

The Depiction of the Metaphysical in German and African Fiction: a study of strange illnesses in Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis" and Ngugi WA Thiongo's *Wizard of the Crow*

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Abstract: *This paper examines the early 20th Century prose-fiction of German writer, Franz Kafka and that of African writer, Ngugi Wa Thiongo's 21st Century novel, which, both describe strange illnesses of their major characters that defy orthodox cure. Each writer operating in a separate literary tradition and space, and with contrasting levels of civilization, is uniquely different in his diagnosis and prescription of cure. The paper proves that metaphysical elements were a recurrent decimal in human living whether we admit it or not, as the use of these strange phenomena in fiction by the two writers portends more than a parable or an allegory. It also proves that the modernist world-views of maintaining monolithic ideas about human existence was no longer sacrosanct. Kafka appears more helpless than Wa Thiongo who deploying Freudian concepts, appears to have solutions for the metaphysical ailment, in a postmodernist era.*

I. Introduction

Although the discipline of literature deals essentially with fictive works of poetry, drama and prose – fiction, it aspires to imitate the real world and the activities of man. It imaginatively recreates the physical world, human activities, history, thoughts, environment and values of society with a view of promoting and sustaining the legacy of orderliness, decency and stability. In this regard, classical philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle devised that the highest and most desirable thought process of a human being is his capacity for rational thinking and reason which the basic parameters of establishing truths and reality in any given society. Humanism, therefore, as explained by Mary Klages(2006) below is man-centered and is associated with the ideals of the Enlightenment and modernity:

In broad philosophical terms, "humanism" is a world-view of perspective that rejects anything supernatural as an explanation for existing phenomena. Rather than seeing the world as governed by some sort of divine spirit, like a god, which is the source of and reason for everything that happens, humanism argues that what we can observe with our senses can be explained by human investigations and thought. This view as you might guess forms the basis for what would become in the western world that concept of science, the idea that observation and deduction are sufficient means for understanding how the world works and how things happen, without reference to any kind of divine or extra-human power. (II)

This manner of thinking contrasts with the idea of the metaphysical which draws attention to things that are thought to exist but cannot be seen. In Aristotle's theory of tragedy, the human character rather than spiritual elements are held responsible for the turn of fortune or the calamity of the hero. He explains that an ideal tragic plot must be plausible, probable and objective. His famous dictum that poetry is concerned not with what has happened, but with the kind of thing that would happen or that is possible in accordance with probability or necessity, underscores the need for literature to address events and characters that are common in everyday life and not spiritual activities or events. To Aristotle, a poem which recounts the actions of a vengeful deity is not an invitation of something which does or could exist in the real world, but it is an imitation of the kind of thing which could necessarily or probably happen if the traditional beliefs about the gods were true. Hence he advised the creative writer to "prefer impossible probabilities to possible improbabilities" in writing literature. (26)

To reinforce the efficacy of realism in literature, Klages reports that authoritative view of Samuel Johnson of the Augustan age just before both the Romantics, the psychoanalysts, the modernists and post modernists stepped in to interrogate its stability: She says:

Realism of fiction, according to Johnson, also ties the genre more closely to the actualities

of human existence, because they do not contain the “wild strain of imagination” of poets, and do not rely on supernatural or inexplicable events. Fiction comes from authors who have direct knowledge of human nature, gained through intercourse with other humans, rather than from writers closeted away from the normal world inventing impossible scenarios. Because a novelist copies easily recognizable events and characters, Johnson, argues, any reader can judge the accuracy of the representation and evaluate a novel according to that standard. (22)

However, is fiction judged simply by how factual it is or are there some other considerations in determining its efficacy? This is one of the most contentious topics in literary studies, a feud that was first enacted by Plato who banished poets in his republic for imitating nature is a futile exercise. To him the physical world was a mere shadow of reality, a mere appearance whose real existence was in the abstract realm. In his search for the unchanging reality, or something that was perfect and fixed, Plato said the senses, imagination or emotions should not be trusted because they are involved in appearance only, whereas only human reason could perceive absolute reality (30). By this understanding, the literary artist whose main preoccupation is to imitate the physical world was two times removed from the truth since he is dealing with a mere shadow of reality.

