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This dissertation examines the use of magical realism as a device for political criticism in the postcolonial African novel as seen in the works of of Kojo B. Laing, Ben Okri, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, namely *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, *The Famished Road*, and *Wizard of the Crow*, respectively. I argue that, in these novels, magical realism is not merely a literary mode; rather, it is an aesthetic of necessity. In other words, its use by these postcolonial African writers is dictated by the kind of issues they address in their works. Magical realism is the result of an intentional break away from the modes used in the previous African novels. This departure is informed by the realization of the current generation of postcolonial African writers that the social, political, and economic situations in Africa have extraordinary origins which require extraordinary narrative techniques such as fantastical or marvelous realism for adequate representations. In other words, their choice of magical realism is informed by their dissatisfaction with social realism, satire, and other forms which have revealed their limits vis-à-vis the postcolonial African crisis. Because of the postcolonial critics' tendency to assess all magical realist texts with the same criteria, this dissertation emphasizes how the socio-cultural milieus on which the authors I examine draw variously shape their individual magical realist texts.

Chapter One discusses magical realism as aesthetic of necessity from its original application to art criticism to its current intervention in the postcolonial literary criticism. Chapter Two discusses Laing's use of a utopian-grounded existentialist magical realism

to create limitless possibilities for the creation of a new Africa. Chapter Three focuses on Okri's use of the "abiku" myth to describe the condition of post-independence Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular. Finally, Chapter Four examines how Ngugi draws on Gikuyu folklore to create fabulous realism and satirical magical realism for his depiction of the social, economic, and political situations of postcolonial Kenya and Africa.

HYBRIDIZING POLITICAL CRITICISM IN THE POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN
NOVEL: MAGICAL REALISM AS AESTHETICS OF NECESSITY

by

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CHAPTER I

MAGICAL REALISM AS AESTHETIC OF NECESSITY IN THE POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN NOVEL

Magical Realism: Origin and Definition

You must use the language in a manner which permits god to exist-the divine to be as real as the divan I am sitting on. Realism can no longer express or account for absurd reality of the world we live in – a world which has capability of destroying itself at any moment. Salman Rushdie (qtd. in Faris 88)

What I meant was the critical realism of the 19th century fiction and then, say, socialist realism, which means a readily recognizable similitude between the reflection and the object of reflection becomes inadequate where truth is starker than fiction. How does one write about massacres, for instance, in a way that would shock the reader when in reality thousands and thousands of people have been slaughtered in our lifetime? An almost annual 20th century occurrence? A novelist has to find ways of addressing the issues, but how? The fantastical, the fable, is just one possibility. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Interview with Bronwyn Mills, 2001

When asked about the present situation in Africa, during an interview, the veteran Postcolonial African theorist and critic Ngugi wa Thiong'o observes that the socio-political situation in Africa has reached a point where the novelist's imagination must go

beyond realism if he/she is to adequately represent it. He suggests that one possible adequate way of depicting the present predicament of Africa is through the fable, the fantastical. Ngugi's call for the use of what is referred to as magical realism in the depiction of current African situation in literature suggests that this mode is employed out of necessity, thereby confirming the incommensurable role of literature and writers in the socio-political life of Africans. Indeed, Ngugi's response echoes Salman Rushdie's comment on the situation in his native country quoted above, where he describes magical realism as the special style he needs for the portrayal of contemporary India.

This overt engagement of African writers in cultural, political and social issues is not new. In fact, faced with the destruction of Africa by colonialism, African writers had already used poetry, drama, and fiction to glorify the African past, depict the clash between indigenous and colonial cultures, condemn the European subjugation, and demand the independence of Africa. Even with the official end of colonialism, African writers' involvement in politics has not faded, because the betrayal of the hopes inspired by the independences has provided them with another mission, which, in the words of Frantz Fanon, they "must accomplish or betray". It is exactly this mission that connects postcolonial African literature to post-colonial African politics. It is indeed the mission called for by the French philosopher and literary critic, Jean - Paul Sartre, as he writes in his chef-d'oeuvre entitled *What's Literature?*: "a writer is always a watchdog or a jester, but the primary function of the writer is to act in such a way that nobody can be ignorant of the world: a novelist cannot escape engagement in political and social issues" (38). For African writers, art has political and social functions. That conception of art did not begin

during or after colonialism, but long before Africa's confrontation with European invasion and predation. In indigenous Africa, griots, story tellers, soothsayers, and singers took this responsibility so seriously that they had always been at the service of the society they lived in; in other words, they had always responded to their society's call. Postcolonial writers who employ magic realism appreciate its efficacy to adequately fulfill art's political and social functions. This is what Rushdie has emphasized in his comments on Garcia Marquez's magic realism:

It deals with what Naipaul has called 'half-made' societies, in which public corruption and private anguishes are somehow more garish and extreme than they ever get in the so-called 'North,' where centuries of wealth and power have formed thick layers over the surface of what's really going on. In the works of Marquez, as in the world he describes, impossible things happen constantly, and quite plausibly, out in the open under the midday sun. It would be a mistake to think of Marquez's literary universe as an invented referential closed system. He is not writing about Middle Earth, but about the one we inhabit. Macondo exists. That is its magic. (*Imaginary* 301 – 302)

What makes Macondo fit for magic realist depiction is very well present in the postcolonial Africa of the novels under discussion in this dissertation. This Africa is overwhelmed with corruption, nepotism, dictatorship, violence, greed, to list but a few. This is what these novels want to vividly represent as it will be demonstrated in each chapter.

Therefore, I argue that the three postcolonial novelists selected for this dissertation have indeed chosen to honor that tradition of political engagement by remaining ready to answer the call from their societies. In "The Novelist as a Teacher", Chinua Achebe writes, "The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-

education and regeneration that must be done. In fact he should march right in front.”

Achebe himself has many a time performed this duty. For instance, amidst a growing campaign of misinformation and denigration of African peoples through print and other media, Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* to set the record straight about the perception of pre-colonial Africa in the West. Also, after the independences, faced with a growing corruption and political violence in his native Nigeria, he published *A Man of the People* to expose the mischievous behavior of the political elite, thereby warning them about the consequences of such behavior. Likewise, in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, the Ghanaian novelist and critic Ayi Kwei Armah offers an acerbic critique of postcolonial African politics as the new rulers in Ghana have failed to live up to the promises they made to their people. In South Africa, at the peak of Apartheid regime, Alex La Guma did not hesitate to denounce the inexplicable violence that was consuming the entire South African society. In works like *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* and *Time of the Butcherbird*, La Guma exposes the effects of the violence inherent in apartheid on both the victims and the perpetrators and suggests resistance as solution to the status quo. Such historical commitment compels Laing, Okri, and Ngugi to embrace magical realism in their depiction of the current situation in their respective postcolonial African countries. These writers' departure from social realism is motivated by their desire to find a mode that does not limit their imagination as they seek to not only depict the outrageous conditions of life in their countries of origin, but imagine extraordinary solutions that give hope to their fellow citizens. In fact, I argue that it is their desire to substitute the vision of hopelessness and fatalism that pervades recent realist novels with their vision of

hope and possibilities that led them to magical realism, which makes it possible for them to create fictional worlds where human beings' wildest dreams are realizable. Unlike realist modes such as exposes or memoirs, magical realist mode offers its practitioners the freedom of representation that makes it more inclusive, and therefore effective in that it can be employed in any contexts.

For Laing, Okri, and Ngugi, magical realism is not merely a literary mode; rather, it is what I term aesthetics of necessity. In other words, their use of magical realism is dictated by the kind of issues they address in their respective novels and the vision that provides impetus for their artistic endeavor. The use of magical realism in the novels under discussion is rooted in politics of the countries of their authors as well as art; its mission is first and foremost political, and in some degree, rhetorical as well as aesthetic; it advances arguments as well as depicts culture. Most importantly, it serves as a method for challenging received ideas by making people aware of alternative possibilities.

My aim in this dissertation is to demonstrate that these three writers employ magical realism in their novels as a device for political criticism of their respective countries. I argue that the complexity of the current socio-political situations in their postcolonial countries, namely Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya caused them to place their novels between two seemingly contradictory worlds; that is, the real and the imaginary, the ordinary and the fantastic. In fact, almost all the real events in these novels are coated with the extraordinary, the fantastic, and the magical. This is what has been referred to as magical realism, a literary technique critics trace to Garcia Marquez. Magical realism has

emerged as narrative technique in the postcolonial African novel because the other narrative modes have revealed their limits vis-à-vis the current socio-political crisis in Africa. The inability of these modes is due in part to the extraordinary nature of the causes of the crisis writers seek to address.

Magical realism is defined as a literary movement associated with a narrative mode that combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them. *The Longman Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines magical realism as “a type of contemporary narrative in which the magical and the mundane are mixed in an overall context of realistic story-telling.” (92) Magical realism, therefore, can be taken as a crossover between ordinary and extraordinary events, realistic and unrealistic events in the representation of real issues.

Postcolonial African writers employ magical realism in their literary works as an effective alternative to the realist mode used in the past. It serves to capture what may seem unbelievable to Western sensibilities but real to indigenous understanding, as well as open the way to a world of limitless possibilities. In fact in postcolonial Africa the magnitude of vices like corruption, despotism, dictatorship, and electoral frauds, defies human imagination; even the sacredness of life is violated by the carnage that is the result of the gratuitous violence that characterizes socio-political relations in postcolonial Africa. Femi Osofisan, the staunchest opponent against the use of magical realism by African writers agrees with this claim when he admits in an essay that “the experimental work of West African magical realist writers is an aesthetic response to West Africa’s

recent experience of civil war, dictatorship, drought, famine, and economic failure” (qtd. in Newell 187). All these misfortunes require a narrative mode that provides both a powerful condemnation and room to dream again. In order to take advantage of this disposition, the three postcolonial novelists in this dissertation, Ben Okri, Kojo Laing, and Ngugi wa Thiong’o have embraced magical realism in their recent works. This, in fact is a break away from the modes that had characterized African literature for decades. Contrary to what some critics have argued, I contend that the move of these postcolonial writers from literary modes such as social realism and satire to magical realism is the results of both the changes in the socio-political and economic landscape of Africa and the realization that this mode can play an indispensable role both in the criticism and the representation of this new African reality.

Critics trace the origin of magical realism in postcolonial literature to Latin America in the 1940s with the publication of *Men of Maize* in 1949 by Guatemalan writer Miguel Angel Asturias and *The Kingdom of this World* also published in 1949 by Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier. However, it is said that it was the publication of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in English in 1970 that turned magical realism into an international phenomenon. In this novel, people who died return to life; for example, Melquiades, who is described as a heavy gypsy with an untamed beard and sparrow hands, and who is credited with introducing magic in Macondo at the beginning of the novel, dies and returns to chronicle the village’s history, including the horrific massacre of workers by the banana company:

He really had been through death, but had returned because he could not bear the solitude. Repudiated by his tribe, having lost all of his supernatural faculties because of his faithfulness to life, he decided to take refuge in that corner of the world which had still not been discovered by death, dedicated to the operation of a daguerreotype laboratory. (Marquez 50)

Marquez describes Melquiades' life as if it were something natural. This simplistic account of an extraordinary event characterizes magical realist texts. In "Ouaga Saga, Magical Realism, and Postcolonial Politics", Carina Yervasi of Swarthmore College argues that, in general, magical realism has been defined as a yoking together of dissonant actions and events, a bringing together of realist action with fantastic events that coexist both comfortably and uncomfortably in a single diegetic world (43).

Magical realism has become important as a powerful means of expression worldwide, especially in countries formerly under colonial yoke, and which are still struggling to achieve real political and economic independence, because it has provided the literary ground for significant political criticism. It transcends the limitations that prevent realism from reaching interpretive closure. In fact, it serves as an alternative to the now blunt realist mode, thereby affording writers an incommensurable device for more effective representation of the economic, social, and political realities in the aforementioned countries. What makes magical realism more convenient for Postcolonial African magical realist writers is their belief that the fantastic, the supernatural and even the magic should be allowed in our attempt to fully interpret the socio-political situation in postcolonial Africa, because not only they believe that realism has shown its limits in its representation of the world but they also think that it is foreign to the socio-political milieu it is attempting to represent. As Wendy Faris puts it:

For whatever realist texts may say, the fact that realism purports to give an accurate picture of the world based in fidelity to empirical evidence, and that it is a European import, have led to its being experienced by writers in colonized societies as the language of the colonizer. From this perspective, to adopt magical realism with its irreducible elements that question that dominant discourse constitutes a kind of liberating poetics. (The Question of Other 103)

Faris' suggestion that magical realism helps the writers in formerly colonized societies to avoid the language that was instrumental to the despotic rule that continues to haunt them even to this day sheds more light on the argument I make about its use by Laing, Okri, and Ngugi in their respective novels. Elsewhere, Wendy Faris and Lois Zamora further argue that "in magical realist texts, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation" (3).

In light of the, I argue that magical realism is used by postcolonial African writers to critique the political situation in their countries as well as subvert the Western notion of reality. This is unequivocally the main purpose of the three postcolonial African writers I examine in the present dissertation. In their novels, each of these writers employs a form of magical realism infused with his local culture to depict the social and political situations of his country as well as offer an alternative to the realistic interpretation of people's daily experiences.

The subversive function of magical realism has been emphasized by most critics. According to Warnes, magical realism was defined earlier as a mode of narration in which the non-or extra-rational-often associated with myth or fantasy- is represented on

scrupulously equal terms with the empirical, objective or phenomenal world familiar to realism. (135) Thus, magical realism is mode of narration that contests the monopolization of the truth by realism; in other words, it is a mode that subverts the only one notion of reality. Marie Rose Napierkowski, the editor of BookRags defines magic realism as “a literary movement associated with a style of writing or technique that incorporates magical or supernatural events into realistic narrative without questioning the improbability of these events.” (1) What these definitions reveal is that magical realism rejects simplistic representations, because even though it seems banal, magical realism is a multipurpose or multifunctional mode that writers appropriate when they address multidimensional issues. It follows that magical realism is a narrative mode that enables these writers to undertake multipurpose endeavors in their novels. In fact, in their works, the three writers I discuss in this dissertation aim at multiple targets; thus, they attack political, economic, social, cultural, and spiritual crises in their respective country. In line with Faris’ argument mentioned earlier, I contend that because all the aforementioned crises are to some degree the legacy of the policy of exploitation and destruction imposed on the countries of these writers by colonial powers, by offering an alternate interpretation of these crises, magical realism can inspire hope for a better future in such countries.

Magical realism, I argue, owes its multipurpose and multifunctional abilities to its hybridity. The fact that it is the result of the fusion of Western ways with indigenous way of seeing equipped its practitioners with limitless possibilities in their artistic endeavors. In this regard magical realism is a hybrid mode of narration with a multifunctional

capability that can be appropriated by writers from across the world, when necessary, for specific purposes. In this dissertation I will demonstrate that Laing, Okri, and Ngugi's use of magical realism is not inadvertent; rather it is the reflection of political, social, economic, and cultural realities of their respective countries. Thus, magical realism, I argue, serves as an aesthetic of necessity in their respective novels under discussion in the present dissertation.

Magical Realism as Aesthetic of Necessity

Postcolonial African writers employ magical realism in their literary works as an effective alternative to the realist mode used in the past. It serves to capture what may seem unbelievable to Western sensibilities but real to indigenous understanding, as well as open the way to a world of limitless possibilities. In fact in postcolonial Africa the magnitude of vices like corruption, despotism, dictatorship, and electoral frauds, defies human imagination; even the sacredness of life is violated by the carnage that is the result of the gratuitous violence that characterizes socio-political relations in postcolonial Africa. Femi Osofisan, the staunchest opponent against the use of magical realism by African writers agrees with this claim when he admits in an essay that "the experimental work of West African magical realist writers is an aesthetic response to West Africa's recent experience of civil war, dictatorship, drought, famine, and economic failure" (qtd. in Newell 187). All these misfortunes require a narrative mode that provides both a powerful condemnation and room to dream again. In order to take advantage of this

disposition, the three postcolonial novelists in this dissertation, Kojouhar Laing, Ben Okri, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o have embraced magical realism in their recent works. This, in fact is a break away from the modes that had characterized African literature for decades. Contrary to what some critics have argued, I contend that the move of these postcolonial writers from literary modes such as social realism and satire to magical realism is the result of both the changes in the socio-political and economic landscape of Africa and the realization that this mode can play an indispensable role both in the criticism and the representation of new realities in their countries. Social realism, a narrative convention that reflects the problems of the writer's immediate society dominated the African literary landscape in the aftermath of independences. It was mainly used to depict the disillusionment and the frustration of the people who put all their hopes in the new elites who became rulers of the new Africa. Likewise, satire was an important weapon African writers used to attack corruption, greed, and mismanagement of politics and economy around the same period. These narrative forms had had their success, but the current African socio-political realities look more propitious to magical realism.

In *Magical Realism in West African Fiction*, the postcolonial critic Brenda Cooper describes the contexts that are conducive to the use of magical realism in fictional works. She stresses that magical realism thrives on transition, on the process of change, borders and ambiguity. She locates those zones at the point of contact between capitalist development and older pre-capitalist modes in postcolonial societies and where there is the syncretizing of cultures as creolized communities are created. For her the emergence of magical realism in the developing World countries is the consequence of their sudden

encounter with Western capitalism, technology and education. This encounter resulted in the urbanization of rural localities, the dislocation of families and their hybrid positions; in other words, the disruption of the traditional way of life (15 – 16). Because of that emphasis, postcolonial societies are especially apt subjects for magical realism.

Postcolonial cultures operate with the old colonial, the even older pre-colonial and the emerging new state all in conversation with each other. This unnatural assemblage that Cooper describes, requires a new aesthetics; in other words, an aesthetics capable of capturing what she refers to as “social patchwork, dizzying in its cacophony of design” (16). In fact, this unnatural assemblage often results in social, cultural, economic, and political crises, where magical realism mode becomes necessary.

Similarly, in *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, Wendy Faris observes, “Regardless of their specific political agendas, magical realist texts are often written in the context of cultural crises, almost as if their magic is invoked when recourse to other, rational, methods have failed” (83). In other words, it is a mode to which writers turn when the situation they seek to represent resists the modes that would otherwise be more convenient. This shows the incommensurable means that magical realism makes available to writers who are looking for a mode that enables them to navigate through new and complex territories. This extraordinary ability inherent in magical realism is the reason why writers choose to place their work in the utopian world like Laing’s *Woman of the Aeroplanes* or in the traditional belief system of the people whose lives are depicted like in Okri’s *Famished Road*. The utopia and the traditional beliefs these writers rely on permit the cohabitation between the supernatural and natural,

the irrational and the rational, the Western and the indigenous, and the imaginary and the real. This results in the creation of texts that offer multiple versions of socio-political realities in these writers' countries.

In his part, Frederic Jameson emphasizes the relationship between historical context and magical realism. He argues that magical realism as formal mode depends on a content which betrays the overlap or the coexistence of pre-capitalist with nascent capitalist or technological features. Drawing on the works of Alejo Carpentier and Gabriel Marquez, the Latin American magical realist writers who insist that "in the social reality of Latin America 'realism' is already necessary a 'magic realism'", Jameson concludes that "Latin America's tumultuous socio-political past is already a precondition for magical realism" (311). Toni Morrison seems to make a similar argument as she insists that what critics refer to as magical realism in her work is inherent in her culture; in other words, there is nothing extraordinary in her narrative. This suggests that her narrative aims at faithfully depicting what is going on in the society that has emerged from that culture. As she declares: "My own use of enchantment simply comes because that's the way the world was for me and for the black people that I knew" (Faris 179). This claim validates many other writers' contention that magical realism in their work is born to the political, social, and cultural realities of their respective milieu. But Marquez goes beyond magical realism's Latin American social realities connection to sum up the motives behind the use of magical realism in his work as follows:

We, the inventors of tales, who will believe anything, feel entitled to believe that it is not yet too late to engage in the creation of ... a new and sweeping utopia of life, where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where love will

prove true and happiness be possible, and where the races condemned to one hundred years of solitude, will have, at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth. (qtd. in Schroeder 46)

It becomes clear that besides its inherence in the socio-cultural realities, magical realism can intentionally be used to achieve a specific purpose. The experience that inspired Marquez's new utopia of life has also been that of many oppressed people across the globe. Thus, writers who experienced similar political and social predicaments have used magical realism in their narratives as a form of protest and a means of liberation from all forms of oppression. For him the writer "who can believe anything" can also believe in the possibility of hope and redemption, and that's part of magical realism offers. Using the three novelists mentioned above, this dissertation refutes critics' claims that texts that are referred to as magical realist are in reality historical novels because of their reliance on myth, folklore, and the fantastic. The problem with these claims is that they totally ignore the evolutionary character of African literature.

Contrary to these critics' contention, this dissertation insists that magical realist texts are the result of an intentional rupture from the modes used in the previous African novels. In fact, like its origin traceable to the limit of expressionism, magical realism in African novels serves as an alternative to social realism and satire. Frantz Row, the German critic, who coined the term magical realism felt the necessity to find another mode that will accommodate realities that were beyond the reach of Expressionism. In "Magic Realism, New Objectivities, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic", Irene Guenther writes:

In 1920, leading critics and artists perceived Expressionism as having nothing more to say. It was resolutely pronounced “tot,” dead. The “child” anxiously awaiting to take Expressionism’s place, however, needed a “real name.” This proved problematic because the child, the artistic trend nipping at heels of Expressionism even before 1920, defied easy categorization.... The child did not even embody one coherent style, but instead comprised numerous characteristics, new ways of seeing and depicting the familiar, the everyday. It was, in effect, ein neuer Realismus (a new Realism). (33)

Even though social realism or satire is not yet pronounced “tot” (dead) as it was done for Expressionism, the three writers I examine in this dissertation felt the need to switch to magical realism for specific reasons. As Abiola F. Irele writes in *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel* about magical realist texts:

...Here, the recourse to fantasy and myth translates not merely the need felt by the writers for culturally grounded mode of African imagination – a mode of perception that accounts for the atmosphere of the experience that traditional esthetic forms seek to convey – but also for a governing metaphor which functions to give weight and comprehensiveness to the vision of life each writer seeks to project. (3)

In this regard, Ben Okri’s 1994 radio interview is very illuminating in the sense that it helps readers and critics to understand the motivations behind the choice of magical realist mode. Hear what Okri has to say:

... An important part of my tradition is that we do not believe that the dead die.... We believe that when people die, they go to another realm....And as I listened to people and read and encounter others, I found it wasn’t just for me... It’s a new wind that is spreading across the world ... it’s a new yearning and a new discovery that is slowly occupying the old tyranny of the mean description of reality. We are now becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the linear, scientific, imprisoned, tight, mean-spirited, and unsatisfactory description of reality and human beings. We want more because we sense that there is more in us. We need ritual passages to separate different points of our experience. We need ritual, initiation, transcendence of consciousness.... The thing is that it is high time we

started healing the human spirit by giving back to it its full, rich, hidden dimensions. And that is all I am trying to do in my fiction-to restore the kingdom, as I said. (qtd. in Ogunsanwo 40)

Okri is unambiguous about his choice of magical realism; it is his realization that something is always missing in the way that realism portrays the world and its everyday issues. He does not think that realism is capable of representing the world in all its dimensions and complexities. Hence, his decision to employ magical realism which he believes possesses the needed means to leaf through all the complex dimensions of the world we live in. What is far more interesting in Okri's work is his ability to fuse together the most mundane events with the supernatural in order to make sense of the complex socio-political situation of a country plagued with political corruption and violence. The kingdom that Okri seeks to restore needs a new aesthetics capable of telling the truth where other aesthetics have failed. It is an aesthetics that will open the eyes of the world to the hidden truths. For him, realistic depictions of the world will remain incomplete as long as the spiritual world is ignored, because the world is too complex to be captured by realism alone. The spiritual is important to Okri because it serves as an alternative to European realism that has been responsible for reducing indigenous mode of knowing to silence.

The three novels under examination in this dissertation have embarked on the same mission. They all reject a simplistic interpretation of the current socio-political situation in Africa and urge people to pay equal attention to the rational and the irrational events that enrich everyday life in Africa. To challenge any attempt of homogenization of magical realism, each of these novels appropriates a form of magical realism that best

fulfills its mission. Through these diverse forms of magical realism, Laing, Okri, and Ngugi aim at offering their audiences other ways of looking at the world by showing the possibility of cohabitation between the physical world and the metaphysical world, the fantastic world and the real world, the rational world and the irrational world.

As I will show in the coming chapters, each of these novels features a variety of magical realisms adopted by necessity to help redefine the world in its fullest existence. The Existentialist Magical Realism in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, the Abiku Myth in *Famished Road*, and the Fabulous realism and Satirical Realism in *Wizard of the Crow* all revolve around the beliefs by their authors that in the postcolonial African experience, there exists a correlation between the rational and the irrational worlds, the natural and the supernatural, the real and the unreal, the material world and the fantastic. In these novels, I argue, the simultaneous use of the real and unreal aims at a full representation of socio-political reality in their authors' countries. In fact, because of the particularity of the events that happen in their countries, I cannot but assert the normality of these writers' use of the unreal or fantastic as device for the depiction of realities in those countries.

Thus, it is important to emphasize the growing interest in magical realism, particularly by writers in postcolonial countries. I argue that the current interest in magical realism by postcolonial novelists in general, and the writers under study in the present dissertation in particular, is motivated by their desire to commit their literary work to social and political reforms, as well as depict the social reality in their respective countries. The fiction therefore has a persuasive, didactic intention towards the masses

and politician of their countries. Besides, the hybrid character of the management of postcolonial countries imposes upon the writers the choice of a hybrid mode if they really wish to capture all the aspects of social, economic, and political life. In fact, in postcolonial countries, politics and religion, means and ends of development, the ruler and the state, the ruler's political party and the state, the ruler's bank account and the national treasury are indistinguishable. It might not be exaggerated to claim that almost everything in postcolonial Africa is hybrid. Postcolonial Africans are the sites of hybridity par excellence because their encounter with colonialism exposed them to hybrid cultures, hybrid economies, hybrid societies, and hybrid milieu. Therefore, if postcolonial African writers are serious about their role, it is normal that they hybridize their work. In this way they reaffirm their commitment to socio-political issues of their societies.

Another justification for the use of a hybrid mode such as magical realism in the political criticism in the postcolonial novel is what Harry Garuba has termed "re-traditionalization of Africa. He explains that:

Re-traditionalization, entails two different but related processes that run concurrently in post-independence Africa. The first involves the assimilations of modern forms into traditional practices by 'traditional' elite; and the second refers to the practice of 'modern' elites. The latter involves the recuperation of traditional forms and practices – such as the Sango statue, praise songs at presidential inaugurations, and sacrifices to protect a car- their incorporation into the forms of Western modernity. (264 – 5)

As example of such re-traditionalization, Garuba cites the erection of the statue of Sango, the Yoruba god of lightning, in front of the National Electric Power Authority of Nigeria. Sango was believed to have had the ability to "call down" lightning to destroy

his enemies and burn their houses and homesteads. It is a myth that has survived to this day (261). Beyond the symbolism that Sango may represent, lies the political elites' desire to reaffirm their attachment to national culture despite their Western education. In Ghana, the statue of the mythical Ashanti king, Komfo Anokye, receiving the golden stool from above has been erected at a very busy intersection in Kumasi (Ashanti Region).

In both cases there is a clear intention of Nigerian and Ghanaian elites to embrace modernity and at the same time reaffirm their attachment to traditional beliefs. But the myths surrounding Sango and Komfo Anokye are hardly distinct from reality in the eyes of ordinary Nigerians and Ghanaians. In fact they are integral part of socio-political realities. In many African societies the belief in Sango-like gods is very popular with different names; thus people don't hesitate to invoke the power of the god of lightning against criminals in the community. For instance, if a goat goes missing and there is suspicion that it might have been stolen, the owner would invoke the lightning god and put the matter into his hands so he can identify the culprit and punish him/her with death.

In light of what precedes, I suggest that beyond the fact that the "re-traditionalization" alluded to by Garuba creates hybrid realities which in turn encourage the use of a hybrid literary mode, in this case magical realism, for their representation, there are other realities that create sine qua non conditions for such mode. The didactic intention of these writers becomes even more important here because magical realism also fosters open-mindedness in the West about the possibility of an alternative to the visible world. In fact, one of magical realism's main functions is to serve as a method for

challenging received ideas by suggesting alternative possibilities. The three magical realist writers discussed here are continuing with the traditional role of the artist in Africa, which is teaching the audience about morals in communal life and the validity of the spiritual world. The trust the artist enjoys from his or her audiences lies in the fact that he or she shares the latter's beliefs. Surprisingly, it is where critics expect magical realist writers to do the impossible; that is, to distance themselves from the beliefs of the societies they are portraying and treat those beliefs with irony.. Those critics believe that for a writer to qualify as magical realist, he/she must have ironic distance from the magical world view for the realism not to be compromised. At the same time they urge the writer to strongly respect the magic to prevent it from dissolving into simple folk belief or complete fantasy, split from the real instead of synchronize with it. Discussing magical realism, Brenda Cooper remarks that:

Ironic distancing is a crucial feature of the magical realist narrative point of view. Magical realist writers strive towards incorporating indigenous knowledge in new terms, in order to interrogate traditions and herald change. Thus upholding the indigenous as a justification in itself for returning to ancient values and customs, without ironic distancing, is inimical to magical realism... It is obvious that only a writer who has travelled away from indigenous ways of life and belief can develop this ironic distancing. In their comprehensive retention of belief in magic and the penalties inherent in disobeying its rules, writers and storytellers like Fagunwa and Tutuola cannot write within the magical realist mode. (49)

Cooper's remarks suggest that a writer cannot live within a society, share its superstitious beliefs and still create a magical realist text based on that society. Cooper may have been right if her remarks dealt with writers other than those who have ties to Africa. But African writers, whether from the continent or the Diaspora, have always

sought to be close to their people in order to better understand the truth that rules their world as well as to prescribe appropriate remedies to their day to day challenges. As Roberto Gonzales Echevarria so eloquently puts it, “the act of distancing oneself from the beliefs held by a certain social group makes it impossible to be thought of as a representative of that society”. Amongst the writers under discussion in this dissertation, at least one is unambiguous about his belief in the superstitions of his people. Okri made it clear in his radio interview that in his tradition “the dead never die”. Cooper’s remarks validate the ongoing contentious debate over the definition and usage of the term magical realism. In fact, despite its popularity and increase use in world literature, critics have yet to agree on single coherent definition of magical realism. Cooper’s and Echevarria’s arguments seem to engage with what the American cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz has termed “experience-near” and “experience-distant” concepts. In *Local Knowledge*, Geertz described them as follows:

An Experience-near concept is, roughly one which an individual – a patient, a subject, in our case an informant- might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he and his fellows see, feel, think, imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others. An experience-distant concept is one which various types of specialists – an analyst, an experimenter, an ethnographer, even a priest or an ideologist - employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims. “Love” is an experience-near concept; “object cathesis is an experience-distant one. (57)

In light of the quote above, it appears that Echevarria argues for ‘experience-near’ whereas Cooper argues for “experience-distant.” For the former, the closer the writer is to the culture or society he/she writes about, the more authentic the representation will be. For the latter, the farther the writer is from the culture or society he/she writes about,

the more objective the depiction will be. While these two critics are making equally pertinent claims, it is nonetheless important to point out that an accurate, complete and respectful representation of a culture is likely to come from a voice within that culture.

The result of these divergent views is the cacophony that seems to take roots in the debate on this literary mode. Discussing magical realism in *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said writes:

Discussions of magic realism in the Caribbean and African novel, say, may allude to or at best outline the contours of a “post-modern” or national field that unites these works, but we know that the works and their authors and readers are specific to, and articulated in, local circumstances, and these circumstances are usefully kept separate when we analyze the contrasting conditions of reception in London or New York on the one hand, the peripheries on the other. (374)

Said is warning critics against any amalgamation when it comes to the use and even the definition of magic realism. For him each magical realist text must be approached according to its specific context and purpose. Similarly, in “Escaping the Tyranny of Magic Realism? A Discussion of the Term in Relation to the Novels of Zakes Mda”, Derek Alan Barker warns critics against what he calls the tyranny of magic realism:

In weighing up any term, we must examine its value for our own purposes, that is, we must make a frankly interested assessment. It becomes tyrannical, I suggest, when its application is simply expedient, modish or dismissive of the narrative truth of the text... the narrative strategy of magic realism is most apt when the subject matter treats of the struggle to re-shape an appalling present infused with contradictory ontologies and burdened by continued effects of a traumatic past. (1 -2)

Barker's remarks emphasize the importance of context and purpose in the assessment of any literary term in general and magical realism in particular. This emphasis is very important to the present dissertation because in addition to discussing the reasons behind the use of magical realism in the three texts under discussion, I argue against critics who waste no time in concluding that there's a Latin American influence on every magic realist text. Doing so frees magical realism from the labyrinth of uniformity where critics have sought to confine it. Some magical realists are even adamant about their discontent with the claim of the so-called Latin-American influence. In his Acceptance Speech for the Olive Schreiner Prize, the South African novelist, Zakes Mda has this to say:

Finally, I must thank my family, my wife, my children, and most importantly the culture that inspired me to write this novel. It is a magical culture, making it possible for me to write magical novels.... I wrote in this manner from an early age because I am a product of a magical culture. In my culture the magical is not disconcerting. It is taken for granted. No one tries to find a natural explanation for the unreal. The unreal happens as part of reality. The supernatural is presented without judgment. A lot of my work is set in the rural areas, because they retain that magic, whereas the urban areas have lost it to Westernization. (281)

As he made it clear, Mda did not need outside influence to write in the mode that is referred to as magical realism. Instead he acknowledges the influence of the culture in which he was born and raised and of which he writes. Mda is committed to this culture and believes in its superstitions; yet his novels in which he represents his people's beliefs are considered magical realist texts. Mda's claim sheds light on another hidden secret about magical realism – the laborious work towards building consensus about the origin of this mode. This dissertation argues that because of the enormous contribution of local

cultures to magical realist texts as well as the multiple purposes for which those texts are created, any attempt to reach an agreement on the definition and the origin of magical realism leads to a dead end.

Another important point critics often ignore is the connection of magical realism to the oral traditions in many, if not all, cultures across the globe. In African epic traditions, for instance, spirits and other supernatural forces participate in the actions of the hero whom the entire society relies upon. These forces are appealed to by the hero and his people to help defeat their enemies. This reliance upon the supernatural is explained by the fact that in the African worldview the visible world and the invisible world are accepted as equally relevant in the life of all members of the community. In fact, in this worldview, the visible and the invisible realms are believed to work in symbiosis on behalf of the community. Kariamuw Welsh-Asante discusses the African centered worldview: “The process of perception in an African centered worldview combines the sacred and the profane, mind and body, the natural and the supernatural as organic dynamic entities, able to manifest themselves in all sorts of combinations and disciplines” (17). Amongst the texts I study in this dissertation, Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* particularly emphasizes this African centered worldview. For instance, in the riot scene, Okri depicts the participation of the dead alongside the poor in the fight against the thugs:

The dead, slowly awakening the sleep of the road, were acrobats of violence. They somersaulted with new political dreams amongst men, women, and children. I heard several voices, without fear or beyond it, uttering a new rallying call. ...

The people from the photographer's compound were in the vanguard. The dead were curiously on the side of the innocents. (180)

Here Okri engages in the African epic traditions, where the hero or the oppressed appeals to the supernatural to help defeat the villain or the oppressor. In doing so, he reconnects his magical realist text to its African ancestor, thereby distancing it from its supposed Latin America connection. In light of this, I argue that African magical realist texts do not need to be traced back to Latin America. But even if they do, Africa's influence on Latin America must be taken into consideration, for it may well be the same African epic traditions that inspired Latin American magical realist writers. Nevertheless, the debate over magical realism will continue to preoccupy critics and theorists alike.

