitimating tool for the African nationalist project. In this way, directly and

indirectly, African writers contributed to the “reinvention” of the African nation state (Annie Gagiano, 2015: 82).

Tracing the genealogy of realism in African literature back to African nationalism goes a long way in explaining what then appears to be a crisis of representation that besets African writers in the post-independence period. This is a crisis that comes about as a result of the failure of African independence, which is then marked by a proliferation of what is now known as disillusionment literature. Some of the notable works of this period include Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Petals of Blood* (1977), Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People* (1966) and an array of works by a host of post-independence writers whose subject continues to be the failure of the African nation state. The genealogy of foundational African writers would not be complete without factoring in how African women writers such as Mariama Ba, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, Nawal El Sadawi and others have been trail-blazers in providing nuanced and firm representations of the same issues but focalising the female subject’s condition worsened by both colonialism and patriarchy. This is a foundation on which rests new and not so new voices such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Yvonne Vera, NoViolet Bulawayo, Yvonne Owuor and others. One should point out in this respect that women writers’ genealogies can also be traced back to both male and female writers as shown by the connections between Adichie and Achebe, Owuor and Ngugi or Vera and Marechera. It is the preoccupation with the political and social aspects of the nation state especially among male writers that has led critics such as Fredric Jameson (1986: 69) to label this kind of writing and Third World writing in general as “national allegories”. Susan Andrade (2011: 92) argues in this respect that over time female writers are no longer defined by their earlier “hesitancy” in confronting national issues directly as they now “represent the national imaginary more directly”. Although one can take issue with Jameson’s view of national allegory for its reductive nature, the nature of the representation in many of the foundational texts lends some credence to his claim.

The literature of disillusionment also marks the divorce from nationalism by the African writer. However, the failure of African independence or the disavowment of nationalism does not necessarily result in the abandonment of the realist mode of representation as one would expect. So in text after text African writers grapple with this ‘unexpected’ set of circumstances (Andrade, 2009). They begin a new project of critiquing and subsequently questioning African

nationalism whose epitome is the moment of independence. This reappraisal of the nationalist struggle and the coming into being of the African nation state is an attempt at the delegitimation of this whole process. The form of African writing at this stage surprisingly still remains dominated by the realist mode of representation but with nascent attempts at experimenting with other forms of representation. In this respect one begins to see writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah, Dambudzo Marechera and others incorporating modernistic features in their works. While realism with its insistence on replicating experience offers a means of bringing out the terrible impact of colonialism on African lives, the coming of independence and its aftermath make African writers realise its inadequacies in dealing with the complexities of this period. In *House of Hunger* (1978) Dambudzo Marechera is lauded mainly for his prescience and unequivocal repudiation of the Zimbabwean nationalist struggle and the nationalist vision which he demeans, belittles and delegitimates through the prostitute figure in the bar:

> I got up hastily and, escaping into the toilet, just made it to the bowl where I was violently sick. As I came out, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I collided with two massive breasts that were straining angrily against a thin T-shirt upon which was written the legend ZIMBABWE. (p31).

The figure of the female prostitute linked to the name Zimbabwe at the height of that country's liberation struggle is a deliberate assault by Marechera on the male construct of the nation which is normally couched in female terms. More significantly, Marechera makes his name through an attempt at abandoning what all along had been the conventional mode of representation in African writing and adopting modernism. Although other African writers such Armah or Ngugi had adopted techniques of modernism much earlier than Marechera, their works are still steeped in some kind of African nationalism. In Marechera's work one sees an apparent lack of plot whose most visible feature is the stream of consciousness technique. He also seems to push boundaries in that he throws away the kind of self-censorship that characterised most African writing. In spite of this seeming repudiation of the nationalist vision, what marks and sets apart most of the texts of this period is their realist depiction of disillusionment, despair, corruption, decay and general misgovernance in post-independence societies. The persistence of this debilitating condition of the post-colony

seems to spur African writers to search for new forms of representation. It is in this light that Sony Labou Tansi's *Life and a Half* which is the focus of this chapter should be viewed.

All this is a cursory view of the evolution of African literature highlighting some of the issues that this study as a whole keeps referring to because they are a kind of running thread that one discerns throughout African writing in general. There is need to problematize some of these views. In doing so one is at the same time mindful of the plethora of views regarding African literature in terms of intention, motivation, audience, language and technique. One important reminder to always bear in mind is that echoed by Obioma Nnaemeka (1994). Nnaemeka emphasises that in dealing with African literature we should never lose sight of the fact that the African reality in African literature is an invention or a reconstruction which should never be accepted as is but should be questioned:

> The pervasive acceptance, particularly in the West, of African creative works as a mimesis of African cultural and social reality accounts for the inclusion of African novels such as *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, and *Le Pauvre, Christ de Bomba* in syllabi for sociology, anthropology, and political science courses. Therein lies the danger, however; for the use of novels in this way implies an acceptance of their realism without having questioned the reality they supposedly depict; in other words, those who adopt novels for such purposes tend to overlook the manner in which they have constructed reality. (140)

Nnaemeka calls for caution in examining what African writers write about, how and why they do it, and ultimately, who they write for. This presents an exciting challenge as it alerts us to the complexities of the "realities" that earlier writers sought to replicate and also presents an opportunity to subject to scrutiny some later writing's claims of newness and difference.

As has already been noted, African writing was given what was supposed to be an unassailable purpose by tying it to the goals of African nationalism. However, the complication in roping in writing to the nationalist cause has also resulted in what Simon Gikandi (2012: 310) has called "double mimesis: the imperative to question existing colonialist theories of representation and the desire to inscribe the lived experiences of the colonised and to will them into being as modern subjects". Although there has always been a story-telling tradition in African societies, most published works in indigenous or European languages by early writers such Sol Plaatje, Amos Tutuola, Chief Daniel Fagunwa, Grace Ogot and others largely remained invisible or could not adequately serve as a guide or template, so African writers

turned to traditions from Europe, principally realism. According to Gikandi "Realism seemed to occupy a privileged position in the politics and poetics of cultural nationalism because it promised narratives that would produce the objective world of the colonised and represent their spaces as autonomous and self-engendered" (p317). However, the onset of African independence and its aftermath quickly exposed the glaring short-comings of the 'reality' on the ground. More importantly, argues Mineke Schipper (1985: 559), that "'reality' is experienced and expressed by artists and writers in different ways. Reality and knowledge about it are socially determined and therefore relative". This is a point also highlighted by Susan Andrade (2012: 295).

Several issues have emerged so far. First, the deployment of realism is an attempt by African writers to counter colonial representation of the African. Secondly, there is a convergence of nationalism and the literary movement and then a realisation of the inadequacies of realism. Significantly, therefore, the failure of African independence essentially became also the failure of the realist mode of representation. However, in spite of this apparent failure of realism there seems to be a reluctance or inability to abandon this mode of representation and resort to something else to capture the new African 'realities'. It is in the midst of this crisis of representation that Sony Labou Tansi emerges as an important trail blazing figure in African fiction since his text appears well ahead of texts such Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) or Ahmadou Kourouma's *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* (2000), especially in terms of his unusual representation of the postcolonial condition. He emerges at a moment when there is a rupture between nationalism and the African writer, a moment when the persistent and worsening postcolonial condition brings out into the open the inadequacies of the once trusted mode of representation.

Tansi has attracted quite a substantial amount of attention in critical circles and continues to do so as he is 'discovered' and 'rediscovered' especially outside the Francophone world. According to Julin Everett (2013: 2) there are ongoing discussions on Tansi's works, especially with regards to issues of violence and power. Everett, like this study, views Tansi's works as still worthy of study because of their enduring relevance in contemporary Africa. This study uses *Life and a Half* (2011), Alison Dundy's translation of Tansi's *La Vie et Demie* (1979). A number of studies on *Life and a Half* and Tansi's work in general have been preoccupied with issues of oppression and resistance. There have also been a number of studies focusing on

the representation of violence in this particular novel. Pascale Perraudin (2005) has questioned the prevalence of violence in *Life and a Half*. In her comparative study of Sony Labou Tansi and Dambudzo Marechera, Flora Veit-Wild (2005: 27) draws on Bakhtin and Mbembe to examine the "grotesque body of the postcolony". Lydie Moudileno (1998: 31) grapples with the question of whether *Life and a Half* can be called a novel of hope, but is unable to reach a satisfactory conclusion. Almost a decade later Moudileno (2006) returns to Tansi's novel taking issue with what she sees as a partial reading or misreading of the novel that focuses on the magical realist aspect. To Eileen Julien (1989: 382), "*La vie et demie* is about the betrayal of discourse" and she goes on to interrogate the relationship between words and power. Julien also argues that the novel is "no mere recital of the ills of political oppression" (372). This study revisits some of these clearly conflicting views attempting to offer fresh perspectives. While the issue of violence has received some attention, there is still need to complicate the representation of violence in Tansi's work without simply reducing it to oppression and resistance. In addition, although there is consensus on the experimental nature of the novel, surprisingly there still continues to be debate on the overall narrative mode adopted by the writer. The dominant view places *Life and a Half* in the magical realist tradition. However, there is still need to examine the effectiveness of this mode and the motivation behind its adoption by the writer. There has also been little study of Tansi's conception of time and its implications on some of the major issues in the novel and in African literature. It appears there also have been some difficulty in pinning down Tansi's vision and notions of hope/despair (Thapelo Mashishi, 1999: 1). One can argue that this is a common feature shared by a large number of dictator texts, especially in terms of the recurrent violence, the unfulfilled hopes and the endless quest for meaningful change.

The chapter first examines Tansi's apparent abandonment of the realist mode and how his search for a new form heralds the serious or earnest embrace of experimentation with an unusual mode of representation within the context of African postcolonialism. The chapter argues that Tansi manipulates time and space in an innovative way to paint and re-paint new images of dictatorship and the postcolonial condition in general. It also explores how Tansi attempts to build, mangle, erase and resurrect characters by deploying relentless violence on the human body. In this respect the chapter interrogates how Tansi seeks to simultaneously repudiate and restore hope in conditions where existence is an endless nightmare. The

chapter seeks to achieve this by zeroing in on the author's construction and 'destruction' of human figures which I regard as 'half-characters'. Ultimately the chapter interrogates how Tansi's relentless creation and re-creation of blurred and at the same time jarring sharp images and his spatial and temporal manipulation deny the dictator presence and permanence. So, the chapter seeks to answer the following questions: What are the strategies deployed by Tansi to represent worsening postcolonial conditions? What is the significance of the body in the performance of power? What is the impact of the manipulation of time in relation to power? How does Tansi blur and redefine boundaries in the novel?

4.2 Sony Labou Tansi and *Life and a Half*: Synopsis

Sony Labou Tansi has been hailed for his experimental writing. Kenneth Harrow (1994: 315) sees Tansi as "both the heir to a generation of struggle and the fore-runner of a new powerful school of Congolese or Central African writers whose works respond to a set of political and social circumstances". According to Dominic Thomas (2002: 52)

> Sony Labou Tansi's attempts at dismantling traditional narrative linearity, his lexical and syntactical creativity, and his concern with the dissipated civil authority characteristic of disintegrating postcolonial states have contributed to the creation of a subversive body of writings.

These are some of the critical views that this study draws on and subjects to intense scrutiny in this chapter.

Sony Labou Tansi, whose real name is Marcel Ntsoni, was born on 5 June 1944 at Kimwanza in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He moved to the smaller Republic of the Congo early in his life and became a citizen of the country. He published a number of novels from the 1970s to the 1990s. Writing in French, few of his works have been translated into other languages but this has not hindered the impact of his writing inside and outside Africa. Some of Tansi's well-known works in English translation are *Life and a Half* (1979), *Parentheses of Blood* (1985), *The Anti-people* (1988), *The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez* (1995) and *The Shameful State* (2015). This study is based on Tansi's translated version and critical works in English. Besides being well-known for his novels Tansi was also a playwright, poet and politician. According to Howard French (2004: 34), "For a while, in the 1980s, Sony Labou Tansi was

Africa's greatest writer". At the very least, he was one of the best-known African writers in the French-speaking world. Howard French who was one of the very last people to interview Labou Tansi before his death says "Tansi was a pioneering figure in African literature, a self-consciously avant-garde writer" (p36)[1]. Tansi, like a host of other African writers before and after him, tackles the perennial issue of dictatorship in postcolonial Africa, but what makes his writing stand out (which is also a subject of this study) is his technical innovation.

Life and a Half, which is the focus of this study, is widely regarded as Sony Labou Tansi's most accomplished work. This is a story that is set in an imaginary independent African country called Katamalanasia which is intended to represent many of the independent African countries afflicted with a similar problem of a brutal dictatorship. The country is ruled by a succession of brutal dictators whose proliferation, assumption of power and inevitable overthrow is such that one completely loses count. Each of the dictators is known not by his name but by the title "The Providential Guide".

A synopsis of the novel quickly reveals the challenges that the writer presents in the path of the reader. There is no clear or coherent storyline. The fragmented narrative is made more complicated by the characters whose faces are fleeting silhouettes that are grossly over-shadowed by the widespread violence, blood-letting and outright killings that one encounters from beginning to end. One of the few characters that the writer gives a semblance of sustained prominence more than the others is the first dictator Cypriano Ramoussa whose aliases are Obramoussando Mbi, Loanga, Yambo and eventually The Providential Guide Marc-Francois Matela-Pene and His Majesty Cezam the First. Other prominent characters are Katamalanasia dictatorship's tenacious opponents Martial and his daughter Chaidana. The story opens when the first dictator to be encountered by the reader is interrupted by one of his soldiers while having a meal. It opens with a simple but deceptive scene that quickly reveals the true nature of the world that Tansi creates. The soldier leads Martial and his family

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1. In an article entiled "The Golden Bough" Howard French describes how he had gone on a mission to track down Tansi after hearing that the writer and his wife Pierette were dying in a remote village deep in the Congo. After quite some difficulty French found Tansi and his wife and had what probably could be Tansi's last interview where the writer reiterates some of his views on writing and politics. Tansi died two weeks after the interview with French. See Howard French (2004).

into the room where the dictator is having his meal and announces his arrival with the casual "Here is the man" (p5). What follows is startling violence and brutality at a moment when one least expects such a turn of events:

> The Green Room was nothing but some sort of enclosure within the spacious dining room. As he approached the nine rag-humans the lieutenant had shoved along, while proclaiming his rancorous 'Here is the man,' the Providential Guide smiled innocuously and then plunged the knife into him, the one he used to hack off a big piece of meat bought at the Four Seasons, the largest store in the capital, reserved for members of the government. The rag-father raised his eyebrows as the iron blade disappeared in his throat. The Providential Guide withdrew his knife and turned back to his Four Seasons meat, which he cut and ate with the same bloody knife. The rag-father's blood silently poured from his throat. (p5)

This violent bloody scene which foregrounds the life in the text plunges one into the banalities of life in Katamalanasia marked by violence and death. Tansi gives the reader no respite as the dictators' violence and blood-letting fill up the pages of *Life and a Half* from beginning to end. If Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* which is I discuss in chapter 2 is dominated by just four dictators from different countries and Hama Tuma's nation depicted in *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor* is all about The Chairman, *Life and a Half* leaves one scratching the head in trying to make head or tail of time and the numbers as one learns of the long line of dictators or Providential Guides that come and go. Tansi's text, as is argued in the study, calls for 'new eyes' or different kind of reading(s) as the writer approaches and interrogates dictatorship in unusual ways. In reading *Life and a Half* one is constantly forced to do so against other writers who have also dealt with the same issue of dictatorship. Here I have in mind Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savanna* (1988), Ousmane Sembene's *The Last of the Empire* (1983) or Nuruddin Farah's *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979) which all adopt what one can call restrained approaches as compared to Tansi's no holds barred strategy.

4.3 Re-working a Tradition in *Life and a Half*?

As has already been noted, Sony Labou Tansi writes against the backdrop of an established body of African writing dominated by the foundational writers who initially legitimate and then later de-legitimate the African nationalist project. This fiction which flourishes in the 1950s, throughout the 1960s and 1970s and which is focused on the anti-colonial struggle and

the emergence or establishment of the new states in Africa "was largely locked into a realist mode" (Anthony Chennels, 2006: 48). Tansi writes at a time when there is an apparent tiredness and monotony in African writing. This perception is heightened by the subject matter prevalent in African writing by Tansi's contemporaries and predecessors, which is the disillusionment associated with the coming into being of the African nation states. At the centre of the representation of this disillusionment over the failure of the African nation state is the African dictator in his various forms as encountered in texts such as Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966), Ahmadou Kourouma's *The Suns of Independence* (1968) and others. Tansi's major challenge then is how to deal in a novel way with an issue that is no longer fresh in Africa. Lydie Moudileno (2006: 29) notes that

> Like so many other African works before it, the narrative denounces the totalitarian power of post-independence regimes. In the novel, an imaginary postcolonial nation is crushed under the weight of the ubiquitous figure of the African dictator – ironically dubbed 'providential guide of the nation'. In this respect, Sony Labou Tansi's famous text echoes other similar works – plays and 'romans de la dictature' 'dictatorship novels' – published throughout the seventies and early eighties.

In fact, adds Moudileno, *Life and a Half*'s "novelty is not of a thematic order" (p29). The impression created here by Moudileno is that there was nothing special anymore about the subject of dictatorship. It was as if the theme had run its course. While this is largely true since the resolution of the Cold War, there is little doubt that this is an area whose relevance continues to be demonstrated, not only in fiction but also 'outside literature'. In my view, the significance of the theme of dictatorship to Tansi is that it allows him to experiment, innovate and demonstrate fresh and effective ways of engaging with a continent's unusual problems. This section of the study therefore conducts a detailed examination of how Tansi searches for and comes up with strategies that are not only new, but ones that create new insights on the postcolony and its unending woes. By approaching Tansi in this way the study avoids falling into the predictable trap of generalising or reducing an African writer's work to hackneyed terms or sound bites such as 'commitment' or 'resistance'. The study argues that Tansi's work should be examined within the context of the unusual vistas that the writer avails to readers, writers and the critics.

In *Life and a Half* one sees a writer who has realised and accepted the exhaustion of a tradition. More importantly, Tansi takes on the challenge and begins the process of re-

charting new directions. In examining this literary re-direction one cannot ignore the glaring question of why this occurs at this particular moment. Besides the already noted trajectory of African writing which is characterised by hope, collusion, legitimation, disillusionment and de-legitimation, Tansi's entry epitomises writers seeking relevance and recognition in a world that remains stuck in a miasma of woes.

Tansi's work should not be looked at without interrogating some of the views surrounding the production of African literary texts in non-indigenous languages. Like the generality of writers writing in non-indigenous languages, Tansi writes from a privileged position. He is consciously aware of the power of his choice of medium, which in his case is French. Because of this, Tansi and others like him have chosen a primary audience whose tastes they strive to appeal to in one way or another. Tansi's privileged position is also strengthened by his educated background which no doubt has exposed him to other literary traditions. This exposure in turn influences and shapes Tansi's aesthetic direction. In this respect it should not therefore come as a great surprise that Tansi's work is often compared to that of writers beyond the continent such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez. So in reading Tansi one should not lose sight of the factors that seem to have influenced and shaped his writing.

In *Life and a Half* the writer is bent on breaking away from one tradition and is in the process of laying the foundations of another. One has to point out here that Tansi was not alone in such an endeavour as other African writers also attempt to experiment in re-imagining the representation of the postcolonial condition. One such writer is Nurrudin Farah whose works reveal a pre-occupation with dictatorship and a penchant for innovation as he incorporates modernistic strategies in some of his novels. According to Gikandi (1998: 754) Farah turned to the aesthetic of modernism because of his awareness of the limits of realism:

> Farah's major works were written under the shadow of European and African modernism. Modernist writers such as Joyce, Becket, and Yeats provide the epigraphs that frame his novels. His favourite African writers, whose works are constantly echoed in the early novels, are Soyinka and Ayi Kwei Armah, the great African modernists.

However, in his dictator novels Tansi does much more than Soyinka or Armah. He resorts to something that is new in the African literary tradition although Amos Tutuola (1920-1997) is sometimes hailed for his much earlier attempts at innovation, especially in terms of his

deployment of Yoruba folktales.[2] It is this break with tradition or his change of direction that makes his novel 'new' when it comes out. Dominic Thomas (2002: 53) regards Tansi as "one of sub-Saharan Africa's most innovative playwrights and novelists" whose works "made considerable inroads toward the articulation of an avant-gardist project by foregrounding literary activity". A host of critics place Tansi in the same bracket as Ben Okri, Salman Rushdie and Marquez, thereby characterising him as a magical realist writer.

It is important to point out here what seems to be the controversy surrounding magical realism, a controversy that also inevitably complicates both negatively and positively the nature of Tansi's work. The term magical realism can be attributed to Franz Roh who is said to have coined it way back in 1925 to refer to what Kenneth Reeds (2006: 175) calls a "new artistic tendency" in European art. According to Michael Valdez Moses (2001: 107) although Franz Roh might have first employed the term "Magischer Realismus" in 1925, Massimo Bontempelli "independently minted his own identical critical term in 1927", while Alejo Carpentier popularised a similar "notion of 'lo real maravilloso americano' " in 1949. More interestingly, Moses says "the magical realist novel has arguably become the preeminent form of fiction in the contemporary world" that is "attracting an ever widening international audience" (p105).

One common but at the same time contentious view is that magical realism is now regarded as part and parcel of the global postcolonial literary movement (Moudileno, 2006: 30). Gikandi (2012: 309) observes that "an antimimetic bend undergirds the most prevalent view of postcolonial literature" and also points out the claims of a link between magical realism and postcolonialism: "The basic claim made for postcolonial literature in the 1980s was that it was driven by the imperative to unload the burden of referentiality, to unsettle the transcendental subject, and to displace realism, thereby creating a space for alternative regimes of representation". Stephen Slemon (1988: 21) views magical realism as a troubled concept in literary theory. Significantly, he argues that magical realism should be read as postcolonial discourse "as it can be seen to provide a positive and liberating response to the codes of imperial history and its legacy of fragmentation and discontinuity".

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2. Although initially received with much scepticism and criticism, Amos Tutuola's works were later hailed as being innovative and transgressive. Tutuola's works also incorporated non-realist techniques. See Carolyn Hart (2009).

The same link between magical realism and postcolonialism is also noted by Laura Moss (2000: 1) who observes that "non-realist writing is frequently privileged by postcolonial critics searching for a form to hold disruptive politics because of the assumption that its various forms are inherently conducive to political subversion due to their capacity for presenting multiplicity". Flora Veit-Wild (2005: 228) also places magical realism within the ambit of postcolonialism:

> It is no coincidence that this new literary direction transcends national, regional, and even continental borders from Francophone, Lusophone, and Anglophone Africa to Latin America or Southern Asia. Similar socio-political developments in these areas have produced a literature that reacts to the absurd with absurdity, to the grotesque with grotesqueness, and to the terrifying with black humour.

To Gerald Gaylard (2005: 36) some African postcolonial fiction is African postmodernism, and therefore to him postcolonialism and magical realism are a form of "'Third World' postmodernism". The point of all this seems to be given some clarity by Brenda Cooper (1998: 29) who highlights that

> What has emerged, then, is a debate with regards to the nature of postcolonial cultural politics. Magical realists are postcolonials who avail themselves most forcefully of the devices of postmodernism, of pastiche, irony, parody and intertextuality; they are alternatively recognised as oppositional to cultural imperialism, but also as reactionaries, who perpetuate the retention of the Western stereotype of the exotic Other. In other words, magical realism and its associated styles and devices is alternatively characterised as a transgressive mechanism that parodies Authority, the Establishment and the Law.

One begins to see some of the reasons why Sony Labou Tansi is drawn to magical realism. It is a mode of representation that seems to allow the writer re-imagine, re-paint, re-create, and re-construct images of a world that, instead of going away, refuses to die away. At the centre of this dystopian world that Tansi engages with through magical realism, is the strange figure of the dictator wreaking untold havoc and suffering on individual bodies and the body politic. Magical realism gives Tansi the power to create a frightening reality that is "never entirely new" as it bears "an uncanny resemblance to the one we already know". Significantly,

> The uncanniness of the magical realist image is due to an aesthetic experience that privileges experience over knowledge. Consequently, its elusiveness notwithstanding, reality can be perceived, lived, and relived over and over again, in all its freshness, each time as if it were

> occurring for the first time. Its perception resembles a child's awe and wonder at discovering the world around him. (Eugene L. Arva, 2008: 80).

This study argues that it is because of the ever present figure(s) of the dictator and the slew of brutal and perverted acts in the postcolony, Sony Labou Tansi's world in *Life and a Half* remains familiar, but freshly and continuously shocking to the reader. This is not without paradox as, in spite of its nearness and newness of this constructed world, says Arva,

> magical realism writes the hyperreal, the constantly vanishing real: a world void of original referents either because extreme events have rendered them inaccessible, or because they have become too familiar and trite, blurred by the successive layers of simulacra that pervade all too much of contemporary discourse. (p81)

So, magical realism provides Tansi and the reader with the tools with which the scourge of dictatorship can be re-interrogated. The writer carries out a process that makes one sit up and pay attention to what otherwise has been reduced to a routine everyday occurrence. In *Life and a Half* dictatorship is re-imagined and re-packaged in a new form that speaks to and engages the senses in ways that are clearly intended by the writer to shock the reader in an attempt to ensure that one is never lulled into accepting the dictator's postcolonial 'reality' as the norm. Tansi strives to use fiction to reveal that the unimaginable is indeed possible and does exist in daily life in the postcolony. In doing so Tansi is relentlessly brutal to the reader and the dictator as each one becomes a victim of the writer's words. In the process, magical realism becomes for the writer what Lydie Moudileno (2006), invoking Aime Cesaire, reluctantly calls "Arme miraculeuse" or the miraculous weapon. In this respect, one of the striking features of *Life and a Half* is the uncensored unrestrained violence which is an issue that I examine in great detail later in the chapter. At this point it is important to highlight that Tansi finds magical realism an appealing mode of representation because of its ability to produce what Arva (2008: 61) calls a "felt reality" in an "attempt to reconstruct violent events". More importantly, magical realism allows Tansi to re-create in words a reality that dictatorship or the establishment in general will always seek to hide under a veil of political correctness as witnessed in Hama Tuma's *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and other Stories*. The heavy influence of South American magical realism on Tansi's works is visible especially through the fantastic occurrences in some of his texts. Even the title of one of his texts *The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez* (1985) echoes one of the classics of South American

magical realism *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Above all, it is the link between dictatorship and magical realism in Tansi's works that betray direct and indirect Latin American influence on the writer.

The study's main argument in this section therefore is that in the process of re-interrogating and re-constructing new or alternative ways of perceiving the postcolonial condition, Tansi brings out into the open in no uncertain terms the severe short-comings of an established tradition. More importantly, Tansi embarks on a project of re-fashioning new paths, ways or strategies which enable what Cooper (1998: 1) called "seeing with the third eye". The significance of all this is that Tansi seeks new paths, re-works and re-fashions a tradition as the established one cannot handle the nightmare in the postcolony. Thus, says Said A. M. Khamis (2005: 95) "realism can never fully offer up the world in all its complexity and irreducible plenitude – especially in a new situation in which nothing is real as it used to be".

While there is little doubt that *Life and a Half* takes the dramatization of dictatorial power to new levels, it would be naïve to ignore some of the unintended consequences of the writer's representation. First, Tansi seems to force a generation, if not generations of writers and critics to rethink the notion of the African novel and African writing in general. To Tansi, the African novel as known then seems to have become a relic to be simultaneously shredded, discarded and reconstituted. This stance by the writer becomes apparent from the onset when one encounters a new form of reality that is marked by unbridled violence, brutality and murder that seem to call upon the reader to question his own sanity, and that of the writer and society at large as everyone battles to make sense of it all. One questions the meaning of it all as Martial, the leader of the opposition movement ranged against the dictatorship in Katamalanisia, is butchered and his body literally shredded by the dictator or Providential Guide but still refuses to die and hangs onto life to repeatedly mock the dictator: "I do not want to die this death" (6). In Tansi's work everything becomes a subject of scrutiny: the novel, the writer, the reader, the dictator and his world and the other world or reality beyond the novel's pages.

Through the novel Tansi re-works one's sense of time or history since it becomes a struggle to establish a direct link between the world created in *Life and a Half* and that which is supposed to be known. There are no easily identifiable historical figures, events or space(s) that can be regarded as the text's equivalents, models or templates. So one neither sees nor

hears the voices of an Amin, Bokassa, Nguema, Mobutu or other notorious African figures associated with the genre of the dictator text that are often plucked from the history archives by writers. Surprisingly, in spite of this upheaval and chaos wrought on one's sense of history, there is still a sense of déjà vu as what is evoked is a feeling that what is being witnessed is not completely alien to the continent of Africa, which is the setting of Tansi's text. In this way the pages of Tansi's novel become a playground for re-imagining and re-constituting history, which in is a process that involves simultaneously embracing and spurning history. The overall picture that emerges in this regard is a hotchpotch of meanings that again confound one's sense of direction and being. So Tansi forces one to question the very notion of the novel as an extended vehicle for communicating meaning. In this case one then sees some validity in the assertion by Bisanswa (2000: 130) that Tansi engages in a process of re-inventing the African novel as in his hands the "novel stretches itself, but also hardens, it becomes malleable, but seems to thrive for the stretching of forms and themes". One may take issue with the view pertaining to the stretching of themes as the over-riding theme of dictatorship and its accompanying woes are a recurring feature in African literature. However, the newness of Tansi's novel lies in its preoccupation with the act of writing itself or what Bisanswa calls 'form'. While one seems to overshadow the other, in my view there is a struggle or conflict between form and theme. It is this struggle for supremacy which marks a break with the older tradition of realism, a struggle whose result is the birth of what Bisanswa calls the new African novel (p130).

As seen earlier in this section, there have been spirited attempts to link magical realism with postcolonialism. The consequence of reducing magical realism to nothing but an appendage of postcolonialism is that an impression has been created that magical realism is synonymous with the chaos, strife, corruption and misrule in Third World countries. Liam Connell (1998: 95) says the formal characteristics of magical realism are hard to distinguish from those of modernism and therefore argues strongly against "attempts to keep these movements distinct through the categorisation of one sort of literature as *modern* and another as *magical*" as such attempts "merely serve to codify a set of prejudices about Western European and non-Western societies and their respective modes of thinking". In other words, magical realism is now largely regarded as a quaint contraption for the representation of the Other parts of the world. Stephen Slemon (1988: 9) notes that in "Latin America, the badge

of magic realism has signified a kind of uniqueness or difference from mainstream culture". More tellingly, in this respect Slemon says there is "incompatibility" between magical realism and what he calls "the more established genres". He goes on to describe magical realism as "most obviously operative in cultures situated at the fringes of mainstream literary traditions" (p10). This in my view again heightens the sense of quaintness which results in what Michael Valdez Moses (2001: 117) has called an "exotic appeal". Moses then argues that writers such as Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie and Ben Jelloun "depend in no small part for their literary success on the *exotic* appeal of the magical elements in their novels" (p111). These are views which also force one to pay attention to the formal structures of *Life and a Half*. There has not been much rigorous interrogation of Tansi's work in this respect.

In spite of the controversy surrounding it, it is clear that the mode has been appropriated and effectively deployed by postcolonial writers. While later disciples and practitioners of magical realism such as Salman Rushdie and Ben Okri opt for this mode of representation for what appears to be its elasticity and open-endedness, one again sees evidence that they are also drawn to it because of its novelty and idiosyncratic nature. The question that cannot be ignored in this respect is what implication this has on Tansi's work. Moses (2001: 106) has a positive view whose main thrust is that magical realism has enhanced the marketing of Third World literature globally:

> The worldwide prestige of magical realist fiction signals more than the fact that the publication, distribution, translation, and consumption of such narratives have been integrated into a global market place. For the magical realist novel depends upon but also enframes a certain concept of the world that is distinctly modern.

So Tansi seems to write, as it were, with an eye on these views about this kind of writing. He therefore writes to take the novel out of or beyond the borders of Africa. In this regard one concurs with Theo L. D'haen (1995: 195) that

> Magic realism thus reveals itself as a ruse to invade and take over dominant discourse(s). It is a way of access to the main body of 'Western' literature for authors not sharing in, or not writing from the perspectives of, the privileged centres of this literature for reasons of language, class, race, or gender, and yet avoiding epigonism by avoiding the adoption of views of the hegemonic forces together with their discourse.

