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***A QUESTION OF THE BODY: COLONIAL LEGACIES AND  
POSTCOLONIAL IMAGINARIES OF POWER IN AFRICAN  
LITERARY TEXTS***

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**Umeobi Fredrick C.**

Federal Polytechnic Oko, Anamba State.

**Abstract**

This study examines the representation of corporeal difference as one of the fundamental ideologies on which the power dynamics of colonial and postcolonial polities are based. The analyses in this study are anchored on postcolonial theory with regard to issues such as power, race, centre/margin and decolonisation while the various notions of corporeality discussed here are informed by the works of theorists like Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, Achille Mbembe and Michael Taussig. With textual examples from novels by authors such as Chinua Achebe, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Sony Labou Tansi and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the paper argues that the body is a pertinent starting point for reflection on subjectification given that (apart from its analogical efficiency) it represents the vital entity on which basic considerations of self and other are imagined and refracted in concrete political practices. Though the asymmetries between the colonizer and colonized bodies have undergone transformation in the postcolony, the realities of the postcolonial regimes are still hinged on corporeal differences that make distinctions, however subtle, between bodies with surplus power and those with a deficit of power, depending on their aggregate positionality with regard to the centres of power, especially the State. The body of the potentate becomes the incarnation of this difference, hence making it a frequent creative topos. This study comes to the conclusion that the African novel constitutes a central and critical locus in the debate of the decolonisation of the mind and the deconstruction of epistemological grounds of difference. This is carried out through a variety of narrative structures, one of the most effective of which is the postcolonial dictatorship novel form.

**Key words:** African, body, power, subject, postcolonial, hegemony, subversion.

**INTRODUCTION**

The background of colonial and postcolonial history of the continent, African literature has been, to a certain extent, an exposition and interpolation of the discourses of a corporeal

difference used by various power regimes to deny the humanity and rights of certain racial and political subjects and to justify violence against them. While the subject body under the colonial regime was objectified through racial epistemologies of difference that questioned its very humanness, the postcolonial dictatorial

regimes, with their discourses of righting the wrongs of colonialism, have ended up consigning crosssections of the society to second order citizenship, limiting their space of civic participation and access to the commonwealth. However, while colonialist discourses focus on the undeveloped or underdeveloped nature of the subject body, postcolonial articulations of difference are mostly concentrated on the “exceptional body” of the ruler or potentate, a supposed topos of national unity, collective memory, and national redemption. It is this very mythology of the potentate’s body that turns the latter into a creative motif in postcolonial dictatorship novels that divest it of its difference, reinstating its worldliness and equality with subject bodies. This study examines the modes through which creative representations in Africa have engaged with discourses of the corporeal difference along the various historical transformations in political power in Africa.

### **Corporeality: Between metaphoricity and vitality**

The body is a key representational medium in art in general and in literature in particular. Its vitality and symbolic depth make it an efficient in-road into several concepts and practices in popular culture, cultural studies, anthropology, etc. Every form of knowledge strives to articulate itself as an internally coherent organism, a body. Far from being a metaphor, the body subtends our very thinking processes and intervenes in our conceptual and practical

knowledge of the self in relation (as well as in opposition) to the other.

In this regard, the 19th century German philosopher, Nietzsche emphatically affirms that even philosophy, a discipline that claims to be founded on immaterial reflection and pure logic, is indeed induced by the “the symptoms of the body, of its success or failure, its fullness, power and high-handedness in history, or of its frustrations, fatigues, impoverishments, its premonitions of the end, its will to an end” (2001). One of the recurrent metaphors through which power is imagined and narrated in postcolonial African literary texts is the body metaphor. The body is a fundamental trope in the imagination of cultural, socio-economic and political power. As a matter of distributing resources, political systems gauge the aggregate effect of policy choices on the various bodies within their polity based on tacit (and mostly unavowed) order of priority. The question of power relationship can thus be understood as the relationship between bodies, their strengths and frailties; their contextual myths and stereotypes; their pleasures and pains; their honour and shame; their sustenance and diminution, etc.