Christopher Warnes justifies the proliferation of disagreement and confusion around magical realism as follows:

At the heart of the critical uncertainty about magical realism are the meanings that the term is assumed to signify: ideas clustered around notions of narrative and representation, culture, history, identity, what is natural and what is supernatural. There are, in the final analysis, very few realms of modern thought not undergirded by assumptions about the nature of what is real and what is not, and it is to these assumptions that serious magical realist literature claims to speak. (1)

While this dissertation acknowledges the importance of this laborious quest for consensual definition, purpose, and origin of magical realism, my main focus will be the discussion of the existence of various forms of magical realisms and their use in the texts under examination as aesthetics of necessity. I argue that because of the lack of

consensus I noted above, critics will better serve literature if they take note of the existence of various magical realisms that are informed by their particular cultural, economic, social and political contexts as well as their purposes. Discussing magical realism, Harry Garuba introduced the concept of animist realism, which for him offers much more margin of maneuver than magical realism. For Garuba, magical realism is a subgenre of animist realism; as he notes, “many of the literary techniques of the artists who have been labeled magical realist writers derive their warrant from traditional animist cultures.” To quote Garuba more fully:

Animist realism, I believe, is a much more encompassing concept, of which magical realism may be said to be a subgenre, with its own connecting characteristics and its formal difference. By repetition and difference, magical realism at once signals its dependence on the enabling code of animist discourse and its representational “realism” and also marks its difference. To state it somewhat more precisely, animist materialism subspecies into the representational technique of animist realism, which may once again further subspecies into the genre of magical realism. (275)

The above statement suggests that magical realist texts draw on the animist beliefs of their societies they represent. The truth, however, is that there are magical realist texts that did not originate from animist societies. With the recent interest in magical realism in countries like the U.S., critics need to realize that this mode is too shrewd to be tamed. It has no boundaries and does not seem to want any. Responding to Garuba’s magical realism and animism connections, Christopher Warnes writes:

This only a partial solution, for Garuba does not acknowledge the possibility that magical realism might have other, alternative intellectual genealogies that do not include animism. Animism provides a possible base for what I am calling faith-based strands of magical realism. But it does not explain irreverent magical

realism, as I am defining it, which has a different genealogy that includes rationalism, skepticism, idealism and postmodernism. (128)

Warnes's response suggests that magical realism can very well exist outside the realm of animism. In fact, magical realism has already resisted other critics' attempts to confine it exclusively to Postcolonialism. When Homi Bhabha refers to magical realism as "a literary language of postcolonial writers", I'm not sure whether he means the language is invented for the exclusive use of these writers or it works well for them. In "Psychic realism, Mythic Realism, Grotesque Realism: Variations on Magical Realism in Contemporary literature in English", Jeanne Delbaere-Grant writes: "magical realism is not exclusively a postcolonial phenomenon, but a much older one whose various offshoots require more precise and specific definitions" (249). Delbaere-Grant's call for precise and specific definitions is also a challenge to postcolonial critics who employ a monolithic rubric to assess the magical realism status of texts. For instance, in "Spiritual Realism", a review of Okri's *Famished Road*, Kwame Anthony Appiah writes: "My own sense is a difference between the ways in which Latin American writers draw on the supernatural and the way that Okri does: for Okri, in a curious way, the world of the spirits is not metaphorical or imaginary; rather it is more real than that of the everyday" (147). Derek Wright has corroborated this point in "Postmodernism as Realism: Magic History in Recent West African Fiction":

Okri does not envisage his world as an imaginary mythic, metaphorical or parabolic construct, after the fashion of the magic realists, or as a surrealist fantasy, as in the folkloric dream-narratives of Amos Tutuola, where the fantastic events occur only in a hallucinated esoteric real sharply differentiated from the

real world. The novel's spirit realm is not an approximation to reality but a reality in its own right. (182)

For Appiah and Wright, Okri's representation of the world does not belong to the realm of metaphor and imagination because it is more real than the real one. This, therefore, disqualifies him as a magical realist writer. Contrary to Appiah and Wright's contention, Warnes confirms Okri as a magical realist writer as he emphasizes the latter's use of a multi-dimensional realism, an important feature of magical realism, in *The Famished Road*:

It is my argument in this chapter that it is exactly this feature of the narrative project behind *The Famished Road* that qualifies the novel as a magical realist text, and that thereby connects Okri with a number of writers specifically affiliated to magical realist modes of narration. The caveat in this observation is that we need to be clear that Okri's is a faith-based, ontological magical realism quite different from the irreverent, discourse-oriented magical realism of a writer like Salman Rushdie. (129)

Warnes reiterates the open secret that there are different types of magical realisms, each of which is shaped by the context and purpose of its creation. Today critics seem to have fully embraced this notion of pluralism in magical realism. And in fact it would almost seem a contradiction in terms if the magic realist writer were forced to subscribe to a certain pattern in order to be considered one. As the chapters will show in details, the three novels in this dissertation are representative of this pluralism. Each of these novels displays a variance of magical realism. Nowadays, there is a growing interest in the study of these variances. Among the critics who have shown that interest, William Spindler comes to mind. In an article entitled "Magical Realism: A Typology",

he proposes that there are three different types of magical realism, which he insists, are not mutually exclusive:

He calls the first form of magic realism “Metaphysical Magic Realism”, which he argues, corresponds to Roh’s ideas and the original definition of the term. According to Spindler, this form of magic realism abounds in painting, where unsettling perspectives, unusual angles, or naïve “toy-like” depictions of real objects produce a “magical” effect. In this case, he observes, “magic” is taken in the sense of conjuring, producing surprising effects by arrangement of natural objects through tricks, devices or optical illusion. In literature, Spindler locates Metaphysical Magic Realism in texts that produce in the reader a feeling of unreality by the technique of *verfremdung*, by which a familiar scene is described as if it were something new and unknown, but without dealing explicitly with the supernatural. (79)

Spindler refers the second form as “Anthropological Magic Realism”, where the narrator has “two voices”. Sometimes he/she depicts events from a rational point of view (the “realist component) and sometimes from that of a believer in magic (the “magical” element). This form is characterized by the author’s adoption of the myths and cultural background of a social or ethnic group. Here the word “magic” is taken in the anthropological sense of a process used to influence the course of events by bringing into operation secret or occult controlling principles of Nature. (80)

Finally, Spindler terms the third type of magical realism “Ontological Magic Realism”, which he says, contrary to Anthropological Magic Realism, resolves antinomy without recourse to any particular cultural perspective. In this form of magic realism the supernatural is presented in a matter-of-fact way as if it did not contradict reason and no explanation are offered for the unreal events in the text. The writer of this form does not rely on the mythical imagination of pre-industrial communities. Instead, the total freedom

and creative possibilities of writing are exercised by the author, who is not worried about convincing the reader. The “magic” in this form refers to inexplicable, prodigious or fantastic occurrences which contradict the laws of the natural world, and have no convincing explanation. (82)

Even though the focus of this dissertation is not the discussion of different types of magic realism modes, Spindler’s meticulous study referenced above deserves a particular attention, because it sheds light on the different types of magic realism present in the three novels under discussion. In addition, in a very surprising way, it reinstates writers such Chief Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola, and even Wole Soyinka in the magical writing tradition. The merit of this study lies in its reaffirmation of the non-monolithic nature of magical realism. This mode, I argue, can be taken as a master hat that can be worn by any writer whose agenda makes its use necessary. It has no historical or geographical boundaries. Thus writers from anywhere could embrace this narrative mode, should their purpose and vision require its use. This is my focus in this dissertation, as I seek to demonstrate that magical realism is used in the three novels under discussion as an aesthetic of necessity. As an aesthetic, magical realism’s strength resides in its non-monolithic nature. Each magical realist text is distinct from other magical realist texts, but what unites them is their ability to treat the supernatural as if it were natural and mundane. In Warnes’ words, “magical realism is a mode of narration that naturalizes the supernatural, that is to say, a mode in which real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence” (3). As necessity, magical realism is employed to address the persistence of corruption, oppression, neocolonialism that

realism cannot adequately represent because of its limitations pertaining to time, space, its Western origin as well as its complicity in the creation of the very situation the novelist writes about.

An examination of these novels reveals that Laing, Okri, and Ngugi employ magical realism narrative mode by necessity in order to imaginatively chronicle the perverse effects of colonialism, neocolonialism, politico-managerial, socio-cultural and economic crises that have connived to sequester their respective countries in a permanent state of chaos and hopelessness. For instance, Kojo Laing grounds his magical realism in the rich Asante folklore and relies on his extraordinary linguistic ability to transcend the status quo and negotiate the deceptive divide within races, between races, within nations and between nations. In so doing, Laing subtly repudiates the notion of racial, cultural, and linguistic purity. Indeed his use of a hybrid language in the novel suggests a call for unity of all cultures and people of the world. It also shows the complementary role of cultures.

In *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, through Kwame Ata, the bad twin and Nana Pokua, the spiritually powerful woman, one sees the influence of Akan folklore, matriarchy and even some esoteric elements. Kwame Ata symbolizes the Asante trickster (Ananse) very popular in Akan folklore, and Pokua, the indispensable role of women in Akan society as well as their supposed association with witchcraft and occultism. In the novel, Kojo Laing features two immortal communities that have freely chosen to sever ties with their surrounding communities. It is a move that allows them greater freedom to thrive outside

any given constraints. In Tukwan, the mystic inventor, Kwame Atta proposes “the democratization of family genetics” in order to facilitate the inheritance of body parts out of family pool. He swears that “this would reduce guilt, tribe ... and paradoxically, increase the space of individuality available to each person” (27). This is Laing’s way of breaking away from the idea that ancestry, past, or history determines man’s identity. In fact, I argue that this is a total demarcation from the ideology of cultural nationalism that dominated African literature for decades. Laing does not reject Africa’s past, but he emphasizes the possibilities available to those who live outside any pre-given circumstances. The call for the democratization of family genetics on the eve of the trip to Levensvale is meaningful, for it allows Tukwan residents to reaffirm their selfhood, thereby opening them up to new encounters. Therefore, *Woman of the Aeroplanes* is also a critique of postcolonial identities and their formation, where selfhood has often been compromised. Laing does not believe in a predetermined identity. Instead, he believes that identity is determined in the present and remains in perpetual transformation. Above all, it is an acerbic critique against African writers and political leaders whose efforts aim at revisiting and celebrating Africa’s past in their attempt to forge a genuine cultural identity. It is also an attack on the notions of cultural homogeneity and superiority often used by the dominant groups to oppress other people, be it within a race or between different races.

Ultimately, in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, Laing argues that the development or survival of postcolonial Africa must not depend upon its past or socio-political environment; rather, it must count on its ability to transform itself through encounter with

the world; in other words, through economic, social, cultural, and political integration, interconnection, dialogue and exchange. In this novel the reader experiences magical realism immediately. Nana Pokua, the powerful mother of Tukwan is known as the mistress of two small aeroplanes which both stood at the level of her lips: one at her upper lip, and the other at her lower lip. As for how she brought the planes to Tukwan, that still remains a mystery. This, I will argue validates the utopian life alluded to by Gabriel Garcia Marquez as he justifies his use of magical realism by his commitment to creating a new utopia capable of affording the oppressed people freedom of choice, thought, and action.

Ben Okri's magical realism is built upon a very popular Yoruba cultural myth. His magical realism can be identified as anthropological magical realism, based on Spindler's framework. *The Famished Road* is set at an intersection where the forest, the road and Mme Koto's bar meet. The novel's protagonist, Azaro is an "abiku" a spirit child who dies and returns repeatedly. The myth of "abiku" exists in most traditional African societies. In *Fertile Crossing*, Pietro Deandrea writes: "...Okri's magical realism, therefore, is rooted in an indigenous belief-system, but it must be noted that this system has non-Yoruba, pan-Nigerian implications." For instance, my own "Tem" ethnic group in central Togo refers to the spirit child as "esso varu", which means God's gift. The spirit children are believed to inhabit two worlds- the real world and the spirit world. They are believed to have two loyalties; this causes them to be in permanent struggle, in which the spirit world always wins, unless negotiations through libations and animal sacrifices are performed to appease the latter. In this case the spirit-child will stay, but

still, there is no assurance that the ties with the spirit world have been completely severed. The spirit world may continue to haunt him. Such is Azaro's tragedy; he has decided to remain in the real world and be the only child of his poverty-stricken family. Instead of bringing his family peace, he brings them suffering because his spirit brothers want him and they always try to lure him and take him away.

In *Famished Road*, Okri likened Nigeria and Africa to the "abiku". The history of Africa is that of endless rebirths. In fact, after the depopulation of Africa by the slave trade, came colonialism, after colonialism came the despotic regimes. Like Sisyphus, Africa seems to be condemned to keep rolling the rock up the mountain. When one looks at the back and forth of Africa today, one feels like asking, "What's wrong with this continent? Such a rich and vast continent is being wasted by wars, genocides, corruption, despotism, nepotism, venality, dictatorship, abject poverty, but to list a few". In postcolonial Africa, everything is in perpetual beginning; there's no movement forward. Postcolonial African countries are the lands of political and economic status quo. No development seems possible because the lands are controlled by people with evil intent - the politicians and their foreign allies who continue to rule Africa by proxy. Recently, a frustrated African politician asked the French government officials, the supporters par excellence of African despots: "Why do you think that a democratized Africa is incompatible with your interests?"

The exasperation of this politician is similar to that of Okri and other magical realist writers. When social injustice and political prestidigitation preside over the countries outside any legitimacy and distilling fear and terror in the mind of citizens,

which is the case in many postcolonial regions today, the writer has the supreme duty to find adequate modes of narration to carry his/her message. Thus, magical realist writers find their individual ways to subtly allow the supernatural, the fantastic, and the imaginary in their work. Okri makes his use of the supernatural acceptable and understandable by grounding his work in the Yoruba myth of abiku. This Yoruba myth and other supernatural occurrences in the novel give Okri the necessary tools he needs to imaginatively chronicle the pursuit of the dead end to which the political, social, economic, colonialism, neo-colonialism, corruption, bribery, bad governance, and political opportunism have all conspired to condemn Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. During an interview with Jane Wilkinson, Okri insists that, “myth is what makes it possible for those who suffer and struggle, whatever the suffering, to live and sleep and carry on” and adds that “a society’s dreams and its myths and its perception of reality is in the inviolate ... area of the African consciousness that has remained immune to the effect of colonialism” (qtd in Wright 159). This statement speaks to the reasons behind Okri’s use of magic realism and confirms that he does so by necessity.

Among the three writers I discuss in this study, Ngugi has been the most unequivocal about his use of magical realism in his novel. Even before the publication of *Wizard of the Crow*, the novel that earned him his place among magical realist writers, responding to a question about the current situation in Africa during an interview with Mills, Ngugi sums-up his intention and reasons for embracing magical realism: “Things are so bad I think the only way to write about it is utter fantasy, fable-it is so awful!” Here Ngugi is explicitly suggesting that the narrative mode he utilized in the past cannot

adequately comment on the current situation in Africa. For Ngugi, the fantastic and the fable, both elements of magic realism, are necessary means that enable him to depict the current political, social, cultural, and economic chaos in Africa.

As Ngugi sets his novel in the mythic republic of Aburiria with a nameless ruler, he plants the décor for this needed aesthetic. Here he uses Aburiria and its Ruler as a metaphor for all African countries and their political leadership. I argue that *Wizard of the Crow* represents a “master hat” that fits any postcolonial African country. For instance, like Ngugi’s Kenya, countries such as Zaire, Nigeria, Guinea, Cameroon, and my native Togo became independent in the 1960s. Unfortunately, the euphoria provoked by these independences was short-lived, as groups of national elites or military forces who hijacked the political process became determined to remain in power ad infinitum, even if that calls for the extermination of the very people they must protect. Ngugi is aware that the present situation in Africa is caused by the self-serving political leadership. He is also convinced that this situation, even though caused by real people, defies human wisdom. Thus, he turns to the fantastic, the fable, the myth, the magic, and satire for its depiction. Like in Aburiria, instead of good governance, most postcolonial African leaders resort to brutality, corruption, nepotism, improvisation, zeal, magic, political assassinations in order to strengthen their grip on power. As a veteran socio-political critique who believes in the obligation of the artist to commit him/herself to social and political justice, Ngugi has come to realize that only the writer’s imagination combined with his/her transcendence of realism could help him/her comment on the current chaos in African cul-de-sac.

All these writers take advantage of the limitless possibilities magical realism offers them in their attempt to chronicle the situation in postcolonial Africa. The choice of this mode reflects the kind of issues these writers seek to address; in fact magical realism is born out of necessity. This dissertation, therefore, seeks to demonstrate that the three writers under discussion employ magical realism as an aesthetic of necessity, thereby emphasizing the differences born out of the specific contexts of their production. Their writing shows the non-monolithic nature of magical realism and reaffirms its pivotal role in the world's literatures.

Divided into five chapters, this dissertation examines the emergence of magical realism and its various uses as represented in the novels of the Ghanaian writer Kofi Laing, the Nigerian writer Ben Okri, and the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o respectively, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, *The Famished Road*, and *The Wizard of the Crow*. Each chapter addresses the unique way each of the writers above appropriates magical realism in order to adequately pursue his purpose.

The introductory chapter discusses magical realism as an aesthetic of necessity from its original application of art criticism to its current intervention in the postcolonial literary criticism. It offers critics' definitions of magical realism as well as my own definition of the term in regard to the context in which I examine it.

Chapter two draws on Sartrean Existentialism to discuss the limitless possibilities that magical realism affords Kofi Laing as he attempts to critique and free mankind from cultural and historical a priori and the complex of racial superiority, thereby enabling a

re-emergence and self- reinvention of the oppressed groups and a genuine renegotiation of their socio-cultural relations with the privileged groups. I argue that Laing's magical realism is existentialist because it reaffirms the freedom of man so dear to Jean Paul Sartre. In *Existentialism is Humanism*, Sartre writes: "Man is not only that which he conceives of himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be only after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself" (22). Sartre's emphasis on individual subjectivity derives from his beliefs that existence precedes essence; in other words, man exists first before becoming what he is. It is based on the postulate that man is born free and that whatever he becomes is a result of his free choice. Implicit in Sartre's philosophy is the claim that man should free himself from any *a priori* such as family, culture, history in order to allow himself room for self-invention. In *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, Laing uses magical realist devices to offer his characters the necessary means to fulfill even their most extreme desiderata. In the novel the characters have the latitude to do things at will.

Chapter three discusses Okri's use of the "abiku" myth to depict the condition of post-independence Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular. In his review of *The Famished Road*, Kwame Anthony Appiah writes: "My own sense is that there is a difference between the ways in which Latin American writers draw on the supernatural and the way that Okri does: For Okri, in a curious way, the world of spirits is not metaphorical or imaginary; rather, it is more real than the world of the everyday." (147). Drawing on this valuable claim by Appiah, I argue that Azaro's tumultuous and uncertain

life is a parable of postcolonial African condition. In other words, Azaro's restless life epitomizes the endless struggle for survival in Africa. In Yoruba mythology "abiku" are spirit - children that are believed to be born to die repeatedly. The myth, an essential feature of magical realism makes it possible for Okri to adequately interpret the peculiar situation of postcolonial Nigeria and by extension, the postcolonial Africa.

Chapter four examines Ngugi's uses fabulous realism and satirical magical realism to depict the social, economic, and political situations of postcolonial Africa. In *Wizard of the Crow*, Ngugi fuses fable, fantasy, magic and reality, and coats all with satire to adequately address the present extraordinary situation in Africa. For him, I argue, fabulous and satirical magic realism is an esthetic of necessity, as he himself declares during an interview, "Things are so bad in Africa today that the only way to write about it is utter fantasy, fable." In other words, Ngugi believes that he can draw on folklore to delineate the current situation in Africa. As mentioned earlier, Ngugi purposely sets his novel in the imaginary republic of Aburiria with a nameless ruler, in order to make his use of the needed aesthetic possible. In the novel almost all the events are either invented or exaggerated and are all left at the mercy of a story teller who acts as a narrator. Ngugi firmly believes that only fable, fantasy, the imaginary and some satire can deal with a situation that has become immune to realistic depiction.

Chapter five concludes this dissertation; it will explore the necessity and the aesthetic that are embodied in these, and will suggest the way in which the writers offer the kind of hope that Marquez sees as the core of magic realism. It sums-up the previous

four chapters around the central argument that Laing's *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, Okri's *The Famished Road*, and Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* partake of an aesthetics that has been intentionally embraced because of the limitless possibilities it affords each of the writers. Furthermore, this section will look into the differences and patterns among these novels, thereby suggesting how they each contribute to an understanding of the particular culture and society they depict and how together they suggest paths toward an emerging Africa. The final part of this section will shed light on how through their utopian invention of limitless possibilities, the authors of these novels reignite the flame of hope for the entire continent. The prevalence of African myths, folktales, fables, witchcraft, and traditional religions in these texts is far from gratuitous. In fact it is an unambiguous statement that the remedies to the current crisis in Africa reside neither in the abandonment of Africa's past nor its ostentatious celebration, but in African people's willingness to be inspired by it.

CHAPTER II

TOWARDS A WORLD OF LIMITLESS POSSIBILITIES: EXISTENTIALIST MAGICAL REALISM IN KOJO LAING'S *WOMAN OF THE AEROPLANES*

Existential Magical Realism as Critique of Cultural Nationalism

History never walks here, it runs in any direction. We have been building something different here for years and years, and you just want to come and discover a whole town by accident, then pulls down a house that doesn't conform to building regulations in Kumasi! What have we had to do with Kumasi since it banished us for subversive activity, for refusing to listen to *all* the songs of the ancestors? A quarter of the spirits of the ancestors will do, we shall fill the other three quarters. (1)

On the very first page of *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, Kojo Laing unveils the central point of his novel; that is his firm belief that if man frees himself from any pre-given conditions, such as race, history, and nationality, he will enjoy the limitless possibilities that surround him. Even though Laing does not completely reject the influence of human's past in his present and future life, he does affirm that what man becomes is largely dependent upon his own effort. The inhabitants of Tukwan, the banished and invisible utopian town, have courageously refused to listen to "*all* the songs of the ancestors", because they want the freedom to shape their destiny according to their aspirations. In doing so, they reject the notion of predetermination that is believed to inform the now and here of people. In fact, it is an affirmation of independence of mind and actions so dear to Laing. Despite the extraordinary nature of their actions, the

aspirations of the residents of Tukwan are realistic, but their fulfillment depends mostly upon their individual and collective openness to the outside world. The novel features two communities, one in Ghana and the other in Scotland. The two communities inhabit respectively Tukwan and Levensdale, both invisible to their surrounding towns. The inhabitants of Tukwan are immortal and live extraordinary lives, as is exemplified by the many wonderful characters of the book: there is Pokuaa, a buy- and-sell woman who perfumes her airplanes every morning with frangipani lavender; she is the mistress of two small aeroplanes which both stand at the level of her lips (4). Moro, who dreams to co-rule Tukwan Nana Bontox, dresses his Mercedes Benz in blue underwear, plastic, to keep the world away (7). There's Tay, the lawyer, who, in the absence of crime, makes up and defends cases against himself; he proposes a decree banning all expectations of the immediate future (9). Kwame Atta, the inventor, who often tries to shed his body to let a better person occupy it; he invented the stupidity machine that reveals the truth about everyone's past, and his twin brother Kwaku, who is so burdened by goodness that he walks with a stoop (2-3). And Kofi Senya, the spiritual shrine master smokes his pipe with a vulture perched on it (2). In Tukwan, yawns and laughter can be collected by a tractor and measured; to be allowed to continue to stay in the town, everyone had to have an element of originality (7 & 9). As the novel progresses, Laing embark his readers in a journey made possible by Pokuaa's aeroplanes, to Levensdale, Scotland, for business. The planes have trailers loaded with local products--cassava, palm nuts, goats, ducks and the like--for export purposes. Levensvale in Scotland, like Tukwan, is banished and forgotten by progress. In this town we meet another group of bizarre characters like old

Alec the bogey, who tries to auction his genitals for the price of a bottle of malt whisky (64). What these marvelous lifestyles reveal is that when human beings are free from all influence, they are capable of dreaming big and achieving extraordinary things. The central concerns of *Woman of the Aeroplanes* are unity and change both of which are achieved through the miraculous journey undertaken by the inhabitants of Tukwan. What makes this possible is Laing's adoption of utopia. Coined by the English lawyer, social philosopher, and author Thomas More,¹ utopia has diverse meanings. It plays on two Greek words eutopos, 'a good place', and outopos, 'no place'. It has been seen as a program for an ideal state, a contemplative vision of the ideal, a satirical look at contemporary European society, and a humanist jeu d'esprit.

Magical realist writers employ utopia because it represents a fertile ground for extraordinary and magical actions and events. It serves to imagine solutions that are otherwise impossible in the rational world. In chapter I argue that Laing's recourse to utopian solutions to the real problems of the contemporary world shows his faith in human beings' capacity to achieve great things if given the freedom to do what they please. What makes it possible for people to accomplish extraordinary things in a utopian world is the freedom they enjoy. For example, in Tukwan "The lake is adjusted, merely by pulling the ripples, so that it could come nearer the meeting and interrupt the wisdom if it got too much" (14), "Lies were temporarily suspended", and "The sun has been adjusted to clear the lake of reflections" (40 - 41). Time has been turned in cycles: "if you go too slow, one cycle will catch up with you; if you go too fast you will bump into

¹ *The Cambridge Guide to English Literature*, 972

another cycle that is not ready for you” (151). “Urines are used to lift planes” (104). Nana Pokua, the powerful mother of Tukwan is credited with miraculously bringing the planes to Tukwan from UK. The residents of Tukwan owe their business trip to Levensvale to her, because without these aeroplanes nobody could have travelled. Laing believes that “Tukwan is realistically possible in terms of cross-cultural interchange” (qtd. in Copper 195). However, for this cross-cultural interchange to materialize, there needs to be contact between the cultures involved. A possible contact between Tukwan and the outside world presupposes a “travel inner and travel outer”; this necessitates a means of transportation, which Pokuaa has provided the town with. The reader learns that “The planes were owned in trust for the town by Pokuaa: she bought them, and had arranged for the town to buy them back by exporting palm-nuts and cassava to a sister town in the UK. She was prepared to take anything up in the sky to let the town prosper” (5). Also, the reader later learns that:

People were skeptical about Pokuaa’s intentions until she miraculously brought the aeroplanes. Now they were waiting patiently for one great thing: to make a journey to the sister town, Levensvale, a journey that they hoped would lead to prosperity. The shrine said the travel was necessary, but that those to travel had to be carefully chosen. (5)

The extracts above present two opposing events, one rational and the other irrational. If the transactions that led to the acquisition of the aeroplanes are normal and explainable, their miraculous arrival at Tukwan supposes a supernatural intervention. What makes this interaction between realistic and magical occurrences possible and acceptable by the residents of Tukwan is that their world is simply a utopia. Indeed,

utopia enables Laing to create a world of limitless possibilities. Tukwan and Levensvale are utopian towns which exist outside time and their inhabitants enjoy immortality.

Woman of the Aeroplanes encourages inclusiveness, a mixture of opposites, abolishing the opposition between the rational and the irrational by integrating magic into science, tradition into modernity, orality into literature. Utopia, according to Garcia Marquez, enables man to live in the world where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where genuine love and happiness are possible, and where all the oppressed races are offered a second chance on earth. (qtd. in Schroeder 46) In her analysis of *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, Brenda Cooper has pointed out the limitless possibilities available to Laing through his use of utopia as she writes: “*Woman of the Aeroplanes* is situated within the relationship of two towns – Tukwan in Ghana and Levensvale in Scotland. Both towns reject the corruption and racism of their respective countries at large, but only because their inhabitants are, in a sense, not human – they are immortal, much like the gods”. Utopia, she argues, “has become an imagined alternative to racist imperialism and its corrupt legacies, a device for postcolonial writers who refuse simply to abandon the political” (193).

Utopia, hence, represents an indispensable tool for political criticism for postcolonial writers who commit their literary works to attacking the political status quo in their countries as well as suggesting solutions for the amelioration of the conditions of living of the oppressed.

In an attempt to contextualize the emergence of utopia in postcolonial African literature, Cooper draws a parallel between *Woman of the Aeroplanes* and Raymond

Williams' 'Utopian and Science Fiction'. According to her, Williams deals with the generation of Western radicals whose privileged position enabled them to witness the lies and corruption of the rich and powerful people. These radicals were inspired to learn and imagine the condition of the excluded others. As a result they opted out of the privileged position to join the marginalized, to become materially poorer and thereby gain a clear moral advantage. For Cooper, this description fits the African writer-intellectuals very well. She writes:

They see the abuse of power by some African leaders and privileged classes, also with an insider's eye, given their access to these classes through their own privileges and status. They too empathize with the impoverished masses, from whom, however, those privileges separate them. They therefore construct solutions in form of utopias, which may be anchored in mythical pasts and secured from others by strong moats and walls; or perhaps they are utopias steeped in magic, where borders are entry points which embrace change. There is Soyinka's Aiyero in *Season of Anomy*, Achebe's Abazon in *Anthills of Savannah*, Kojou Laing's Tukwan and Levensvale in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*. (194)

Cooper suggests that postcolonial African writers employ utopias that are steeped either in African mythical past or magic to provide solutions to the complex post-independence dilemma. In *Woman of the Aeroplanes* it is not easy to disentangle Laing's real world of the novel from utopia, for as Deandrea warns, "instances such as movable lake, pens writing on their own, rains falling upwards, aeroplanes with sentient noses, to list only a few, should not be taken as merely metaphoric constructions, be they symbols or hyperboles, because they really exist and occur in the action of the novel" (94). Thus the two aeroplanes that make the trip to Levensvale may be imaginary to some readers, but in the utopian world of Laing's characters they are real. The same way Laing uses

languages to create unity in the world, he uses the flight motif to transcend the geographical boundaries between Africa and the West. In *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, flying becomes a means through which Tukwan achieves its humanity; since Tukwan can reach other parts of the world by flying, it reciprocally avails itself to external visits. Laing believes that Africa in general and Ghana in particular can no longer avoid contact with the outside world, because Africa and Ghana need to reach out to the world to initiate new cultural, political, technological, business and racial relationships that will enable them to meet the challenges of the millennium development. At the same time flying makes it possible for Africa and the West to meet and complete each other, thereby closing the fissures that separate them. All this reaffirms Laing's argument that the future of humanity lies in the willingness of people from all parts of the world to go out, meet, and exchange with other people in order to allow the construction of new collective and individual identities in the image of the linguistic hybridity, which I will discuss later in this chapter. Tukwan and Levensvale need each other to become whole; as Cooper notes: "Tukwan nor Levensvale can achieve their humanity or their material well-being without the other. Tukwan alone is only half utopia" (204).

When asked as to "whether Tukwan is a utopia, a dream, or an embodiment of an alternative politics", Laing sums-up his answer as follows: "Tukwan is realistically possible in terms of cross-cultural interchange. In terms of hope, it is realizable utopia" (qtd. in Cooper 195).

Implicit in Laing's message in *Woman of the Aeroplanes* is that Ghana's destiny is in its own hands; in other words, its destiny depends on its ability to transform itself

and the useful materials from its past as well as open itself to the changes in the world. Laing neither calls for a total abandonment of the old ways, nor an uncritical ingurgitation of everything new. In Tukwan, “it was generally agreed that new things were as wise as the old, and that the opposition between the two was welcome and controllable” (27). Laing wants a confrontation between old values and new values; this confrontation is an important part in the process of the invention of what’s authentic. He envisions a society that is neither a photocopy of the old nor a photocopy of the new; rather, he projects a society that is capable of forging its own destiny by keeping the best of the old and combining it with the best of the new. For him the material is already there; what is needed is the Ghanaians’ willingness to transform it according to the need of the moment. He does not want his fellow citizens to consume things they have taken no pain to produce.

In his first novel, *Search Sweet Country*, published in 1988, Laing chastises Ghanaian intellectuals for “failing to make use of the freedom available to them to create new worlds, new wholes.” And he goes on to add:

They (intellectuals) believe in very few single-minded cogitations... they don’t want their relaxed minds to do little crazy thinking...forgetting that nature’s little obsessions have created the whole universe. The choice: you either find your own way, or develop it-you can’t escape that either-and link it with other ways, or you are doomed to a series of well-rehearsed shrugs.... (290)

Here, Laing makes allusion to not only the intellectuals’ enthusiastic assimilation of the colonial imports, but also to the nationalists’ ostentatious search for their roots,

neither of which in Laing's estimation, provides a solution to the problems the country faces.

I argue that *Woman of the Aeroplanes* is a critique against the elites who have enthusiastically adhered to Christianity, European clothing, and languages. The success of the three "C" theory, that is Christianizing, Colonizing and the so-called Civilizing mission in Africa was made possible by the unselective adoption of the European way of life by the African elites who were trained in the colonial schools for the purpose of perpetuating the colonizer's domination on the colonized people in the form of neocolonialism. These schools were simply brain-washing and indoctrination institutions because they inculcated in the mind of the elites that their success in the colonial society depended upon the total rejection of the African way of life. Unfortunately, this situation is not without dire consequences, for it causes within the individual a psychological instability. Discussing the behavior of the elites in the colonial societies, Abdul R. JanMohamed, a notable critic and theorist in postcolonial literature, asserts that the denigration of the colonized by the colonizer unintentionally creates what he terms "historical paradox" for the former:

Because the moral validity and the social momentum of the indigenous culture have been negated by European denigration and by the autocratic rule of the colonial government, the African finds that if he adheres to the values of his own culture, he chooses to belong to a petrified society. However, if he accepts the Western culture, he finds himself engulfed in a form of historical catalepsy, because by rejecting his own past he belongs to a society that has no direction and no control over its historical evolution. (151 – 152)

JanMohamed theorizes the tragedy of the colonized society very well. Because his society has no control over its historical evolution, the colonized elite is deprived of necessary references capable of sustaining him in his quest for better conditions. Such a lame individual can hardly ignore the easily accessible ready-made cultures upon which his ascent to the pedestal of the masters depends. Frantz Fanon offers a similar analysis of the colonized people in *Black Skin, White Masks* when he writes:

Every colonized people-in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality-finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle. (18)

This self-annihilation in the name of facile consumption atrophied the genius in the elite, according to critics like Fanon, turning him into a mere representative of the former colonial power. For Laing, the painful journey of postcolonial Africa in general and Ghana in particular dates back to the very moment when the elites chose to uncritically embrace the colonial imports. Indeed, it was the beginning of Africa's "Sisyphus tragedy"; according to Greek myth, Sisyphus was punished by gods for all eternity to roll a rock up a mountain only to have it roll back down to the bottom when he reaches the top. The condition in postcolonial Africa parallels the condition of Sisyphus. Laing believes that all this could have been avoided if the intellectuals had resisted the temptation to passively ingurgitate what was served to them by the colonizer. At the same time, as it can be seen in his novels, especially, *Search Sweet Country* and *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, Laing does not show preference to new ways over the old, nor does he do the

old ways over the new. His attitude towards both the new and the old shows his awareness of the dangers inherent in blind conservatism and unchecked modernism. The former has delayed Africa's development, whereas the latter has made her less spiritual and more materialistic. He proposes a syncretism between newness-modernity and the best from the old. In Tukwan the residents have given Kwaku de Babo the task of "modernizing all proverbs from all tribes. And also, all ritual outside the shrine was declared instant, creative and individual, as long as they were all reassessed once a year..." (27). Laing is encouraging the reinvention of Ghanaian culture out of the old, the useful elements of the old. As mentioned earlier, the major theme that runs through *Woman of the Aeroplanes* is that of change, I should say, active change through an imaginative transformation of the individual, his community and his past and by keeping his present dynamic. To allow this transformation a smooth process, Laing believes the individual must be independent from his past; that is he must be capable of selecting what he needs for his transformation without any influence from old and new, from modernity and ancient traditions. Thus, on the eve of their journey to Levensvale, the residents of Tukwan decide to free the elders from their past: "The long unbroken communal cloth for the elders was cut by Kofi Senya. 'My inventions are working!' A/Atta shouted with triumph; and the elders could at least walk the extra metres without relying on the power of an unusual invention, nor on the power of being pulled back rudely by their own cloths" (28). This freedom of movement offered to the elders put their destiny back into their own hands. In other words, their future resides in their actions, and not in passive reliance upon what used to be or what is available. The elders will no longer be acted

upon; rather, they will act themselves. By placing the elders' destiny in their actions, Laing espouses Sartrean existentialist philosophy, which sees no alternative path to man's happiness other than his actions. For Sartre man is absolutely free to build his destiny. In *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, the characters' yearning for unity with other parts of the world and change is achieved through their imagination and spirit of entrepreneurship. This is exemplified in the character of Pokuaa, the contractress, whose planes made the cross-cultural exchange possible.

Unlike the other magical realist writers I will discuss in this dissertation, Laing's magical realism is existentialist because it reaffirms the freedom of man so dear to Jean Paul Sartre. Sartre's emphasis on individual subjectivity draws on his beliefs that *existence* precedes *essence*; in other words, man exists first before becoming what he is. It is based on the postulate that man is born free and that whatever he becomes is a result of his free choice. Implicit in Sartre's philosophy is the claim that man should free himself from any *a priori* such as family, culture, history in order to allow himself room for self-invention. *Woman of the Aeroplanes* emphasizes self-reliance and action as necessary means for Ghana and Africa's prosperity. In Laing's estimate nothing external to the individual's effort and free will should determine the outcome of his/her endeavors. In other words, Ghana must not surrender to the diktat of its history- colonialism and slave trade if she wants to prosper. In Tukwan even magic plays only an intermediary role; it provides some motivation, but the rest is in the hands of the inhabitants: "I don't understand a magic that can put a ring round an aeroplane yet fail to bring it down", de Babo hissed to himself, hoping kofi Senya would hear. He did, and replied with growing

grin: ‘Intermediate magic always finds its own way later!’” (33). Cooper’s description of “intermediate magic” is worth nothing here; for her:

Intermediate magic has limited power. It is a progressive kind of magic that furnishes a kick start, the critical spark that will culminate in movement only if there is a keen and competent driver in the seat, a motivated and trustworthy protagonist at the narrative. Perhaps the driver is a pilot controlling an aeroplane, perhaps a scientist, inventor of a magical contraption, like the crucial stupidity machine of Laing’s second novel, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*.... (156)

Like its refusal to listen to all the songs of the ancestors that caused its banishment from Kumasi, once again, Tukwan refuses to surrender its responsibility to magic.

Tukwan wants to claim most of the effort needed for its transformation and allow only a little bit of magic in. Laing’s magic is existentialist because its success depends on how much effort the beneficiary puts in the process. Because Tukwan is utopia, all the desires of its inhabitants should be fulfilled with no effort. In spite of this, the inhabitants are always working hard; whatever they achieve, they do so thanks to their own effort and imagination. They are the reason why Tukwan is even possible because without their marvelous actions nothing will be accomplished. For instance, to break the dam of history imposed upon them by gods and enter into modernity, “Atta had to invent more, before a single new house could be built beyond the present ninety-nine” (3). Laing’s message is that change does not happen on its own; instead people need to commit to making it possible and accepting its consequences. Thus, when the two communities from Tukwan and Levensvale embrace each other the result is change:

Change was being created by little actions and little dramas that seemed to be turning time slowly away from its abnormal breaking point now in existence and

towards the sludge of the normal ... Time was speeding up into small spaces and pulling things together from farther and farther away, things that may not have been clearly related in the past at all...The secret was that once one had created the new, it had to allow the new to create value and principle by enforcing its own orthodoxy. And this new orthodoxy became only a framework over which all the ordinary everyday living passed. (133)

This change eventually takes away their immortality and allows them entrance into modernity. The two communities are happy because they can finally see their dreams come true. At the end of the novel, Pokuaa marries de Babo and gives birth to a child, the Scot Angus, and Aba, a Ghanaian, are married and expecting a baby, and Kaki the driver of the cruel traxcavator who used to bulldoze houses is now a builder of roads.

The two communities depicted in the novel have severed ties with the other communities around them. It is a move that allows them greater freedom to thrive outside any given constraints. In Tukwan, the mystic inventor, Kwame Atta proposes “the democratization of family genetics” in order to facilitate the inheritance of body parts out of family pool. He swears that “this would reduce guilt, tribe ... and paradoxically, increase the space of individuality available to each person”. He also reminds his people that his invention has been reblessed by the ancestors as ways of living, but insists that they must not control them (27). This is Laing’s way of breaking away from the idea that ancestry, past, or history determines man’s identity. In fact, this is a total departure from the ideology of cultural nationalism that dominated African literature for decades. Laing does not reject Africa’s past as Sartre would, but he emphasizes the possibilities available to those who live outside any pre-given circumstances. The call for the democratization of family genetics on the eve of the trip to Levensvale has a particular significance, for it

allows Tukwan residents to reaffirm their selfhood, thereby opening themselves up to new encounters. Therefore, *Woman of the Aeroplanes* is a critique of postcolonial identities and their formation. Laing does not believe in predetermined identity. Instead, he believes that identity is determined in the present and remains in perpetual transformation. Above all, it is an acerbic critique against African writers and political leaders whose efforts aim at revisiting and celebrating Africa's past in their attempt to forge a genuine cultural nationalism.

At several instances in the novel Laing parodies postcolonial African politicians' attachment to the past through Nana Bontox, the traditional chief of Tukwan. He has many wives, and for the whole duration of their visit in Levensvale, he wears his traditional regalia, including a golden ring that he claims belongs to Okomfo Anokye, the magician king credited with giving the Asante people the Golden Stool, which symbolizes their kingship. Nana Bontox is the opposite of all the characters in the novel; he is described as unwise than anyone else and is expected to remain the same while all other people experience strive for new things:

When he ascended the stool, he immediately descended, complaining that the wisdom required was beyond him. But this is exactly what we want of our chief: unwise than anyone else, including some children, so that he may have something different from the head to offer.Naa did not disappoint his people: he continued to make a fool out of himself as often as possible, so that the people rested assured that he was faithfully showing the opposite of qualities he should offer. (8)

By refusing to be wise, Nana Bontox is stuck with the past, which makes him out of touch with reality, thereby turning him into a comic figure. There is a direct reference

to Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of independent Ghana, whose nationalist politics drawn on traditional cultural values, culminated in a one - party dictatorship, which enabled him to silence all his critics. While Nkrumah's commitment to Ghana's independence cannot be questioned, his rule was as oppressive as the colonial rule he fought so hard to end. Thus, when the stupidity machine reached the local sky, it couldn't help revealing the truth about violence in the political history of independent Ghana. For the machine, Kwame Nkrumah and Kofi Busia share equal responsibility in the political violence their people were subjected to:

And there were Kwame Nkrumah and Kofi Busia engaged in a furious waltz over Tukwan – no Adowa no kpanlogo no kete were available at that instant in time – but forgetting that it was the people's heads they were dancing on: squashed heads, bleeding heads, bruised heads, kwashiorkor heads, and totally crushed brains. The basket was overheating in its binding metal, but the mad history coming out of its entrails refused to stop. (98)

Adowa, kpanlogo, and kete are all traditional dances of Ghana which were very popular around the time of independence. Laing seems to say that all the fervor around these cultural devices only served the politicians to consolidate their power at the expense of Ghanaians.

