



DISMANTLING INJUSTICE THROUGH REVOLUTIONARY ACTIVISM IN ABANI'S *GRACELAND* AND NGUGI'S *MATIGARI*

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Abstract

Nigeria's Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004) and Kenya's Ngugi's *Matigari* (1987) portray failed leadership in post-independence African nations. These novels contain graphic instances of injustice and inhumanity perpetrated by the leaders against the masses. The masses in these novels elect revolution as a means to topple the oppressive and unjust governments and wrest a change. This essay adopts John Rawls' *Theory of Justice* and Peter Calvert's *Theory of Revolution* to interrogate the socio-political denials, inequalities and oppressions meted on the masses by their leaders and the masses' response through revolution. Rawls' justice theory states in part: "Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice [...] laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust" (3). Calvert's revolution theory avers: "Revolution is a process by which people become disenchanted with the incumbent government, on which they focus their failure to attain their...demands" (3, emphasis in the original). *Graceland* and *Matigari* revolve around despotic African leaders who exploit and dehumanise their people. Bruised but resilient in their plight, the masses summon a rare courage and confront their tyrannical rulers in a revolutionary effort, thereby dismantling the latter's unjust strongholds. This essay argues that Abani and Ngugi believe that when the masses are pushed beyond a certain limit that they are bound to retaliate against their oppressors.

Key words: Injustice, tyranny, oppression, revolution, Africa, freedom, *Graceland*, *Matigari*

Introduction

The term 'injustice' is a noun which connotes lack or absence of fairness or justice. It is also synonymous with violation of the right(s) of another or others. Injustice is an appropriate term that portrays the activities of two African rulers: Colonel and Ole Excellent against their subjects in *Graceland* and *Matigari* respectively. Though injustice is a common characteristic of the leadership style of many third world leaders, in these novels, this vice is stifling and reigns supreme, thereby reminding one of John Rawls'



submission that an ‘unjust institution’ must be abolished on account of its unjustness. Though an abstract idea, justice is craved by all humans and a society without justice is one where oppression and unfairness abound. This brings us to John Rawls’ submission on justice.

Rawls’ Concept of Justice

In his over four decades’ old book, *The Theory of Justice* (1979), John Rawls outlined the concept of justice. In this text, Rawls identifies justice to be “the first virtue of social institutions [...]”. Underscoring the importance of justice in any given society, he recommends the reformation or abolition of laws that are bereft of justice, however elegant and well-arranged such law may be. Identifying truth and justice as the first virtues of human activities, Rawls adjudges them to be uncompromising human virtues and avers:

Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others [...] Therefore in a just society the liberties of equal citizenship are taken as settled; the rights secured by justice are not subject to political bargaining or to the calculus of social interest (3-4).

Flowing from this proposition is the fact that all human beings are endowed with inalienable basic rights peculiar to him/her. Rawls’ hypothesis provides that laws that are devoid of human face and human feelings should be reformed or abolished. His argument presupposes that equal citizenship is given to all members of a given society. This proposition recognises the right to life as a non-negotiable right that cannot be compromised. However, when Rawls’ concept of justice is tested in the socio-political universe of these novels in focus, its failure becomes very glaring as the citizens’ rights to life, liberty and equal citizenship are irretrievably eroded.

Calvert’s Theory of Revolution

Revolution is a Political Science term with Latin origin ‘*revolutio*’ meaning “a turn around.” It is a term that has attracted various definitions as a result of which the Social Scientist, Peter Calvert identifies one of its characteristics to be “the absence of an agreed definition...” (3). D. E. H. Russell, another Social Scientist, agrees with Calvert when he states that “The use of the word ‘revolution’ is, of course, extremely varied” (57). Calvert defines revolution as a “contest between government and opposition for control of the state” (1). This contest for change in political power and political structure happens when the masses revolt against the government as a result of economic and socio-political oppression.



Calvert further sees revolution as “a *process* by which people become disenchanted with the incumbent government, on which they focus their failure to attain their...demands...it is a *programme* of change instituted and carried through by the incoming government...it is an *event* in which an existing government is overthrown and a new one established in its place (3, emphasis in the original). Calvert establishes the issue of “disenchantment” of the masses and their resolve to “overthrow” an “existing government” in his definition. These are exactly the case in these novels. First, the government’s ills against the masses reach a point when the latter get disenchanted because they cannot attain their dreams due to the failure of the incumbent government. Consequently, revolution becomes the next option. This submission is apt with regard to the rulers’ oppression of their subjects and the latter’s revolutionary activism in these two novels. It provides some key words that rightly and graphically reflect the situations in the texts in focus. Driven by dissatisfaction with their high level of oppression by the heads of governments, the masses reject and challenge the political authorities of the Colonel and Ole Excellent in an attempt to combat and replace them, or at least get some respite in *Graceland* and *Matigari* respectively. There is a travesty of justice manifested in painful oppressions and social inequalities of the vulnerable masses and the latter’s revolt in these texts. This position is justified as the essay unfolds.