Underlining the multidimensionality of the body, Slattery (2000) underscores that “what is unique about the body in literature that sets it apart from our consciously lived everyday body” is that “it offers a way of seeing in and through it to other dimensions of human experience”. By implication, the body can simultaneously stand for itself and for something else, efficiently encoding both a

vitalistic and a symbolic dimension. The metaphoric density of the body makes it apt in retracing genealogies of power relations. With regard to the body as a marker of historical trajectories of power disequilibrium, Foucault affirms that:

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body (Rabinow, 1984).

It is worth noting that, by "destruction of the body", what is meant is not necessarily the physical annihilation of the body per se, but rather its objectifying inscription into various discourses and metaphors of power and difference. The reflections and representations of different bodies can lead to an understanding of power relations in different historical contexts. The use of the body metaphor here takes stock of the complexity of the body in presenting domination/subjugation without essentialising subjective experiences. In the same way, the body particularises hegemonic enactments in a specific context while reminding us of the relative generality of such practices of objectification. This explains why in the discussion that follows, the researcher tries not to essentialize the practices of

corporeal differences as limited to the African colonial subject, but rather to establish their connexion with other colonial and postcolonial corporeal regimes in other spaces. The Latin American experience thus becomes interesting connecting points as can be seen from my recourse to the works of Michel de Certeau and Michael Taussig, scholars who have written on corporeality in that part of the world with regard to the colonial and postcolonial ideologies of power.

### **Colonial encounters and the discourses of corporeal differences**

Contemporary postcolonial texts are underlined by memories of the unequal bodies of the colonial encounters. In order to explore the metaphors of colonial power, it is important to retrace the process of colonization not in its actuality or point of crystallization, but in its latent form of the idea of colonialism. In this regard, artistic representations of colonialism have also focused on the colonial desire, that is, the conception of the colonial space by the colonial force as a *terra nullus* that needed to be effectively occupied<sup>3</sup> by the colonial "centre". In his article on the writing of history published in 1975, the French cultural critic de Certeau presents a painting on Amerigo Vespucci that can appropriately serve as a starting point to the discussion in this study. Through a painting that depicts the colonization of Latin America, undoubtedly applicable to colonial conquests in Africa, Amerigo Vespucci, the Italian male "discoverer" arrives on the colonial territory motivated by the desire and "armed" with the

mind-set to control. With a complex paraphernalia of “weapons of civilization” intricately depicted by the ambiguous image of a spear at the tip of which is affixed the sacrosanct cross, the colonizer imagines the colonial territory<sup>1</sup> as a primeval, vestal and exotic space that requires his civilizing mission. The other’s space is represented by a nude woman, an “unnamed presence of difference” on which the conqueror “will write the body of the other and trace on it his own story”<sup>2</sup> (de Certeau, 1975). It is on the space of the other’s body that the male colonizer will engrave the seal of his power. The relationship between space and body was taken to be a natural aspect of the other’s being; whereas, Struver (2004) argues that such a relation should be considered as a construct. The preceding imagination of the other’s space-body sets the scene for the colonial encounter that would later inform the metaphorical representation of power in the colony and postcolony.

The example earlier mentioned betrays a complex imagination of the other’s body in the epistemological paradigm of the colonizing European mind. Mbembe (2001) argue that the colonial imagination of the other’s body is marked by a sense of the *thereness* of the native subject. Mbembe (2001) qualifies this *thereness* in reference to Hegelian discourse whereby something exists just because it is perceptible as an “object”. The “fact of its being” is its mere immediacy, bearing “no definite finality” prior to the advent of the coloniser (Mbembe, 2001). The subject’s body and the space on which it is

located bears no meaning and the colonizer claims the divinely ordained mission to bring it into the fold of history and modernity. Vespucci’s portrait represents how the colonizer imagines himself as endowed with the priority to speak for the other, to define his mission in reaction to the other and, most importantly, to invest the other’s body with epistemic difference. This premise of difference would characterize the manner in which the body of the native is eventually *thingified* and *objectified* under the exigencies of colonial “modernity” and “civilization”. Like every form of desire, the colonial desire was a mixture of fantasy and extrapolation of the colonizer who came to believe that the native subject indispensably needed his civilization and protection. Bhabha aptly captures this false premise of colonialist mentality when he insinuates that:

The colonized population is then deemed to be both the cause and effect of the system, imprisoned in the cycle of interpretation. What is visible is the necessity of such rule which is justified by those moralistic and normative ideologies of amelioration recognized as the Civilizing Mission or the White Man’s Burden (1994).