By demonstrating the failure of cultural nationalist politics, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, argues that the development or survival of postcolonial Africa does not depend upon its reliance on the past, but rather on its ability to transform itself through encounter with the world; in other words, through economic and political integration, interconnection, and most importantly, through cross-cultural interchange. By refusing to listen to all the songs of the ancestors, the residents of Tukwan show their desire to be in

control of their destiny; they want less influence from their ancestry in their life. They believe that their happiness lies not in embracing everything from the past, but in selecting what is useful in the latter and completing it with their own inventiveness. The residents of Tukwan also reject conformism; they want their town to be original, so they refuse to conform to the architecture of Kumasi. After all, “Everybody had to have one element of originality before he or she could continue to stay in the town” (9). The law of originality is an expression of independence from any pre-given values, predetermination, or immovable essence or history that is expected to inform their here and now. By defying their ancestors, the residents of Tukwan show independence of mind and action. Indeed, it is an expression of freedom of choice and action. It is an existentialist affirmation of self through one’s own will. In Sartre words, “Man is nothing other than his own project. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself, therefore he is nothing more than the sum of his actions, nothing more than his life” (37). In *Woman of the Aeroplanes* Laing’s message is that neither the African elites’ uncritical adoption of the Western way of life nor their ostentatious attempt to return to the African traditional ways will save them.

Using the nationalist politics promoted by Nkrumah, affectionately referred to as “Osagyefo” (savior-at-war), as the basis for his analysis of Kojo Laing’s literary works, Francis Ngaboh-Smart offers the following commentary in *Beyond Empire and Nation*:

Unfortunately, Ghana’s post-independent political culture has been marred by failure and decline. Nkrumah’s rule (1957 – 1966) started the disintegration despite the waves of optimism on which he rode to power. He exacerbated Ghana’s problems, although Ghana was equally constrained by issues of

dependence, as is often the case in new states. Using the charismatic appeal, Nkrumah quickly transformed himself into a cult figure, instituted a vast network of patronage, undermined opposition to his regime, steered Ghana towards one-party state in 1964, and became the sole decision maker.... Thus, decade after independence, Ghana, as a nation, lost the capacity to weld together individuals and collectivities, as large segments of the population became disillusioned and alienated from the state and power structure, and many Ghanaians gave up on the idea of the nation. These developments provide the contexts for understanding Laing's writing. (72)

In light of this commentary, Ngaboh Smart argues that Laing's works attempt to conceive of a discourse beyond the nation, to transcend the sterility into which Ghana's ideological aridity seems to have imprisoned the state. According to him, Laing's novels generally expose the failures of the attempts to forge nationalist based identities by presenting us with a paradigm that neither fully valorizes indigenous structures nor fully denies external influences, a reconfiguration of identity that derives its resonance from ironic explosions of previous narratives. (73) In other words, Laing has abandoned the major preoccupation in the writing of his predecessors, who, according to Bill Ashcroft, sought to assert the idea of nation as based on naturalized myths of racial or cultural origin as a vital part of the collective political resistance which focused on issues of separate identity and cultural distinctiveness. (183). The inescapable truth is that since nationalism is based on the notion of cultural and racial purity, nationalist politics ends up replicating the exclusionary theories that rationalized the oppression of the colonized people. In eschewing nationalist based resistance, Laing has joined the new generation of postcolonial writers and theorists who are experimenting with a new form of resistance by distancing themselves from any notion of cultural purity. Thus, in their writing they

emphasize inherent interdependence of cultures and identities that spring from them. As

Bill Ashcroft writes:

Most post-colonial writing has concerned itself with the hybridized nature of post-colonial culture as strength rather than weakness. Such writing focuses on the fact that the transaction of the post-colonial world is not a one-way process in which oppression obliterates the oppressed or the colonizer silences the colonized in absolute terms. In practice it rather stresses the mutuality of the process. It lays emphasis on the survival even under the most potent oppression of the distinctive aspects of the culture of the oppressed, and shows how these become integral part of the new formations which arise from the clash of cultures characteristic of imperialism. Finally, it emphasizes how hybridity and the power it releases may well be seen to be the characteristic feature and contribution of the post-colonial, allowing a means of evading the replication of the binary categories of the past and developing new anti-monolithic models of cultural exchange and growth. (183)

Kojo Laing's novels emphasize the need for postcolonial African writers to move away from nationalist narratives that exacerbate the polarization of the cultural identity debates that followed the independence of African countries. They lay bare the insufficiencies of the rhetoric of cultural authenticity that advocated the formation of African identity based on the re-appropriation of history and pre-colonial culture. Thus, Laing's novels celebrate hybridity which subverts the binaries that make such rhetoric possible both in postcolonial Africa and the West. Unlike his predecessors, Laing wants to free the postcolonial identity debate from the notions that there is a fixed and pure African culture that the postcolonial subject must return to if he or she is to construct a stable and authentic African identity. For writers such as Ngugi, Achebe, and Armah, the postcolonial African predicament is in part due to the damage he or she sustained during his or her encounter with the colonizer's culture. That encounter, they argue, created

hybrid subjects dispossessed of their authentic African traditions. For this reason, they devote their artistic endeavor to assaulting colonial culture while they reassert the indigenous cultures. Against this effort to forge an authentic African identity based solely on the pre-colonial African culture, Laing reminds us of our multiple subjectivities and emphasizes the potential for hybridity to serve as a site for the formation of identities that take into account these subjectivities. The intervention of Homi Bhabha in the postcolonial identity debate is significant as his theory shifts the debate from narratives that stagnates around racial or cultural origins to the narratives that focus on what happens when cultures meet. In *Location of Culture*, Bhabha writes:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments of processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.
(2)

Implicit in Bhabha’s theory is that nations, cultures, and identities must be understood as narrative constructions that arise from the hybrid interaction of contending national and cultural constituencies. In other words, Bhabha contests the notion of fixed, stable cultures and identities; for him cultures and identities are continually fluid constructs. This leaves no room for cultures or identities to be safely kept and retrieved intact when needed, thereby proclaiming that the quest for national culture in the traditions is useless. As Bhabha notes, there is no pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in

the fixed tablet of tradition. ... The recognition that tradition bestows is a partial form of identification. In restaging the past it introduces other, incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition. This process estranges any immediate access to an originary identity or a received tradition (3). For Bhabha the return to the past follows a process that is influenced by other temporal cultural agents, which makes it impossible for traditional culture to retain its purity, for, according to Kojo Laing, in Tukwan, “history never walks, it runs in any direction” (1). This, indeed, makes Bhabha’s claim more relevant because it is illusory to pretend to retrieve traditions unaltered.

Woman of the Aeroplanes mocks both African nationalists’ enthusiasm towards authenticity and the European’s obsession with cultural difference by highlighting the interdependence between Africa and Europe. For instance, Tukwan has shown that “the future should be the humanity of travel inner, travel outer” (18). This explains the enthusiasm of its residents vis-a-vis the trip to Levensvale. For them the prosperity of humanity resides in a reciprocal exchange. Unlike the colonial invasion of Africa which left no room for sincere interaction, Tukwan sees in this trip an opportunity to teach and learn:

‘The man that goes to the moon can surely go to humanity! And you gain from me, I gain from you, eh!’ ‘Ah, I can see that you people want to make humanity both ordinary and glamorous!’ ... which little Pamela with joy in her eyes pushed out of the way to get to the dais to hold her father’s hand, and wave a big white handkerchief given to her by Pokuaa. And out came all the handkerchiefs, the Levensvale natives learning to wave while waving and the visitors so used to it already that they danced the wave. (88)

This intercultural exchange the reader witnesses in the excerpt above is what Laing is pushing for. He believes in a partnership that is based on reciprocity. He rejects any form of dependency, but celebrates interdependency. The visitors' desire for reciprocity is recurrent in the novel: "Love us all as we love you all, for we are here to help you helping us! Never forget!" "... and the conference too would come, where kyinkynga would be devoured cross culturally" (68 – 9). Laing emphasizes the importance of reciprocity to prove that no race, culture, or civilization is self-sufficient and that the reaffirmation of our humanity relies in our mutual consciousness of the existence of one another. Like Bhabha, Laing is interested in bringing cultures together to create hybrid cultures, thereby ending cultural hegemony.

Despite this unambiguous argument for change through openness, critics such Cooper has accused Laing of being ambivalent towards that very change his whole novel advocates. For Cooper, Laing does not fully embrace Africa's entrance into modernity and that he even espouses the cultural nationalism of his predecessors, which he disavows in most passages of his novel. To substantiate her claim, she cites the way Kofi Senya proposes to protect both the ancestral values and modernity in Tukwan:

The first thing we must do is to make Pokuaa the formal leader of this town, even in her pregnancy, for she has done so much, and I am certainly not fit to lead from the front. I will continue to be in the background behind the pregnant president. The next thing is to make Kwame Atta our ambassador to the cities and countries outside us: all the strangers go to him, even though Lawyer Tay tries hard to win them over to himself. The next solution is to create a new maze by spreading the truth of your book, which is fitting chronicle of all that we have been trying to do, and whose spirit would be behind the most tortuous maze ever created. Then after that we must have an election to choose what to do, where to go with or spirit and

morals and inventions, and to decide finally what we can tolerate and what we cannot! (181)

According to Cooper, by allowing Senya the spiritual, his daughter Pokuaa, and the inventor Kwame Atta to assume leadership position in the new Tukwan, Laing has jumped right back into the culturally nationalistic territory, where his predecessors looked for solutions to the problems of their post-independence nations. She argues that in doing this Laing has abandoned his cross-cultural interchange project aimed at creating hybrid identities to occupy his new worlds, thereby disqualifying him as a magical realist writer, the title he earned in the earlier parts of the novel. (210) To corroborate her claim, Cooper quotes a passage from Pietro Deandrea's 1996's essay on Laing, "New Worlds, New Wholes": Kojo Laing's Narrative Quest for a Social Renewal" published in *African Literature Today*. In her own words, Deandrea seems to agree with her interpretation when he states:

Notwithstanding his revolutionary style, Laing still belongs to that descent of African artists who have brought to the fore their preoccupation with the state. The main theme of his writing could be summarized in one question: how could a new Ghana – and consequently a new world – be built? Although Laing's anti-realism and problematization of history might easily be assimilated by some postmodern or post-colonial critics, the pervasive national project supporting his style cannot be traced back to the constant dismantling of such projects theorized by postmodernist academics like Homi Bhabha. (qtd. in Cooper 210)

However, in a rather surprising contradiction, after complaining that Laing is a complex writer, Cooper also quotes Deandrea where the latter admits he still believes that Laing is a post nationalist writer: "On the other hand, both Laing's socio-political quest and stylistic influences succeed in going far beyond any Ghanaian or African boundary,

therefore rejecting any label of ‘nativism’”(qtd. in Cooper 211). I don’t think Cooper does justice to Laing by trying to force him into the rank of nationalist writers whom he attacks in his novels. How can one ignore the cosmopolitan character of Laing’s oeuvre and claim its concern is only local. Contrary to Cooper’s claim, from the beginning of the novel to the end, Laing has never deviated from his global project. Throughout the novel he has maintained his distance vis-a-vis the nationalist discourse that calls for an exclusive embrace of African traditional values in the construction of new African societies. The difference between nationalist writers and Laing is unmistakable, for whereas Laing’s novels emphasize the necessity of syncretizing tradition and modernity to create a new Africa, nationalist writers call for celebration of traditions at the expense of modernity. Ultimately, the only option left is to simply side with Deandrea and argue that despite the complexity of Laing’s work, he cannot be confused with cultural nationalist writers.

Likewise Cooper’s ejection of Laing from magical realist writers’ group is unsustainable because Laing has not abandoned his project of hybridization as she claims. However, if Cooper does not suggest a mode for Laing to be associated with, Deandrea does just that in *Fertile Crossings*. Here, Deandrea focuses his discussion of *Woman of the Aeroplane* on the trickster character of Kwame Atta, comparing him with Ananse, the Akan folktale trickster character. He proposes that Atta’s mischievous behavior in the novel, especially, his transgressions and constant desire to outsmart everybody bears resemblance to Ananse. He then concludes that:

Woman of the Aeroplanes should not be considered as magical realism or as pure fantasy. With the usual reservations attached to the theoretical ambiguity of any critical label, some new definitions could be proposed: fantastic realism, social fantasy, or in the light of Laing's connection with folktale world, folktale realism. (97)

In her part Arlene Elder focuses her attention on Pokuaa and her aeroplanes. In the novel Pokuaa is credited with procuring the two aeroplanes and miraculously managed to bring them over to Tukwan. We are also told that the "two aeroplanes rest at the level of her upper and lower lips" (4). Elder suggest that:

this image is not intended to suggest only a 'plane kiss', however as Pokuaa's lips are 'aero-dynamically useful, since the Aeroplanes could ... be measured by the open mouth; one lip could heighten a plane, another lip could lower it'. She calls this image "the humanization of the planes and mechanization of Pokuaa, which takes Laing into postmodern cyborgian hybridity territory." She then terms this hybridity of technology and animism. (80 – 81)

I believe Kojo Laing would agree with all these interpretations because what I learn while studying Laing's literary works is that he is a non-conformist writer, who always seeks to avoid labels. He also understands that the influence of oral tradition on his novels predisposes them to such disparate interpretations, for in oral literature the meaning of a rendition is in the mind of each individual member of the audience.

Limitless Humanity through *Ubuntu*

Woman of the Aeroplanes echoes the African concept of humanity referred to as *Ubuntu*. It is an old Bantu word (one of the African dialects) that means "humanity to

others”. This philosophy is based on the belief that the self’s existence is dependent on the other’s existence: “I am because you are, and since you are, therefore I am.” This philosophy of being and becoming has been practiced in all African societies for centuries. In “Valuing the Emergence of *Ubuntu*”, Nicolito A. Gianan, professor of Humanities at University of the Philippines – Los Banos sums up the *Ubuntu* philosophy as follows:

The *Ubuntu* philosophy is indicative of a practice that has enabled Africans themselves to look into their own culture and recognize the fact that they have their own philosophy that is, once again, universal and universalizable. This becomes the state of affairs because *Ubuntu* philosophy is seen not only as being in dialogue with culture, but also as a practice of individuals that are intelligent, rational, and humane. Obviously, this is concretized in the claim that a human being becomes a human being through another human being. To reiterate, specifically, it is said that a person is a person through another person. (87)

This is opposed to the western concept of existence, which emphasizes the individual’s ability to cogitate: *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). *Ubuntu* is an outward movement whereas *cogito ergo sum* is an inward movement. *Ubuntu* promotes a sense of unity, togetherness among the people of the world; most importantly it is against discrimination of any kind. It reminds human beings of their moral obligation to equity in their relationships with others. The visitors from Tukwan arrived in Levensvale with this attitude as they decided to sing “‘Yen ara yen asaase...’ down the glen. Travelling the travelling earth proved the world belonged to all” (60). However, upon their arrival at the immigration services, the visitors would later learn that they could not claim Levensvale as their own, for they were told that they needed visas to enter the town:

We believe not all of the party has visas, we believe; nor do we consider that the proper quarantine procedures were taken for the accompanying birds and animals, goats if you care to have the proper description. Also it may be considered a threat to the public to have the aeroplanes landing the way they did. ... 'You may come from heaven if you like, but we are here in the line of duty...' (60 – 61)

Laing contrasts two different views of the world: the European view of territorial limit against the African view of humanity without frontiers, a form of cosmopolitanism. This enables him to expose Europe's anxiety about the other as well as its hypocrisy, especially when one thinks that the balkanization of Africa was decided in Berlin without the consent of Africans. Despite this betrayal, the invaders and predators that arrived in Africa, masquerading as missionaries were welcomed and treated with dignity, because for Africans, the earth belongs to everybody. However, *Woman of the Aeroplanes* seems to suggest that the visit of Levensvale by the residents of Takwan offers Europe a unique opportunity to "go to humanity" by embracing the *Ubuntu* philosophy which the visitors are promoting in Levensvale. For instance, to counter the discriminatory practices of Europe as seen in the immigration incident, de Babo talks about Tukwan's spirit of inclusiveness informed by *Ubuntu*: "We wish, we twins to extend the territory of our humanity to include even those who deny us..." (62).

In light of what precedes, I argue that Laing's quest for unity and togetherness on behalf of the world can be fulfilled through the adoption of *Ubuntu*. This suggests that any barriers that exist between people must be dismantled. In the novel this effort is substantiated by two motifs – language and travel. In *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, Laing attempts to use language and travel to create new unified worlds. Nevertheless, of the two motifs, Language is given preeminence. Because man is *homo loquens*- man as talking

animal, Laing makes the transformation of language a sine qua non condition for the materialization of his vision of unity of the world. The importance of language in human life lies in our awareness that without it we cannot know or understand one another, in other words, our desire to extend our humanity to others is doomed. In *Homo Loquens: Man as a Talking Animal*, Dennis Butler Fry has emphasized the indispensability of language in human community:

... But it is of course in the life of human community rather than in that of the individual that speech and language play their major role. We can scarcely now imagine the condition of a human group totally lacking in any possibility of talk between its members. Talk means very much more than communication... A universe away from such matters is the variety of exchange represented by talk among people, with its myriad planes of intellectual, emotional and factual interchange which make up the infinitely complex web of social life. Without it human existence would be unrecognizably different. Man is above everything else the talking animal- homo loquens. The overwhelming majority of human beings spend a great deal of their time talking and listening to each other. (3)

Language sustains and nourishes human relations and is the basis for a harmonious human community. In other words, it is the glue that holds the community together and enables the pursuit of the well-being of its members. The human's need for language expressed by Fry suggests an intrinsic connection between language and the African concept of *Ubuntu* I have discussed earlier, for the desire of community is very palpable in its enunciation. As Gianan notes:

Ubuntu is also an idea that projects a notion of transcendence, eliciting a borderless meaning yet encouraging and promoting mutual understanding between peoples, even though they come from different cultures. Clearly, the emergence of *Ubuntu* is a key in the system through which a particular human community relates with itself and with other communities worldwide. In this context, it is seen as the quintessence of community and communality. (89)

The mutual understanding that *Ubuntu* encourages between peoples from different cultures necessitates a medium that can be used by members of those cultures, but a language which none of them can lay claim to. This medium, I argue is the language of unity Laing seeks to invent in his novels. In fact, his search for this very language led him to what I refer to as experimental linguistic hybridity, which, as I will show later, earned him much criticism from postcolonial critics and theorists. *Ubuntu* is realized through language of hybridity that allows everyone a part and place in communication and action. In this way *Ubuntu* - magical realism connection is established.

Limitless Possibilities through Linguistic Hybridity

Hybridity is a postcolonial construct that aims at countering all binaries based on notions of ethnic, cultural, racial, and political purity. It refers to the new trans-cultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization. For Nikos Papastergiadis, “it is an invention of postcolonial theory, a radical substitute to the homogenic ideas of cultural identity such as racial purity and nationalism. It is an antidote to essentialist subjectivity” (189). Conversely, cultural critics like Jean Fisher stresses that “the concept is too deeply embedded in a discourse that presupposes an evolutionary hierarchy and that it carries the prior purity of biologism” (qtd in Papastergiadis 169) Nonetheless, other critics continue to celebrate the positive aspects of hybridity in the current identity debate. Papastergiadis argues that the positive feature of hybridity is that it acknowledges that identity is

constructed through a negotiation of difference, and that the presence of fissures, gaps, and contradiction is not indicative of failure.

Woman of the Aeroplanes intervenes in the debates over hybridity on many levels including linguistic, cultural, and racial. However, linguistic hybridity is the starting point of this intervention, as exemplified in Laing's use of Ghanaian Pidgin English and other vernacular languages alongside English language. This attempt to inaugurate his politics of hybridity has been viewed as purposeless. For instance, in his examination of Laing and other new African writers with regard to the politically committed generation who started producing literature in the 1970s, the postcolonial critic and playwright, Femi Osofisan has this to say:

Mythology, fabulation, polyphony – or according to some, cacophony – these are the narrative goals, and grammar, realism the satirical elements. [...] High preference is given to syntactic and semantic idiosyncrasies, such as the use of sudden phrasal inversions, verbal inflation, idiophones, eccentric punctuation and neologism. [...] Clearly the new writers have turned away from our own burning concern to mobilize the society for political goals. (qtd. in Deandrea 78)

Osofisan's criticism of Laing is twofold: on the one hand, he seems to be dissatisfied with the way the latter uses language, and on the other hand, he expresses his frustration with Laing and his fellow new writers for lack of political commitment in their literary endeavors. In his part, discussing *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, Derek Wright acknowledges that Kojo Laing is creating "a real and an imaginary Ghana, an actual place and an autonomous realm of pure language" (200). As for Brenda Cooper, she complains about the gaps that exist between Laing, his characters, and his readers as she writes:

His aim was to make his medium his message and to construct a new poetic language in the spirit of the oral tradition, with influence from English and a number of other languages spoken in Ghana. He has, however, created a language that is somewhat impenetrable to all but a few intellectuals, who are themselves challenged to decipher the messages of his riddles. (191)

Cooper suggests that Laing's attempt to create a hybrid language consisting of English and other languages with the devices of oral literature has failed because his messages have become incomprehensible to even intellectuals. While I agree with Cooper that Laing's messages are difficult to understand, I don't think it is an experiment gone wrong; rather, I argue that Laing has deliberately chosen to place his language beyond the monopoly of the intellectuals. Ordinary people in Ghana understand this language very well, for it is not rare to hear such a mixed language in the casual conversation of average Ghanaians. Laing wants to end the hegemony the Ghanaian intellectuals have enjoyed because of their mastery of English. In fact, one of the colonial legacies Africa continues to endure today is how zealous some African intellectuals are about their mastery of European languages. Like in the colonial era, mastery of English or French continues to be associated with class and status. It was a colonial practice to elevate those who could speak the colonizer's language over their fellow citizens. For instance, Leopold Sédar, Senghor, the poet-president, and cofounder of Negritude, owed his popularity in the world less to his position as the president of Senegal than his mastery of French. During my elementary and middle school years in the 1980s, we were Senghor's fans; that was twenty years after the official end of colonialism. We loved his use of bombastic words which were equated to his mastery of French. Nobody wished to speak broken French because it would be a big shame to do so. Making mistake in our

mother tongue was a non-event because nobody cared. Even to this date, more than a half century after independences in Africa, students are still proud to identify themselves with the French or British because of their mastery of the languages of Molière and Shakespeare.

Recently, a Togolese blogger angrily attacked a Togolese journalist for misusing the language of Molière. The blogger found it unacceptable for the journalist to make mistakes in French and called upon him to seek mastery of all the intricacies of the language before using it. Ultimately, I argue that Laing intends to ridicule linguistic purist like this blogger. The following exchange between Korner Mensah and De Babo is indicative of this intention:

To deflect his distraught mood Korner Mensah asked the dozing Babo this, ‘What would happen to the English language when we arrive among the native?’ Kwaku gazed at him in irritated wonder, but said nothing. The pastor persisted: ‘You have appointed yourself in that quiet and cunning way of yours, as the custodian of the English language...’ ‘But everything else is in Twi,’ de Babo said, ‘and you are not going to get me to be defensive about a foreign language that I knew before I could walk...’ ‘O no!’ interjected Mensah, “I too love the language, but I have not set myself up as the ridiculous master of it, nor do I consider that its native speakers have become soft and self-indulgent with it...” (46 – 47)

De Babo exemplifies the African elite who want to be more royalist than the king. The African elite’s near veneration of European languages is a proof of the triumph of European colonialism in Africa. The elites are the reason why colonial languages continue to enjoy linguistic hegemony in Africa. Therefore, Laing wants to invent a language upon which nobody can claim mastery. Most importantly, he wants to indigenize English to the point that even the native English speakers will need an

interpreter or a glossary to understand his English text. In fact, Laing's language constitutes a linguistic and literary counter-attack from the former colonized against the colonizer. Several instances in the novel demonstrate this intention, like in "She was a kind of buy- and- sell woman, she was an arrangement alombo.... Recently she had to travel to London to see the edge of somebody's tongue: to look into Roy Mackie's mouth to clinch the deal of aeroplanes and farms" (4).

Or when Kwame Atta mystifies his host:

Me I want rice and stew, cassava, bread, abooloo, abunabu, expertly-fried forest wood-maggots, pigeon-pea bean leaves, akrantie, the under-thighs of an odum squirrel, waakye and abe-wine, fufu and abenkwan gari foto withtilapia-controlled shitoh, green-green with the freshest plantain, akple, groundnut soup with brown rice, banku and okro soup, nkontommire stew with a koobi interregnum, the red and yellow flare of agushie stew with yam so fresh that it shouldn't be born yet, yoo ke gari... Hausa koko in the morning, kenkey and kyenam with deep-fried shitoh..... aaaaaah, I die! Jock stared at him with disbelief, and said with force, 'But you didn't mention fish and chips!' (130)

In the first example Laing is doing a literal translation from Akan into English. In the second he mixes English with different Ghanaian languages to the point that even though he mentioned fish (kyenam), Jock still thinks he didn't. Like Jock, Laing's non-Ghanaian readers face the embarrassment.

In *Narrative Shape-Shifting*, Arlene A. Elder has pointed out the difficulties Laing's texts pose to his readers. According to her, though Laing's novels' hybrid language serves his thematic purpose by modeling his desired linguistic unification of peoples, the reader is so often required to turn to the glossaries filled with Ghanaian words and neologisms that interfere with his or her comprehension of the narrative action (56).

The reader's difficulty in reading Laing's texts shouldn't make us ignore the political engagement of his works. Laing does not create art for art's sake; his use of such a language is in itself political, for it echoes his argument that man's future resides in his ability to utilize what is already available to create new things. On purely linguistic basis, Laing's novels are in constant transgression and subversion of the English language. I believe there is nothing more political than the transgression and subversion of the language that was the cornerstone of the success of colonization and oppression of Africa by foreign powers. In "Koyo Laing's Poetry and the Struggle for God", M.K. Kropp-Dakubu offers an interesting insight about Laing works. According to her, Laing began his literary career as a poet with a mission to beat the English into a weapon for attacking cant, bigotry, and his own psychological disorientation. Kropp-Dakubu also points out that Laing has become more impatient with language in his recent literary works and his inability to escape from language is his classic dilemma and therefore his major preoccupation. Kropp-Dakubu then concludes that because the testing ground for Laing's language has been in poetry, an understanding of his poetic work is fundamental to an understanding of his literary enterprise as a whole. (235) Laing's frustration with language resides in its inability to fulfill his agenda; but he does not abandon it; rather, he seeks to transform it by stretching its borders to limitless horizons by bringing to it all the aesthetic and poetic values of its use. In another essay, titled "Search Sweet Country and the Language of Authentic Being", Kropp-Dakubu justifies Laing's use of poetic language by his love of concreteness in language. He then traces the origin of the latter's poetic use of language to Scotland and his native Ghana:

In an earlier paper, the language of the poetry of B. Laing was presented as a synthesis of the techniques and traditions associated with the Concrete Poetry movement (especially as practiced in Scotland during the 1960s) and with the techniques of figurative speech characteristic of formal language use in Akan. Focusing upon existential concerns that were strongly influenced by the writings of Kierkegaard, Sartre, and most especially R. D. Laing, I showed that this language is directly related to what the poems have to say, and that it was deliberately created for direct expression of unified, existentially authentic experience. In the present paper, I argue that the same synthesis and the same concerns are further developed in the language of B. Kojo Laing's first novel, *Search Sweet Country*. The language and the linguistic imagery of the novel arise directly from the poems and build upon them. (19)

Kojo Laing does exactly the same in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, where on many instances he employs Ghanaian pidgin, Akan words, as well as what he calls enriched English, for not only poetic effect but also for authentic experience. For instance, the following expressions, "the woman, she try-O!" (84), "memaaamieeee! Ibi hard-O!" (98); that beard-beard loss is serious-OOoo are used to indicate the degree of seriousness of the speaker. While some readers may feel confused with such expressions, Laing's Ghanaian audience feels at home with them, because these pidginized expressions are an integral part of their everyday conversation. Another marker of authentic experience that is recurrent in the novel is "koraa" (at all): "Me, I no jolly this air koraa!"; "some of you don't deserve to be immortal, koraa!"; "...Tale did not drink, koraa!" The use of such words enables Laing to attain the concrete meaning of what he wishes to express. This also shows Laing's indebtedness to Akan folktales tradition. In "The Language of the Proverb in Akan", Lawrence A. Boadi has described the techniques of Akan storytelling. According to him, good Akan and Guan storytellers change their voice to translate the mood in which a character is, such as surprise, anger, joy, happiness, hatred, love and

even death. These exaggerations, he adds, are meant to help the audience capture the incidents being described in the fairyland. The use of onomatopoeia in the narration aims at the same purpose. He argues that Repetition in the use of reduplication is one of the devices for exaggeration. It is used to show the size, height, length, and shape. Verbs and adjectives are the parts of speech mostly reduplicated. Furthermore, Boadi points out that another way of storytellers using reduplication to show exaggeration to achieve their aim is the prolongation of either medial vowel or the final vowel sound. For instance, a beautiful young woman may be described as “fefeefe” and a tall tree as “dua tenteenten, kakraa...” (Ghanaian Literature 36)

Laing himself has always been adamant about his love for the concrete. In “My Non-paper”, a paper he presented at the first conference on Anglophone African literatures held at the University of Toulouse-Le Mirail, and later published in *Thresholds: Anglophone African Literatures*, Kojo Laing claimed that he has always had an obsession for the concrete and abstract as friendly opposites, and that he was appalled as a teenager by the fragmentation of the Western mind, where the intrusion of dichotomy between the subject and the object left a huge emotional space. As a result, in Laing’s words, “a lot of experiences became second-hand.” He then declared:

Being somebody with a highly developed physical existence, I would sometimes feel like vomiting in the face of abstraction, this fragmentation... as an idea, not in relation to any specific Westerner. If you have that feeling when you want to stress the concrete in relation to the abstract, then you know that what goes with it is a feeling of responsibility for all the peoples of this world, hoping that my own people will never fall into this existential chasm. (104)

As a writer, Kojo Laing takes his responsibility vis-à-vis the world very seriously. He believes that he owes the world an authentic representation of all peoples' experiences. This is made possible by what Arlene Elder has termed "oraliture", that is the synthesis of oral and literary forms. Like a storyteller, Kojo Laing wants his readers to live the real experience of the action that is being described. Therefore, his use of onomatopoeia and linguistic play does very well have a purpose, and that is to convey experience with concreteness. Among the critics who examine kojo Laing's literary works, Kofi Anyidoho, in my view explains better the former's use of language in his novels. Commenting on Laing's third novel, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*, Kofi Anyidoho sheds light on Laing's use language as follow:

The real magic of kojo Laing's literary art is the creative and transforming power of language. In his hands, language is not a sacred inheritance, to be used with restraint and according to pre-established rules. Rather, it is a miracle tool for transforming perceptions and rearranging our thoughts into new modes of apprehension. Perhaps this is why Laing's novel makes such uncompromising demands on the reader's thought and imagination. (qtd. in Anyidoho 18)

With Kojo Laing language transcends its usual role as mere means of communication and interpretation of our experiences; rather, it is a catalyst in the making of the world he envisions. For this reason, he places language at the center of all his literary endeavors. In his novels he seeks to break out the chains that are preventing the use of language to its full extent. His non-respect for grammatical rules in his work is not inadvertent, but deliberate. Laing's use of language can be traced to the role of the linguist in African oral tradition. In Akan society, whose oratory techniques, I argue, Laing borrows from, the chief linguist is known as "Okyeame" (spokesperson of the

chief). The “Okyeame” is chosen for his competence and good oratory skills. He performs ritual prayers, maintain liaison between the chief and his visitors, and carries the messages between the chief and his subjects. In *Speaking for the Chief: Okyeame and the Politics of Akan Oratory*, Kwesi Yankah, a Ghanaian ethnographer, comments on the role of the “okyeame”. According to him, among the chief’s functionaries, the “Okyeame” is the most conspicuous, for he performs duties in various areas of activity - social, political, religious, and rhetorical – on the chief’s behalf. He is the chief’s orator, diplomat, envoy, prosecutor, protocol officer, prayer officiant, and most importantly, the chief’s confidant and counselor (84 – 5). The “Okyeame” is expected to perform these duties, because his mastery of rhetoric makes him a key figure within the royal circle.

Interestingly, Kojo Laing himself has laid claim to the title of “Okyeame”, which he made clear during the presentation I alluded to earlier. As he declares: “My first concession to a systematic appraisal of my role as a writer is that it is related to the concept of “Okyeame”, or the linguist of the chief who interprets what the chief says, usually in content and form, except that, please, substitute the universe for the chief” (104). Okyeame’s power resides in his linguistic ability that enables him to beautify the chief’s words and even prevent any ambiguity that may lead to crises. Commenting on the role of the Okyeme in the Akan society, Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah write:

The practice of using speech intermediaries in royal discourse is partly aimed at creating opportunities for the flowering of language in the relay process. Akyeame (plural of okyeame) often say, ‘We embellish the chief’s words,’ and they compare the treatment of the chief’s words with the act of making fufu (a basic food made by pounding plantain and cassava in a mortar) to facilitate consumption.... Speaking through an okyeame leaves room for possible

modification, addition of omitted detail, and the elevation of discourse to a poetic level. (604)

In the novel we see Nana kasa the Okyeame perform these duties. He pours libation at the welcome ceremony in Levensvale: “Akwaaba was brought out by the hosts, Okyamehene took out the schnapps and placed it beyond the heather, to pour libation after the exchange of greetings” (58). Also when Nana Bontox is angered by his subjects during their landing in Levensvale, it is the Okyeame who appeases him after adjusting the alphabet in his mouth: “O Nana, you know that we love you tootoo much, and we will love you even more if you survive the jump” (56).

However, Kojo Laing also believes that his role as “Okyeame” goes beyond that of an ordinary “Okyeame”, because he insists that he is more interested in the creation of new worlds than the interpretation of the existing worlds. As he writes:

... The creation of new worlds-some self-referential worlds – is more important to me than the interpretation of existing worlds. The only link which I have is that I believe that the incidence of broken consciousness – that’s a horrible word – is more prevalent in the west than where I come from, where there is still, through all sorts of activity, an umbilical link with the universe, where consciousness is not a fragmented entity. The only way out, back home, is for us to develop the analytical aspects without breaking the umbilical cord.... (105)

As Okyeame (chief linguist), Kojo Laing places his hope for the creation of worlds that reflect our desire for unity in linguistic unification. He believes that the creation of a language through a synthesis of many world languages may lead to unity. His vision as he makes it clear in the author’s note on the glossary that opens his third

novel, *Major Genti and the Achimota Wars* (1992), is to see the world opt for a lingua franca:

The words listed in the glossary at the back of this book are the outcome of the world of Major Genti and the Achimota Wars. The motive behind them is to internationalize the English. I believe that more parochial areas need a broadening of vocabulary – hence many of the words are repeated in my novels and poetry. Some are invented, most are direct translations from Akan and Ga and sometimes Hausa. It is usual in Ghana (with such a cosmopolitan mix of cultures) to intersperse one language with words from another. This ought to be done universally for the idea is to create one gigantic language.

In *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, such interspersing is recurrent as in “I have borrowed your tower, with the help of Appa, for a small religious experiment, kakra, an experiment of logic: if your churches are emptying, and my pine necklaces in the hills are filling up, then why not take a significant part of the church to the necklace, and hope that the latter cures the former ...” (89). “What a problem-ase!” (100). In Akan “kakra” and “ase” respectively means a little and matter/problem. These Akan words are synonyms of small and problem, and yet Laing placed them next to each other. There seems to be a sense of complementary cohabitation between the English language and the Akan language. Implicit in this message is Laing’s belief that no language is self-sufficient and that all claims to linguistic hegemony are responsible for discrimination and hatred between tribes, between regions, between nations, and between continents. In fact within African countries, it is not rare to see people arguing and fighting over the superiority of one language over the other. In my native Togo, there are about forty five different ethnic groups, which mean that a total of forty five languages are spoken in the country of six million people. People’s loyalty to these ethnic groups is so strong that it gets carried into

the political sphere. Thus, most political violence in Africa has its origin in the ethnic tensions.

In light of what precedes, I will argue that Kojo Laing's language informs his criticism of the cultural- linguistic status quo among his fellow Ghanaians, between Africans, and between Africans and the rest of the world. Thus, his use of the oral form alongside the written form, as well as pidgin and local languages alongside English language aims at interrogating the artificial boundaries that continue to hinder human's desire for interactions and a complementary cohabitation. As Arlene Elder writes: "Laing, like Okri weaves his narratives into the strong, organic web of African oral tradition and demonstrate through his marvelous characters and unexpectedly related geographical spaces the necessity of recognizing similarities rather than differences" (56).

In fact, the gigantic language Kojo Laing envisions is a hybrid language that cannot be claimed by any specific linguistic group, thereby abolishing the divisions based upon claims to linguistic hegemony. In *Tukwan*, Kojo Laing has brought together people from different Ghanaian ethnic and cultural groups. Despite these differences, these groups are living in harmony which enables them to undertake gigantic projects such as their business visit to Levensvale. *Tukwan* is free of crime, sin, racism, and tribalism because family genetics has been democratized at the suggestion of the chief scientist Kwame Atta:

He had decided without the authority of the ancestors, that there was a finite number of human type available in *Tukwan*; and that once the number has been reached, any human characteristic – whether physical or mental – was a repeat of

what was already available over an agreed time span of two thousand years: so that if you talk about inheriting a leg, then you could easily inherit it out of the family pool. This will increase togetherness and rope all bones into a potential oneness. He swore that this would also reduce guilt, tribe – which barely existed in the town anyway – and then would, paradoxically, increase the space of individuality available to each person. (27)

Tukwan is possible not only because it is a utopia, but also because its inhabitants have accepted to transcend their linguistic differences and allow their languages to live in symbiosis. Laing's linguistic hybridity also addresses the language debate that dominated African literary criticism in the 1970's.

Beyond the Language Debate

Because language was instrumental to the annihilation of indigenous cultures, the general sentiment after independence was that the salvation of African culture could only be achieved through the re-valorization of indigenous languages. This presupposes the use of African languages in African literature. The debate reached its culminant point when the Nigerian critic Obi Wali's boldly postulated that: "... until these writers and their western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncertainty, and frustration" (qtd. in Olaniyan and Quayson 299).

