



Interpreting The Socio-Cultural Symbols in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Wizard of the Crow and Ben Okri's StarBook

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ABSTRACT

African literary writers use African socio-cultural values and elements in writing African literature. These values and elements help them to restore, recreate, and/or reclaim the long socio-cultural practices and histories of African nations. One of these is the socio-cultural symbolic elements that epitomize nationhood or peoplehood. The main purpose of this paper is to investigate the African nations' socio-cultural and political experiences by interpreting culturally significant novels, which are written by national-oriented writers. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Wizard of the Crow from Eastern Africa and Ben Okri's Starbook from Western Africa are purposively selected based on their culturally symbolic features they employ. Extractions are included to make the interpretation textually evident. From the interpretation, we can conclude that both Ngugi and Okri depend on their respective community's culturally symbolic elements to retrieve and reclaim the African nation's culture and history. In this regard, birds, insects, and ogres are the most important creatures that are represented in the novels to signify the socio-cultural meanings that the respective country's culture and tradition provide to them. Similarly, they use the novels to depict the national socio-political predicaments. They also signpost the way out of the troubles of the African nations. They specifically indicate that Africans' wit and wisdom need to be reconsidered for their socio-political healing.

Keywords: socio-cultural symbols; African wisdom; African nation; African literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

African literature often confines itself to its socio-cultural milieu. It reveals that African culture has rich national resources. Therefore, the connection between African literature and African cultures is so strong because African cultural elements are abundantly reflected in African literature.

As has often been remarked, the most influential African writers have been committed to developing a narrative form that is adequate to the historical and cultural complexities of postcolonial black Africa. The success of these writers in fashioning creative ways of elucidating Africa's experience in the modern world serves to make the continent the subject, rather than the object, of literary representation and philosophical knowledge (Gikandi, 2003, p.254).

The following are some key ways in which African cultural elements are reflected in the literature of the continent.

First, many African oral traditions are included in African literary works, including folktales, myths, legends, and proverbs (Garuba, 2003; Gikandi, 2003). These influence the literary tradition of the continent. For example, the works of Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Wole Soyinka are influenced by the rich oral storytelling traditions of Igbo, Gikuyu, and Yoruba communities respectively.

Second, African literature frequently includes the spiritual and religious beliefs of the continent (Garuba, 2003). These show the central role of spirituality in many African cultures. Authors like Amos Tutuola and Buchi Emecheta have incorporated the Yoruba and Igbo belief systems into their narratives.

Third, The complex socio-political and historical realities of the African continent, including themes of colonialism, nationalism, liberation battles, and post-colonial experiences, are frequently reflected in African literature. Authors engage with these subjects by drawing on cultural traditions and lived experiences of the continent to create narratives that appeal to the African audience. In this regard, Ousmane Sembène and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o are among the influential writers.

Fourth, African authors also allude extensively to culturally significant symbols, motifs, and imagery to convey deeper meanings and cultural significance. Accordingly, animals, natural elements, and cultural artifacts are used as symbolic elements to build the basis of African nations' literature. For example, Amos Tutuola's takes culturally symbolic elements from Yoruba traditional beliefs to write "The Palm-Wine Drinkard". Similarly, Wole Soyinka uses the masking, rituals, and chants of the Yoruba culture in his plays to reflect themes of identity, myth, and tradition.

In the post-colonial literature of Africa, the allegorical form of writing is used as a method of recuperating the past cultural resources, subjugated by the colonizers, to reconceptualize and reinterpret it in the present and at the same time to claim Africa's history and culture. As observed by Slemmon (1988, p.157), "There has been a resurgence in allegorical writing in recent years, and in my view, the most interesting examples of it are coming out of postcolonial cultures." In this regard, a certain cultural society could have symbols that help them to describe and express their culture and beliefs. These kinds of symbols are said to be socio-cultural symbols, providing an

“insight into a culture and a tool with which to further probe various cultural beliefs and practices” (Fetterman, 1998, p. 28).