The colonizer takes upon himself the moral responsibility of determining the needs of the colonized subject and using his arms of “civilization” to come to the latter’s rescue.

Along this trajectory of representation, colonization came to symbolize “the loss for agency and free will” (Gikandi, 2004) of the native subject since his existence was a function of the representation of the colonial master. In addressing the colonial experience and its influence on creative representations of power, Ngate (2007) posits that the “colonizers had no trouble at all making the colonized invisible, erasing them as subjects of any kind of meaningful discourses”. It is from the position of “invisibility” that postcolonial literature has sought to question successive regimes of power and control over the subject’s body.

Whatever the colonial master represented himself, some of the colonized communities internalized the colonial encounter in their collective memory. Internalisation did not however exclude the subject’s tactics of subversion and contestation as can be seen from the proliferation of legend, myths, folklore, fables, popular ballads, proverbs, anecdotes, idioms, rumours,<sup>3</sup> etc. that characterise subject representation of colonial encounters in Africa. The colonial encounter, the fate of colonizer/colonized bodies and experiences of dispossession became embedded in riddles, proverbs and folktales, precursors of postcolonial forms of creative writing. In most cases, material and spiritual dis-possession were inseparable as represented in narratives that bring to bear different perceptions of the bodies of the self and other.

In an allegorical folktale published in 1961, Kenyatta represents the question of presumed

bodily difference of the coloniser/colonized through the encounter between the farmer and the elephant and how the latter came to occupy the former’s space. Initially, the peasant peacefully inhabits the space of his small hut until a violent storm begins to blow outside. The desperate elephant comes to plead for space to rest its trunk given that the hut cannot accommodate the entire body. After prior hesitation, the man consents to the apparently sincere plea of the elephant. The elephant starts by pushing its trunk inside the hut, but slowly gets its whole body in. At the end, he flings the man out in the rain and comfortably occupies his space with its gigantic body. With sheer impunity, the elephant tells the man that since “...your skin is harder than mine”, and as “there is not enough room for both of us, you can afford to remain in the rain while I am protecting my delicate skin from the hailstorm” (p. 48). In despair, the peasant reports the case to the Jungle Court. In the caricatural court session that follows, the defence of the elephant is a caricature of colonial justice, revealing presumptions of corporeal knowledge as it underlies colonial governmentality.

Firstly, the Jungle lords recognize the elephant’s right and *duty* to develop the *empty* space for the benefit of the man. Secondly, the body of the elephant deserves priority over that of the man who has to suffer in the rain. Thirdly, in declaring that the elephant’s occupation of the space is for the subsequent benefit of the man, the lion and other members of the Jungle pledge to have reflected on their judgment with



a high sense of “objectivity”. The elephant’s version of the situation is trusted by the other members of the court who consider it as objective while that of the poor man’s plea is received with ridicule as “emotional” and “subjective”. The jury constitutes itself as impartial men “chosen by God to look after the interests of races less adequately endowed with teeth.” (p. 49). The poor farmer nurses a sense of grief and grudge due to lack of representation and looks forward to the moment when he shall rightfully re-occupy the space of which cupid and brutal capitalist power has deprived him. The image of the powerful elephant and the helpless man is quite appropriate, for it brings out the power disequilibrium between the occupier and the dispossessed subject. In spite of the activities of the peasant, his space is perceived as an empty space that needs to be put in motion through capitalist activity which only the colonizer can affect. However, one can notice that the story deconstructs the assimilation of the native subject to the animal state and it is instead the colonizers that are portrayed as acting under Jungle law.

