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RIGHT AND JUSTICE : A QUENCHLESS QUEST IN NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S *MATIGARI*



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Ngugi wrote the novel *Matigari ma Njiruungi* in Gikuyu in the month of September 1986. It was translated into English as *Matigari* by Wangui wa Goro. He wrote three novels in Gikuyu, *Devil on the cross*, *Matigari* and *The Wizard of the Crow* so as to address his people peasants, workers and illiterate masses. In this connection, Ngugi (1985:151) writes: "An African writer should write in a language that will allow him to communicate effectively with peasants and workers in Africa in other words, he should write in an African language." Writing in African languages has many advantages and difficulties. One can fully exploit the native tradition of orature on the one hand and world literature and culture on the other. Ngugi (1993: 22) mentions that "African writers in African languages are engaged in the great adventure and drama of creating a new and great tradition. In this task they have at least two great reservoirs: the heritages of orature and of world literature and culture." English is the dominant language in Kenya, whereas Gikuyu and Kiswahili are native languages. But English is spoken and understood only by a small minority of the population in Kenya. Ngugi (2009) says that "English is just a language like any other language. It is only that it got spread all over the world. It has vocabulary that copes with certain development. But any language is capable of similar development."

Ngugi narrates how he once heard a story being told to his children by one of his sisters. He wrote the novel, *Matigari* based on that story. In Ngugi's (1998:124) own words, it is the story "of a man who has an incurable wound and is in search of a cure. He

is told of a medicine man whose name is Ndiiro, but he does not know the way to Ndiiro's place...I used the same structure in the construction of *Matigari*, the story of a wanderer in search of social justice in a post-colonial society." The oral element of the story is ingrained in the narrative. In *Matigari*, there are enough details of the past history of the country and the freedom fighters. Regarding the antecedents of the novel, he says:

By January 1987, intelligence reports had it that peasants in Central Kenya were whispering and talking about a man called Matigari who was roaming the whole country making demands about truth and justice. There were orders for his immediate arrest, but the police discovered that Matigari was only a fictional character in a book of the same name. In February 1987, the police raided all the bookshops and seized every copy of the novel (viii).

Matigari is a memorable satire on the betrayal of human ideals and on the bitter experience of post-independence African society and also it is an allegory, the story of every man in a neo-colonial country. Ngugi is deliberately vague in establishing both the temporal and spatial settings of his novel; he refuses to define where and when his story takes place, insisting in a prefatory song:

This story is imaginary./ The actions are imaginary./The characters are imaginary. /The country is imaginary – it has no name even. Reader/Listener: may the story take place in the country of your choice!
(ix)

Steven Tobias (1997) said that "*Matigari* is not

the story of one isolated country but a schematized documentation of the entire postcolonial experience. In this novel, Ngugi recounts the way in which Western institutions and codes supplant those that are native to Africa in the service of both the continent's former colonizers and their newly arisen African imitators. In that regard, *Matigari* can be viewed as an abstract philosophical work with both descriptive and prescriptive elements."

Matigari ma Njiruungi is the main character in the novel. It is the story of an old man and a patriot, who fought in the national liberation struggle and then made up his mind to quit his arms and girdle himself with a belt of peace. He returns home to claim his 'house', which had been usurped by Settler Williams, and John Boy. While searching for his 'house', Matigari is stunned to discover that the 'house' is in the illegal possession of John Boy Junior, who runs a business in collaboration with Robert Williams. For disturbing 'peace and stability,' Matigari and Muriuki, who is a leader are arrested and put in prison. Matigari searches for truth and justice in the country. He asks people at the Restaurant, Market place and law courts where one can find truth and justice in the society. Three persons, a student, a teacher and a priest ask him to stop searching for truth and justice and not ask too many questions. For asking the same question to the Minister of Truth and Justice, Matigari is taken away to a mental hospital on the orders of the minister but he escapes from there. No one knows who he is. The government launches a manhunt for Matigari. In the meanwhile, people debate about the identity of Matigari. Nobody knows whether Matigari is a man or a woman or a child or an adult. "Some people say this, and others say that. Some say that he is as tall as a giant, and that his head touches the sky" (159). At the end of the novel, the police dogs leap on Matigari and Guthera and they fall into a river.

