REVIEW ESSAY

When Dragons Refuse to Die: African Politics as Children's Fantasy in Wayetu Moore's *The Dragons, The Giant, The Woman—A Memoir*

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The Dragons, The Giant, The Woman—A Memoir. By Wayetu Moore.
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Although Wayetu Moore's *The Dragon*s, *The Giant*, *The Woman* is a memoir of the first and gruesome Liberian Civil War, which lasted eight years from 1989 to 1997, it projects heroism and socio-political underdevelopment within the context of magical realism and the supernatural. This is evident, too, in classic children's comics, such as Cressida Cromwell's *How To Train Your Dragon* (2017), which narrates the legend of Hiccup, a timid Viking who eventually turns out as a child-hero. Both authors draw insight from familiar characters, myths, and animal metaphors to portray bitter realities within the socio-political space. Meanwhile, Moore relies on African orature, replete with riddles, songs, fables, and folktales about animals and superhuman characters, to construct her plot and characters. The African folktales primarily teach didactics and expose children to community ethos and tenets that could shape them into moderate citizens. Moore artistically employs the fluidic and dynamic nature of the African unwritten/oral literature to circumvent logic and war trauma on a girl-child, especially Tutu (her alter-ego). Moore confirms in an interview with Naira NYC that her father and grandmother's magical narratives preserved her innocence and psyche as a juvenile during the Liberian post/war.[2] The novelist offers a euphemistic view of the war portraying the rebels' gunshots as "dragons fighting" and dead casualties of war as "people sleeping on the road."[3]

Also, Ol' Ma's explanation to Tutu that dead ancestors have their abode in "the wandering sky" and supply the rainfall buttresses African's firm belief in the unbroken link between the world of the living, unborn, and ancestors as postulated by Wole Soyinka in *The Fourth Stage* (1990). Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975)

further graphically illustrates the spiritual consequence of violating communal rites. As revealed in the text, Elesin-Oba's delay in fulfilling the rite of passage (his ceremonial death) for a deceased king spelled doom for the entire community. Africans generally believe that there is a need for communal sacrifices to maintain the spiritual harmony between the physical and metaphysical realm, thus the assumption of constant synergy between animate and inanimate, human beings, spirits, and nature (animals and plants).

In absorbing African orature into their works, African writers introduce a dimension that projects dual realities—realist and illusory—or what Kole Omotosho (1979) terms "marvellous realism" or "magical realism." The literary technique is inspired mainly by Gabriel García Márquez, Salman Rushdie and Alejo Carpentier. Magical realism is a construct for some African writers who homogenize their messages within African philosophy and metaphysics. Brenda Cooper's (2012) view is somewhat contradictory. She opines that magical realism is a literary technique borne out of necessity based on most Third World writers' socio-economic burden. This postulate is incomplete even though it is central to famous first-generation Nigerian writers, including Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ola Rotimi. They passionately recount socio-political challenges in Nigeria for cultural propagation and decolonization agenda. They achieved this by deploying indigenous language and aesthetics to revolt against Eurocentric stereotypes and neo-colonial structures in Africa and connect with their African roots. The weakness in Cooper's submission is that it overlooks magical realism as the core of particularly the Yoruba African culture. Meanwhile, African orature is entrenched in African literature, fluidic, and multidimensional, and can be manipulated to fit individual and ideological needs.

Brenda Cooper cites Ben Okri, Syl Chelley-Coker and B. Kojo Laing as renowned West African postcolonial/magical realists. However, she neglects the fusion of myths, folktales, and taboos with social history in their works, mainly to expose gaps and influence remediation in governance and economic processes in Africa.[4] For instance, Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) projects Nigeria's cyclical progress or underdevelopment as a typical Abiku (an African child with recurrent deaths) and his expedition in light of the transitioning of the former British colony to independence eventually occurred on 1 October 1960. The "road" metaphor in Okri's novel is equivalent to Wole Soyinka's

The Road (1965), which projects tragic realities of a post-independent Nigeria like political thuggery, bribery, road accidents, and religious conflict the Yoruba religious and philosophical standpoint.