Critical Opinions on the Novels

The worlds of *Graceland* and *Matigari* are reminiscent of societies where law, order, human dignity and sanctity are very much absent. The novels are fraught with tyranny, brutality and diverse oppressive tendencies flowing from the leadership to the followership. For instance, in the creative world of *Graceland*, a microcosm for Nigeria, the military government represented by the Colonel jettisons the affairs of governance to prey on the masses. In this permissive society where might is regarded as right and where everything is possible and acceptable, the presence of the Colonel evokes fear in the citizens because his authority is unquestionable. The slogan in this military governed society is: “[...] dere is no right or wrong with soldier. Just what we want [...] The Colonel has killed people for this kind of disrespect (121)”.

This excerpt, an account of Jimoh, a junior officer in the Army, summarises the character trait of this military head of state who is always on the prowl at night clubs in pursuit of pleasure and hapless victims for his oppressive sport. He also murders innocent citizens in cold blood. Later in the novel, he turns this vicious habit into a “useful” venture for his human parts business. As Elvis the teenage protagonist metamorphoses into adulthood in this horror-filled state, Redemption, his friend and a character in the novel tells him that “People like Colonel use their position to get human parts as you see and den freeze it”



(242). There is a replication of Colonel and his odious acts in Ole Excellent against Kenyans in *Matigari*.

Some scholars and critics have provided critical insights on these novels. Starting with *Graceland*, a novel which captures the events in Nigeria from the early seventies to the early eighties when military governance held sway, Benjamin Ohwovoriolè, (2009) carries out an elaborate study on the novel's structure and characterisation and seen these as metaphors of neurological disorder. Ohwovoriolè identifies several medical neurological disorders such as: epilepsy, muscular dystrophy, alzheimer's disease and so on, and equates these medical abnormalities with the condition of the Nigerian nation and her people. He postulates: "Basically, Chris Abani depicts Nigeria as a character with neurological flaws. Her children, the imaginary citizens that are the other characters that populate the text inherit some of these nervous system disease (sic)" (116).

Maria Sita Kattanek, (2011), interrogates the high violence content of the novel and its effect on Elvis, the young protagonist in the course of his growth. In her article, she decries the humiliation and "degradation that Elvis experiences" which she contends, become "the rule rather than the exception when he observes life in postcolonial Africa". This critic also focuses on the general lack, poverty, hunger, corruption and exploitation that define the political regime of the time (428). Kattanek is of the opinion that Elvis and the citizens of Abani's fictional world experience the ugly side of socio-political governance due to the failure of state authorities to live up to their responsibilities towards the citizens. She, however, seems to oversight the revolutionary activities of the exploited masses in the novel when she asserts that characters in the novel "[...] live without questioning the system that makes people disown their bodies [...]" (430). This observation belies the revolutionary struggles of the masses as Sunday Oke, a character in the novel elatedly enthuses: "We are planning revolution here" (253). Instances of revolutionary activism by the citizens to topple the despotic regime and wrest justice after they have come to self-realisation following the revolutionary campaigns of Caesar Augustus Anyanwu, alias the King of the Beggars, abound in the text.

On her part, Army Novak (2008) compares the human part hunt, commodification and the exploitative tendencies of the military in the novel to the era of slave trade and identifies the only difference between the two methods of dehumanisation to reside in the slight transformation of the style of operation of the version in *Graceland*. Novak notices "no end to colonialism" in this novel and asserts that it is "only a transformation of US and Europe policies and methods" that constitute such difference, as according to her, "conquest and slavery are replaced by the creation of a market" (35).



For Heater Hewett (2005), Abani does not concern himself with the usual practice of blaming outsiders for Africa's socio-political predicament in *Graceland*. Hewett notes "[...] a shift from the post-colonial concerns of blame to the inner transcultural one within the African socio-political set-up. In her view, this novel obviously does not write back to the Empire in the classic fashion of postcolonial textualities". Instead, it dwells "[...] on Nigeria as a cultural, transitional and hybridised space [...]" (22). Her observation points to the conclusion that *Graceland* locates the cause of Africa's political maladministration within the continent itself and not as a result of external forces.