Socio-cultural symbols could also have national meanings. As a result, they have national significance because the national situation of a country can be revealed through them. These Socio-cultural symbols are derived from the long-lived tradition of the people, and they represent the nation of the people.

A cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements is defined as the epitome of their peoplehood.... symbolic elements that may provide a sense of ethnic belonging. Examples of such symbolic elements are kinship patterns, physical contiguity, religious affiliation, language or dialect forms, tribal affiliation, nationality, physical features, cultural values, and cultural practices such as art, literature, and music. Various combinations of these elements ('one or more') may be privileged at different times and places to provide a sense of ethnicity (Ashcroft, 2000, p. 78).

In this regard, African literary writers have used these culturally significant symbolic elements to enrich their literary productions with multifaceted meanings. At the same time, they have used them to represent the national resource to a larger audience and to reflect the national culture and theme. Xavier (1999,p.341) also strengthens this point by saying, “Together with economic and institutional support, the nation is produced by narration and other forms of representation, implying a particular blending of historical ground and mythic accounts of past experiences”

Literature that reflects the national culture can be categorized under the rubric of national literature because the cultural conditions of a particular nation are represented and revealed (Jameson, 1986). Hence, in modern African literary writing, writers have been mostly preoccupied with African tradition to meet their literary aim of reinstating the African socio-cultural history. For example, influential writers, like Ben Okri, Chinua Achebe, and Ngugi wa Thiong’o are known to deal with the African socio-cultural conditions in their novels. These authors are renowned to be post-colonial African writers. They have produced influential and proliferated works for African literature, which significantly reveal the socio-political history of the post-colonial African nations. In this instance, Ngugi’s novels like *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Petals of Blood* (1977), and *Devil on the Cross* (1982), and Okri’s novels like *The Famished Road* (1991), *Astonishing the Gods* (1995) and *Dangerous Love* (1996) can be worthily mentioned.

Furthermore, African literature can be considered as a post-colonial discourse that valorizes a body of critical thinking and polemics against the metropolis's ideological, political, and socio-cultural views towards the colonies. Therefore, it has brought different stylistic or technical approaches and thematic issues to extend its resistance and/or reactions against this Eurocentric assumption and its biased representation in literary expression and discourse during colonialism.

Allegorical writing is one of these strategies that post-colonial writers use for similar purposes. "Some of the most remarkable opportunities for literary allegory in the late twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century come from writers from countries that were once subject to direct European colonization." (Copeland & Struck, 2010, p. 274).

National allegory, as termed by Fredric Jameson (1986), plays its role in raising post-colonial consciousness in the psychological and physical liberties of the colonies in addition to exploring and platforming Africa's socio-political situations. In short, for resistance against Euro-centrism and developing consciousness about Africa, the post-colonial allegorical form of writing, or National allegory, is one of the mechanisms by which post-colonial writers and critics polemically contest the imperial discourses, and show the post-independent society's predicaments. Ben Okri and Ngugi wa Thiong'o are worthily mentioned in this instance.

Here, national allegory entails the symbolic narrative of post-colonial prose. The story of a novel in post-colonial Africa can be narrated symbolically. Symbolic narration implies the technique of telling the story of a novel by representing one character, object, thing, or an event for another historical figure, object, thing, or a historical event that happened in reality in the historical movement of Africa. Alternatively, it is a narrative to be read for its metaphoric referents narrating one story often explicitly, there is also another embedded narration, which is implicit. As Xavier (1999) points out, intentional encoding of the national experience through the narrative process is a recurring fact in third-world literature. This form of writing has its peculiar features in post-colonial African literature in that it focuses on the socio-cultural, political, and historical conditions of the post-colonial nation-states. This provides knowledge about society and their predicament/or experiences. It is also an important device for revisiting and revising the past socio-political matrix of the continent.

We have tried to examine studies related to this theme across different bodies of literature. However, to our knowledge, there does not seem to exist a comprehensive and exhaustive treatment of the use of socio-cultural symbols against the concept of national allegory in contemporary Anglophone African novels. The conditions of post-colonial nation-states can be understood from the implications of their socio-cultural symbols by the lenses or/views of national allegory.