This image aptly portrays the question of colonial conquest in Africa as a story of bodies marked by inequality and difference. The corporeal representational codes employed by Kenyatta are characteristic of popular imaginaries of colonial power in many parts of Africa. In the Congo for example, the image of the colonial State was popularized through the myth of the Bula Matari - the crusher of big rocks - represented in the person of Henry

Morton Stanley sent by the Belgian monarch Leopold II to sign colonising treaties in the Congo under the banner of the International Association of the Congo (IAC). The image of Bula Matari and its sheer brutality became a common imagery of the colonial State in Africa as a whole<sup>4</sup>. Though Henry Morton Stanley, the so-called Bula Matari, constructed bridges, roads, railways and other public structures, these came at the cost of immense human sacrifice by subject bodies many of whom died from forced labour.

Young (1994) purports that “Bula Matari, crusher of rocks, managed in a short time to assert a powerful hold on subject society and to smash its resistance...No social contract other than conquest bound its subjects to its rule” (p. 139). The colonial State became imagined in the myth of Bula Matari as a gigantic body that sweeps everything under its path with brutality and whose authority went unquestioned. The desire and impulse to conquer, to possess and to dominate the other’s corporal space, glossed over as the prerogative to “protect”, constitutes the underlying imaginary of (post)colonial domination. However, in spite of the brutality of Bula Matari, colonial governance in the Belgian Congo sought to present itself as a gentle loving colonial father protecting the interests of the weak infant, the colonial subject. Through this logic, colonial territories were designated and denoted as “protectorates”. According to this paternalistic approach, the native was considered as an inchoate that needed to be protected by the father/mother

figure of the colonial master against his “propensity for suicide” and self-annihilation” (Fanon, 1963). Apart from its paternalistic dimension, colonialist power also operated on an androgynous imaginary that combines both the mother and father figures, exploiting the attributes of both figures. In his characteristic burlesque mood, Rabelais’ Pantagruel asserts that:

Conquered nations are new-born babes; as such they must be given suck, they must be rocked, fondled and amused. Like new-planted trees, they must be supported, propped up, protected from all tempests, injuries and calamities. Like convalescents from lengthy illness, they must be nursed, coddled and cherished (Bakhtin, 1984). The prerogative to protect the inchoate “other” usurps the analogy of “family” to represents and otherwise brutal imperial enterprise. Colonialism thus represents itself as an act of benevolence (Said, 1994). However, this selfnarrative of colonisers is deconstructed by postcolonial writers that underline the self-contradictions of the colonial system in relation to the disparity between discourse and practice. This comes out starkly in the text of the Senegalese novelist Kane (1995). He represents the various methods that the colonial master used to ascertain total subjugation in the colonial process as a contradiction of “reason” and “objectivity” through which colonial governmentality claims to function. Kane’s text depicts the bewilderment of the indigenous communities in the face of French colonial invasion. The colonial experience is described

as a surreptitious event that leaves the captured native in a state of frenzy:

Those who did not have any history were pitched against those who carried the world on their shoulders [...]. The known world was enriched by a birth that took place in mud and blood).

In effect, while it is clear that the colonizing process was accomplished through a mixture of brute force and guile, this might take precedence over right. When peaceful means were used in some circumstances, this was always done in the backdrop of a threat of force. The *modus operandi* of the colonial master is underlined by the arbitrary use of force given that the native subject did not represent any legal personality by virtue of his race and his position in the power matrix. The end justified the means - native subject bodies were sequestered, divided and classified into categories:

However, the end result was the same, everywhere. Those that fought back and those that surrendered, those that complied and those that stood their grounds all found themselves at the end of it numbered, divided, classified, labelled, conscripted and administered. The colonial administration mapped the local territorial sphere according to a colonial teleology of corporeal difference. Kane’s narrator underlines the ambivalence of colonial conquest by stating that those who killed without mercy also had the power to heal. This

refers to the effectiveness of the medical services provided by the colonial administration.