In this debate the two critics who have unequivocally stated their positions about the use of European languages are Ngugi wa thiong'o and Chinua Achebe. Ngugi's argument against the use of European languages in African literature centers on the

devastating role these languages played in the colonization process. In *Decolonizing the Mind*, a collection of essays in which he clarifies his theory of language, he has this to say: “Language was the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of physical subjugation and the language was the means of psychological subjugation” (9). Ngugi sees in the use of European languages by African writers a deliberate perpetuation of this subjugation which the African writer must take upon him/herself the responsibility to combat. He does not believe that African writers can use European languages and still achieve this goal. He has gone as far as calling the literature produced in European languages by African, “Euro African literature”. To practice what he preaches, Ngugi broke up with English in the 1970’s and began producing in his native Gikuyu. According to Ngugi, this abandonment of English was his way of fighting against imperialism: “I believe that my writing in Gikuyu language, a Kenyan language, an African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples” (28). Implicit in this decision is Ngugi’s belief in the important role of working class and peasantry in the struggle against the persisting influence of colonial forces in the post-independence Africa. For him, a real national culture will only emerge after Kenyans have severed ties with English, the colonial import. Ngugi does not accept the claims that African writers can use European languages to dismantle the lingering structures of colonialism. For as the poet activist Audre Lorde so eloquently puts it, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (qtd. in Olson 259). He argues that any efforts to free

African peoples from the colonizing structure without first repudiating European languages as the carriers of an oppressive value were doomed from the start.

Arguing totally against Ngugi's position on the use of European languages in African literature, Achebe takes a pragmatic approach. In *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, he remarks that it is not only convenient to use those languages, but it is necessary because they offer Africans a medium of communication that transcends all the ethnic groups. Using Nigeria, home to hundreds of ethnic groups as example, he argues that a true national literature that will celebrate national culture will only be possible through English. For him literatures that are produced in indigenous languages should be simply referred to as ethnic literatures (93 – 95). Achebe wants the African writer to embrace the advantages offered by European languages to produce literature that will still convey his/her peculiar experience, for no one, he believes, loses anything for using languages that offer more choices in the production of literature. Elsewhere, he asks: "Is it right for a man to abandon his mother tongue for someone's?" And proceeds to answer his question: "It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given this language and I intend to use it" (102).

Laing endorses neither of the positions above, for his novels seek to end the status quo in the language debate in postcolonial Africa, rather than perpetuate it. Kojouhar Laing's intention in his literary endeavor is to substitute the debate of exclusivity with that of inclusivity, for he believes there are no self-sufficient languages, but complementary languages. He contests the notions of authenticity, superiority and purity in language. Discussing Laing's use of language in *Search Sweet Country*, Ngaboh-Smart argues that

“Laing’s comments on language raise issues such as authority, source, origin, and influence, but he treats language as a pragmatic communicative event. Just as the novel makes choice a component of the quest for identity, it also abandons belief in linguistic hierarchy or existence of a metalanguage, prior to the individuals in the linguistic cauldron that is Ghana” (96). Laing makes similar comments in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, where he mystifies both his Ghanaian and English readers. He wants neither of them to feel too confident about their mastery of English or Ghanaian languages. As Brenda Cooper remarks, “he created a language that is somewhat impenetrable to all but a few intellectuals, who are themselves challenged to decipher the message of his riddles” (191). I particularly agree with Ngaboh-Smart’s claim that Laing uses language as a “pragmatic communicative event”. Laing understands that what matters in the use of a language is its ability to carry the writer’s or speaker’s message the way it is intended. Thus, Laing’s language is shaped by the message it conveys. When Kwame Atta was asked why he was stammering, he simply answered: “Bbbbut I thought you knew sharp that whenever I mmmmention my popylonkwe, I stammer, I multiply the language...” (73). The impression one has here is that in Laing’s novels, events seem to shape language not the other way around. The act of stammering is imposed upon Atta by his unease to pronounce “popylonkwe”, which means male genitals. However, it is possible to argue that Atta stammers whenever he mentions this word as an act of auto-censorship. Atta is aware of the etiquette of his cultural milieu, which he manages to observe. In most African cultures it is taboo to publicly mention private parts or sexually explicit terms, especially in the presence of children.

Therefore, people would find ways to use coded languages to get around any term that will bear an explicit sexual connotation. The adaptive shift observed in Laing's language owes much to the influence of the tradition of African story telling on his art. The ambiance in which Laing presents his novels-the comic atmosphere, the wordplay, the neologism, to list but a few... are devices of storytelling. The storyteller is a performer whose performance heavily depends on his or her audience's disposition. Since his or her aim is to please that audience, he or she will try everything. In other words, the storyteller will negotiate with his or her audience through adaptation and improvisation.

To someone who is familiar with the art of storytelling, the instability observed in Laing's narrative may not be a problem, because the rendition of stories can be influenced by the audience, place, and time. For each occasion it is possible to hear a different version of a story; thus the storyteller feels like proclaiming: "we never tell the same story twice". A good storyteller is the one who can adapt his story to the audience, place, and time. He is also the one who can improvise his stories whenever necessary. Sometimes the improvisation is necessary to avoid a language deemed offensive to the audience. The oral tradition critic Solomon Iyasere recalls his experience as follow:

... On another occasion I attended a story-telling session at which 'the Murder of Adesua' was again presented by semi-professional artist-critics, but before a different audience. This affected the rendition itself, the critical comments, and the recreation that followed the initial recital. When the entire performance has ended, I asked the chief performer the reasons for these adaptations and inconsistencies. He chuckled and replied, can't you see, there are too many old women here tonight. (325)

Oral literature is a communal art whose criticism is at the mercy of all the members of the audience. In fact the participation of the audience in the performance is strongly recommended. Any audience member can challenge the artist about the meaning or a riddle, proverb, expression, or action. It is an invitation to join voices and experiences to create something for a communal good. *Woman of the Aeroplanes* can be said to fit this description.

Arlene A. Elder emphasizes the influence of African oral tradition on Laing's literary works as she writes: "... Laing, like Okri, weaves his narratives into strong, organic web of African oral tradition and demonstrates through his marvelous characters and unexpectedly related geographical spaces the necessity of recognizing similarities rather than differences" (56). Elsewhere Elder points out that "Laing wishes us to participate in the creation of his text by supplying our own meanings for some of his words" (57). This confirms that Laing is a storyteller who understands the art of storytelling. This is why I don't think Laing simply "wishes us to participate...", rather, he demands us to participate in his creation. During the performance of any oral art, the audience ceases to be mere spectators and become accomplices of the production by either voicing their agreement or disagreement with what the performer say. In *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, some statements are created in such a way that they seem to invite responses from the listeners: "Then the machine itself went off, with Atta's face grave and broken; his heart had been made useless before Pokuaa again, but he would plod on, ampa" (96). "Believe me, ampa" LT said with conviction, "if I had my way all courts would be in the sky..." (104). "All their tongues stretched different inches, but Kwame Atta's was the longest,

anokwere” (107). The words “ampá” and “anokwere” mean true. I believe this a challenge to the audience’s sense of imagination, for the narrator did not need to add them to his statements. Even though the readers of *Woman of the Aeroplanes* don’t really have the opportunity for a direct objection or agreement with these statements, I believe there is an attempt by Laing to stage a confrontation between the narrator and his audience in a way that is reminiscent of the performances by storytellers in African oral traditions. Storytelling is a conversational activity between the audience and the performer; people in the audience can interrupt the performer for questions or objections. As Solomon O. Iyasere explains: The performance of one artist would be listened to carefully, and if another expert present thought the performer had made a mistake, he would cut in with words such as:

I beg to differ; that is not correct.
You have deviated from the path of accuracy ...
Ire was not Ogun’s home town.
Ogun only called there to drink palm-wine...

Thus interrupted, the performer might try to defend himself by pleading his own knowledge or suggesting that others should respect his rendition:

Let not the civet-cat trespass on the cane rat’s track.
Let that cane rat avoid trespassing on the civet-cat’s path.
Let each animal follow the smooth stretch of its own road. (323)

The performer reminds the challenger that there are always different versions of the same story and that instead of interfering with his rendition, the latter simply present his version. Similar interplays can also be located in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*. For

instance, when Bobby Maclean challenged Kwame Atta about his English, the latter says, “O I assure you that it is English I’m speaking, but it’s an enriched version, ye see” (85). Atta’s response means that there are many versions of English. Through this interplay, Laing pokes fun at the linguistic purists who sought to keep the English language as homogenous as they could. Thus the recurrence of pidgin, the linguistic mixtures, and other linguistic manipulations in *Woman of the Aeroplanes* is meant to accomplish the same purpose. We recall, however, that this is what earned Laing most of the criticisms against him, ranging from dismissal of works as too playful to carry a serious political message to complaints about the difficulties critics encounter when they attempt to assess them, as discussed earlier.

Elder responds to these criticisms by pointing out that even though Laing’s synthesis of oral and literary forms may make him a difficult writer to read, the reasons are to be found in his double role as Trickster/author and his playful creation of risky comic elements in his texts (56). This is a strategy that works for Laing, for it enables him to make fun of the issues confronting postcolonial Ghana. Laing has been unambiguous about his disagreement with social realist writers whose denunciation of the socio-political decadence in postcolonial Africa is straightforward. So his double role as Trickster/author and his playfulness are employed as subtle means for avoiding direct confrontation. Elsewhere Elder acknowledges the relevance of this strategy by stating that, “the Tricksterish fun of Laing’s wordplay, semi-helpful glossaries, and linguistic quirkiness may be read as an oblique response to the long-lasting debate about the ‘appropriate’ language for African writing...” (57). Nevertheless, Elder insists that

Laing's innovative, sometimes socially directed, sometimes self-referential, wordplay, with its 'deliberate nonfluency' must necessarily distract us from his plots.

Laing seeks to end the "either or" debate by proposing an inclusive one through his linguistic hybridity. For him it is no longer about the appropriate language for African literature; rather it is about the language that is appropriate for all the citizens of the world because the cultural, economic, political and racial dialogues he envisions require such a language. It is a language made of different languages of the world and which belongs to no race or nation. This language epitomizes Laing's yearning for a hybrid identity, as he makes it clear in the following humorous but serious excerpt:

I am the elephant with a difference, for they cannot tell whether I am an African elephant or an Indian elephant, nor even a third breed which was born in anyany zoo, that place of the bestial soul- once removed; my trunk costs nothing to call, and whenever the Prime Minister wants me, it is not the telephone he/she uses but radar; I am usually a dangerous entry into the airspace of my own country, I slip in the spray of water created by my own trunk, a very expensive trunk lined with gold from Obuasi and diamond from Akwatia. I have come to this machine to try hard to find out whether the honorable Prime Minister is really a racist or not. ... (97)

The passage above emphasizes the purpose of Kojo Laing's texts; that is the creation of a hybrid identity that is representative of the multiple identities of the contemporary world, and where all the differences inherent to these identities are preserved and celebrated. This process, according to Bhabha, "prevents identities from assuming primordial polarities". Thus, Laing confirms his indebtedness to Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity that "entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (5). Like Bhabha, Laing's message in *Woman of the Aeroplanes* is that the

solution to the polarities which exist in human relations lies in the hybridization of languages, cultures, identities, and races. Commenting on Laing's intervention in the language debate in the postcolonial Africa, Ngaboh-Smart has pointed out the stark differences that exist between Laing and his predecessors. According Ngaboh-Smart, Laing has entered the linguistic debate in order to challenge the nationalists' hope that the revalorization of the indigenous languages will be the solution to the linguistic imperialism in postcolonial Africa. He argues that Laing sees "the unresolved clash of languages in modern Ghana as a source of strength, a criticism of the type of linguistic particularity Ngugi advocates in his seminal nationalist work *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*". This, Ngaboh-Smart insists, is Laing's way of countering the African nationalist aesthetics' view that there was a pre-given authentic African identity that could be retrieved for the purpose of African renewal. This, Ngaboh-Smart insists, "is evident in the way Laing globalizes the Ghanaian linguistic experience, as well as in his disavowal of identity primarily constructed on indigenous structures" (98).

As Ngaboh-Smart has demonstrated, Laing's novels show his awareness that Africa can no longer afford linguistic and cultural insularity in a world that has become more inclusive. Thus, Laing's desire for unification is not only linguistic and cultural but also racial. Since the democratization of family genetics proposed by Kwame Atta, the inventor, allows anybody to inherit parts of bodies from anybody, the inhabitants of Tukwan can carry body parts from different races in one body:

There was a blast of freedom from free-mixed bodies and worlds, ampa... the little knots of time pulls ropes of people ahead, so that what Babo thought he was doing with his own elbow was really Gilmour's elbow; for the blast of freedom came without warning, and could come in bits: one hole from one nose measured exactly like another, some nostril metamorphosis. Shebelda adjusted a jaw that she suddenly shared with Aba, even though she had just wanted Pokuaa's jaw. Could Jack fit his quiet wailing into someone else's heart, perhaps someone like Amoa with vast holes of youthful and reincarnated joy.... (66-67)

Here Laing demonstrates that even differences in physical appearance can be overcome. The physical integration between Ghanaians and Scots is meant to ridicule racism that emphasizes the difference of appearance between Europeans and Africans. Laing's message is that the difference in physical appearance does not make anyone less human than the other. This is what Sala reminded the young red-haired Donald Shearer after he made the latter wear the corset: "Never forget when you grow up that you played with a boy called, Sala, with a different skin, and with as much play in this skin as you have in yours, never forget!" Later, after playing with Iain Sala repeats the same lecture to him: "Never forget that when you grow up, it is your duty to remember this day of playing as often as you can, and that however different my food or my worship is, we are the same" (68). Sala is using the corset to bring all the children of the world together.

Laing's focus of his anti-racist message on youth echoes his overall existentialist belief that what one becomes is not predetermined, and that people are not born racists but become racists. This proves that racism is not an innate attitude; rather it is a social construct designed to justify the will of one race to oppress and exploit the other. This is exemplified by the natural and innocent interaction between Sala, Donald, and Iain. Thus, Laing subtly delivers his most powerful anti-racist message by challenging all the

theories that were used to justify the dehumanization and subjugation of the Africans both through slavery and colonialism. For Laing the binary opposition between white and black is man-made and can be overcome through the adoption of a colorless skin:

Come laddie, if they are hounding you, jump out of your skin and huddle blue or green, anything to escape from the white or the black, for I am a good purple colorless Scotsman myself! O I know that you have had a whole binful of Presbyterians who were racist at the same time, for just when you think they would be allies against the Sassenachs, then they would betray you: they would see the beautiful black in you as if you didn't exist, and then they would create some dubious connotations around your skin with their instantly primitive minds. Laddie, these men of the surface of the skin are the last primitives of this earth! Stop running, stop running, so you can hear more... (80)

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon has already offered a similar analysis of the untenable situation of black people in a world that used lies to deny them their humanity. In "the Fact of Blackness", a chapter devoted to his theory of Black and White relations in the world, he summarizes his encounter with the White world through an innocent white boy as he writes:

Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened! Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible... The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a nigger, it's cold, the nigger is shivering, the nigger is shivering because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the nigger, the nigger is shivering with cold, that cold that goes through your bones, the handsome little boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage, the little white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: Mama, the nigger's going to eat me up. (112 – 114)

Both Fanon and Laing are adamant about their indignation about the attitude of the world that made it difficult for a human being to embrace another human being

because of their racial differences. Their concerns were and are still the concerns of many postcolonial African writers; this makes it difficult for critics to sustain claims that Laing's novels deflect from political issues. However, Laing, unlike Fanon and many of his predecessors, is playful, humorous, and less radical in his indictment of racism. In the above humorous excerpt, Laing pursues his call for hybridity, which he views for the moment as the solution to the deceptive racial divide. The colorless skin envisioned will be the result of mixtures from many skin colors of the world. Like the gigantic language Laing is inventing in his novels, the hybrid race could put an end to all the skin-color based politics that makes it possible for a man to hate another man for his skin, as is denounced in the passage below:

Yes Sonny, it was shocking to see Mothers' Union members hate a man for his skin, it was shocking to see professors of good Scottish universities claim that some skins were not equal to others and you could see that bestial and misplaced pride stiff on their faces. But of course their daughters would like you, for sensible ones among them would certainly want something greater than the skin... (80)

By emphasizing the lack consensus between older and younger generations on the issue of race, Laing seeks to expose the madness of racism by once more echoing Fanon's message in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

Color prejudice is nothing more than the unreasoning hatred of one race for another, the contempt of the stronger and richer peoples for those whom they consider inferior to themselves and the bitter resentment of those who are kept in subjugation and are so frequently insulted. As color is the most obvious outward manifestation of race it has been made the criterion by which men are judged, irrespective of their social or educational attainments. The light-skinned races have come to despise all those of a darker color, and the dark-skinned peoples

will no longer accept without protest the inferior position to which they have been relegated. (118)

However, whereas Laing appears to be more optimistic about a peaceful solution, Fanon saw no way out of the racial quagmire. Fanon argues that Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other, that other will remain the theme of his actions. For Fanon, the recognition of Blacks by Whites must be won through struggle; he believes that the individual who has not staked his life does not attain the truth of this recognition (216 – 219). Against Fanon's logic of confrontation as the sole remedy to racial problems, Laing proposes the merging of the races into an undistinguishable race, the one nobody can claim, thereby putting an end to the complex of superiority and inferiority that has poisoned race relations in the world. The success of this complex initiative depends on the willingness of each party involved to embrace the other with sincerity. Indeed, Laing proposes a triple integration between Africa and the West through Tukwan and Levensvale. To make this process easy, before their departure for Levensvale, the leaders of Tukwan have decreed that everybody should "reveal the secrets of what he or she was doing before being pulled into the strange time of this village" (19). Everybody needs to confess and come clean before the trip. These confessions are very important because they pave the way to forgiveness in order to ensure a true reconciliation. Thus, the residents of Tukwan want to forgive each other on the local level before they embark on their mission to Levensvale. In the same spirit, during one of their conferences in Levensvale, the lord Provost Tommy, the

highest personality of the town confesses his ancestors crimes and seeks forgiveness from the visitors. Tommy regrets his ancestors' involvement in colonization as well as racism that underlies it:

... and I still can't believe that my ancestors were involved with colonies and other cruelties... I weep for their damned and broken souls... but since most of them have improved by reincarnating themselves into us here, then I have hope in the future. I am bored with racism. It's so primitive, it shuts out so much, it dehumanizes the doer and the done so much that I find it disgusting for a man or woman to show its stench and then go home and behave like a loving father brother or lover, or like a god fearing person. The good loving racist father... (88)

Laing is pushing for repentance and reconciliation through the power of reincarnation. The reincarnation of the racists offers them an opportunity to confess their crimes in order to forge a new relationship based on the acknowledgment of a common humanity with their victims. The confessions are proofs that people are ready to start anew. The message is that individual and collective identities are constructed through contact and exchange with the outside world. The visit to Levensvale has created strong bonds between the guests and their hosts, which would later enable the formation of new identities out of existing identities: "It was as if identities so different, had become one, and thus the parting meant something being wrenched. 'It is the dignity of the parting we're after... "(154). This is the kind of union Laing promotes in his novels – the union between different cultures, languages, races and identities in order to create new hybrid wholes. People from Levensvale are not happy to see their guests leave because of the friendship and love that have come to exist between them and their guests. Mackie

wishes Atta could invent something ‘to open Pokuaa’s heart to either of us standing here...’ (156).

Laing’s desire to bring the opposites together is also seen in the religious domain, as Pastor Korner Mensah declares” We have churchified the shrine and we have enshrined the church” (10). This is a union between the church and the shrine, two utterly opposed belief systems. Laing is appealing for the abolition of the barriers between African traditional religion and Christianity. According to the Pastor “the temporary union between the two religions was approved by Kofi Senya to help make the coming journey easier for the soul” (10). However, a genuine reconciliation between these two faiths is achieved in Levensvale after the visitors have had the opportunity to indict the leaders of the so-called established religions for the role of the church in racism and demand their mea culpa. The strongest condemnation of the church is delivered by Pastor Korner Mensah during the business conference:

Yes, canon, yes, but help us with the established churches: tell us how much blood they have on their hands, how many betrayals they have caused; please take some statistics of the number of priests that have been racists over the centuries; let us know how often the churches have turned their backs on their true duties. I had a brother once living in the land of London, and he went faithfully to a church for three months; and for these three months, the priest never said a word to him, and once this priest even moved off ostentatiously when it reached my brother’s turn to shake his hand. Ewurade Nyankopon! And such a creature has a naming called priest! ... And our two towns must give each other the greatest thanks for having none of this terrible nonsense with us, none of this horror, none of this assault on the color of the soul, none of this sly tearing of the spirit! (145 – 146)

Laing believes that the duty of his generation is to make racism a thing of the past because it is too primitive. For him the Manichean relation between blacks and white

must be replaced by a relationship governed by love and reciprocal recognition. Laing seems to impose on the two renegade towns what French people call “le droit a l’oubli” (right to oblivion) in order to make reconciliation possible. Thus, Laing enables these towns to escape their past through reincarnation, which means death of racism and end of subjugation of one race by the other, and the beginning of a life free from hatred. Laing uses reincarnation to establish the utopian world he envisions, as he makes it clear, “in terms of hope Tukwan is a realizable utopia”.

Thus the flight motif that controls *Woman of the Aeroplanes* exemplifies Laing’s commitment to inter - human meetings. Tukwan, the imaginary banished town means travel in Akan. “Tu-kwan” means to go away or to take a trip; in other words, to acknowledge the existence of other human beings in other areas of the world. In fact, in Laing’s universe traveling goes beyond discovery of other places to become a means of reconnection between the fragmented parts of the world. Flying becomes an indispensable means through which Laing experiments his vision of the world, for it enables him to transcend the geographic obstacles that contributed to the separation of the people of the world. The inhabitants of Tukwan believe that the future of mankind resides in the interaction between all people of the world: “This showed that the future should be the humanity of travel inner, travel outer” (18). In other words, there is a need for man to explore his inner self and the external world, to understand himself and the world around him; in short, to embrace the familiar and the unfamiliar. Flying makes this freedom to inner and outer possible. It tears down the walls of divisions between people, their continents, and cultures. Laing should be viewed as localist, continentalist, but most

importantly, as globalist, because his literary works seek to re- unite the fragmented entities on local, continental, and global levels. Thus, he repudiates tribalism that seeks tribal superiority, radical nationalism that is too much concerned with national identity, racism that is concerned with racial purity, as well as all the markers of divisions in human relations. Tukwan and Levensvale are the prototypes of the world Laing envisions, for in these invisible towns, there is no racism: “And our two towns must give each other the greatest thanks for having none of this terrible nonsense with us, none of this horror, none of this assault on the color of the soul, none of this sly tearing of the spirit” (145 - 46).

Laing’s intention *Woman of the Aeroplanes* is to transform all the oppositions into juxtapositions in the service of humanity. As a result we see the formation of all kinds of syncretism: the African religion and Christianity have merged: “the church has been enshrined and the shrine has been churchified” in Tukwan as a blessing for the trip to Levensvale, and in Levensvale Pastor Mensah has created the “new Necklace Church” (67). Another most striking proof of religious syncretism is the image of God who is described as “an African with a tama and a tammy in his hands” (151). Per the glossary ‘tama’ is a waist beads and “tammy” is a Scottish hat. There is science and magic syncretism as exemplified in “stupidity machine” invented by the Kwame Atta but given a soul by the shrine master Kofi Senya: “Some of the soul I have given it, has to be renewed”. “Calm down Kwame Atta, calm down, I am not reducing your science, I am augmenting it, I am making it longer and stronger in time” (151). Based on these syncretisms, it could be argued that Laing’s new man, new culture, new religion, new

science, and new world will spring from the juxtaposition of the opposites. Juxtaposition enables the participation of each entity without ever losing its originality to the other. It also exposes their differences, but at the same time shows that despite those differences, they can work together for the well-being of the world.

In *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, Laing does not call for the creation of things from scratch; instead, he encourages creations from the best of existing opposites such as old and new, traditional and modern, spiritual and scientific. Throughout the novel, Laing's major preoccupation has been the creation of new worlds out of the old. He believes a new Ghana and a new Africa are possible through the modernization of the traditional. In an interview with Maja Adewale Pierce, Laing has called for modernization of traditional practices such as pouring libation and expressed his admiration for the fitters, welders, and bicycle repairers of Abossey Okai or Suame Magazin, who "can repair and even design a lot of things that are not indigenous to Ghana." A similar intellectual agility is to be expected from educated professionals, including the African writer:

I always get a bit wary of the colonial period being given a social and psychological weight that it doesn't deserve. The process applies to the whole history of different peoples in Ghana. If you go the villages you will see what I mean, and you can relate what you see there to the intellectual in Legon or Kumasi. This is where I would say that, yes, politics is important but looking for solutions you need to go further back, beyond the political, especially the colonial or the imperial period. This is a mistake that politicians make. If you're looking for symptoms of a people's stagnation, you've got to go deeper within the psyche.... This is where one gets a little desperate because in this world the only way to move forward is to be extremely self-conscious about finding ways of changing the mind. And the solutions do exist. (qtd. in Zabus 49)

In light of this statement it can be argued that Laing's utopia is realizable because it has been created from things that already existed. For instance, Tukwan and Levensvale did not originate from spatial and temporal vacuum. Both towns became invisible only after they had been banished by the major cities around them for refusing to accept unchanged the traditions of the ancestors. Thus Laing's utopia is a catalyst that makes what was deemed very impossible possible. In *Woman of the Aeroplanes* science and magic have come together, souls have been recycled, church and shrine have joined hands, technology and human beings have teamed up, tradition and modernity have embraced each other, languages have accepted a complementary cohabitation, black people and white people have accepted interracial unions, and most importantly postcolonial Africa and West have initiated a new relationship that is based on reciprocity, fairness, and understanding of their common humanity.

For Laing if Tukwan is possible, new Ghana, Africa, and world are possible; however, he warns that all will depend on their commitment to doing what is needed to get there. Therefore, what made the extraordinary life of Tukwan possible is not the utopia but the willingness of its inhabitants to accept cross-cultural interchange, modernization, science, and technology for the betterment of all. The destiny of Tukwan is in the hands of its hardworking geniuses such as Pokuaa, Kofi Senya, Kwame Atta, and Kwaku de Babo, respectively business woman and owner of the two aeroplanes, shrine master, inventor, and scribe. These characters are the *raison d'être* of Tukwan because without their ingenuity the utopia will be unrealizable. Pokuaa made the business trip to Levensvale possible, thereby enabling Tukwan to gain its humanity where its future lies:

“she was prepared to take anything up into the sky to let the town prosper” (5). Kofi Senya, the shrine master uses his spiritual powers to tame science and technology and puts it in the service of his people. Kwame Atta has invented a stupidity machine that knows everybody’s secret and without his inventions Tukwan cannot break history; in other words, it cannot achieve its humanity. The hundredth house that is needed for change to occur in the town rests on his willingness to invent:

The mist made the myth easier, ampa; for as the town grew, it didn’t: the houses grew into forties fifties seventies eighties and nineties, but created a dam of history when they got stuck at ninety-nine. It was a shame that the pressure to break this history rested with the bad twin, who was obviously one of the biskitisers of life. (6)

Kwaku de Babo was the chief secretary of the town, and he wrote everything with his pen and his chalk – parts of the book were slate – even when there were no meetings koraa. He is also the Tukwan’s historian and has been charged by the ancestors with modernizing all the proverbs from all the tribes. (2, 27) These different actors with the help of other residents work tirelessly to fulfill Tukwan’s dream; that is to achieve humanity through modernization. For Laing nothing other than Ghanaians’ commitment matters in the search for solutions to their cultural, political and economic challenges. Therefore, instead of endlessly blaming the colonial intrusion in Africa for all the problems and attempting to resuscitate the pre-colonial Africa, Ghana and Africa will benefit from accepting the irreversible march towards modernity. In Tukwan once the one hundredth house was built, mortality came back, history ceased running in any

directions, and time ceased to be cyclical. Pokuaa who could not have children became pregnant. Laing sums up this inescapable truth in the following extract:

Kofi Senya would often literally run away from such truths, hoping that moving to a new land would somehow stop the inexorable drift towards mortality, and ... Ewurade!... freedom within time. His pipe was choked with remorse: both towns would break the immortal through a process they couldn't stop, simply because they thought that was the only alternative available. Only the mad would find a way to march back into time, as if there was not enough energy to do anything else... (133)

What is obvious in the novel is that Laing's use of utopia, magic, and hybridity has created a world of limitless possibilities for his characters to fulfill their wildest desires. Most importantly, it has enabled the novel to propose solutions to real social, cultural, economic, political, and religious problem on local, continental, and global levels. This, I believe, qualifies *Woman of the Aeroplanes* as a magical realist text. However, because I am also aware that behind the novel's utopian world, marvelous actions, hybridity, and magic, there are committed people like Kofi Senya, Pokuaa, Kwame Atta, Kwaku de Babo, Korner Mensah in Tukwan and Lord Provost, Mackie and others in Levensvale who provided the necessary impetus to the novel's accomplishment, the appropriate label for *Woman of the Aeroplanes* should be "existentialist magic realism".

CHAPTER III

BORN TO DIE: READING BEN OKRI'S "ABIKU" IN *THE FAMISHED ROAD* AS A PARABLE OF THE POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN CONDITION

Unlike in the previous chapter where utopia was the basis for magical realism, it is the African traditional belief system that offers Ben Okri the fertile ground for the production of his magical realist narrative in *The Famished Road*. Set at an intersection where the forest, the road, and Madam Koto's bar meet, *The Famished Road* revisits the abiku myth in the Yoruba traditional belief system. This choice of using tradition enables the author to assert the survival of African worldview as well as depict the current social and political situations in postcolonial Nigeria and Africa as a whole. In an interview with Jane Wilkinson, Ben Okri, the author of *The Famished Road* and Booker Prize-winner, explains his choice of the African belief system as the basis of his narrative:

Because if one were going to be investigative, one would probably say that a true invasion takes place not when a society has been taken over by another society in terms of its infrastructures, but in terms of its mind and its dreams and its myths, and its perception of reality. If the perception of reality has not been fundamentally, internally altered, then the experience itself is just transitional. There are certain areas of the African consciousness which will remain inviolate. Because the world-view it is that makes a people survive. (86)

Mythic Realism

Even though colonialism may have destroyed Africa physically, for Okri, it has not been able to affect African spiritual values, which he thinks must be taken into

account in our effort to make sense of the universe. His comments to the interviewer on December 12, 1990 suggest the limitations of colonialism: its inability to completely alter the spiritual and the mythic. Thus, Okri's fusion of myth and reality in his novels can be viewed as a way of showing the resilience of African spirituality as well as repudiating the tendency to impose the Euro-centric realistic view of the world, which he terms "the linear, scientific, imprisoned, tight, mean-spirited, and unsatisfactory description of reality and human beings" (qtd. in Ogunsanwo 40). Okri's Booker Prize winning novel, *The Famished Road*, encourages cohabitation between myth and reality, the ordinary and the extraordinary, the rational and the irrational, rejecting any single-minded interpretation of the world. Okri's works promote the notion that there is a multitude of ways of looking at the world, and that all of them are equally valid, as he explains:

Everyone's reality is superstitious. It's a simple fact you can't get away from. The scientist's view of the world is superstitious because it is provisional and a description of reality. The atheist's is superstitious, just the same way because it excludes. The person who has got a very strong religious belief is superstitious because their belief constructs the universe. Everyone's universe, everyone's perception of the world and of time is unique to them. It's a world in itself. It's a complete world. (Ogunsanwo 40)

By fusing reality and myth and allowing them to coexist on equal grounds, Okri succeeds in reasserting the relevance of African spiritual belief in the century of extraordinary scientific and technological development. He also proves that the African world view has outlived colonialism, despite the powerful destructive means the latter had employed against the former. In fact, the destruction of African worldview was crucial to the success of colonialism; this is what brought missionaries to the center stage

of the colonial enterprise. In the colonial missionary schools, indigenous students were forced to renounce their beliefs dismissed by missionaries as backward. Though Okri's return to the mythic narrative may be viewed as a root-seeking quest of the African self like other African writers who have come to be known as nativists, in reality it is a way of demonstrating the limits of the colonial mission in Africa with regard to its determination to obliterate African spiritual values and replace them with Western ones.

In *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Source Book*, Pushpa Naidu Parekh and Siga Fatima Jagne observe that Okri's fusion of the realistic and mythical realms is common in postcolonial literature and has a very clear purpose.

They write:

By extending the scope of his novels to include mythical dimensions, Okri participates in another redirection that is characteristic of contemporary postcolonial literature: he effectively redirects his narrative strategy to minimize the significance of the colonial master and maximize the experiences of the postcolonial subject. Instead of focusing on the colonial destruction of traditional African societies and cultures, therefore, he draws attention to their survival, albeit a precarious survival often lived on the threshold between life and death. (367 – 368)

Okri refuses to accept the notion that the colonizer's culture has totally overwhelmed colonized peoples' cultures. Instead, his works emphasizes the hybridity inherent in postcolonial cultures in order to show that colonized cultures have survived colonialism. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin contend that most post-colonial writing has concerned itself with the hybridized nature of post-colonial culture as strength rather than a weakness. They argue that:

Such writing focuses on the fact that the transaction of the post-colonial world is not a one - way process in which oppression obliterates the oppressed or the colonizer silences the colonized in absolute terms. In practice, it rather stresses the mutuality of the process. It lays emphasis on the survival even under the most potent oppression of the distinctive aspects of the culture of the oppressed, and shows how these become an integral part of the new formations which arise from the clash of cultures characteristic of imperialism. (183)

In addition to showing the endurance of African culture, Ben Okri engages myth and social realities in *The Famished Road* to lay bare the suffering of the masses, the political struggle, and the political corruption in Nigeria on the eve of the country's independence from Britain. Although the novel is set in set in Nigeria before independence, its themes and argument are decidedly postcolonial. For example, the novel makes several allusions to political parties campaigning for elections, as in the excerpt where Azaro expresses his confusion about the promises of the latter:

It became quite confusing to hear both parties virtually promise the same things. The Party of the Rich talked of prosperity for all, good roads, electricity, and free education. They called the opposition thieves, tribalists, and bandits. At their rally they said, everyone will be fed, all questions will be answered.

That evening the van of the Party of the Poor paraded our street. They too blared music and made identical claims. They distributed leaflets and made their promises in four languages. When the two vans, each parked with armed bodyguards, passed one another, they competed with the amount of noise they could generate.... The two van clashed twice that evening. We kept expecting some sort war to break out, but both parties seemed restrained by the healthy respect they had developed for one another. The truth was that the time hadn't yet arrived. (390)

This excerpt suggests that there is already a political party in power (the Party of the Rich) and an opposition (Party of the Poor) that is trying to unseat the former. During the colonial rule, no party was authorized and the colonized were not associated to the

management of the colonies. Therefore the existence of two opposing parties proves that the Nigeria of *The Famished Road* is postcolonial, where the local elites are already in power. There are other passages in the novel which also point to postcolonial Nigeria, especially, the allusions to coups by the military: “There will be changes. Coups. Soldiers everywhere” (478). All these references are indicative of a Nigeria that is already independent. They very well describe the Nigeria we have known from its independence in 1960 to this day. The setting of the novel in the pre-colonial era is a deliberate choice by Okri, who, it could be argued wants to make a statement that the umbilical cord that exists between the pre-colonial Nigeria and postcolonial Nigeria has still not been cut. It could also be argued that the choice of this setting is necessitated by Okri’s desire to include the mythic dimension in his narrative, which allows time and space to enjoy some elasticity. As this dissertation demonstrates, history is very important in Okri’s narrative, but it is conflated with myth. With regard to history, Azaro’s predicament is caused by the pact he made with his spirit-companions before he was born into the real world. What makes this pact believable is the belief in the abiku myth, which is the basis of Okri’s narrative.

The Famished Road juxtaposes two realms – the realistic and the mythic, the natural and the supernatural, the physical and the metaphysical, thus confirming its status as magic realist text. Wendy Faris defines magical realism as a mode of narration primarily characterized by five features:

First, the text contains an “irreducible element” of magic that is unexplainable according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated by modern, post-enlightenment empiricism, ...; second, the descriptions in magical realism

detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the reader experiences the closeness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds; and, finally, magical realist texts question received ideas about time, space and identity. (167 – 173)

Several instances in *The Famished Road* exemplify these features. For the first feature, take, for instance, the rituals performed by Azaro's parents in their effort to appease him and get him to choose to remain in the real world. There is also the car washing ritual organized by Madam Koto:

The herbalist sprinkled his complex potions and his corrosive liquids on the car. He emptied half a bottle of precious agogoro on the bonnet. And after the ritual washing was complete, after the old people present, the powerful ones, the chiefs, and the cultists, had made their libations, the gathering got down to the momentous business of getting drunk. (381)

The performance of these rituals implies a belief in the supernatural and the irrational, which are beyond the realm of the laws of the universe. At the same time, these rituals are related to the real world, for they are performed on things of the rational world. Both Azaro and Madam Koto's car exist materially. This very well demonstrates the second feature of magical realism listed above. The third feature is also present throughout the novel. The reader of *The Famished Road* sees supernatural and natural events unfold causing him/her to become skeptical in regard to the veracity of the descriptions he or she is reading. In one specific instance, Azaro describes a scene where a mysterious girl appears in Madam Koto's house. Azaro is the only one to see the girl among all those present in the house. When he tells Madam Koto that he saw the girl wash the plates, she does not believe him and orders him to go and wash them instead:

‘Where have been?’ she asked, shouting above the carpenter’s hammering.
‘I went to look for the girl.’
‘Which girl?’
‘The girl who was washing the plates.’
‘She stared at me as if I had turned into a fish, or as if I had gone mad.’
‘What plates?’
‘The plates in the backyard.’
She went out and looked and came back shouting.
‘Something is wrong with you,’ she said.

The hero of the novel Azaro epitomizes the fourth feature of magical realism. As an abiku he inhabits two worlds simultaneously. This is reflected in the setting where there is a constant interface of the realistic world and the mythic one. Many a time in the novel, Azaro experiences both worlds, as in the market place episode, where he finds himself walking among real people and the spirits:

I shut my eyes and when I opened them again I saw people who walked backwards, a dwarf who got about on two fingers, men upside-down with baskets of fish on their feet, women who had breasts on their backs, babies strapped to their chests, and beautiful children with three arms. I saw a girl amongst them who had eyes at the side of her face, bangles of blue copper round her neck, and who was more lovely than the forest flowers.... That was the first time I realized it wasn’t just humans who came to the marketplaces of the world. Spirits and other beings come there too. They buy and sell, browse and investigate. (15 – 16)

In another passage Azaro describes how he finds himself shifting between the real world and the mythic world: “One moment I was in the room and the next moment I found myself wandering the night roads. I had no idea how I had gotten outside. I walked on the dissolving streets and among the terrestrial bushes. The air was full of riddles” (307). Okri successfully brings the real world and the mythic world so close that Azaro does not know when the shifts occur between them. In fact, he does not oscillate between

the two worlds willingly; he is at the mercy of these back and forth movements. This takes us to the fifth feature of magic realism. Critics have opined that Azaro's sudden and involuntary shifts from the realistic world to the mythical serve to dismantle historical time in the mind of the reader. In *Strategic Transformation in Nigeria Writing*, Ato Quayson writes:

Throughout all these myriad of events, no specific time indices are given. All the time indices are vague references to "that night", "the next morning", "during the time" and so on. Subsequently, the narrative makes concessions to temporality by referring to a sequence of days such as "Saturday" and "Sunday" as a frame for the occurrence of certain events. It is clear that the narrative imposes a framework of temporality on the narrated events rather reluctantly, for, as it progresses temporal indices become less and less prominent. (128)

Okri makes his intention to question received ideas about time, space and identity very explicit as he opens the novel with a mythic statement: "In the beginning there was a river" (3). As this dissertation will show in the coming sections, amongst the three novels under discussion, *The Famished Road's* narrative is the only one to reflect almost all the features of magic realism suggested by Faris.