Thus, the present authors are motivated to explore different socio-political experiences that post-independent African nations have faced by interpreting the socio-cultural symbolic elements that are used in prose fiction, particularly novels. The novels selected for this study, *Wizard of the Crow* (Nugugi wa Thiongo, 2006) and *Starbook* (Ben Okri, 2007) are later works of the writers. They have not gotten much accessibility from this perspective for researchers. These authors seize cultural symbolic views to see how African literary writers reinstate the African socio-cultural history and define African literature.

2. METHODS

The study was designed to systematically analyze literary pieces from the contemporary postcolonial novels of Africa. It was primarily intended to interpret the reflection and implication of socio-cultural symbols in literary works. Therefore, we employ textual analysis as our research method. First, the texts were purposively selected based on the presence of the socio-cultural symbolic elements and the writers' literary background. The presence of these elements was identified through the following important features:

First, parabolic characterization was deployed in allegorical novels. In the second stage of African literature, the primary purpose of the writing is teaching moral lessons or shaping the human conscience (Webb, 1978). Hence, moralizing tales like parables and fables are component elements of African fiction. Moreover, in parabolic characterization, the traits of characters can be identified by their moral position. This kind of narration includes the naming process of a character. This can again be transferred to depict the level of moral corruption in the post-independent society.

The allegorical novel was also identified by the appearance of related literary devices (like symbolism, metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, and personification). It usually employs figurative language to create vivid imagery and to deepen insightful meanings and perspectives.

The allusion of the past or the making of cross-reference of cultural, historical, and religious contexts is another feature of the allegorical novel. "In the close web of allusion and cultural cross-

reference that forms the fabric of the text, the names even of the guests at the final dinner (a thinly-disguised vegetation ceremony) have deep symbolic significance.” (Fletcher, 2021, p.9). Therefore, there are specific events, movements, or ideologies that inspire writers. These embrace the historical and cultural contexts wherein they have lived and experienced.

Accordingly, a close reading of the novels, *Wizard of the Crow* and *Starbook* was conducted. The literary biographies of the authors whose works employ the African socio-cultural temperament are important here because the main distinguished role of African literature is reclaiming the continent's socio-cultural and political climate. In this regard, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ben Okri, who were selected for this study, are renowned post-colonial African writers. They have produced influential and proliferated works for African literature, which significantly reveal the history of modern African literature. They are listed under the rubric of African great writers who uphold African cultural, economic, political, and psychological predicaments.

Next, analytical interpretation of the content of the novels is conducted by paying attention to the socio-cultural symbolic elements employed in them. Comparative Analysis is made to compare the socio-cultural symbols in *Wizard of the Crow* and *Starbook* to identify similarities and differences between them. This helped to explore how these symbols reflect or comment on the socio-cultural contexts in which the novels were written.

For the study of socio-cultural symbolic elements, 'national allegory' is an important window of perspective because it gives a powerful way to interpret the cultural symbols represented in literary texts. As mentioned earlier, approaching African literary texts through the lens of national allegory helps us to uncover the deeper socio-cultural symbolic meanings of the society whose sociocultural contexts are reflected in the texts. Therefore, we believe that national allegory, which is a new status of allegory since the late 20th century, has been a viable theoretical perspective for the nuanced understanding of the national culture, identity, and oppression of African nations from which the texts are selected for this particular interpretation. In this regard, Xavier (1999,p.333) observes that “allegory has acquired its preeminence in criticism because the accumulation of historical experience related to cultural shock, slavery, repression, and violence has shown its central role in the interaction of different cultural systems”.

Although the concept of ‘*national allegory*’ emerged in the late 20th century, it has continued to be used as a vibrant and relevant theoretical perspective up to now by many critics. To mention some of these critics, for example, DiMatteo (2024) used national allegory to analyze a novel called ‘*Open City*’ by Teju Cole. Ghosh (2023) also used it to study contemporary Indian novels to explore new urban realism in the country. Similarly, Reimer (2020) employed national allegory to examine Canadian young adult fiction.

3. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

3.1. Socio-Cultural symbols in *Wizard of the Crow*

Ngugi, who was affected by the Gikuyu people’s terrible suffering from the British imperial domination and the Mau Mau rebellion for Kenyan independence, has used the community’s socio-cultural symbols in his earlier novels so that he has revealed his thematic obsession and stylistic features. Through his literary works, he always sides with the community. His political stand led him to detention/jail for a year without accusation. He was forced to leave his homeland and live in foreign countries. The scars left by what Ngugi suffered in Kenya, his homeland, persisted, leading him to write about it. Ogude (1999, p. 46) notes that

Ngugi’s recourse to allegory would seem to be a strategy aimed at creating some sense out of a state of chaos; a way of reclaiming Kenya’s history once suppressed in the colonial state and again in the postcolonial state. Allegorical writing, for Ngugi, must have opened up the possibility of transformation – a means of rereading the imperial myths and their social agents in the postcolonial state.

Hence, the allegorical /symbolic perspective drawn from the community to whom he belongs was a vital tool for Ngugi in crafting his literary productions.

The Gikuyu society, wherein the novel ‘*Wizard of the Crow*’ was grounded in its socio-cultural setting, has various socio-cultural symbols that help them to signify their communal interpretation /or meaning significations. Some of the most important socio-cultural symbolic elements that are found in the novel are interpreted below:

A brief summary of *Wizard of the Crow*

There was a dictatorial regime in the republic of Aburiria, an imaginary country in East Africa, whose leader is known as “*the Ruler*” throughout the novel. He considers himself as he has the

mightiest right to rule the country forever. The fate of the country is solely in his hands. The 'Ruler' is stricken by malaise out of rage, which restricts his vocal voice to speak out words. He further suffers from tummy bloating that raises his body to the ceiling, which later changes into a rumor of pregnancy. Besides his ailment, a strong mass of opposition to the coordination of "the movement for the voice of the people" has already been praised throughout the whole country. The movement is especially coordinated by female protesters, whose leader is Grace Nyawira, the heroine of the story. Her friend-in-bond for politics and revolution, Kamiti, also called the "Wizard of the Crow", becomes an instrumental figure in the struggle against the dictatorship. He plays a significant role in exploring the mental image of *the Ruler* and his ministers. At the same time, he used to probe out important governmental information for the "Movement for the Voice of the People" along with his female counterpart.

The Crow: Crow has various socio-cultural implications in African cultures and traditions. It is usually depicted in African folklore and myths signifying those cultural significances that have been given due regard by African people (Finnegan, 2012; Marzluff & Angell, 2013).

Many oral stories including fables, folktales, and myths are included in the novel. Aesop's¹ fables are among them in which the crow is one of the characters. These fables are also African fables because Aesop collected various oral stories from cultures across the world (Gibbs & others, 2002). However, these collections of stories are similar to most African stories. As such, some argue that Aesop originated from Africa and his stories are from African oral traditions.

Why does Aesop have African animals in so many of his fables? Most of his fables have a moral and African folk tales often show us the meaning of a proverb. Aesop's fables aren't like fairy tales from Europe with "happy ever after" endings. They are much more like traditional African stories. Life is tough... and things can end badly for anyone who doesn't watch out or use their wits! Nowadays I think that Aesop was African. He was probably captured somewhere in North Africa and forced to go to Greece. His name sounds

¹ Aesop is a legendary Greek fabulist who is supposed to collect various fables. The Western tradition of fable effectively begins with Aesop. Modern editions contain up to 200 fables, but there is no way of tracing their actual origins; the earliest known collection linked to Aesop dates to the 4th century BCE.

like the old Greek word for a black African: "Ethiop". Some say that he was so wise and witty that his master freed him and that he became an adviser to the king (Grobler & Naidoo, 2011,p.7).

Kamiti, one of the main characters, is represented as the "Wizard of Crow" in the novel. He played a significant role in the plot of the story to move on in suspension and for the thematic obsessions to be revealed succinctly at the end. The novel takes the title "Wizard of the Crow" for the outstanding role that the character has played in the text's overall recreation of African wit and truth. Therefore, why is the 'Crow' important for its representation, and what does it imply in the novel?