John Hawley (2008) includes *Graceland* among the African works that recount the Biafran war and also stresses that the novel focuses attention on the telling consequences of violence on children (22). The critic is also irked by the depth of violence which wars can wrought on a child's psyche after juxtaposing it with other literary works on similar subject. The above observations about *Graceland* are apt and insightful. However, they seem to be silent on the revolutionary attempts of the frustrated and disgruntled citizens at resisting the harsh and obnoxious rule of the despotic military administration. "Revolution," a term defined by Calvert (1996) as "a process by which people become disenchanted with the incumbent government, on which they focus their failure to attain their political demand" (3), is adopted by the masses to topple the draconian government of their political leaders in both *Graceland* and *Matigari*.

Some scholars have also offered critical opinions on *Matigari* which is considered as the most controversial of all Ngugi's novels because of its advocacy of armed struggle against oppression. Odun Balogun is interested in the characteristic structures of this novel which properly identify it as an African oral epic narrative. He avers that the novel's "...mode of characterisation, the kinds of linguistic and stylistic formulas that it employs, as well as the details of its temporal, geographical...setting all point to the fact that the novel was meticulously written to conform with the characteristics of traditional African oral epic narrative performance" (n.p).

Nicholas Kamau-Goro and Emilia V. Ilieva (2014) perceive the ailment of *Matigari* the eponymous hero of the novel as a communal one just as they associate the hero with selflessness. They note:

As an embodiment of the nation, *Matigari*'s illness is a public rather than an individual affliction. His is a quest for a cure for a communal malady. Although the novel ostensibly eschews referentiality, *Matigari*'s story reasserts the unnamed country as post-colonial Kenya. The radio broadcast recall events in Kenya's recent post-colonial history (9)



Ngugi's identification with the oppressed masses and the peasants is re-asserted by Kabira Wanjiku Mukabi (1983) whose observation succinctly captures the author's style in *Matigari*. The scholar observes that "Ngugi models himself on the traditional artist in Gikuyu society who was the spokesman of the little people, the underprivileged" (35). It is noteworthy that in *Matigari* that Ngugi practically transforms to the hero, Matigari, who embarks on a deliverance mission for the long oppressed people whose voice has been muted by the greedy and oppressive African rulers. *Matigari* thus replicates the situation in *Graceland*.

In *Matigari*, Ngugi deliberately adopts the African oral story-telling method for its didactic properties because apart from the moralistic values, it equally aids the novel in creating what Gikandi calls "an alternative to the bourgeois public sphere inherited from colonialism and perpetuated in post-coloniality (2000, 226). Eric Nsuh Zuhmboshi (2014, 94) notes that "...*Matigari* could be read as a political discourse on the absence of social justice and equality in postcolonial or post 1960 African societies. What is very peculiar about this novel is that unlike Ngugi's previous novels that have specific social settings, *Matigari* does not have any particular social setting" (94). Though these observations are insightful, they are silent on the revolutionary struggle of the masses to challenge their leaders and wrest some freedom for themselves which is a gap that this essay seeks to fill.

Oppression, Injustice and Revolutionary Actions in the Novels

The masses endure all these shades of injustice with equanimity but as soon as they attain political awareness, they courageously rise against their oppressors through revolutionary struggles. In *The Revolutionary Character in the African Novel* (2014), Sophia Akhmemokhan aptly makes a pertinent observation when she argues: "when the revolutionary embarks on an enlightenment campaign, it is both to create awareness and to cultivate discontent" (4). Like Calvert, she raises the question of discontent which Calvert calls disenchantment. This holds true in the two novels as the subjects embark on revolutionary campaigns when they become disenchanted by their leaders' oppressions.

In *Graceland*, the audience witness the random killings of the vulnerable citizens for the purpose of harvesting their organs for merchandise by Colonel. In this society, killing is a routine practice as the Colonel kills for the mere fun of it. Jimoh reveals to Redemption, one of the characters, the habitual practice of this sadistic ruler that equates might with right: "This your friend is a lucky man. The Colonel has killed people for this kind of disrespect [...] dere is no right or wrong with soldier. Just what we want (121). In this fictional universe, the lives of the masses are worthless as they are mere sport to their military ruler. Life which is an inalienable right of the individual is truncated at will and for such a flimsy reason as disrespecting the Colonel. What transpired in the novel before Jimoh's revelation does not warrant the taking of human life because Elvis, Redemption's



friend in question, is shocked by such a revelation and asks in his childish naivety: “Who is the Colonel, anyway. Do you think he would have shot me in a crowded nightclub?” (121).