The novel's protagonist, Azaro, is an "abiku", a spirit child who dies and returns repeatedly. In *Fertile Crossing*, discussing Okri's two abiku novels, *The Famished Road and Songs of Enchantment*, Pietro Deandrea writes: "The pivotal novelty of the two books is Azaro's nature: he is an abiku – a spirit-child believed by Yoruba lore to be "any child who dies and is reborn several times into the same family" (48). It is worth noting that the abiku phenomenon exists in other parts of Africa but under a different name. My own ethnic group "Tem" in central Togo shares the abiku myth with the

difference that in our case the spirit child takes the name of the herbalist whose intervention convinces him or her to stay in the real world. The protagonist of the novel Azaro continues to be haunted by his spirit-brothers because he has violated the pacts he made with them before his birth, as he explains:

As we approached another incarnation we made pacts that we would return to the spirit world at the first opportunity. We made these vows in fields of intense flowers and in the sweet-teasing moonlight of that world. Those of us who made such vows were known among the Living as abiku, spirit-children. Not all people recognize us. We were the ones who kept coming and going, unwilling to come to terms with life. We had the ability to will our deaths. Our pacts were binding. Those who broke their pacts were assailed by hallucinations and haunted by their companions. They would only find consolation when they returned to the world of the Unborn, the place of fountains, where their loved ones would be waiting for them silently. (4)

Azaro's tragedy is that even though he made those pacts with his spirit companions, he has decided to remain in the real world and be the only child of his poverty-stricken family. As a result, instead of bringing peace to his family, or "making happy the bruised face of the woman who would become his mother" (5) as he claims, he brings them endless suffering because his spirit brothers want him back. As it is shown in many instances in the novel, those brothers always try different tricks and even get Azaro in trouble in order to convince him to give up the material world as in the following exchange:

'... Why don't you know? Haven't you seen what lies ahead of you?'
'No.'

Then they showed me images which I couldn't understand. They showed me a prison, a woman covered with golden boils, a long road, pitiless sunlight, a flood, an earthquake, death.

'Come back to us, they said. 'We miss you by the river. You have deserted us. If you don't come back we will make your life unbearable.'

Azaro's family is more affected by his tragedy than he is himself, because whatever punishment his spirit companions reserve him, his parents end up paying a heavy price. When Azaro comes back from his near death experience, he learns that he has exhausted the energy and finances of his parents: "When I recovered, however, my parents had already spent too much money on me. They were in debt" (9). One would expect Azaro to be willing to give up the spirit by revealing his secrets and thereby stop bringing trouble to his parents. On the contrary, Azaro tells the reader that he was happy that the ceremony prescribed by the herbalist was never performed because his parents could not afford it:

Neither Mum nor Dad could afford another ceremony. And anyway they did not really want to believe that I was a spirit-child. And so time passed and the ceremony was never performed. I was happy. I didn't want it performed. I didn't want to entirely lose contact with that other world of light and rainbows and possibilities. I had buried my secrets early. I buried them in moonlight, the air alive with white moths. I buried my magic stones, my mirror, my special promises, my golden threads, objects of identity that connected me to the world of spirits. I buried them all in a secret place, which I promptly forgot. (9)

It follows that Azaro has chosen to belong to both worlds and manages to oscillate between them and sometimes live in the two dimensions simultaneously. Because of the vicissitude of the real world, he refuses to pledge total loyalty to it, but he wants to give hope to his parents for them to keep living. At the same time, he refuses to sever ties with

the spirit world because he wants to keep enjoying the supernatural powers that come with his loyalty to it. In his early childhood, whenever Mum praised him for his miracles and powers, he agreed but added: “For as long as my cord to other worlds remained intact, for as long as my objects were not found, this might continue to be true” (9). However, the paradox of Azaro’s situation is that his miracles and powers have not been able to end the suffering of his family. Mum and Dad have continued to languish in misery in the ghetto. Sometimes, their predicament is the direct consequence of Azaro’s involvement with the spirit worlds. For instance, when his spirit-companions caused him to break a blind old man’s window, his parents were forced to pay for the repair cost despite their meager financial resources. Azaro describes what happened after the window incident:

The room changed. The lights became tinged with red. Then to my amazement I saw the old man had two heads. One had good eyes and a gruesome smile of power. The other remained normal.

The blind old man: ‘come here, you abiku child, you stubborn spirit-child. You think you are powerful, eh? I am more powerful than you,’ the old man said, in a resonant, young man’s voice. Leave my son alone,’ Mum said before letting out a deafening high-pitched shriek...

When they have gone Mum got up and locked the door. Then she turned on me: ‘Why did you break their window, eh? Do you want to kill us? Don’t you see how poor we are, eh? Have you no pity on your father? Do you know how much glass costs, eh?’

‘I didn’t break it.’

‘Who did?’

‘The spirits.’

‘How can spirits break a window?’ Dad wondered.

‘I don’t know.’

‘You use these spirits as an excuse every time you do something bad, eh?’

Do you see what dangerous son you are? You will kill us, you know. You will kill us with your troubles. Look at what you’ve done. You let that blind old man come

into our room. Do you know what powers he has? Did you see the way he behaved? If he had caught you, only God knows what would have happened.’ (321 – 322)

This description sheds light on the chaos that reigns in the ghetto, where violence and justice are hardly separated. Azaro’s family’s poverty makes them powerless and susceptible to any abuse. When Mum says “you will kill us”, she alludes to how Azaro exposes them to the world. Their private space, their room which serves as living room and bedroom has been invaded by the old blind man and his family. Mum is unhappy because the invasion of her family’s private domain not only lays bare her family’s secrets but it makes them more vulnerable to the blind man’s occult powers. Mum is more worried about the latter than anything, for she insists on the fact that Azaro’s troubles will kill them. According to Azaro, the blind man possesses some supernatural powers, but he is the only one to see when the old man appears with two heads. However, Azaro seems to be less terrified by the old man’s power than Mum, who lacks the clairvoyance needed to access the supernatural world. Azaro is not disturbed by the old man’s bizarre appearance because his liminal existence enables him to perceive the material world and the supernatural world as normal. One of Okri’s particularity as a magical realist writer is that, unlike other magical realist texts studied in this dissertation, his texts present situations where the everyday and the supernatural are not separated from one another. In fact, as in the window incident above, *The Famished Road* contains several instances where Azaro interacts with the natural and the supernatural realms simultaneously, like in the following excerpt:

For a while, the three-headed spirit stayed silent. Dad was on his chair, polishing his boots. He looked at me furtively. I felt the frailty of parents, how powerless they really are. And because Dad said nothing to me, because he made no attempts to reach me, made no gestures towards me, did nothing to appease me, did not even attempt a smile at me, I listened to what the three-headed spirit was saying.

‘Your parents are treating you atrociously,’ he said. ‘Come with me. Your companions are desperate to embrace you. There is a truly wonderful feast awaiting your homecoming. They yearn for your lovely presence. You will be treated like a prince, which is what you are.....

Don’t fly away,’ the sprit said. ‘If you fly away I don’t know where you will land. There are many strange things here that devour the traveler. There are many spirit-eaters and monsters of the interspaces. Keep to the solid ground.’ Dad coughed, and I tripped over a green bump on the road. We traveled on.....
(326 -327)

Azaro shows compassion vis-a-vis his parents who lack clairvoyance to see beyond the material world. Because Azaro’s parents are blind in the spirit world, their private space is constantly violated by his spirit companions. However, what is noteworthy here is Azaro’s own powerlessness; in my view, he is a toothless bulldog, or a supernaturally gifted naive child who does not know how to make use of his powers to help his family and himself. Azaro does not control his own life and is constantly acted upon instead of acting. What the excerpt above also reveals is the meanness of Azaro’s companion spirits, whose ultimate aim is to cause unhappiness in the former’s family. The belief in the existence of spirits is abundant in many African societies; there are two types of spirits: the malevolent spirits that inhabits forests, bush and big trees and the benevolent spirits that are believed to mix with people but only visible to those with clairvoyance. Both types of spirits are said to be attracted to the market place, where they come, buy and sell like normal people. Sometimes they appear as humans in order to

mislead people like the naive young girl in Tutuola's *The Palm-wine Drinkard*, who could not resist the fake beauty of the skull masquerading as a handsome man. In this novel the narrator tells the adventure of a beautiful, naïve, and rebellious girl who is duped by a skull and taken to the forest as his wife. The girl is very beautiful; actually, she is the embodiment of beauty in the village. She has refused to marry all the suitors who have come to propose to her. One day, as she is selling in the village market she sees a very handsome man going around. Not knowing the man is a skull masquerading as a man; she falls in love with him and follows him. She only realizes her mistake when they enter the forest where the man is from. But it is too late; the handsome man returns all the body parts he borrowed and becomes a skull. The lady is held prisoner. She will later be freed by the Drinkard. Likewise, in *The Famished Road*, Azaro describes a similar experience:

I was following a beautiful woman with a blue head. She moved in cadenzas of golden light. She floated on the wind of a royal serenity. Superimposed on distant plangency of Mum praying in the dark, the woman turned and beckoned me. I followed her smile and listened to the fugal birds. She drew my spirit on to fountains of light and lilac music and abiku variations. The air was faintly scented with resinous smoke and incense, flavoured with the fruit of guavas and cherries and crushed pineapples. I walked behind the woman for a long time, walking to the tunes of alto voices beneath cypress trees..... Mum took me home over the mud and wreckage of the street, over the mild deluge, under an arpeggio of watery stars. She was silent. I smelt the gutters and the rude plaster of the corroded houses. Then all I was left with was a world drowning in poverty, a mother-of-pearl moon, and the long darkness before dawn. (308)

Like Tutuola's naïve girl, Azaro is lured to the spirit world by a spirit who appears to him in a form of a beautiful woman. Tutuola's girl followed the skull because she couldn't resist his beauty, and also believed he was a real man. Likewise, Azaro

cannot resist the woman with a blue head's beauty. However, unlike the young girl in Tutuola's novel, Azaro is a victim of his own extraordinary powers, which give him access to the invisible world. Because he cannot resist the wonders of the invisible world, he is constantly in danger of being abducted. In the African traditional belief system the threat that the spirit world poses to the real world is taken very seriously. Thus, people are advised against roaming around areas that are believed to be inhabited by spirits. Some disappearances and drowning of people have been linked to spirits; in case of drowning, people who are believed to have been lured by the spirits into the river are buried on the bank of that river followed by rituals in order to appease the spirits. In this case, most victims are said to possess supernatural powers that make them fall for the wonders of the spirit world. Azaro's misfortune lies not only in his supernatural powers but in his refusal to cut the umbilical cord that links him to the spirit world.

Postcolonial Nigeria as Abiku

Azaro's situation parallels the situation in postcolonial Nigeria. The umbilical cord between Nigeria and her former colonizers manifests itself in the persistence of oppression and exploitation of poor people by the new rulers of the country. Azaro epitomizes the current Nigerian politicians who come to power with no social and political programs that can uplift their people. Instead, because of the incongruous pacts they signed with their neo colonial mentors to continue the exploitation and oppression of Africa, these politicians choose to ignore the legitimate aspirations of their people. They

behave as if they care about their people's well-being, but in reality they are serving the interests of their neocolonial masters who are as mischievous as Azaro's spirit companions. In *Azaro*, Okri revisits the themes of betrayal of trust and disillusionment that run through most postcolonial African novels.

In *The Famished Road*, Okri likens Nigeria to the "abiku" because the history of Nigeria is that of endless rebirths; like the abiku-child, Nigeria seems to be condemned to perpetual beginning. After its independence from Britain, the country has experienced civil wars (Biafra War), political instability, many coup-d'etats and dictatorships. The consequences of all these unfortunate events are the current political and economic stagnation in which the country is plunged. Such a rich country is wasted by endless disruptions. Even as I complete this dissertation, at the time when the world thinks Nigeria has overcome its violent past and that it can work for development and prosperity, another cycle of violence is threatening the relative peace in the country, thereby sabotaging once again the hopes and aspiration of people. In fact, the sudden emergence of the radical Islamic sect Boko Haram represents a setback for Nigerian government that is working hard toward stability and development. In *the Famished Road* Okri captures this back and forth very well through Ade, the other spirit-child, who declares that, "Our country is an abiku. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day, it will decide to remain. It will become strong. I won't see it" (478). Okri sees Nigeria as the land of political, social, and economic status quo. No development is possible because the land seems to be permanently plagued by violence, corruption, and destabilizations. Another reason Okri alludes to in the novel about the political, social,

and economic stagnation in Nigeria is the country's colonial past that continues to haunt her. Like Azaro, Nigeria's colonial past continues to haunt her in the form of neocolonialism; just like Azaro's mischievous spirit companions, the former colonial powers have not said their last word, as exemplified in their continued influence on postcolonial politics.

Azaro describes the circumstances of his separation from the spirit world as follows:

You are the mischievous one. You will cause no end of trouble. You have to travel many roads before you find the river of your destiny. This life of yours will be full of riddles. You will be protected and will never be alone. We all went down to the great valley. It was an immemorial day of festivals. Wondrous spirits danced around us to the music of gods, uttering golden chants and lapis lazuli incantations to protect our souls across the interspaces and to prepare us for our first contact with blood and earth. Each of us made the passage alone. Alone, we had to survive the crossing – survive the flames and the sea, the emergence into illusion. The exile has begun. (6)

This passage could be taken to be a metaphor for Nigeria's tumultuous passage from colonialism to independence. Like many other former colonized countries, Nigeria still carries and will always carry the weight of colonialism like a tortoise and her shell. Just like Okri's hero, Postcolonial Nigeria's destiny seems to still be tied to her colonial past; Okri's unwilling adventurer in the novel is his postcolonial Nigeria, a country that has spent almost sixty years to end corruption and poverty, establish real democracy and rule of law with very little success. Nigerians are used to witnessing the succession of one corrupt and oppressive regime by another, just like the back and forth of the Abiku children. I argue that the persistence of this pattern equates Okri's Nigeria to the nations Azaro alludes to in the following passage:

THE SPIRIT-CHILD is an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead. Things that are not ready, not willing to be born or to become, things for which adequate preparations have not been made to sustain their momentous births, things that are not resolved, things bound up with failure and with fear of being, they all keep recurring, keep coming back, and in themselves partake of the spirit-child's condition. They keep coming and going till their time is right.....There are many nations, civilizations, ideas, half-discoveries, revolutions, revolutions, loves, art forms, experiments, and historical events that are of this condition and do not know it. There are many people too..... (487)

In light of what has been discussed so far, it follows that Azaro's tumultuous life can be taken to be a parable of postcolonial Nigerian condition. Like Azaro, postcolonial Nigeria is stuck forever in-between colonial past and postcolonial present. Azaro's tragedy is that he is condemned to remain locked in-between the real world and the mythic world. This is the punishment for his refusal to stay in the spirit world with his companions. Likewise, Nigeria won her independence against the reluctance of her colonial master, who, like Azaro's spirit companions, wanted to keep her under his control forever. MSC Okolo, a Civitella Ranieri Fellow and postcolonial critic, shows the direct link between colonization and the lack of progress in former colonized nations as he writes in *African Literature as Political Philosophy*:

The interest of the colonial masters at the time of granting independence to African states was in ensuring that they, the masters, retained the exploitative economic hold they had on Africa. They therefore tried their best to ensure that the Africans that succeeded them were 'yes-men' they could control. Given that colonial rule was founded on oppression and dispossession and betrayed no interest whatsoever in nation-building, these successors were encouraged to follow the same path. The result is that the independence of African states came without concomitant economic, financial and ideological freedoms. Instead of political independence, African states found themselves in a new colonial situation: neo-colonialism. (89 – 90)

Okolo thus confirms that Nigeria's tragedy is like that of the abiku-child Azaro; she is condemned to serve two competing interests, namely the former colonizer and African people. However, the truth is that, because of the unconditional support the corrupt and despotic regimes receive from the former, everything is done at the latter's expense as shown earlier. How does an artist interpret a self-destructive attitude of this magnitude without crossing the border of realism? How can he or she rely on realism to expose corruption of this proportion in order to help the poverty stricken masses understand the causes of their endless suffering? For Okri it is through the spiritual, the mythic and the supernatural imagination rooted in African traditional beliefs that the task is made possible.

Commenting on Okri's use of African supernatural imagination in his works and his intentions, Arlene Elder notes:

... Moreover, despite Okri's formal education in modern western values, *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Richies* are spiritual to their core. They are also political in their author's basic intent. Okri re-creates West African myths and rituals in order to assert traditional African cultural/spiritual values as the only resource powerful enough to combat modern political corruption and oppression world-wide. (10)

Elder's emphasis on the socio – political message of the novel sheds more light on Okri's commitment to the societal realities of Nigeria, Africa, and the world. As a writer, Okri is aware of his responsibility vis-à-vis his people and the world. Thus following the examples set by his predecessors such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, among others. Ben Okri understands that literature must be used in the interest of people; it must be about the lives, aspirations, fears, happiness, and liberty of the people. A true literature

must be in the service of the people among whom the writer lives. It must also be the tool with which the poor country can free itself from the external and internal forces that are responsible for its situation. It must chronicle the realities that rule the poor people. In this context the African writer must be the vanguard of his people and warn and advise them against the dangers of their behaviors. Most importantly, the writer must stand against the elite, the ruler, the politician, and the rich who are responsible for the oppression and the suffering of the people in the community. In “the Novelist as a Teacher”, Chinua Achebe has called for the writer to take his role as leader and lead his people to salvation and not hesitate to denounce those malevolent forces that are responsible for the deterioration of the situation in Africa. Similarly, Emmanuel Ngarra insists that “A serious writer must be concerned about humanity and his society; a serious writer must address to the human predicament in general and to the African situation in particular” (28). Okri has accepted this responsibility at age seventeen as he told Jane Wilkinson in an interview:

I'd always enjoyed writing essays, but I'd never felt that I was actually writing till out of indignation and frustration I wrote about a social injustice. I had been affected by the high rents in the ghettos. Nobody could control the landlord. The rent edict was useless. So I wrote about it, collecting as much data as I could, and my essay was accepted. From that moment I understood something of the relation between what you see and what you have to say. The minute you see it, you have to say it. That's where responsibility begins. (78)

Okri carries this responsibility through all his published works. In each of these, he unequivocally denounces corruption, economic and political violence, and suffering in post – independence Nigeria and opens a window of hope for the oppressed and the poor

to keep living. Okri finds this hope in Yoruba abiku myth, as he claims, “myth is what makes it possible for those who suffer and struggle, whatever the suffering, to live and sleep and carry on. That’s when it’s most important” (85). This is what gave Africa the hope and courage to live despite the military, cultural, political, and economic violence its people have been experiencing for centuries. The Nigeria Okri depicts in *The Famished Road* has survived many seasons of suffering during colonialism and is still suffering under the local leadership. Nigeria has experienced more military coups-d’état than any other African countries. Each coup has taken the country back to where it just came from. The democracy his country has been yearning for has been delayed by the frequent bursts of the military into the political arena. The military has always used the politicians’ greed and their inability to evolve as pretext to seize power and impose dictatorship. Between 1966 and 1993 seven military coups have been staged in Nigeria.

The reigns of the successive regimes that came to power as a result of those coups were characterized by massive violation of human rights. Each regime enforced its grip on power through the arrest, imprisonment, torture, and execution of dissenters, press censorship and consolidation of dictatorship. As if that were not enough, the corruption and greed these regimes were supposed to suppress became endemic. This led M S C Okolo to point out that, contrary to social scientists’ notion that military is a class set apart from society which can transcend the conflict – corruption, bribery, nepotism – of civilian politics, a good deal of evidence suggests otherwise. As example, he cites the regimes of Babangida and Abacha in Nigeria, as being “characterized by unbridled violence, looting of economy and the entrenchment of draconian policies” (88 – 89). In

The Famished Road the coming and going of the abiku child epitomizes the pattern of succession of one dictatorial, corrupt, and greedy regime by other dictatorial regimes in Nigeria and in Africa as whole. The consequence of this political status quo is the suffering endured by the weak and poor in their ghettos, where they are exposed to the rigor of existence. This is what makes the abikus dislike the real world, as Azaro reveals at the beginning of *The Famished Road*:

There was not one amongst us who looked forward to being born. We disliked the rigors of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love, the ignorance of parents, the fact of dying, and the amazing indifference of the Living in the midst of the simple beauties of the universe. We feared the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see. (3)

These hostile conditions of living are intentionally created by contemporary postcolonial African politicians and their wealthy friends whose economic success depends upon their merciless exploitation of the poor as well as their alliance with the ruling elite. In *The Famished Road* people's political affiliations and their relations with others are determined by their social status. The result is the formation of a polarized society that pits the rich against the poor. In the ghetto Madame Koto and the landlord represent the rich and Azaro's family the poor. Politically, the former are affiliated with the Party of the Rich, and the latter is affiliated with the Party of the Poor. Because of their affiliation with the Party of the Rich, Madame Koto and the landlord have become very powerful in the ghetto. The landlord is a greedy slum owner who joined the Party of the Rich in order to continue his exploitation of the poor tenants of his property. He has become so zealous that he sees no boundaries between politics and business. Thus, he

uses the protection he enjoys as a member of the Party of the Rich to increase the rent whenever he wants and uses his property to coerce his tenants into voting for his party, as Azaro recalls in the following excerpt:

‘I have told this to all my tenants. Anybody who wants to live in my house, under this roof that I built with my own hands, should vote for my party. Did you hear me?’

Mum did not nod. She stared grimly at the twitching candle.

‘I doesn’t matter if you answer or not. I have said what I have to say. If you have ears, listen. If you want to be my tenant, when the election comes you will go and vote for my party man.’

‘It is simple. All you have to do is press ink next to his name. A simple matter. My party will bring good, roads and electricity and water supply. And remember this: we have people at the polling station who will be watching you. We will know who you vote for. Whether you vote for our man or not we will win anyway. But if you don’t vote for him there will be trouble....’ (198)

The landlord’s speech is representative of the political atmosphere in postcolonial African countries, where elections always end in violence, arrest of opposition supporters, assassination of rivals, and sometimes military coups. In this excerpt Okri tells the readers how the same political parties manage to stay in power for more than thirty years in Africa. There is a saying in Africa that “the party that organizes an election shall not lose it.” Because the ruling party controls the electoral process, its candidate is always assured to be declared the winner. The landlord told his tenants that “whether you vote for our man or not we will win anyway.” This shows that in reality the landlord’s party does not need people’s votes to win the election; however, because of his masochism, the landlord subjects his tenants to psychological abuse by threatening to evict them, if they don’t vote for his candidate. He wants to use the election to increase

the rent and punish those who still refuse to bow to him. So, after the election, because Dad refused to vote for the party of the Rich, the landlord sent his thugs back to Azaro's house to hack the door with machetes:

Our door had been crudely hacked with machetes. They had almost splintered the wood. Gashes were long rather than deep on the door. A foul-smelling substance, glistening red under the candle-light, had been smeared across the wood in a set of menacing signs. Our door had been marked. I went back in.

'Who did it?'

'It was the landlord.'

'How do you know?'

'Dad challenged his party.' (227)

As if hacking the door were not enough, we also learn that the landlord has increased Dad's rent. He is singled out for the increase because he is the only one who challenges the landlord openly despite Mum's warning that there are spies on their compound:

He said even if they kill him he wouldn't vote for the landlord's party. He went around the compound saying this. Some of the neighbors nodded when he made his declaration. Mum warned him that the landlord had spies in the compound.

'Lower your voice.'

'Why?'

'Spies.'

'Let the spies drop dead too!'

'I am afraid for us.'

'There is nothing to fear.'

'But I am afraid.'

'What right has the landlord to bully us, to tell us who to vote for, eh? Is he god? Even God can't tell us who to vote for. Don't be afraid. We may be poor, but we are not slaves.'

'Where are we going to find another room?'

'Our destiny will provide.' (203)

Dad is paying the price for trying to preserve the only thing he has left, that is the freedom to think and decide for himself. He believes that poverty may have snatched everything from them, but it has not taken away their dignity. Dad is ready to stand his ground at the risk of losing his room. He is an idealist who confronts the injustice in his society in order to build a more equitable society. Even though everybody experiences the same injustice and abuse, nobody seems to care, because they all fear retaliation. In this passage, Dad points to two major problems in Africa: the guilty silence of the masses and their lack of unity. It is hard to understand the willingness of African masses, the poor people to continue to accept their conditions in silence, hoping that “One day, by a quiet miracle, God will erase the wicked from the face of the earth” (281). The people in the ghetto have accepted their wretched conditions of living because they believe that there is always a miracle for those who suffer. However, it is worth pointing out that there are other reasons why people choose to do nothing to change their conditions. In addition to their faith in miracles, the fear of antagonizing the powerful people like the landlord is to blame. Because of the retaliatory actions like the ones Dad faces, they prefer to stand aside and watch. In the novel, we learn that “people were sacked from their jobs because they were on the wrong side of politics” (203 – 204).

This is how corrupt the political system is in postcolonial Nigeria and Africa by extension. Examples of this behavior abound in most postcolonial African countries. Loyalty to the ruling party can open any door to an individual. To this day, in my native Togo, recruitment in the public sector is done based on people’s political affiliation. Sometimes the practice takes the form of politico-ethnic discrimination because the most

loyal to the ruling party are from the president's ethnic group. Aspiring civil servants are asked to take a political litmus test before they are considered for positions in the civil service. Even more alarming is that the practice has reached the private sector because the ruling party has infiltrated it. The managers of the private companies and enterprises are predominantly selected based on how closely they want to work with the corrupt regime. Because the latter are the sole regulators of the public and private sectors, the owners of private companies do nothing other than comply. In the army, the practice is worse; the majority of the superior officers are members of the president's ethnic group. The actions of the landlord in *The Famished Road* betray the secret behind the longevity some regimes enjoy in the contemporary postcolonial Africa, despite their unpopularity. Having guaranteed their total control over the country's finances, public and private sectors, the security forces, and media, those regimes become unstoppable in their folly to remain in power ad infinitum. It follows that the only choice left for ordinary citizens is to comply or face the fury of those greedy power hungry neocolonialist dictatorships.

Photography as a Form of Resistance

In the novel, Okri uses the mistreatment of Jeremiah the photograph by the thugs of the Party of the Rich to shed light on the plight of the dissenters of those postcolonial African dictatorial regimes. Like the people on Azaro's compound, those who cannot bear the consequences of their dissent simply become puppets, zealots and sycophants and work against the interest of the majority. Unfortunately, these new political converts

often pose more threats to the dissenters than the dictators themselves do. Of course, there is the physical violence, which paid thugs and the army regularly unleash on innocent people in order to silence them. But there is also the psychological violence, which consists in blackmailing, intimidating, eavesdropping, and spying executed by the converts against those who refuse to look in the same direction in their regions, hometowns, and neighborhoods. In *The Famished Road*, the landlord and Madam Koto represent the zealous new converts in the ghetto. The photographer has become the target of the thugs because he is trying to keep records of all the abuses his people are subjected to every day. He is forced to go in hiding and appears occasionally only at night, as Azaro recalls:

One night some men came to our compound to ask about the photographer. They claimed to be journalists. They said they'd heard he was staying with tenants in the compound. The tenants denied it, but they began to keep watch. At night we saw strange men leaning against the burnt van, staring at our house. When I told the photographer about it he became scared and we did not see him for many days. (204)

Okri's photographer is a journalist and human rights activist who, in my view, seeks to expose corrupt politicians and their violent methods. He is committed to the cause of the oppressed people and believes his effort will pay off one day, as he states: "One way or another we will continue to fight for truth. And justice. And we will win" (189). Okri pays homage to African journalists and human rights activists who have defied the dictatorial regimes to record the atrocities committed against ordinary citizens. In postcolonial Africa, journalists are the *bête noire* of the autocratic regimes; in other words, they are the most dreadful enemies of the dictators, who seek to control the

information. Thus, those regimes always use two approaches in their dealing with journalists. The first approach consists in bribing journalists in order to silence them. If that does not work, the autocrats resort to a campaign of terror and assassinations. In Okri's Nigeria, the reign of General Sani Abacha (1993 – 1998), two years after the publication of *The Famished Road*, has been particularly difficult for journalists and Human Rights activists. They could not help denouncing the endemic corruption of Abacha's regime, and they paid a heavy price for that. For instance, in 1995, Ken Saro Wiwa, a Nigerian journalist and Human Rights activist was executed for speaking against environmental degradation caused by petroleum companies in his native oil-rich Delta region. Countless journalists and activists, who dared to expose corruption and speak for ordinary Nigerians, were beaten, arrested, tortured, imprisoned without trial, and summarily executed by security forces and paid thugs. As Okolo writes, during the reign of Babangida and Abacha:

Any form of opposition constituted a virtual invitation to be killed. Dele Giwa, the ex-editor of *Newswatch Magazine*, was killed during the Babangida regime because it was believed that he had some explosive information on the government. Kudirat Abiola, Pa rewane, Ken Saro Wiwa, to mention just a few, were also murdered for their criticism of the Abacha government. (89)

The chaotic atmosphere which Okri depicts in *The Famished Road* looks like a prophecy for the coming of Abacha's military regime. However, Nigeria does not have monopoly over the situation described in the novel in regard to the mistreatment of journalists. In the contemporary postcolonial Africa, where corruption and nepotism has become a method of governance, and where the opposition is quasi inexistent, journalists,

especially those in the private press, play the role of watchdogs and are considered the voice of the powerless. This makes journalists the number one enemy of the government. In order to discourage journalists from raising questions about the conduct of public affairs, the governments have enacted what they call “defamation laws” which allow them to detain, impose exorbitant fines to journalists, and close their offices. In doing so, those governments succeed in preventing the dissemination of documented information about their abuses. After the violence that rocked his ghetto, Azaro expresses his frustration about the lack of records for that historical night:

We feared that the photographer has been murdered. His glass cabinet remained permanently shattered. It looked misbegotten. It became a small representation of what powerful forces in society can do if anyone speaks out against their corruptions. And because the photographer hadn't been there to record what had happened that night, nothing of the events appeared in the newspapers. It was as if the events were never real. They assumed the status of rumor. (182 – 183)

The lack of records benefits the perpetrators of violence against journalists because without evidence they can always claim that information about their corruption is just rumors or fabricated by journalists. What is more disturbing about this issue is that even in this century of information revolution, African governments are still trying to muzzle journalists. According to *African Media News*, the Federation of African Journalists (FAJ), the African group of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), and the Eastern Africa Journalists Association (EAJA), told the 50th Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and People's Rights, sitting in Banjul, The Gambia, that African continent is experiencing renewed and aggressive premeditated attacks on

journalists, and media organizations in an attempt to control, manipulate, and censor the free press and free speech. In the words of Omar Faruk Osman, FAJ president,

Journalists continue to face deadly attacks, criminal charges, intimidation and harassments by security forces and, in some cases, with the manifest support of the judicial authorities. We address this gathering of AU member states, National Human rights Institutions and Civil Society to highlight the repressive and precarious conditions in which journalists work in Africa and to call on the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights for urgent actions to secure effective protection for media professionals. (qtd. in Afrcan Media News 1)

In another report published by *IQ4News*, the New York based press freedom organization Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) said that journalism in Africa is a highly dangerous job to do. According to *IQ4News*, the report painted a picture of a profession on the run from the continent's ruling regimes that do not embrace press freedom. The report has also pointed out that many African journalists are murdered, flogged, and imprisoned while doing their work, without any genuine reason left behind. (1)

As the two reports show, contemporary postcolonial Africa has declared war against the only profession that could inform the dispossessed and help them to understand the magnitude of corruption of those who preside over their destiny, and in the process instill in them the desire for change. Because there are no records of politicians' repeated raid in the ghettos, Azaro would have wanted to see poor people store all those violent events in their memories to serve as guides in future. But Azaro thinks, "Some of us began to distrust our memories. We began to think that we had collectively dreamt up fevers of that night. It wouldn't be the first or the last time" (183).

The Famished Road also critiques the shortage of poor people's memory and the self-induced amnesia that encourage politicians to keep doing the same things again and again during each election season. Azaro does not understand why the ghetto dwellers still welcome the politicians who cause the violence and misery they experience:

When they first appeared I thought there would be trouble in the area. I thought houses would burn and party vans be destroyed and thugs roasted. I thought people would remember how the very same party had poisoned them with bad milk and had unleashed their rage upon our nights. But people had forgotten, and those that hadn't merely shrugged and said that it was all such a long time ago, that things were too complicated for such memories, and besides the party had new leaders. (387)

Azaro's thoughts reveal another behavior that sustains the status quo in contemporary postcolonial Africa. Moreover, they express Okri's exasperation with the poor people's implication in their own predicament. They don't seem to care much about tomorrow and therefore fall for any promises politicians make in their rallies. Poor people don't care much about corruption of the Party of the Rich because according to some of them, the latter "are honest about their corruption, they have money and power, and can give poor people contracts, and after all a poor man has to eat" (212).

In spite of all these obstacles, *The Famished Road* seems to argue that there is still a way for poor people to resist the oppression. This is demonstrated through Azaro's family and Jeremiah, the photographer. The two symbolize resistance in the novel because, unlike the other oppressed people in the ghetto, they use their skills to resist oppression. As boxer, Dad (Black Tyger) resists the Party of the Rich by fighting their thugs. In his part, Jeremiah's camera functions as the memory of the people of the ghetto,

for it records the daily oppression visited upon them. The ghetto dwellers, Dad and Jeremiah all believe in miracle; however, unlike the other ghetto dwellers who are waiting for a supernatural intervention, Dad and Jeremiah believe that miracle is in the resistance against oppression. This is the miracle Okri believes in, the one that comes from within the oppressed. In this sense it could be argued that even though the novel promotes African spirituality, it does not espouse the oppressed people's naïve expectations that that: "One day, by a quiet miracle, God will erase the wicked from the face of the earth" (281). In line of this, it could be argued that Okri's idea of African spirituality is different from the people of the ghetto. For him miracle is a catalyst in that it provides hope to the oppressed people and thereby encourages them to stand up for their right. Following his epic victory against the green Leopard, Dad addresses the people of the ghetto:

THINK DIFFERENTLY
AND YOU WILL CHANGE THE WORLD.
REMEMBER HOW FREE YOU ARE,
AND YOU WILL TRANSFORM YOUR HUNGER INTO POWER!

To me this is the most important moment of the novel because, in a very direct way, it tells the poor people of the ghetto that nothing other their actions can change their living conditions. *The Famished Road* suggests that the poor people have what they need to transform their poverty into wealth because they possess the freedom to choose their own destiny. In other words, instead of waiting for a miracle, they must be their own savior. In line with this, it could be said that Okri views people faith in the miracle with irony. This leads us to reexamine Cooper's evaluation and exclusion of the novel from

corpus of magical realist texts. In her assessment of West African magical realist texts, Cooper has made authorial ironic point of view the essential feature of magical realism, which she claims Okri lacks:

If “hybrid” is the key word for magical realist plot, then “ironic” is the keyword for its author’s point of view. It is an irony that is compromised, contradicted and sometimes corrosive in the fiction. What is always the case is that it is neither possible nor appropriate for magical realist writers to present in an unmediated, undistanced way, the pre-scientific view of the world that some of their characters may hold. The gulf between the peasant’s and the writer’s point of view is a critical space where the negotiations between magic and realism take place. (33)

What Cooper decries here is Okri’s ambivalent attitude towards his characters’ beliefs in miracle. While I agree with this critique, I think that *The Famished Road* contains more magical realist features than it needs. What is ironic in this debate is that if I take into consideration Okri’s claims in his interviews, I will conclude that the precious “ironic point of view” is rather manifest between him and his critics.

Socio-Political Metamorphosis

The extraordinary transformation of Madam Koto after she joins the party of the Rich, gives the poor people of the ghetto more reasons to keep welcoming politicians in the ghetto:

‘Is it true’, one of them said, ‘that Madam Koto now has prostitutes in her bar?’
‘That’s what I heard.’
‘And that she has joined the party?’
‘What else?’
‘They have promised her contracts.’

'For what?'
'For their celebration and meetings.'
'We will be looking at her and she will become rich.'
'She is rich already.'
'How do you know?'
'People say she is going to buy a car.'
'A car?'
'And get electricity?'
'Electricity?' (280 – 281)

Soon these rumors have become reality. Madam Koto has indeed become rich and bought a car:

AND THEN, TO crown our amazement, the news reached us that Madam Koto had bought herself a car. We couldn't believe it. No one along our street and particularly no one in the area owned such a thing as car. People owned bicycles and were proud of them. One or two men owned scooters and were accorded the respect reserved only for elders and chieftains. But it most certainly was news for a woman in the area to own a car. We clung to our disbelief till we saw the bright blue little car, with the affectionate face of an enlarged metallic tortoise.... It didn't really matter that it was a small car, or that she couldn't drive it properly. What mattered was that yet again she had been a pioneer, doing something no one had done. People became convinced that if she wanted she could fly over the ghetto on the back of a calabash. (379 – 380)

Madam Koto has become the star of the ghetto, she inspires admiration and envy. This is what people in the ghetto hope for. They know very well that Madam Koto's money comes from the same corrupt politicians who are starving them. Yet, people in the ghetto want to support politicians with the hope that they will get money and contracts. In contemporary postcolonial Africa, it is not rare to hear people say "if they bring money, we will vote for them." Unlike in the West where candidates' electoral campaigns are funded by their supporters, in Africa it is the other way around. Voters attend rallies with the expectations that the candidates will give them money, food, and other goods. People

support parties not for the pertinence of their message but for the rice and money they distribute during each election cycle. *The Famished Road* critiques this rush to immediate material self-improvement at the expense of the future. Poor people are divided by their individual interests. The lack of unity in the ghetto, which Okri exposes in his novel, is encouraged by ghetto dwellers' conflicting interests. This explains why even though the spies on Dad's compound are also affected by the same inhumane conditions of existence, they still collaborate with the landlord. Like Dad's, their rooms are infested by rats and other rodents. Because of the landlord's greed and lack of respect for human dignity, he does not want to spend money to rid the compound of rats. Yet, people in the compound still want to spy for him. Azaro's description of a scene following the photographer's attempt to exterminate the rats sheds light on the inhumane living conditions in the ghetto:

I sat up. All around the mat, under the centre table, by the door, on top of the cupboard, near the bed, were the bristling corpses of rats. I screamed. The room was a Calvary of rats, a battleground of them. They had died in every conceivable position. There were rats near my pillow, clinging on to the mat with their bare yellow teeth. There were rats all over my cover cloth. Some had died beside me, died beneath the cloth, perished on the centre table, their long tails hanging over the edge.... (235)

This near cohabitation with rats is the common experience of the ghetto dwellers and all poor people in post-independence Nigeria and Africa. Through this naturalistic description, Okri wants to shock the conscience of his readers about the degree of suffering of poor people. Most of Okri's characters seem to be aware of their condition, but they don't think they can do anything to change it: "Some people have too much and

their dogs eat better food than we do, while we suffer and keep quiet until the day we die. And even if we don't keep quiet who will listen to us, eh?" (281). Okri's novel highlights the inequalities between rich and poor in postcolonial societies. The gap is widening every day because while the rich are becoming richer and richer, the poor are becoming poorer and poorer. It is a total exploitation of man by man. For the greedy rich people, poor people are a means, not an end. To the rich and powerful like the landlord, the humanity of the poor is less important than money. This is exemplified in the landlord's indifference vis-à-vis the dilapidated conditions of the rooms he is renting to people:

One night as I slept the rain dripped on my head; it seemed the rain was corrosive and ate through new places in the zinc roof. I had to move my mat. Sometimes it rained so much that the containers filled up and overflowed, and the floor covered in water....The rain swept down so badly that I could no longer sleep on the floor and had to share the single bed with my parents. When more holes opened above us, we had to keep moving the bed round the room. It got so awful that we couldn't find a place that wasn't leaking. We ended setting for having the water drip on our feet. Dad complained to the landlord, but he merely threatened to increase the rent further if he fixes the roof. We couldn't afford the rent as it stood so we had no choice but to settle for being soaked through at night. (311)

The landlord is a shameless swindler; he is the symbol of political, moral, and economic corruption in the post-independence Nigeria and Africa. He fits the photographer's description of greedy rats: "They are never satisfied. They are like bad politicians and imperialists and rich people. They eat up property. They eat up everything in sight. And one day when they are very hungry they will eat us up" (233).