Similarly, Wayetu Moore employs the symbol of the "road" to amplify Liberia's depreciating and irredeemable state during the Civil War. In this regard, the gory sight of disembodied victims of war is substituted with Ol' Pa's alternative reality, which becomes Tutu's coping mechanism. As a literary protégée, Moore has tapped the inspiration of a child-hero, especially from migrant African writers, particularly Ben Okri and Chimamanda Adichie. In this sense, Okri's Azaro, notably Adichie's 15-year-old Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus* (2004), are figurations of Nigeria's development at different phases, particularly during the independent and post-independent era. The latter's protagonist exemplifies Nigerians' repressive state during the 19 years of Nigeria's military administration, from 1966 to 1999. Adichie artistically blends the chaotic state within and outside of the girl-hero in the text. Ade Coker's assassination metaphorically portrays Ken Saro-Wiwa's murder and the military's disregard for the press's human rights and freedom in Nigerian history.

In the same vein, Eugene, celebrated as an icon in the church and community is authoritarian and constantly violates his wife and children. This act forces Jaja, who is elderly and intolerant of the domestic abuse, to rebel against his father, who eventually was poisoned to death by his wife, Beatrice, but leads the family into a post-trauma. Beyond the psychological theme of the text, Cooper x-rays the mystic and supernatural by focusing on animated objects in and around the characters, mainly the "broken figurines," which are symbolic of Beatrice's damaged self/home.[5] Following the footprints of preceding African writers, Adichie constructs a realm without borders between the living and the dead, the animate and the inanimate, the big and the small, the literal and the symbolic, and words and things.[6]

Meanwhile, the theme of post-war trauma is conspicuous in mature characters in Adichie's latter text, *A Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007), a graphic depiction of the Nigerian Civil War or Biafra War from 1967 to 1970 when the Igbo (an ethnic group predominantly in Eastern Nigeria) demanded cessation from Nigeria. The jostle for power among high-ranking military officers in Nigeria who belonged to two main ethnic groups, Igbo and Hausa (an ethnic group predominantly

in Northern Nigeria), further heightened the tension. In the Biafran war, the sudden disappearance of Kainene, Olanna's twin sister, gives Adiche's text an open-ended conclusion, indirectly exposing Nigeria's irredeemable state. By implication, the African literary artists are more concerned about connecting with their readers from the physical, political, spiritual, and psychological planes using any tool, including magical realism.

Sublimely, Wayetu Moore adopts a child-hero to create a horror narrative fantasy and take an objective view of the Liberian Civil War. She explains that her novel is a unique representation of a "new perspective to the African war story" that negates the norm of rescue by "some aid workers" or causalities of war staying in "a refugee camp."[7] The author affirms that her novel is a sensitive recount of war during her formative years. The folktales about Tutu's dragons and dreams, the girl-hero, are narrative strategies utilized to reinforce the theme of political instability and military rule in Africa.

Meanwhile, Guignery Vanessa reminds us that the "forest" is central to African narratives and folktales, and it is an imaginative space for African writers to accommodate the fantastic and mysterious.[8] In similitude to Ben Okri's *Famished Road*, two classical Nigerian fictions, Daniel Fagunwa's *Forest of a Thousand Daemons* (1938) and *Amos Tutuola's My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954), expounds on the significance of sacred forests, supernatural beings and spiritual escapades of two protagonists, a hunter and a wandering boy in the forest. The indigenous Africans mainly believe that certain spirits inhabit or have meeting spots in trees. Remarkably, John Pepper Clark and Soyinka's poem *Abiku* reinforce the idea that an *Abiku* spirit may accompany "kindred spirits" or their spiritual companions to the top of a baobab tree when it grows bored with staying "indoors."

Likewise, sacred forests or groves are dedicated to annual festivals and rites, such as the Osun-Osogbo grove in Southwestern Nigeria. However, beyond the intertextuality of the African literary heritage and ecofeminist stance of Wayetu Moore, the exploration of African politics is a liminal space divided between the past and present and the world within and without a child's (author) imagination. In Tutu's memory, the Hawa Undu dragons are pseudonyms for two former Liberian warlords, namely Samuel Doe, Prince Johnson, and Charles Taylor, to parody the murder and carnages perpetrated while in power.