From the very first pages of the novel one sees a writer striving to make his text remarkably different from the known norm or tradition of African writing. Doing so becomes a pioneering act or a process of searching for and charting a new literary path. This in my view is what Tansi seeks to achieve by opting for a new mode of representation in African literature. At the same time one sees a writer striving to make a difference as demonstrated by his dabbling in political activities which, according to Mattiu Nnoruka (2000: 185), even earned him a seat in the Congolese National Assembly. Lydie Moudileno (1998: 24) characterises *Life and a Half* as a magical realist text, a view which the critic however seems to repudiate a decade or so later:

> I would like to show how the insistence on 'affiliation" and/or a 'vision exotique' 'exotic vision' problematically impose the 'magical realist' label onto the text at the expense of more accurate and productive readings. My primary objective is to demonstrate that insisting on *La vie et demie*'s exclusive adherence to the magical realist tradition generates a misleading reading of the text. (Moudileno, 2006: 32)

If Tansi re-works and overhauls a tradition to chart a new path in African writing, one has to now examine how the writer does this in the novel. This is an area that needs attention and I examine in detail in the next sections of the study.

4.4 "we'll go get her from her grave, we'll court-martial her bones, she'll be posthumously condemned to death" - Sony Labou Tansi, *Life and a Half* p54

The above words by one of the dictators, also known as The Providential Guide, underline the dictators' obsession with the body and violence that I discuss in this section. There have been numerous studies on colonial and postcolonial violence. Most of these studies have consistently sought to establish a direct link between the two. Sony Labou Tansi's novel is replete with violence from beginning to the end, leaving one wondering about the sense of it all. This section of the study examines Tansi's representations of the body in relation to violence and power. In *Life and a Half* the human body is turned into a site for violent and bloody struggles which mirror the convulsions in the larger body politic. In this way, the human body becomes a metaphor for the postcolonial nation that is figuratively raped, butchered, mutilated and abused in all sorts of unimaginable ways. At the centre of these

gross violations is the figure of the dictator and his long line of progeny, who in spite of being a physical living body, has ceased to be human in the normal understanding of the term.

Like in most dictator texts, the dominant body is that of the dictator. This is a body which seeks to establish absolute control over all the other bodies under him. More importantly, the dictator does not hesitate to demonstrate the extent of his dominance over other bodies. Torture and physical elimination become ways of establishing and demonstrating absolute control over other bodies. Actions by the dictator in this respect bring out into the open the contentious power relations between different individual bodies. What the reader cannot escape from noticing is Tansi's focus on the violence. By relentlessly creating recurring images of disturbing violence, Tansi deliberately overshadows and pushes to the background or thwarts any expectations of productiveness from the violent acts. To demonstrate that his focus is not exactly on the humans reeling under dictatorship, Tansi does not create any opportunity for the reader to identify with any of his characters. Most of the characters are hence cast as anti-heroes as they have no redeeming qualities at all (Mattiu Nnoruka, 2000: 185).

The chief villain in Tansi's novel is the dictator or the Providential Guide through whose direct or indirect bidding the mutilation or elimination of other bodies is carried out. In fact, most of the heinous acts witnessed are carried out by the dictator himself. The extent to which the dictator can go in his pursuit of total control over the nation is thus achieved through the brutalisation of the bodies of those deemed to be enemies of the state. He attempts to completely wipe out all his opponents, including their families. So we see Martial and his family being led into the Providential Green Room, a dining room which is soon literally turned into a slaughter hall as there is a massacre of almost the whole Martial family.

What makes Tansi's representation of violence disturbing is that there does not seem to be any attempt by the author to give sense and purpose to the violence. Here one recalls how Chinua Achebe (1973: 624) takes issue with Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) which he calls a sick book for its preoccupation with despair and its failure to inspire hope. Tansi's novel can be read in this light. However, the unbridled violence, torture, abuse and murder create a world that is disturbingly familiar as Katamalanasia is never intended by the writer to be an alien world beyond our own. This is probably what makes it more frightening – Tansi makes us witness our basest side. The human body loses its

supposed hallowed aura of respect that is ritualised in many cultures as it is wantonly violated in an unceasing manner. Thus, the human body in spite of its sacrosanct nature becomes a play thing in a world where life in general has lost all value, a world where the body has become just a "big piece of meat" (*Life and a Half* 5).

In a number of dictator texts and even in the world outside the pages of fiction, dictators and some of their actions are a subject of myth, rumour and gossip to such an extent that it is sometimes difficult to establish the true picture. Here I have in mind the numerous stories of brutality and even rumours of cannibalism associated with real-life dictators such as Idi Amin of Uganda and Jean-Bedel Bokassa of the Central African Republic. In *Life and a Half* the violence, brutality and murders are placed in the public arena for all to witness, without an attempt by the dictator or the writer to hide what goes on. Myth, rumour and gossip seem to compete with the reality on the ground while at same time also complementing each other. The reader becomes a witness to acts that surprisingly the writer does not attempt to present as crimes against humanity. Tansi creates the impression that everything that is on show is not only an everyday occurrence but a norm that should be taken as is. This is an effect that Tansi achieves through the endless cycles of coups, violence and bloodletting from the beginning to the end of the novel. If the human body is supposed to be a symbol of the sanctity of life, Tansi does not make any effort to respect this view. He seems bent on heightening the process of bodily desecration. In this way, one begins to see parallels between the desecrated human body and the failed African nation state and continent. If this is Tansi's intention, then it is designed to go against the grain.

What is even more disturbing is that Tansi does not harbour any illusions about notions of resistance or agency, which would at least instil some sense of hope. His representations of the body and its brutalisation create a world where nothing makes sense and is never expected to either. So one sees dictator after dictator in an unending cycle that leaves one in a sense of paralysis and then fatalistic acceptance. In my view, Tansi's stance echoes Wilfred Owen's words: "The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est/Pro patria mori"*[3]- that it is indeed a lie that

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3. Wilfred Owen's poem highlights the realities of war. The death, pain and suffering which are an inescapable part of war make one re-think idealistic notions such as heroism and patriotism. See Andrew Spacey's "Analysis of Poem 'Dulce Et Decorum Est' by Wlifred Owen". https://owlcation.com/humanities/Analysis-of-Poem-Dulce-et-Decorum-Est-by-Wilfred-Owen

it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country or ideals. Like Owen, Tansi is not idealist and therefore shows little or no respect for notions like patriotism or nationalism. If Tansi's absurdism is rooted in a fundamental dissatisfaction with the world as it is, there is little or no suggestion in his writing as to an alternative or the nature of what he desires.

Although human life and the body are depicted as cheap, they are at the same time used to mock those that are bent on violating them. More importantly, Martial with a body that is butchered and literally turned into mince-meat and soup, tenaciously hangs onto life and becomes a symbol of an equally brutalised nation with an indomitable will to live and possibly outlast the monstrous body of the dictator. The reader is left reeling under the shock from the sudden but brutal violence that begins innocuously with a dinner, but there is no respite as the dictator calls for more fire power. He places the barrel of his machine gun on Martial's forehead and fires. When he empties the first clip but still fails to kill Martial, he goes into an even more violent frenzy:

> He had his long, gold-sparkling sabre brought to him and began slashing the rag-father while cursing him furiously in the name of his three hundred sixty-two ancestors, recalling in his fevered temper those days long ago when the very same ancestors cleared the forest to build the very first model of the village destined to become Yourma, the capital city. He added obscene fragments of speech to every slash of his sword. The rag-father was quickly cut in half at the height of his navel, his guts fell down with the lower half of his body (p7).

When even this fails to snuff the life out of Martial, the Providential Guide then resorts to the ultimate assault – eating up his opponent. Clearly, it is the physical body that is the direct target of the dictator's anger and violence. He is not only after snuffing life out of Martial but is obsessed with erasing the body from physical presence through torture, mutilation, and finally ingestion. Similar violent scenes are replicated throughout the novel and they seem to overshadow other aspects of Tansi's artistic work. The significance of this strategy is that it opens up avenues for the exploration and interrogation of the postcolonial condition. The violence raises a number of questions in relation to power and existence in the postcolony. Firstly, what is the effect of all this violence on the citizenry and the postcolonial nation? Secondly, what is the possible affective impact on the reader of the graphic representations of violence or the 'violence of representation' on the reader? Thirdly, can the violence be some kind of window to give us a peek into the minds of the dictator and the writer? I argue

in this respect that Tansi presents postcolonial existence as a traumatising experience, directly and indirectly a result of the violence perpetrated by the dictator. The dictator's subjects lose their individuality and humanity as they have been rendered into nothing but bodies or lumps of flesh. According to Nevine El Nossery and Amy L. Hubbel (2013: 1) "suffering is a universal predicament" that is often "arduous and at times impossible to speak of, trauma is a separating force that can render its victims silent or incapable of grieving." However, Tansi's Martial who is the embodiment of an alternative existence that can only be dreamed of, refuses to be silenced by the violence that is perpetrated on him and the subsequent trauma. His refusal to die and the mocking refrain "I do not want to die this death" reveal a being who has not been silenced by the endless traumatic experiences. The novel brings out how life in the postcolony can be hell, but one that can be endured far beyond the norm. All this is made possible by Tansi's deployment of magical realist strategies. Tansi as a writer seems to vindicate Nossery and Hubbel's view that "Traumatic experience may be unspeakable, but it is not necessarily unrepresentable" (p1). Hence, Tansi strives to overcome barriers to representation in order to show us what lies beyond.

Another significant aspect of the brutal violence that seeks not to just punish but violate and desecrate the bodies of perceived opponents is that it also inevitably puts the perpetrator's mind under the spotlight. In other words, the nature of the violence pushes us to try and burrow into the mind of the dictator to search for answers to explain the violent acts. In this way, the dictator loses his individuality as he is turned into a subject and specimen for forensic investigation.

Reading Tansi and encountering the incessant violence, the question that remains at the back of one's mind is: 'what is the purpose of all this?' In his analysis of *Life and a Half* Pascale Perraudin (2005: 73) also asks the same question that inevitably bothers every reader: "it became legitimate to ask what is at stake in such modes of representing violence". More importantly, Perraudin characterises the recurring violence as "bewildering" and distressful as it is "disconnected from the political real". What seems to puzzle Perraudin is that the violence does not seem to have any political purpose. Rachel Park (2018) associates such violence with colonialism. Unlike Park, Oumar Cherif Diop (2012: 65) sees no fault in Tansi's graphic representation of violence as violence "has been the hallmark of the postcolonial African states". With an eye for the quaint, which more often than not meets the

expectations of “writing about Africa”, Flora Veit-Wild (2005: 238) sees Tansi as someone who simply “writes the real madness in the postcolony into a fictional narrative that is monstrous in every dimension”. Because of the prevalence of what appears to be senseless violence, cannibalism and lurid acts, it is unavoidable to link dictatorship and the postcolony in general with madness. One recalls the myths surrounding Bokassa, Amin and other African dictators in this respect as noted earlier in the study. Clearly, this brings attention to the challenges of the nature of representation in Tansi’s novel. It is important to interrogate what this study sees as the complicated notion of Tansi’s representation of the body and violence.

Initially the male body represented by Martial evokes images of admirable qualities of heroism as he stands up stubbornly against the dictator and refuses to die even when he is repeatedly stabbed, shot, gored and eaten up. Africa then, like Martial’s body becomes a ‘body’ that refuses to bow to another’s dictates. However, Tansi shows that he does not harbour any illusions about this body, about Africa, that is. We witness this body turn against itself by inflicting violence on its already traumatised body as Martial rapes his own daughter, Chaidana, “to administer” what Tansi calls “an internal slap” (p46). The depravity reaches unimaginable depths in the novel as Martial uses rape as a form of punishment on Chaidana for how she uses/abuses her body as a weapon against the regime responsible for the brutality affecting the nation. In this case Chaidana’s body is violated by her own father as punishment for allowing her body to be violated by the enemy.

Tansi’s images of violence appear incomprehensible but the incomprehensibility mirrors the mangled African nation state. It is through the recurrent violence that Tansi problematizes the notion of heroism. The African leader as represented by the Providential Guide and his successors descend to such depths that the title father of the nation and the nation itself become synonymous with the violence and chaos that characterise the postcolony. Those who fight dictatorship like Chaidana and Martial have been so brutalised that they too have internalised violence that it becomes difficult to distinguish between them and the dictator in terms of their indiscriminate use of violence. So Tansi’s representation leaves the postcolony as a space devoid of real heroes to turn to for salvation.

4.5 **"But time. Time has tumbled"** *Life and a Half* p5

These words which are part of the opening lines of *Life and a Half* straight away announce to the reader that one is now entering a whole new world, a world where things will not be as they have been known to be all along. As has been noted earlier in this chapter, Tansi is aware of the shortcomings of the traditional forms of representation which relied on the realist approach and emphasised what can be termed the instrumentalisation of literature which bestowed on writing and the writer the function of fighting injustice and transforming society. If one draws on Moudileno (1998: 22) that fiction always "proposes a certain vision of society" and is also "inseparable from the realities that inspire it", this view should form a basis for a critical examination of Tansi's project in this respect. To begin with, the realities of the postcolony are now well-documented but it is the nature of their representation by Tansi that calls for more debate and in the process attracting re-examination of the postcolonial condition. Secondly, in doing so, one cannot ignore the always nagging questions regarding the writer's intention or vision.

By resorting to magical realism Tansi taps into tried and tested strategies of defamiliarisation transplanting them onto an otherwise moribund African writing tradition. Gerald Gaylard (2005: 43) associates magical realism with what he calls "excesses". According to Gaylard "defamiliarisation is the chief agent of the postcolonial imagination, an agent that is able to see the new and the old in new light" (p80). Herein lies its attractiveness to the postcolonial writer. Deployed by the postcolonial writer, it becomes a means of re-visiting a familiar, intractable condition whose major 'highlight' in the case of Tansi and other postcolonial writers is dictatorship.

For Tansi, breaking with tradition involves re-telling the story or stories of dictatorship from a new perspective or employing Cooper's "Third Eye" to decode the postcolonial condition. In order to do so Tansi first focuses on the narrative structure. Since the postcolony is now space where existence has almost been reduced to the level of meaninglessness, Tansi strives to capture this 'madness' in the postcolony by constructing a story without the conventional features of a story. If narrative is the "architecture of time, the attempt to give meaning to the outward flow of life" as Gaylard (p112) points out, one of the best ways of disrupting narrative is to mangle and confuse our conception of time. So one of Tansi's major strategies

is narrative defamiliarisation or temporal manipulation whose value is again noted by Gaylard:

> In many ways time is the yardstick of reality, so tampering with time tends simultaneously to break down and open up our concept of reality, mystifying it in the process and allowing the creative imagination to range and forage at will. (P112)

In Tansi's novel one sees what Phyllis Taoua (2002: 230) calls a "logic of continuity and chronology" being "replaced by a disorderly, sense of time". Taoua adds that time then becomes "more mythical than historical". While the postcolonial condition that inspires Tansi's text is supposed to stem from known historical sets of circumstances, the world that Tansi creates is recognisable, but it is at the same time unrecognisable because of the deliberate manipulation of time. What heightens the temporal confusion or the tension between historical time and mythical time is illustrated by the mingling of blurry, vast periods of time and unusual precision in measuring time in relation to some of the events. In the novel time is first rendered extremely difficult to pin down since one's imagination is stretched together with it:

> It was the year Chaidana turned fifteen years old. But time. Time has tumbled. The sky, earth, things, everything. Totally tumbled. It was back when the earth was still round, when the sea was the sea – when the forest … No! The forest doesn't count now that brains are full of reinforced concrete. The city … just leave the city alone. (P5)

This impression of timelessness which is encountered at the beginning of the novel is soon heightened by a faceless narrator whose presence is never concretely apparent because of the unusual space-time relationship:

> Chaidana recalled these scenes every night, as if she were beginning them again, as if in the sea of time she returned to that port where many hearts were moored to many names. She had become the rag-human being residing in two worlds: the world of the dead and the world of the 'not entirely living,' as she herself said. (p9)

While the reader is still in temporal confusion trying to comprehend the vastness of time, he or she is struck with how this "sea of time" can be painted with unusual precision and clarity. We are told of the opposition leader's death in prison at the age of one hundred and thirty-

three years and nine months. According to Taoua, “this exaggeration distends time’s passing in an expression of suffering and protest” (p230). The direct effect of this manipulation of time is that the chaos and confusion in the postcolony hit home hard as dictators and their misdeeds become part of the cyclical nature of time. In other words, the exaggeration of time creates the impression that dictatorship and the suffering associated with it are part of the order or disorder of things as one finds it difficult to believe that there ever was a time when things were different. One is forced not to gloss over this situation. The reader is forced to experience this unending nightmare. More importantly, the reader is forced to ask hard questions about the nature of existence. At the same time Tansi does not hesitate to forewarn the reader that the process of coming to terms with postcolonial existence is never going to be easy. His warning in the foreword aptly entitled “Warning” is that *Life and a Half* is “about writing absent-mindedly” and speaking to the world about “the absurdity of the absurd, me, unveiling the absurdity of hopelessness” and so he embarks on a journey to “invent a place of fear in this vast world that’s going to hell” (p3). True to his warning, there are no illusions about the world to be witnessed in the novel. If we had been getting used to the chaos and confusion in the postcolony, Tansi’s novel strives to re-awaken us to the absurdity by bending and twisting time in a renewed effort to indict dictatorship. However, in spite of the scrambled images created by the manipulation of time, Tansi surprises by avoiding too much use of words by creating a compact text of just one hundred and thirty pages while at the same time painting the impression of leaving nothing unsaid. This in my view highlights Tansi’s awareness of the limitations of words or language to adequately represent the ‘reality’ in the postcolony. In my view, the compactness of *Life and a Half* is deliberately intended to highlight the inadequacy of language while at the same time celebrating the author’s ability to capture the vastness of the chaos and confusion in the postcolony in fresh, striking ways.

Tansi’s technique of compacting and stretching time is aided to a large extent by the characterisation which is also designed to defy comprehension. The characters create chaos and confusion as they come and go in spite of their attempts to defy the vagaries of time. When Layisho died at the age of one hundred and thirty-three years,

> Guide Jean-Heart-of-Father, who succeeded the successor to the successor of the Providential Guide, waited for Layisho’s body to decompose for burial in the Cemetery of the Damned, just

> as he waited for a preview of his writings. But Layisho's body didn't start to decompose until a year and twelve days after his death. (p55)

The dictator Jean-Heart-of-Stone had a forty-year reign and proclaimed a Virgin Week in which he slept with fifty virgins who then gave birth to fifty boys each one with Jean as the first name. They became the first series of the Jeans. The dictator goes on to sire two thousand little Jeans (103).

More importantly, Tansi also creates individuals who are able to navigate their way through the postcolony to even outlive the most brutal and intransigent dictators. In this way, postcolonial space and time become slippery and defy control and ownership emphasising that power is ephemeral despite its devastating effect on human bodies that is graphically depicted throughout the novel. So, while time, order and lives, or the "sky, earth, things, everything. Tumbled" (6), there is surprising mutation and regeneration of everything which creates the impression that what happened never happened or the impression that it will in fact happen again. Therefore, through manipulation of time and character Tansi is again able to create new myths, while destroying others.

The manipulation of time and the overall technical thrust clearly reveal a writer who is aware of the intended and unintended effects of his writing. Tansi does not seem blind to the sometimes loud but suppressed whispers that the African novel can serve "to attest to the validity of Western discourse on Africa" (Moudileno, 1998: 22). One suspects that Tansi is determined to force feed the Westerner the expected images. At the same time, however, Moudileno argues that *Life and a Half* should not be read as a "joyous novel of hope – far from it – but rather, that we locate how writing can enact a formidable refusal of processes by which African creativity is overlooked or negated" (p23). In this respect, this study acknowledges and questions the negative implications of writing such as that in *Life and a Half*. The implications are directly and indirectly connected to the violence, the body, manipulation of time, among others. One sees this in Michael Syrotinski (2001: 92)'s analysis of the supernatural or what he calls "ghost writing" or "Sony Labou Tansi's spectrographic subject". Syrotinski makes what appear to be attempts to deny what is in his mind:

> What do I see in Martial's unpredictable (re)visitations in this novel? What do I *think* I see? Ghosts have an important place in most traditional cultures and mythologies, their appearance is not in the least surprising, and is even expected. The whole spectrum of shades, shadows,

> spirits and phantoms figure prominently in oral legends and tales, and are an integral dimension of most African belief systems and cosmologies. It is furthermore true that witchcraft, sorcery, and spirit-mediumship continue to play an active role even in urbanised, Westernised African society.

According to Syrotinski there are two kinds of time in *Life and a Half* and other texts like it: Western linear time and African mythical time. So Tansi's aesthetic manipulation of time can be construed as a label that distinguishes and separates the African world from the rest. In other words, the violence, torture, mutilation, cannibalism, sex and manipulation of time relocate and restrict the African to a world that one inevitably juxtaposes with the 'civilised' Western world that is characterised by linear time.

Tansi pre-empts accusations of reinforcing stereotypes. More interestingly, the writer seeks to poke fun at powerful Western publishers who continue to directly influence the production of African artistic products by prescribing what to write and what not to. This emerges when we learn that Chaidana Layisho, the daughter of the first Chaidana was a prolific writer who had written *Collection of Nonsense with Lipstick*, *Memoirs of a Demon*, and *Bits of Flesh in Bits of Words* which were songs, screams, stories, dates and numbers. We are told that these had been offered to the North American editor Jim Panama, who said he wanted at least a dozen more like them for an anthology (p51-52). So Tansi comes through as a writer striving to retain his independence in the face of huge competing interests ranged against him as an African writer. These are the external forces dictating the tastes to be satisfied. Then there are the local influences represented by the stifling and life-threatening world epitomised by the dictator. Tansi turns dissidents like Martial and himself into an embodiment of ideas and society that the dictator fights to suppress and prevent from coming into fruition:

> No! I don't want to kill you. I don't want to give you 'Martial's existence,' because you're all the same - you refuse to die once and for all. I'll make you build a cage. There is no place yet on this earth for the ideas you propagate. You'll quietly wait in your hut until the time for your ideas has come. You will wait until there is a place for them here. Then those who hold your ideas will bust you out and at that time you may propagate your stinkers as much as you like. (p55)

Evidently, one gets the impression that Tansi sees himself or the African writer as being engaged in what could be and is in some cases literally a violent struggle to lift the African from the real and imagined world that the Western reader salivates for.

4.6 Boundaries and Transgressions in *Life and a Half*

Blunt, striking images of violence in *Life and a Half* demonstrate Tansi's consistent attempts to go beyond the limits of convention in his representation of the postcolonial condition. Reading the violence becomes a journey of discovery across a postcolonial world dominated by dictatorship as Tansi drags a disturbed reader from one threshold to another and beyond, crossing and transgressing existing frontiers.

In examining transgression in Tansi's work, this section largely draws on Cedric Gael Bryant (1990: 732), whose analysis of Toni Morrison's fiction asserts that order can derive "from a person's ability to devise a means of coexisting peacefully with chaos". Can this help in deciphering Tansi's strategies or the behavious of his characters? If one adopts such a stance in reading Tansi, the writer's representation of the postcolonial condition becomes manageable and even tolerable to some extent. The lingering question in this respect, however, is whether Tansi expects the reader to rationalise or see sense and logic in what goes on, or even accept what lies beyond the known frontiers. If so, where does this leave our conventional notions of hope and despair? In other words, Tansi seems to blur the line between hope and despair. The violence and the blood-letting perpetrated by the dictator, which is non-stop, leaves one wondering whether there can be hope in such a situation. This impression is further worsened by the fact that the demise of one dictator does not bring an end to the violence and suffering in the postcolony as the dictators regenerate and proliferate to the extent of defying suitable language to capture the nightmare.

Pursuing the notion of frontiers, one is inevitably confronted with the question of their nature. Peace, order, violence and chaos become a confusing lot as the dictator resorts to unimaginable brutality to quash any perceived threats to his authority and version of order. This creates a world where the lines between order and disorder become blurred or have been completely erased. The dictator's violence and bizarre actions which involve torture and physical elimination give birth to and bring to the fore unusual individuals like Martial. Our understanding of pain and human suffering is stretched beyond the boundaries of comprehension as the human body and spirit become a stubborn constant that defies the dictator and which even time fails to erase out of existence.

Tansi creates a world peopled by 'figures' whose action blur the line between 'human' and 'non-human'. According to Phyllis Taoua (2002: 224) Tansi creates what can be called stick figures. These are figures with just the bare minimum features of what constitutes 'human'. The writer never allows such characters to develop into recognisable human beings. This is especially so with the dictator himself who is never allowed to appear like a normal human being. Although the dictator is deliberately left bare and undeveloped, his actions prompt one to ask what it means to be human. The dictator's inability to observe the bounds of 'convention' and also the inhumane treatment that he subjects other human figures to create the image of a being that has crossed to another world altogether where figures like him can be found. The dictator transgresses and redefines any notions of ourselves that we might hold as his actions shock, dumbfound and traumatise the 'normal' human beings. In the process, the line between sanity and insanity is blurred as one struggles to understand the nature of existence in the postcolony. Like Taoua, Emmanuel Yewah (1993: 94) sees texts that are like Tansi's as texts that

> create political figures (here limited to dictators) in the image of satrap and endow them with self-destructive qualities. Such qualities not only make them unstable but also deny them the kind of detailed physical and psychological development that would enable them to transcend their conceptual framework. In order to ensure that they remain confined to this framework, they are made static and presented as psychologically retarded at the crudest and most primitive stage of their conception.

More importantly, he sees dictators as being trapped in time and "they must never be allowed to develop beyond the primitive stage in which they are merely mental pictures". This leaves dictators half-baked or as some kind of half-men or half characters whose existence confirms the boundary between the human and non-human. At the same time, it is a boundary that Tansi persistently blurs as the real and the non-real, the human and non-human become hard to distinguish.

Achille Mbembe (1992: 4) seems to allude to the simultaneous existence and blurring of boundaries in the postcolony: "the postcolony is made up not of one single 'public space' but of several, each having its own separate logic yet liable to be entangled with other logics when operating in certain specific contexts". Mbembe then makes a claim about the postcolonial subject that can also be read against Tansi's *Life and a Half*:

> he is publicly visible only at the point where the two activities overlap – on one hand, in the common daily rituals that ratify the *commandment's* own institutionalisation (its *recherché hegemonique)* in its capacity as a fetish to which the subject bound; and, on the other, the subject's deployment of a talent for play and a sense of fun which makes him *homo ludens par excellence*. It is this practice as *homo ludens*, that enables subjects to splinter their identities, and to represent themselves as always changing their persona; they are constantly undergoing mitosis, whether it be in 'official' space or not. (Mbembe, p5).

While the conventional application of Bakhtinian notions of carnivalesque and obscenity focuses on the evocation of laughter and humour, *Life and a Half* transcends such notions. The violence and brutality subjected to human bodies, coupled with the dictator's mad quest to extinguish human life leave little space for a carnivalesque existence in the postcolony. According to Lucy Rayner (2010: 6) Bakhtin saw the carnival as "a temporary suspension of all hierarchies coupled with joyous, uninhibited celebration of the breaking of social norms, mocking authority and parodying official ideas and standards". The postcolonial subject's quest to survive is presented as no laughing matter in *Life and a Half*. Life and death are serious business in which the myths of the *homo ludens par excellence* is laid bare by the blood, pain, trauma, tears and deaths.

So Tansi creates a world which also blurs and re-defines knowledge about ourselves. Life and death, pain and relief, hope and despair, the human and inhuman, peace and violence, chaos and order, the body and the spirit, all become entangled and thus blurring the lines of definition. Lines between genres are also blurred as Tansi searches for more effective ways of representing postcolonial existence. More importantly, through *Life and a Half* Tansi and the African writer in general come across as beings who are able to co-exist with the chaos wrought by the postcolony's long line of dictators. If the postcolony is a world of madness, Tansi writes madness in the midst of a world gone mad. Writing becomes madness confronting madness. His 'madness' is the ability to transgress boundaries and should therefore be interpreted as similar to what Cedric Gael Bryant (1990: 733) sees in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) where "madness itself is a survival strategy that empowers individuals with the means to order chaos in unusual ways". Overall, Tansi's transgressive art becomes an instrument of what Karin Fierke (2004: 3) has called "allowing trauma to finally be communicated". This is largely achieved through unflinching use of graphic details throughout the text.

The foregoing appears to be partly the source of Tansi's continued appeal to those aware of his works, testimony of which is the sizeable critical attention in both English and French.

4.7 Conclusion

The chapter has examined how the exhaustion of one tradition leads to the development of another. For Tansi, the strategies of realism proved inadequate in confronting and representing the never-ending post-colonial condition that is dominated and scarred by dictatorship. The apparent exhaustion of realism as a mode of representation is heightened by the intransigence and recurring nature of the scourge of dictatorship. The study has argued that it is this 'exhaustion' that allows Tansi to experiment, innovate and demonstrate fresh ways of engaging and re-engaging with some of the continent's most intractable problems at the centre of which is dictatorship.

The significance of Tansi's work is that it is able to shock the reader to reimagine the mad existence in the postcolony through temporal and spatial manipulation. There is temporal tension and confusion between historical and mythical time. The writer compacts and distends time, thereby almost rendering post-colonial space a sea of meaninglessness. Time and space, equally like power in the postcolony, become slippery, ephemeral and defy control and comprehension by both dictator and the reader. Through manipulation of time, space and character, Tansi is to a large extent able to create new myths while shattering others. This chapter has also managed to demonstrate that African writing is not static and is always in conversation with other traditions as seen through Tansi's deliberate departure from the conventional representation of the postcolonial condition. Finally, I have shown that although there is danger of Tansi's writing falling into the exoticising stereotype, there is evidence that the writer is aware of the politics of publishing. Therefore, in *Life and a Half* Tansi emerges as a deliberately transgressive writer who is aware of the disruptive potential of his work.

CHAPTER 5

The Griot and the Hero in *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*

"Who are these people we call great men? They are, without a doubt, those who best confabulate." *Waiting for the Wild Beast to Vote* P225

5.1 Introduction

One of the most fascinating African writers of the dictator text and by far also one of the most accomplished to date has been Ahmadou Kourouma (1927-2003) from Cote d'ivoire. Kourouma not only re-engages with the performance of power and its predictable abuse in the postcolony, but also with a variety of literary issues that continue to attract deserved attention from critics such as history, myths and metafictionality. If as I have shown in the previous chapter Sony Labou Tansi's dictator novel is about experimentation and innovation, in Kourouma's *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* (2004) one witnesses a writer also bent on taking his novel or African writing in general to a different level. Like Wole Soyinka, Hama Tuma and Labou Tansi, Kourouma shows a fascination with the figure of the African dictator. Soyinka, Tuma and Tansi bring out the ugly abuse of power perpetrated by the African dictator through drama, the short story and the novel respectively, all dominated by satire intended to subvert the power and myths surrounding the figure of the dictator. Kourouma, like a host of other African writers adopts the vehicle of the novel in his engagement with dictatorship and postcoloniality in general.

This chapter examines the dictator's attempts to conflate his name, body and identity with the nation. This largely entails deliberately turning the leader into a national hero on whom the nation's destiny rests. The argument here is that in pursuit of power and its retention at all costs, the dictator has to continuously engage in a process of mythologisation. In this respect the chapter examines the following questions: How does the dictator project himself as the national or African hero? How successful is the novel's protagonist in his attempts to maintain or enhance his hero status? How successful is the *donsomana* as a demythologisation tool?

The study argues that through his representation of the dictator figure Kourouma simultaneously questions, embraces and rejects established myths, history and supposedly known realities while at the same time striving to reconstitute new imaginaries of

postcoloniality. First, the chapter tries to contextualise Kourouma's work in terms of African writing while exploring the question of who exactly the writer is writing for. In this regard, the study finds it prudent to ask the question that almost every African dictator text appears to elicit in one way or another: What or who is the true African hero? This is a question that writers and critics alike continue to grapple with even today, testimony of which is in the form of works by young writers/critics such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) or Mukoma wa Ngugi (2018). Adichie cautions against what she says is "The Danger of a Single Story", while Mukoma wa Ngugi (2018) re-traces "the rise of the African novel" to re-engage issues of language, identity and ownership. The study goes on to explore what it regards as the conflicted or the simultaneous complicit and subversive nature of Kourouma's dictator novel in its representation of the dictator figure. It also examines how Kourouma contributes to the re-conceptualisation of the African imaginary through the novel.