The socio - political atmosphere depicted in *The Famished Road* offered the military the alibi to make repeated interventions in the political arena. This theme has already been addressed by many Nigerian writers but in satiric and social realist modes,

corroborating Stephanie Newell's assertion that 'third generation West African writers like Okri have maintained a thematic relation with their predecessors: "... the label 'third World' should not obscure the fact that many of the new, experimental writers share themes with other and earlier West African authors, including a common concern for urban poverty, slum-life, and political violence in the postcolony" (184). Among the earlier writers, Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* comes to my mind. This novel uses satire and humor to depict the extent of corruption, nepotism, political violence, greed, and bad governance that characterized Nigeria after its independence from Britain. The protagonists of the novel are Chief Nanga and Odili. Nanga is a ruthless politician who is the embodiment of political corruption; he is also a shameless opportunist who seeks score political points in any given situation. Like Okri's landlord, he exploits the naivety and vulnerability of the poor to enforce his power. Against him, there is the idealist Odili who despises corruption and dreams of a prosperous Nigeria in which one's success is not dependent on who you know, but what you know. Above all, the novel chronicles the conflict of generation that is still present in most African countries. Like in *The Famished Road*, the society depicted in *A Man of the People* is polarized into rich and corrupt politicians represented by Nanga and the poor and idealists represented by Odili. Nanga's rise to power has nothing to do with education; rather, he owes this to his zeal and devotion to the ruler who prefers the status quo to the development of his country. So Nanga goes from a minor parliamentarian who used to be a back-bencher to a very important minister. Together with the ruling party, they continue to keep their own

people in poverty through oppression, torture, humiliation, violence, corruption, and fraudulent elections.

The fact that *The Famished Road*, published almost thirty years after *A Man of the People* is still delineating the same atmosphere of political violence, corruption, greed, and social stratification is proof that Nigeria still has a long way to go before it reaches its destination. This long journey is represented in the “road” of the title of Okri’s book, *The Famished Road*. At the beginning of the novel Okri tells us that, “In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry” (3). In this evocation of myth, Okri also emphasizes the importance of history in the plight of contemporary postcolonial Nigeria. For him in order to understand contemporary Nigeria, we must first understand Africa’s history. Two big historical events took place in Africa one after the other, namely the slave trade and colonialism. The two events were complementary because the former which robbed Africa of her valid men and women paved the way to the latter, which saw no resistance in its conquest of Africa. These events planted the seeds for Africa’s endless suffering. Even the golden opportunity provided to Africa after the Second World War was wasted by Africans. In fact while in Asia all the countries under colonial domination succeeded in gaining their independences in five years (1945 – 1950), in Africa it took the leaders fifteen years, allowing substantial time for the colonizers to infiltrate once again the elite in order to manipulate the new Africa. This explains why like Okri’s road, Nigeria’s journey toward real development is paved with

betrayal, treachery, labyrinths, and monsters. In *The Famished Road*, Dad describes the dangerous nature of Okri's road after a deadly battle with the latter:

I was walking down the road, drinking, singing and then the road said to me: "Watch yourself!" So I abused the road. Then it turned into a river and I swam. It changed into fire and I sweated. It transformed into a tiger and I killed it with one blow. And then it shrunk into a big rat and I shouted at it and it ran like the creditors. And then it dissolved into mud and I lost my shoe. (94)

Elsewhere, the reader learns that as revealed by prophecy, the road will never be finished despite the people's effort and willingness to do so. Azaro's spirit-friends give him various reasons why the road will never be finished:

"So why has it taken so long to build so little?" Their prophet said many things which they never understood. One of the things their prophet said was that the road cannot be finished. What their prophet meant was that the moment it is finished all of them will perish.... They will perish of completeness, or boredom. The road is their soul, the soul of their history. That is why, when they have built a long section of it, or forgotten the words of their prophet and begun to think they have completed it, land quakes happen, lightning strikes, invisible volcanoes erupt, rivers descend on them, hurricanes tear up their earth, the road goes mad and twist.... Because they have the great curse of forgetfulness. They are deaf to the things they need to know the most. (329 – 330)

Okri seems to refer to Nigeria's entrance into modernity, but he warns that it should be done with moderation. Okri wants his fellow Nigerians to know that they should not accept modernity at the expense of their indigenous spiritual values because, for him this is where their soul is and therefore, has to be preserved. Okri believes that the rush to modernity encourages greed, love for materialism, and moral disintegration. In fact, unlike the spiritual and communal life characterized by solidarity known to traditional Africa, we now observe a rush to material self-improvement characterized by

individualism and immorality. The common interest is broken into different individual ones. Then every individual fights for him/herself or his/her close family. The community means nothing; so unlike the old hero who turned defeat into victory for the whole community, the hero today seeks to only satisfy his or her personal need. This is what Azaro sees in Madame Koto, whose success in materialism made her arrogant and insensitive to other people's suffering. For Azaro, Madame Koto is no longer the caring person he knew: "She had changed completely from the person I used to know. Her big frame which had seemed to me full of warmth now seemed to me full of wickedness. I didn't know why she had changed" (251).

But Azaro soon learns from Madame Koto herself that her change in attitude is a direct consequence of her wealth which is gradually creating a gap between her and the people in the ghetto. To Azaro's surprise, Madame Koto vociferated her aspirations and the truth that rules her life:

You think because I sit here all day long, because I cook pepper soup and wash plates and smile to my customers, you think because I do all these things that I don't have plans of my own, eh? You think I don't want build a house, to drive a car, you think I don't want servants, you think I don't want money and power, eh? I want respect. I am not going to run a bar forever. As you see me – now I am here, tomorrow I am gone. You think I want to live in this dirty area with no electricity, no toilets, no drinking water? If you think so you are mad! You are a small boy and you don't know anything. Your people are not serious. You can sit in a corner like a chicken and look at me, but when the time comes you will remember what I am saying. (251)

Madame Koto has become a power hungry selfish capitalist who is ready to do anything to get power and money. Thus, because of Azaro's supernatural powers, she is repeatedly pleading with his parents to get him to go to her bar so he can attract

customers: “I will forget the money if you let your son come and sit in my bar now and again..... Because he has good luck.....I will pay for him to go to school” (63). “I want you back. Your mother agrees. Since you stopped coming the bar has been empty” (205). For Madame Koto, Azaro, whom she refers to as a strange child is a magnet that can attract customers, in other words, Azaro is a means for her material success. Dad has decried this very attitude during a conversation with Azaro: “Our people are very powerful in spirit. They have all kinds of powers. We are forgetting these powers. Now, all the power that people have is selfishness, money, and politics” (70).

The trouble with the contemporary Nigeria is that its people have abandoned the ways of the ancestors and have become greedy, selfish, corrupt and too much involved in politics. Okri thus critiques the individualism and the collapse of spiritual values in the contemporary Nigerian and African societies in order to awaken the consciousness of all the people concerned. Okri does not oppose Nigeria’s passage into modernity, but he is against the change that distances people from their spiritual values. In fact his desire for change can be read in the road metaphor. When asked to explain the connection between his road and Soyinka’s *The Road*, Okri has this to say: “No, there is no connection. My road is quite different. My road is a way. It’s a road that is meant to take you from one place to another, on a journey, towards a destination” (Wilkinson 83).

Okri’s road suggests the inevitability of change: “All human beings travel the same road” (70). In the novel all the characters and physical locations experience various levels of metamorphosis. Madam Koto and her bar have undergone a material and spiritual metamorphosis. Madam Koto has joined the party of the rich; she owns a car and

is a powerful figure in the ghetto. Her bar has electricity, a gramophone, servants, and houses prostitutes. It is a change that Azaro found inevitable: “And when I sat up and looked around I knew we were in the divide between past and future. A new cycle had begun, an old one was being brought to a pitch, prosperity and tragedy rang out from what I saw, and I knew that the bar would never be the same again” (220).

The change in the bar is more visible through the clientele that is now frequenting it. Unlike the former setting that used to welcome poor people, madmen, people with various deformities as well as all kinds of spirits, the metamorphosed bar is visited by elegant people:

There were a lot of people outside. They were elegantly dressed in bright kaftans and agbadas and safari suits. They laughed and talked in animated tones. There were many women amongst them. The strong scent of their perfumes was heavy and inescapable on the evening air. The two thugs who had earlier led the man away stepped into the bar. ... They did not look like thugs. In spite of the bandage and the animal expression in their eyes, they looked like modern businessmen, contractors, exporters, politicians. Dressed in lace kaftans, with matching hats, they were wonderfully high-spirited. (220)

Madam Koto's business is booming and with that comes her economic and political power; but she is never satisfied, and her insatiability turns her into a dreadful vampire. Towards the end of the novel, Madam Koto is described as a powerful witch; hear what Azaro says:

Madam Koto grew more powerful with the rainy season. She developed a walk of imposing and languid dignity. Her fatness became her. She wore clothes that made the beggars ill. She talked of leaving the wretched area; she was scornful of everyone. We listen to her berating passers-by. She grew more powerful and she grew more beautiful as well. The rainy season swelled her frame. She incarnated all her legends into her new spirit, joined with her myths. She became all the

things we whispered she was and she became more. At night, when she slept, she stole the people's energies. (She was not the only one: they were legion.) While dad raged the spheres crying for justice, Madam Koto sucked in the powers of our area. Her dream gave children nightmares. Her colossal form took wings at night and flew over the city, drawing power from our sleeping body.... (495)

On both levels, Madam Koto's metamorphosis turned out to be negative because she has become poor people's physical and spiritual tormentor. Even Okri finds her "quite terrifying" (Wilkinson 85). She is power hungry on both political and spiritual levels. She is a typical African politician whose contempt for poor people has reached a level of absurdity. In postcolonial Africa, what is happening is that, in the physical world, politicians are denying poor people their humanity and in the metaphysical world they are sucking the energies poor people need to fight malevolent forces, thereby confirming the latter's physical and spiritual annihilation. Postcolonial African politicians have created physical and metaphysical conditions that are meant to perpetuate the abiku cycle in the lives of poor people. In *The Famished Road*, Okri successfully depicts these conditions by juxtaposing realistic and mythic settings. In "The Interface of Myth and Realism", Abiodun Adeniji, professor at University of Lagos offers an interesting analysis of Okri's setting when he writes:

The interface of myth and realism in Okri's setting is an authentic vehicle for his thematic preoccupations. Through the interface of myth and realism in his setting, comprising the physical locale and the temporal dimensions, Okri condemns the neglect and oppression of the common man by post-independence African leaders. Okri's main argument seems to be that the kind of physically debilitating and spiritually nauseating socio-economic environment deliberately created by self-serving Nigerian leaders can only foster the birth of many abikus, and only the rich benefit when the poor continually give birth to abiku children because the phenomenon extinguishes any kind of competition that the children of the poor might give to the children of the rich. (217)

Adeniji corroborates my main argument that the abiku myth in the novel is a parable of postcolonial African condition. The abiku symbolizes the back and forth between hope and despair in the social and political life of the masses in postcolonial Africa. As I have sought to demonstrate, I agree with Adeniji that the setting of *The Famished Road* between two contradictory worlds is informed by Okri's desire to capture the incomprehensible realities in postcolonial Nigeria, where the living conditions are comparable to the conditions dreaded by all the abikus who refuse to be born or remain in the real world. As Azaro confirms:

There was not one amongst us who looked forward to being born. We dislike the rigors of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love, the ignorance of parents, the fact of dying, and the amazing indifference of the Living in the midst of the simple beauties of the universe. We feared the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see. (3)

The abikus do not want to be born nor live in the real world because they the conditions there hostile to their well-being. For Adeniji, the same could be said about what is going on in Nigeria today. He argues that, if the children of average Nigerians die young through the creation of an unfavorable socio-economic environment, the rich can easily perpetuate themselves in power and hand over the control of the nation, economically and politically, to their off springs after their exist from political office. To substantiate this claim, he provided concrete examples in the real world of post-independence Nigeria where such hereditary economic and political transfers of power are already taking place:

Muktar, the son of the former head of state, Shehu Shagari was a minister in the Obasanjo regime. Femi Fani-Kayode, another minister in the same government is the son of the late politician Fani Kayode, popularly known as “Fani Power” in the Western regional politics of the First Republic of Nigeria. The daughter of Obasanjo himself, Iyabo, was a commissioner in Governor Gbenga Daniel’s administration in Obasanjo’s native Ogun State and is presently a senator in the current political dispensation. Bukola Saraki, the current governor of Kwara State is the son of Senator Olusola Saraki, who also has an offspring in the national assembly. Adeniyi Adebayo, the former Ekiti State governor the son of General Adebayo, former military governor of old Western State. (217 – 218)

Adeniji raises a serious question about nepotism in African politics, especially in the present day where there are abundant examples of father to son successions to political power. For instance, in Togo, when the longest reigning dictator, General Gnassingbe Eyadema died in 2005, his son Faure Gnassingbe was quickly sworn in by the military as his successor against the constitution and the popular will. Similarly, when the Gabonese dictator Omar Bongo died in 2009, his son Ali Bongo was also sworn in as his successor against the will of the Gabonese. In Egypt, Libya, and Senegal, Hosni Mubarak, Colonel Gadhafi, and Abdoulaye Wade, respectively, groomed their sons to succeed them, but they have not been successful. This behavior explains how the political class in Africa has not been renewed since the independences in 1960. The same families and friends have presided over the destiny of African people for more than a half century with the same vision, which has always led to a dead end. The consequence of this situation is the atrophy we observe in African politics and economy. There are no development and prosperity in postcolonial Africa because the same self-serving politicians have been doing the same things over and over again for five decays.

If Madam Koto's metamorphosis led her to join the Party of the Rich where together they have created physical and metaphysical conditions that contribute to the perpetuation of the abiky cycle, characters such as Azaro and Dad have become more aware of their responsibility vis-à-vis the dwellers of the ghetto. In this regard, Dad is the antithesis of Madam Koto. While he is fighting for justice, Madam Koto continues to commit evil in the ghetto. Dad's and Azaro's metamorphoses involve a quest motif. The quest motif is used in many postcolonial African novels. It is a technique employed in the search of an ideal, moral, political, or spiritual. Azaro and Dad are in quest of a just and humane society. In order to establish such a society, Azaro and Dad have to overcome both real world and spiritual obstacles. Azaro's struggles began since the day he had decided to remain in the real world against the will of his spirits-companions. He has to constantly confront them in order to keep living in the real world. Azaro also has to defeat the evil forces amongst the living in order to survive in the real world. He is fully aware that "the world seemed populated with people intent on me for one obscure reason or another" (114). Indeed, in the real world people like the blind old man and Madam Koto have proven to be Azaro's nightmare as they always seek to steal his supernatural powers like in the following examples:

Come here, he said.

Why?

I want to see with your eyes.

I stayed still. The wind rose again and hurled a fine spray of rain at us. After a while, I felt myself moving. Something in me moved. I resisted. But the wind was stronger. The blind old man laughed as I struggled. I discovered that the wind had divided me, had separated me from myself. I felt an inner self floating towards the blind old man. Or was it that the blind old man was floating into me, invading my consciousness? I wasn't sure..... Further on I saw a lizard with the blind old

man's face. It was playing an accordion at the roadside. I chased it.... I was still searching for the lizard to smash it utterly, for I was sure it would have some sort of effect on the blind old man, when the spirit came and dragged me away. (313, 334)

Azaro's quest is about self-discovery and reaffirmation of his desire to stay among the living in spite of the suffering and limitations of the real world. Unlike Ade, he has voluntarily refused to go back to the spirit world where he will live in infinity. Ade wants to return to the spirit-world because the real proved unbearable: "I want to go to my other home. Your mother is right; there is too much unnecessary suffering on this earth" (477). However, it is in that very suffering that Azaro sees possibilities of change:

Ade wanted to leave, to become a spirit again, free in the capacity of freedom. I wanted the liberty of limitations, to have to find or create new roads from this one which is so hungry, this road of our refusal to be. I was not necessarily the stronger one; it may be easier to live with earth's boundaries than to be free in infinity. (487)

Azaro had the choice between hope and despair; he chose hope because he has faith in humans' creative genius. He has chosen to break the abiku cycle because he sees possibilities for transformation even in the most desperate and chaotic situation. What matters is one's capacity and willingness to endure and outlive that situation. Ade sees chaos coming to the real world, but he also sees change, hope, happiness beyond the chaos:

There will be changes. Coups. Soldiers everywhere. Ugliness. Blindness. And the when people least expect it a great transformation is going to take place in the world. Suffering people will know justice and beauty. A wonderful change is coming from far away and people will realize the great meaning of struggle and hope. There will be peace. Then people will forget. Then it will all start again,

getting worse, getting better. Don't fear. You will always have something to struggle for, even if it is beauty or joy. (478)

Okri believes that despite the destructive behavior of the self-serving postcolonial African politicians and their foreign mentors, Africa still possesses the necessary strength for development and prosperity. For Okri everything lies in the hand of African people, especially the poor and the oppressed. Like Azaro, what is crucial in the process is the choice the poor and the oppressed will make. They have the choice between the status quo, which means destruction and change, which means development and prosperity. For Okri the choice is clear; according to him, Africa has an incredible capacity to not die and be destroyed. Unlike China that was always unified and had this great wall to prevent invasion, Africa had no great wall, yet it manages to remain unique. It's things like that, the resilience of the spirit, the great dreaming capacities, the imaginative frames that are within the terrain of the book. (Wilkinson 87) Therefore, Azaro's embrace of the real world proves that Africa will always overcome obstacles and that one day she will fulfill her destiny. This recalls Derek Wright's comment that "Azaro's commitment to the living seems to Okri to signify a defiant assertion of faith in Africa's material survival and betterment, no matter how difficult the circumstances and how great the suffering" (154).

Among all Okri's characters, Dad, also known as Black Tyger, embodies all the qualities attributed to Africa in the excerpt above. This is what made his rise from anonymity to fame possible. At the beginning of the novel, Dad was introduced in the novel as the embodiment of poverty. "Poverty is driving him mad", Mum said. His quest

for an ideal social and political world goes through four phases. First, he has to struggle to make the ends meet. He has taken all sorts of jobs including load carrier and night soil man just to earn money enough to pay his rent and put food on the table. In a frustrated mood, Dad tells Azaro: “Do you think of us, eh? How we sweat to feed you, to pay the rent, to buy clothes, eh? All day, like a mule, I carry loads. My head is breaking, my brain is shrinking, all just so that I can feed you, eh?” (119). In the second phase, Dad becomes the only man in the ghetto to openly oppose the Party of the Rich. This opposition angers his landlord and store owners affiliated with the Party of Rich. His landlord has slapped him with a rent increase and at work he is forced to carry heavy loads. Amidst these battles, Dad opens a third front. This phase is the most important because it has proved to be deadly. In this phase Dad has already become a boxer and taken the totemic name of Black Tyger; his first fight opposed him to the ghost of Yellow Jaguar, a famous boxer who died three years before. Even though he defeated the Yellow Jaguar, Black Tyger has undergone a bizarre devolution into a child: “He seemed very tragic in his grotesque condition of an adult trapped in the consciousness of a child” (360). The fame Black Tyger earns after defeating the Yellow Jaguar lifted him to the status of an old African hero who turned defeat into victory for the community. His fight against the Green Leopard is a communal fight because the latter is a fearful thug used to spread terror in the streets of the ghetto and is said to be on the payroll of the Party of the Rich. Black Tyger’s victory over the Green Leopard is celebrated as the victory of the poor and oppressed over the self-serving politicians. In the final phase Dad goes through a psychological transformation. He becomes aware of his aloneness; he realizes that an

individual alone cannot defeat the unscrupulous greedy and corrupt politicians of postcolonial Africa:

But it was when people took to bringing their problems to him, when they asked him for money, for advice on everything from how to get their children admitted to hospital to how to get books for their youngsters, that Dad realized he couldn't be a visible or an invisible Head of State just by himself. (411)

Through Dad's awareness of the inability of an individual to change the conditions of people, Okri is making an appeal to all the oppressed people to rise up and unite against their oppressors, because the status quo will not end on its own. For him, no oppression ends unless the oppressed rises against his oppressor. In Dad's political declaration:

He criticized the people of the ghetto for not taking care of their environment, for their lazy attitude towards the world, for their almost inhuman delight in their own poverty. He urged them to lift themselves up by their thoughts. He asked them to think differently in order to change the world. He reminded them of their freedom, and told them that they will transform their hunger into power. (419 – 420)

In *The Famished Road*, Okri's convergence of the well-known Yoruba myth of Abiku and reality enables him to depict with imagination the condition of postcolonial Nigeria and by extension the whole postcolonial Africa. Through the abiku motif, he has successfully explained the Africa's endless attempts to embrace real democracy, good governance and pave the way to development and prosperity:

Dad found out that all nations are children; it shocked him that ours too is an abiku nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals, and the child of our will refuses to stay till we have

made propitious sacrifice and display our own intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny. (494)

The merit of Okri's novel lies in the solutions it suggests for ending the abiku cycle. For instance, he warns postcolonial Africans that individual struggle cannot overcome the corruption and greed of the politicians, and calls for all the oppressed and dispossessed to unite and fight their common foes – the self-serving postcolonial African politicians. *The Famished Road* has restored hope for African renaissance, thereby defying the pessimistic look the world has reserved for Postcolonial Africa. Thus declares Okri:

I'm offering this to Africa and to the world. We can look at our condition in Africa with despair. On the other hand we can look at it and say 'Well, we are some of the luckiest people at this time because we've got so much to invent and fight for. Time is actually a short thing and the future is all there to be created'. (Wilkinson 87)

In this regard *The Famished Road* can be said to navigate the same existentialist territory as Laing's *Woman of the Aeroplanes*. This is where Okri's idea of African spirituality differs from the people in the ghetto. Whereas Okri sees in the spiritual the hope that should instigate African people towards actions, the people of the ghetto see in the spiritual the possibility of a miracle which they naively continue to wait for. Okri's message is that the end of oppression and corruption is in the hands of the people in the ghetto, for if Azaro can break the Abiku cycle, they too can bring about change.

However, given the persistence of gender inequalities in the society represented in *The Famished Road*, where do women stand in regard to Okri's hope? This question is

worth discussing because it looks like the survival of African spirituality which is the basis for Okri's hope may well have permitted the perpetuation of prejudices against women. For instance, despite Mum's hard work and sacrifice on behalf of her family, Dad hardly treats her with respect, as is exemplified by his frequent verbal and physical abuses of her. Because Dad still holds traditional views about women, he does not think a woman has the right to know her husband's whereabouts. For example, in the following passage, Azaro recalls one of the many violent incidents in his family. When Dad returns home after spending the night outside, Mum asks:

Where have you been, my husband? We were so worried...Don't ask me any questions, Dad growled, pushing Mum away from him... Leave me alone! Can't a man do what he wants without a woman troubling him? I have a right to do what I want! So what if I stayed out last night! You think I have been doing nothing? I've been thinking, you hear, thinking! So don't trouble me as if I've been with another woman... Mum cried out and then stifled the cry. I heard Dad hitting her. I looked and Dad was slapping her on the head, kicking the table, shaking Mum, pushing her, muscling her around, and her arms flailed, and then she submitted herself his anger, and I got up and rushed at him... (151 – 152)

Dad is still clinging to traditional views about male-female relation characterized by a total control of woman by man. The survival of these views betrays the hope Okri sees in the survival traditional values. Okri's own portrayal of Madame Koto is suspicious because he seems to perpetuate old prejudices against women. Okri thinks Madame Koto is a "terrifying devouring witch" (Wilkinson 85). Here Okri draws on traditional belief system where women are often associated with witchcraft. Witchcraft is viewed as evil and as life destroying practice. Witches are believed to be active at night and can only be seen by clairvoyants or people gifted with supernatural powers. This

description fits Okri's depiction of Madame Koto towards the end of the novel: "Her colossal form took wings at night and flew over the city, drawing power from our sleeping bodies" (495). Belief in witchcraft continues to be the most common supernatural belief in many parts of Africa. The direct consequence of such belief is the gratuitous violence unleashed upon poor women often accused of witchcraft. A recent incident in Okri's Nigeria's neighboring country Cameroon is a case in point. Last year, in December 2010, a group of youths in Cameroon searched from house to house for old women whom they accused of witchcraft. They beat those old women in front of a huge crowd that displayed an incomprehensible indifference. The mobilization of these youngsters was motivated by their beliefs that these old women are witches and that they have used their witchcraft to cause them various misfortunes. When asked by a French journalist to explain their acts, the leader of these youths has this to say: "this is the third time I have failed the civil service recruiting exam, I know these witches are behind my misfortune." These youths are the victims of the persistence of the old traditions that favor magical and supernatural explanations of real socio-political problems over empirical evidences. One should question the usefulness of holding onto these traditions when this means the perpetuation of the oppression of one gender by another. This problematizes the notion of hope attributed to magical realism, given that it draws on the very traditions responsible for all forms of injustices against women. However, as called for by Kojo Laing, holding onto the most useful traditions can offer alternative possibilities for African people.

CHAPTER IV

TOWARDS A NEW MODE OF DEPICTION OF POSTCOLONIAL AFRICA: FABULOUS REALISM AND SATIRICAL MAGICAL REALISM IN NGUGI'S *WIZARD OF THE CROW*

Like Kojo Laing's *Woman of the Aeroplanes* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, which I examined in my preceding chapters, *Wizard of the Crow* offers an acerbic critique of postcolonial African regimes reputed for their economic mismanagement, corruption, dictatorship, permanent submission to foreign dictate, but goes a bit farther to include the persisting class and gender inequalities in Africa, the predation of the poor countries by global capitalism, as well as a very subtly psychoanalytic explanation of the truth that rules the life of the African elite. Stylistically, even though the three novels work within magic realism tradition, they differ from each other in regard to the purposes for which their authors employ magic. While Kojo Laing employs magic to make the transition of his people from tradition to modernity possible, bring African and Western cultures together in a complementary cohabitation, as well as offer his people the freedom to determine their own destiny, Ben Okri uses magic to show the resilience of African spirituality as well as counter the Euro-centric realistic view of the world in order to offer hope to his people. In the last novel this dissertation discusses, the author combines fabulous realism and satirical magic realism to satirize the socio-economic and political situations in postcolonial Kenya in particular and Africa in general. Fabulous realism is the result of the fusion between fable and reality, and satirical magic realism

is the result of the fusion between magic, reality and satire.

Wizard of the Crow tells the story of the Free Republic of Aburiria, a fictitious African country ruled by a dictator known as the Ruler and his sycophantic ministers who are engaged in a Machiavellian power struggle and who enjoy plotting against each other in their desire to win his (the Ruler) utmost sympathy. Unlike in *The Famished Road* where two clearly defined groups, the rich and the poor, are struggling for the control of their country's resources, in *Wizard of the Crow* various groups are battling for the protection of their individual interests. Among them: there is the Ruler who is engaged in a fierce battle to cling to his waning power; there are the poverty stricken Aburirian masses who are battling for jobs and the women who are fighting against male domination, both groups led by Kamiti the wizard and his companion Nyawira; and the Global Bank, the representative of the neocolonial forces who are battling for the control of the country's economy.

Oral traditions devices are the locomotive of the novel, which Ngugi has called "an epic from Africa". Compared to his previous novels, *Wizard of the Crow* marks a shift in Ngugi's artistic concerns and style. Indeed, unlike *Weep not, Child, the River Between, and Petals of Blood*, where Ngugi employed social realism to deal with issues directly related to Colonial and Post-Colonial Kenya, *Wizard of the Crow* goes beyond Kenya to address the root causes of the current socio-political malaise in Africa. In this novel, Ngugi employs fabulous realism and satirical magical realism as aesthetics of necessity. In other words, the depiction of the postcolonial African situation calls for this narrative style, which is also reflected in the setting and the portrayal of his

characters. When asked about the present situation in Africa during a September 2000 interview, Ngugi puts his head in his hands: “- aagh! Things are so bad I think the only way to write about it is utter fantasy, fable-it is so awful!” (Mills 1). Ngugi seems to go a little further than the other magical realist writers in his depiction of the situation in postcolonial Africa.

One way he goes beyond Okri and others is that he makes his setting mythical, rather than real, which gives him the freedom of fairy tale in some way. Set in an imaginary African country of Aburiria, *Wizard of the Crow* opens with fabulous rumors about the unexplained illness of The Ruler. Because the Ruler’s illness cannot be scientifically diagnosed, Aburirians have developed extraordinary theories about its causes. Amongst these theories, five have been on the lips of every Aburirian citizens: the first theory blames the Ruler’s illness on the anger he developed after being denied an interview by the *Global Network News* during a visit in New York; the second theory claims the illness was a curse from a the cry of a wronged he-got; the third blames it on the ruler’s long rule; the fourth traces it to the Ruler’s legal wife, Rachael’s refusal to shed tears after her fall from grace; and the fifth believes that the illness is the sole work of the daemons that the Ruler had housed in a special chamber in the State House, who had now turned their backs on him and withdrew their protective services. (3 – 10) The Ruler’s illness and Aburirians’ theories about it are reflective of fables which are defined as stories with fantastic events and creatures having allegorical meaning. The Ruler’s absolute power depends on sycophants like Sikiokuu, Machokali, and Big Ben, who have gone as far as surgically enlarging their ears, eyes, and tongue respectively, in order to

serve as his most loyal spies and spokespersons. In Aburiria, where nepotism and corruption are the basic actions of the state, the main preoccupation of the élite who frequent the Ruler is self-preservation, and they know what to do to remain in the good grace of the dictator whose only criterion for cabinet appointments is the candidate's loyalty to him and only him. Thus, when the Ruler learns that Machokali, the sycophant in chief, has gone to England to surgically enlarge his eyes in order to better serve him, he rewards the latter with the most prestigious position in the cabinet, as we learn in the following excerpt:

Then one day he flew to England, where 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, or 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.... The Ruler was so touched by his devotion and public expression of loyalty that even before the MP returned home from England the Ruler had given him the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, an important cabinet post, so that Machokali would be his representative eye wherever, in whatever corner of the globe lay the Ruler's interests... (13)

This fairy tale-like narration of events is what is unique in Ngugi's magic realism. The once upon a time quality allows for satire and humor as well as a depiction of the horror and injustice of life under the Ruler. Indeed, this is what drives all the characters and their actions in the novel.

The Ruler's positive response vis-à-vis Machokali's act of devotion has opened the Pandora's Box for grotesque bodily modifications. Thus, in the Ruler's entourage another back bencher MP decides to follow the footsteps of Machokali. Nothing can stop this particular cabinet member, for he goes as far as secretly selling his father's plot and

borrowing money to buy a ticket to France and a hospital bed in Paris to have his ears enlarged in order to better serve the Ruler. When Sikiokuu comes back with his new look, the Ruler is pleased with what he sees and decides to upgrade the former's position in the cabinet:

His ears were larger than a rabbit's and always primed to detect danger at any time and from any direction. His devotion did not go unnoticed, and he was made Minister of State in charge of spying on the citizenry. The secret police machine known as M5 was now under his direction. And so Silver Sikiokuu he became, jettisoning his earlier names. (14)

In Aburiria the ridiculous does not kill, and so, later, we learn that another MP has been inspired by the fortune of Machokali and Sikiokuu. Benjamin Mambo has his tongue elongated so he can effectively echo the Ruler's commands to soldiers in the country and threats to his enemies before they reach the Aburirian borders. This earned him the Information Minister portfolio; but he later learned at his own expense that he also needed to enlarge his mouth to retain the ability to speak. The bodily changes of these three sycophants are also followed by name changes. Marcus became Machokali, Silver became Sikiokuu, and Mambo became Big Ben; the latter is believed to have been inspired by the clock at the British Houses of Parliament. Their extraordinarily distorted bodies make them look more like cartoon characters than humans, thereby creating a comic atmosphere throughout the novel. What makes Ngugi magic realism different than the other two writers' is that his is grounded in satire, humor, and sarcasm that the exaggerated depictions of the physical appearance of characters aim at. This is what is termed satirical magic realism. At the heart of satirical magic realism is mockery for

mockery's sake. Ngugi's peculiar depiction of The Ruler and his devotees makes his critique against them very powerful; by demoting them to the cartoon status, he shows how worthless they are as in the episode where the Ruler is diagnosed with Self-Induced Expansion (SIE): "It seems that the Ruler's body had started puffing up like a balloon, his whole body becoming more and more inflated, without losing the proportion of parts" (469). This ultimately leads to the rumors that the Ruler was pregnant. By emasculating the Ruler, he is demystified and left at the mercy of the world. The abundance of humor-satire in *Wizard of the Crow* sets it apart from the other two novels this dissertation discusses, especially *The Famished Road*. For instance while the magic in *The Famished Road* is presented in a matter-of-fact manner, where the author believes that the supernatural events are as normal as natural ones, Ngugi's satire and humor make his use of magic ironic. He seems to distance himself from the supernatural and views his people beliefs in it as ridiculous. In other words, Ngugi incorporates ironic distance, Brenda Cooper's most important feature of magical realism. This is demonstrated in Kamiti's admission to Nyawira that he and his childhood friends used to test the superstitious beliefs of his people and make fun of them:

When we were children we used to play witchcraft. We would stick a wooden spike through a bundle of leaves, a dead frog or lizard, and one or two Sodom apples and then plant the spike in a path. From a safe distance we kept an eye on it, and what excited us most was to see adults, grown men and women, avoiding any contact with the bundle. Some would even take a step, or two back, then give it a wide berth. Nobody dared touch it; there were times when the bundle remained in place, Lord knows, for days. (84)

The presence of the magic in the novel aims at ridiculing Aburirians' superstitious beliefs, especially in regard to their readiness to believe everything the wizard tells them through divination. Even though the wizard does not perform any miracle per se, his patients believe he can change their conditions through his magical powers. The wizard knows too well that his patients do not need any magical intervention in order to better their condition; what they need is self-empowerment, which enables them to exteriorize their repressed desires without fear. Under the autocratic regime of the Ruler, Aburirians have repressed their most cherished desires because they do not want to antagonize the former. Through this parody of magic, Ngugi tells Aburirians that the miracle is in their own hands and that only their courage and actions will determine their success. Ngugi's magic realism is satirical because he does not share the superstitious beliefs of his characters; rather, he looks at them with irony and sarcasm.

Joseph McLaren observes that "satirical magic realism refers to the use of this literary style for the primary purpose of mockery, ridicule, and humor, rather than its use in the portrayal of characters and events simply in terms that stretch the boundaries of so-called normative reality" (151). Critics have questioned the effectiveness of the polemic of this novel, given its heavy reliance on satire. Thus, for McLaren, "the more problematic question is whether the extensive use of satirical magic realism results in distance from the actualities happening on the ground. He goes on to quote the *Sunday Times* review of the novel, which argues that:

given the facts on the ground, the real-life Big Men now ruling in Africa and the global machinations of American finance, this satire linking the two still has an

important point to make, but is Ngugi's critique less effective because of the high degree of satire, some of which could be considered "burlesque"? (155)

Au contraire, satirical magic realism makes Ngugi's critique of the postcolonial African autocratic regimes even more effective, because political realities in postcolonial Africa are themselves satirical in nature. For instance, the bodily transformations of Machokali, Sikiokuu, and Big Ben, respectively Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of State, and Minister of Information points directly to postcolonial African dictators' obsession with the control of information. In fact what assures them longevity in power is their ability to control information, which enables them to keep their citizens in permanent ignorance. They understand that their ability to withhold information to their citizens perpetuates the myths they created around themselves. The Ruler of Aburiria has been able to maintain his grip on power for such a long time thanks to his ministers who serve as his eyes, ears, and tongue. Aburiria is a police state where the truth of any event must come from the mouth of the Ruler. This is why when the Global Bank officials leaked to the media the information that they were no longer interested in funding Marching to Heaven Project, the Ruler felt betrayed and was angry to the point that he went through a bizarre bodily metamorphosis that turned him into an inflated balloon. The bizarre, even funny actions of the Ruler only highlight the plan of disinformation and terror that he exercises over his own people. It is a serious commentary about the dangers of absolute power. According to the narrator, the Global Bank's news had hit the Ruler hard, especially because the Bank had not followed the diplomatic protocol that obliged it to inform the Ruler via diplomatic channels or a special envoy. When Tajirika, his closest

advisor finds him swaying in the air, the Ruler pointed at the newspapers scattered on the floor:

Look around you. Look at those papers. Look at all the headlines. Is there a soul in the whole wide world who is not reading this? Where have diplomatic nicety gone? Imagine how my enemies must be rejoicing, believing that their agitation was responsible for halting our plans for Marching to Heaven! (650 – 651)

Tajirika is still plunged in confusion and astonishment and could not really understand what is going on with the Ruler, the only one to explain the causes of his physical transformation. However, as soon as his personal doctor arrives, the latter opens up. In the narrator's words:

The Ruler was quite candid with the doctor. He explained that when he read the news from the Global Bank, he had become so angry that his body started to expand even more. He had called his special advisor to have somebody to talk to in the hope that this would ease the anger within. While waiting for Tajirika, he had read some more newspapers, only to feel his anger mount until it almost choke him, and that was when he felt himself lifted uncontrollably. He could not exactly tell when it started, but it was definitely when he was already in the air that his tummy began to ache. At first the pain was manageable, but now it had become unbearable. (652)

It is clear that it is not the rejection of the request for funding that makes the Ruler angry; rather, it is the Bank's decision to release the information to the media in New York. Had the information been directly communicated to the Ruler, he and his cabinet henchmen would have come up with an extraordinary explanation that may have even led to new celebrations. The whole political structure in Aburiria rests on lies, and whoever gives a version contradictory to those lies is accused of treason. This is why it is not surprising that the Ruler's most hated prisoners are journalists, historians, and professors.