Elvis’ question above arises from the unusual way in which the citizens are treated with abuse and indignity. Besides his unprovoked routine killings, the Colonel is also a harbinger of death as he negatively influences the law enforcement agents in a similar despotic manner. This position is brought home in the case of an un-named indigent trader and father of ten who procures a loan to establish a trade in second hand clothing materials. This man who previously solicited alms from the public to cater for his family, resolves to procure a loan to establish a means of livelihood in *okirika* (second hand clothes) business. But on a fateful day, Colonel’s oppressive police force strikes and the man’s wares end up in flames. The narrative voice recounts this painful incident: “A man came running towards him [Elvis], carrying some clothes on hangers, a policeman hot on the heels. Just before he got to where Elvis stood, the man tripped and fell. The policeman pounced on him and snatched the clothes away, carrying them to the raging bonfire and throwing them in” (73). Consequently, this struggling poor trader loses his entire means of livelihood within a twinkle of an eye. Obviously too much for him to bear, “Before anyone could react, he jumped into the fire. As the flames licked around him, it seemed the fire smacked its lips in satisfaction. And in the fire, he continued to yell as he wrestled with it. The last thing Elvis heard before the man died was terrible laugh” (74). This horrible manner of death emanates from the dehumanising military government with an equally callous police force. This is not surprising since it is part of “what the soldiers want”, as noted above.

Incontestably, the brutality of the political system flows down to the police as well as the masses, dulling their humanity. The killing of Jeremiah, another character, in much the same way as that of the *okirika* seller elucidates this point. Jeremiah, a carpenter, goes to recover his money from Peter, his debtor. The latter denies having had any transaction with Jeremiah and turns the table against him, accusing him of being a thief. This attracts an irate crowd that instantly sends Jeremiah to an untimely death by burning, just like the second hand clothes seller. Unbelievably, there is a police check point a few yards away from the scene of the incident yet they watch without intervening to save the innocent man. This gruesome incident is relayed in this tear-provoking manner:

I no be thief! I came to collect my money from dat man who owes me! The accused thief shouted, pointing at a man in the crowd. “Whicih man?” Someone in the crowd asked [...] the man he was referring to, a short nondescript man, shifted uncomfortably. “Who owe you? Crazeman!” Peter shouted, throwing a stone at



the accused thief. It caught him on the temple, tearing a gash, and fresh blood pumped dark and thick (225).

As expected in such a society that robs people of their humanity as this, Jeremiah is roasted in a raging fire by an unfeeling crowd and is left to char into an unrecognisable human heap by an insensitive police (224-227). Instructively the dehumanising rulership style of the military is emulated by both the police and the citizens, thus transforming them into an unfeeling masses who prey on one another in much the same way as their wicked ruler preys on them.

The state subverts the principle of the inviolability of human life as propounded by Rawls. The Colonel, being bereft of every iota of humanity, freely violates the lives of his subjects. Through sheer force and without scruples, he raises a killer squad which he sends on killing missions and gradually graduates from cocaine pushing to human-parts peddling. Before their role as escorts of human parts to Togo, Redemption tells Elvis: “De people who we wrap cocaine for, well, dey have moved on to anoder business [...] I don’t know what it is, but is not cocaine [...] Dat dey send to States and oder places, and any way dey have left the cocaine business [...] Dey are paying five thousand naira each for us to follow deliver something” (138). Redemption and Elvis as escorts, accompany Anthony and Conrad, the GMC truck driver and the relief driver respectively to the Colonel’s agent in Togo to fetch the coolers containing what they later discover to their repulsion to be human parts and hypnotised teenagers:

Just then Anthony and Conrad came out of the hut carrying two giant plastic coolers. Grunting, they struggled to get them into the back of the truck [...Conrad] retuned with six people [...] Elvis saw that their hands were tied and that they were a mixed bunch of kids, boys and girls, ranging in age about eight to sixteen [...] they filed in silently, sitting facing each other [...] Conrad chained the feet of their new passengers together (232).

Anthony proffers a falsified response regarding the status and personalities of the chained children to douse Elvis’ curiosity, stressing that they are “crazy runaway from Ghana” and that their father “is a big man in Rawling’s gofment, so we are returning them to their parents” (234). With cigarettes and bribes to each lead police officer at the several checkpoints, they are able to manoeuvre their way. It takes the revelation of Kemi, one of the captives who is not affected by the hypnosis for them to realise that such is the new business venture of the Colonel who dispatches his killer squad to schools to kidnap pupils for the purpose of merchandise. In response to Redemption’s question, Kemi replies: “Please don’t kill me sir [...] The other man said he is going to kill us [...] I am in secondary school [...] they kidnapped me, sir” (235).