There is an extensive range of scholarship on Ahmadou Kourouma as noted by Christiane Ndiaye (2007: 96), among others. However, most of it is in French, which is a feature that has made Kourouma's works and the scholarship on his writings remain largely unknown outside French-speaking the countries. This study is limited to Frank Wynne English's translation of *En attendant le vote des bete sauvages* (*Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*) published by Vintage in 2004. In this regard, the study restricts itself to critical works in English or those that have been translated into English. Amadou Kone (2007: 110) justifies the persistent interest in Kourouma's work by arguing that "a body of fiction as important as that of Kourouma remains inexhaustible". In my view the enormous fascination with Kourouma largely stems from his subject matter and the nature of his craft. More importantly, this subject matter is again testimony to the enduring nature of the dictator character in African literature and also outside the pages of this literature. Carrol Coates (2007: 124) argues that Kourouma himself betrays a fascination with historical figures whom he says are lightly disguised characters. Not unexpected, the dominant ones of these figures from the pages of history are the dictators. Coates goes on to illustrate this by tracing the presence of the Ivorian dictator Houphouet-Boigny in Kourouma's novels. In this regard also, Jean Ouedraogo (2007: 77) characterises Kourouma's work as "fiction feigning the biographical". Isaac Ndlovu (2008) sees Kourouma's works as being driven by the writer's fascination with history. In his subsequent study on Kourouma, Ndlovu (2012: 61), drawing on Linda Hutcheon (1988), goes

on to characterise Kourouma's works, especially *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*, as an example of satirical historiographic metafiction. The majority of studies on Kourouma focus on what they see as the writer's unusual use of language. Kourouma himself seems to write with a conscious awareness of this and hence deliberately seeks to feed into and sustain this narrative concerning his works. This deliberate strategy in his work is pronounced by the writer himself in an interview with Jean Ouedraogo (2000) in which Kourouma spells out his intentions which are marked and driven by what the study sees as a calculated urge to be different.

Kourouma directs his energies at the genre itself – the African novel. So he says: "my intention is to be authentically African" (138). While Kourouma is hailed for this attempt, one has to point out that writers like Achebe and others had tried also to create a different kind of writing but still using the former coloniser's language. Similar to what is seen in Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* and Hama Tuma's *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor*, Kourouma targets and makes use of history and myths. Amadou Kone (2007: 110) is so impressed by Kourouma's approach that he declares that the "true revolution of the African novel begins, however, with Ahmadou Kourouma and *Les soleis des independences*" (*The Suns of Independence*), Kourouma's first novel. To Kone, what he sees as revolutionary in the Ivorian writer's work is his use of language. This clearly reminds one of a writer such as Chinua Achebe for his much acclaimed use of language in *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Achebe and Kourouma seem to be largely hailed for their treatment of European languages although it appears neither writer was fully aware of each other's literary attempts. This seems to characterise creative and critical works from English-speaking and French-speaking African countries. In my view, this is a problematic that seems to afflict African literature in general. Colonialism provided some conditions for cross-cultural communication across African territories but it also erected political and linguistic barriers across the African continent, rendering writers and critics from Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone backgrounds almost invisible to each other. This in my view largely explains why Kourouma is characterised as being technically revolutionary. According to Kwaku A. Gyasi (1999: 82), the language issue is a common problematic in African literature and he sees African writers such as Kourouma, Achebe and others as "creative translators". Gyasi also sees these writers as "grandmasters in the transposition and re-creation of this verbal art form in the creative translation of African literature" (85). In his

analysis of Kourouma's works Patrick Corcoran (2013: 21) is of a similar view but takes the notion of translation in African literature to a higher plane:

> Recent developments in translation studies, particularly approaches which give due cognizance to translation as an act which is less about a simple transposition of meanings through linguistic operations and more about translating cultures, may help shed some light on this complexity. Kourouma's practice as a novelist provides multiple examples of the 'postcolonial' perspective on translation in operation, whether translation be understood as a metaphor for the activity undertaken by the author, as an activity delegated to characters and figured intradiegetically, as a structuring device for the elaboration of the narrative, as a performance that effectively produces the text or as a metaphor for the act of writing itself.

It is this that also demonstrates a writer like Kourouma's attempts to not only write differently, but more significantly, to engage in a process of rediscovering African indigenous literary resources.

Christiane Ndiaye (2007: 97) takes issue with most of the scholarship on Kourouma and says the reception of Kourouma's works in scholarship circles conforms to the characterisation of Africa as a calamity ridden continent. Overall, Ndiaye takes issue with literary critics' fascination with the stereotypical representation of the African continent. More important is the argument that Kourouma is caught in a trap of what Ndiaye regards as the role of truth-teller created for him by critics. This is a role which involves peddling the expected images of Africa which then results in "privileging a truth discourse" in Kourouma's works (104).

Overall, this chapter examines the contribution that Kourouma has made to the debate about the conceptualisation(s) of the African hero. Although this is an area that has received considerable attention in African literature as a whole, this study's intervention explores the subversive potential and limits of the *donsomana*, the Malinke hunter's purifactory praise poem, song, and tale.

5.2 Kourouma and *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote:* Overview

As has already been noted earlier on, Kourouma is a towering figure in African literary circles but is only so in French-speaking countries. Like many African writers from the French-speaking parts of the continent, he remains a figure still largely to be appreciated by readers and critics in other parts of the continent. Drawing on a study by Kathryn Batchelor (2009), Vivian Steemers (2012: 37) highlights the relative obscurity of francophone African writers and their works outside the francophone world. Citing Batchelor, Steemers argues that translations of African francophone novels represent a very small percentage of all translated literature in the UK and US:

> Or to put it differently: the overall translation rate for all francophone African Literature into English is 4.8%, the number per country in 2008 ranged from 0 translations in Burundi, Rwanda, and Togo to 23 (9.5%) in the case of Cameroon and 7 (11.9%) in Guinea (Batchelor 18)

This is an observation that also, to some extent, justifies the inclusion of Kourouma in a study of this nature whose medium is English. One other unusual feature about Kourouma, besides the fact that he is relatively unknown in the Anglophone literary world, is that he has not been as prolific as some equally well-known writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Nurrudin Farah and others. However, this does not seem to have prevented the growth and spread of his fame. There is a gap of around twenty years between Kourouma's first novel and the second one. He published only four novels between 1968 and 2000. In an obituary in the UK's *The Independent* (2003), Margaret Busby says Ahmadou Kourouma's "*oeuvre* was about quality rather than quantity, and he had an impressive array of 18 prizes to prove it".

Ahmadou Kourouma (1927-2003) was born in Boundiali, the Ivory Coast, to Malinke parents of Malian and Guinean origin[1]. He spent his early years in Guinea and attended secondary school in Mali. He was expelled from school and was drafted into the French army to fight in Indochina in the early fifties. These experiences in Indochina are clearly evident in some of

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1. Ahmadou Kourouma reveals his Malinke origins in a 1997 interview. In fact, he calls himself "a *malinke*". See Jean Ouedraogo and Ahmadou Kourouma (2000) "An Interview with Ahmadou Kourouma: (November 24, 1997)". *Callaloo* 23 (4) 1338-1348.

the episodes in *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*. Kourouma later continued his education in France, after which he worked in the insurance business in France, Algeria and Cameroon. What is surprising about Kourouma's background is that the writer does not seem to have a deeply academic or literary background that could have shaped and influenced the direction or nature of his work. Here one has in mind African writers such as Ngugi, Achebe, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Soyinka and many others whose works have large imprints of academia.

Ndiaye (2007: 95) highlights Kourouma's fame and argues that the writer has achieved notoriety, superstardom, impressive book sales and mythical stature. Ndiaye also adds that Kourouma is probably one of the most widely-read of the African francophone writers and that "Kourouma's writings are among the rare African best-sellers of African literature". This is a point that Ndiaye emphasises by stating that 100 000 copies of *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* have been printed. Ahmadou Kourouma's first novel *The Suns of Independence* was published in French in 1968 as *Les soleis des independences* and the English translation only appeared in 1981. Steemers (2012: 38) sees the gap between the appearance of the original French edition and that of the English translation as a result of the "complexity of translating the 'malinkized' version of French" used by the writer. According to Jean Ouedraogo (2004: 231) Kourouma's works created a "stir" and "shockwaves":

> With a certain brio and a sense of renewal, the author Kourouma forced himself on the African literary scene and won over, with each passing work, a francophone readership that paid him more and more attention. Indeed, many were surprised by the narrative forms, the irregularity, the diversity, and especially the density of his oeuvre.

Guy Ossito Midiohouan and Patricia Geesey (1991: 23) regard Kourouma's first novel *The Suns of Independence* as "a masterpiece not only because of the theme explored (disillusionment in post-independence Africa), but also because of the originality of his writing style". Like *The Suns of Independence*, Kourouma's second novel, *Monne* (1990) can be regarded as the writer's version of portions of African history and as evidence of his attitude toward use of French (Midiohouan, 1991: 231). To Amadou Kone (2007: 116), in *Monne* "the linguistic question remains at the heart of the novel". Before *Monne*, Kourouma had written the play *Le diseur de verite* (1972) which is also described as "revolutionary" because of its "perspicacity and truthfulness" (Ouedraogo, 2004: 2). Like *The Suns of Independence*, *Le diseur de verite* also resulted in Kourouma going into exile. In fact, Ouedraogo describes

Kourouma as "the perpetual exile" (4) whose paths across various nations mirror those of some of his characters. Kourouma's fascination with language is again witnessed in *Allah n'est pas oblige* (*Allah is not Obliged*) which was published in 2000. Kourouma won a number of awards as recognition for the nature and impact of his works. Notable ones are Prix de Francite (1968), Royal Belgian Academy (1970), the Prix des Nouveaux Droits de l'Homme, the Grand Prix de l'Afrique Noire, the prize from the Association of Francophone Television and Radio Journalists (1990), the Prix des Tropiques (1998), the Prix de France-Inter (1999), the Grand Prix des gens de lettres de France (1999) and others (Ouedraogo, 2004: 2)

Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote was first published in 1998 in French as *En attendant le vote des betes sauvages*. Although replete with humour, this is the story of the tragedy of Africa dramatising the naked, brutal exercise of power and the quest to retain it at whatever cost. The story is set in an independent African country called the Republique du Golfe but obviously intended to be a microcosm of the continent at large. The country is ruled by "Koyaga, hunter and President-dictator", a ruthless dictator who has been in power for generations after having grabbed power in a bloody coup. Kourouma employs powerful devices from Africa's oral tradition to bring to life the scourge of dictatorship. In this novel the tale or *donsomana* of the life of Koyaga the dictator is narrated publicly by Bingo, the dictator's traditional praise-singer, griot, poet, chronicler and musician, also known traditionally as the *sora*. In this task the *sora* is accompanied and aided by Tiecoura, the performer with flute who is his *koroduwa* (apprentice), initiate and the big man's fool. So the *sora* sets the stage to bring the epic of Koyaga's dictatorship to life:

> You, Koyaga, sit enthroned in the centre. At your right hand sits Macledio, your Minister of Orientation. I am Bingo, the *sora*; I sing, I pay tribute and pluck the cora. A *sora* is a teller of tales, one who relates the stories of the hunters to spur their heroes to greater feats. Remember the name of Bingo, I am the griot, the poet and chronicler, the musician of this Brotherhood of Hunters.
>
> (WFTWB p2)

The *sora*'s assistant then issues what is supposed to be taken as a warning underlining their freedom of speech to the dictator and the audience that nothing will be left unsaid:

> President Koyaga, General, Dictator, here we will sing and dance your *donsomana* over the feast of six vigils. We will tell the truth, about your dictatorship, your parents, and your

> collaborators. The whole truth about your dirty tricks, your bullshit, your lies, your many crimes and assassinations…
>
> (WFTWB p2-3)

The purpose of the *donsomana* (tale) no doubt is also to stroke the ego of the dictator, to spread and publicise myths about him and serve as a warning to would-be dissenters and usurpers. This is the tale of Koyaga's rise to power and his tutelage by the masters of the game, the already established African 'heroes'. So, right from the start Koyaga is schooled in the art of dictatorship as the continent is never short of 'role-models':

> You Koyaga, must do nothing to exercise your authority as Head of State without first embarking on a voyage of initiation, without first inquiring into the art, the perilous science of dictatorship from the masters of autocracy. You must first journey. Meet and take counsel from the masters of absolutism, of the one-party state, the most prestigious heads of state from the four cardinal points of freedom-butchering Africa. (WFTWB p208)

The griot then takes the reader on a long journey which takes one through Koyaga's life from his birth to the twilight of his rule, which is the point where the novel actually begins. Koyaga is born in the tribe of the Naked people, also called the Paleos which is the moniker for the Paleonegritic people. Koyaga's rise is foregrounded with the unusual details of his father, Tchao's history. The eventful life of Koyaga's father (Tchao) is intended to underline Koyaga's unusual ancestry, thereby laying the foundation of what would be an equally remarkable and unusual life of the *donsomana*'s hero (Koyaga). The flashback to Tchao's life suggests that his greatness would inevitably pass on to his son, Koyaga. Tchao is described as an accomplished fighter among his people, who later also distinguishes himself fighting in the French colonial army. Koyaga is depicted as a true son of his father in terms of his exploits. After an unusual birth and childhood, like his father, Koyaga also joins the French colonial army and goes on to fight in Vietnam, and also distinguishes himself. After the war Koyaga stages a coup against the first president of their newly independent country, which marks the beginning of his long and bloody rule.

What is important at this stage is to point out that the *donsomana* is much more than just a riveting tale, it is a scathing attack on Africa's dictatorships. It is a vehicle through which the figure of the African dictator takes shape and also takes centre stage. It is Kourouma's casting of this figure and its wider artistic implications that the study seeks to interrogate.

5.3 Pioneers, Founders, Heroes and Villains

"Africa is by far the continent richest in poverty and dictators" (WFTWB p440)

Reading Ahmadou Kourouma's *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* is a fascinating journey of discovery full of shocks, twists and turns. Kourouma takes the reader across different periods and spaces, intertwining the past and the present while at the same time leaving one peering into an uncertain postcolonial future. This section of the study argues that Kourouma deliberately forces us to re-think the notion of the African hero in post-independence Africa through representation of dictatorship. While dictatorship is clearly the central focus of *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*, the panoramic nature of the novel and its overall technical thrust allow one to re-imagine a wider African experience. Kourouma seems to be deliberately chiding and laughing at attempts by African leaders to build larger-than-life images of themselves and to conflate self and nation. Here my argument is that the writer teases and toys around with received notions of the African hero as he directs his satire at conventionality, stereotypes, Western publics, the African writer and African writing itself. In terms of structure and technique Kourouma's novel seems to turn upside down our very notion of satire as the writer transforms himself not only into a satirist but into the target and victim of his satire. Before delving into the intricacies of what I see as the writer's metafictional thrust, there is need to retrace Kourouma's journey to the pinnacle of the writing trade. Patrick Corcoran (2013: 22) reveals how Kourouma's first novel, *The Suns of Independence*, had initially been rejected by the French publishing fraternity for failing to meet their expectations of the genre. We are told that after being rejected by publishers in France, *The Suns of Independence* was then accepted in Canada but only on condition that he excises and rewrites large portions of the novel. Kourouma did this dutifully to produce a text which apparently satisfied the tastes of the publishers and their reading public. One suspects that this was a rude awakening to a person who at this stage was just an aspiring African writer to come face to face with the grim reality of the literary institutions affecting postcolonial writers. This initial rejection and the subsequent prescription of what form the novel should take opened Kourouma's eyes to an issue whose relevance continues to resonate with African writers across the continent. The self-reflexivity and metafictional mode which is highly visible in *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* can therefore be traced back to the initial encounter between the writer and those in whom real power lies within

the context of the book industry. Kourouma is forced to reluctantly accept a prescribed notion of writing or the novel. However, Kourouma seems to do so with jest and enthusiasm which should be read as a journey of reimagining the African personality.

What then is the African hero? This is a question that the writer seems to persistently ask and tries to answer. That this is a question that the writer is constantly aware of is evident when one of the narrators in his novel rhetorically asks:

> Who are these people we call great men? They are, without a doubt, those who best confabulate. Which birds are most beautiful? Those who have the most beautiful voices. The greatest works of literature in all humanity, in every civilisation will always be fairy-tales, fictions. After all, what are the Bible, the Qur'an and other fundamental works of literate civilisations, great civilisations, timeless civilisations? What are they? That is, what do they teach us, these great religious, great literary works. A truth, and always the same truth. A man finds fulfilment and becomes a thaumaturge as soon as he frees himself of the fine distinction between truth and falsehood. (WFTWB p225)

In asking these questions, Kourouma is forcing the reader to in turn question the character, nature, role and the construction of images of the African hero. More importantly, in my view, this brings under the spotlight the origins and the nature of the modern African nation-state at the centre of which are the 'heroes', founders or pioneers of African nationalism and independence.

To answer the above questions, Kourouma fashions his novel by quarrying from the continent's vast indigenous resources which he then ultimately uses to engage with postcoloniality in general. Kourouma uses the traditional or indigenous literary repertoires to narrate and interpret the unusual postcolonial experiences at the centre of which is the dictator, Koyaga and others of similar ilk in various regions of the African continent. The major notable feature is that Kourouma's novel is structured and fashioned like an epic poem-cum-tale. This is a feature also highlighted by Isaac Ndlovu (2012: 59) who calls it "a mock-epic". Susan Gorman (2014: 1) argues that epics "do not have absolute meaning in and of themselves as genres, but rather their meanings are defined by where and when they are written and read, and by how they are used in combination with one another". Gorman largely draws on Wai Chee Dimock (2007: 1379) who also links the novel form to the epic form and highlights its open-endedness: "Saturated and resaturated by human needs, the epic is

what we collectively make of it: it can be poetry, fiction, or street performance, just as its habitats are both east and west, high and low, ancient and modern". These features, which will be explored in relation to the novel later in the chapter, go some way in explaining why Kourouma finds the epic form attractive and suited to his needs.

The novel is in fact designed to be and also to imitate the *donsomana* or praise poem. Adopting this narrative mode allows Kourouma to engage with the performance of power in post-independence Africa, at the centre of which is the African dictator casting himself as the founder, father, hero or saviour of the nation. So Kourouma embarks on a project to re-think and re-define the protagonists of the modern African states. The irony here is that initially, as seen with the difficulties that the writer had in publishing *The Suns of Independence*, this is a project that is to a large extent determined by the global politics of the book trade which seems to prescribe what is and what is not feasible to the African writer. For Kourouma, his Malinke tradition becomes a source of inspiration as he seeks to negotiate his way through the politics of the book publishing industry by creating something that is refereshingly different. It is modern not just in the sense of being in novel form, but in terms of overall subject. The epic form allows Kourouma to tap into the local or indigenous techniques to deal with contemporary experiences at the centre of which is postcolonial dictatorship. So Kourouma structures his novel in the form of an epic praise poem which tells the story of the dictator Koyaga's brutal rise, equally brutal rule and eventual attempts to cling onto power at all costs. The novel is divided into six vigils which are narrated or performed over several nights, which is one of the techniques that he borrows from Malinke traditional performances. The central focus of the story is primarily the dictator Koyaga and others like him across the continent battling to retain power at all costs in a rapidly changing world where the Cold War is no longer there to sustain and justify dictatorships.

Another major structural feature of the novel which is something again borrowed from indigenous performances, is the naming and presentation of the narrative as a *donsomana.* By doing so Kourouma unequivocally announces the double identity of his project which is indigenous or Malinke, but being also conveyed via a non-indigenous language. The *donsomana* or hunter's purifactory tale is a long tale made up of a series of tales largely narrated by Bingo, a *sora* or *griot,* who should in fact be regarded as the novel's real protagonist. Because of its epic nature, the *donsomana* is designed to take the supposedly

unfamiliar reader on a long journey of discovery that involves unmasking, embracing and rejecting notions of African imaginaries. In this case, Koyaga, who in fact by contracting the griot touts himself as the protagonist of the tale, allows the reader to tag along and experience his life. Through flashbacks which constitute long episodes within the larger tale, Kourouma criss-crosses different time periods and spaces tracing the origins of the present. Through the *donsomana* which is in essence a performance, he endeavours to make the reader experience to the fullest what is at stake by fusing the traditional or indigenous and the modern in order to explore how the modern African leader is a product of both traditions and is wily enough to exploit these contradictions that constitute the African nation-state. Kourouma's main aim seems to be that of transforming the novel into much more than what it has been all along. He seeks to hew it from the isolated individual writer and isolated reader associated with the acts of writing and reading and turn it into a communal artefact – the *donsomana*. According to Rosemary G. Schikora (1982: 812), the narrator transforms the isolated reader into an audience whose "sympathetic cooperation" he also enlists. While using the epic is not unusual in the African novel as witnessed in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) and *KMT: in the House of Life* (2002) or Meja Mwangi's *The Return of Shaka* (1989), it is the immediacy and dramatic nature of the *donsomana* in engaging with contemporary issues that heightens its overall impact.

By its very nature as some kind of epic, the *donsomana* involves individuals designed to dominate the story as a whole. Peter Okeh (2000: 8) sees epics as

> stories of famous individuals in various communities who distinguished themselves by their exceptional qualities and great exploits, especially in war. They are however not pure history, for the historical details used are embellished, manipulated, magnified, and renewed by oral artists such as griots

In the same vein, Isidore Okpewho (1979: 34) says "the oral epic is fundamentally a tale about the fantastic deeds of a man or men endowed with something more than human might and operating in something larger than the normal human context". Anny Wynchank (2004: 1) argues that there is an abundance of epics which extol the lives and deeds of illustrious heroes in Africa and makes a list of those that she considers epic heroes. Interestingly, Okpewho and Wynchank conceptualise heroism and power as male. Wynchank's list of heroes is dominated

by men such as Chaka, Sundiata, El Hadj Omar and others. Wynchank then highlights the role of the griot which was an integral part of the epic:

> The bard or griot in West Africa, who used to relate the epic, was first and foremost an artist. His aim was to entertain the listeners, who were fond of hearing about the prowess and exploits of their kings and warriors. The griot usually accentuated the superhuman dimension of the hero. In order to make his tale more pleasant, he skilfully used his art, the literary form of his narrative, the beauty of his language and any other device which could strike the imagination of his listeners. (p2)

If one reads Kourouma's novel with the above in mind, it becomes clear that the writer is in conversation with African oral tradition. More importantly, it also emerges that by transplanting the epic form onto the African dictator novel, Kourouma complicates and problematizes the novel genre and the epic form. Through the *donsomana* Kourouma deploys indigenous techniques into the genre of the novel, which in turn blurs temporal boundaries by revealing the continuities or similarities of peculiarities in the performance of power. If the novel is regarded as an originally foreign mode, Kourouma's strategy is designed to transcend the conventional notion of the genre of the novel. Since his novel cannot be a traditional praise poem or a traditional epic, Kourouma does not strive to produce a novel in the Western sense. In my view, to Kourouma this does not seem to be a well-nigh impossible task because of the postcolonial dispensation characterised by violence, blood and death in the hands of Africa's preponderance of dictators. In other words, the dictator figure and his misrule provide ample material for Kourouma's tale. Koyaga's obsession with power and its personalisation is poignantly captured by the griot, Bingo: "Power is a woman who cannot be shared. In a herd, there can only be one male hippopotamus" (121-122). It is important to note that Kourouma also understands power as male, a point that the study comments on significanty in the final chapter. However, the challenge and complication encountered by Kourouma in this regard is that the dictator figure fails to fit the template of the epic hero. As seen already, the epic focuses on the actions or deeds of a figure (hero) fighting for and defending his community. These are obviously qualities that the dictator Koyaga is not endowed with. He is in fact the opposite of the conventional hero. What Koyaga has in abundance is graphically illustrated throughout the *donsomana* by the griot Bingo and his *koroduwa* Tiecoura:

> Koyaga, you have many faults, grave faults, You were, you are as tyrannous as a savage beast, as untruthful as an echo, as brutal as a lightning strike, as murderous as a lycaon, as emasculating as a castrator, as populist as a griot, as corrupt as a louse, as libidinous as a pair of ducks. You are… You are… You have many other faults which if I were to try to expound them all, catalogue each one at a stroke, it would surely tear one's mouth at the corners. (WFTWB p368)

At the same time, the study is aware that even those labelled as famous heroes are not always without complications or controversy in terms of how they are viewed by society. A good example of this fact is Chaka whose life and exploits have been interpreted in very different or contradictory ways by historians and the creative world. This is a point that Carolyn Hamilton (1998) highlights in her investigation of what she calls "The Origins of the Image of Shaka".[2] The argument at this stage is that by adopting and adapting the template of the *donsomana*, Kourouma problematizes the notion of the hero. The audience is continuously reminded of Koyaga's numerous transgressions and bloody crimes against his own people in the pursuit of power. He is depicted taking part in the bloody elimination of his opponents:

> Phlegmatically, Koyaga jumped down from the window with a dagger. Despite the screams of the newly appointed general, Koyaga emasculated him – the uncircumcised must be emasculated while alive, adds the responder. Three of the infantrymen, prised open the committee president's jaws. You Koyaga, a veteran, stuffed his penis and his bloody testicles into his gaping mouth. (WFTWB p129)

So, by making Koyaga authorise the performance of the *donsomana*, Kourouma magnifies the incongruity of this particular epic hero's exploits.

While the traditional epic exalts the exploits of the true hero, Kourouma's novel does not pretend to be doing this. This is in spite of the dictator's blatant attempts to couch and present himself as the hero, not only of the *donsomana* but of his society as a whole. As has already

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2. Chaka's exploits have been of great interest in oral tradition and also in modern historical accounts. See Carolyn Hamilton. *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention*. Cape Town: David Phillip Publishers. (1988).

been noted the griot performs because of him, but more importantly, the griot is specifically hired for praise-singing, flattering and image-making. The dictator, Koyaga, seeks to present himself in the mould of the traditional heroes like Sundiata[3] and others. However, when one looks at the griot's selective use of facts from the past, the performance (*donsomana*) becomes suspect in spite of the satire and playful chiding. After all, the satirical aspect is persistently overwhelmed by the towering figure of Koyaga and his villainous exploits. If this is the case, the dictator seems to emerge victorious in the mythicisation battle. Officially, the role of the griot is the mythicisation of the dictator and his authority, while unofficially and surreptitiously the griot attempts to subvert the same institution that he is hired to advance. The foregoing casts a heavy shadow on the genre of the African dictator novel. By adopting the template of the *donsomana* for his novel, Kourouma allows us to re-engage with some of the perennial issues characteristic of the modern African nation state. By its very nature an epic allows us to see large swathes of both time and space. So, by casting his novel as a *donsomana*, Kourouma fuses the past and the present through the creation of national figures such as Koyaga and others. So time and space are held together, though precariously and tragically, by the presence of common figures in the form of dictators. This is a process that involves what Carrol F. Coates (2007: 130) calls warping time through historical figures. The past is dragged into the present in order for us to comprehend how things got to be what they are. However, the problem is that the past which is the focus of the *donsomana* is basically the story of one man who attempts to turn himself into the hero and everyone else into villains. Through satire, a large portion of the blame is expected to be placed on this leading individual. As the tale unfolds, the niggling doubt concerning the suspect nature of the griot's narrative also continues. The narrative places so much emphasis on the deeds or exploits of one man who is also the griot's paymaster, thereby tying the destiny of the postcolony to that single individual. Koyaga is like many other African dictators in that he conflates the nation with himself thereby making it his fiefdom. This highlights the fragile nature of the postcolonial state.

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3. Sundiata united the Mandinga (Malinke) people and founded the Malian Empire. He has been a subject of folklore and historical accounts. His story has also inspired many writers, including Kourouma, who should be regarded as "the transplant of the Malinke oral tradition" (Ouederago, 2007: 79).

What is extremely troubling are the images concocted through the use of the *donsomana* device. At the same time, there is substance in the claim that orality is able to bridge the present and the past:

> In other words, you might say that the oral tradition has functions – and has functioned for hundreds of years – as a bridge between the past and the present, and the future; an accumulation of knowledge obtained in the past which you consult and adjust in the present in order to find your way into the future.
>
> (Eva Johorlt, 2001: 100)

The *donsomana* does this by using characters as a means to re-play the past, the present and allowing one to re-imagine how the future will pay out. Koyaga and his world can only be understood by going through the story of his father during French colonialism. Again, the present which is dominated by Koyaga can only be made sense of by sifting through the lives or histories of those connected to him. The larger question posed by Kourouma seems to be whether these connected times, spaces and histories can take the African into the future, a question that is an existential one to Koyaga. The novel in this sense betrays a problematic obsession with the past which results in what Maggi Phillips (1997: 168) calls over-burdening the present with the past. This, in my view, paints a picture of a continent that is unable to rid itself of the baggage of the past. More importantly, by associating the dictator who is a reality of the present with the past (symbolised by the *donsomana*), the dictator is endowed with unusual powers and pedigree as he is able to straddle both the past and the present. While the *donsomana* is intended to mock or parody the dictator, the fact that the dictator is literally the last man standing attests to his unusual 'heroic' instinct for survival. He appropriates the past by placing himself at the centre of the *donsomana* and thereby also claiming space in that past which he uses in his attempts to manipulate the present and determine the future. This impression is created by the griot right at the beginning of the *donsomana*:

> Your name: Koyaga! Your totem: the falcon soldier and president are you. You will be the president of the Republique du Golfe and its greatest general for as long as Allah (may he preserve us for years and years to come) does not take from you the breath that gives you life. You are a hunter. With Rameses ll and Sundyata you are forever one of the three great hunters among men. (p1)

Associating Koyaga's name with and placing it beside the legendary ones of Sundyata (Sundiata) and Rameses ll establishes the dictator's place in time, that is, past, present and future. This becomes part of what Christiane Seydou (1983: 52) has called the "telescoping of time". In other words, Koyaga symbolically becomes a Sundyata through whom the nation lives on. Koyaga ties himself to a long African past in order to establish himself as being part of the natural progression of things which at the same time ties his name to a future which cannot come about without him as doing so would be tantamount to disrupting the temporal flow of things.

At the same time, associating the dictator with the past makes him anachronistic or a relic in a 'modern' world and the fact that Africa has been "rich" in such figures again reflects the continent's inability to move forward. The images of a moribund world at the centre of which is the dictator Koyaga are some of the disturbing consequences of the writer's resort to orality. This a point highlighted by Christiane Ndiaye (2007) who attributes this to a misreading of Kourouma. To a large extent, this stems from the writer's use of the *donsomana* dominated by a figure (Koyaga) who appears to re-confirm the archetypes and stereo-types. Ndiaye questions the attempt to read, see and comprehend Africa or the African through Kourouma's works. Kourouma's attempts to re-constitute the novel are questioned here. Kourouma seems to be exploiting the age-old fascination with blackness or difference:

> Does this 'authentic' and supposedly positive difference not risk transforming itself one more into essentialist alterity where, at best, the Other is an object of curiosity, fear or misunderstanding; and at worst, the inhabitant of such a strange universe that it is inaccessible and suspected of being populated by beings outside the human species? [4] (Ndiaye, 105)

While the resultant effect of the images concocted by Kourouma through the *donsomana* appear unintended, the initial rejection of the original version of the novel by publishers in France and its eventual publication in Canada only after wide-spread changes (Corcoran, 2013: 22) seem to point to a writer who is consciously aware of the possible impact of his work. In other words, it is difficult to allay the suspicion that these seemingly unintended

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4. Christiane Ndiaye examines the controversy surrounding Rene Maran's novel Batouala, subtitled "true black African novel". The controversy seems to have been over the meaning of "truly black".

consequences of the novel are in fact part of the material that was expected to fulfil the demands of the publishers and their target market outside Africa.

Since Kourouma deliberately incorporates orality into his work by structuring his novel in the form of a *donsomana*, it is now necessary to examine what exactly the functions of orality are. Uzoma Esonwanne (2012: 151) has argued that "history has compelled African poets to make grim choices", one of which, besides the perennial one of language, "was poetics: which, African oral or European literary poetics, was best suited to the African poet's needs and imagination?" More importantly, Esonwanne asks incisive questions regarding the relationship between orality and literacy in postcolonial writing. The major questions include whether the oral that is inscribed by African writers is ornamental or functional, whether the focus on the interplay between orality and literacy is "designed merely to conceal the non-African provenance of the aesthetic" (p139). By resorting to the *donsomana*, Kourouma re-engages the issue of orality in modern African literature. This is an issue that has been debated extensively by various scholars because of its also extensive adaptation and incorporation into African literature by various foundational and contemporary African writers. Martial Frindethie (2008: 17) links the use of orality by African writers to what he calls the "quest for originality". This in my view reveals and partly explains the adoption of a number of techniques of orality by a number of African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Okot p'Bitek, Kourouma and others. In some of her numerous studies on oral literature in South Africa Isabel Hofmeyr (1996: 87) says "the crowded world of oral literary genres" can include "anything from migrant women's songs, to sermon traditions, chiefly praises, riddling sessions, political performance poetry, regional narrative forms and so on". Significantly, Hofmeyr argues that "oral forms do remain marginalised at all levels". However, if this is the case, Kourouma seems bent on proving that Africa's oral forms are a rich source of inspirational material for re-imagining African experience, past, present and future. Christopher Miller (1990: 69) sees distinctions between the oral and the written and says they "underpin the entire relationship between Sub-Saharan Africa and the West". Miller adds that "Orality and literacy are two worlds that exist in a state of tension, enriching and contradicting each other in daily life". According to Hofmeyr (1991: 633):

> In trying to explain the way in which oral cultures are transformed, there is a temptation to give commonsensical explanations of orality and literacy. In terms of these perceptions, oral

> forms are believed to be vulnerable, tenuous and on the verge of extinction. Printing and writing, on the other hand, are perceived as powerful, durable media that almost inevitably erase all oral forms which they encounter.