In Kane's text, *La Grande Royale*, the king's elder sister and a much respectable figure in the community, argues that Samba Diallo needs to go to the Whiteman's school so as to learn his secret, especially that of defeating the weak without necessarily being right. Thus, the colonial logic was based on a Darwinist survival of the fittest that offered no room for ethical considerations in human relationship.

In general terms, the responsibility of African authors has been to represent the state of the subject body under regimes of control and governmentality. Many of them used the novel, amidst other artistic forms like poetry and theatre to depict and question the inhumane practices and realities of colonial dispossession. Their texts are characterized by the intention to probe into the past of the community, to re-examine communal ethos and most importantly to examine the impact of historical conditions on the present of the social body (*le corps social*) and to provide a vision for the future. Achebe (1964) captures the obligation of African authors in mapping the trajectories of the African social body:

There is a saying in Ibo that a man who can't tell where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body. The writer can tell the people where the rain began to beat them. After all the novelist's duty is not to beat this morning's headline in topicality, it is to explore in depth the human condition. In Africa

he cannot perform this task unless he has a proper sense of history (p. 159).

In spite of their different modes of inscriptions and representations, many African novels focus on communal dilemmas and anxieties resulting from the African peoples' past and how it impacted their sense of being and their relation amongst themselves and with the rest of the world. Questions of history and memory become very primordial in African literature given that the past and the present are perceived as enmeshed in highly complex ways. For the novel to comprehensively articulate a vision for the future, the dynamics, complexity and entanglements of the past and present need to be adequately grasped. The African authors' quest for the meaning of history is not a parochial and inward-looking endeavour. Rather, it is inscribed within an interrogative imagination of the human condition and the intersection of global relations of power and hegemony. The literary practices of African authors in relation to the body and other tropes, though situated in African contexts, also take cognizance of the body's universal dimension.

### **“Redressing” the body of the colonized subject**

In a general sense, the colonial enterprise defined itself as a preparatory process, a time of transition whose outcome would be redemptive to the native subjects, considered incapable of autonomous existence and selfrealization. In Africa, while the French, through the policy of



assimilation sought to turn the colonized into a French man in black skin, the British colonial administrative policy of indirect rule was conceived as transitory and transformational, the final outcome of which would be the formation of self-government. The implication that political independence was an intended culmination of colonial policy had “formerly characterized British rather than French colonial policy” (Hargreaves, 1995). This fact was to play an important role in the nature of postindependence relationships between the former colonial master and the neo-colony.

The conditions of colonial bondage began to loosen after the Second World War as colonial governments were pressured into making consistent concessions towards the granting of self-determination to the colonized societies. More so, the period between the end of the Second World War and the early sixties in particular coincided with other revolutionary movements elsewhere in the world<sup>5</sup> as countries that were under direct or indirect colonialism rose up against forces of hegemony and imperialism. Though the forces that fought for independence were undermined by internal factions and contestations, there was a certain sense of

“moral harmony” (Hargreaves, 1995) in the colonies based on the belief in the justness of the cause. The process of decolonization, the gradual or sudden formal withdrawal of colonial tutelage from their hitherto colonial

“protectorates” became perceived as a paradigmatic process of transformation. From whatever perspective, the years preceding independence were years of great expectations in the African colonies.

In many cases, the hope and promise of redemption took shape ironically amidst rather brutal responses to colonial protests that led to many deaths and lack of organizational resources on the side of the anticolonial movements. But these difficulties did not substantially impede the momentum of liberation and the road to selfdetermination. The incarceration of some nationalist leaders only had the boomerang effect of mythologizing their image amongst the masses that never lost sight of the promise of newness. In other words, the resilient body of the would-be leader of the new nation commanded popular identification as a crystallization of hope for entire communities.