After Kemi's account, Redemption also volunteers some information about Colonel's new business venture to Elvis: "As I know it, the Colonel dey supply these children to white people [...] slavery [...] Dese children can become prostitutes in European country or even [the] Far East". The duo experience greater shock on discovering the contents of the big coolers. On Redemption's instruction to Elvis to get some bottles of beer from the coolers for them to drink and douse their thirst, they surprisingly discover that they are actually escorting frozen freshly harvested human parts for Colonel's business:

Elvis staggered back in disgust [...] shit, he swore, popping the cover of the other coolers. The second one held what appeared to be several organs, hearts and livers, also parked with ice [...] Redemption turned to the shout. It came from a young man who had gone to inspect the coolers. In his fright he had knocked one of them over, and the human heads rolled across the ground like errant fruit from a grocery bag (237-238).

Evident in the above is the cannibalistic thrust of this military ruler whose political activities border on injustice and human rights violation. The oppression, suffering and poverty induced by bad governance in *Graceland* are obviously stifling. Due to unemployment, Okon, a character in the novel, initially sold his blood in hospitals to survive. But when his blood level starts to diminish, he decides to join other equally unemployed hungry citizens to hijack "corpses from road-sides and even homes which they sold for organ transplants to earn a living" (308).

As the situation becomes unbearable with immense disenchantment, the masses embark on revolution. At the symbolic Freedom Square, the masses converge with placards that read: "WE OWN THIS LIFE, FREEDOM [...], NO SACRED COWS (*Graceland*, 265-266 emphasis in the original). They are at this square to demand their humanity and rightful entitlement to existence. This is brought about by the discontent cultivated in them by the revolutionary lectures of the King of the Beggars as earlier noted. Such revolutionary slogans on their placards and the open chanting of Bob Marley's freedom song: "Get up, stand up, stand up for your rights", belie Kattanek's claim that the characters in *Graceland* "[...] live without questioning the system that makes people disown their bodies [...]" (430). This is a proof that the oppressed masses are poised to negotiate their freedom by challenging their oppressor. They choose the path of physical confrontation by emulating the speech of Malcolm X, a historical revolutionary figure:

Malcolm X once said America is a prison. So is this country [...] we [...] imprisoning ourselves by allowing this infernal, illegal and monstrous regime of military buffoons to continue. They continue to play us like fools, buying off our allegiance with



money, or with force when they cannot pay the price. I am calling for rebellion [revolution...] (156).

With the above speech by the King, revolutionary action to combat the government of the Colonel is set in motion. Moreover, in this action that smacks of an epic struggle, the masses in their mixed multitude of “late-night workers, policemen, security guards on break and the homeless, including a large number of children” (156) bring down this unpopular military government.

The Colonel and symbol of their oppression is consumed in this revolution thereby ushering in justice and freedom for the masses, a clear case of triumph for the long traumatised citizens. Though the King and champion of the struggle dies in the battle, it is elating to know that the once dehumanised masses who had once brutalised their own as seen in their culpability in the deaths of Jeremiah and the *okirika* vendor as well as the insensitive police, a previously willing instrument of oppression in the hands of the Colonel, all unite to fight the symbol of their oppression.

Matigari is centred on Matigari, the eponymous protagonist who returns to his unnamed post-colonial African state which is understood to be Kenya, after many years of involvement in *Mau Mau* freedom fight with the colonialists. He discovers to his chagrin that the indigenous rulers who inherited power from the white colonialists have become more vicious than the former masters. Matigari plunges himself like a roving camera to x-ray the degree of injustice unleashed on the masses by a tyrannical ruling class headed by His Excellency Ole Excellent.

Matigari traverses the society seeking the salvation of the down-trodden masses as he daily witnesses the catalogue of injustice against the land and her people by the political elite. He is disheartened to discover that most orphaned children whose fathers were consumed in the *Mau Mau* war have been further pushed to the margins. They now have to bribe the guards at the fenced garbage dumpsite before they are allowed to scavenge for articles of value to be sold to eke out a living. “Each child had to pay a fee to enter. A ticket to enable them fight it out with dogs, vulture, rats, all sorts of scavengers and vermins, for pieces of string, patches of cloth, odd bits of leather, shoe soles [...] bones [...] anything” (11). Obviously, this is the height of inhumanity and abuse by the political leaders of this post-colonial nation.