Aristotle’s argument on other hand, admits that both fiction and facts could be fused together to produce a work of art. He believed that the act of imitating nature does not need to be a straight forward copy of the object imitated. The similarity between the object and its likeness may reside in a more oblique and abstract correspondence. Indeed, unlike the work of a historian, the events in a novel may not even have to conform with the basic structure of reality as long as it is probable and possesses the possibility of repeating itself.

It would appear that Aristotle’s argument may have laid the foundation for later trends in literary studies that challenged the notion of a stable and fixed meanings about human society. The Romantic conception of arts, for instance, directly questioned the belief of humanism, particularly in insisting on the superiority of all things natural over anything artificial. Some Romantic poets like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Keats introduced supernatural elements in their poetry to infuse a sense of wonder and create a deliberate sensation from that expected by traditional poetry. The psychoanalytical thinkers led by Sigmund Freud also challenged this classical view of the rational man and sets the psychological agenda for the 20th and 21st centuries. Freud’s essay, “The Interpretation of Dreams” (1899) introduced the idea of the psyche and the unconscious as the storehouse of the writer, way beyond the realm of his control. Alanya Harter’s (2003) comments about Freud are quite useful here in explaining the sudden rise of metaphysical elements in literature in the 20th and 21st centuries. He opines:

Freud’s hypothesis concerning the repressed contents of the unconscious seemed to confirm everyone’s worst fears, namely that darkness was capable of overwhelming and controlling the daytime world of ordinary reality (424)

This paper seeks to examine the emergence of metaphysical elements in the prose fiction of Franz Kafka of Germany and Ngugi Wa Thiongo of East Africa. While Kafka, a German published his story in 1913, just before the First World war, Wa Thiongo published his novel, *Wizard of the Crow* in 2007, almost a hundred years afterwards. Kafka is after classified as a modernist writer who engaged expressionist and surrealist techniques while Wa Thiongo is a known Marxist writer who is also regarded as postmodernist owing to his new-found penchant to celebrate the meaningless, ambiguity and confusion of the impoverished subjects of Africa. Both writers tell a story of the main characters who are sick with strange sicknesses that defy orthodox cure.

II. Kafka’s “Metamorphosis”

The background for the emergence of the short story, “Metamorphosis” by Franz Kafka in 1913 has been aptly given in the introductory notes of the editor of the *Bedford Anthology of World Literature* (2003), Alanya Harter who links the European industrial revolution of the 19th century with the conditions of servitude and frustration, Kafka’s characters find themselves. He explains that the industrial revolution created wealth for the middleclass who also instituted big bureaucracies in which common citizens were lost and dehumanized. In many respects, this scenario is the late 20th and early 21st centuries which citizens wallow in sicknesses, hunger, disease, unemployment and stagnation foisted on them by corrupt and dictatorial political leaders. Kafka was engaged with writing about the intimidation of the individual by big corporations, governments and the law courts. Under these giants, the ordinary citizens were marginalised and they became nonentities:

His works embody a disturbing loss of faith in the fundamental institutions

of Western civilization – universities, churches, courts and governments – and implicitly argues that if God still exists in the post World War I era and many doubted He did – the He has retreated into the vast recesses of the cosmos, out of touch and out of hearing. Given the absence of both rational control in the world and model of the universe that include God, Kafka was brilliantly prophetic about the rise of totalitarianism in the Twentieth century and the horrifying effects that fascist and communist regimes would have on millions – as well as about the alienating influence of international corporations. (423)

In “Metamorphosis” the main character, Gregor Samsa is struck with a strange ailment. As he sleeps in the night and wakes up, he discovers that his physical body has been turned into an insect, a cockroach.

When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from troubled dreams, he found himself changed into a monstrous cockroach in his bed. He lay on his tough, armoured back and raising his head a little managed to see – sectioned off by little crescent – shaped ridges into segments – the expense of his arched, brown belly, atop which the coverlet perched, forever on the point of slipping of entirely. His numerous legs, pathetically frail by contrast to the rest of him, waved feebly before his eyes. (87)

Although, Gregor regarded himself as sick and could not go to work as he regularly did, the rest of his family members are at a loss of what to do. Gregor’s family, to whom he has dedicated his working life is unsympathetic to his plight. Even though, the demeaning, pitiable and dehumanizing change in him is completely out of his control, his parents abandon him and could not call a doctor or seek any other means to restore his humanity. His sister, Grete, who had at first responded to Gregor’s plight also abandons him eventually. The general feeling at home is that Gregor had let them down with his condition. Kafka paints a picture of despair as this creature crawls in the dark helplessly navigating the confines of his untidy room.