II

Matigari ma Njiruungi in Gikuyu literally means 'the patriots who survived the bullets' – the patriots who survived the liberation war. Matigari fought for the national liberation and now wants to give up his arms, girdles himself with a belt of peace. He buries all his weapons with noble intentions:

'It's good that I have now laid down my arms.' He tore a strip of bark from a tree and girded himself with it, once again murmuring, 'Instead, I have now girded myself with a belt of peace. I shall go back to my house and rebuild my home.' He crossed the river and came out of the forest. (5) Matigari visits a factory and wants to find 'his' people and 'house'. He says that he will not go home until he has found his people. He doesn't know where to start his journey, and where to look for them. The people working in the factory come from all parts of the country. He thinks that a patriot who is looking for his people ought to start from where people work. Matigari tells Ngaruro wa Kiriro, a factory union leader, that he had built a house with his own hands but Settler Williams usurped it: "The tailor demands his clothes, the tiller his land, the worker the produce of his sweat. The builder wants his house back" (21). Matigari's search takes him to a garbage dump where he sees children who pay fees to enter and fight each other for 'goodies'. At the garbage dump, policemen often take the things which are in good condition from the children. They pretend to get angry and grab it. Sometimes the police catch them as thieves.

Muriuki, a local leader and Matigari go to a restaurant and order for beers. Muriuki tells Matigari how his mother died. She used to rent a hut in the village but she could not afford to pay for it. One day the landlord asked her to leave the hut but she refused. That night she returned home drunk. Unfortunately, she dies in flames. Now in the bar, they find a barmaid-cum-prostitute called Guthera who is tortured by policeman and their dogs for not offering herself to them for free. Matigari saves her from the police. Matigari tells Guthera about his story. He tells her that when he had finished building the house, Settler Williams grabbed it. He says that he was the one who produced everything. But now it is Settler Williams who collects the profits. Matigari tells Guthera how he had fought Settler Williams, and of how John Boy saved the Settler's life. While searching for his family, Matigari is shocked to discover that the house, which had been usurped by Settler Williams, is now in the illegal possession of his son John Boy Junior and Robert Williams. Robert Williams and John Boy prevent Matigari from entering the house and they question him about

his familiarity with their fathers. Matigari is eventually arrested because of insistence on reclaiming his 'house'. In the prison, he meets people who have been arrested for 'selling milk without license' for 'vagranacy' and for 'teaching Marxism' and communism in school. Matigari tells his story to the people in the prison. He has decided to come back to his people girded with a belt of peace. He thinks that a person who seeks justice never tires of the search until he finds what he wants. He thinks: "Truth never dies; therefore, truth will reign in the end, even if it does not reign today" (64). In the meanwhile, everyone is seen asking: 'Who was Matigari ma Njiruungi?' His fame spreads over all the country. At last he escapes from the prison cell. He becomes a legend; with this the first part of the novel ends. In Part Two, Matigari is shown as a hero of the masses. The people of Trampville compose a song in praise of Matigari ma Njiruungi: Show me the way to a man/Whose name is Matigari ma Njiruungi,/Who stamps his feet to the rhythm of bells,/And the bullets jingle./And the bullets jingle (71).

To get the answer for his question, Matigari visits many eating-places, restaurants, market places, farmlands, law courts. He travels on foot. He rides on donkey carts. He gets lifts on bicycles. He travels matatus, buses, lorries and by train. He goes to all the places where people are likely together and he asks the same question. While searching for truth and justice, Matigari comes across law courts, small traders, shepherds, an old woman. Nobody gives the correct answer to the question. Listening to the question of Matigari, an old woman tells him that he can't find answers to his questions there where nobody lives. Truth and justice are to be found in people's actions. Right and wrong are embedded in what people do. Among the people, the main problem is fear. She tells him that there is too much fear in the country and nobody tells the answer even if they knew. Matigari goes to a student and tells him that he has traveled the length and breadth of the county and asks him the same question. The student tells him that students were arrested when they had called for a prayer meeting to pray for peace and love in the country but policemen killed twenty-five students instantly. The Voice of Truth announced that the university was closed

because the students went on strike over food. His question was that where one can find something and appropriate for one self.

A teacher is also afraid of Matigari and he wants to live like others in the society, and he does not want to invite problems by asking and making demands. He suggests Matigari to meet the priest for the answers to his questions. So Matigari meets the priest and asks the same question. But he does not get answer and the priest advises Matigari to approach the rulers. Matigari visits a meeting organized by the Minister of Truth and Justice. He again asks the same question but he can't get the answer. Matigari and Ngaruro wa Kiriro who is a worker in a factory are put in a mental hospital.