Miller and Hofmeyr reveal the contradictions surrounding orality and the written word with the two forms existing in and representing different worlds altogether. My contention here is that in *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* Kourouma is clearly aware of these tensions or contradictions and taps into them to critique the performance of power in contemporary Africa. For Kourouma such a process entails rethinking the 'inherited' medium of the novel. The paradox, however, is that the refashioned genre still exists in a foreign language. This is a fact that forces one to wonder who exactly Kourouma is writing for. This troubling issue becomes even more acute because of the writer's resort to orality. In an extended passage Christopher Miller also points out the effect of using a European language:

> Everywhere, elitism vexes intellectual life. By speaking and writing in European languages, the African intellectual makes himself/herself incomprehensible to the majority of the people, who become an object in the intellectual's discourse. European language literacy is the most important element in a process of distancing, a displacement that removes the intellectual from the immediate sphere of traditional culture. (p70)

The above brings into question the impact of *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* and other texts like it. While the *donsomana* is intended for public or communal consumption, one cannot ignore the incomprehensibility caused by the use of a European language that Miller highlights. In fact, Miller then goes further to pass a damning verdict on Kourouma's *The Suns of Independence*, something that equally applies to *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* and other similar African texts: "his written French, having been 'thought in Malinke', is always already a translated language, but the original *text* does not exist. We are faced with a sort of palimpsest, a poorly erased original, that affects the form and meaning of the French text" (p202). In my view, it is such perceptions of incomprehensibility that Kourouma attempts to rectify by adopting the Malinke epic form to engage with known or contemporary African realities at the centre of which is the African dictator. At the same time, however, one should be mindful of Eileen Julien (2006: 679)'s powerful argument that the presence of oral genres in a text should not be viewed as "the *necessary trace* of a writer's origins that is the proof of a genuine Africanness, but an *appropriation* and *strategy* through which the writer attempts to solve aesthetic and social questions". In spite of Miller's claims, Kourouma's approach is

validated by Walter Ong's (1982) observation and claim that it is "inescapably obvious that language is an oral phenomenon" (6) and that "The basic orality of language is permanent" (7).

5.4 Conflicted Roles

Ahmadou Kourouma's *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* has been hailed for its gripping, brash and blunt rendition of the tale of performance of power in modern Africa at the centre of which are Koyaga, depicted as the stereotypical tin-pot dictator and Bingo, the traditional story teller variously known as the griot, *jele* or *sora*. This section argues that although Koyaga and Bingo cast a long shadow throughout this deliberately pseudo-traditional, but at the same time modern tale of power and its performance, surprisingly, neither of the two is the 'star' of the novel. It is the writer who looms large and tall above all the characters as he creates for himself the role of the ultimate griot by turning the novel into a *donsomana.* Ahmadou Kourouma casts himself as the modern griot or *sora* and pits himself against the traditional griot or story-teller and against the dictator, thereby transforming the novel into a gripping tale or *donsomana* of the battle of myth-makers. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction, this section of the study examines Ahmadou Kouruoma's attempts to re-cast the novel's conflicted role as a vehicle for the representation and re-conceptualisation of the African reality and imaginary.

Historiographic metafiction and post-modern texts in general, problematize the incorporation of the "inter-texts of history, its documents and traces" into what has been termed an "avowedly fictive context" (Hutcheon, 1986: 302). This study argues that Kourouma simultaneously questions, embraces and rejects established myths, histories and supposedly known realities while at the same time striving to reconstitute new imaginaries of post-coloniality. More importantly, the study goes on to explore what it regards as the simultaneous complicit and subversive nature of Kourouma's dictator novel, highlighting how in the process of re-narration of power Kourouma contributes to the re-conceptualisation of the African imaginary through the medium of the novel.

Reading *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* one gets the feeling that he is being allowed to enter the dictator's supposedly hallowed but at the same time desecrated space. The griot

Bingo and his assistant Tiecoura are hirelings roped in for the private amusement of the dictator Koyaga. More importantly, they are brought in for the overall goal of lending legitimacy to Koyaga's regime as a last-ditch attempt to save and prolong his now anachronistic rule in a post-Cold War dispensation. It is hallowed space in that it is specifically created by the dictator to trumpet his achievements, and display his virility and overall power. Through the *donsomana*, the dictator's self-mythicisation is concretised. However, the *donsomana*'s irreverent nature is also intended to be an assault on the dictator's god-like image.

Kourouma creates an arena where figures that are both historical and fictional are constructed, resurrected, re-constructed and deconstructed. Space, histories and myths are intertwined, but at the same time boundaries between them are blurred, erased, re-drawn and challenged. The re-enactment of the *donsomana* re-creates the novel as space for re-engaging histories, myths, power in general and the act of writing itself. By adopting the *donsomana* as a structural device for his novel, Kourouma blurs the line between the spoken word and writing as the *donsomana* creates the illusion of a live performance. A conventional reading of the novel captures the dictator Koyaga as the focus of the story. However, a close reading of the novel demonstrates that the writer seeks to subvert images of the modern African hero-leader. More importantly, this section of the study argues that although biting satire runs though the novel as expected with the dictator as the target, Kourouma seems to achieve much more than expected as will soon be demonstrated.

Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote is clearly intended to satirise the abuse of power in the Republic de Golfe and the rest of post-colonial Africa. Kourouma achieves this by his seemingly effortless dramatization of the brutal violence accompanying Koyaga's rise to power and his long and brutal reign. By modelling his novel along the lines of a traditional hunter's tale (*donsomana*), Kourouma creates the illusion of a huge audience, which is intended to metaphorically extricate the novel from the realm of the private individual reader into a public performance. The reader becomes part of the "huge" audience witnessing the performance that is the *donsomana*. In the process, the readers/audience are supposed to not only witness, but be participants in publicly censuring Koyaga's dictatorship. Bingo, the *sora*, and Tiecoura, his *koroduwa* (apprentice assistant) lead the charge against the dictator. His notoriety and villainy are sung out loudly for all to hear: "Under the iron rule of Koyaga, it

is hard for a citizen to heave a sigh, to whisper a hint, to whistle a tune in secret, even in his own home" (352). This public dramatisation of Koyaga's brutal dictatorship reminds everyone that it is Koyaga who has created the space for the performance that is supposed to represent an indictment of his brutal rule. Clearly, from this one can argue that the *donsomana* is a compromised tale since it is authorised by the dictator. The space that is created is therefore essentially suspect and compromised since it owes its existence to the dictator himself. Leroy Vail and Landeg White (1991: 311) provide useful insight into the functions and impact of praise poetry. Through their analysis of the quasi-anthropological observations of Dr Andrew Smith on his visit to the court of Mzilikazi who was the paramount chief of the Ndebele people, Vail and White attest to the circumscribed nature of oral poetry or public performances:

> In the earliest account we have of poetic license, Andrew Smith's description of Mzilikazi in 1835, Smith had emphasised the role of oral poetry in allowing people to present their comments and regrets to the king, who was by this means kept in touch with popular sentiment. But no matter how sharp the criticism, no challenge was intended to the ruler's legitimacy. The very act of performance implied an acceptance of clientage in Mzilikazi's nascent state

In my view, this raises questions on the efficacy of the *donsomana*'s and the novel's satire since it is primarily designed for the amusement and also ulterior motives of the dictator. More importantly, the *donsomana* is roped into the service of power. In this case, Koyaga has contracted the *sora* and the *koroduwa* to perform the purifactory rites at the thirtieth anniversary of his assumption of power as one of the tricks up his sleeves in attempting to breathe life into his waning dictatorship now under threat from seismic geopolitical shifts stemming from the end of the Cold War. This relationship between the griot and the dictator makes the narrative (*donsomana*) highly suspect and complicit. Nevertheless, one notes the griot and his assistant's attempts to subvert the boundaries imposed by the dictator. In the introductory remarks the sora, Bingo, tries to detract attention from these boundaries or the power exerted by Koyaga on their performance:

> Here we are all gathered in the great gardens of your palace. Everything is ready, each in his place. I will tell the tale of purification; the story of your life, life as master hunter and dictator. In the Malinke tongue, the tale is called a donsomana. It is an epic told by a sora with his koroduwa – an apprentice in the purifactory stage, the cathartic stage. Tiecoura is a koroduwa

> and, like all of his kind, he plays the fool, the idiot, the loon. He can do as he wishes, Everything is permitted him, and nothing that he does goes unpardoned. (WFTWB p2)

These attempts, however, are overshadowed by the dictator's clear ownership of the performance, which owes its existence to him. While the atrocities perpetrated by the dictator make the tale and its open-space public performance a kind of open court of law where the villains are unmasked and censured, the dictator seeks to not only own that tale, but use it for his own selfish ends of power retention.

Throughout the *donsomana*, the griot excoriates, chides and ridicules the dictator through graphic words and indelible performance repeatedly calling him "hunter, emasculator of man and beast" (422). He is reminded of his "dirty tricks", "bullshit", "lies", "many crimes and assassinations" (3). The griot seems to even revel in seizing this opprtunity to undress the dictator.

This, however, does not detract from the fact that the *donsomana* is a tale partly designed for the entertainment and gratification of the dictator, a point Kourouma reminds us when the *sora* makes half-hearted attempts to restrain his *koroduwa*: "Cease from insulting this gentleman, a man of great honour as Koyaga, the father of our nation for if you do not ruin and damnation will hunt you down and destroy you down. Hold your tongue!" (p3). Although the *donsomana* as a public performance may be about shouting out and publicly speaking truth to power, at the same time one notes that it still remains compromised and complicit "truth". Moreover, juxtaposed with the brutal reality of Koyaga's power, the subversive nature of the *donsomana* pales into virtual insignificance: "In his republic, the Supreme Guide was everywhere at all times, he was omnipresent" (357). So, Kourouma highlights the fictionality or myth of speaking truth to power in such circumstances. Read in this sense, the *donsomana* becomes a charade, that is, a performance that feigns censure when it is in fact designed to be part of the strategies deployed by the dictator to ensure that he retains power. If this line of argument is pursued further, the *donsomana* becomes an epitome of the dictator's mythicization. In other words, instead of subverting the dictator's power, the griot only succeeds in concretising the dictator's mythical status, thus contributing in shoring up his power.

As has already been noted, *Waiting for the Wild Beast to Vote* is a dictator novel that largely draws on history which it then dramatizes by turning it into a *donsomana* which is largely narrated by the *sora* (griot) Bingo and the *koroduwa* Tiecoura. This study's intervention goes beyond the conventional reading of the novel or its equally conventional reading as a satirical attack on Koyaga and African dictatorship in general. The study problematises notions of satire and history. Through the novel, histories, myths and fiction are re-visited, questioned, re-narrated and debunked, leaving them on precarious ground. Instead of making the dictator the target or victim of his satire, Kourouma zeroes in on the histories, myths and the *donsomana* for their pseudo-subversive nature. In fact, it is not too far-fetched to regard the novel as a satirisation of the very notion of satire itself.

So, the *sora* (griot) and his *koroduwa* (responder) are conflicted, complicit and compromised like their performance. They subvert the very tool that is supposed to subvert power as they become the dictator's willing play-mates. At the same time the griot is a symbol or representative of the story-telling fraternity whose membership Kourouma seems to claim and underline by crafting the *donsomana*-like novel. Kourouma therefore seems to cast doubt and aspersions not only on writing or the art of story-telling, but on himself as a writer. In other words, Kourouma seems to be unmasking and chiding the weaknesses of his writing and by extension his very being. While it has been argued that Kourouma subverts the *donsomana* (Ndlovu, 2012: 59), this study posits that Kourouma undermines both the modern griot (writer) and the novel. The two purport to undermine the authority of the dictator through satire which exposes and brings to censure the excesses of power. Ironically, by casting doubt on the integrity of his own writing, Kourouma also casts doubt on the whole tale about Koyaga, which in turn highlights the limitations of the histories, myths or tales that are concocted by dictators. By doing so, Kourouma attacks his own role in the creation of myths, histories and tales. Like Bingo the *sora* (griot), Kourouma unmasks and questions the writer's simultaneously subversive and complicit roles in re-imagining postcoloniality.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed how Kourouma represents the performance of power using the template of the *donsomana.* Kourouma dramatizes the role played by African leaders in

bringing the continent to its knees through well-documented acts of misrule. In doing so, Kourouma ridicules the African leaders' attempts to cast themselves as founders, pioneers and heroes of their respective nations. Through *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*, Kourouma demonstrates that the African dictator text continues to provide space for continued engagement with some of postcolonial Africa's most intractable issues. The chapter concludes by noting and highlighting Magali Armillas-Tiseyra's view that dictator texts "pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality, unsettling notions of historical truth, and reflect on the nature of writing itself" (Armillas-Tiseyra, 2012: vi). Overall, this study's intervention is to underline the metafictional nature of the novel demonstrating how it problematizes characters, the writer and the performance of power.

CHAPTER 6

Reinvention, Power and Representation in Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Wizard of the Crow*

> The mythical roots of 'rumour' hark one back to Roman mythology in the figure of 'Fama', the goddess of 'Rumour', and in Virgil's *Aeneid* (Book iv) she is imaginatively conceived as a swift birdlike monster with as many eyes, lips, tongues and ears as feathers travelling on the ground but with her head in the clouds.[1]

6.1 Introduction

This chapter picks up from where the previous one left off by focusing on Ngugi wa Thiong'o who, like Ahmadou Kourouma, is also a writer writing about a postcolonial world buffeted by the global winds of change. Ngugi is one of the writers whose works have contributed immensely to the growth and development of modern African literature. Together with other foundational writers Ngugi has laid the foundations of modern African writing. Carrying out a study on Ngugi is both a daunting but fascinating exercise. It is a daunting exercise because of the writer's enormous oeuvre. This is a body of works made up of plays, novels and theoretical works spanning decades. At the same time, any study of Ngugi's works constitutes an exciting challenge because of the enormous contribution he has made and continues to make in his attempts to provide African writers, African literature and all sorts of audiences with his interpretations of the African postcolonial condition. Simon Gikandi (2000: i) regards Ngugi as one of the most influential African writers because of his creative works and also because of "his criticism of wider cultural issues – such as nation and narration, power and performance, language and identity, empire and postcoloniality".

Through the novels *Wizard of the Crow* and *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* Ngugi and Kourouma respectively, carry out what appear to be similar projects at roughly the same time. There are clear similarities between Kourouma's *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* and Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* which are difficult to miss. The obvious one in this regard, one

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1. See Prodosh Bhattacharya (2017) "Rumour as Performance: Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* and the Peripheral Ontology of Postcolonialism", *Middle Flight*: *SSM Journal of English Literature and Culture* 6 158-167

which also determined the selection of their texts for this study, is that both of them are dictator texts dealing with an unusual situation in which the writers strive to represent in fiction a reality which seems to confound conventional narrative forms. Another similarity which this study finds hard to ignore is what it sees as their attempts to re-conceptualise and deconstruct the figure of the postcolonial African dictator within the context of post-Cold War politics. However, while Ahmadou Kourouma does so through what has been termed "malinkised French" (Steemers, 2012: 38), Ngugi writes *Wizard of the Crow* at a point in his writing career when he had already abandoned writing in English and resorted to his mother language Gikuyu. In other words, *Wizard of the Crow* is written in an African indigenous language and then translated into English, with the latter exercise also carried out by the writer himself. Ngugi's resort to Gikuyu brings an interesting dimension to the debate on the nature of African writing. In the previous chapter I noted how a novel like *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* which is written in a European language (French) is regarded as basically a palimpsest or an already translated version, but one in which the original version does not exist. The argument in this regard as has been seen in the previous chapter is that the African writer's creative product is always a problematic one as the writer thinks in the mother tongue and writes in a European language. Ngugi attempts to render this aspect of the language debate irrelevant by resorting to write in his mother tongue. This is a feature that has characterised Ngugi's creative endeavours and was marked by the performance of the play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I Will Marry When I Want*) at Kamiriithu in 1977 and its publication in Gikuyu in 1980. It appears, says Simon Gikandi (2000: 196), the "choice of language and audience had helped Ngugi overcome the gap between history as an experience and object of analysis and its status as an everyday experience".

Because of the large body of work by Ngugi, together with the huge impact the writer has had, there is also a huge body of critical works on the writer. Scholarship on Ngugi has largely focused on the ideological or political aspects of the writer's works. This is a feature that is evident in Joseph McLaren (1995)'s overview of the critical reception of one of Ngugi's works entitled "Ideology and Form: The Critical Reception of *Petals of Blood*" or in Neil Lazarus (1995)'s "(Re) turn to the People: Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the Crisis of Postcolonial African Intellectualism". Most of the scholarship is largely on works done by the writer before 1989 which is also a result of the fact there is a huge dry spell in terms of the writer's post-Cold

War creative output, save for the memoirs. In my view, this is a special cut off point in any extant study of Ngugi because of the writer's well-known ideological leanings and quasi-political activism prior to 1989. This particular year heralded the collapse of the Soviet Union and also the resolution of the Cold War. Although the pitfalls of the socialist experiment had been apparent almost two decades earlier especially among left-wing European intellectuals, African intellectuals had clung tenuously to the socialist dream largely because of colonial capitalism's disastrous impact on the continent. So, the resolution of the Cold War essentially represented the collapse of the socialist vision, an ideal that Ngugi had unequivocally subscribed to and articulated through creative works such as *Petals of Blood* (1976), *Devil on the Cross* (1980) or *I Will Marry When I Want* (1982) where both content and form clearly reveal authorial intention. In addition, Ngugi had also made his ideological position very clear at various forums and through his essayistic pronouncements. In an interview with Ken Olende (2006) Ngugi spells out what he sees as the role of his writing:

> Art and artists can draw pictures of our struggle that instil strength, clarity, hope, to our struggle to realise visions of a new tomorrow as embodied in the struggle and survival of our children; or pictures that instil fear and dependence or give rational, artistic legitimacy to the world of the oppressor nations and classes. Artistic and intellectual ideological struggles are part of the overall struggle for survival and development. [2]

It is in this respect that Oscar M. Maina (2007: 67) highlights that "Ngugi has been accused of focusing on ideologies at the expense of creativity". However, Maina is quick to also point out that *Wizard of the Crow* is "a purely artistic text". So it is not surprising that the focus of most scholarship on the pre-1989 Ngugi's works seems to be also largely predictable as it is to a large extent determined by the writer's ideological stance. It is this earlier Ngugi that has received wide scholarly attention. However, *Wizard of the Crow* is a breath of fresh air as it presents readers and critics an opportunity to re-evaluate Ngugi within the context of a largely globalised world, but one in which the postcolonial condition is still a challenging reality to both writer and ordinary citizen.

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2. Ngugi's theoretical and political pronouncements have been widely covered over the years. The following by the writer himself provide important insights into some of the writer's ideas, intention, style and vision: *Writers in Politics* (1981), *The Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Oppression in Neo-Colonial Kenya* (1983), *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), *Moving the Center: the Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993) or *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams: the Performance of Power in Postcolonial Africa* (1996).

A number of critics see similarities between *Wizard of the Crow* and Ngugi's earlier texts. They argue that the novel is an attempt by Ngugi to re-write his earlier works (Dalleo 2012; Mclaren, 2008; Gikandi, 2008; Armillas-Tiseyra, 2012; Ndigirigi, 2007; Maxwell, 2011). According to Raphael Dalleo (2012: 139) the novel is an "overt summing up of the author's previous work" and more importantly, he regards it as "rethinking the anticolonial ideologies". Joseph McLaren (2008: 151) sees the novel as a "twenty-first century critique of neo-colonialism". These views evoke images of a writer transformed by the passage of time and a transformed global landscape, but struggling to let go of a past which is given concrete presence and substance by the tenacious African dictator and the intractable postcolonial condition. In this respect Njogu Waita (2014: 49) sees in *Wizard of the Crow* a writer rethinking and revising some of his earlier views on gender: "Nyawira is indeed a revision of earlier female characters all the way from Nyambura (*River Between*), Mwihaki (*Weep Not Child*) and Guthera in *Matigari*". However, according to Waita the novel is different from the writer's previous works in that this time "the novelist does not pretend to offer explicit solutions" (49).

This chapter situates itself within the debates on Ngugi's attempts to interpret and re-interpret the postcolonial condition through what Ndigirigi (2007: 70) calls "experimentation with new ways of retelling the story of the changing sameness of the African dictator and his many disguises". This chapter largely draws on some of Simon Gikandi (2000: 1-2)'s approaches to understanding Ngugi by adopting his suggestion that Ngugi's major works should be analysed as "a series of experiments in narrative form, experiments driven by the author's search for an appropriate style for representing an increasingly complex social formation". Gikandi adds that Ngugi's literary works

> are best read as a continuous – and often agonised – search for the narrative forms that best represent the complete culture of postcolonial Africa and as a reflection of the contradictions inherent in any attempt to synthesise aesthetic forms and cultural formations in a continuous state of flux.

The chapter's point of departure and fascination with *Wizard of the Crow* primarily stems from the fact that it is part of the writer's post-Cold War creative efforts and is therefore well-placed to illuminate to us how Ngugi has transformed aesthetically and in terms of his world view. Most scholarship on this later Ngugi provides us with some of the evidence of the now

acute crisis of representation that Ngugi, like other left-leaning writers, faced after the resolution of the Cold War. In my view, the impact of this seismic shift in the global geo-political affairs should not be downplayed if one looks at how the maps of a number of countries across Europe and in Africa had to be re-drawn, with previously 'big men' also falling victim to the changes. Here what comes to mind is the disintegration of countries such as the USSR, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and the emergence of new nations such as Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzogovina, Slovakia, Czech Republic, a united Germany from the unification of West and East Germany and the plethora of independent nations that emerge from the ashes of the Soviet Union. In Africa, Eritrea emerges after it excises itself from the previously Eastern-bloc backed Mengistu's Ethiopia. The resolution of the Cold War also brings to an end conflicts such as the Angolan and Mozambican civil wars, while ushering in independence to Namibia and eventually South Africa. The existence of apartheid South Africa, the occupation of Namibia and the sponsoring of civil wars had all been rationalised as part the global war against communism.

In the midst of these changes, writers, such as Ngugi and others, whose works had espoused particular political visions had to redefine their visions and re-invent themselves. If all along from *The River Between, Weep Not, Child* to novels such as *A Grain of Wheat, Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi had battled with the nature of the African novel (Gikandi, 2000: 160), trying to domesticate the genre as it were and make it conform to the needs of the African writer and the African condition, the collapse of the world wide socialist dream only added to the crisis of representation that is diagnosed by Jameson (1986), Gikandi (2000) and Ndigirigi (2007). Ngugi's works prior to 1989 had been marked by bitterness about the African condition but tempered by an over-optimistic vision of social change. However, in *Wizard of the Crow*, one witnesses a writer who has reached a kind of damascene moment. There is now an image of a mature writer who has mellowed with age. The dictator novel presents Ngugi with the vehicle and arena where he can transcend the challenges and set-backs, which have rendered the previous vision unviable and antiquated in a globalised world. The overall argument of this chapter is that *Wizard of the Crow* is a novel about re-invention. More importantly, the chapter seeks to demonstrate that this is a re-invention that is instigated and inspired by the vagaries of time. Both the writer and his creation are temporal products. In *Wizard of the Crow* time complicates writer and characters as each compete to

redefine themselves in severely changed circumstances. In Ngugi's case, the long period of exile from home seems to have taken a toll on the writer in the sense that he is no longer as sure-footed as he previously was in terms of his creative intentions. In an interview with Harish Trivedi (2003: 9-10) Ngugi acknowledges the toll of exile:

> The problem of exile is being forced away from the location of inspiration. A writer feeds on what he encounters – in a market place, in public transport, in a religious centre; those images are very important. So for me it is very hard that I have been taken away from the Gikuyu language environment. I have been deprived of that and I need that contact.

Ngugi's plight is further complicated by a 'new world order' now dominated by liberal notions of democracy and human rights.

This chapter addresses the following questions: How does the postcolonial dictator try to rebrand himself in order to cope with the changes spawned by globalisation? What is the significance of the contestation over the control of narratives in contemporary postcolonial society? In what way(s) does the novel encourage re-imagining of postcolonial identities, time, space and authority in a globalised terrain?

6.2 Background and Synopsis

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's writing spans decades. His career has frequently been marked by his public pronouncements on some of the pertinent cultural and political issues affecting postcolonial Africa. These views have shaped his creative works in terms of production and also in terms of their critical reception[3]. According to Gikandi (2000: 12), "One of Ngugi's major achievements as a writer arises from his sensitive understanding of the complete relation between aesthetics and politics in modern society". In this regard Ngugi stands out especially in his sustained ability to intervene in and shape directly and indirectly some of the major cultural and political debates on and about the continent. This partly explains his detention in 1977 and subsequent exile in Britain in 1982. The impact of his work is again

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3. The following are some of the sources that provide detailed background information on Ngugi and also make significant contributions to the debates surrounding the writer and his works: David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe (1997), James Ogude (1999), Simon Gikandi (2000) and Reinhard Sander & Bernth Lindfors.eds. (2006).

demonstrated by the rabid response of the Daniel Arap Moi regime to his novel *Matigari* (1986). All available copies of the novel were seized from the publisher by state security agents (Gikandi, xi). Odun Balogun (1995: 185) argues that Matigari "was so artistically successful that the Kenyan government had mistaken its protagonist for a real life revolutionary seeking government overthrow and had issued a warrant for his arrest". The writing of *Wizard of the Crow* should be seen within the context of Ngugi's long-held views on language and cultural production. There also seems to be little let up on some of these views by Ngugi as revealed through some of his recent public pronouncements.[4]

So the novel *Wizard of the Crow* (2007) is written in the writer's mother tongue Gikuyu and published in 2004 as *Murogi wa Kagogo* and then translated into English by the writer himself, not only to make a point about some of his views but symbolically include his original "home" (Kenya) as part of his audience. *Wizard of the Crow* is a novel that has been justifiably described as ambitious. This is by no small means an understatement at all. In a 2003 interview with Harish Trivedi and Wangui wa Goro, Ngugi describes the novel which he was then still writing in his mother tongue Kikuyu as "a huge work which I have been writing every single day since May 1997 – about two thousand pages in double space"(Reinhard Sander and Bernth Lindfors, 2006: 408). The translated version published by Vintage that that I refer to in this chapter is also a novel of epic proportions made up of 768 pages of non-stop storytelling. This initial feature straight away points to the expansive or epic nature of the postcolonial world and its now seamless boundaries. Ngugi conceives this project to capture the realities of a postcolonial world that now refuses to be contained within what once appeared to be clear physical and temporal boundaries. The story's setting is an imaginary country called Aburiria. Like most dictator texts, as seen in previous chapters, the setting is fairly recognisable and designed to reflect a good number of post-independence African states. Aburiria is ruled by an archetypal dictator simply called The Ruler. In his review of

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4. That Ngugi's views on language have remained largely consistent is revealed in a series of public lectures delivered at several South African universities in 2017, one of which this writer was fortunate enough to attend at The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, on 2 March 2017. In the lectures themed: "Decolonise the Mind, Secure the Base" Ngugi revisits the language issue in Africa and passionately argues that African scholarship and the African state at large are not in touch with the people as "the majority are rendered linguistically deaf and mute by government policies that have set European languages as the normative measure of worth in every aspect of national life". See https://www.wits.ac.za/news/latest-news/general-news/2017/2017-03/language-at-the-centre-of-decolonisation-.html

Wizard of the Crow, Evan Mwangi (2007: 255), says that Ngugi's "dictator figure is fleshed out with details that also suggest an amalgamation of Mobutu, Pinochet, Abacha, Suharto, Marcos and other world dictators".

The dictator's long reign in Aburiria is in its twilight as the resolution of the Cold War has left him and his regime vulnerable to internal threats and indifference, disinterest, and downright disengagement by an international community whose buzzwords are now multiparty democracy, human rights, and free and fair elections. Similarly, like his fictional dictator, Ngugi and other writers like him are left disoriented and unsure of their place in this post-Cold War world. The conflict between East and West had spawned and sustained dictatorships in Africa and other parts of the world, but now African dictators such as Aburiria's The Ruler can no longer rely on the West for economic and other forms of external support. Here one has in mind the likes of real-life dictators whose fall had been precipitated by the end of the Cold War. Mengistu Haile Mariam, Kamuzu Banda of Malawi, Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania and others readily come to mind. The plight that the Aburirian regime finds itself in, in the post-Cold War period, is similar to that of the dictator Koyaga in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*.

In *Wizard of the Crow* the dictator is so out of touch with reality that he fails to understand the implications of the geopolitical changes that now pose real existential threat to his rule. The leading characters in the novel are the Ruler and his henchmen such as Machokali (Sharp Eyes), Sikiokuu (Big Ears) and Big Ben Mambo, the policeman-cum-narrator Arigagai Gathere, Grace Nyawira and Kamiti. Grace Nyawira is the leader of the Movement for the Voice of the People, an underground movement which carries out modest acts of sabotage to embarrass and humiliate the regime. Kamiti is an unemployed homeless graduate who later partners Nyawira in the Voice of the People's Movement. More importantly, Kamiti doubles as the *Wizard of the Crow*, a kind of a witchdoctor famed for his magical powers and is even hired by the regime in its attempt to cure the Ruler of the strange illness that is the subject of rumour throughout most of the novel. The Ruler's already precarious situation is made worse by the strange illness and his henchmen who are stuck in the old politics of survival through ingratiating themselves with the Ruler. The henchmen come up with ridiculous ideas and acts which evoke derision and disgust from the ordinary people. Significantly, Aburiria and its rulers have become pariahs in the post-Cold War dispensation. The blindness and absurdity

of the regime are highlighted by the Marching to Heaven project, which can be compared to the skyscraper that the British tycoon Robert Maxwell wanted to build in the middle of a public park in Nairobi. According to Machokali, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, this was going to be

> a building such as had never been attempted in history except once by the children of Israel, and even they had failed miserably to complete the House of Babel. Aburiria would now do what the Israelites could not do: raise a building to the very gate of Heaven so that the Ruler could call on God daily to say good morning or good evening or simply how was your day today, God? The Ruler would be the daily recipient of God's advice, resulting in rapid growth of Aburiria to heights never dreamt by humans. (16)

The project, which is called Heavenscrape or Marching to Heaven and is designed to flatter the ego of the dictator, is something that the regime can never afford or bring to fruition. More importantly, the idea of the project exposes to the ordinary citizens and the world at large the sheer enormity of the regime's absurdity. The novel is dominated by "theories" or rumours about the Ruler's illness whose function is to highlight the strange nature of the Aburirian regime by contesting the official narratives. Eventually, the Ruler is deposed, not by the actions of Nyawira and Kamiti's Movement for the Voice of the People, but through a coup staged by one of his henchmen Tajirika (make self rich) who quickly proclaims himself Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasianus Whitehead (753).

6.3 Postcolonial/ Aburirian Re-invention

This section of the chapter explores how the dictator and subjects seek to re-invent themselves in order to cope with globalisation. The post-colonial world is space that continues to spawn complex images. It is this complexity that one reads in the African dictator text, especially one that is fairly recent in terms of the author's creative output such as *Wizard of the Crow.* It is a novel that bestrides different worlds spatially and temporally. The novel is conceived by an author whose notions of home have vastly changed over the years as he writes from a base spatially removed from his original homeland. Gichingiri Ndigirigi (2010: 187) argues that "as an external exile, Ngugi has become a global citizen". This exile or the "temporal and spacial separation from the homeland" says Ndigirigi (2007: 71) "has thus given the writer space to reflect almost dispassionately on home". Secondly, the novel deals

with a postcolonial world that has now been opened to the outside world, and also one in which the wider world has been opened to the postcolonial one in that there is now increased movement of people, goods and information across borders in way never seen before. It is not just that the writer is no longer a citizen of just one nation, Kenya, but the characters also find themselves living in a globalised world which defies any form of containment. Physical or spatial boundaries are no longer enough to circumscribe human experiences and ambitions, a point which is amply illustrated by the experiences of Kamiti which have taken him out of Africa to other continents.