The police force in *Matigari* as in *Graceland* is an extension of the corrupt and unjust government. It abdicates its role as the maintainer of peace to exploit and oppress the masses by levelling false accusation against innocent people in order to exploit them financially and sexually. Above all, they take bribe and pervert justice. After the insight



from the boy, Matigari comes across five men comprising two policemen, a tractor driver and two guards who had collected money from the scavenging children and is surprised to see them divide the loot and wonders aloud: “So these five were busy dividing among themselves the money they had taken from the children? So a handful of people still profited from the suffering of the majority, the sorrow of the many being the joy of the few?” (12).

Further instances of police complicity in the oppression of the masses and thwarting of justice are brought home in the following incidents. On his interrogation by Matigari as to the reason for their having to pay to enter the garbage yard and what would happen if they refused to pay, he gets a dumb-founding revelation from this boy that doubles as his guide: “Oh, they beat us up [...] The Police and these bandits work together. They are as inseparable as these fingers on my hand! [...] If we don’t pay, the police come after us claiming that we are thieves, [...] sometimes they drive us away from our houses and call us vagrants” (13&14).

The police that should be an arm of law and justice connive with politicians and powerful members of the society to exploit and extort the already impoverished masses. This boy whose identity later comes to be known as Muriuki, an orphaned son of a freedom fighter (15), takes Matigari to where he calls their house, a camp of many impoverished children whom the bad political situation has turned to human wrecks and street urchins. Their house is a “vehicle cemetery” for want of a better place to call home. Here, each child pitches his ‘house’ in any badly damaged car of his fancy. “This is our village [...] they are our houses. Each one of us has his own house. Mine is a Mercedes-Benz’, he announced proudly, as if to say that this house was better than all the others” (15&16).

Contrary to their roles as maintainers of law and promoters of justice, here as in *Graceland*, execute their duties in reverse by terrorising and traumatising the public. The case of Guthera, the prostitute is apposite. She is humiliated to cow her into submission for sexual exploitation. They set their dog on her and terrorise her to a point where she unconsciously passes urine and bares herself to the consternation of a fear-gripped crowd. Again, like the masses in *Graceland* before coming to political awareness, the crowd watches without making any effort to rescue Guthera from police brutality. It takes the bold and prompt intervention of Matigari to stop the cops’ madness and deliver Guthera from their devouring orgy. He reprimands the crowd for watching helplessly as one of theirs is innocently dehumanised: “How can you stand there watching the beauty of our land being trodden down by these beasts [...] Why do you hide behind a cloak of silence and let yourselves be ruled by fear? Remember the saying that too much fear breeds misery in the land” (31).



The masses here just like in *Graceland*, have allowed their humanity to be numbed by the routine evil and injustice that have become the order of the day but soon understand their folly and amend after the revolution initiated by Matigari. The response of the police to the curt charge of Matigari to “Leave [Guthera] alone”, (31) is “Who gives you the right to interfere with the law?” The police who held the dog asked him. “What kind of law is this which allows policemen to harass defenseless women?” Matigari snaps back. The claim of the police is as puerile as it is stupid and exposes the ultra vires manner in which they wield their power: “Do you know that this woman has disobeyed police order to stop? We are here to ensure peace and stability [...] Do you want me to set this dog loose on you [...] (31). This encounter between Matigari and the police in the former’s interventionist effort towards Guthera’s safety is a vital insight into the operations of the legal arm of this government and a reflection of the attitude of the political head of this society.

The law is channeled into corrupt use just like the political power holders who wield their authority abusively, oppressively and tyrannically. Here, the law becomes an instrument of oppression and exploitation wielded at the whim and caprice of its holders without control. Settler Williams and the duo of the President, His Excellency Ole Excellent and John Boy, his African accomplices, stop at nothing to extort the people and promote imperialist agenda. Whereas His Excellency silences and muzzles the students and their lecturers so that they do not expose his imperialist agenda by clamping them into prisons, Settler Williams and John Boy are busy exploiting the workforce in their jointly-owned Anglo-American Leather and Plastic Works Company.