Some symbolic meanings are given to the **Crow** in different cultures and beliefs like wisdom and divination, cunningness, and ability to see beyond the ordinary (Marzluff & Angell, 2013). However, one of these says, "the crow represents the most intelligent birds" (Britannica & others, 2006, p. 488), establishing its reputation for intelligence and resourcefulness (Marzluff & Angell, 2013). The context used in the novel suggests this implication. In Kenyan oral tradition, Crow is also known for its problem-solving skills. For example, we have known it in the fable called "The Crow and the Pitcher" wherein the Crow quenched its thirst in a spell of dry season by putting pebbles into the pitcher which contained little amount of water in its bottom part. Because of the drop of small pebbles into the pitcher, the water rose up until at last, it was near enough to the thirsty crow, (Winter & others (eds), 2014). Though it is known in Aesop's fables, it is also an African oral tradition known throughout the continent. Therefore, the author of this novel alludes to this oral tradition to provide strategic solutions to the African nation's post-independent predicaments. Some of the roles played by "Wizard of the Crow" or Kamiti, show his strategic skills in overcoming the problems while depicting his insightful wit and wisdom. These are discussed in the following paragraphs.

The two characters, Kamiti and Nyawira, escape police brutality with Kamiti's wit. The police officer was chasing Kamiti and Nyawira (later becoming a couple) on the streets, through bushes and villages, and from house to house in order to put them under his brutality. He was also interrogating residents to give him information about their whereabouts. However, Kamiti came up with an odd but brilliant idea that could keep away the rapacious police officer from coming near to the house they had entered. He tied bones and rags with a dead lizard and a frog together. He also wrote the following on the cardboard in big letters: "Warning! This property belongs to a wizard whose power brings down hawks and crows from the sky. Touch this house at your peril, SGD. wizard of the crow." (2006, p. 77). Then he suspended down these bundle of things above the entrance of the

door of the house. When the police officer who was chasing them saw the bundle of those alien things, he took a step back immediately.

This shows that the level of bribery and corruption is at its climax in the post-independent nation-states. It affects every citizen of the nation. By and large, every household faced this problem. This problem resides because of the **moral deprivation** of the national leaders who are again affected by the neo-colonial ideological systems. The post-independent leaders are affected up to the point of forgetting their respective country's socio-cultural values, which were used and practiced in the past. Therefore, **negotiating** with the native's cultural values is crucial to resolving the severe socio-political crises that the African nations are facing. The stratagem used by Kamiti implies that African socio-cultural wit is crucial in solving the post-colonial African nation's problems. So, it must be part and parcel of the search for a solution.

Second, his psychological ability clearly outlines the mental image of a person. Kamiti has the ability to outline the mental image of a person by carefully scrutinizing his demands. By using a series of logical questions, he can squarely click out the crux of the matter that is recurring frequently inside the person's mind. For example, he probed out the recurring obsessions that one of the characters, the police officer called Constable Arigaigai Gatherer, contemplated in his mind. This police officer wanted to step up to the best of the power hierarchy in the country. Although he longed to secure his power desire, this could not happen in a short period. As a result, he claimed that his colleagues were the reason for his failure. When Kamiti, disguised as a witch doctor, wittingly confirms this to the police officer in power-seeking, the police officer comes to believe that Kamiti, "Wizard of the Crow", is an omnipotent figure who could change the fate of a person.

Third, he discloses the secret desire for a political takeover of the cabinet Minister. African leaders are power seekers because they believe that political power is the source of power, money, and property. Therefore, at the expense of logical reasoning and public responsibility, they want to grip the political power of the nations. This desire for political power creates a conflict of interest among the politicians, which results in again conspiracy and political rivalry that affects the majority of the people. It is also the source of political divisiveness. This is the prolonged impact that colonialism left behind on the continent of Africa. Hence, it is important to be aware of the political situation in African nations in order to root out political rivalries.

Similarly, Sikiokuu, the state minister, wishes to control the power of the country.