This particular dictator novel allows Ngugi to re-explore the complexities of a world which Francis Fukuyama (1989; 1992) had tried to capture with his notion of the "end of history". If African writing had been about writing back or re-conceptualising the past, *Wizard of the Crow* is about a writer and a world having to deal with a completely different set of circumstances. Robert Colson (2011: 138) presents an interesting argument that reads the dictator in Ngugi's novel as all being about attempts to "arrest" time. Colson's basic argument is that the dictator or The Ruler attempts to stop the coming of change. A number of actions by the dictator illustrates this. This no doubt is a credible reading of *Wizard of the Crow*, especially when seen against the dictator's obsession with power and its retention. At the same time the dictator comes across as a wily figure who though appearing irrational in his actions, is to some extent able to read the times to forestall or thwart any potential threats to his rule. The most outlandish, irrational act by The Ruler, one which dominates the novel, is the Marching to Heaven project. Said to have been conceived by one of his leading sycophants, Minister Machokali, with "strong hints from high above" (15), the project is a symbol of the attempt to come to grips with the inexorability of the passage of time threatening to sweep away his rule. Since the world has changed and literally moved on, the dictator has to conjure up new tricks of keeping himself unforgotten and relevant in a post-Cold War dispensation. All these are efforts calculated to reassert his authority and prolong his shelf life. In the midst of stagnation and wide-spread poverty, Marching to Heaven, in some twisted way is intended to symbolise "progress". It becomes a symbol of the dictator's quest to demonstrate change in action or a nation and a ruler that refuse to be left behind. The weirdness comes from the scale, scope and overall rationale of it all. The barest of common sense would make one quickly realise or come to terms with the incongruity of it all

in a nation and continent afflicted by debilitating poverty and disease. More importantly, Ngugi shows how this particular dictator is afflicted by the same old disease of grandiose dreams in a world threatened by change. The height of the folly which defies even any sense of humour is the audacity, belief, hope and wild expectations that there would be takers for this grandiose dream who would be ready to finance it. Indeed, The Ruler out-performs even himself in defying and exceeding the known limits of absurdity. Conception of the Marching to Heaven project is intended to create the impression of a leader who is way ahead of the times. His notion of progress is supposed to be way beyond the common citizen's known comprehension and therefore can only be grasped by those like him with close proximity to the heavenly world courtesy of the Marching to Heaven project. The Ruler's conception/misconception of time and self becomes emblematic of postcolonial missteps and blunders. The Marching to Heaven project is a queer attempt at re-branding. It is couched and packaged in images intended to underline The Ruler's and the nation's march in one direction – heaven. In this sense the architects of the Ruler's vision seek to create images of a ruler and nation destined for the greatest of all heights – the Lord's Kingdom.

The inexorability of this march or progress represents corralled or captured time, which, like The Ruler's internally exiled wife, Rachel only exists in relation to The Ruler. This has echoes of the contentious relationship between the Kenyan strong man Daniel arap Moi and his estranged Helena.[5] If this problematizes and complicates notions of time and existence, it does not appear so to the ordinary citizen, who without much difficulty reads the actions of the dictator and his regime as extreme absurdity as will be seen later in this chapter. All this begs one to ask whether time can really be captured or "arrested". If progress can be forestalled, it becomes clear that what the dictator attempts to capture, "arrest" or forestall is the march towards a different kind of postcolonial dispensation, one in which the nation is back to its senses and has managed to reclaim its terrestrial space, dignity and aspirations, minus The Ruler. The strange disease that ravages the body of The Ruler is a stark reminder of the futility of all human actions, especially that of seeking immortality, also known as

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5. See "Revealed: Why Moi Divorced Jonathan's Mother" by Martin Murigi. https://hivisasa.com/posts//950-revealed-why-moi-divorced-jonathans-mother

Marching to Heaven. The dictator seeks to exercise absolute control over his subjects' bodies, minds and lives, a feat he is largely able to accomplish until now. Machokali, Big Ben Mambo and Sikiokuu become living symbols of The Ruler's almost ultimate control over the bodies of his subjects. Each one of these men seeks to re-invent himself through acts of bodily alteration in the service of The Ruler. The bodily alterations figuratively transform the dictator into a mythical divine figure or creator with power to re-create or re-mould human figures. Marching to Heaven is supposed to cap the transfiguration and immortalisation of The Ruler. Ironically, his own body fails him as it is wracked with an incurable disease and a mind, like those around him, that has been captured by "white ache" or the desire to be white.

The dictator seeks to re-invent himself while at the same time clinging onto a legitimating but fading past, which is now irrelevant in a New World Order where, instead of being rewarded for supporting the triumphant side which has been bank-rolling him all along, he is now an irritant to be ignored or swatted away. The American President even sends a special envoy to try and bring this new reality to the attention of the dictator and make it sink into his head:

> The West and the civilised world are eternally grateful to you for your role in our victory over the evil empire. We are now embarking on a new mission of forging a global order. That is why I am now visiting our friends to tell them how to move in step with the world. To everything its season, says the preacher. There was a time when slavery was good. It did its work, and when it finished creating capital, it withered and died a natural death. Colonialism was good. It spread industrial culture of shared resources and markets. But to revive colonialism would now be an error. There was a time when the cold war dictated our every calculation in domestic and international relations. It is over. We are in the post-cold war era, and our calculations are affected by the laws and needs of globalisation. The history of capital can be summed up in one phrase: *in search of freedom*. Freedom to expand, and now it has a chance at the entire globe for its theatre. It needs a democratic space to move as its own logic demands. So I have been sent to urge you to start thinking about turning your own country into a democracy. (580)

The American envoy then adds in a blunt and unequivocal manner:

> Let me make our position clear. We cannot build a global economy under the old politics of the cold war. What we are saying is this; many parties, one aim – a free and stable world where our money can move across borders without barriers erected by the misguided nationalism of the outmoded nation-state. (580)

So while the world has moved on, the dictator strives to hold on, and holding on means clinging onto power through devising more and more absurd means. The Ruler is at first clearly puzzled and confused by these new and strange times:

> He tried to control his anger, genuinely puzzled at how his relationship with Washington, London, Berlin, and Paris had soured as to compel them to dispatch a special envoy to chastise him in front of his cabinet. In the days of the cold war, they used to shower him with praises for dispatching thousands of his own people to eternal silence. And now, even after he had assured them that he was ready to repeat what he had done for them, they were lecturing him about restraint and the new global order! (580-581)

While the above also satirises the American agents of globalisation, it paints a picture of a figure completely out of sync with time. Even more strange is that he now seeks to out-do time itself by re-inventing and re-casting himself as a god that can re-create time itself. Marching to Heaven becomes the iconic symbol of the megalomaniac vision of a figure that seeks to immortalise itself even in the face of a life threatened by disease. The dictator attempts to create an illusion of movement while things are virtually at a standstill. If there are any changes, these are represented by society's refusal to buy into the absurdities.

6.4 Words and the Contestation for Power

This section of the chapter seeks to examine how time has drastically transformed the postcolonial world in ways which present unusual challenges to the dictator in his efforts to contain any form of dissent and remain in power. More importantly, the study argues that the postcolonial terrain is now a world which Ngugi depicts as one in which the boundaries erected by the Ruler are crumbling as the edifice of dictatorship struggles to cope with the vagaries of time. Ngugi paints a picture of an under siege dictator who is now challenged by once voiceless, hapless and powerless ordinary citizens who now have somehow found novel ways of challenging the regime of the Ruler. The contestation for power in Aburiria is now basically the struggle for the control of the 'word'. Control of the word ensures that whoever has that control is now the creator of new myths and new meanings in society.

Ngugi has always been concerned about the accessibility of his message. At the centre of this problematic is the well-documented abandonment of English and the adoption of Gikuyu

language as the primary means or medium of communication, especially in terms of his creative endeavours. As noted earlier, Ngugi's abandonment of English and adoption of Gikuyu seems to render the so called language debate moot, at least with respect to his own writing. More importantly, this particular action by Ngugi is designed to at least create the illusion of not being what he repeatedly calls "Europhone" literature into something that is African in terms of identity. Ngugi also engages in a myth-making exercise of self by exaggerating the impact of his work. He claims in an interview with G.G. Darah in 1983 that he hoped to replicate what he believed he had achieved through writing in his mother language:

> In a way, *Devil on the Cross* was appropriated by the peasantry and integrated into the oral tradition. The book I know for sure, was read in families. A family would get a copy and ask one of their literate members to read sections to them. And I know a particular family where a literate member was enjoying a certain kind of power playing this role of interpreter.[6]

By penning *Wizard of the Crow* in Gikuyu Ngugi attempts to shatter the myth of the hegemony of the "Europhone" novel. Ironically, doing so entails creating new myths dominated by what is intended to be a locally rooted creation which however echoes the nineteenth century English novel. Here one has in mind how Ngugi produces and disseminates *Wizard of the Crow* to the public.[7] The novel is produced or published in segments which essentially serialises it. The question that remains, however, is the extent of the reach of Ngugi's message. This is a question that Ngugi had hoped to answer by resorting to the use of Gikuyu. However, it is important to point out that writing in Gikuyu has not really opened up the market to Ngugi.

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6. See Darah, G. G. " 'To Choose a Language is to Choose a Class': Interview with Ngugi wa Thiong'o" in Reinhard Sander &Bernth Lindfors. eds. 2006. P188-191

7. Here what I have in mind is how Victorian novels by Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell and other writers of that period were produced and disseminated in segments or instalments. The 'popularity' of the nineteenth century English novel seemed to rest on its focus on the pertinent issues of the day, issues that seemed largely to do with the everyday concerns of the ordinary people. The popularity was also enhanced by the serialisation which heightened the suspense. That this could have influenced Ngugi is beyond doubt. See https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/mar/13/serialised-novels-podcasts-serial-readerse

According to James Ogude (1999: 107-108), Ngugi's "narratives written in Gikuyu still occupy an ambiguous literary space… The readership still remains a literate, distant audience and not necessarily the peasantry and the workers that Ngugi has in mind as his target audience". Ogude adds that a survey carried out by Ngugi's publisher reveals that the writer's works in Gikuyu "have attracted very limited readership". This is a point also highlighted by William Slaymaker (2011: 14). Nevertheless, *Wizard of the Crow*, just like *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* is conceived and designed as an arena for the creation and solidification of new myths, of which the primary one is the notion that the spoken word or its performance is enough to bring art to the people.

While Ngugi clearly exalts and gives primacy to the spoken word, he at the same time demonstrates how words or language in general can be slippery, ambiguous and unreliable. This is demonstrated by how a number of events, some of them with far-reaching consequences, are sparked by rumour or misinterpretation. In fact the whole novel is driven by rumour and the embodiment of all this is Constable Arigagai Gathere (A. G) who is one of the novel's chief narrators. In this way could Ngugi be pre-empting or suggesting debate on the problematic nature of his art or the act of writing in general? If this reflexivity subverts the dictator's attempts to exercise control over language, it also acknowledges the limitations of language or the writer and his art to really rationalise, come to terms with and communicate the absurdities that remain rife in the post-colony.

The Marching to Heaven project should be read in this light as its conception is designed to create new myths on the foundation of the old ones, but all intended to solidify and entrench the dictator's rule. The old myths cast The Ruler as the sole and mighty embodiment of the nation with the power of life and death over everyone in Aburiria. To remind Aburirians of the fate of those who dare to oppose him, The Ruler announces at his birthday celebration "the release of hundreds of political prisoners, among them a few authors and journalists all held without trial" (21). More importantly, this raw power is legitimated and maintained through absolute control of the word which is symbolised by the existence and role of the nation's official newspaper the *Daily Parrot* through which The Ruler is helped to "shepherd the sheep" (21). The Marching to Heaven project seeks to take the mythicisation of The Ruler to lofty or heavenly heights by building a tower to heaven. The post-cold war globalised world calls for the creation of new narratives of legitimation and Marching to Heaven is conceived

to serve this purpose. As is the case in any dictatorship, at the centre of these new narratives is the dictator, and in this case, it is The Ruler of Aburiria. New images of The Ruler are concocted and disseminated in an effort to create new myths about him and his regime. In doing so, however, the regime dismally fails to read the times. It believes that it can still easily sway public opinion by resorting to the supposedly old, tried and tested tactics of control. This is witnessed at the birthday celebration where the Marching to Heaven project is unveiled and one of the leading henchmen enthusiastically tries to sell the idea to the citizens:

> Minister Machokali was waxing ecstatic about how the benefits of the project could trickle down to all citizens. Once the project was completed, no historian would ever talk about any other wonders in the world, for the fame of this Modern House of Babel would dwarf the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Egyptian pyramids, the Aztecan Tenochtitlan, or the Great Wall of China. And who would ever talk of the Taj Mahal? Our project will be the first and only superwonder in the history of the world. (17)

The Aburirian regime seems to be stuck in a time rut and does not realise that the new postcolonial world is one in which the ordinary citizen literally challenges the dictator's control of the 'word'. The narrative surrounding The Ruler and Marching to Heaven is rudely disrupted when the Ruler is giving his speech:

> He stopped, for suddenly near the centre of the multitude issued a bloodcurdling scream. A snake! A snake! Came the cry taken up by others. Soon there was pandemonium. People shoved and shouted in every direction to escape a snake unseen by many. (22)

In my view, this seems to be part of the crux of Ngugi's message. In other words, Ngugi seeks to demonstrate how the 'word' can be democratised by bestowing on the ordinary citizen the ability to disrupt or discredit the official narratives and the ability to create and disseminate new words, narratives or myths to counter the official ones. This contestation for meaning should be read within the context of Ngugi's well-documented attempts to popularise literature. If Ngugi's earlier works such as *Petals of Blood, Devil on the Cross* and *I Will Marry When I Want* had been bluntly explicit in their message of social change by presenting what can be read as a programme of action, in *Wizard of the Crow* form seems to overshadow the ideology. While it is difficult to separate the two as Hayden White (1978) has demonstrated, there is a subtlety and lack of closure in the novel which is a feature that is absent in some of Ngugi's earlier, strident works. In *Wizard of the Crow* the author seems to have abandoned the old strategy of instrumentalising literature as a tool for social change in which time and

history are envisioned in a linear pattern with a clear destination of the desired society. Just as the Cold War had largely been won and lost by the West and the Eastern Bloc respectively, without outright conflict between the main contenders, Ngugi tries to demonstrate how everything can boil down to the word. By focusing on the word, the author literally and metaphorically opens the mouths of the ordinary citizens. So Ngugi creates a postcolonial world with a multiplicity of mouths, voices and stories which confound the regime. This is now a terrain in which it is not just the state with the power to create and disseminate social meaning, but all citizens as well. The multiplicity of words, voices, stories and meanings has created a world in which power is now increasingly tenuous as it is now challenged by the ordinary citizens' new found ability to tell stories in their own way. Simultaneously, the ordinary citizen refuses to swallow the official stories but turns to the fellow citizen for information.

At the centre of this struggle for the democratisation of the word is AG or Arigaigai Gathere, the police officer-cum-narrator. While he is indeed one of the leading protagonists in the novel, in my view, Ngugi is not really interested in the person as such, but the word. If one reads Ngugi in this way, it becomes clear that what is at centre stage is control of the 'word'. It is what AG and ordinary citizens do with the word that seems to fascinate Ngugi. The question in this respect, one which Ngugi also seeks to pose, is to what extent absolute power can be challenged orally. If the old world was a world in which the word belonged to one man, Ngugi now contests this by giving the ordinary citizen the ability to speak differently or to choose what to listen to. As has already been noted, Ngugi was worried about the distance between his art and the subjects of his work. These were the ordinary men and women whom all along he had put across as workers and peasants. This is especially so in works produced during the heady Marxist days. These are works with an explicit ideological message and prescribed programme of action such as *Petals of Blood, Devil on the Cross* or *I Will Marry When I Want*. So Ngugi had sought to bridge this gap by resorting to popular forms of art. According to Ogude (1999: 87) "Through his experimentation with the Kamiriithu popular theatre Ngugi came to believe that the answer to his dilemma lay in the popular forms steeped in the traditions and contemporary experiences of the Gikuyu". Ogude goes on to argue that this "creative use of orality" by Ngugi in his works is not something new in his writing: "although Ngugi's recourse to oral forms is more pronounced in his works written in

Gikuyu, his earlier works have always been rooted in both popular mythology – the popular forms of the Gikuyu – and a fusion of modern Western conventions of writing" (88).

While theatre had seemed to provide Ngugi with the vehicle to directly talk to the people, Ngugi seemed to realise its inherent challenges and limitations in terms of production, reach and sustainability in the face of brutal government censorship and crackdown. Some of these challenges and limitations became glaringly obvious when Kamiriithu theatre which Ngugi and his colleagues had formed to put their views into practice was shut down by Kenyan authorities. What Ngugi needed was something that would resolve these challenges while remaining intelligible and accessible to the ordinary men and women in society. In my view, Ngugi falls back on the novel as a genre but for it to be effective, the writer attempts to transform it into some kind of mass communication tool by transplanting into it the popular forms. In *Wizard of the Crow* Ngugi seeks to demonstrate how power can be subverted by and through a process of democratisation of discourse. The author creates a postcolonial world which is now characterised by a simultaneous process of mythicisation and demythicisation of the word or the process of communication. Doing so portrays a writer whose vision has now transformed into accepting the changed times, times in which the old strategies of direct confrontation or overt social action have proved insufficient and untenable. A clear sign that the writer has had to change tact is the lack of an explicit message or programme of action. In this regard, as was alluded to earlier on, *Wizard of the Crow* is shorn of the loud and incessant political rhetoric that characterises some of his previous works. What therefore comes into focus as part of the writer's central vision are his views of opening up the postcolonial space through the word or subversion of the dictator's control over social meaning. These changes in vision and tact are in no small way a result of the fact of living in exile and the changed global political landscape in which the catch-phrases are now human rights and multi-party democracy. While previously Ngugi had depicted the postcolonial world as a theatre of inevitable confrontation or literally as a battlefield where different antagonistic groups or classes are pitted against each other, now Ngugi seems to view this postcolonial world as one which can only be opened up through the democratisation of social discourse. For Ngugi, doing so means challenging the dictator's attempts to control the construction and dissemination of messages or meaning in society. This is what constitutes the struggle over the control of the word. As has been seen earlier on in Hama

Tuma's *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and Other Stories*, performance of power also largely relies on manipulating the construction and flow of meaning in society through a process of mythicisation. Similarly, The Ruler's regime in *Wizard of the Crow*, like in any dictatorship, seeks to prolong itself and has for a long time largely survived by complementing brutal violence with sometimes gross or subtle tricks.

The Movement for the Voice of the People represents vestiges of the belief that change can be effected through physical confrontation. However, what one notices is the absence of a clear sustainable programme of action. More importantly, like the writer, the group seems to have very limited political objectives and does not have the illusion of bringing down The Ruler's dictatorship. Clearly, what is seen here is a writer who no longer harbours the old visions or hopes of social change. Ngugi's vision has now shifted to a new front focusing on the democratisation or opening up of postcolonial space through free discourse. It is in this sense that Ngugi glorifies what I term dialogical interaction. The question is what exactly does this mean in a world in which the overt means of confrontation have failed to work, a world in which the designated agents of change have failed to deliver (Ndigirigi, 2007: 69)?

Ngugi's approach is now to simply deny the dictator monopoly over meaning or myth-making. In order to understand how Ngugi attempts to achieve this, it is necessary to examine Aburiria's edifice of power. As has already been noted in Koyaga's Republique du Golfe in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* or the Great Chairman's Ethiopia in Hama Tuma's anthology, the spectacle of power is given expression and legitimation through processes of mythicisation where the dictator is elevated to the level of a god through fabrication and exaggeration of his figure and exploits. Here one also recalls how the dictators in Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* all vie to outdo each other in self-mythicisation. While the threat of violence is always present and real, it is the manipulation of information that gives expression to raw, blunt power. Through this manipulation, the dictator in *Wizard of the Crow* attempts to deny ordinary citizens access to truth to such an extent that they are left to speculate about the goings on in Aburiria:

> Now everybody in the country knew something or other about the Ruler's birthday because, before it was firmly set in the national calendar, the date of his birth and the manner of it celebration had been the subject of a heated debate in parliament that went on for seven months, seven days, seven hours, and seven minutes, and even the honourable members

> could not arrive at a consensus because nobody knew for sure the actual date of the Ruler's birth, and when they failed to break the impasse, the honourable members sent a formal delegation to the very seat of power to seek wise guidance, after which they passed a motion of gratitude to the Ruler for helping find a solution to a problem that had completely defeated their combined knowledge and experience. (12)

The Aburirian dictator's grip on information is also designed to emasculate even the imagination of the ordinary citizen, leading them to find it hard to believe that there was once someone else on the seat of power before The Ruler or that there could ever be another leader after the Ruler in future:

> he had sat on the throne so long that even he could not remember when his reign began. His rule had no beginning and no end; and judging from the facts one may well believe the claim. Children had been born and given birth to others and those others to others and so on, and his rule survived all the generations. So that when some people heard that before him there had been a first Ruler, preceded by a succession of governors and sultans all the way from the eras of the Arabs, the Turks, the Italians, to that of the British, they would simply shake their heads in disbelief saying, no, no, those are just the tales of a daydreamer: Aburiria had never had and could never have another ruler, because had not this man's reign begun before the world began and would only end after the world has ended? Although even that surmise was shot through with doubts, for how can the world come to an end? (5-6)

So the dictator has invaded and taken control of the populace's ability to imagine and re-imagine, let alone will into existence a different kind of dispensation.

In *Wizard of the Crow* Ngugi seeks to demonstrate how the goal may not necessarily be to wrench away political power from the dictator. What is at stake now is control of national or postcolonial imagination. Could Ngugi be suggesting that he who has control of the word or ability to tell and re-tell stories will ultimately control national imagination? As already realised previously, Ngugi also highlights the slippery nature of words or meaning. He now heightens this first by denying a single narrator the role to tell the Aburirian story. So instead of one narrator, the novel makes use of several narrators. While Ngugi has used this technique in the past, notably in *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*, in *Wizard of the Crow* the multiplicity of voices each with its own rendition of the nation's goings on, is designed to mirror the chaos or confusion in the body politic. Mustapha B. Ruma (2015: 198) identifies three categories of narrators in the novel. The existence of several narrators forestalls the

Ruler's attempts to be Aburiria's sole voice. The polyphonic nature of the novel is clearly meant to drown the dictator's voice. This challenges the dictator's hegemony over meaning, thereby demystifying his aura of omnipresence and omnipotence. In other words, instead of one source, there are now multiple sources of myth, all challenging, equalising and negating each other, but above all, challenging the dictator's authored and sanctioned myths. One of the major narrators is some kind of an omniscient narrator who quickly attests to his own unreliability or the existence of other versions or sources of information. He takes the reader/listener through five of what he calls the "many theories" all of which attempt to explain the Ruler of Aburiria's "strange illness". So as he goes through the five theories or stories "most frequent on people's lips" (5), the narrator does not hide the fact he is not the sole source of information about the events in Aburiria, and that he is only retelling what he has gleaned from others. It is not a surprise, therefore, that his narration is persistently marked or qualified by his refusal to own the stories so they are marked by disclaimers: "It is said" (4),or "Others now came up with a third theory" (5). The narrator highlights the unreliability of his stories or other people's narratives when he presents the story about the Ruler and the chamber in State House where he kept the skeletons of some of his victims: "Let me say as the narrator that I cannot confirm the truth or falsity of the existence of the chamber; it may turn out to be a mere rumor from the mouth of Askari Arigaigai Gathere" (11). Although Ngugi initially and in many parts of the novel creates the impression of an omniscient narrator, the storyteller occasionally turns himself into more than just a detached witness to become a participant in order to give his story almost unimpeachable authenticity: "Our own media" (273) or says "we may find it difficult to get a full picture" (273-274). In spite of this partial immersion of self by the narrator into the events/story, the narrator still cautions us about the danger of swallowing everything that one hears or reads. More importantly, he highlights the suspect nature of the regime's narratives: "Come, all you who were there, and help us tell the story of what followed the Ruler's visit to the USA. This tale needs many tongues to lighten the sense, for none of us was at once in Aburiria and America" (273). The other narrator, policeman Askari Arigaigai Gathere who besides performing this role of narrator, is also a witness and participant in some of the strange events in Aburiria, and is identified by one of the narrators as being rumoured to be a possible source of some of the rumours in the land. Another category of narrators in the novel is made up of countless ordinary citizens or what Ruma calls "multiple and faceless narrators who are themselves

either witnesses to the events or are downright rumour mongers" (198). What this illustrates is that the blurring and collapsing of narrative voices and boundaries heightens the slippery nature of meaning while also serving the practical purpose of confounding the dictator's attempts to muzzle dissenting voices. More importantly, it creates a postcolonial world in which the dictator has lost the myth-making monopoly as he literally has to contend with a "cacophony of voices" (Ruma, 198) or plethora of myth-makers in the form of ordinary citizens.

So what emerges in Ngugi's novel is a postcolonial world in which the boundaries have ruptured in the sense that the word as a metaphor of the authorised versions of postcoloniality can no longer be contained by the mighty hand of the dictator or through covert means. There is manifest contestation for the control of narratives in society. The slippery nature of meaning in the twenty-first century postcolonial world and the futility of the dictator's attempts to re-establish his hegemony over the myth-making process in Aburiria is highlighted by the first person-cum- omniscient narrator when he reminds us that society has to "rely on countless rumourmongers" for "a full picture"(273). Reading *Wizard of the Crow* in this sense, one sees the picture of a writer attempting to simultaneously suggest and repudiate means to democratisation of the postcolonial space. The word, speech or the ability to tell stories is central to the whole process, Ngugi seems to say but without being overly prescriptive. In this sense, one can only agree with Raphael Dalleo (2012: 147) that "The central conflict in *Wizard of the Crow*, between the Ruler's regime and those who oppose it, is figured explicitly as a "discursive struggle". It is possible here that the centralisation of a discursive struggle in the novel points to the influence of the linguistic turn in the humanities academy in the 1980s and 1990s. However, it cannot be ruled out also that what is demonstrated is the impact of neo-liberalism on Ngugi, especialy its insistence on pluralism. This is largely so if one takes into account the fact that because of the long period in exile, Ngugi has virtually been part of this kind of constituency.

Ngugi's thrust and goal in *Wizard of the Crow* become more comprehensible if one recalls his views on performance which are encapsulated in this question that he asks in *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams* (111): "Could performance ever be fully contained and realised in the written?" Simon Gikandi (2008: 156) argues that *Wizard of the Crow* is "the culmination of a long process by the novelist to simulate the art of the storyteller in writing". Senayon

Olaoluwa (2014: 394) who also sees the novel as simulation says "Simulation in this regard is construed as a mimetic reinvention of African oral storytelling skills, dynamics and context in written literature in a way that allows for 'suspension of disbelief' ". Gikandi adds that Ngugi "makes the reader forget that this is a written story" and is able "to create and sustain the illusion that this is a story that is being passed from mouth to mouth" (157). In this respect, Gikandi recalls Walter Benjamin and regrets that he did not live long enough to witness Ngugi's accomplishments in *Wizard of the Crow*. In "The Storyteller" Benjamin had written: "Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from speech of the many nameless storytellers."[8]

In my view, the net effect of the foregoing is that Ngugi largely achieves his goal of simulating the democratisation of the word or the myth-making process. Gikandi examines Benjamin's analysis of what constitutes the modern novel, especially the view that the novel as a genre is unable to satisfactorily capture or communicate human experience. According to Benjamin "the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly" (362). What is fascinating about Benjamin's argument is that he attributes the incommunicability of experiences to traumatic events: "with the (First) World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience"? (362)

If traumatic experiences are supposed to render one mute, this is not the case in *Wizard of the Crow.* What is illuminating about the novel in this regard is that although the postcolonial condition is traumatic and seems to defy conventional representation, Ngugi creates characters who in fact are eager to embellish and pour out their experiences and those of others and refuse to succumb to dictatorship's attempts to silence them.

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8. See "The Storyteller" by Walter Benjamin in Dorothy J. Hale. ed. 2006. *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000.* Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing. 361-378.

In *Wizard of the Crow* this democratisation of the word or what Armillas-Tiseyra (2012: 125) calls the "dissipation of authority", is witnessed through how rumour and hearsay are given prominence by the various narrators. Prodosh Bhattacharya (2017: 158) defines rumour as a "proposition or belief in general circulation within a community without proof of evidence of its authenticity". Hey Chen, Yang K. Lu and Wing Suen (2016: 89) examine how rumours can mobilize people into collective action: "Rumours may or may not be informative, but they create public topics on which people can exchange their views". From these views one can see how the "theories", hearsay and rumours circulating in Aburiria about the Ruler's illness and other issues contest the regime's official stories. The irony is that the regime's attempts to muzzle these counter narratives only succeed in fuelling the theories, hearsay and rumours, or spawn new ones. In his study on rumour and power in Togo during the long rule of the dictator Gnassingbe Eyadema, Stephen Ellis (1993: 463) examines the functions and effect of what has been termed *radio trottoir* or bush radio. According to Ellis *radio trottoir* "may be defined as the informal discussion of current affairs by the urban public in Africa". More importantly, Ellis adds that *radio trottoir*

> is of considerable political importance, mainly because it appears to be the principal means by which many city dwellers in Africa acquire information. *Radio trottoir* consists not only of rumours, but also of jokes, puns and anecdotes passed on by word of mouth, hence it is a field where ordinary citizens play an active role in forming a popular image of the government. Governments and their opponents certainly acquire information by listening to *radio trottoir*, but at the same time they seek to influence public opinion in a manner which, at bottom, is no different from the work of public relations specialists in modern Western politics. *Radio trottoir*, in other words, is a field of political contestation. (463)

This discursive struggle is highlighted by one of the narrators in Ngugi's novel when he recounts how what he calls "the war of rumours intensified day by day" (670):

> the principal vehicles for the claims and counterclaims were the state radio, nicknamed the Dictator's Mouthpiece, and the people's word of mouth, nicknamed the Bush Telegraph. When the Mouthpiece talked about the dictator's birthday, the Telegraph talked about the dictator's day of giving birth. When the Mouthpiece claimed that the man who had manufactured the lies about male pregnancy had agreed to make a confession before the people's assembly, the Telegraph countered with the claim that the Ruler had agreed to confess his pregnancy before the entire assembly. (670)

Reading *Wizard of the Crow* drawing on the above, it becomes clear that Askari Arigaigai Gathere and the numerous faceless citizens are the cornerstones of Aburiria's *radio trottoir*. These rumours running wild in Aburiria, says Madeline Wilson (2016: 1), "serve to destabilise the Ruler's authority by offering multiple subversive ways of reading against the dominant narrative". So, the plurality of voices in the novel essentially constitutes a formidable front in the mythicisation/demythicisation struggle in Aburiria.

6.5 Mythic Figures, Mythic Time and Mythic Terrain

The word, as has already been seen earlier in this chapter, seems to be the writer's focus in *Wizard of the Crow*. Senayon Olaoluwa (2014: 396) calls what Ngugi does with words in *Wizard of the Crow* "the animation of 'speech' ". Storytelling in writing becomes performance in the form of rumour, gossip, jokes or tales. Ngugi demonstrates how postcolonial space can be a field of contestation, re-invention and re-imagination of the postcolonial condition in general. It is in this regard that this section adds onto the previous section by exploring how the opening up or democratisation of postcolonial space is achieved by Ngugi largely through the mythicisation of human figures, time, space and authority to force one to re-imagine the postcolonial condition in a globalised terrain.