Matigari also comes to the shocking discovery that the colonialist-Settler Williams whom he had fought desperately for the freedom of the colony has actually died with the colony’s attainment of independence but has left his footprint everywhere and visibly too. His son, Robert Williams Junior has inherited the estate which his father forcefully extorted from the citizens of the colony, among whom is Matigari himself. Now while Robert Williams is the director of the factory where Ngaruro works, John Boy Junior, the son of William’s Kenyan servant is the deputy director of the same company (24). Matigari observes the painful connivance of the oligarchy with their imperialist friends in the exploitation of the colony’s resources. Smarting from such painful betrayal, he elects to recruit his own squad of revolutionaries to fight and drive away Settler Williams Junior and John Boy his Kenyan lackey.

In this post-colonial state, foreigners own almost all popular shopping centres, conglomerates, companies and other financially buoyant business outlets with the exception of a few Africans. Financial institutions like British-American Tobacco, Barclays Bank, American Life Insurance are owned by foreigners. Rather than promote



economic and socio-political justice for the masses, His Excellency Ole Excellent goes out of his way to protect foreign and multinational interests. He sets the police to foil the proposed students' demonstration outside the British and American embassies and to protect the foreigners and their businesses (49). He explains his action away with the phrase: "A friend in need is a friend indeed".

Regrettably, black people in governance have gone ahead to invite the white colonialists back through the back door, thus promoting the latter's interest and investment to the detriment of their own people. The distinguishing feature between Settler Williams Jnr. and John Boy Jnr., his African friend and accomplice lies in their complexion as both of them are same in all other aspects such as: oppression, exploitation, injustice, inhumanity and other obnoxious tendencies. They own the vast plantation, the factories where they function as director and assistant director respectively and they exploit the workers for which the latter plan an impending strike. The stifling neo-colonialist and imperialist activities in this society and the complicity of Africans in the exploitation of their people are evident in the excerpt below:

A Whiteman and a Blackman sat on horseback on one side of the narrow tarmac and next to the gate. Their horses were exactly alike. Both had silky brown bodies. The riders wore clothes of the same colour. Indeed, the only difference between the two men was their skin colour. Even their postures as they sat in the saddle were exactly the same. The way they held their whips and reins - no difference. And they spoke in the same manner (43).

Matigari's attempt to take over the house from Settler Williams Jnr. and John Boy Jnr. is stopped by the police who arrest him and dump him in a cell with eight other people all of whom are arrested for flimsy reasons ranging from wandering, to selling milk without license (54). The nine inmates, all political detainees, are united in their suffering, oppression and starvation and the bean cake (*akara*) and a bottle of beer which two of them were about to eat before their unwarranted arrest symbolically become a binding communion to tie up their resolve to stage an imminent revolution if the people must survive under the unjust regime. In a manner reminiscent of Christ's last communion with his disciples before his betrayal, arrest and death, the inmates "[...] lit two candles [...]" When the drunkard's turn came, he leaped to his feet, holding the food in his right hand and the bottle in his left, and started speaking as though he were reading the Bible from the pulpit" [...] do this to one another until our kingdom comes, through the will of the people!" (56, 57). Obviously, it is only through a united force of the masses who have been pushed to the margins that change will emerge through a concerted revolutionary move.



Matigari takes his fellow inmates through the story of the land: the beginning of the trouble, colonialists' usurpation of the land, efforts of the *Mau Mau* freedom fighters of whom he is a survivor, the stealing of his farm land by Settler Williams, the devolution of his farm and house from the senior Settler Williams to his son on independence and John Boy's father's part in his failed attempt at killing Settler Williams Senior and how both Williams and John Boy Jr. are the ones now reaping from his sweat and how his arrest and detention came about. Matigari gives them the entire history of the colony and gets them stirred up for a possible revolution (58-61). Having witnessed oppression and injustice in the dispensation of Black/African leadership, Matigari resolves to seek for Truth and Justice in the land as soon as he leaves the prison.

Fortunately for him and his co-prisoners, the combined secret operations of Guthera and Muriuki get them out of prison. Matigari vows to go in search of Truth and Justice, two non-existent concepts in the country. The worker, one of his prison inmates, has given him an exposition of the evil partnership of Robert Williams Jr. and John Boy Jr. while in the cell. He had told him: "That inseparable pair have been oppressing us all this time. Every worker knows that Robert Williams and John Boy are like twins born out of the womb of the same ogre. And do you know something else? The whole police force is in the hands of these two. So are the law courts" (65).