Notably, the military takeovers and constant powerplay, bloodthirstiness and inordinate rivalry between factions of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL) led to the death of at least 250,000 and approximately a million displaced individuals, including the author (Tutu) during the First Liberian Civil War from 1989 to 1997.

The aftermath of wars is social chaos and national hostility leading to expatriates' extermination, including "Chinese and Lebanese" business owners in Liberia.[9] Tutu's narrative further reveals that the military exploited the disintegration, nepotism and disunity among ethnic groups in Liberia, namely Gola and Kissi and Loma and Gio, Vai and Kpelle, Kru and Mano, Bassa and Krahn, and Grebo and Gbani, to perpetuate their selfish ambition.[10] Following the brutal assassination of Samuel Doe by Prince Johnson in Monrovia on 9 September 1990, Tutu concludes that the political players' bloody revolution, despite the positive motive, signaled more destruction than the construction of Liberian's socio-politics.[11] The Arab Spring in 2011 sparked a chain of reactions leading to the demotion of ten powerful liberators turned dictators across Africa. The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old fruit vendor who was harassed by police officers on 17 December 2010, heightened the national outrage against 24 years of autocracy and the extended leadership of the Tunisian president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali.

Likewise, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was ousted from office after 30 years in power, the Libyan president, Muammar Gaddafi, 42 years in power, the Burkinabe president, Blaise Compaoré, 27 years in power, the Gambian president, Yahya Jammeh, 22 years in power, the Angolan president, José Eduardo Dos Santos 38 years in power, the Zimbabwean president, Robert Mugabe 30 years in power, the Congolese president, Joseph Kabila 18 years in power, the Algerian president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika 20 years in power and the Sudanese president, Omar al-Bashir 30 years in power. Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* (1984) is an apt portrait of former dictators in Africa, namely Bugaran dictator, Field Marshal Kamini of Uganda as Idi Amin, Central African Republic (Jean-Bedel Bokassa), Zaire (Mobutu Sese Seko) and Equatorial Guinea (Nguema Masie Biyoto).

Power corrupts absolutely, especially when there are no structures to check excesses of public office holders and equip young leaders.

Revolutions alone are insufficient when an ailing system counteracts effective leadership processes. Thus, to survive the "curse" of the "forest" or tame dragons at the corridors of power in Africa, there is a need to mentor leaders with proven vision and integrity. Pointedly, the "dragons" in Tutu's imagination correlate with Soyinka's "giants," all in the category of "wretched heroes, all once princes, all once well-intentioned men" (Moore 93).[12] A cursory look at the Liberian Civil War indicates that geo-ethnic politics, religious sentiments, disregard for the rule of law, external control by international communities, possessive mentality, and murky corruption threaten successive and progressive leadership in Africa. In this regard, Wayetu Moore's artistic simulation of fiction with social realities from a child's viewpoint redirects readers to critically revaluate past political narratives with contemporary realities to learn from former African leaders' errors to chart a desirable future for Africa.

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Notes

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2. Kimberly Wang, "Wayetu Moore on How Love and Liberia Shaped Her Debut Novel." Naira NYC, accessed July 1, 2019, https://nairanyc.com/wayetu-moore-love-memories-liberia-debut-novel/.

3. Wayetu Moore, *The Dragons, The Giant, The Woman – A Memoir* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2020), 58.

4. Brenda Cooper, "Landscapes, Forests and Borders within the West African Global Village," in

5. *Mapping the Sacred: Religion, Geography and Postcolonial Literatures*, eds. Jamie S. Scott and Paul Simpson-Housley, 275-293 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001).

6. Ibid., 12

7. Ibid.

8. Wang, "Wayetu Moore on How Love and Liberia Shaped Her Debut Novel."

9. Vanessa Guignery, "Landscapes Within, Landscapes Without: The Forest and Other Places in

10. Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*," *Études britanniques contemporaines* 47, (2014): 1-25.

11. Moore, *The Dragons, The Giant, The Woman*, 25.

12. Ibid., 36.

13. Ibid., 93.

14. Ibid.