He refers to them as terrorists and rumormongers. The Ruler is a demagogue who uses emotionally charged language to manipulate and control his people in order to win their sympathy and turn them against those who dare tell the truth. Thus, when the Ruler finally comes to the podium to grant parole to political prisoners as a show of gratitude to citizens of Aburiria, who offered him Marching to Heaven, the Aburirian Tower of Babel as birthday gift, he finds another opportunity to vilify journalists and professors among them:

..... This terrorist of intellect has spent ten years in jail, said the Ruler, but because of this historic occasion, I have let him out early. But professor Materu would not be allowed to grow his beard a length more than half an inch, and if he transgressed, he would be reimprisoned....All the other dissidents had to swear that never again would they collect and pass on rumors as history, literature, or journalism..... (20)

Here fiction seems to imitate life because Ngugi himself was jailed by the very regime many commentators point at as the target of the satire in *Wizard of the Crow*. In 1977, at the time Arap Moi was serving as Kenyan's vice-president, he ordered the imprisonment of Ngugi for writing a play in his native language Gikuyu. *Ngaahika Ndena*, later translated as *I Will Marry When I Want*, which was considered too critical to neocolonial Kenya and therefore too incendiary for the masses it was written for. After his one - year imprisonment without trial, he lost his professorship at Nairobi University. So, professor Materu may very well be Ngugi, which also confirms the parallel between Aburiria and Kenya under Arap Moi. I have already visited the plight of journalists and writers in my previous chapters, but the fact that Postcolonial African writers discuss this theme in many of their artistic work is proof that it is widespread across the continent. In

Aburiria, fantasies and realities are so indistinguishable that their depiction requires a concentrated dose of satire as Ngugi does in this novel.

In this Free Republic, the Ruler is the nation and the nation is the Ruler. He believes he and the nation are synonymous. Whoever dares believe the contrary has to face his anger as is frequently the case with Sikiokuu and other praise singers in his entourage. When Sikiokuu, in an ecstatic mood speaks about the Ruler and the country as separate entities, he finds himself in one of the most embarrassing situations, where only his acceptance of self-humiliation can save him, as in the scene below:

Sikiokuu: 'I want to present you with all the enemies of you, our Ruler, and of the country.' 'You little cunt of a man!' the Ruler shouted angrily. Why do you go on and on about my enemies and those of the Country? Is there a distinction between me and the Country?' 'Forgive me, My Lord and Master. I wished only to intone your name twice. As with God above! We know him by many names. O My Lord, you don't know how sweet your name sounds in the years of those who truly believe in you and who know that you and the Country are one and the same. (136)

As surreal as Sikiokuu's behavior may seem, there have indeed been real ministers in the postcolonial African governments whose behaviors make Sikiokuu a moderate sycophant. In 1975, Mobutu's Minister of Interior, Egulu Beanga ostentatiously declares:

...in our religion, we have our own theologians. And at all times, there are prophets. Why not today? God has sent a great prophet, our prestigious Guide Mobutu. This prophet is our liberator our messiah. Our church is the MPR (political party). Its chief is Mobutu; we respect him like one respect Pope. Our gospel is Mobutism. This is why the crucifixes must be replaced by the image of our Messiah. And party militants will want to place at its side his glorious mother, Mama Yemo, who gave birth to such son. (qtd. in Young 35)

These extreme cases of loyalty are found in many postcolonial African countries. In Togo, colonel Assila of the Togolese Armed Forces offered to sacrifice himself in order to persuade the Eyadema to stay in power. In the 1980s, this dictator went on television and declared that he was stepping down as president. This created an indescribable emotion across the nation. His sycophants improvised public crying sessions begging the dictator to remain in power. Their argument was that without Eyadema, Togo would become an orphan nation. In the middle of this political theater, Colonel Assila gathered people of his hometown near the railroad and announced to them that he was giving up his own life in the president refused to stay in power. When Eyadema learned about Assila's determination to sacrifice himself, he went back on television and announced that he was no longer stepping down. This earned Assila many promotions and turned him into a hero.

Like the other postcolonial dictators, the Ruler of Aburiria adores flattery, praises, and glorification. The Sikiokuus of all postcolonial African countries know how to play the game in order to continue to enjoy the dictators' favors. These shameless lackeys' sole daily preoccupation is how to please the dictators and rally people behind them in order to give them the impression of love; thus they make sure that all the actions of the dictators receive citizens' attention. In Aburiria, any action of the Ruler is news. It has even been reported that:

..... His every moment – eating, shitting, sneezing, or blowing his nose is captured on camera. Even his yawns were news because, whether triggered by boredom, fatigue, or thirst, they were often followed by some national drama: his enemies were lashed in the public square with a *sjambok*, whole villages were

blown to bits or people were pierced to death by a bows-and-arrows squad, their carcasses left in the open as food for hyenas and vultures. (3 – 4)

There are many parallels between Ngugi's exaggeration and the realities in many postcolonial African countries, where, under repressive regimes, real life is as fantastic as fiction can possibly be. What makes satirical magic realism so successful in *Wizard of the Crow* is that its closeness to reality makes it easy to decode. This is the risk Ngugi took for writing this novel. Many commentators have opined that the 2003 attack against him and his wife during a visit in Kenya was orchestrated by the remnants of Moi's regime, who were not amused by his portrayal of their behaviors and actions in his fiction. In "The Postcolonial Wizard," a review of *Wizard of the Crow*, Simon Gikandi has commented on this tragic incident:

It has been suggested that the vicious attack on Ngugi and his wife in Nairobi on August 11, 2003, during his first visit to the country after twenty years in exile, was an act of revenge for the way the novelist had represented the old regime in his fiction. Some people have even speculated that an early manuscript was obtained by the regime and that the attack was financed and planned by its supporters. (165)

Given that Ngugi is a Kenyan, it is not surprising that Moi's supporters have been outraged by the similarities of the events and characters of the novel to politics under the Father of the nation. However, it also wouldn't have been surprising to see the novel banned in countries like Malawi, Zaire, Togo, and Gabon if the dictators who ruled those countries for many years were still in power, for it simply looks like an honest description of their respective regimes.

As violent as it was, the attack on Ngugi suggests that his brand of satire embedded in magic realism is effective. As Gikandi puts it:

If all this turns out to be true, *Wizard of the Crow*, like other great postcolonial novels, will have succeeded, in the most tragic and perverse manner, to achieve the historic goal of the international avant-garde, namely to interrupt and transform the narrative of the real life. It would, indeed, be ironic that Ngugi and his wife should have been attacked by remnants of a dying regime unhappy with the way their self-righteous regime had been depicted in a novel. (165)

Yet, another reason for the novel's success lies in its use of the folklore traditions of the Gikuyu people. The fables, narrated in a series of stories provide a setting that reflects the outrageous events and actions of the characters of the novel. Early in the novel, Ngugi introduces his audience to a fabulous story about the solitary confinement of Rachel, the once beloved wife of the Ruler. The story goes that on one special evening, the mighty Ruler of Aburiria and his wife Rachel has a supper at the State House. Rachel thinks this is the opportune moment to call the Father of the nation on what she considers to be his incestuous behavior. As she confronts the Ruler about his sexual relations with school girls, he stops eating and turns to her to make sure she really said what he has heard. Then, according to the narrator, the Ruler, "speaking with studied calm, a faint smile on his face," he told Rachel that "the unfinished meal would be their last supper together." To prove to Rachel that his power has no limit, he built her a house on a seven-acre plot that he surrounded with a stone wall and an electric fence, in which he stops the time:

All the clocks in the house were frozen at the second, the minute, and the hour that she had raised the question of schoolgirls; the calendars 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 at the last supper, the clothes the same as she had worn that night. The bedding and curtains were identical to those where she had once lived. The television and radio kept repeating programs that were on during the last supper. Everything in the new mansion reproduced the exact same moment.

A record player was programmed to play only on hymn:

Our Lord will come back one day
He will take us to his home above
I will then know how much he loves me
Whenever he comes back

And when he comes back
You the wicked will be left behind
Moaning your wicked deeds
Whenever our Lord comes back. (8)

According to the narrator, Rachael was to remain inside the guarded mansion until “she had shed all the tears for all the tomorrows of all the children she had accused him of abusing, and then the Ruler would take her back to restart life at the exact moment she has fallen from grace” (8). The Ruler is thus elevated above the world and is now in charge of it. There is a sort of deification of the Ruler who has tamed time so he can control all the events. Once again, Ngugi creates a fairy tale atmosphere in order to accommodate the Ruler’s hubris.

Critics have found a parallel between this scene and scenes in well-known texts. For instance, Gikandi traces it to the Bible; he argues that the scene comes from the Bible, the Ur-text of African-language written literature. In this text, the leader provides

his wife with a last supper and leaves her, like her Biblical namesake, Rachael, weeping for her children in the wilderness. (164)

The taming of time also parodies the long political and economic stagnation in which postcolonial African dictators have kept their countries over the course of their one - party system of government. During those one party and one strong man rules, events seemed to enjoy the myth of eternal return, for they are reenacted every year to refresh people's memories about their relevance. Having seized power by coups-d' état, postcolonial African dictators forced their people to accept them as liberators. Once that was granted, their next move was the falsification of history by way of changing the Independence Day, destroying their predecessor's legacy, inventing new national holidays that symbolize their own political philosophies. Each year the commemorations of these holidays are identical to the previous as if they were frozen and retrieved intact. The organizers always made sure that the events, the uniforms, the dances, the libations, the parades, and the venues, all look exactly the same as the previous ones. In Aburiria:

The birthday celebration of the Ruler would always start at the seventh hour of the seventh day of the seventh month, seven being the Ruler's sacred number, and precisely because in Aburiria the Ruler controlled how the months followed each other – January for instance trading places with July – he therefore had the power to declare any month in the year the seventh month, and any day within that seventh month the seventh day and therefore the Ruler's Birthday. (12)

In spite of the satiric nature of the description in the excerpt above, it is not hard to find its perfect match in the recent postcolonial African political scene, where theatrical performance is preferred to satisfaction of the needs of the citizens. The situation described above unequivocally resonates with what I have observed in my

native Togo for more than thirty years. In the Aburirian Republic, the Ruler's magic number is seven; in Togo Gnassingbé Eyadema's magic number is thirteen because he came to power by coup d'état on January 13. In Aburiria the Ruler is the most intelligent person in the country. For instance, when the honorable members of the parliament failed to determine the latter's birthday after a heated debate that went on for "seven months, seven days, seven hours, and seven minutes, they had to seek his wise guidance to help solve the puzzle" (12). In Togo, Eyadema had countless attributes: he was the most intelligent person, he was the wisest, and he was the most virtuous. Important events were organized on the thirteenth of the month at thirteenth hour, thirteenth minute, and thirteenth second. He even loves to joke about that; he would set his official appointments around this number.

Even though factual examples may still seem surreal to those who have not experienced the socio-political realities in postcolonial Africa under dictatorship, it may resonate very well with millions of readers who share this experience, and particularly with African readers. This is the common political history of Africa. Aburiria fits Togo, Congo, Gabon, Kenya, and others. In any respect this novel is a representation of the realities in postcolonial Africa. The presence of extraordinary episodes throughout *Wizard of the Crow* may make readers view it as fantasy; however, what is true is that when it comes to postcolonial Africa, fantasy is very well abundant in the socio-political reality.

Fables drawn on the rich African oral tradition, particularly the Gikuyu folklore make it possible for Ngugi to easily juxtapose realism, satire and magic in order to offer

insight into postcolonial African politics. It looks like the novelist needed some magic to better explain realities in postcolonial Kenya and by extension, Africa. The hero of the novel, Kamiti is an intellectual with hidden spiritual powers, which he inherited from his grandfather. Even though reluctant at the beginning, he becomes a wizard who uses mirrors to cure Aburirian politicians from their fantastic ailments such as “white ache.” When we first encounter him, he is lying on a garbage heap, having an out-of-body experience as a bird. Trash collectors mistook him for a corpse and are terrified when the dead apparently arises:

He was tired, hungry, and thirsty and felt beaten down by the sun. He wanted to climb to the top, when suddenly he felt very weak in the knees and collapsed at the foot of mountain of garbage. He could not tell whether he was in a temporary coma or a deep sleep, but when a slight breeze blew it lifted him out of himself to the sky, where he now floated. He could still see his body lying on the ground and the mountain of garbage where children and dogs fought over signs of meat and white bones [...] I am human, I am a human being, a soul, and not a piece of garbage, no matter how poor and ragged I look, and I deserve respect, he heard himself say time and again as he descended to and repossessed his body. (38 – 40)

This out-of-body experience sets the tone for *Wizard of the Crow*'s concern about the inequalities that exist in the Aburirian society. During Kamiti's flight over Aburiria, he realizes the ubiquity of the inequalities in all the cities and regions of Aburiria. He notices with surprise that like in Eldares, every town he traverses, “people were hungry, thirsty, and in rags.” “Shacks stood side by side with mansions of tile, stone, glass, and concrete.” He also realizes that he is not alone in his condition of poverty, and even envisions to remain “a bird in order to escape suffering that characterizes human society” (39). This scene is reminiscent of a scene in *The Famished Road*, where Dad undertook a

journey through a three day sleep. Like Kamiti, “he saw divisions in our society, the lack of unity, he saw the widening pit between those who have and those who don’t, he saw it all very clearly” (492). These supernatural moments are magnifying glasses that enable these heroes to clearly see what’s going on in their respective societies. This flight marks the beginning of Kamiti’s awareness of his responsibility vis-à-vis social and political reformation in his country. He did not like what he saw and thought something needed to be done. Kamiti believes that the first step towards a real reformation must be the healing of the souls, for “damaged souls produced damaged policies, not the other way around” (62).

As the novel progresses, Kamiti becomes a wizard and uses his magic and healing powers to help the Aburirians. Aburirian politicians and businessmen visit his shrine for divination and cure of their bizarre diseases. Kamiti first displayed a sign that says “Wizard of the Crow, enter at your own risk” to dissuade Arigaigai Gatherere, who was pursuing him and Nyawira, from entering the room they were hiding in. But Gatherere went back and upon his insistence Kamiti finally commits himself to magic as the “Wizard of the Crow”, role he plays with Nyawira alternatively. At the center of their magic is the mirror, which they use during their divination sessions. It is a technique that helps the wizard’s patients discover themselves, because for Kamiti the causes of Aburirians’ bizarre ailments are to be found within each patient. As A.G. accounts:

‘You said that there are shadows crossing yours,
Yes’.

‘We need mirrors to see our shadows. We need mirrors to see other people’s shadows crossing ours. You can rent mine for two thousand, two hundred, and fifty Buris.’ (116)

Aburirians are very superstitious and they are convinced about the Wizard's healing power. Soon after his visit to the wizard's shrine, A.G. is promoted to a highest rank and believes he owes his promotion to the Wizard, who has destroyed his enemies. As he maintains: "What caused this sudden change in my career?" A.G. would ask his listeners, only to answer the question himself, "The Wizard of the Crow."

Also, when he is taken to New York to cure the Ruler's bizarre illness known as self-induced expansion (SIE), he leaves his body behind, becomes a bird, and undertakes a spiritual voyage back in time in search of black power:

Go back in time. Arise and go to the crossroads, all the marketplaces and temple sites, all the dwelling places of black people the world over, and find out the sources of their power. There you will find the cure for SIE [...] He woke up in flight, laughing, recalling his travels from the pyramids of Egypt to the plains of the Serengeti and great Zimbabwe; Benin to Baha and on through the Caribbean to the skyscrapers of New York, alighting everywhere to glean wisdom. (494)

When we read passages like these, we are quickly reminded of the beliefs in witchcraft in traditional African societies. Most often female witchcraft (witches) is associated with evil, for it is believed to destroy life through mysterious means. Witches only operate at night and are invisible to ordinary people. Witchcraft always takes place in the metaphysical realm, which places it beyond the reach of human reason. Witches have the ability to abandon their bodies at sleep and fly like birds in search of their victims. In *The Famished Road*, Azaro complains that, "Madam Koto's colossal form took wings at night and flew over the city, drawing power from our sleeping bodies" (495). Conversely, Male witchcraft (wizardry or sorcery) is perceived to be benevolent, for it helps protect the community against the evil forces of witches. Kamiti is the

benevolent African wizard who helps Aburirian who think they are bewitched by their enemies. In addition to fables and satire, Ngugi has introduced the supernatural in his narrative. This technique places the novel within the magical realist tradition as many reviewers and critics suggest. In his assessment of *Wizard of the Crow*, Hazel Rochman writes:

Magic Realism drives this mammoth novel set in the imaginary African country of Aburiria, and exiled Kenyan writer wa Thiong'o roots the wild fantasy in the brutal horror of contemporary politics. His ridicule of the powerful knows no bounds as the novel chronicles greed and corruption in Aburiria and in the West, including the Global Bank's funding of the Aburirian ruler's Marching to Heaven Tower of Babel. But even more than the crazy plot of coup, countercoup, flattery, and betrayal, what holds the reader here is the intimate story of one couple. Quiet secretary Nyawira, secret leader of the people's resistance movement, persuades her intellectual lover, Kamiti, to give up his search for himself in the wild, and they embark on a plan to change the world, with Kamiti disguised as a sorcerer. Set off by the global farce, this unforgettable love story reveals the magic power of the ordinary in people and in politics. (*Booklist*)

Surprisingly, Ngugi has resisted this label. As Simon Gikandi notes in his review of the novel:

Ngugi has seemed irritated by suggestions that his work is an African version of the genre of "magic realism" associated with Latin American writers of the "boom" generation. He has reacted to such claims by reminding his interlocutors that his narrative models are drawn from Gikuyu folklore, not "magic realism." (160)

Thus Ngugi has joined the other postcolonial African writers who reject such comparisons. For instance, Ben Okri and Zakes Mda have made it clear that the presence of the supernatural in their novels has everything to do with the cultures in which they write. These cultures, they argue, view the supernatural as normal as the natural. Like

these two writers, Ngugi may have not intended to write a magic realist novel; however, it is not easy to ignore the fact that their narrative styles match a style that has already earned a name. Therefore, Ngugi's narrative may very well be drawn upon the Gikuyu folklore, but it cannot escape the label of magic realism, for all the features in his narrative point to this mode. In *The Cambridge Companion the African Novel*, Ato Quayson defines magical realism as a literary mode in which equivalence is established between the code of real and that of the magical. He attributes real to the pragmatic and ordinary sense of everyday life as most people experience it and argues that the magical is an umbrella term to denote elements drawn from mythology, fantasy, folk tales, and any other discourse that bears a representational code opposed to realism. (164) There is no question that Ngugi's narrative in *Wizard of the Crow* fits in this umbrella because of his use of devices such fables, wizardry, witchcraft, and the fantastic, all of which, it could be argued are quintessential to the critique he is leveling against the Aburirian dictator and his henchmen. For Phyllis Taoua, it is Ngugi's use of magical realism that "helps enliven the narrative's satirical humor in the novel" (*The Cambridge Companion to African Novel* 218).

African Magical Realism meets South American Magical Realism

Even though this dissertation investigates Ngugi's narrative in regard to magical realism, it does not ignore the validity of his reaction quoted above. Those who are familiar with Ngugi's politics of writing would find his resistance against the association

of his narrative mode with Latin American magic realism quite acceptable. He takes the identity of African literature very seriously. His writings have always emphasized not only the authenticity of African cultures, but also their relevance in the production of literature, which he always expresses explicitly. For instance, in a 2004 interview with Angela Lamas Rodrigues, commenting on the publication of *Wizard of the Crow* in Gikuyu, Ngugi declared: “It was very important for him to show that an African language can talk about anything in the world. It can talk about Brazil, India, Asian, China, astronomy, philosophy, and so on. It’s very important to me that this material is going to be available in Gikuyu and, through translation, in other African languages as well” (167). What Ngugi seems to reject is the tendency by critics to overlook the cultural bases of individual texts that are often labeled magic realist texts. For Ngugi the comparison suggests imitation, which in turn perpetuates the notion that African cultures have nothing authentic to offer the world. This is a prevalent attitude among modern African writers. In *African Literature: an Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, the postcolonial literary critic Isidore Okpewho argues that this attitude is a direct consequence of the negative campaign African cultures and languages were subjected to during colonialism. According to him, there has been the increasing tendency on the part of modern African writers to identify with the literary traditions of their people in terms both of content and of technique aims at demonstrating that Africa has had, since time immemorial, traditions that should be respected and a culture to be proud of. He then observes that as far as the creative writers are concerned:

The main offshoots of this program have been to collect and publish texts of the oral literature of their people as practiced by them over time and to use that literature as basis for writing original works that reflect, from a more or less modern perspective, some of the major concerns of today so as to demonstrate that traditional African culture is not obsolete but relevant for articulation of contemporary needs and goals. (83)

In line with this, I argue that, in writing *Wizard of the Crow* in Gikuyu, Ngugi seeks to emphasize the africanness of his narrative mode and thereby celebrate the rich African oral traditions that sustain it. Thus, even if his narrative in the present novel fits the magic realist mode, it directly springs from Gikuyu folklore which drives the novel from the beginning to the end. Ngugi's use of the technique of the storytelling in the novel makes it more appealing when read aloud in front of large audiences, for orature still plays an important role in the Gikuyu society. In *Encyclopedia of African Literature*, Simon Gikandi writes:

Orature is a strategic communal tool for non-literate societies in their consolidation and socialization processes, and its spoken nature guarantees its widest circulation. Unlike written literature, orature has unfixed boundaries, which gives it greater freedom in its execution and interpretation - it can thus be used to praise and criticize those in power. (416)

Upon the publication of *Wizard of the Crow* in Gikuyu under the title *Murogi wa Kagogo*, it has been reported that in Kenya, it was read in bars, market places, and all public places just like storytellers would perform before their audiences. In fact, for Gikandi, it is the abundance of orature in the novel that makes it a chef-d'oeuvre, especially for readers familiar with African oral traditions. Hence his comments that: "The genius of *Wizard of the Crow* is to be found in Ngugi's unforced ability to draw on the

multiple oral traditions of his cultures and experiences to create and sustain the illusion that this is a story being passed from mouth to mouth” (157).

However, it is also this infusion of orature in the novel that earned Ngugi most of the criticisms level against his style. For critics the novel’s reliance on orature makes it cumbersome. For Tom Adair of *the Scotsman*, “at best the prose is limber, at worst it is lax” (Complete Review). This raises the question of expectations, which is worth discussing here because it will shed light on the quasi competing reviews of the novel. In fact, African and Western readers have received the novel differently because their heterogeneous interpretations are intrinsically linked to their linguistic, social, political and cultural as well as their individual experiences. Each reader approaches the novel with subjective expectations achievable only within specific paradigms. Outside those paradigms the expectations become obstacles working against the reader’s effort to extract a meaning from the text.

Thus, the reception of *Wizard of the Crow* is tributary to the experience from which the reader reads it. An African reader, who is familiar with the oral traditions and postcolonial African politics, will find resonance in the novel’s style and themes. Because the narrative style accounts for everyday life in postcolonial Africa, he or she identifies with it without any resistance. Also, because he or she grew up in the society where the storytelling was still practiced, he or she is much more receptive to Ngugi’s narrative technique. Conversely, Western readers, as the reviews show, encounter difficulties because the experience with which they read the novel and expectations they set for the novel differ from the African readers’ experiences and expectations. The Western models

and values they bring to the reading don't respond adequately to the nuances which are only visible to the initiated. In regard to *Wizard of the Crow*, Western readers are confronted with two difficulties: their unfamiliarity with the oral traditions from which Ngugi borrows his storytelling devices and their inability to identify with the socio-political situation Ngugi depicts in his novel. This is where the advice offered by David Hellman of the *San Francisco Chronicle* in the novel's earlier reviews deserves more attention, as he writes:

Wizard of the Crow may improve his status, but only for those willing to wrestle with its incredibly demanding text. Nevertheless, the novel has many rewards for those willing to face its challenges. (...) the novel is full of moments that are entirely predictable and others that appear to pop out of nowhere. From an ingrained Western perspective this could be annoying, which could lead to this novel not receiving the recognition it deserves. But to enjoy this book, readers should just abandon any expectations they may have of literature and just surrender themselves to the story.

The merit of Hellman's advice is that he is aware of the danger of trying to understand a literary work through the use of fixed models and values. However, I do not support his use of the word surrender as an appropriate way to embrace the text in this case as he advised, because very often it is not the reader's resistance to a literary text that causes its misinterpretation; instead it is his inability to negotiate his way between his expectations and the realities that inspired the text. In our present situation, Western readers may be better served if they consider the oral background of the novel as well as its politico-historical context. To understand *Wizard of the Crow*, Western readers need to know why Ngugi uses oral traditions devices in his narrative. Equipped with this knowledge, readers can easily negotiate the meaning between their expectations and the

author's. The use of storytelling is necessary in this novel because it responds very well to the behavior of Ngugi's characters. It is really interesting to see how the fables invented by political actors in Aburiria quickly become the new realities that the country must live by. These fables are carried throughout Aburiria in the form of rumors which everyone can alter before he passes them over to other people. In fact this is what sustains the novel, for the information about all the events reaches people via rumors. These rumors play a double role in the novel: on the one hand they serve to spread the lies of the Ruler and his sycophants to all corners of Aburiria. On the other hand they play a subversive role, as they allow citizens to express their discontent with the Ruler without putting themselves in danger. Because nobody knows the source of the information carried through rumors, even the enlarged eyes, ears, and tongue of Machokali, Sikioku, and Big Ben Mambo are incapable of detecting their authors. For instance, a simple rumor about a snake has dispersed people gathered to celebrate the Ruler's birthday. When the first scream that mentions "a snake!" is heard, it is repeated by others who have not seen anything, and this led to a pandemonium: "People shoved and shouted in every direction to escape a snake unseen by many. It was enough that others had; the cry was now not about one but several snakes" (22).

The same way one unseen snake has become many snakes, information in Aburia is received in several different versions. The power of rumors lies in the fact that without traceable origin, they are properties of everybody and nobody at the same time. This allows them to be recreated again and again at will. Rumors have multiple identities and this makes them untraceable. Ngugi has modeled the identities of his characters on the

multiple identities of the rumors. Kamiti and Nyawira respectively, hero and heroine of the novel have multiple identities which they assume through disguise. Disguise is a technique whereby a character assumes another role, usually involving a change of costume in theater. When Kamiti was tired of looking for a job without success, he disguised himself as a beggar: “He opened his bag, took out some rags, and quickly changed. With a felt pen, he drew lines of misery on his face. In no time he had transformed himself from a respectable-looking job hunter to a dire seeker of alms”(71). At his shrine, he is not the MBA holder looking for a job; he is not the beggar, but the wizard of the crow. Nyawira too disguises herself into various identities. She is the office secretary of Tajirka, the chairman of Marching to Heaven, she is a beggar, a dancer, a limping witch, and leader of the Movement for the Voice of People, as Kamiti puts it: “This woman was chameleon-like. One moment she was a faithful secretary, then a player in the politics of poverty, and even a singing religious fanatic” (87). Through Nyawira, *Wizard of the Crow* extends to performance, which creates propitious conditions for the organization of the resistance against the Ruler, Marching to Heaven, gender discrimination, class stratification, and global capitalism. Gikandi defines performance as:

a means by which society reflects on its current condition, on the members’ relationship with each other and their environment. It enables people to define and/or reinvent themselves and their society and either reinforce, resist, or subvert prevailing social orders. In performance, subversion and legitimization can emerge in the same utterance or act. (418)

This is indeed the purpose of the performances by the Movement for the Voice of the People in the novel. In these performances, these women, led by Nyawira, disguise as beggars, cultural group dancers, and singers. The performances have given them the avant-garde role in the novel. In their individual households they are second class citizens who are abused and humiliated by their husbands. The chief abuser of women is the Ruler himself who has built a maximum security prison for his wife Rachael. The latter's treatment epitomizes the plight of all the women of Aburiria and even the nation.

Nyawira tells Kamiti that:

Rachael's fate speaks volumes: if a woman who had been at the mountaintop of power and visibility could be made to disappear, be silenced forever while alive, what about the ordinary woman worker and peasant? The condition of women in a nation is the real measure of its progress. You imprison a woman and you have imprisoned a nation, we sang in a song of celebration. (253)

For this reason, Nyawira believes that the emancipation of Aburirian women is also the liberation of the nation from oppression. The peculiar situation of the Aburirian woman makes her emancipation the emancipation of all the social groups in the nation and even the world. According to Nyawira, The Aburirian woman carries three burdens which make her the most oppressed person in the world: "She is oppressed on account of her color like all black people in the world; she is oppressed on account of her gender like all women in the world; and she is exploited and oppressed on account of her class like all workers and peasants in the world" (428). *Wizard of the Crow* takes advocacy of women's issues to an extreme level in order to tackle the shameful practice of wife-

beating. In Aburiria, wife-beating is sanctioned by state law as decreed by the Ruler in his philosophical booklet:

Magnus Africanus: Prolegomenon to Future Happiness. According to this philosophy: Women must get circumcised and show submission by always walking in a few steps behind their men. Polygamous households should not form queues. Instead of screaming when they are beaten, women should sing songs of praise to those who beat them and even organize festivals to celebrate wife beating in honor of manhood. Most important, all Aburirians should remember at all times that the Ruler was husband number one, and so he was duty bound to set an example by doing in the country what individual men were to do in their households. (621 – 2)

The satire of the novel reaches its culminant point as Nyawira and her women decide to go on offensive by instituting what they call the people's court where Aburirian wife-beaters appear before nine women for their trial. Titus Tajirika, whose beating of his wife Vinjina has become his favorite pass time, is the first man to face the justice of the Aburirian modern woman:

'Who are you?'

'A new order of justice created by today's modern woman. You are now appearing before a people's court.'

'I refuse to recognize your authority,' Tajirika replied with a little bit more defiance.

'Don't worry yourself. By dawn you will.'

'Get off my back,' he said again, annoyed with himself for sounding as if he was pleading.

'What is this about?'

'Justice. We are hawk-eyed justice. We float in the air, our ears wide open to the cries of women. Now it has come to our ears that you beat your wife night and day.'

'Listen to me there is no power on earth that can tell me how to run my home.'

'That might well be so, but man, woman, and child compose a home, and if one pillar is weak, the family is weak, and if the family is weak, the nation is weak. So what happens in a home is the business of the nation and the other way around.'

(435)

The Movement for the Voice of the People believes that the malaise of Aburiria is the direct consequence of the weakness in individual families. The families in Aburiria are in the image of the Ruler's dysfunctional family, for he is synonymous with the nation. Thus, as goes the Ruler's family, so goes the nation. The Ruler's inability to run his family affects the whole nation; his misrule of his family is translated into the misrule of the nation. For these reasons, in order to heal the nation, one must heal the family first. For the Movement for the Voice of the People, the restoration of justice in the nation begins with the restoration of justice in the families. Nyawira herself is a victim of gender oppression. She had a failed marriage with John Kaniuru, the leader of the youth branch of the Ruler's party, who married her so he could benefit from her father's wealth. She also has a failed relationship with her father, Matthew Wangahu, who has disowned her many a time. When she disobeys him and marries Kaniuru, he disowns her; also when Wangahu learns that she is involved in the protest against Marching to Heaven, he publicly threatens to disown her: "If you don't give yourself up within one week, I say publicly to the whole world, I will no longer call you my daughter, for I am loyal to God in Heaven and the Ruler here on earth" (297). The Ruler is the sole beneficiary of all the failed male-female relationships in Aburiria, for every repudiator has cited loyalty to him as the number one reason. Thus, like Wangahu, as Titus Tajirika learns that his wife Vinjina is involved with the Movement for the Voice of the People, he improvises a press conference where he publicly denounces her:

Dear Gentlemen of the Press. I have called you here today to tell you and, in telling you, tell the world that I would give up my life for the Ruler. As I am so loyal, how could anyone imagine that I could possibly have anything to do with a

worker, a simple secretary, or a simple housewife, subverting the Mightiest of Governments...etc. (229)

Even though this indiscriminate oppression of women by men may give the reader the impression that Nyawira and her Movement of the Voice of the People have a feminist agenda, in reality their agenda transcends feminism and embraces globalism, as evidenced in Nyawira's appeal to the world:

Those who want to fight for the people in the nation and in the world must struggle for the unity and rights of the working class in their own country; fight against all discriminations based on race, ethnicity, color, and belief system; they must struggle against all gender-based inequalities and therefore fight for the rights of women in the home, the family, the nation, and the world... (428)

This is the sense of Nyawira's commitment to organizing women and raising their awareness in order to fight for socio - political reforms in Aburiria. For Nyawira, gender-based oppression is as evil as racism and religious bigotry. This is why her revolutionary movement wants to tackle all form of oppression. To fulfill this task, Nyawira and her Movement of the Voice of the people use performance to anonymously protest against the excesses of the Ruler and his cronies.

Through performance or "theater of politics," as Nyawira terms it, the Movement for the Voice of the People successfully opposes and disrupts all the events related to Marching to Heaven. The success of the Movement for the Voice of the People lies in Nyawira's acting ability as well as her early interest in politics and social issues. When we first encounter her in the novel, she is recovering from a car accident that nearly took

her life. What changed her outlook of the world is the realization that poor people are more humane than rich people. According to the narrator:

What surprised her then and later when she recalled her near fatality was the number of cars that simply passed her by: no one had stopped to see if anyone was hurt or needed help. The people who hurried to her rescue were the barefooted, mostly. One unloaded his donkey cart to rush her to the nearest medical center many miles away, the donkey announcing their arrival at the emergency room by braying loudly and shitting. (79)

The compassion of the haves not touched Nyawira to the point that she turned her back to the wealth she was born in to embrace the life of modesty, where she can commit herself to fighting for justice and equality and emancipation of women in Aburiria. This is what “caused a rupture in her relationship with her father” (80). Before the accident she used to hate the exiled revolutionaries who were fighting for justice. But now, like these revolutionaries, she admits “we cannot leave the fate of the nation to the man-eaters” (746). But she also admits that the task of healing the nation cannot be done by one person or by any number of people when each is acting on his own. For Nyawira, it is only when all the oppressed people, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, region, religion, and tribe, come together and resist their common oppressors that they will bring about social and political reforms in the country. She sums-up her socio-political theory as follows:

In Aburiria there are those who reap where they never planted and those who plant but hardly ever reap what they planted. The first camp, even with its allies abroad, is small, and yet it is able to lord over the second because it divides it along ethnic and sometimes gender and religious lines. Our movement wants to reverse that. We do not ask people what their tribe is but where they stand in the conflicting interests of the two camps. You have not a say in the ethnicity into

which you are born, but you have all the say in the choice of associates. Biology is fate. Politics is choice. No, the life of even the least among us should be sacred, and it will not do for any region or community to keep silent when the people of another region or community are being slaughtered. The wealth of science, technology, and arts should enrich peoples' lives, not enable their slaughter. We oppose the tendency to make women carry the weight of customs that outlived the contexts that may have made them necessary or even useful earlier. The context is gone but the practice goes on. (725 – 726)

The Agenda of Ngugi's Narrative Technique

This declaration sheds light on Ngugi's revolutionary socialist agenda, which is demonstrated in most of his literary work. He always emphasizes the plight of the masses in postcolonial Africa. Ngugi believes that a tiny minority of elite and their foreign allies have hijacked independent African nations and returned them under another form of oppression. He attacks politicians for continuing the colonial exploitation of the masses and denying them freedom. In *Aburiria* the perpetuation of exploitation of the masses by the ruling class has led to the emergence of two antagonistic classes: the class of profiteers which consist of the ruler and his entourage, and the masses which consist of workers, students, unemployed, and peasants. In *Wizard of the Crow*, the profiteers or the man-eaters, according to Nyawira, are represented by the Ruler, Machokali, Sikioku, Tajirika and their followers, whereas the voiceless, the masses are represented by Kamiti, Nyawira and the Movement for the Voice of the People. The former stands for the failure of the post-colonial elite in Africa whereas the latter stands for hope. In the section titled "Queuing Daemons", Ngugi juxtaposes the two groups in order to expose the striking differences amongst them. When a billboard sparked rumors that the chairman was hiring

thousands of workers for Marching to Heaven, two long lines were quickly formed in front of Tajirika's office:

One was made up of people in custom suits, standing stiffly and solemnly as if at fashion parade; it reached all the way to the door. She had dealt with people of their ilk the previous day, and so it was not a big surprise.

The second line started at the billboard **TEMPA JOBS: APPLY IN PERSON**. It was composed of people in patched-up clothes and worn-out suits in all colors of the rainbow, a stunning contrast to the array of black and gray in the queue of the rich. (138)

Here, Ngugi emphasizes the importance of hearsay in countries under dictatorship; since everything is considered as state secret, citizens rely on rumors to go on with their everyday life. But what the above excerpt exposes even more is the desperation of masses for employment and the wide gap that exists between the rich and the poor. The queue of the people in custom suits represents the profiteers of the oppressive and corrupt regime, whereas the queue of people in worn-out suits represents the poor. The former sees Marching to Heaven as another opportunity for illicit enrichment whereas the latter, in their desperation, sees it as an opportunity to earn money through their own labor for their subsistence. These are people who walk up and down the streets of Eldares, the capital of Aburiria in search jobs. They are university graduates like Kamiti, who cannot find a job, despite his "BA in economics and Master of Business Management, MBA" (53). Despite his degrees, Kamiti has been looking for a job for three years to no avail. In lieu of a job what he gets is humiliation like the one he was subjected to at Eldares Modern Construction and Real Estate, where the chairman

Tajirika, after wasting Kamiti's time with a lengthy interview, ridiculed him. At the end of the interview, pointing to the signboard that reads "No Vacancy:

For Jobs Come Tomorrow," Tajirika tells Kamiti: 'It is simple. I want you to read loudly what is written on this signboard.' Even before uttering the words on the board, Kamiti knew that Tajirika was toying with him. But the words came out of his mouth and he heard himself read loudly: *No Vacancy: For Jobs Come Tomorrow*. 'There you have read it correctly!' Tajirika said triumphantly. 'What is it that you don't understand? Or do you need a Hindi interpreter? On these premises, there is no use for your herbology. Here are your Indian papers. Over there is the main avenue. And now you'll excuse me, for I have an important engagement in Paradise'. (59)

The novel exhibits a very serious problem in the postcolonial Africa, where recruitment in the public sector has nothing to do with the applicant's degree or what he/she knows, but who he/she knows. Like in Aburiria, job seekers have to choose between bribing the officials and getting the job or remaining jobless forever. As Kamiti sits to review the film of what has just happened to him, Nyawira reminds him that "even holders of PhDs are unemployed, and that quite often they have to bribe their way into a job, and other times they have to use elders from their villages to plead with the Ruler on their behalf, *for nobody gets a job if not by the Ruler's magnanimity*" (62 – 63, my emphasis).