These two men, from the above excerpt, have the instruments of the law at their beck and call and can thwart the course of justice at will to oppress the masses. Consequently, Matigari decides to go in quest for Truth and Justice in the land, determined to work towards their entrenchment through revolutionary move if he fails to find them: "Where have truth and justice gone to in this country?" (61). He had wondered while still in prison and the inmate accused of theft had replied him: "[...] if you continue asking questions of that kind, you will find yourself in a mental hospital or in a pit of everlasting darkness". He traverses all nooks and crannies of the society without finding the twain concepts of Truth and Justice. His quest for truth and justice takes him further to the people in the street, tea-bush, court, in nature; to an old woman; a student; a teacher; a priest (77, 79, 82, 86, 89, 91 93, 95) but all these people and institutions fail to provide him with an answer. Worst of all, the purported visit and speech by the Truth and Justice Minister and President Ole Excellence which is interpolated by the Priest's prayer and Bible reading (100-111) all point to the fact that the government is anti-citizens and pro imperialists and exploitation.

Ngugi indicts all the institutions as accomplices in the socio-political injustice and rape of Truth and Justice in the country. The seed of revolution having been sown by Matigari in the hearts of his fellow prisoners, Muriuki, Guthera and Ngaruro is gradually nurtured into maturity. He believes and professes: "One day the land will return to the tiller, and the



wealth of our land to those who produce it” because “No government, not even the most repressive, has ever managed to silence the voices of the masses” (124). Matigari comes to the conclusion that: “In the pursuit of truth and justice, one had to be “armed” with ‘words’ as *Justice for the oppressed comes from a sharpened spear* (131, emphasis in the original). Having left the mental hospital where he and Ngaruro were dumped by the unjust government for interrogating the absence of truth and justice in the society (through the efforts of Muriuki and Guthera), Matigari returns to the *Magumo* tree to retrieve his arms from where it was buried and ignite the fire of revolution (137), choosing not to seal his life and the fate of his people “in a tomb of silence”.

Matigari’s commitment to the survival of his society and people is proven in his volunteering to fight the *Mau Mau* war, believing that things would become better for him and the masses when the foreign oppressors were defeated. This was his reason for discarding his arm on his return from the bush. But since the current politicians have shown themselves to be more vicious than the colonialists, his bold and altruistic response to the needs of his people compel him to recover his weapon again as he reiterates: “I am not afraid of dying for the just cause—our heritage” (157). He gets some fuel and drives down to John Boy’s house in a snatched Mercedes Benz to meet Muriuki and Guthera. Beating all security checks, he arrives disguised as a dignitary in the Mercedes Benz to set John Boy’s house ablaze without being detected to the satisfaction of the crowd who intone a song: “It’s burning/Yes, Bad Boy’s house is burning/Let’s warm ourselves with it/It’s burning”. The masses surrounded the house, singing, ‘Boy’s property is burning! [...]’ (167). With one of the symbols of injustice and corruption defeated in a revolution, the joy of the masses knows no bounds. More people join and the masses all join the jubilatory song:

Everything that belongs to these slaves must burn! [...] Their coffee must burn! [...] Their cars must burn! [...] The property of those robbing the masses must burn!

They started burning all the Mercedes-Benzes that were in sight. Their owners ran for their lives. The people split into groups and moved to the different houses and estates. They rendered the security forces helpless. They set the houses on fire, they burned down the houses, tea bushes, coffee-trees, vehicles (166-168).

The narrator relays that the masses behave “as if they were now at war with the oppressors:

“Burn detention without trial – burn! Burn the exiling of patriots – burn! Burn the prisons holding our patriotic students – burn!” (168).



When John Boy Junior heard that his house had been set on fire, he fainted. He was rushed to hospital. Where would his wife and children stay on their return from their summer holidays in the USA? John Boy was not alone in this private terror. Many a comprador tycoon had a sleepless night then. They thought and claim that the insurrection had been carefully planned (169).

Though His Excellency Ole Excellence immediately deploys the state legal apparatus to “shoot on sight”, and “shoot to kill” (169), the masses are happy for exerting a pound of flesh on him and their oppressors and that is enough compensation for their suffering. It suffices that the oppressors of the people have been discomfited. Most importantly, the victory song which keeps blaring “victory shall be ours” (175) by the masses shows that the revolution is successful and all-embracing and that the people’s rights have been restored. Again, here, as in *Graceland*, the citizens resort to revolution as a means of dismantling an unjust regime.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is obvious that Abani and Ngugi consider mass revolution against injustice as the best means of dismantling injustice and preserving one’s humanity. These novelists seem to uphold Rawls’ position that every human being has an inalienable right that must not be denied him/her no matter under whatever pretext. Besides, they also believe that laws and institutions that are devoid of human face should be reformed or abolished. Consequently, in their respective novels in this paper, they create revolutionary protagonists who are able to carry the marginalised masses along the path of revolution.



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