First and foremost, Ngugi's novel is driven by a plethora of human figures (characters), who are heroes and villains, protagonist and antagonist, friend and foe, and the ruler(s) and the ruled who are the sources and subjects of the rumours swirling in Aburiria. At the same time some of the characters assume multiple identities by occupying multiple spaces. The multiplicity of identities is then exaggerated and mystified through the numerous rumours circulating in Aburiria. The dictator dominates the narratives in terms of being the main subject of the "animated speech", rumour, gossip, jokes or tall tales. He dominates the imagination of the postcolonial subject but at the same time he is no longer able to control it. The changed postcolonial circumstances which have given the postcolonial subject the ability to speak, invent and re-imagine mean that although the narratives are about the dictator, they are no longer his. The Cold War had spawned real and fictional dictators such as Idi Amin, Mobutu Sese Seko, Gnassimbe Eyadema, Siad Barre, Ngwazi Hastings Kamuzu Banda, The Great Chairman, Ngunema, Koyaga and many others across Africa and beyond who had

dominated the postcolonial subject's imagination. Ngugi creates the Ruler of Aburiria and his successor Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasianus as remnants and survivors of that period who now cling on precariously in the new postcolonial terrain. For Abururia's ruler, clinging on entails re-inventing and re-hashing the traditional or unusual myths which had by and large been effective in the creation of the clumsily Orwellian Cold War postcolonial world. This attempt to re-establish, re-assert and prolong authority is given form by bizarre human figures who also conjure up bizarre acts. Ngugi creates mythical but at the same time concrete human figures whose mythical status is given form by their living presence and existence in Aburiria. One such character is Dr Luminous Karamu-Mbuya-Ituika, "the man with the leather-bound note book and a pen the size of a water pipe" (21). Dr Luminous is the Ruler's official biographer and is described by the dictator as "My Devoted and Trusted Historian" (21). We are told, tongue in cheek, by the faceless narrator that Dr Luminous' duty was

> To protect the country against malicious rumormongers, so-called historians, and novelists, and to counter their lies and distortions, The Ruler appointed him to be his official biographer, and as everyone knows his biography was really the story of the country, and the true history. (21)

The hiring and deployment of Dr Luminous illustrates the Ruler's crude but calculating awareness of the significance of image-making. The figure of the official biographer becomes the embodiment of the attempts by the Ruler to deify himself. Another cog in the attempts to create the image of a mythical figure at the helm of Aburiria is Dr Eunice Immaculate Mgenzi, formerly Dr Yunity Mgeuzi-Bila-Shaka (the one who changes without scruples or the flip-flopper), a one-time fiery radical opponent of the Ruler who "repented, and pledged faithful service" to the Ruler (21). After her repentance Dr Eunice Mgenzi becomes an information officer, one of the numerous foot soldiers who are the guardians of the Ruler's image. She is rewarded for her new found loyalty and service to the regime with promotion to high sounding posts. The Ruler personally introduces Dr Luminous and Dr Mgenzi at the public gathering intended to present to him the "superwonder gift" (21) of the Marching to Heaven project. At this gathering the Ruler also publicly underlines these two's defection and repentance in order to highlight the futility of opposing his rule. More importantly, it solidifies the image of a mythical figure who defies and outlasts all opponents.

However, what the Ruler fails to comprehend is that the postcolonial world is now a completely altered terrain where the hiring and deployment of foot soldiers such as Dr Mgenzi, Dr Luminous and others will not guarantee the creation and control of his own images. Ngugi deploys devastating satire by creating figures whose images and image-making attempts leave the postcolonial subjects' mouths and the readers' agape with derisive wonder and laughter. As I will soon show, the Ruler surrounds himself with a coterie of sycophants who compete at attracting his attention in bizarre ways, chief of which is deliberate bodily mutilation. By doing so they become the face of the regime and the Ruler's. The bodily mutilations and disfiguration of Machokali, Sikiokuu and Big Ben Mambo mirror the monstrosity of the Ruler's body that is given expression by the numerous tales circulating in Aburiria. The three men constitute the pillars and life of the narratives of power surrounding the dictator. Each one of the three men deliberately alters or disfigures his body in order to directly and indirectly project a particular image of himself and of the Ruler to Aburirians. Each of the disfigured bodies is supposed to be read and rewarded by the Ruler. They each represent the metaphorical long reach of the Ruler. At the same time the altered bodies communicate and enhance the mythical image of the Ruler to Aburirians. According to the narrator, Machokali the Minister of Foreign Affairs had earned that position when

> one day he flew to England, under the glare of publicity he entered a major London hospital not because he was ill but because he wanted to have his eyes enlarged, to make them ferociously sharp, as he put it in Kiswahili, *Yawe Macho Kali*, so that they would be able to spot the enemies of the Ruler no matter how far their hiding places. Enlarged to the size of electric bulbs, his eyes were now the most prominent feature of his face, dwarfing his nose, cheeks and forehead. (13)

Ngugi uses the exaggerated body disfigurations to create ugly figures who have become the face of the regime. Aburiria's dictator whose facial features are never clearly outlined by the writer are also largely seen through the bodily disfigurements of another cabinet minister, Silver Sikiokuu, the regime's chief spy. We are told that

> he secretly sold his father's plot and borrowed the rest to buy himself a flight to France and a hospital bed in Paris, where he had his ears enlarged so that, as he put it in a press statement, he would be able to hear better and therefore be privy to the most private of conversations between husband and wife, children and their parents, students and teachers, priests and their

> flock, psychiatrists and their patients – all in the service of the Ruler. His ears were larger than a rabbit's and always primed to detect danger at any time from any direction. (14)

Creating this image had underlined his "devotion" and "it did not go unnoticed, and he was made Minister of State in charge of spying on the citizenry" (14). Big Ben Mambo had also altered his image by disfiguring his body:

> He chose to have his tongue elongated so that in echoing the Ruler's command his words would reach every soldier in the country and his threats to his enemies before they could reach the Aburirian borders. He first emulated Sikiokuu and went to Paris, but there was some misunderstanding about the required size, and the tongue, like a dog's, now hung out way beyond his lips, rendering speech impossible. Machokali came to his aid by arranging for him to go to a clinic in Berlin, where the lips were pulled and elongated to cover the tongue, but even then not completely and the tongue protruded now just a little. (15)

The bodily disfigurations create hard to miss images that ultimately communicate particular messages about the Ruler. In some strange way, these self-inflicted mutilations by Machokali, Sikiokuu and Big Ben Mambo, which are a significant aspect of the spectacle of power in Aburiria, demonstrate the dictator's direct and indirect ability to take control of the bodies of his subjects by turning them into conduits for the crafting, propagation and entrenchment of his mythical status. According to Tendai Sithole (2014: 89) "Power in its dramaturgy enforces the gaze – that is, the look which creates the climate of fear among the citizenry. The absence of the gaze will render power invisible (as performance), as something impotent". However, this does not seem to be the case in Aburiria as the images concocted have unexpected results which demonstrate how the globalised postcolonial world has freed itself from the enslaving 'awe' of Aburirian tunnel vision which prescribed and authorised only a particular reading and interpretation of images. Mirroring the disfigurations that have created the new 'eyes', 'ears' and 'tongues' for the dictator, personified by Machokali, Sikiokuu and Big Ben Mambo, the ordinary citizens have also acquired 'eyes', 'ears' and 'tongues' that enable them to witness, interpret and narrate the postcolonial condition in their own way. This newly acquired ability of the ordinary citizen to read images in their own way is illustrated by the impact of the bodily disfigurations on them. We are told that on the occasion to celebrate the Ruler's birthday by unveiling and presenting the Marching to Heaven project to him, the crowd at the stadium were awe-struck by Machokali and Sikiokuu:

> People at the stadium kept comparing their different expressions, particularly the movements of their eyes and ears, for it had long been known that the two were always in a mortal struggle to establish which organ was more powerful: the Eye or the Ear of the Ruler. Machokali always swore by his eyes: May these turn against me if I am not telling truth. Sikiokuu invoked his ears: May these be my witness that what I am saying is true – and in mentioning them, he would tug at the earlobes. (14)

Brendon Nicholls (2010: 178) equates the autocratic Aburirian state with a human body: "Aburiria is a body monstrously bloated with absolute power; its faculties and organs of state turned towards its own preservation". If the bodily disfigurations by the Ruler's acolytes are a precursor to the distortions and the disfiguration of the Ruler's mythical image and power, it is the dictator's own body that proves to be the regime's underbelly. The theories, gossip, jokes, rumours and the tales about the Ruler, especially his body, debunk the long-held myths of his immortality. More importantly, the body of the Ruler, which serves as a metaphor of the postcolonial nation of Aburiria and the postcolonial terrain in general, now refuses to conform to the Ruler's dictates. The body betrays the Ruler by literally giving in. More importantly, the Ruler's body becomes the canvas on which the ordinary citizen can now write his own myths. By losing control of his own body, the Ruler also loses control of the narratives and images. Ironically, while all along the dictator had managed to spin, manufacture and peddle myths, he still in some uncanny way does so via the same body. The difference now is that although his figure is still able to spawn myths, these are myths that he is no longer in control of. If he still is a mythical figure, it is in the sense that he is now the subject and butt of Aburirian gossip, rumour, joke and all sorts of tall tales. As the dictator searches in vain for the ultimate cure, society chips away at the myths surrounding his power by spreading rumour about and debunking the official stories about him and his illness.

All along, with the support and self-sacrifice of sycophants such as Machokali, Sikiokuu, Big Ben and others, the Ruler had been Aburiria's greatest actor and myth-maker. However, that role has now been usurped by the ordinary citizen. Arigaigai Gathere, Nyawira, Rachel, the Voice of the People's Movement and the citizens of Aburiria, individually and collectively now defy definition or a clear identity in a globalised world. Besides being mythical figures, they are now also Aburirian myth-makers, wrenching away that role from the regime. Kamiti literally rises from the postcolonial garbage heap to Aburiria's corridors of power despite being a human reject who is picked up at the city's garbage dump-site. Through Kamiti Ngugi

creates a mythical figure who embodies the undying spirit of the contemporary postcolonial subject who shatters old myths while creating new ones. In Rachel and Nyawira the writer creates female figures who refuse to be cowed into submission by a once potent dictatorship. Rachel appears to conform to the stereo-typical image of the submissive woman, but this is an image she shatters when during a rare dinner with her dictator husband she chides and humiliates him, eye-ball to eye-ball, by questioning him about the many school- girls he often invited to the State House:

> I know you take the title Father of the Nation seriously, she told him. You know that I have not complained about all those women who make beds for you, no matter how many children you sire with them. But why school-girls? Are they not as young as the children you have fathered? Are they not really our children? You father them today and tomorrow you turn them into wives? Have you no tears of concern for our tomorrow? (6)

What Rachel questions, chides and debunks is the mythical image of patriarchal dominance and masculine virility. It is at this moment that she emerges from the mythical cocoon of the submissive African woman. Although the dictator tries to re-assert his dominance over her by condemning her to house imprisonment, this same act fuels the tales about him circling in Aburiria and reinforces the image of a deranged figure. In other words, the dictator's actions against his wife Rachel heighten his mythical status in terms of his irrationality. The dictator praises himself for conceiving and carrying out the idea of imprisoning Rachel in the house:

> all the clocks in the house were frozen at the second, the minute and the hour that she raised the question of schoolgirls; the calendar pointed to the day and the year. The clocks tick-tocked but their hands did not move. The mechanical calendar always flipped to the same date. The food provided was the same as the last supper, the clothes the same as she had worn that night. (8)

The rumours about Rachel's house imprisonment and her refusal to be broken by the dictator turn her into a mythical heroic figure engaged in an epic struggle of wills with the dictator.

Wizard of the Crow is therefore a novel that explores the interstices of time, space and power. Time, space and power are problematized through a ruler who is depicted as emblematic of the contemporary postcolonial world where identities defy clear-cut definitions and identity. As seen earlier in this chapter, the Ruler tries to arrest time (Colson, 2011: 138) by forestalling political change, while at the same time desiring to march forward (Marching to Heaven). This

depicts a figure trapped in his own contradictions. Time therefore becomes the dictator's most potent adversary as he has little capacity to resolve temporally induced contradictions. The body that is ravaged by disease, a global community that regards him as a pariah and a postcolonial subject that refuses to be the victim of his attempts at agenda setting reveal a world where time, space and power require reconceptualization.

6.6 Conclusion

Wizard of the Crow is largely about re-invention. Ngugi presents a postcolonial terrain that has been complicated by the vagaries of time, while remaining basically the same. In other words, there is an illusion of change, progress, or marching forward while the condition of the postcolonial subject is still essentially an abject one. Ngugi achieves this by manipulating what Divine Che Neba (2014: 105) calls "a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity as a way of controlling, ordering and giving shape to the futility and anarchy recurrent in most postcolonial societies". The writer complicates images of the postcolonial terrain as he poses questions, and answers them while at the same time cautioning against wholesale acceptance of what he presents. This is a world where information or meaning should be viewed with suspicion as there are now many sources whose credibility cannot be vouched for. Overall, the transformed postcolonial terrain is a world in which the dictator now struggles to hold onto power largely because of the plurality of voices now challenging his once unassailable position. If the postcolonial ruler and subject have to continuously seek ways of re-inventing themselves to cope with the challenges that the postcolonial world keeps throwing at them, the writer has to respond likewise, Ngugi seems to suggest: "Now I have come to realize that, for writing, there is no moment of arrival — or, rather, the moment of arrival is the beginning of a new phase of the journey. It is a continual challenge."[9] Therefore, the novel reveals a transformed writer who has moved beyond the earlier millenarianism, transformed political contexts and rulers struggling to keep pace with the changes.

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9. See 2017 interview with Congolese-Hungarian journalist and writer, Nanda Dyssou. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/an-interview-with-ngugi-wa-thiongo/#!

CHAPTER 7

Power and Extroversion in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

7.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on NoViolet Bulawayo's representation in *We Need New Names* of what has been termed the Zimbabwean crisis at the centre of which is the Robert Mugabe dictatorship. According to Ranka Primorac (2006: 1) "Since the start of the new millennium, violent social change has dominated every aspect of life in Zimbabwe". Sarah Chiumbu and Muchaparara Musemwa (2012: ix) characterise postcolonial Zimbabwe as a land of many crises which have manifested themselves in multiple ways, chief of which have been confrontations over land and property rights, history and the authoritarian nature of the state. Zimbabwe got its independence from Britain in 1980 after one hundred and ten years of colonial rule. From its inception to date the Zimbabwean state has had to face multiple challenges most of which are similar in one way or another to what has been experienced by many independent countries across Africa. According to Chiumbu and Musemwa, the existence of a wide range of scholarship on the Zimbabwean crisis has been "useful in dissecting and bringing to light the core nature of the crisis" (ix). More importantly, the two scholars point out the role of literary texts and a thin diasporic scholarship on Zimbabwe in providing insights into how ordinary Zimbabweans coped with the crisis. However, they feel that there is still room for further work in this regard (ix). In my view, NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* should be read within the overall enduring context of the Zimbabwean crisis at the centre of which is a seemingly never-ending dictatorship. This study sees the novel as one such attempt at unpacking and understanding the impact of the Zimbabwean crisis on ordinary people.

There are similarities between Zimbabwean literature and the literatures of other African countries in that there are discernible stages of growth and development related to colonialism, the struggle for independence and its aftermath. NoViolet Bulawayo is part of the new generation of Zimbabwean authors born and writing well after the attainment of independence and therefore with little or no ties to the previously all-encompassing grand narratives of the liberation struggle. The writing of the older generation of Zimbabwean writers was directly or indirectly shaped by the struggle for independence, Second

Chimurenga[1], which was for a long time, within the Zimbabwean context, touted as the point of reference for someone to be regarded as a serious or patriotic Zimbabwean.

In official "discourses of national history and identity the 'birth' of the Zimbabwean nation under colonialism has become a symbolic point of reference for representation of the nation's history" (Christiansen, 2005: 204). Thabisani Ndlovu (2017: 142) also sees the various *chimurengas* as "historical events that have become cornerstones in the narration of the Zimbabwean nation". Even the writing of 'dissident' authors who try to break away from this influence and chart out new directions such as Yvonne Vera or Dambudzo Marechera is largely defined by its implied reaction to or lack of acknowledgement of the huge elephant in the room – C*himurenga*. At the same time it is worth noting that writers in late colonial Rhodesia and early postcolonial Rhodesia who seemed to go against the grain remained largely obscure nationally or were vilified as the nation's villains for consciously or unconsciously disrupting and repudiating the temporal march of the nation. In fact, evidence abounds that strident nationalistic voices virtually drowned 'dissident' voices. Even those who later became fiery critics of nationalistic narratives such as the Zimbabwean musician Thomas Mapfumo were at one time part of the bandwagon as he sang what he dubbed *Chimurenga* music for its scathing criticism of colonial injustices. In the post-independence period Mapfumo feels that the revolution has been hijacked and so he then carries on with his own version of *chimurenga* as he takes on the black elite by exposing and chiding them for betraying the ideals of the struggle.

Born in the post-independence period, NoViolet Bulawayo belongs to the still emerging generation of Zimbabwean writers whose lives have not been directly shaped by *Chimurenga* and its narratives but by the political and economic crises of the postcolonial period. In terms of generation, experiences and sensibilities Bulawayo has been placed in the same category

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1. *Chimurenga* is a Zimbabwean Shona word which means national struggle for freedom. Modern Zimbabwean history is constructed around the idea of resistance struggles. The First *Chimurenga* was the anti-colonialist struggle from 1896 to 1897. The Second *Chimurenga* was the struggle for independence waged from the 1960s to the end of 1979. Third *Chimurenga* according to the country's ruling party ZANU (PF), refers to 2000s fast land reform programme which involved the expropriation of land from white Zimbabwean Farmers and its distribution to black Zimbabweans. See also Flora Veit-Wild (1993). *Teachers, Preachers, Non-Believers*. Harare: Baobab Books p107-109.

as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Taiye Selasi, Petinah Gappah and others. Although Selasi disapproves of what she calls "pigeonholing African writers", she identifies these writers as the writers that Western media have hailed as "heralding splashes, rebirths, dawns"[2]. These contemporary writers are young, educated and are individuals who in most cases have left their home countries or were born and raised outside Africa in the diaspora in Europe or North America. This has led some critics and commentators to question the authenticity or credibility of their writing in terms of its Africanness. This is a point also raised by Dan Ojwang and Michael Titlestad (2014) who argue that these contemporary writers face a dilemma:

> This dilemma – writing about Africa without living in it – makes these novels accessible to non-African readers, but also, unfortunately, contorts the continent's past and present. One's imagined readership (from publishers and editors to the public) constitutes, in fundamental ways, the work one is writing. African literature written primarily for non-Africans – or, more specifically, those who are not Nigerian, Zimbabwean, Kenyan – is, by definition, less specifically textured.[3]

However, Taye Selasi takes issue with what she says is an attempt to categorise writing in terms of Africanness or lack of it: "The most scathing critique of the African writer is not that she is insufficiently talented, but that she is insufficiently African". While Ojwang and Titlestad caution against the risk of African literature "blurring into 'world literature'", Selasi seems to welcome this as being part of a much bigger canon.

NoViolet Bulawayo was born in Zimbabwe where she lived until the age of eighteen when she left for the United States to live with her aunt while furthering her studies. Significantly, she left for the United States before the eruption and heightening of some of her country's most serious crises such as the Fast Track Land Reform programme and the ensuing economic

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2. See "Taiye Selasi: Stop Pigeonholing African Writers". https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/04/taiye-selasi-stop-pigeonholing-african-writers
3. Dan Ojwang and Michael Titlestad (2014) "African Writing Blurs Into 'World' Literature". https://mg.co.za/article/2014-04-03-african-writing-blurs-into-world-literature

collapse. This is what has led to serious doubts being raised over the credibility of her representation of the Zimbabwean postcolonial condition whose backdrop is a crisis which she was never directly exposed to. This issue is made even more pertinent by Bulawayo's comments in some of her interviews[4] where she claims that what inspired her to write the novel was a news clip that she saw while far away in the United States of a child sitting on a pile of rubble of her home that had been destroyed in a government operation to clear slums[5]. How credible then is Bulawayo's representation of Zimbabwe and Africa if it is based on television news clips? At the same time we should be mindful of the debates examined earlier on in this study on the relationship between literature and history. In other words, in spite of Bulawayo's claims in a number of interviews how real events on the ground back in her home country inspired her work, criticism of her work that stems from her spatial distance from the subjects and larger setting of her story should not lose sight of the fact that her work is primarily a vivid, imaginative artistic (re)creation of home.

It is in this respect that this chapter seeks to investigate the problematic nature of a young contemporary writer such as NoViolet Bulawayo's representation of the African postcolonial condition. Bulawayo attempts to shed light on the impact of the political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe on ordinary citizens through the eyes of children or young people. One huge and persistent constant in the Zimbabwean crisis has been the towering presence and dominance of Robert Mugabe and his dictatorship since the attainment of independence from Britain in 1980 until his removal from office in November 2017. Because of this enduring presence, the name Robert Mugabe has directly or indirectly dominated or influenced media, historical and

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4. In an interview with Irenosen Okojie on June 12, 2013, Bulawayo reveals the influence of the media on her: "It just became important, especially to parallel the media narrative. I was living in the west and seeing things through the internet. I felt someone needed to tell an intimate story that showed what was happening on the ground and captured the full essence of characters." http://caineprize.com/blog/2015/12/1/interview-with-noviolet-bulawayo-on-her-recently-published-novel-we-need-new-names

5. This was Operation *Murambatsvina*, also officially known as Operation Restore Order, which was a government campaign in Zimbabwe to forcibly clear slums and relocate people across the country. The campaign started in 2005 and according to the United Nations it affected at least 700,000 people directly through loss of their homes or livelihood. According to some political commentators, the underlying motive of the operation was to decimate the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC)'s urban support base. See www.un.org/news/dh/infocus/zimbabwe

literary narratives for more than three decades. However, none of the recent Zimbabwean creative narratives has received as much attention as NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. While Robert Mugabe is not overtly mentioned, his pervasive presence and link to events in the novel is undeniable. In fact, this study reads the title of the novel as a jab at the dictatorship and the persistent presence on the national stage of Mugabe and other political players. Over the years there have been a number of creative narratives on the Zimbabwean crisis by writers such as Petina Gappah, John Eppel, Christopher Mlalazi, Brian Chikwava and others. These have been complemented by autobiographical compilations of some of the country's political players such as Joshua Nkomo's *Nkomo: The Story of my Life* (1984), Ian Smith's *The Great Betrayal* (1997), Fay Chung's *Re-living the Second Chimurenga* (2006), Edgar Tekere's *A Life Time of Struggle* (2007), Morgan Tsvangirai's *At the Deep End* (2011), Wilfred Mhanda's *Dzino: Memories of a Freedom Fighter* (2011), Cephas Msipa's *In Pursuit of Freedom and Justice: A Memoir* (2015), or David Coltart's *The Struggle Continues: 50 Years of Tyranny in Zimbabwe* (2016). The significance of auto/biographies is highlighted by Tasiyana Javangwe (2011: 281) who argues that such texts are narratives "engaged in serious contestation to generate desired meanings and images of both self and nation". Memory Chirere (2013) singles out creative works such as Christopher Mlalazi's *Many Rivers* (2009), Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* (2010), Novuyo Rosa Tshuma's *Shadows* (2012) and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* and others as contemporary works that focus on the Zimbabwean crisis.

Thus, the choice of *We Need New Names* for this study is also influenced by its bold attempt at unpacking the Zimbabwean postcolonial condition at the centre of which has been the name Robert Mugabe and his dictatorship, in a blunt, unsentimental no holds barred but also playful fashion. At the same time, the study is keenly aware of and is interested in the possible complications and implications associated with this kind of representational approach which artistically attempts to reconstruct or reimagine the past or human experiences in order to shed light on them based on media accounts, historical or quasi-historical accounts.

Because NoViolet Bulawayo is relatively young and new on the literary scene, scholarship on her is still sparse, which nevertheless is a point which further justifies her inclusion in this study as it is hoped the exercise will constitute a valuable addition to the still limited scholarship on the writer. In her review of *We Need New Names*, Josephine Muganiwa (2013:

188) asks: “In creating dystopia in the novel, is it a true reflection of the represented societies?” By so doing Muganiwa falls into the trap of reading the novel as a historical account. It is possible that hers are comments prompted by proximity to the actual historical events and therefore is sceptical about what she perceives to be an emigre’s misreading or distortion of home. On the other hand, Devon Maylie (2013: 1) calls the novel “the story of Zimbabwe” and “an up close and personal view of the costs of President Mugabe’s thirty-three years in power have had on the country”. The image of Mugabe in the novel, coupled with the fact that the novel echoes recent historical events in Zimbabwe, create an impression of lived experience. Bulawayo also reinforces this view when she declares in a 2013 interview with Judith Rosen that this is a book “engaged with reality” and “It’s very much born out of politics”. What is significant is that the novel presents fresh opportunities for imagining and reimagining Zimbabwe’s dictatorship induced dystopia through the deployment of young voices which in some way lends credibility to narration because of the child’s perceived lack of restraint and self-censorship. The strengths, weaknesses, complications and implications of Bulawayo’s representation of a crisis through the experiences of children can be read as what Chris Jenks (2004: 7) has called “a partial recognition that the child in many senses provides a symbolic representation of the state of the moral order in society, and a politicisation of the real child in everyday life”. According to Lisa Mcnee (2014: 20)

> Our fascination with childhood experiences has created an international boom in autobiographies and children’s literature… The images of children as ‘victims’, ‘rebel’, or ‘the hope of the future’…suggest that we actually construct childhood as an object of concern and that these constructions are products of a particular period and a particular cultural framework. These ‘languages of childhood’, however, are usually foreign to children and to childhood as a phenomenological experience, for they are produced by adults attempting to understand their own or others’ childhood.

In his analysis of the literary representation of the Zimbabwean crisis, Dan Wylie (2007: 152) also focuses on the aspect of truth. In an article entitled “The Schizophrenias of Truth-telling in Contemporary Zimbabwe”, Wylie characterises truth or truth-telling as one of the major casualties of the Zimbabwean crisis. Wylie views Zimbabwean literature as an attempt at retelling the Zimbabwean story. If this is not the case, or if “truth is not easy to come by”, it is because “it’s another well-worn tyrant’s tactic, of course, not merely to crush or exclude opposition voices or to commandeer truth, but to destroy truthfulness itself” (152). Aghogho

Akpome (2018: 2) argues that Bulawayo represents "contemporary realities" but has misgivings on the nature of her writing, which is an issue that is examined in greater detail later in this chapter. Ashleigh Harris (2014: 7) takes issue with Bulawayo and other writers of her generation writing from the diaspora over the credibility or authenticity of the writing as they "fail to convincingly capture the everydayness of African experience".

Since half of *We Need New Names* is set in Zimbabwe and the other half in the United States, a number of critics have posited that the novel is about migrant experiences. Dan Ojwang (2013: 22) argues that "Within the ambit of much of postcolonial theory, exile and diaspora have become attractive positions from which to view the predicament of the contemporary world, with the nomad seen as offering unique insights into modernity and its aftermath". Ojwang goes on to say that

> Meanings of diaspora and exile have become a lot less tied to their origins in violence and oppression. As many critics of postcolonial theory have pointed out, exile and diaspora have been emptied of much of their earlier historical meanings to bear the burden of relatively less painful experiences of travel and migration. (22)

However, *We Need New Names*'s slant seems to be in the opposite direction. By linking the migration and displacement in the novel, Pier Paolo Frassinelli (2015: 715) alludes to the political and economic crisis in the country. According to Camille Isaacs (2016: 174), the fiction of writers such as Adichie and Bulawayo "attends to questions of space and belonging in relation to diasporic experience in the global era". Partly due to the novel's suggestive title, other critics have focused on the aspect of names and naming especially in relation to childhood. Polo Belina Moji (2015: 182) identifies naming and renaming as an important leitmotif in the novel. To Isaac Ndlovu (2015: 133), the novel is an example of "creative reportage". Ndlovu also says the novel "engages with issues of national crises, migration, identity re-evaluation engendered by a deracinating migrant status, problematic desire for home and elusive rootedness".

Robert Muponde (2015) locates *We Need New Names* within the category of Zimbabwean children's literature, even though his study could have devoted more attention to Bulawayo. Nevertheless, his study makes interesting observations on childhood in Zimbabwean literature. According to Muponde, one can read the "history and politics of Zimbabwe through the ways in which its writers represent childhood and the lives of children" (2). More

importantly, Muponde situates Bulawayo's work within what has been called the postnational moment, or the moment when the nation-state no longer matters to its subjects (142). One wonders, however, whether the nation-state will ever wither away to such an extent that it "no-longer matters" or it will continue to be a point of reference even to those who have migrated or have been born and raised far away from it. These and the other foregoing views and claims are part of the issues that this study seeks to interrrogate through a nuanced reading of *We Need New Names*. Although naming and re-naming processes have received some attention, the nexus between them and the Zimbabwean crisis has not been adequately explored. While Bulawayo's language is mostly blunt and carnivalesque (Ngoshi, 2016), there are also covert nuances and subtleties that can shed light on some of the controversies surrounding the nature of Bulawayo's writing which is simultaneously lauded and criticised for its representation of the Zimbabwean and by extension, African postcolonial condition.

This study seeks to engage with some of the debates on extroversion in African literature in order to make a contribution to a richer understanding of contemporary Zimbabwean literature and the African postcolonial condition in general. The overall aim of the chapter is to therefore examine how Bulawayo simultaneously subverts and entrenches stereotypical myths about power and the African postcolonial condition. Some of the important questions to be addressed are: How valid is the view that the novel is about the cry for change? What is the implication of Bulawayo's simultaneous subversion and construction of national myths? How does Bulawayo engage with power, childhood and identity? How does Bulawayo destabilise conventional readings of the postcolonial novel? What is the significance of the childhood trope in reading the Zimbabwean postcolonial condition? In answering these questions the chapter largely draws on Eileein Julien (2006)'s notion of the "extroverted novel" and Graham Huggan (2001: vii)'s views on "self-anthropologising discourse". Huggan examines "the material conditions of production and consumption of postcolonial writings, and the influence of publishing houses and academic institutions on the selection, distribution and evaluation of these works". Amatoritsero Ede's (2015) application of what he calls the use of the narrative moment and Julien's "The Extroverted African Novel" which is proposed as "a theory of why some novels travel (while others stay at home), and of the production and effects of these novels" (Julien, 2018: 371), as will be demonstrated in this chapter, to a

large extent also enhance understanding of works by contemporary writers such as Bulawayo and others.

7.2 Emergence of the Writer and Synopsis

NoViolet Bulawayo was born Elizabeth Zandile Tshele in 1981 in Tsholotsho, Zimbabwe. She adopted the pen name NoViolet Bulawayo to honour her mother, Violet, who died when she was just eighteen months old. The surname Bulawayo is chosen to underline her place of origin since Bulawayo is also the name of her country's second largest city which is also the capital of the region where the writer hails from and is also the setting of the first half of the story. So through the name Bulawayo, the sprinkling of Shona and Ndebele terms and other pointers in the novel, the writer does not make it hard for readers to establish the setting of the story, which is post-independence Zimbabwe. Together with the Shona language, Ndebele is one is one of the major languages spoken in Zimbabwe. In the story, the characters' names are a mixture of Shona and Ndebele, while others are transliterations from the two languages to English. Occasionally, in the story there is code-switching between the two languages, probably to highlight the common plight faced by ordinary people (Ndlovu, 2017: 154). NoViolet Bulawayo reveals the significance of her chosen name in an interview with Alice Driver: "I chose my name as a way of honouring her, of wanting to be identified with my mother". She then adds that "being away from home and not being able to return home for more than a decade created a kind of nostalgia"[6]. Changing her name can therefore be read as the young immigrant writer's own way of attempting to re-establish links with home and is also designed to underline the significance of "new names", renaming or change. As noted earlier on, NoViolet Bulawayo is born a year after Zimbabwe's independence and this means that she has no personal experiences of some of the tumultuous events that led

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6. See Alice Driver's "Writing About Women at the Margins: an Interview with NoViolet Bulawayo". HTTP://VELAMAG.COM/WRITING-ABOUT-WOMEN-AT-THE-MARGINS-AN-INTERVIEW-WITH-NOVIOLET-BULAWAYO/

to the birth of her country and those that have drastically shaped the post-independence era. These are events that directly or indirectly have a large bearing on some of the events and issues in the novel which in the process influence the trajectory of the lives of the writer and those of her characters. One of the most significant of these events is the Second *Chimurenga* or the struggle for independence which was waged from the mid 1960s to the end of 1979. At the core of the Second *Chimurenga* was the grievance over land, a grievance that is later re-deployed as a justification for the pain and suffering that the country goes through in the crisis of the period of the 2000s Land Reform Programme which has been termed the Third *Chimurenga*. This crisis is alluded to and is evident especially in the first half of the novel. To Bulawayo and some of her characters, much of the country's history is just a patchwork of tit bits gathered from adult talk or the sound bites of the state's incessant rendition of that history. To them their idea of history only begins when they are born, but they are the collateral victims temporally tied to the deeds of the past, deeds that they barely understand or have a passing recollection of. At the same time using child characters is a deliberate strategy adopted by the writer to attempt a clean break with the past, or old names, hence the call for "new names". NoViolet Bulawayo, grew up in Zimbabwe during the first two decades of the country's independence, and like her narrator, left Zimbabwe to go and live with her aunt in the United States while studying. *We Need New Names* is set in the third decade of Zimbabwe's independence which begins in the year 2000. However, this third decade of independence is largely marked by one of the worst economic and political crises whose highlights are a devastating economic melt-down and the emergence of an urban based opposition movement which mounts a serious challenge to the hegemony of Robert Mugabe and his ZANU (PF) party. The life of the novel's protagonist, Darling, partly mirrors that of the writer in that for her, departure means escape but at the same time it hinders intimate connection to the tumultuous events in her country's history which begin at the end of the 1990s, stretching through the first decade of the 2000s. The events in *We Need New Names* take place during this crisis-ridden period that Bulawayo misses but attempts to unpack and reconstruct for herself and her readers through fiction. The novel is designed to create the impression of lived experience. However, the point often missed or deliberately ignored by a large section of critics and readers which is an issue that I also examine in this study, is that the events in the novel, like all fiction in general, are contrived but are accepted as "truth" or "history". Bulawayo tries to bring out this point in an interview with Frances

Gertler: “The book is not autobiographical so the events are created”[7]. This, however, has not prevented the conflation of the lives of *We Need New Names*’ characters, the life of the writer and recent Zimbabwean history. The impact of NoViolet Bulawayo’s novel is highlighted by the debates it has generated in both the media and academic circles. Acknowledgement of the impact or influence of this young writer is also seen through some of the awards that she has received. Bulawayo received the Truman Capote Fellowship and was also a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Samford University. The highlight of her achievements was the 2011 Caine Prize for Africa writing for her short story “Hitting Budapest”. *We Need New Names* was shortlisted for the 2013 Man Booker Prize. The awards and recognition that Bulawayo has received have generated intense debate and controversy surrounding the nature of her writing, which is an issue that this study also addresses later in this chapter.