What became evident in most countries in the years of disillusionment was that African nationalism was primarily a struggle against colonialism, not a movement for or toward anything, and its proponents had a better idea of “what they wanted to remove than of what they wanted to replace with it” (Wright, 1997). Political representation and citizens’ sense of belonging became a major question in the newly independent States. Instead of a framework of citizens’ representation that guaranteed a sense of belonging, the State was perceived as a marginalizing structure taken hostage by a set of rent-seeking politicians. The

magic of the revolutionary leader's body, a prior image of resistance and collective spirit, later on was turned into the incarnation of a mythical conception of leadership by those in positions of power, repressing contesting voices and impeding a democratic conception of political space. Achebe captures the new dispensation through the triangular images of the house, body and rain to vividly portray the manner in which the political elite domesticated the crucial moment of transformation in Africa. In Achebe's 1966 novel, the narrator, Odili states that:

The trouble with our new nation as I saw it then lying on the bed was that none of us had been indoors enough to be able to say, „to hell with it“. We had all been in the rain until yesterday. Then a handful of us – the smart and the lucky but hardly ever the best – had scrambled for the one shelter our former rulers left and had taken it over and barricaded themselves in. And from within they sought to persuade the rest through numerous loudspeakers that the first phase of the struggle had been won and that the next phase – the extension of the house – was even more important and called for new and original tactics; it required that all arguments should cease and the whole people speak with one voice and that any more dissent and argument outside the door of the shelter would subvert and bring down the whole house (p. 37).

Thus, independence did not symbolize considerable change but rather the replacement of one class of oppressors by another, with its

novel practices of exclusion. The image of the body comes out as a paradigmatic metaphor in Achebe's representation of exclusion. While the bodies of the powerful claim physical and epistemic spaces, the bodies of the subject are battered by the rains. The postcolonial subject, as in Kenyatta's folktale, is made to face the harshness of the environment even when the State, represented as a supposedly all-inclusive house, has been won from the colonial master amidst hope of change and transformation.

In this situation, there recurs the internalization of "corporal" difference and binary reality reminiscent of the colonizer/colonized relationship. The heritage of the colonial masters is taken hostage by a new set of rulers who demand sacrifices from the people while they are impudently reaping the benefits of the "privatized" national shelter. The people are thereby continually tantalized about a prospective transformation – "the extension of the house". "Tomorrow" as an elusive time-line of the birth of "something new" becomes a problematic temporality, representing deferred expectations. It is therefore on the basis of the impartiality with which the heritage of the "house" (a metaphor of State power) has been misappropriated in the postcolony that concepts like nation-building and patriotism are greeted with scepticism and cynicism amongst many postcolonial subjects. The referential cohesion between State, nation, leader and people are thus problematized. The bodies that make up the nation are thus placed on an aggregate paradigm of privilege and deprivation, comfort and imprisonment,

depending on the location of the individual in relation to the power centre.

In Tansi's work (1983), Dadou, an unjustly imprisoned school teacher, reflects on the relationship of his state of imprisonment with the liberty enjoyed by the powerful "others", especially those who use their political connections to make others undergo undue suffering.

Power and influence are thus portrayed through the metaphor of unequal bodies, bodies of power being able to constrain and limit the freedom of the less powerful

"others". Politics is turned into a zero sum game whereby those who contest the regime are detained and imprisoned under horrendous and unbearable conditions in order that the state barons can prey in tranquillity on public resources.

The condition of bodies that cannot share a common political space runs counter to the imagination of ethics and the body in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. In an article published in 2011, Altez-Abela asserts that Levinas' ethics on the body is based on the ethics of mutual complementarity, the imperative of the body of the self to that of the other in a kind of transcendental coexistence.

The zero-sum vision of power thus contravenes the Levinasian imagination of the body as what is there for the other, not as an entity to be possessed and subjectified, but as a topos that generates an interpersonal ethical

obligation. At the same time as Tansi's body in captivity is a symbol, it also captures the material bodily pain, underlying what Coole refers to as the body's location within the "material and affective worlds" wherein the flesh feels the onslaught of violence "with raw immediacy" (2005).