III

The third part shows Matigari and others escaping from the mental hospital and Matigari making up his mind to abandon his 'belt of peace.' No one knew how Matigari had escaped. The police already started search for a group of madmen and for a woman and a boy who escaped from a mental hospital. The police have revealed that one of the escaped madmen is the one who calls himself Matigari ma Njiruungi. The public are warned that this man is particularly dangerous because he has delusions that every thing belongs to him; houses, the land, the industries and even all the women. Matigari wants to wait until the night falls to get his AK 47 from under the mugumo tree. People think that Matigari would come to John Boy's house, so a group of people gather in front of Boy's house. Everyone expects a miracle on that day. Soldiers and policemen are everywhere. They want to catch Matigari alive or dead but in the presence of the crowd. Who really was Matigari ma Njiruungi? A patriot? Angel Gabriel? Jesus Christ? Was he a human being or a spirit? A true or false prophet? A saviour or simply a lunatic? Was Matigari a man or was he a woman? A child or an adult? Or was he only an idea, an image, in people's minds? *Who was He?* (158) Matigari escapes from Giceru, the informer and visits Boy's house. There the police prevents Matigari from entering the 'house' but Matigari goes into the house in the guise of a VIP and sets it on fire too. When John Boy Junior hears that his house has been set on fire, he faints and

he is rushed to hospital. Not only John Boy but also many a tycoon have sleepless nights then. The officer in charge orders a prize of £ 5,000 to any policeman or soldier who catches hold of Matigari, dead or alive. A hunt is again launched for Matigari. The police dogs catch up with him on the banks of the river in the forests. Matigari and Guthera jump into the river. The police hope to see the bodies of Matigari and Guthera floating on the water. The real questions remained: "Were they dead or alive? Who was Matigari?"

IV

Matigari in the beginning of the novel buries A.K. 47 and a cartridge belt in the forest and wants to wear 'a belt of peace.' Having fought the white Settler and gained freedom for his land. He thinks that it was a period of peace, not of war. But it proves ineffective in the face of neo-colonialism. The white man's entrance through the backdoor with black politicians as their new collaborators turns Matigari's dreams into a nightmare. Matigari built a house but Settler Williams slept in it. He asked Settler Williams many times to leave the house but Settler Williams did not listen to the words of Matigari. At last, with disgust, Matigari killed Settler Williams. Matigari started his journey for social changes. He left his weapons and wanted to find 'truth and justice'. Wandering across the land for many miles, he finally comes upon the extensive plantation. He goes to his 'house' with Guthera and Muriuki. Matigari, peasant and tiller of the land, knows it to be his home. The house represents the land and Kenya. Matigari is the voice of the nation; he is 'the crystallization of the collective desires of the nation' (Simon Gikandi, 1992:382) Matigari's character represents everyone who suffered under the colonialists and fought in the war of independence. He is the seeker of truth and justice and he can't get the answer for his question. Gikandi (1992:382) puts a note that "Matigari's words

may resonate with the truth." Matigari observes that there is too much fear in the country. He realizes that there is no truth, there is no peace, and nothing has changed. Matigari says that truth and justice are mightier than any armed power but he wants to get truth and justice by weapons at the end of the novel. There are the neo-colonial forces before independence and Matigari observes the forces after independence also. Through his character one can understand that every one has to become a revolutionary against neo-colonial forces.

About imperialism, Ngugi (1993:55) says, "Imperialism is a three headed monster with one head spitting or threatening to spit fire at the socialist world; the other head is spitting fire at the working people in its own home base; and the third head is directing fire and brimstone at the national liberation struggles in the 'Third' world that seem committed to fundamental social change." In the novel, *Matigari*, the protagonist represents the forces of revolution comprising the patriots, peasants and revolutionary-activists. Another character Ngaruro wa Kiriro represents the working class, Muriuki represents youth and Guthera represents women. The remaining characters Settler Williams and John Boy represent the colonial forces. Robert Williams, the son of Settler William, represents the neo-colonial forces, which had come back after independence. At the end of the novel, Matigari sets fire to the house of John Boy Junior which represents imperialism. Matigari is a fictional character in the novel. But peasants and workers think that there is a person called Matigari, who wants 'truth and justice.' Matigari is puzzled by a world where the producer is not the one who has the last word on what he has produced. He goes round the country asking questions about truth and justice. People who read the novel started talking about Matigari and the questions he had raised as if Matigari was a real person in life.

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