Ngugi believes that unless the exploited masses unite and engage a direct confrontation with the exploiters, the status quo will remain forever. In *Wizard of the Crow*, this confrontation is made possible through performances executed by the masses under the leadership of Nyawira. Her ability to rally the masses through dances, songs, as

well as lead them without being detected is traced back to her years at Eldares University, where she showed interest in theater:

She also loved the stage, and nothing made her happier than playing this or that tragic or comic role, eliciting tears or laughter from an audience. She was a brilliant actress. She could change herself into any character, sometimes so realistically that even those who thought they knew her well because of seeing her on the platforms in many student Political events were often unable to say whether it was really Nyawira on the stage. (80)

Nyawira's ability to disguise herself and go undetected enables her to lead the Movement for the Voice of the People against the Ruler and his accomplices even where she is wanted. There are many such instances in the novel, like when at the dedication of Marching to Heaven, Nyawira led a group of women on the stage and exposed their butts to the foreign officials and a mission from the Global Bank to protest against the project (250). Also, when Tajirika was abducted, she disguised as a traditional dancer and led a protest against his abduction. She led them to dancing and singing:

When I came here to sing praises to the visitors
I did not know that it was to a house at war
I do not sing in houses at war
My song might become cacophony
And my voice gets lost in my throat
For though you see me dancing
I have a husband and a son to look after
I would not want the child to lose a father
For a home is father, mother, and child. (308)

She did all this undetected even by those who know her very well. Thus, when Sikiokuu interrupts their performance, he tells the crowd that the government knows

where Nyawira, the outlaw is hiding and reminds them that it's everyone's duty to report her to the nearest police station.

Performance is not limited to Nyawira the theater student; it looks like the common denominator of all the characters in novel. The Ruler and his ministers are all performers in their own rights. When the Ruler learns that rumors of recruitment related to the construction of Marching to Heaven have provoked long lines of people in Aburiria, he becomes concerned that this will make a bad impression during the visit of official from the Global Bank. As he turns to Machokali for an answer, the latter quickly comes up with the idea that he will tell the Global Bank the lines are manifestations of support for the project. "As soon as the other ministers realized that the Ruler was excited by Machokali's motion, their tongues loosened, each claiming, one after another, that queuing was more intense in his respective region with his constituents singing nothing but songs in praise of Marching to Heaven" (162). As if that were not enough, ministers make up another story that "the Ruler has invented a new theory of politics – the theory of queuing, which could be taught in all Aburirian schools and colleges supplanting the outmoded theories of Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, and Pope" (163).

Stories like these are abundant in *Wizard of the Crow*; unfortunately, this is the game dictators and their henchmen play with their citizens – turning fiction into reality, lies into truths. Sycophants like Sikioku and Machokali exist in all dictatorial regimes; they are masters of storytelling and know how to turn their stories into reality in order to secure the ruler's sympathy on their behalf. The extraordinary transformation of fiction into reality, defeat into victory, and failure into success is true to oral tradition that

underlies *Wizard of the Crow*. Like in storytelling, derived from oral traditions, Ngugi is forced to constantly be there for his readers. In fact, unlike in other literary forms, the storyteller is in direct contact with his audience which takes part actively in the performance. Thus in *Wizard of the Crow*, Ngugi embarks the reader on a journey during which he fulfills the promises he makes through his multiple narrators. He hardly disappoints his audience; whenever he begins a new story, he prepares his audience to its outcome, sometimes telling them that it is not sure whether the story is true or false. Since the story has not been written down, the storyteller knows that his memory might fail to exactly reproduce what happened, thus he begins as if to warn his audience that “les Paroles s’envolent et les Ecrits restent”(written words are better remembered than spoken words). Indeed it is not surprising to hear different versions of the same story, even if told by the same person. In the novel, the narrator has this to say about Arigaigai Gatherer (A.G), the policeman turned storyteller par excellence:

If his storytelling took place in a bar, it was fueled to new heights of imagination by an endless supply of liquor. When the setting was a village, a marketplace, or the crossroads, Constable Arigaigai Gatherer felt charged with energy on seeing the rapt faces of the men, women, and children waiting to catch his word. But whatever the setting, his listeners came away with food of the spirit: resilient Hope that no matter how intolerable things seemed, a change for the better was always possible. [...]. The story they came to hear over and over again was about the night A.G. chased two beggars from the gates of Paradise. At first A.G. used to say that he was with two other police officers, but in the course of the telling and retelling of the story, they disappeared from his narrative. (96)

To the person who is initiated in the art of storytelling, the instability of the narrative mentioned above is not a problem, because the rendition of stories can be influenced by the audience, place, and time. For each occasion it is possible to hear a

different version of a story, thus the storyteller feels like proclaiming: “we never tell the same story twice”. A good storyteller is the one who can adapt his story to the audience, place, and time. He is also the one who can improvise his stories whenever necessary. Ngugi’s characters are masters of improvisations; this is what confirms the reliance of this novel on oral traditions; they hardly plan their actions. Machokali and Sikioku won the Ruler’s sympathy thanks to their ability to improvise solutions for whatever happens in Aburiria. Even Kamiti, the Wizard performs his magic through improvisation like in the following divination session with A.G.:

‘Do you have a mirror?’ he asked me.
‘No.’
‘You don’t carry a mirror?’
‘No.’
‘How do you look at yourself?’
‘I am clean in my ways. I never look in the mirror too often.’
‘How do you know if you hardly ever look at yourself?’
‘I just know.’
‘You told me that sometimes you are on traffic duty?’
‘Yes.’
‘Have you ever stopped a driver in a vehicle with no mirrors?’ (115).

Improvisation is present in every aspect of Aburirians’ life; everybody, from the Ruler to the ordinary citizens, practices it, it is a way of life. Indeed this is the daily reality in Aburiria; Ngugi’s characters are created to just do that as he acknowledges in his interview with John Updike:

The characters are engaged in the constant performance of their own being for the narrative. You never quite know who they are. Often they reinvent themselves through performance. Even I, as their author, do not know where or how the whole novel is going to end except in the constant performance of their own being. (qtd. in Rodrigues 162)

Improvisation is an essential technique in story telling because the narration of the tale has a lot to do with the here and now. As I have demonstrated earlier, the intended rendition of a play or song can be altered to accommodate the audience or any unexpected circumstance. Ngugi's comments suggest that he has deliberately surrendered the novel to his characters and his audiences like it is expected in storytelling.

Through storytelling Ngugi intends to convey a respect for and understanding of the African storytelling tradition in general, and the Kenyan in particular. As I have mentioned earlier readers who are familiar with Ngugi's literary work will not have difficulties reading this text because the intention I mentioned above recurs in almost all his texts. For instance, in *Decolonizing the Mind*, published in 1986, Ngugi explains why he thinks African writers should produce their work in African languages. For him it is absurd for Africans to talk about Africa in foreign languages; he feels that foreign languages cannot adequately talk about issues related to Africa. For the reader who is aware of all this, it is possible to approach Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* with strategies of reading that may facilitate his understanding of the text, because authorial intention informs the style used in the text. Perhaps this is what David Hellman did not take into consideration in the final passage of his review of *Wizard of the Crow* as he claims, after comparing the novel with Rushdie's *Midnight Children* that:

Both are also works most would pray do not end up on their book group or college reading lists. They are full of wonders and delights (and make great titting use of humor), but they can also be tiresome dirges buried in endless explication and redundancy. So much of significance is covered in "*Wizard of the Crow*," but one also ends up wondering why much was not editorially sacrificed for the sake of cohesion and clarity. (3)

Apropos of Hellman's claim, I assume that he might have missed Ngugi's intention and therefore, the purpose of his style. To me Ngugi's use of what Hellman seems to call "tiresome dirges buried in endless explication and redundancy," is justified because he wants to keep his text as close to the oral form as he can. Redundancy and endless explications are important features of storytelling, where the performer's main goal is to help his or her audience to have an authentic experience of the event or action that is being described. Western critics often ignore the artistic traditions in which "Third World texts" have been created. Thus, they try to read those texts with the same lenses they use for other texts which are produced in different artistic traditions, with clearly different purpose. Once they discover that the method in the texts resists their criteria, they simply dismiss them as valueless. It is exactly what Tom Adair of *The Scotsman* did at the beginning of his review of *Wizard of the Crow* as follow: "At best the prose is limber. At worst it is lax." The problem Adair faces here is that he has ignored the oral component of Ngugi's text; thus he evaluates the text with criteria used for other forms of literature. Maybe this is what Ngugi wishes to avoid as he opens his novel with an invocation to the reader:

In the spirit of the dead, the living, and the unborn,
Empty your ears of all impurities, o listener,
That you may hear my story

To understand *Wizard of the Crow*, the reader needs to read it as if he/she were being told a story by an invisible storyteller; he/she also needs to be ready to play the role of the audience as practiced in the storytelling tradition. If this is the case how would a

Western reader who comes from the written culture understand this text? Critics are divided over this issue; some believe these skills can be acquired through formal training, whereas others maintain that training alone is not enough. For the latter, the informal training is very crucial to the understanding of the implied meaning because it is done through lived experience. Oral literature is dynamic; thus, it is not unusual for a storyteller, a dirge singer, or war song singer to tell the same tale or sing the same dirge differently. What the performer will say next cannot be predicted, but once it is said the informed audience feels invited to construct the meaning of the words or statement. This exercise requires skills beyond formal training because it is improvised by the performer to satisfy a specific need. The dirge singer sometimes improvises a humorous move to relax the audience. Though the uninformed audience finds this inappropriate, it seems acceptable to the listener who has that experience.

Ngugi subtly attacks the despotic regimes that came to power in Africa after the independences or their successors who seized power by coup-d'états. These regimes are characterized by the concentration of all the powers in the hands of one individual who has the last word over who must live and die. These regimes are also famous for their imposition of one-party system, which forces all the citizens to join the only authorized party and it is usually chaired by the Ruler. The fabulous and satirical magical realism may have given Ngugi some cover vis-à-vis his direct target in the novel; however, for those who are familiar with Kenyan politics, there is no doubt that the Ruler is Daniel Arap Moi, the second president of independent Kenya, who developed the personality cult like many of his postcolonial peers across the African continent. Ngugi's critique

could also fit Mobutu of Zaire (Congo), Eyadema of Togo, Paul Biya of Cameroun, Omar Bongo of Gabon, all of them second presidents of their respective countries after the independence. He knows that the current African tragedy is caused by the political leadership. Even though this is a real situation Ngugi turns to the fantastic, fable, satire and marvelous, in short, the fabulous realism and satirical magic realism for its depiction. Like in Aburiria, instead of addressing peoples' needs, most postcolonial African rulers resort to brutality, corruption, nepotism, improvisation, zeal, magic, and witchcraft with the sole purpose of perpetuating their chaotic governance.

The global dimension of Ngugi's depiction of dictatorial regimes goes beyond Africa to encompass Asia with countries like India and even North Korea. In a 2004 interview with Angelas Lamas Rodrigues before the publication of *Wizard of the Crow*, Ngugi has offered the following preview:

..... Although it is based on an imaginary African country, some of the actions touch on India, and there are even sections, although not extended ones, that mention Brazil, Bahia. Yes! Bahia is in my novel. So it is rooted in an imaginary African country, but its mental location is situated in many parts of the world. In a sense it is an extension of my previous novels, but in other senses it is also a break. I think that there is a shift in the use of language and my facility with Gikuyu. The language is much more playful than it was in my previous novels. (166 -7)

Global Concerns in *Wizard of the Crow*

The global dimension of *Wizard of the Crow* demonstrates Ngugi's awareness of the ubiquitous nature of the problems confronting Africa as well as the interconnectedness of their causes. For him, the same internal and external forces are

responsible for the suffering of the masses in all countries of the world. In other words, the working class and poor people in India, Brazil, or Africa, have the same enemies. Indeed, the same self-serving leadership that is oppressing poor people in Africa can be found in many countries of the world. Likewise, the external forces that are dictating their will to Africa are doing the same to other countries of the world. In this regard, *Wizard of the Crow* exposes the role of the international monetary institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Funds, and the Clubs of Paris and London in the excessive indebtedness of underdeveloped countries. Ngugi demonstrates that the decisions of these institutions are purely political and that they do not take the interests of poor countries into consideration. African countries have accumulated most of their debts vis-à-vis these institutions during the Cold War when world powers like the United States and its European allies were more concerned with defeating communism than encouraging good governance in the Third World countries. For this reason, the dictators have been able to receive funding from the World Bank and IMF for any foolish projects they ever dreamed of. *Wizard of the Crow* satirizes these institutions by disguising them as Global Bank and Global Ministry of Finance, respectively. Ngugi's mockery of these institutions reaches its most culminant moment when Machokali, the mastermind of Marching to Heaven Project proudly tells the officials of the Global Bank and the Global Ministry of Finance that:

The Aburirian masses are ready to forgo clothes, houses, education, medicine, and even food in order to meet any and every condition the Bank may impose on the funds it releases for Marching to Heaven. Upward ever, Downward never. That is our new slogan. We will not rest until we get to Heaven's gate. We swear by the children of the children of our children to the end of the world – yes, we swear

even by the generations that may be born after the end of the world-that we shall pay back every cent of the principal along with interest on interests ad infinitum. The Ruler is not like some of those Third World leaders who are always whining about their commitments, going so far as to ask that their debt be forgiven. (248)

Aburiria's commitment pronounced above speaks to the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) the World Bank and the IMF have imposed on African countries in order ensure the reimbursement of their debts incurred in the realization of white elephant projects like Marching to Heaven. Because of the Structural Adjustment Programs, African countries have to forgo funding for education, social services, and many sectors related to the welfare of their citizens. These institutions have gambled with their money like in a casino and now that they have lost they are sacrificing the citizens who were not involved in the gambling in order to get their money back. *Wizard of the Crow* points to these financial institutions as primary responsible for the debts contracted by Third World countries.

Wizard of the Crow also ridicules Western countries, especially, the U.S. for its support of the crimes postcolonial dictators committed against their citizens in the name of war against communist dissidents. In fact under the cover of struggle against communism, the West has provided material support and intelligence to their so-called friends, the African dictators enabling them to brutally crush any challenge to their regimes. As the U.S. grew alarmed about the protests and queuing mania in Aburiria, the government has dispatched a special envoy with a clear message to the Ruler. In response to the Ruler's claim that what he did before against communists, he can do again against

terrorists, as a way of reassuring the West that he will not lose control of the country, the special envoy reminds the Ruler that:

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 globalization. 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 theater. 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 country into a democracy. (580)

Ngugi seems to confirm that interest and only interest governs our world. The West understands that it is useless “to keep watering a tree that will no longer bear any fruits.” The time of the Ruler is over because democracy is inevitable. In a secret meeting with the Ruler, the U.S. envoy also informs him that the West does support his intention to “put up a kind of latter-day Tower of Babel, known as Marching to Heaven” (582). This suggests that the Global Bank’s backing away from the project has been instigated by the West, thereby exposing the complicity between the Bank and the West for the exploitation of Africa.

Though *Marching to Heaven* seems mythical, in postcolonial Africa, it is not unusual to find colossal projects which have been funded by international financiers. Most often these white elephant projects have no specific goal. Sometimes the funds disappear in the middle of the project, leaving the work unfinished. The Ruler may direct money for a totally new and improvised project, or for the celebration of his birthday or his fortieth anniversary in power. In extreme cases, the Ruler and the Financiers officially sign the loan agreement in front of cameras, but the funds never go in the official coffers

of the country whose people will be reimbursing the loan with interest. In that case the funds are directly deposited in the Ruler's private account in Switzerland under a fictitious name. Those of us who wish to understand why Africa is so indebted to international financial institutions should find their answer here. Nothing is planned by the Ruler and his ministers. Everything is run by improvisation. Ministers only propose projects based on their fantasies, projects that benefit them, projects that pour money into their pockets. At the beginning of the novel, a huge crowd convenes to celebrate the Ruler's birthday, and at the ceremony his sycophantic ministers, in an effort to outdo one another, escalate the national tribute to their leader to the point where it is proposed that a structure similar to the Tower of Babel, called Marching to Heaven be built:

The whole country, the Minister of Foreign Affairs was saying, the entire Aburirian populace, had decided unanimously to erect a building such as had never been attempted in history except once by children of Israel, and then they have failed miserably to complete the house of Babel. Aburiria would now do what Israelites could not do: raise a building to the very gates 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?.... (16)

Apparently, Sikiokuu is not happy because he knows that for their brilliant imagination about the project, Machokali and his committee members would likely be rewarded. Thus Sikiokuu interjected: "Did "brother" Machokali and his committee not realize that the Ruler would get very tired climbing up the staircase to Heaven's gate on foot or riding in a modern elevator, no matter how swift?" With no surprise Sikiokuu suggests another project which will bear his signature, but Machokali is not ready to concede defeat. As he reminds Sikiokuu: "If the minister had bothered to look at the

drawing on the cloth he would have seen that the existing committee had already thought through the problem of heavenly travel...” (18-19).

Ignoring the polemics between his two rival ministers, the Ruler accepts the gift with no further thoughts; but the project will have to be funded by the Global Bank. The Ruler and his sycophantic cabinet members know they must persuade the Global Bank’s officials that Aburiria is a stable country before the funds are released for the project. How does common sense understand such a folly? How does reason explain the enthusiasm of ministers towards Marching to Heaven? The project started like a myth or tale, but it has become the center of Aburirian politics. The Ruler, his ministers and the other citizens are all involved in the debate about the project. Marching to Heaven has gone from fantasy to reality. The narrative has gradually lured the reader into accepting the project as something plausible, especially with the implication of something real as the World Bank alias Global Bank. Throughout the novel Ngugi keeps the reader wondering about what is unfolding before his eyes; events oscillate between reality and fantasies. Events in Aburiria share striking similarities with one another, they all defy human knowledge. Let’s think about the “queuing mania” for example; it started as a very banal event to become one of the most popular phenomena in Aburiria. People behave as if corruption were a virtue. When Tajirika was appointed chairman of Marching to Heaven, he became rich overnight. He then developed a condition called white-ache. The healing power of the Wizard is again sought. Once more the Wizard uses his mirror to cure his patients:

The effect of the mirror on Tajirika was immediate. He woke up as from a dream, stared at the mirror, and started scratching his face. Vinjina let out a frightened cry. She lurched forward, grabbed him by the waist, and began pulling him away from the mirror. Tears flowed down her cheeks in a mixture of fear for him and embarrassment at not having been straight with Wizard of the Crow. Tajirika planted his feet firmly to the ground, his hand reaching out for the mirror. (174)

There are many more fantastic instances pointing to magical realism. There are the endless queues prompted by the rumors that the chairman of Marching to Heaven is hiring. There is the motorized policeman roaming for seven days through towns near and around Eldares in pursuit of the end of the queue only to find that it ends when it begins (158). There is the scene where the ruler talks nonstop for seven nights, seven days, seven hours, seven minutes, and seven seconds (496). There are the Wizard's divinations and cure white-ache and his numerous astral flights. There is also the Ruler's unexplained swollen body and loss of speech.

Wizard of the Crow in Psychoanalysis Territory

In light of the discussion above, it could be argued that thanks to his use of fantasies, satire, witchcraft, magic and fables, Ngugi is able to address the causes of the current situation in Africa. In fact, after an analysis of the discussions the characters have had with the Wizard of the Crow during divination and healing sessions, I realized that the Aburirians, or precisely postcolonial Africans suffer from a common disease: inferiority complex. According to Carl Jung, Swiss psychiatrist and founder of analytical psychology, inferiority leads to hysterical dissociation of personality, which consist

essentially in, as he puts it, wanting to jump over one's shadow, and looking for everything inferior, and culpable not in oneself but in others. That's why the hysteric always complains of being surrounded by inferior mischief-makers, a crowd of sub men who should be exterminated so that the superman can live at his high level of perfection. All man are dangerous if their leaders have unlimited power (qtd. in Krog 313-14).

Applied to Ngugi's characters in the *Wizard of the Crow*, Jung's theory works very well, especially with regard to what they want from the wizard. All those who have been to the Wizard's shrine have asked the Wizard to destroy their enemies. They strongly believe that they are surrounded by a crowd of sub men who are obstacles to their well-being. Thus complains A. G.: "You have spoken my thoughts exactly, I told him. You see, I have been in the police force for many years, and no matter how hard I work I have never been promoted. *Wizard of the Crow*, I am sure I have enemies who are hindering me through magic" (114).

Also when a businessman went to the shrine, he pleaded with the Wizard to protect him from his enemies:

"What ails you?" She heard Kamiti ask the man on the other side of the kitchen pass- through.
"My enemies"
"Your enemies?"
"Yes, my fellow businessmen. ...". (149)

How can people work together to achieve unity, development, prosperity in the situation where everybody accuses everybody of evil? This is what makes African dictators merciless. The dictator builds his power on the assumption that he is surrounded

by his admirers; but if he suspects the opposite, he deals with it disproportionately. For the Ruler, a clear warning must be sent to everybody that nobody is immune, even his closest friends like Machokali. The Ruler lives in constant fear because he knows he incarnates a Manichaean system. He knows that in spite of his ministers' devotion to him, their desire to assume his position would make them hate him. That fear is confirmed during the special divination the Wizard performed in Sikioku's house: "There is no minister who does not dream of one day becoming the Ruler. We lust for power, and what is greater than that of a supreme ruler? You raise a fly whisk or a club and men kneel before you. You sneeze and you silence a multitude. You hold the key to all the wealth in the land. One word and the doors of the Central Bank are open to you..." (414).

The description above summarizes the causes of the problems in Africa; as I have mentioned earlier the postcolonial African elite suffers from inferiority complex which forces him to desire power. Is it wrong to desire power? Of course not, one may even say that it is a legitimate aspiration of any citizen to desire power. But with the postcolonial African elite, the notion of power is at best complex, and at worst irrational. For them power goes hand in hand with westernization or metamorphosis into whiteness. Thus as Tajirika becomes the Chairman of Marching to Heaven, that desire quickly manifests itself:

If ... my ... skin... were... not... black! Oh, if only my skin were white!" [...] As he looked into the future, he suddenly realized that at the rate money was coming in he would end up being the richest man in Africa, and the only thing missing to distinguish him from all the other black rich was white skin. He saw his skin as standing between him and the heaven of his desire. When he scratched his face, daemons within were urging him to break ranks with blackness and enter into union with whiteness. In short, he suffers from a severe case of white-ache. (180)

Even the Ruler, despite his absolute power, has a repressed desire for becoming white, for he too believes that to attain ultimate manhood with absolute respect, he has to be white. As the Ruler fails to secure the loan for Marching to Heaven despite his personal involvement in the lobbying of the Global Bank in New York, he develops a bizarre pathological response. His body inflates like a balloon after losing his voice except for sounds like crr or crawl or cruel. In spite of all this, the lab results reveal that everything is normal, adding more challenge to the scientific community. Professor Din Furyk of Harvard University who is invited by his colleague Dr. Clement Clarkwell, the obesity specialist to give them a hand, writes in his diary:

Imagine my shock when they showed that everything about him was functioning normally! How was this possible? Why this continued self-induced expansion of the body? His belly was as taut as a drum, and whenever I tapped it a sound issued from the mouth. Crr, or was it coral or crawl or cruel? I took Dr. Clarkwell and Dr. Kaboca outside for a conference. What could the ruler be signifying by coral or crawl or cruel? Dr. Kaboca's response was strange: he was a physician of the body, not a decipherer of words; it was better to ask the ministers because they were politicians and politicians are known for their words. (472)

It looks like the Ruler's pathology is beyond the reach of the modern medicine. Amidst this medical chaos, Arigaigai Gatherer, alias A.G. the first beneficiary of the Wizard's magical, suggests the service of Wizard of the Crow to Machokali. The Wizard of the Crow is then flown to New York to diagnose the Ruler's illness and heal him through divination and sorcery. The Wizard eventually helps the Ruler recover his speech and finally express his frustration, the very cause of his condition. For the Ruler the global Bank does not respect him because he is black: *"If I had been white, would they have done what they did to me/ Or, IF I had been white would they have treated me the*

way they just did in the presence of my ministers?” (491). After this revelation, the Ruler recovers his voice and orders his ministers to come so he can tell them what he has been trying to tell them. Like Tajirika, the ruler’s yearning for whiteness is revealed.

This is a good example of global cooperation where orthodox medicine and African spiritual healing have come together to provide remedy for a bizarre pathology. This South – North medical cooperation is clearly articulated by Professor Furyk of Harvard in his diary:

So instead of giving a resounding no as I have intended, I found myself telling him not to worry. He is a doctor of the mind and I of the body, so between us we should be a dream team. I was simply trying to calm him down even as I grew curious. I looked forward to meeting the man who seemed to have a hold on this western-educated high-ranking government minister. (488)

This yearning is not new in the psychoanalytic study of the problem of black people. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon uses one of his patients to explain black people’s desire to become whites, as he writes:

Negro tells me his dream: ‘I had been walking for a long time, I was extremely exhausted, I had the impression that something was waiting for me, I climbed barricades and walls, I came into an empty hall, and from behind a door I heard noise. [...]’ When I try to understand this dream, to analyze it, knowing that my friend has had problems in his career, I conclude that this dream fulfills an unconscious wish. But when, outside my psychoanalytic office, I have to incorporate my conclusions into the context of the world, I will assert:

1. My patient is suffering from an inferiority complex. His psychic structure is in danger of disintegration. What has to be done is to save him from this and, little by little, to rid him of this unconscious desire.
2. If he is overwhelmed to such degree by the wish to be white, it is because he lives in a society that makes his inferiority complex possible, in a society that derives its stability from the perpetuation of this complex, in a degree to which that society creates difficulties for him, he will find himself thrust into a neurotic situation. What emerges then is the need for combined action on the individual

and on the group. As a psychoanalyst, I should help my patient to become conscious of his unconscious and abandon his attempts at hallucinatory whitening, but also to act in the direction of a change in the social structure. (99-100)

In line with these conclusions, I posit that *Wizard of the Crow* functions like a praxis to Fanon's theory. Indeed Ngugi has heard Fanon's appeal on behalf of the African who suffers from neurosis because of his hallucinatory desire to become white. Through Kamiti and Nyawira, in their role as Wizard of the Crow, Ngugi mixes psychoanalysis with African spiritualism to cure the white-ache condition that plagues Aburirians. In fact, the method Kamiti uses with his patients is similar to the one used by the father of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud to cure his neurotic patients. Kamiti asks his patients to say everything that bothers them without omission of any detail. The Freudian patient is asked to state everything he recalls before his current condition. Kamiti represents the traditional African values in *Wizard of the Crow*; therefore, by making him the only person capable of curing his fellow Africans who suffer from the inferiority complex, Ngugi seems to proclaim that the current situation in Africa is not fatal, that there is hope. There is possibility for solution, but that solution must come from within, that is, from Africa. May be this is why Ngugi has also made the emancipation of women the centerpiece in his novel by attacking the traditional practices that favor the oppression of women by men. Ngugi understands that to bring about change in Kenya, men and women must come together to defeat the ruling class, their common enemy. The collaboration between Nyawira and Kamiti symbolizes this union. Nevertheless, it looks like Ngugi has reversed the traditional gender role in *Wizard of the Crow*. In fact, apart from Kamiti the

wizard, no other men are visible in the struggle against the Ruler and his circle of profiteers. Nyawira and her Movement for the Voice of People are at the vanguard in the resistance against injustice. Conversely, only one woman is associated with the ruling class. She occupies a low level position in the government, but for the Ruler this position is a great achievement by a woman and should be celebrated. The ruler pompously announced Dr. Yunice Immaculate Mgenzi's appointment as next deputy ambassador in Washington during his birthday celebration: "I am happy to announce that I have appointed Dr. Yunice Immaculate Mgenzi as the next deputy to my ambassador in Washington. The first woman in the history of Aburiria to hold such a post" (21). The Ruler's statement betrays his regime's unsympathetic policy towards women, as is exemplified by his imprisonment of his wife Rachael. Given that like Rachael, women in Aburiria have openly and successfully defied the Ruler, Ngugi seems to sound the clarion that the days of the traditions that encourage the oppression of women are numbered and that the good days of the oppressed people are ahead as long as they understand that their common enemy is the ruling class.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this dissertation, my aim has been to demonstrate the emergence of a new literary form in the postcolonial African novel. This emergence is in line with the evolutionary pattern of African literature, especially in regard to aesthetic choice. I have argued that this stylistic evolution has a lot to do with the writer's socio-political agenda. An examination of African literary tradition reveals a clear literary progression from the anti-colonial novels of the 1940s through 1960s in a realistic mode, to the use of satire in the 1970s and 1980s, to magical realism in a more recent work such as the texts I discussed in the previous chapters. If realism has been the mode of nationalist novels that resisted and protested against the colonial regime, satire has been the style that has served to depict the disillusionment of postcolonial African masses and the excesses of the ruling elites who replaced the colonizers after independence. The shift from realism to satire has been necessitated by the change in the cultural and social conditions surrounding the writer and his/her creative act. What this shows is that there is a correlation between the narrative style in the African novel and the social and political preoccupations of the writer. This in fact reaffirms the African writer's social and political responsibility vis-à-vis his/her society.

In light of this connection, I have demonstrated that the magical realism I have explored in this dissertation is dictated by what the three writers aim to accomplish. The cultural and political life of postcolonial Africa called for a different form to express the conflicts, absurdities and violence. For this reason I have termed magical realism as aesthetic of necessity. In other words, it is a form whose use has been required by the writers' social and political concerns in their novels. This dissertation has viewed magical realism in the three postcolonial African novels as a mode that is necessitated by the socio-political realities of the postcolonial African countries each of the writers wishes to depict. This mode offers these writers limitless possibilities that enable them to adequately chronicle the unusual social and political realities in their postcolonial African countries as well as offer alternative ways of seeing. In fact, incidents such as the one I discussed earlier about Cameroon are some of the reasons why Postcolonial African writers can no longer rely on realism for the production of their texts. The behavior of the youths in the incidents is part of everyday life and cannot be ignored by a writer whose mission is to translate the socio-political realities of a society plagued by poverty, corruption, violence, and superstition. Both the youths involved in these reprehensible acts and their victims are hostages of their political elites whose greed and selfishness have destroyed the capacity of the country to create jobs for the educated middle class. There is a correlation between the lack of jobs caused by the elite's selfishness and the youths' accusation of the old women. The youths are in search for the reason why they cannot pass the exam and get a job. Since they don't want to believe that their failures on the exams have more to do with the fact that there are only a few jobs available for many

hundred thousand candidates than with the imagined old women's magical powers, they resort to the scapegoating of innocent people. However, it is not also rare to hear that some people have used witchcraft to ensure their success on these very exams that caused the youths anger against the old women. What makes it possible for the youths to prefer the metaphysical explanation of their misfortunes to the scientific explanation are both the ignorance in which the dictatorial regime has abandoned them and their belief in the power of invisible forces.

It is important to point out that Cameroon, since its independence in 1960, has had only two presidents. After about ten years of reign of the first president, the current president who was hand-picked by neo-colonial France has been in power for more than 30 years. It is a country of political stagnation, economic disaster, and permanent social malaise. The result is nepotism, corruption, poverty, and despair, all of which expose the victims to any kind of beliefs. It is a country that is very familiar with wars of secession, at least two between Francophone and Anglophone Cameroon, electoral violence during each election cycle. The country has 30% unemployment.² As an example of the kind of irrationality embedded in the everyday life of postcolonial African states, in Cameroon people are reduced to a state of survival, so they behave like a patient before any doctor. Because they are desperate for cure, they accept to be treated by anyone who claims to be a doctor. However, Cameroon does not have monopoly over the behavior alluded to above; the superstitious youths I discuss here are found everywhere in postcolonial Africa. The causes of such behavior are found at the heart of a particularly peculiar

² Wordpress.org. Statistics: *CIA World Fact book*

management of postcolonial countries. In these countries there is hardly a separation between the public and the private spheres, because the authoritarian rulers presiding over them do everything they can to control all aspects of people's life. For instance, in most postcolonial countries, the national army, the national education, and even the attorney general's office are organized like private properties whose sole owner is the president and his ruling party. There is neither transparency nor accountability; in these conditions, violent repression is the only answer to any form of dissent. As a result, citizens are denied any form of protest or criticism vis-à-vis the ruling class. Because of their inability to confront the real world and its autocratic rulers, citizens turn to the supernatural, the unreal, or magic for answers. In Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya, the countries depicted in the novels I discussed in this dissertation, the socio-political situation is the same as the one in Cameroon, which makes Laing, Okri, and Ngugi's use of magical realism justifiable.

Commenting on the use of magical realism by third world writers such as Marquez and Rushdie, which she refers to as marvelous realism, Kumkum Sangari argues that the mode serves as political criticism in the postcolonial context of falsification and perversion of the real. In "Politics of Possible," she writes:

If the is historically structured to make the foreign locus of power, if the real may thus be other than what is generally visible, if official versions are just as visible as visibly real as unofficial versions, and if even *potentially* real is a *compound* of the desired and undesirable, then marvelous realism tackles the problem of truth at a level that reinvents a more acute and accurate mode of referentiality. The brutality of the *real* is equally the brutality and terror of that which is *immanent*, conceivable, and potentially possible. Besides, if the furthest reaches of imaginary construction alone can equal the heinous deformations of the real, then marvelous

realism must exceed mimetic reflection in order to become an interrogative mode that can press upon the real at the point of maximum contradiction. (163)

This explains why magical realist writers are fond of transcendental realms. They can no longer represent reality with realism because reality has been discredited by the deliberate effort of people in power to constantly manipulate it. Writers in postcolonial Africa choose narrative forms that can represent reality, as unreal as that reality may seem, in spite of all the manipulations. The prevalence of African myths, folktales, fables, witchcraft, utopia, and traditional religions in these texts is far from gratuitous. All these transcendental realms serve to interrogate socio - political realities and offer their adequate representation as well as an alternative filled with hope for the disaffected masses. The three novelists I discuss in this dissertation have worked towards that very goal in their respective text.

The dissertation has argued that the three texts discussed in the previous chapters have been produced according to specific needs and vision of their authors. Each of these writers, namely Laing, Okri and Ngugi, uses a particular magical realism to capture issues that concern him. Thus in Laing's text, there is an effort to bring modernity and tradition together, Africa and Europe together, and Blacks and Whites together for the creation of interdependent cultures and people, which will end the deceptive divide, source of conflicts among human beings. In Okri's work, there is a commitment to explaining and addressing the perpetual economic, political and social failures in postcolonial Nigeria. Finally, Ngugi's work aims at exposing the dictatorship and corruption that have crippled postcolonial African countries.

Postcolonial theorists and critics have the tendency of throwing all the texts bearing the characteristics of magical realism in the same basket without regard to the cultural, social, and political milieus from which each individual text emerges. This broad generalizing of texts that use elements beyond the “real” is in part due to the critics’ rush to trace the origin of postcolonial magical realism to Latin America, where writers like Gabriel Marquez and Jose Luis Borges are viewed as the precursors of the mode. This tendency has irritated some postcolonial African writers to the point that they resist the application of magical realism to their texts, even though the latter exhibit all the features of the mode. As Cooper explains, “African writers tend to reject the label of magical realism. One reason for this is that it implies the slavish imitation of Latin America. It suggests a denial, in other words, of local knowledge and beliefs, language and rhetoric; it seems to perpetuate imperialist notions that nothing new, intellectually or spiritually, originated in Africa” (37). Ben Okri and Ngugi have rejected the label for these very reasons. Although Okri and Ngugi are right to claim the local impulse that guides their novels, this dissertation avoids the tendency to view postcolonial African magical realist texts as mimetic by redefining magical realism in terms of its local and African influences.

Not only does the magical realism of Africa create a form different from that of Latin America, but individual regions use local custom to vary their use of magical realism. In *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, Kojouhar Laing employs a utopian-grounded existentialist magical realism to make the creation of new Africa possible as well as close the racial and cultural chasm between Africa and the rest of the world. It is worth

mentioning that cultural and linguistic hybridization played a pivotal role in this process. If utopia has offered Laing limitless possibilities, Akan folklore has created propitious environment for this utopia to exist. Unlike in the other two novels, Laing's magical realism does not derive from a magic – based belief system. The miraculous transportation of the two aeroplanes from UK to Tukwan and the invention of the stupidity machine are made possible by utopia. The magic in these actions resides in the freedom the characters enjoy in their utopian world. It is also important to emphasize the role of Laing's neologism and linguistic play that have been enabled by Akan folklore in that magic.

In *The Famished Road*, Ben Okri engages both myth and reality to create his version of magical realism. The fusion of the Yoruba myth of abiku and realism that consists of everyday life experiences of the people in the ghetto offers him the necessary aesthetic for the depiction of the socio - political situations which keep Nigerian masses in the state of perpetual suffering akin to the endless death and rebirth of an abiku. The aesthetic also enables Okri to offer hope to these poverty stricken masses as well as urge them to rise against corrupt politicians, the business community, and landlords who are responsible for their predicament in order to end the status quo. Ironically, the success of Okri's resistance and the fulfillment of his hope lie in the same abiku. The abiku-child Azaro's decision to end the birth-death-rebirth cycle as well as his choice to defy his spirit companions in order to bring happiness to his family, symbolizes the possibility that there will be an end to suffering in Nigeria. The magic in this text looks more natural

because it springs from the Yoruban belief system. Azaro's spirit-child status is not utopia but real in the eyes of the author and the readers who share the abiku-belief.

In *Wizard of the Crow*, Ngugi grounds his magical realism in Gikuyu folklore and satire to level an acerbic critique against the despotic rulers of postcolonial Africa as well as urge the oppressed masses to challenge their oppressors in order to foster change. Through the victories of Nyawira's Movement for the Voice of the People against the Ruler and his corrupt yes men and the successes of the Wizard in his psycho-spiritual healing, Ngugi has demonstrated that with commitment and good organization, ordinary people can incarnate hope and change under any circumstance. The magic in *Wizard of the Crow* comes from both African spiritualism (Kamiti's out of body experiences) and the superstitious beliefs of the characters (A.G. and others firmly believe in the wizard's ability to protect them against their enemies and give them good luck).

However they vary, all these writers use their new genre to offer more than a depiction of current conditions in their individual countries, for they also aim to provide strategies for better action as well as hope for their people in regard to change. This may be the reason why these texts are sometimes difficult to classify in terms of mode. These writers, I argue, are less concerned with the belongingness of their texts in a specific mode than what these texts can accomplish. The infusion of forms, devices and treatment drawn from African oral tradition is indeed an unambiguous statement that the remedies to the current crisis in Africa reside neither in the abandonment of Africa's past nor its ostentatious celebration, but in African people's willingness to be inspired by its most

useful elements and use them for new action. In fact, through these elements of African oral tradition, Laing, Okri and Ngugi have invented limitless possibilities for Africa to stop two thousand years of stagnation and suffering and start dreaming again for a prosperous future. Through these texts, these writers have sounded the clarion of mobilization of African masses for the long awaited march towards a real political and economic reform.

In addition, by incorporating African oral devices in their narratives, these writers aim to reclaim Africa's seat at the global cultural rendezvous. In so doing, they make a clear statement that Africa can no longer afford simulacra of participation at the global cultural, political, and economic exchange. In other words, they call the world's attention to Africa's incommensurable contributions to past and present global cultures. This effort, they hope will make Africa a full and respected participant in the political, cultural, and economic exchanges of the world. In doing so, together, these writers have reignited the flame of hope for a whole continent, whose people have been waiting for a true renaissance.

However, it is prudent to wonder: how long will this flame last? Will this artistic success translate into real social and political success? Is Africa capable of ending the abiku cycle of suffering, instability, and oppression? Will the recent coup d'état in Mali, a country considered by political commentators as a model of stability and democracy in Africa extinguish that flame? In spite of this uncertainty, they are still reasons for hope

and change on the continent as long as the artists, in their role as the voice of the people, remain committed to using their creation to fight oppression and advocate for reforms.

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