We Need New Names is a novel that Bulawayo first conceived as a short story entitled “Hitting Budapest”. It is this short story that Bulawayo later extended into a full-length novel. “Hitting Budapest” became the first chapter of the novel. *We Need New Names* is largely the story of the life of Darling Nonkululeko Nkala as a child in Zimbabwe during the country’s political and economic crises of the 2000s and later her life as an illegal immigrant in the United States. So the novel is neatly divided into two sections set in different places (Zimbabwe and the USA respectively). The story is told by a first person child narrator (Darling) who takes the reader along with her through their daily struggles for survival in a country in which virtually everything is shattered by violence and gross mismanagement directly and indirectly attributed to the Robert Mugabe dictatorship. Accompanying the narrator and the reader across the devastated post-independence terrain to witness and experience the harrowingscenes of hunger, disease, pain, homelessness, neglect, abject poverty, political violence and death, are the narrator’s friends, Stina, Godknows, Sbho, Bastard and Chipo. Through the daily movements of these hungry and victimised children, Bulawayo demonstrates that her aim is not just to give the reader a sneak peek into the Zimbabwean society of that decade of crises but to make the reader experience the sights, sounds and

7. In an interview with Frances Gertler, Bulawayo talks about the origin of some of her characters and the challenges of living in a foreign land. See https://www.foyles.co.uk/NoViolet-Bulawayo

pains of growing up in a country torn apart by and suffocating under the big boot of dictatorship. The immediate setting of the first half of the story is a shanty neighbourhood which is ironically called Paradise. The inhabitants of Paradise who are the children in the story and their parents are all living there because they are victims of the government's clean up and relocation exercise, Operation *Murambatsvina* which was ostensibly launched to rid the urban areas of slums. The irony surrounding the exercise is that the destruction of the so called slums resulted in the creation of real slums like Paradise. The pain and suffering of the government's irrational actions are made more poignant by the author's use of mainly child characters. The child victims become the eyes and ears recording and bringing to light what the country goes through. The use of the child, as will be seen in detail later in the chapter, allows the writer to bring out bluntly what adults would not normally say or divulge. In this way, poverty, sexual abuse, death and all sorts of violence are brought up close with little or no self-restraint.

The reader expects some kind of let up when the narrator is sent to the United States to live with her aunt Fostalina while studying. Going to America seems like a dream come true to the narrator. However, she discovers that life is not all rosy for immigrants like her and numerous others from Africa and other parts of the world. She struggles to fit in as an immigrant and she has to study and work in order to supplement their income. More importantly, the narrator and other immigrants like her become victims of American indifference and racism. The subtext to all this, which is also part of the focus of this chapter, is made up of the question that Bulawayo does not ask directly. She gives hints here and there but these have not received adequate attention from readers and critics. According to Memory Chirere one of the main weaknesses of Bulawayo's protagonist is that she "fails to ask important questions about what exactly has happened or not to one's people and country: How did it start? What caused it? Who benefits from it? Are we certain that we see all of it from what it is?"[8]. In my view, these are questions that cannot be divorced from the subtext whose greatest hint is the call for "new names". Bulawayo herself gives a hint of what she thinks should be the direction

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8. See "Memory Chirere Reviews We Need New Names". http://munyori.org/2013/05/memory-chirere/

of reading *We Need New Names*. Although in his review essay for the Weaver Press Michael Etherton says "NoViolet Bulawayo is not writing a politically specific novel"[9], Bulawayo says "I was writing about things that were going on at home, so it was my quiet way of saying, 'we need new names, you can remove names, we need a new president, new ways of thinking of ourselves, new ways of being' "[10]. It is this subtext of calling for new names that will largely be the focus of this chapter, as calling for new names directly and indirectly places the issue of dictatorship or the performance of power at the centre of Bulawayo's representation of the Zimbabwean post-independence crises.

7.3 When Old Names Refuse to Go

Most initial readings of *We Need New Names* seem to have missed or down-played Bulawayo's overall thrust which can be gleaned from the title. This section explores the extent to which the novel is about the call for change. There is plenty of evidence that this is a novel that is about the call for change. First and foremost, the author creates a devastated postcolonial terrain as the main setting of his story. This location is a result of brutal forced removals and displacement and is home to the narrator, her friends and their parents. Darling and her friends remember their previous settlement, which, though not perfect, had been home: "I dream about what happened back at our house before we came to Paradise. I try to push it away and push it away but the dream keeps coming and coming like bees, like rain, like the graves at Heavenway". (65). Then the bulldozers came. Etched in the minds of the children are the terrible sights and sounds of the machine:

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9. NoViolet Bulawayo, We Need New Names - Review Essay by Michael Etherton http://weaverpresszimbabwe.com/reviews/101-we-need-new-names/970-noviolet-bulawayo-we-need-new-names-review-essay-by-michael-etherton

10. See Alice Driver's "Writing about Women at the Margins: an Interview with NoViolet Bulawayo http://velamag.com/writing-about-women-at-the-margins-an-interview-with-noviolet-bulawayo

> the bulldozers appear boiling. But first before we see them, we hear them. Me and Thamu and Josephat and Ncane and Mudiwa and Verona are outside playing with More's new football, and then we hear thunder. Then Ncane says, What is that? Then Josephat says, It's the rain. I say, No, it's the planes. Then Maneru's grandfather comes sprinting down Freedom Street without his walking stick, shouting, They are coming, Jesus Christ, they are coming! Everybody is standing on the street, neck craned, waiting to see. Then Mother shouts, Darling-comeintothehousenow! But then the bulldozers are already near big and yellow and terrible and metal teeth and spinning dust. (65)

The children keep replaying in their minds images of that terrible day when they lost their homes. Bulawayo's children capture the helplessness in everybody as they watched the state-sanctioned destruction:

> I hear the adults saying, Why, why why, what have we done, what have we done, what have we done? Then the lorries come carrying the police with those guns and baton sticks and we run and hide inside the houses, but it's no use hiding because the bulldozers start bulldozing and bulldozing and we are screaming and screaming. The fathers are throwing hands in the air like women and saying angry things and kicking stones. (65-66)

The bulldozer literally represents bare, undiluted power as it razes once solid homes and lives to the ground, leaving nothing but tears and rubble in its wake. Metaphorically, the bulldozer becomes a symbol of a different kind of power. This is raw, unchecked postcolonial dictatorial power that children and adults at first fail to understand and do not know how to confront. It is a kind of power whose exercise and effects are plain for all to see. Bulawayo juxtaposes this raw power with the defencelessness of the children and figures of the numbed, shell-shocked adults. The young narrator recalls how the men who in the child's mind are supposed to be big and strong try to keep up appearances in the midst of all this:

> the men always tried to appear strong; they walked tall, heads upright, arms steady at the sides, and feet firmly planted like trees. Solid, Jericho walls of men. But when they went out in the bush to relieve themselves and nobody was looking, they fell apart like crumbling towers and wept with the wretched grief of forgotten concubines.
>
> And when they returned to the presence of their women and children and everybody else, they stuck hands deep inside torn pockets until they felt their dry thighs, kicked little stones out of the way, and erected themselves like walls again. (76)

Still, this does not fool anyone at all, especially the women. The women "who knew all the ways of weeping and all there was to know about falling apart, would not be deceived" (77).

However, with time as they get over the shock some of the men who had been rendered "speechless, without words", and had for some time "walked around in silence, like the returning dead" slowly "remembered to open their mouths" (75). So among themselves, in subdued voices, they question why all this was happening to them:

> They shouldn't have done this to us, no, they shouldn't have. Salilwelilizwe leli, we fought to liberate this country.
>
> Wasn't it like this before independence? Do you remember how the whites drove us from our land and put us in those wretched reserves? I was there, you were there, wasn't it just like this? (75)

The power that wreaks havoc in their lives is indiscriminate as both young and old are its victims. The inhumanity of this power is given expression by the rumbling machine which chugs on inexorably without pausing to reconsider the pain and suffering it leaves in its wake. Postcolonial power, like the machine, is not endowed with any humanity at all. It is blind and unfeeling like the man driving it. Therefore, through the bulldozer Bulawayo creates a powerful symbol of pain, havoc, indifference and utter callousness. In addition, by juxtaposing the child victim and the towering machine, the writer poignantly paints and brings out an image of a puny postcolonial subject-victim while also bringing out into the open the monstrosity of the authors of the pain and suffering.

The deliberate destruction of homes and lives makes one wonder whether the postcolonial subject can ever find respite and solace. However, the reader witnesses the birth of a new settlement - the ironically named Paradise. The destruction of homes and the sprouting of new but barely habitable settlements has echoes of the colonial period's forced removals and re-locations of people, especially in Southern Africa, where incidentally *We Need New Names* is set. Here one recalls how in *Time of the Butcherbird* (1979) Alex La Guma captures the plight of the Hlangeni people in apartheid South Africa who are evicted from their ancestral lands and dumped in a barren wasteland which "was no land for ploughing or sowing: it was not even good enough to be buried in"(1). In the poem "Red Hills Of Home", Chenjerai Hove (1985: 1) captures the impact of colonialism on African land in Zimbabwe before independence:

> The green hills of home have died,
>
> Red hills cut the sky

and the nearby sooty homes of the peasants

live under the teeth of the roaring bulldozer

Bulawayo evokes memories of an almost forgotten past in order to force the reader to juxtapose the colonial and post-independence periods. It is as if time stands still in this land as pain and suffering are the constant binding the two periods together to create a continuous wasteland. This no doubt is Bulawayo's indictment of independence. What she creates in the novel are images of a land where change has refused to come and these are also heightened by the juxtaposition of Paradise shanty and the wealthy suburb of Budapest. These two represent another reality on the ground. The image of a single wasteland is quickly complicated by the existence of Budapest which at first appears like an island of peace and calm. The existence of Budapest highlights the huge inequalities in society. More importantly, Bulawayo uses Budapest to give us a glimpse of how a predatory elite have become the new masters of the land.

Bulawayo also bluntly but playfully excoriates the exercise of power in the post-independence period. She presents graphic images of greed and victimisation. On one of the forays into the wealthy suburb of Budapest to steal guavas, the children witness how even those who are supposed to be safe from the raw power of the state also easily become victims. Through the children we are shown a wealthy white couple going through harrowing experiences simply because of their colour in spite of being also citizens of the country. A gang of marauding political activists sweep through the wealthy suburb of Budapest seeking retribution. They invoke what they perceive as and call wrongs of the past to justify their actions. In this incident power is presented as a loose animal gone mad. This is not a group of people after righting any wrongs at all. In the same vein, the bulldozer that destroys the children's homes is part of a calculated political move to neutralise perceived anti-government constituencies. The mob, like the bulldozer, is a machine that is deployed for ulterior motives. The destruction that results in the birth of Paradise shanty is driven by senseless justification that is blind to human suffering. So, Bulawayo forces one to question the sanity of the political forces responsible for the "mayhem". The victimisation of the white couple is intended to bring out how post-independence policies such as that of black empowerment or indigenisation are

nothing but just empty rhetoric designed to camouflage the political elite's greed that Jean-Francois Bayart (2009) has aptly labelled as the "politics of the belly". The victimisation and the dispossession like that which befalls the white couple in the novel brings out the hypocrisy and subterfuge of the post-independence elite who selectively invoke the past in order to justify their actions.[11]

The major argument in this section is that there is a powerful subtext running through *We Need New Names*. This underlying thrust of the novel comes to the fore through the blunt images and the hints thrown around playfully by Bulawayo's child characters. Although the events across town in the wealthy suburb of Budapest give us a peek into the lives of the other half of society and show us that this section of society is not immune to the rampant abuse of power, it is in Paradise shanty where the children live that we witness the harrowing existence of the postcolonial subject. Bulawayo presents Paradise shanty as a microcosm of a postcolonial nation that is battered by years of gross abuse of power. The writer establishes a clear link between the origin of the shanty, the abject existence of its inhabitants and the reckless exercise of power. The tragic day to day lives of the settlement are presented as mundane occurrences but one never completely gets used to them or accepts the situation as beyond redress. It is largely through the use of a child narrator and mostly young or child victims that Bulawayo makes it hard for one to accept the reality that is Paradise and by extension the condition prevalent in the country. The writer makes no attempt to gloss over the poverty, violence, destruction, pain, suffering and loss of life. In fact, her aim is to drag the reader along following the lives of the narrator and her friends. In this way the enormity of the postcolonial crime of misrule is brought alive and is not allowed to fade into the background. The sight of shacks, how they come into being and what goes on inside, the decadence, violence, poverty, disease and death become a refrain in the novel. The child narrator forces the reader to witness, experience and document the violation of human dignity in post-independence society.

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11. Some of the "mayhem" of this period of crisis is captured in short stories like "The General's Gun"by Jonathan Brakarsh or "Plenty Ways to Die in the Republic" by Lawrence Hoba in the aptly titled anthology *Writing Mystery and Mayhem* (2015).

Through the title *We Need New Names,* Bulawayo seems to be calling for the identification, naming and getting rid of the figures responsible for the crisis. This is the writer's attempt to engage with the issue of power and its exercise. It is in this respect that the novel should therefore be read as a call for change. In my view, the writer's diagnosis is that it is the old names, figures or players that are responsible for what is going on in society. Read in this way, Bulawayo's novel becomes a powerful social commentary on the postcolonial condition. More importantly, the writer wants the reader to attach this debilitating social condition to human names or figures. There are several hints from the subtext. The writer directly and indirectly reveals the dominance of particular names and figures. It is these names or figures and their persistent presence that even the children single out as the source of their tribulations. Their answer is that the 'game' now needs new names, new players or political figures.

The adults in Paradise shanty attempt to answer this call for new names. To be exact, they are prodded into answering this call by a fledgling opposition movement or what are called the "Change people" (133) in the novel. The answer is participation in political action or voting in national elections to bring in new blood, new figures or new names. Thus, there is feverish activity as the shanty's inhabitants and others like them across the country expect at last to replace the old names with new ones. Election time becomes a time for hope to at last bring about change in their lives. Youths like Bornfree and Messenger are dizzy with excitement as they see themselves as the new names, or if not, as the facilitators of a new dispensation: "We're demonstrating tomorrow, on Main Street, come and walk for change! Be the future!" (29). To the children, all this is great fun to witness, momentarily more exciting than their usual games:

> We can hear them whistling and chanting about change, and in no time we hear the children's voices chanting as well. I turn to look and I see everybody has abandoned Andy-over and is running after Bornfree and Messenger. Fist above their heads. Running and jumping and chanting, the word change in the air like it's something you can grab and put in your mouth and sink your teeth into. (29)

The prospect of new names, change or new lives energises even the usually lethargic, listless and resigned adult inhabitants of Paradise shanty:

> Paradise didn't sleep. The adults stayed up for many nights, dizzy and restless with expectation, not knowing how to sit still, not knowing how to bend low inside the shacks, not knowing how to sleep, not knowing how to do anything anymore except stand around fires and talk about how they would live the new lives that were waiting for them. (134)

However, Mother of Bones calls them fools (29) for harbouring dreams of change. She seems to have a clear understanding of the nature of the beast that those calling for change have decided to confront: "What do they think they are doing yanking a lion's tail don't they know that there will be bones if they dare?" Indeed, change becomes a dream deferred and a real nightmare, proving right the cynical but prescient Mother of Bones. People are not only robbed of their vote through rigged elections but there is violent retribution against those who had expressed their call for change by voting for new names. They "Waited and waited and waited" for change or the arrival of new names but

> the waiting did not end and the change did not happen. And then those men came for Bornfree. That did it, that made the adults stop talking about change. It was like the voting and the partying and everything that had happened had not even happened. And the adults just returned quietly to the shacks to see if they could still bend low. They found they could bend; bend better than a branch burdened with rotting guavas. (135)

The reality of the price paid by those who dare yank the lion's tail is graphically revealed by the children in one of their games when they dramatise the brutal killing of the youth activist called Bornfree:

> Then Godknows swings a hammer, making a straight line in the air. It hits Bornfree at the back of the head and I hear the sound of something breaking. Sbho swings an ax and hooks him at the side, above the ear. Next, a machete catches Bornfree in the face, splits him from the eye to the chin. Then we are just all on him. Thrashing beating pounding clobbering. Axes to the head, kicks to the ribs, legs, knobkerries whacking all over. (141)

The images are grim. The aftermath of the elections has turned Paradise shanty and other parts of the country into a world of coffins, funerals and throngs of mourners (133). The sign on Bornfree's fresh grave drives this home and becomes a dark reminder of the brutal, unequivocal price to be paid for daring to dream about new names: "BORNFREE LIZWE TAPERA, 1983-2008, RIP Our Hero. DIED FOR CHANGE" (139).

Therefore, in calling for new names Paradise shanty's children or postcolonial children are able to diagnose the malady afflicting the land. They realise that there is need for real change which should begin by replacing the names or figures "refusing to die". The children, like the adults are fed up with hearing the same names. In fact, these are the only names or leaders they know. However, unlike some in Ngugi's fictional Aburiria state who do not believe it possible to have any other name at the helm of the state other than The Ruler, Bulawayo's children have hope. They dream of a future when they will have new names to shout out in their games.

7.4 Myths and Power in *We Need New Names*

In light of the foregoing, it is clear that *We Need New Names* is also about the exercise of power and its devastating consequences. Bulawayo links the postcolonial condition to the exercise of power. This is part of the powerful subtext that runs through the novel that Bulawayo engages with in a playful but subversive manner. In this respect, this section discusses the simultaneous subversion and construction of national myths in *We Need New Names*. Those who claim to have founded the nation and to have forged and driven the history of the country are exposed as the authors of the pain and suffering being experienced. As seen in the previous chapters, postcolonial reality can be so strange and confusing. The reality that Bulawayo engages with is so confounding that it has almost rendered mute the adult postcolonial subject. Bulawayo therefore deploys the child as a narrator, victim and an unlikely source of hope that can evoke the reader's outrage by saying out things as they are. While writers such as Tansi, Tuma, Kourouma and Ngugi resort to strange or unusual means of representation to deal with the equally unusual or strange postcolonial condition, Bulawayo banks on the child's unembellished truth to reveal the situation as it is. It is this approach that largely drives the underlying message or subtext whose goal is to bring out into the open the link between the past and the present which collapse into each other freezing time as it were. In other words, endless crises, violence, pain, suffering, homelessness, death and other social ills become the glue or common denominator binding the past and present together.

The source of *We Need New Names*' strength also lies in its ability to diagnose and dramatise the malady afflicting postcolonial society. Earlier on I noted how Memory Chirere accuses Bulawayo of failing to make a proper diagnosis of the country's condition. In my view Chirere fails to appreciate Bulawayo's engagement with the nation's core myths. In doing so Chirere consciously or unconsciously reveals how he has been influenced by official versions of the nation's crises by alluding to meddling by outsiders. One of Bulawayo's strategies, which Chirere misses or refuses to accept, is to confront and deconstruct the old myths of liberation and their casting as the sole story of the nation. In fact, the grand narratives' attempt to dominate and silence other narratives or what Lene Bull Chriatiansen (2005: 203) has described as the state's "monopolization of the discursive space of national history and identity in Zimbabwe" becomes a liability and Achilles heel. The writer's approach is deceptive as it mimics the naïve and simple demeanour of the child in order to vocalise the postcolonial subject's tribulations. Like her young characters, the writer has known no other narratives besides those she is born into. They might have defined her life but she does not seek to rehash them. Writing in an earlier period Yvonne Vera shows disdain for grand narratives, or what Terence Ranger (2004: 216) calls "patriotic history", by focalising and vocalising the individual woman's pain. For example, in *Butterfly Burning* (2000) Yvonne Vera barely acknowledges some of the powerful nationalist narratives in similar colonial contexts that would drown or suppress individual female experiences of pain and marginalisation. In *Butterfly Burning* a "huge" historical event, Zimbabwe's First *Chimurenga* or rebellion against British colonialism (1896-7), is mentioned in passing, making it a brief afterthought. A supposedly monumental historical event is thus reduced to seventeen dangling male bodies. However, Bulawayo acknowledges and confronts the seminal national moments in order to link them to the country's dysfunctional state. In *We Need New Names* Bulawayo presents a society that has been so saturated with the old myths of liberation that there now is a call for "Real Change" (59). The writer makes it clear that this is the context in which her characters live. So Bulawayo's writing becomes a subversion of the old myths of liberation and the birth of the nation. The source of the persistent crises, pain and suffering is demystified as even children are able to place a finger on it – the old names. In other words, those who have been crafting the story of the nation and have cast themselves as its creators and principal players incriminate themselves through their claims of ownership. If they created the postcolonial space as their stage and cast themselves as the protagonists, can the children be faulted for

pointing out their culpability? This is the writer's way of subverting the old but persistent myths of liberation.

In the society depicted by the novel the symbols that constitute and reinforce the myths are evident even in Paradise shanty where people and places are given names that evoke memories of past national struggles. A name such as Bornfree, the brutally slain youth, harks back to the past while ironically placing focus on the ignominy of living in the dystopic present. Bornfree is also called Lizwe (country). Put together the two names and the brutal killing of their bearer, become part of the biting satire that exposes the hollowness of the national liberation struggle myths. Bulawayo seeks to show how clinging onto these old myths of liberation and nation formation has got the nation to its current position. More importantly, the old myths have been conveniently deployed for ulterior motives as seen in the incident where the white couple is threatened with eviction and dispossession. So Bulawayo takes a dig at policies couched in narratives of national liberation, restitution and empowerment when in fact they are just plain political "thuggery" and greed (117). Could Bulawayo be saying the crises are caused by the fact that the nation is built on misleading myths? Bulawayo deconstructs the nation's foundational myths to demonstrate how they have contributed to the pain and suffering. Thus, in the novel childhood emerges as a deceptively naïve, innocent and vulnerable, but powerful tool for exposing, debunking and censuring the seemingly permanent narratives and names whose dominance have wrought havoc on the nation.

7.5 Extroverted Images: Power, Gazers and Victims

Although Bulawayo succeeds in subverting the old myths upon which the nation state has been constructed, the process has also spawned unintended consequences. A number of critics have decried what they see as the extroverted nature of Bulawayo's writing. In a chapter entitled "The Extroverted African Novel" intended to prompt debate on the nature of African writing Eileen Julien (2006: 681) hypothesises that

> What African readers and readers beyond Africa think of typically as the African novel is, I submit, a particular type of narrative characterised above all by its intertextuality with hegemonic or global discourses and its appeal across borders.

Julien adds that

> 'the African novel' is recognised as such precisely because it is characterised by extroversion and engagement with what is assumed to be European or global discourses: surrealism, primitivism, magical realism, cultural studies, the motifs of postcolonial theory (hybridity, exile, marginalisation, dislocation) or areas of inquiry and theory integral to the social sciences, such as Marxism, feminism, democratisation and governance, politics of the state, and globalisation. (685)

Julien's hypothesis still remains relevant today especially in light of the emerging writers such as Bulawayo and others whose works are at the centre of some of the controversies surrounding the nature of African writing today. Drawing on Julien, this study views *We Need New Names* as a text that re-opens and re-invigorates the debates on the representation of Africa. Why has the novel received so much media and critical attention? How do we explain the accolades that Bulawayo has received in so short a time? Why has the novel been so successful in a literary world where many African writers remain unnoticed and unacknowledged? Why has the novel generated so much debate or controversy? These are important questions that can only be answered by examining the nature of Bulawayo's representation of the African postcolonial condition. This debate on the representation of Africa in contemporary African writing is now complicated by that those driving it are contemporary writers who are largely emigres (Ojwang and Titlestad, 2014). This is a point used against them to insinuate that their writing is not in any way related to everyday African experiences. However, this has not prevented them from attracting attention and garnering acclaim for their portrayals of Africa. Could it be the aspect of race at play here as anyone with a direct or indirect claim of links of 'origin' is easily regarded as an expert on Africa? The debate is further complicated by the contradictory signals from the writers. Some of them seem to embrace their African roots and do not hesitate to seize and utilise this in their creative endeavours. More importantly, they readily accept the honour of strutting across the globe as expert interpreters of African experience. On the other hand, others such as Taiye Selasie (2013) take issue with the label 'African' to designate or distinguish their writing. They see themselves as citizens of the world and therefore, in their view, their writing should not be compartmentalised or labelled as African literature.

Strong and hard-hitting questions have been asked by some readers and critics over the nature of new writers' representation. Helon Habila (2013) asks whether this new writing by Bulawayo and other contemporary writers like her is a fair representation of the realities of

Africa. In his essay "How to Write About Africa" Binyavanga Wainaina (2006) sarcastically pokes fun at stereotypical representations of Africa. According to Yogita Goyal (2017: 648) *We Need New Names* "restages debates over the reception of African literature". Deborah Kaspin (2000: 330), examines the origins of the evidently contentious representation of Africa and Africans and argues that it is outsiders who are responsible for the origin of the dominant images of Africa. The thrust of Kaspin's argument is that images of Africa do not represent the real Africa. More significantly, she adds that these images of a primitive Africa endure long after colonialism because they "are not fundamentally about Africa at all" (p333). Michael Janis (2008: xi) also sees the huge hand of outsiders in the representation of Africans and argues that Western media monopolize African images. Cecile Bishop (2014) critiques the literary representation of African postcolonial dictatorships and argues that in the representation of dictatorship, fiction and history are taken as one with little attempt to challenge this kind of approach. In other words, Bishop blames writers for entrenching particular or stereotypical images of the continent largely by their over-reliance on thinly disguised aspects of African history.

The question here is why such representation now comes from Africa itself, not outside. Can non-Africans be blamed for swallowing hook line and sinker these clichés when they largely now emanate from Africa itself? This is contrary to and brings into question the calls by people like Christopher Miller (1990: 1) for some kind of "Theories of Africans" to guide the non-African to a "correct" interpretation of the literary text. Akin Adesokan (2012: 5) points out that "the metropolitan West remains the primary context of the reception of postcolonial works". More significantly, Adesokan says the distinguishing features of novels by the new or contemporary writers are that they are usually written by women and focus on "innocent or marginal protagonists" while thematising "the emotional consequences of familial or public upheavals". Some of these are clearly features that place Bulawayo's novel in this category of writing.

It should not be a surprise therefore that the African texts like *We Need New Names* are implicated in shaping, inventing, re-inventing, entrenching and stereotyping African identity or perceptions about Africa and Africans by reducing everything to particular images. One of the major charges against African writers in this regard is that they have created what Graham Huggan (2001: vii) calls the "booming 'alterity industry' ". He argues that African writers have

taken advantage of the outsider's appetite for "exotic" images of Africa which conform to their expectations. In contrast to Miller (1990) who argues that anthropology can be a useful tool for the outsider to unpack the African literary text and Africa in general, Huggan posits that there has evolved a tendency to abuse anthropology so as to further long-held stereotypical beliefs about Africa and Africans. One begins to wonder whether texts such as Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* and others like it are not guilty of marketing exoticism which has been described as a

> a particular mode of aesthetic perception – one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery. (Huggan, 13)

Like Huggan, Amatoritsero Ede (2015: 120-121) accuses contemporary African writers of concocting a "self-anthropologizing discourse" by peddling contrived differences, otherness or exoticism. Significantly, Ede accuses "new" or contemporary writers of taking advantage of what he calls "narrative moments":

> My concept of narrative moment (in both singular and plural senses) is simply one made up of a historical or contemporary event or series of events of large or small import in the public or private sphere, affecting individuals or collectives, that can inspire (especially) fictional or factional narratives or even, in a personal sense, the memoir or autobiography. (115)

One sees how these historical events or narrative moments are latched upon by some young contemporary writers. More significantly, the writers seem to knead and package their literary products in response to and to satisfy the non-African's tastes, a characteristic that Ede points out in respect to the sensational rhetoric in Bulawayo's short story "Hitting Budapest". The argument here is that in *We Need New Names* NoViolet Bulawayo uses carefully selected exceptional historical events which become narrative moments that are then deliberately packaged to create a text that fits what is expected of an African text. This is a charge that is also made by Ikhide Ikheloa (2012) and who accuses NoViolet Bulawayo of exoticising her writing in order appeal to outside tastes: "a successful African writer must be clinically depressed, chronicling in excruciating detail, every open sore of Africa". However, like Ede, Ikheloa only focuses on Bulawayo's short story "Hitting Budapest". Well before the publication of the novel *We Need New Names*, Ikheloa was able to predict the

impact of the then short story "Hitting Budapest" on Western audiences and commentators. More importantly, Ikheloa was able to contemptuously predict that the short story would win the 2011 Caine Prize for African Writing because the writer had strategically packaged it to appeal to Western reading tastes. Ikheloa also links emergence of writing such as Bulawayo's to the creation of prizes for African writing: "The creation of a prize for 'African writing' may have created the unintended effect of breeding writers willing to stereotype Africa for glory". Without pulling any punches Ikheloa's prediction was: "Bulawayo would be my pick for the prize. She sure can write, unfortunately her muse insists on sniffing around Africa's sewers."[12] While some foundational texts like Armah's *The Beautyful Ones are not Yet Born* have also been accused of being sick for focusing on "Africa's sewers", emerging writers like Bulawayo seem to distinguish themselves by their over-reliance on media-driven images and perceptions of Africa whose representations they seem to revel in. This section explores these charges by identifying and examining in detail instances where language, characters and events are deployed to create what is supposed to be an "exotic" product. Bulawayo selects and seizes from the Zimbabwean crisis events whose intention is to induce shock and revulsion. More importantly, these are also events that are supposed to resonate with Western audiences. Because of the crisis-ridden nature of the post-independence Zimbabwean society referred to earlier on in the chapter, there is no dearth of events that can fit neatly into the template of narrative moments. For immediate impact, these are events that the writer selects from current topical issues that are dominating both print and electronic media. The huge events that the writer uses as narrative moments to construct her novel are Zimbabwe's controversial land reform programme and Operation *Murambatsvina.* Each of these represents a defining moment which brings the issue of postcolonial statepower under intense scrutiny. The events are accompanied by widespread social upheaval which is peddled as a new struggle or *Chimurenga* for nation building, but this is at great human cost and consequently attract widespread international attention and condemnation. More importantly, the events are conceived and carried out by the same leading names and political figures, a point that is highlighted by Bulawayo's child characters. The writer herself

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12. See Ikhide R. Ikheloa's "The 2011 Caine Prize: How Not to Write About Africa". https://xokigbo.com/2012/03/11/the-2011-caine-prize-how-not-to-write-about-africa/

does not hide the fact that her writing is a product of the narrative moments in her country's history. This is seen earlier on in the chapter when she says her decision to write the story "Hitting Budapest" and then the novel as a whole was influenced by a news-clip of a child sitting on a pile of rubble after the destruction of their homes in operation *Murambatsvina*. While the operation exposes the massive consequences of the abuse of power in post-independence Zimbabwe, Bulawayo is quick to realise its artistic creative potential.