Even though now he would have had additional cause to remain hidden, because as a result of the dust that lay everywhere in his room, and flew up at the merest movement, he himself was covered with dust; on his back and along his sides he dragged around an assortment of threads, hairs and bits of food, his indifference to everything was far too great for him to lie down on his back, as he had done several times a day before, and rub himself clean on the carpet. And in spite of his condition he felt no shame at moving out on to the pristine floor of the living room. (135)

One of the most dehumanizing scenes in the story occurs when Gregor’s father, Mr. Samsa, sick and tired of the horrible situation asserts his authority as the head of the household. While Gregor crawls to the living room where the rest of the family along with tenants of the house are listening to music, he drives him back into his room, throwing fruits at him. One of the apples that lodge in Gregor’s back rots and festers until Gregor dies without understanding what has happened to him.

Most scholars regard this tale as a parable of the debased citizens living in squalor in the society. But it is the ease with which the author depicts a huge cockroach living and interacting with human characters, without a solution to the strange illness that underscores the inability of Western orthodox medicine to solve every problem of humanity

III. Wa Thiongo’s *Wizard of the Crow*

Ngugi Wa Thiong is one of Africa’s leading novelists who began writing fiction since the 1960s. His latest novel, *Wizard of the Crow*, the most voluminous African novel till date interrogates the authoritarian modernist worldview obsessed with monolithic ideas, structures and sacrosanctity. Famous for his Marxist approach, Wa Thiongo creates the character of a president in a fictional country of Aburiria who is a brutal dictator and a friend of the West.

His friends in the West needed him to assume the mantle of the leader of Africa and the Third World, for Aburiria was strategic importance to the West’s containment of Soviet global domination. The ruler accused

the Socialist party of forming one link in the chain of the Soviet ambitions... It is said that in only a month he moved down a million Aburirian communists, rendering the Ruler the African leader most respected by the West and landing him numerous state visits with Kings, queens and president receiving him in their places of lavish dinner parties. The Western media was bountiful in its praises. (234)

Both the Ruler of Aburiria and his neo-colonialist masters are engaged in this immoral partnership that robs the citizens of Aburiria their much-desired peace and progress. Perhaps, Ngugi's way of explaining this betrayal is in the Ruler's illness which symptoms include speechlessness, bloating to full obesity and buoyancy of the body as it air-lifts him to the ceiling.

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... Not only did the Ruler seem on the verge of bursting, but he had also lost the power to speak (469-470).

Orthodox medical practitioners as represented by the Harvard trained Dr. Din Fury K and Dr. Clarkwell call the Ruler's illness as Self-Induced – Expansion (SIE). They are unable to cure him but are preoccupied with fighting over the patentship of its cure all in the name of money and market. Kimathi, the sorcerer calls it the malady of words or (IF) which is induced by the wishful thinking of African elites either to be like the white men or to benefit from the contraption of the whiteman's neo-colonial agencies like the Global Bank. The Wizard of the Crow heals Tajirika of this illness when he collects illegal monies from contractors in anticipation of the Marching to Heaven project. The Ruler's condition worsens when in a hotel room in New York he is snubbed by officials of the American government and Global Bank which promised financing his pet project of Marching to Heaven.

The Ruler rose to make a speech, completely unaware that the letter in his hand was now shaking. They sat glued to their seats, anticipating his every word. But when he Ruler opened his mouth, no word came out... Suddenly his checks and stomach began to expand. No, not just the checks and the tummy but the whole body. They looked at one another with dismay. They had never seen anything like this (486).