### **Phallic virility and power: Between colonial conquest and postcolonial autocracy**

Power in the postcolony, as in the image of the colonial empire before it discussed in the first part of this article, has often been represented in both literary texts and popular culture as phallic conquest. Colonial enterprise was a geographical and racial variable of a form of domination that characterizes male practice of power over the female and the environment. This subconscious basis of power underlies the postcolonial State, created on the myths of the invincible and virile founding father, the Head of State, the Father of the Nation, Father of independence, etc. Subjects of the new nation are therefore supposed to go through the same convalescence and tendering process enjoyed/endured by a newly planted tree and a new-born baby by the *initial agent* that wills it into being. Within the pseudo-cultural mind-set of family conviviality with its legitimizing gloss of

"protection" of the "weak" by the "strong" the father figure seeks to evade accountability to those he governs.

In his seminal work published in 1997, Taussig analyses the phenomenal

“martyrology” of the founding figure of the State in postcolonial dictatorial regimes. This is essentially based on the engrafting of the discourse of anti-colonial struggle in such a way that the liberty of the people is literally folded into the corporeal palimpsest of the potentate. The body of the potentate, even though it undergoes the common metabolic processes of a normal body, becomes the substance of the “mystical interior of the State, the mist that surrounds its being”. In a way, we can talk of the potentate's two bodies: the official body encumbered with discourses of power, sacrifice and redemption and the normal body that responds to the common forces of nature. In comparing the human and baseness of the potentate's body with the mythical level to which it is elevated as an incarnation of the spirit of a quasi-Hegelian spirit of history, Taussig remarks that:

Here where the body becomes the stage of nothingness upon which the great drama of stately forms can parade alongside rampant impulses and aborted significations, where disembodiment gives way to other embodiments secreting magic force, here is the scene of the “gateway”, the portal, serene in the necessity of its *mission impossible* (1997, p. 39)

The narrative of the martial ingenuity of the anticolonialist nationalists is imprinted on the presidential body that demands both the homage paid to a martyr and the adulation of miraculous survivor. It is a dead-living as well as a private-public body, the site or the centre

of “the circulation of the ghostly image of the Nation-State” and a space for the celebration of its “apocalyptic triumphalism”. This view rejoins the scathing attack made by Tansi who states that:

The word “founding father” carried with it a magical halo that tragically suggested the idea of a shameless founding father endowed with patriotic, national, and procreative powers; powers that in turn carry a hint of the notion of the fatherland as the product of an act of birthing, in some infamous tower, cut off from reality, as if nations can emerge from a baker's oven. (2007).

This critique underlines the dialectical relations in societies that bring about historical changes as opposed to conceiving history's movement as the result of acts of singular individuals. In this passage, the image of the potentate's body as an androgynous and autoreproductive body is underlined. In line with Sloterdijk's conception of spaces, the potentate's body becomes a Thanatop (or Theotop/Ikonotop), a body-space of

“revelation of ancestors, the dead, the spirit and the gods of the group, offering to this group a semiological connection, a gateway for the manifestations of the „beyond”” (Rouanet, 2011). In this logic, the Christlike sacrificial body of the potentate represents the nadir of pain and suffering, but also the condition *sine qua non* for the redemption of the nation. Thus, this ideologized poesis of the potentate becomes a recurrent raw material in

postcolonial dictatorship novels which seek to bring the body back to the world, underlining its prosaic and mundane dimension as opposed to its ideological conversion into a mythical devotional site of national redemption.

### **Deconstructing the redemptive body of the potentate**

The exceptional character of the “Father of the Nation” image in postcolonial political sphere has been a source of inspiration to African novelists. In this section, the researcher considers the novel, *Wizard of the Crow* (2006) by the Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong’o as an exemplary case. Ngugi’s text is a burlesque representation of a dictatorial regime that is narrated according to the Biblical genotext. His narrative traps the President of the fictional Republic of Aburiria, simply referred to as The Ruler, in his own illusion of power. The text deconstructs the redemptive image which the Ruler claims to re-present and re-situates him within the worldly context to which he belongs. With what appears to be a mixture of Beckettian theatre of the absurd and