Bulawayo's other strategy is the deliberate creation of a world of difference which concocts images of or an illusion of what is supposed to be a typical, literally pristine Africa where time, people and life are all frozen still. This is part of what has been termed "staging marginality" which "denotes the process by which marginalised individuals or minority groups dramatise their 'subordinate' status for the imagined benefit of a majority audience" (Huggan, xii). Bulawayo's use of language, names and naming which is marked by strange-sounding names, code switching and obscenities can be read as part of this process of staging marginality. Even her adopted name seems designed to attract attention by giving it an exotic ring. It is an unusual name. The writer gives up her real first name, "Elizabeth", and creates a new one "NoViolet" which is made up by combining the indigenous Ndebele preposition "No"(with) and non-indigenous "Violet" (her late mother's name). She also gives up the surname "Tshele" for the historically loaded "Bulawayo" (the place of death or killing field). In her novel a priest who conducts church services on top of a mountain is called Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro. Besides the obscene connotations associated with the name "Bitchington", within the context of Zimbabwe the surname "Mborro" appears to be a derivative from a Shona word for the male sexual organ (*mboro*). It does not really matter (as long as the desired effect is achieved) whether this is the priest's real name or it is a nickname that the squatter camp's children gave him. While a Western audience might not immediately latch onto this name game, there is an allure about the names with clear pointers, which is then confirmed by the plethora of critics and media commentators. The effect of such a name on a priest and religion in general is to add to the creation and piling up of incidents and characters for the desired images and atmosphere. A scene from one of the priest's services at his shrine on top of the mountain highlights that like his name, the religion and life in the squatter camp ironically called Paradise are bizarre, if not 'savage'. With the help of his

congregants, Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro tries to exorcise demons from a possessed woman:

> Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro prays for the woman like that, pinning her down and calling to Jesus and screaming Bible verses. He places his hands on her stomach, on her thigh, then he puts his hands on her thing and starts rubbing and praying hard for it, like there's something wrong with it. His face is alight, glowing. The pretty woman just looks like a rag now, the prettiness gone, her strength gone. (40)

In this incident Bulawayo is able to dramatise 'strangeness', 'savagery' or perverted behaviour as everyday occurrences. It is through this same incident that the reader is shocked to discover that eleven year old Chipo's pregnancy is a result of being raped by her grandfather. Other strange or exotic sounding names or titles are Bastard, Godknows, Bornfree, Mother of Bones, Vodloza, Chipo, Paradise and others. Within the Zimbabwean context the names of some of Bulawayo's characters are a satirical commentary on the postcolonial condition. Names like Bastard, Godknows, Paradise or Mother of Bones (one who survives on scavenging), allude to the harshness of existence all around them or ironically poke fun at their life or those responsible for their misery. Chipo which literally means 'a gift' captures both the tragedy and bitterness when one considers that this is an eleven year old girl who is pregnant because she was raped by her grandfather. Other names, like Bornfree and Nonkululeko, though fairly common and roughly mean the same thing (freedom), are an obvious dig at freedom or independence which has rendered Paradise shanty's young and old miserable victims of post-independence misrule. Therefore, through language, names and the naming process in *We Need New Names* become a kind of social commentary to highlight the deplorable life in Paradise and the rest of the country.[13]

If the above reduces life in the squatter camp to a joke, Bulawayo also shows how cheap and miserable it can be. Poverty, disease, decadence and political violence threaten the lives of the children and the adults at the shanty and the whole country. In a harrowing scene in the

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13. Thabisani Ndlovu (2017: 154) gives his translations and explanations of some of the Shona and Ndebele names and terms in the novel.

bush, one witnesses the children about to assist their friend Chipo terminate the pregnancy which is a result of incest using a "rusted clothes hanger":

> Sbho tells Chipo to lie back down, and then she kneels and lifts Chipo's dress, pushes it up all the way to her chest, exposing her growing stomach. Underneath, Chipo is wearing a boy's khaki shorts. There is a long scar on her thigh, from when she was pierced by a broken branch when we were stealing guavas and the owners appeared out of nowhere and chased us out of the tree and down the road. Sbho and I start poking Chipo's stomach with our fingers. It feels hard at the front, like she has swallowed stones, soft at the sides. (81)

Life is so cheap in this land where "God does not live" (17) that when the children come across the body of a woman who has committed suicide dangling in a tree they strip the body of shoes after stoning it. Through these incidents and others that highlight the cheapness of life one gets the impression that Bulawayo is in conversation with the older generation of writers such as Vera and Marechera to collapse time, generations, pain and suffering into each other to underline the persistence of the dystopic condition. If a writer such as Marechera had been prescient by being dismissive of the nationalist project, Bulawayo alludes to this prescience by demonstrating how the same old names that straddle the past and the present have transformed the landscape into one continuous terrain of pain, suffering and death.

Besides the strange names, obscenities, poverty and rampant decadence and trivialisation of human life that are reminiscent of Dambudzo Marechera's *House of Hunger* or Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*, in Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, it is the backdrop of dictatorship that really gives the text the stereotypical exotic ring and appeal that conforms to the expected images of Africa. Zimbabwe and The United States of America, representing two completely different worlds are juxtaposed to highlight the differences between the two with the latter being nothing else but dystopia (Muganiwa, 2013: 188). One is supposed to be the ideal to escape to while the other is a hell-hole to escape from. Political violence in the hell-hole is dramatized in the text. More importantly, it is not just the blacks who are its victims or its witnesses, but children and whites also. The perpetrators of the violence, whose identity is linked to ruling party activists through "the flags of the country", "toyi-toying" and "clenched fists" and slogans (111), are painted as murderous savages. Bulawayo dramatizes this with both visual and aural imagery. On can literally see and hear the marauding gang "toyi-toying" and hear their loud voices baying for blood:

> Kill the Boer, the farmer, the khiwa!
> Strike fear in the heart of the Whiteman!
> White man, you have no place here, go back, go back home
> Africa for Africans, Africa for Africans!
> Kill the Boer, the farmer, the khiwa! (111)

The gang is described as "wild, chanting and screaming and yelling and baring teeth and waving weapons in the air" (113). Their propensity for brutal, senseless violence is heightened by how they invade an elderly white couple's property where one of them "pounces on the door with a machete and starts hitting it and hitting it, and the others join in with their weapons" (114). All this is depicted by the text as the norm in the world of the story's children. By so doing, the Zimbabwean dystopia is dramatised to make it more shocking and appealing to the intended target audience. The impact of Bulawayo's harrowing representation is undoubtable. Helon Habila recalls how an unnamed panelist at a Caine Prize seminar on new African writing "accused new writers of 'performing Africa' for the world". The more damning charge from Habila targeting Bulawayo is that in her novel, "There is a palpable anxiety to cover every 'African' topic; almost as if the writer had a checklist made from the morning news on Africa". There is substance in this view as the writer is obsessed with her country's political and economic challenges which she focuses on by dramatizing the politically motivated violence and forced removals and displacement of thousands of people.

In her critique of Bulawayo's novel Silindiwe Sibanda (2018: 74) argues that the novel's "children continually perform their poverty … which renders it poverty porn". Poverty porn has been defined as the deliberate staging, display or representation of poverty, suffering, grief or misery for the purpose of eliciting sympathy and assistance. In Bulawayo's case the staging of poverty is designed to appeal to the outsider's conscience and expectations. Above all, Sibanda accuses Bulawayo of making "extensive use of stereotypes of blackness" and she lists the also often cited images of the failed African state, civil strife, hunger, poverty and disease. However, some critics like Robin Brooks (2018: 21) and a few others are convinced that women writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Bulawayo "expose popular stereotypes about African people in their novels through controversial depictions and subject matters as a way to disrupt these stereotypes". *We Need New Names* recalls and subverts old myths that are deployed in the service of power. While the foregoing views are to a large

extent valid, they fail to establish the link between power, the postcolonial condition and persistence of the "checklist" and "stereotypes of blackness" that Habila and Sibanda take issue with. The reality of the performance of power and its consequences in postcolonial Africa, with the ubiquitous big men of Africa at the centre of it all, continue to sustain the "checklist" images of "stereotypes of blackness".

7.6 Dissident Images, Dissident Readings: Deconstructing Extroversion

Although in the preceding section I have demonstrated that *We Need New Names* is a largely extroverted text, in this section I argue that Bulawayo's text also calls for nuanced readings and doing so reveals that the writer engages in an exercise aimed at destabilising the Western reader's expectations. I argue that Bulawayo's extroversion is deliberately staged, not only for the sole purpose of packaging suffering or staging poverty, but also for subverting those very markets that thrive on stereotypical notions of the black other. In doing so I take up and develop an idea that Graham Huggan (2001: 43) only broaches but is largely silent on in his text. Huggan suggests what he calls "a deconstructive exercise in ethnographic parody, a series of pointedly exaggerated, at times caricatural, cultural (mis)readings aimed at a Western model reader". The core of my argument in this respect is that Bulawayo is consciously aware of the obvious or larger impact of her writing on the Western reader and therefore seeks to subvert that same reader's tastes and expectations. Read in this light the same text assumes a new shape or meaning as it becomes a product designed to poke fun at Western audiences.

So, although Bulawayo is accused of reproducing, promoting and entrenching stereotypes, a deconstructive or dissident reading of the same text reveals that the novel is a satire of the Western reader's voyeuristic fascination with the black other. Read in this way, almost every aspect of the novel examined in the previous section and has been condemned by Ikheloa (2012), Wainaina (2006) and others, assume new meaning. The novel's spatio-temporal setting is dominated by post-independence dictatorship led by the unnamed, never seen but recognisable dictator Robert Mugabe. The poverty, political violence and suffering in the novel are cast as a direct result of this dictatorship that is driven by names that literally refuse to go away as they stubbornly cling onto power. Every aspect that is dredged from post-

independent “Africa’s sewers” (Ikheloa, 2012) is linked directly or indirectly to the dictatorship. Power, its abuse and the intransigent aging dictator provide the stereotypical backdrop which Bulawayo is keenly aware draws attention as seen by the recurring media images of African crises.

What should be put under the spotlight is not the exoticism, the self-anthropologising discourse or extroversion, but the Western reader. Read in this light, Bulawayo tongue in cheek laughs and urges informed readers to also laugh at the naïve Western reader and the persistence of stereotypical perceptions of the black person. The same tropes of names/naming, rape/sex, political violence and white persecution can be read deconstructively to undermine the intended market. While a number of characters are given names with unusual or exotic ring, with some that clearly speak to the debilitating economic and political situation, Bulawayo does not attempt to explain the meaning or significance of some of the indigenous names, especially those with unusual meanings or connotations such as Mborro or Chipo. Without any explanatory notes from the writer, only informed readers would get the humour that comes from giving an indigenous Christian prophet a name that refers to the male phallus. It is as if Bulawayo is playing a game as she toys with the ignorance of uninformed readers and deliberately shuts them out. It is my contention that the writer also laughs and urges informed readers to laugh at the persistent perceptions of the black male’s hyper-sexuality which is given expression through the name and activities of Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro and the incestual rape and pregnancy of Chipo. So Bulawayo writes to recall, expose and chide myths like the infamous “Black Peril”. In her review of *Black Peril, White Virtue. Sexual Crime in Southern Rhodesia, 1902-1935* (2000) by Jock McCulloch, Diana Jeater (2002: 465) points out that “The whole point about ‘Black Peril attacks is that, with a few exceptions, they *didn’t* happen… ‘Black Peril’ wasn’t a phenomenon of sexual crime, but of *fear* of sexual crime.” A character like Prophet Bitchington Mborro is designed to validate and caricature the outmoded existence of the fascination with the black male other as demonstrated by the incident on the mountain when the Prophet prays for a woman placing his hands on her “stomach”, “thigh” and “thing” or vagina (40). Through exaggerated characters like Bitchington Mborro, Bulawayo interrogates the Westerner’s fears, anxieties, and concerns which stem from proximity to the non-white. One can read the political violence and persecution of whites in the novel in the same way. The black on black political violence

and the 'victimisation' of white Zimbabweans is linked to the dictatorship of Robert Mugabe, as if to validate images of a 'heart of darkness' where the white man is always in danger. A text such as *We Need New Names* offers the non-Western other the space to chide and laugh at the misplaced fears and anxieties. So the extroverted text in this sense becomes a tool for subverting exoticism. In this way, the Western readers and publishers come across as naïve and anachronistic in their encounter with postcolonial realities.

7.7 Dystopic Power, Dystopic Childhoods, Dystopic Lives

This section examines the nexus between childhood, power and identity in Bulawayo's depiction of post-independence dystopia. Childhood trope is central to any reading of *We Need New Names*. Childhood in Zimbabwean literature in English has received quite considerable scholarly and creative attention. These range from Flora Veit-Wild (1993)'s panoramic *Teachers, Preachers, Non-Believers: A Social History of Zimbabwean Literature* to the fairly recent *Some Kinds of Childhood* (2015) by Robert Muponde. There is little evidence that this appeal is waning as childhood continues to be a useful tool for engaging with the "narrative moments" (Ede, 2015) that the Zimbabwe post-independence era never seems to run short of courtesy of the cycles of "crises" Chiumbu and Musemwa (2012) as noted earlier on in the chapter. As noted earlier also, in terms of recent creative output focusing on the Zimbabwean crisis, no Zimbabwean text has received as much attention as NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. The novel's success seems to be largely a result of the writer's ability to reconstruct and dramatise events and create what are supposed to be credible characters within the context of a media-hogging African crisis. Bulawayo succeeds in deploying childhood as both a victim and a way of reading the Zimbabwean postcolonial condition. While the main structural device of the novel is the "narrative moment", the child figure drives the story and ensures its creative impact.

As already seen, Bulawayo's success is also largely due to her ability to strategically seize and make use of particular historical contexts. Significantly, the writer uses childhood to engage power, its abuses and the attendant consequences such as nation-building/destruction and the scattering of postcolonial subjects beyond the postcolony's physical boundaries. Bulawayo creates memorable images of a crumbling nation being abandoned by its victimised

and traumatised people. The haunting image of a brutalised teenager who has fled political persecution is difficult to erase from one's mind. We are told of Aunt Fostalina's teenage cousin Prince who has fled to America and has been so traumatised by the terrible experiences back home that he is now virtually a big baby who talks to himself, "yells and screams and kicks like somebody is trying to do things to him". To quieten him, "Aunt Fostalina wraps him in her thin arms like he is a baby" and "rocks him and rocks him" (159). The effect of this image is heightened and capped by Prince's sorrowful heart-wrenching song that mourns the loss of family, relative, friend, home and freedom:

> *Sobashiy' abafowethu*
>
> *Savuka sawela kwamany' amazwe*
>
> *Laph'okungazi khon'ubaba lomama*
>
> *S'landel'inkululeko* - [14] (159)

So that there are no doubts as to the crime against humanity back home, Bulawayo reveals the "burn scars" from the brutal torture that has reduced a human being to such a state (155). Like Tuma's trials in *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor*, the images are out in the open for the public gaze to soak in how rabid power can be. In a chapter aptly titled "How They Left" Bulawayo highlights that what is happening are not isolated events but widespread ocurrences. She describes vividly how the nation falls apart and is abandoned by its children who

> flee their own wretched land so their hunger may be pacified in foreign lands, their tears wiped away in strange lands, the wounds of their despair bandaged in faraway lands, their blistered prayers muttered in the darkness of queer lands. (145-146)

The chapter is short (less than two pages) and poetic but as haunting as the country that is being abandoned:

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14. While the song mourns the loss of family, friend, relative, home and freedom, translation does not adequately capture the tragic moment or convey the exile's aguish. Translation leaves just plain words and also strips Prince and the song of the 'strangeness' or exotic ring.

> Look at them leaving in droves, the children of the land, just look at them leaving in droves. Those with nothing are crossing borders. Those with strength are crossing borders. Those with ambitions are crossing borders. Those with hopes are crossing borders. Those with loss are crossing borders. Those in pain are crossing borders. Moving, running, emigrating, going, deserting, walking, quitting, flying, fleeing – to all over, to countries near and far, to countries unheard of, to countries whose names they cannot pronounce. They are leaving in droves. (145)

The cries and tears of Paradise shanty's children draw attention, especially beyond the nation's borders, to the African state's failure to look after its own. Muponde (2015: 141) locates Bulawayo and her novel within what he calls the postnational moment. Muponde's basic argument in relation to Bulawayo's work concurs with Keith Breen and Shane O'Neill's (2010: 2-3) definition that the postnational moment is when the "nation state and national identities no longer matter, that they have no political significance". In other words, this is when the magnitude of the nation-state's failures is such that it has now rendered itself irrelevant to those that are supposed to be its citizens. It is as if the nation-state has ceased to exist. There is definitely evidence in *We Need New Names* that the nation-state has to all intents and purposes functionally disintegrated. If a nation is an "imagined community" as Benedict Anderson (1983) says, can this devastated postcolonial terrain depicted by Bulawayo in the first half of the novel be anywhere near the imagined ideal? What is left is nothing but what the children in the novel mockingly call a "kaka" of a country. The children in the story use the word 'kaka' to mean human excrement.

If the foregoing is the case and that the nation-state no longer matters, however, the main character Darling's escape to the United States makes her realise that she cannot get rid of the purportedly abandoned identity and nation easily. Darling and the other immigrants discover that they are unwanted and continue to be identified with the lands they thought they had given up and had given up on them. Bulawayo captures the plight of the unwanted immigrant through the tragic figure of Tshaka Zulu who, in order to get to America, had "sold all of his father's cows" (240). When Tshaka Zulu fails to make it in America and finds himself unwanted, he literally loses his mind. Bulawayo paints a picture of a lost, disoriented figure desperately groping around for traces of self, far away from a home he cannot get back to anymore. Tshaka Zulu's tragic end is sealed when one day the police are called to subdue him when the medicines and all other interventions fail. Through this incident Bulawayo cleverly

locates the immigrant's plight within the larger condition of blacks in general by alluding to the American Blacks Lives Matter movement and the precariousness of black existence in America. The inevitable end of Tshaka Zulu's life at the hands of the police brings into perspective the futility of the immigrant's notion of escape and the attempt to shed off the burden of the nation-state identity from one's back. At the same time, those left behind scrounging for survival in the nation-state feel betrayed by those who fled the upheavals and no longer see those who fled as part of them as shown by how Chipo chides Darling in their phone conversation:

> Why did you run off to America, Darling Nonkululeko Nkala, huh? Why did you just leave? If it's your country, you have to love it to live in it and not leave it. You have to fight for it no matter what, to make it right. Tell me, do you abandon your house because it's burning or do you find water to put out the fire? And if you leave it burning, do you expect the flames to turn into water and put themselves out? You left it Darling, my dear, you left the house burning and you have the guts to tell me, in that stupid accent that you were not even born with, that doesn't even suit you, that this is your country? (286)

So, in a strange twist of things the immigrants' rejection by their adopted countries makes them realise that the failed nation-state they fled from still matters in terms of their identity even beyond the failed nation-state's borders. So,

> The social, political and economic problems form the abject essence of the postcolonial nation-state. This abjection imprints the national subjects, who are metonymical parts of the nation. Because of this affiliation, the citizens cannot easily undo the link with the abject postcolonial nation-state even when mobility enables them to leave its geographical space behind; their mobilities carry the abject essence of the national failures with them. (Anna-Leena Toivanen, 2015: 3)

Therefore, postcolonial power whose enduring symbol is the aging dictator, has created the dystopic condition, but that condition becomes the mark of identity. Thus, the abject or dystopic postcolonial condition ironically serves as the glue that holds the dysfunctional state's and 'its' citizen's identity together. Consciously and unconsciously, the postcolonial subjects define themselves and are defined and identified by their common experiences or unwanted heritage of abjection. At the same time, the postcolonial subject's existence or continued survival becomes a stubborn reminder to power of the subject's presence, which

is to some extent read as a refusal to become a non-citizen or stateless. Although in the postcolony power victimises, displaces and attempts to banish the postcolonial subject into complete invisibility, the child and all the neglected and victimised in places like Paradise shanty and others become a persistent reminder of the marginalised subject's stubborn resilience and hope. The hope intermittently bursts out into the open at election time when they still continue to vote in elections which are unlikely to bring about change by ushering in new names. So the child character in *We Need New Names* becomes a symbol of the cyclical nature of life and possibilities of regeneration which point to the arrival of new names. Ironically, the dystopic postcolonial state under the grip of the stereotypical dictator-cum-father of the nation is responsible for the neglect, poverty, misery, disintegration and the dispersal of subjects to faraway lands, metonymically remains home to those it has neglected, victimised and brutalised and those who disavow it.

7.8 Conclusion

NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* represents an important addition to creative works engaging with contemporary Zimbabwean post-independence crises. Its success lies in its ability to reconstruct important historical events into what Ede has called narrative moments. In doing so Bulawayo turns her novel into a blistering critique of post-independence Zimbabwean dictatorship. She deploys childhood as a vehicle to capture the dystopian condition. Playful child innocence couched in humour does away with otherwise adult restraint, censorship or creative embellishments. This is juxtaposed with the pain, suffering and misery whose source is the all-powerful dictatorship whose face are the same old names or myths that stifle any attempts to introduce new names or change. The nation state emerges as battered and dysfunctional with some of its citizens abandoning it. However, flight from this terrain and attempts to assume new identities are complicated by the realities of alienation and rejection in faraway lands. Clearly, flight, escape or attempts to shed off the burden of one's abjection become a tragic, futile exercise. At the same time the flight or attempts to escape become a shaming and damning testimony to the postcolonial state's abject failure to look after its own. *We Need New Names* has justifiably been accused of 'extroversion' (Julien, 2006) or 'strategic exoticism' (Huggan, 2001) in that it is created with an external audience in mind which reinforces the stereotypical images of a backward and

crisis-ridden continent. However, Bulawayo also complicates representation of the postcolonial condition as her writing opens itself up to dissident or deconstructive reading which destabilises and creates new meanings suggesting that the novel is also a parody of the persistent tastes for exotic images. The overall conclusion of this chapter therefore is that Bulawayo suggests new ways of reading the Zimbabwean postcolonial condition that expose, challenge and subvert entrenched myths and power in general.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

Decades after the Ghanaian flag was raised to herald the period of feverish decolonisation that saw the birth of new nation states across Africa, the idea of the nation still continues to capture the imagination of African writers. There is abundant evidence of this fascination with the story of the nation in spite of the brickbats that Fredric Jameson (1986) has had to endure for his controversial characterisation of Third World literature as"national allegory". Nowhere is this evident, as this study has shown, as in the African dictator text. One of the major issues that arises from the study is why there is this persistent fascination with the African dictator text among African writers. Through drama, the short story and the novel, the dictator text hearkens back to the past to re-examine the moment of inception of the modern African state, its current status and future prospects. What emerges in the study is that the dictator text has been and continues to be a site of reimagining the African postcolonial condition. The long running theme in all the texts analysed is dictatorship, but significantly, what comes out in each text is that there are numerous and often confusing versions of the nation.

Directly and indirectly, the texts are given form and impetus by a personal ruler who struts about as the father of the nation. This leader or father of the nation strives to be the nation. Indeed, he becomes synonymous with the nation. The paradox is, as seen through Tom Mboya (1963) and Ali Mazrui (1963), in some cases it is society that places the ruler on a pedestal to create the symbolic father of the nation. However, through sheer force of will, violence and skulduggery, the father of the nation moulds himself into more than just a symbol or father figure as he literally becomes the nation. So, he writes himself into the story of the nation. In fact, as seen in all the texts, the story of the nation becomes a one man show.

If a nation is an "imagined community", as Bennedict Anderson says, what version or versions come(s) through in the texts analysed? The writers do not pretend to offer alternative existences, but what they succeed in doing is to paint pictures of postcoloniality that leave us with no option but to condemn it. Through drama, Soyinka simplifies and does not complicate images of the brutal dictators represented by Benefacio Gunema, Emperor Kasco, Field Marshal Kamini and General Barra Tuboum. Like the sculptor character in his play, Soyinka presents himself as a sculptor but in his case, his goal is to produce master-pieces of the

monstrosity embodied by the play's real-life referents. These are men whose end goal is simply the retention of power at all cost. Do such men have a grand plan, a vision or version of an "imagined community", or it is almost inconceivable to expect such men to cobble together a version or vision of an "imagined community"? Clearly then, the grandiose projects such as The Marching to Heaven Project in Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* are nothing but part of the mythologisation designed to entrench the dictatorship. The inevitable question arising from this is: If the 'father of the nation' does not have an inkling of how to inspire imagination of genuine nationhood, where does this leave the postcolonial state? The repression in Hama Tuma's stories and the wide-spread violence in *Life and a Half* expose the myths and falsehoods of the dictator's version of nationhood. Ernest Renan (1882) asks a pertinent question which throws light on the incongruity of the notion of the nation in post-independence Africa at whose apex is the 'father of the nation': "What is a nation?" It is his answer that I find useful in reading the African dictator text, especially in relation to the deeds of the dictator. Renan says:

> A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things which, properly speaking, are really one and the same constitute this soul, this spiritual principle. One is the past, the other is the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present consent, the desire to live together, the desire to continue to invest in the heritage that we have jointly received. Messieurs, man does not improvise. The nation, like the individual, is the outcome of a long past of efforts, sacrifices, and devotions. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate: our ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past with great men and glory (I mean true glory) is the social capital upon which the national idea rests. These are the essential conditions of being a people: having common glories in the past and a will to continue in the present; having great things together and wishing to make them again. [1]

While the postcolonial dictator might invoke the past and elaborate mythologisation, the writers suggest that the 'father of the nation' does not have the capacity to transend his own selfish interests.

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1. See Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?" Text of a conference delivered at the Sorbone on March 11th, 1882, in Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* Paris, Presses-Pocket, 1992. (Translated by Ethan Rundell).

Kourouma, Ngugi and Bulawayo dramatise the inevitability of change. Attempts to conflate individual and national myths become exercises in futility as time refuses to be "arrested" or corralled as seen in the study. Although I tried to show the fragility of the postcolonial state, I also want to build a case here that it is the fragility of the myths of omnipotence and immortality of the dictator that are laid bare through the fears and insecurities on display. Above all, this is given flesh by the dictator's body which fails to defy time as its end or demise is concretised and hastened by disease or violence. When Robert Mugabe, out of bitterness for being forcefully removed from power, denied the state possession and ownership of his body by refusing to be buried at the national cemetery, it is an attempt to demonstrate his ownership of the national narratives of liberation, heroism, sacrifice and nationhood[2]. Conflating his own body and the nation leads to the delusion that without his body that symbol of nationhood, the Heroes Acre, would be discredited. This was Robert Mugabe's one final act of mythologisation. Significantly, as I have hopefully managed to show, the postcolonial condition is so confounding that the writer, as in Ngugi's case, calmly has to come to grips with the realities that time presents to us all mere mortals, that is, there is no coherent script to life and its experiences. Although Fanon is often hailed for his prescience in predicting the betrayal that would come from the post-independence elite, Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* presents a postcolonial dispensation whose only certainty is the refusal to follow a specific template or script.

The ubiquitous images of big men, or self-styled heroes and fathers of Africa's postcolonial nations bring under the spotlight the gendered nature of postcolonial power in literary texts. The fact that the historical African dictator and the literary one have been male is an image that is reinforced by the texts analysed in the study. This lays bare one of the uncomfortable truths associated with the performance of power in post-independence Africa. While there have been some notable representational exceptions of powerful female figures such as Estina Bronzario in Sony Labou Tansi's *Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez* or

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2. Tinashe Mushakavanhu (2019) calls Robert Mugabe "the de facto biographer of the nation", while Shepherd Mpofu (2017) describes Mugabe as a the "living national ancestor who militarily personifies and tells grand narratives, relates the myths and brings to life memories of liberation war and nation-making".

Wakanda's female warriors in the award-winning film *Black Panther*, this study has revealed through the dictator texts analysed, the need for further study of the gendered nature of literary representations of power in postcolonial Africa.

Zoe Norridge (2012) examines whether the themes of sex and conflict are "intricately woven". Citing the works of Yvonne Vera, Calixthe Beyala, Aminatta Forna and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Norridge argues that women writers have been writing texts with "explicit sexual descriptions and graphic violence". What then is the difference between the approaches of male and female writers in handling the challenges of the postcolonial condition? In the texts examined in this study one has seen an almost obsessive pursuit of power which literally overshadows other forms of existence. Whenever there are explicit sexual encounters as seen in Tansi's *Life and a Half*, there is a lack of sensuality that reduces such encounters to just violent encounters or assaults of the body. The dictator text in its casting of power, sex and violence, as conceptualised especially by male writers seems to fall in line with what Achille Mbembe (2015) calls "platonizing ideologies that would cast the body as a prison for the soul" as there is nothing else to celebrate in life but the pursuit of political power and its retention. However, in *We Need New Names*, the violence and pain of the postcolony are arguably forgotten in the fleeting moments when Darling's mother and her lover clearly enjoy the comfort and soothing effect of each other's bodies. It is during such moments that one sees a marked difference between a writer such as Bulawayo and the male writers in this study. Following in the footsteps of a writer such as Yvonne Vera, NoViolet Bulawayo attempts to show the possibilities offered by life even in otherwise trying times[3].

Writing in the *Guardian* newspaper on 4 January 2017, Charles Foran asks: "Can any nation truly behave 'postnationaly' – ie without falling back on the established mechanisms of state governance and control?" Foran then goes on to explain what he calls the postnational thought which he says is about "the use of a different lens to examine the challenges and precepts of an entire politics, economy and society".[4] It is this that Ngugi teases through his

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3. It is worth noting that both Yvonne Vera and NoViolet Bulawayo hail from the same country and city, that is, the city of Bulawayo in Zimbabwe. Bulawayo is clearly in conversation with Vera in *We Need New Names.*

4. See Charles Foran. 2017. "The Canada Experiment: is this the World's First 'Postnational' Country?" *The Guardian* 4 January 2017.

act of writing about 'home' from afar. More than a decade later, NoViolet Bulawayo who is the study's only female writer and the youngest of the writers, presents us with the opportunity to also interrogate the notion of postnationalism. Her novel forces us to reconsider our perceptions of nationhood and belonging through characters who are battered, violated and almost unacknowledged by their country. Flight and exile initially appear to be an appealing solution to the nightmare in the nation state. However, as I have shown in the study, this path leads to a new nightmare which ensures that one's identity remains stubbornly tethered to the abandoned nation. One feels this inner pain and crisis expressed by Mongo Beti when he returns 'home' to Cameroon after around thirty years of exile in France. He says he discovers "a new sense of belonging within his community of origin".[5] One wonders whether all this casts doubt on the idea of the postnational moment. At the same time I also see the self-reflexivity in Bulawayo's writing as evidence that the writer is acutely aware of the controversies surrounding contemporary writing by Africans and those of African descent in the diaspora. Bulawayo therefore opens up space and extends debates on the contested nature of contemporary African writing in the face of charges of extroversion and opportunism.

The study located the dictator text within the overall movement of the literature of disillusionmemt in Africa but it also teased out possibilities of alternative representations, readings or interpretations, especially with repect to later writing such as that of NoViolet Bulawayo. This is facilitated by the study's panoramic approach which does not restrict itself to a single African author, African country or region of Africa. This approach created room for a credible investigation, especially in terms of style and context.

Overall, the study discussed the representation of dictatorship in selected African texts focusing on the centrality of power, myths and temporality. The selected texts again revealed and testified to the African writer's preoccupation with the performance of power and its consequences on postcolonial life in general. Drawing on a number of critics such Barthes, Nkosi, Tomaselli and others, the study examined the myths surrounding dictators and the performance of power. Mythologisation comes across not just as a preserve of the dictator and his functionaries, but also of writers and citizens in general.

In exploring the representation of dictatorship, I also examined the intended and unintended consequences of the genre. The thesis acknowledged Keith Booker's (1995) characterisation

of a large bulk of postcolonial African literature as dystopian. This is a feature that finds expression and identity through the dictator text. Tied to this is the temporal nature of the dictator text which stems from its undeniable links with the continent's history which serves simultaneously as its source and subject. In other words, the dictator text relies for its form, issues and existence on the continent's turbulent historical experences. I argued that if the African dictator text is to be slated for its overly dystopian character, it should also be acknowledged as an arena where African experiences are vigorously interrogated and reimagined. Significantly, through careful selection and analyses of texts, I demonstrated how the African dictator text has given birth to new strategies for representing and understanding the perrenially confounding debilitating postcolonial condition.

This study has, therefore, tried to bring new insights into the representation of power and the postcolonial condition in Africa through analysis of the African dictator text. It will hopefully be a modest critical addition to the study of representations of dictatorship in Africa which Gichingiri Ndigirigi (2014: xxi) says has not been as comprehensive as the study of the Latin American dictator text. Nothing dramatizes the continued relevance of the African dictator text as the events surrounding the burial of Robert Mugabe. As the Mugabe family buried him in a sealed metal coffin, Zimbabweans went about their daily lives, certain that their fate was not sealed with his. The dictator text is therefore well-positioned to demonstrate what Simon Gikandi (1991: 131) says are stories' ability to create "timeless and autonomous version of events so that they can speak to future generations".

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5. See Phyllis Taoua. 2018. *African Freedom: How Africa Responded to Independence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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