Again, it is the ministrations of the Wizard of the Crow that seems to work and not the administration of orthodox medicine by doctors trained from the best medical school from the West. Dr. Furyk acknowledges that Kimathi is "a doctor of the mind and I of the body" thus admitting that rational interpretation of social reality cannot be complete. However, this admission is half-hearted and condescending since Dr. Furyk feels irritated that Kimathi responds to his question by asking him where he also studied medicine.

Where did you go to school? I was a little irritated by both the question and the tone, for could he not see that I was white? What else did he expect to speak? Harvard, of course I said curtly (88)

However, Wizard of the Crow is not merely about the dichotomy between white and black or Western and Traditional African values nor is it a juxtaposition of capitalism and socialism. Ngugi explores a wide range of philosophies and ideas in different parts of the globe to shore up a formidable argument that good ideas do not necessarily come from a monolithic source. The heterogeneous ideas propagated by the author through his well-educated sorcerer-hero have important things to say about knowledge, subjectivity, feminism and the social transformation of society. This position negates the modernist trend which tended to aspire toward homogeneity with a slant to the so-called high culture of the West. Ngugi's strategy here recalls Sarup's(9) explanation of Jacques Lacan's heavy reliance on metaphor and metonymy to elaborate the hitherto simplistic juxtaposition between the signifier and the signified in structuralism. He explains that as a result of the amending chain of ideas pervading human society one word (or one phenomena or idea) can be signified while it also signifies another in a limitless sequence. Sarup explains:

There is no natural link between signifier and signified. In repression, for example, one signifier comes to substitute for another. The old signifier and what it signifies is. "Pushed down" to the unconscious. In the course of a lifetime the individual builds up many chains of signification, always substituting new terms for old and always increasing the distance between the signifier that is accessible and visible and all those that

are unconscious (11).

Consequently, the Wizard of the Crow represents this multidimensional motif of post-modernist philosophy. This can be noted from his frank confession to Nyawira at the Prairie:

In truth something other than the stench of corruption drove me to Eldares, Kamithi started. “ A combination of events forced me to look within myself and I saw a clear purpose to my life. My only goal had been to educate myself so as to earn plenty money to make good oney parent’s sacrifice. As you know, this dictated my choice of business studies as my main subject... In India by studying the art of healing through plants, I suppose I had only a hazy motion of becoming a physician of wounded souls... I was drawn to the religions of the East. I wanted to learn more about the prophets and teachers of the East like Buddha, Jain’s Mahavira, Guru Nanak of the Sikhs and even confucious of China... When I returned to Aburiria my spiritual preoccupations yielded to necessity. had to find a job (210-211).

For the same reason of survival which propels Kimathi and Nyawira to engage in sorcery, a representative of the West, the special envoy of America to Aburiria explains the various stages of signification of domination to which the West had subjected Aburiria and other states in Africa. In the following excerpts slavery is a metaphor for colonialism and colonialism is in turn a metaphor for globalization all of which are actively canvassed by the West for economic reasons.

There was a time when slavery was good. It did its work, and when it finished creating capital, it withered and died a natural death. Colonialism was good. It spread industrial culture and shared resources and markets. But to revive colonialism would not be an error. There was a time when the cold war dictated our every calculation in domestic and international relations. It is over. We are in the posting cold war era and our calculations are affected by the laws and needs of globalization (580).

In a similar view, the indigenous leadership in Aburiria moves from one metaphor of exploitation and immorality to another- from colonial domination to the reign of a weak leader chosen by the colonialists to take over after independence. The Ruler comes in as a second leader fully subservient to the former colonial master and bereft of ideas to govern his country properly. He is succeeded by another weak and subservient leader, Tajirika, so called as the Emperor who is ironically well educated in the West.

Like Kimathi and Nyawira, Ngugi’s idyllic hero and heroine, almost every other character in the novel embraces sorcery as an alternative option for survival or protection from perceived enemies. The agitators against the Ruler are so efficient in their activities that the only official explanation that is given by government is that the agitators were djinns. Constable Arigaigai Gatherer becomes the first beneficiary of this new way of perceiving social reality in sorcery as he receives promotion for having the courage to chase the spirits. He however attributes his success to the benevolence of the Wizard of the Crow whom he adore and fantasizes in all his private and official communications. The Wizard of the Crow also helps the aged religious couple – Maritha and Mariko rediscover their sexual prowess.

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