Rabelaisian burlesque novel, Ngugi’s narrative deconstructs the Judeo-Christian imagery which the Ruler attempts to immitate. After „conquering“ the force of gravity like Jesus Christ, the Ruler’s body is unable to go beyond the ceiling in his final act of “ascension”. *Wizard of the Crow* and the Bible therefore follow the same genotext but respond to rather different intentionalities as can be seen from the

end of the two stories. The Biblical version symbolizes the promise of redemption and an imminent Second coming of Christ:

He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee”, they said “Why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Act 1, pp. 9-11)

On the other hand, the Ruler’s ascension is framed within a worldly context, an expression of absurdist aspirations of a worldly leader. The Ruler’s divine pretensions are limited by the materiality of his worldly body:

Tajirika looked up at the ceiling and his jaw fell; he took a step backward for a clearer view. He could not believe his eyes. The Ruler’s legs hung in the air, his head touching the ceiling and his whole body gently swaying.

“Don’t just stand there with your mouth open – get me down,” the Ruler told him [...] The Ruler’s body, now more passive than ever, seemed impossibly light; only the ceiling prevented him from floating away. Tajirika stood on the chair and grasped at the Ruler’s feet, but no matter how often he did, the Ruler would rise again like a balloon (WC, p. 650).



Instead of the eleven disciples who stand in awe at the ascending Christ as cited below, in Ngugi's parodic ascension scenery, it is the corrupt character of Tajirika, the epitome of corruption and mundane graft who beholds the entrapped body of the president. This form of de-narrating the body of the ruler and re-instating its worldliness can be aligned with Bakhtin's views with regard to burlesque representations of the body:

Things are tested and re-evaluated in the dimensions of laughter, which has defeated fear and gloomy seriousness. This is why the material bodily lower scrotum is needed, for it gaily and simultaneously materializes and unburdens. It liberates objects from illusions of sublimation inspired by fear (1984, p. 376).

It is through the deconstruction of the myth of the president's body that an egalitarian conception of democratic power can be born. The president's body is divested of its difference that sets it above all other bodies, granting him the prerogative to dehumanize other bodies as belonging to a lower order of existence. Thus, Ngugi's novel, as it is the case with a vast tradition of dictatorship novels spanning across Africa and Latin America, is aimed at deconstructing the premise of corporeal difference of the potentate, one of the greatest myths of difference that have succeeded colonial discourses of difference.

## Conclusion

The main argument of this study is that corporeality provides an elaborate paradigm of representation of the interrelated regimes of subjection in the colony as well as the postcolony. In examining the historical representations of power from the era of colonial encounter to the postindependence era, the body image is most apt in revealing and interrogating the various transformations of discourses of difference that account for power inequality, hegemonic relations and political exclusion. In the colonial encounter and the ensuing colonial regimes, a certain interpretation of racial body difference leads to the signification of the "other's" body. Instead of envisioning new modes of corporeality, independence re-positions the presumptions of corporeal difference, converting the leader's body into an epitome of privileged rights as opposed to subject bodies, essential bodies of unconditional civic obligation and violent exaction. The conception of difference prevents the elevation of the colonial subject into a postcolonial citizen. Thus, more than being a political event, decolonisation proves to be a long-drawn epistemological process of deconstructing not only the premises of colonial difference, but also subverting new paradigms of difference that continues to emerge within postcolonial societies themselves.

For the purpose of this study, the researcher has discussed the potentate's body as one of the dimensions of difference in postcolonial political sphere, which through state ideological and repressive apparatus is projected as the topos of national redemption. It is thus in

reaction to the myth of the potentate's body that sets itself above the citizenry that postcolonial dictatorship novels attempt to inspire alternative epistemological relationship of bodies based on dignity and mutual respect. African creative writing therefore constitutes an important avenue of decolonization, engaging notions of corporeal difference, reasserting the humaneness of subject bodies and interrogating the self-images of hegemonic regimes, colonial and postcolonial alike. With regard to postcolonial dictatorship novel, the tendency has been to employ burlesque, scatological and eschatological aesthetics to deny the order of difference associated with the potentate's body and to re-imagine a more representative political coexistence through corporeal metaphoricality and vitality.

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