Sikiokuu could hear very clearly what he was being asked but found it difficult to answer. Finally, he nodded his head.

"No, tell me in words," the Wizard of the Crow insisted. "Do you ever dream of occupying the highest office in the land?"

"Yes. I have," he said through clenched teeth.

And with that, Sikiokuu gathered steam and started talking, words all of a sudden flooding from his mouth like a rushing river.

"There is no minister who does not dream of one day becoming the Ruler. We lust for power, and what power is greater than that of a supreme ruler? (2006, p. 414).

Fourth, he discovers the cause of business rivalry between individuals using a divine mirror. In the same way, 'Wizard of the Crow' has the power to discover the wishes and ambitions of businessmen when they come to consult his divination. For example, Titus Tajirika, one of the businessmen in Aburiria, is an ambitious man who wants to collect more wealth. He owned the huge Modern Construction and Real Estate premises. He had also been assigned as the chairman of the "Ruler's" *Marching to Heaven* project from which he collected three sacks of money from contractors who wished to win a contract from the project. These kinds of dealers paid money as a means of making acquaintance with Tajirika. In short, he was able to amass much wealth from the different ways that helped him to secure his desire to become the number one businessman in Africa. He wished to keep up his highest position in Africa and to become the highest-ranking world businessman.

My appointment as the chair of Marching to Heaven was announced this morning, and by the evening I had come into possession of all this. The morrow would bring even more money, for there were many more people coming to see him [sic, me]. If in just one day I have harvested this much and Marching to Heaven has not even begun, when the Global Bank releases its loans and the construction actually begins, my money will go through the roof. By the time all is said and done, I will be the richest man in Aburiria, the richest man in Africa, probably the richest man in the whole world, and I will be in a position to have anything I want, except . . . (p.173)

Nevertheless, besides accumulating much wealth and property, in order to secure the world's highest businessmen rank, he thought that he had to change his skin color since he knew that whites took the highest business position in the world. But he lacked white skin. So, when Tajirika was thinking

over this matter, he accidentally stuck the spell out of words at his throat. He was unable to speak out because of the malady of words in the larynx. Malady of words became the epidemic in Aburiria that separately struck businessmen and authorities. He only repeatedly tried to say *ifs* and *if onlys*. His wife became worried by the accidental malady of words that her husband suffered from. To her trouble, he also started upholding a mirror to watch his face and scratching it with his fingers. She got more perplexed as to which hospital she could take him to treat his malady. Later, she got advice from Nyawira, his secretary, to visit “Wizard of the Crow”, a witch doctor curing patients. “Wizard of the Crow” then identified the real malady that Tajirika suffered from by using his divine mirror. The diviner made Tajirika speak out every piece of the word that stuck behind his larynx. When he combined them together, those pieces of words became as follows: *If my skin were not black...* and *if only my skin were white like a white man's skin...* From this “Wizard of the Crow” figured out the malady of the person. White-ache afflicted Tajirika because of his desire to become white. So, the diviner pronounced to Vinjina, the patient's wife, that “Daemons of whiteness took possession of your husband...” (p.179). Finally, ‘Wizard of the Crow’ could cure the malady of white-ache from Tajirika. When Tajirika was told that he would become homeless if he became white, he immediately refused to become white by saying, in unison with his wife, that “Black is beautiful. Give us back our blackness” (p.188). This made him free from his malady. But the truth is that Kamiti “was not a witch doctor. He was a make-believe Wizard of the Crow” (p.125). The cunning behind the “Wizard of the Crow” to know the malady of a person was in his ability to psychologically examine, to explore the ambitions and wishes of the person's mind.

Like Tajirika, other businessmen had also admitted to the shrine of the “Wizard of the Crow” to present their claims against their business fellows. Rivalry, the result of selfishness, is spread over the country. As the following short excerpt also substantiates, this complicates the problems of the nation.

Yes, my fellow businessmen. You might see us dining and wining each other, and laughing and slapping one another on the back, but this is all a lie. Now it looks as if the Global Bank is about to release funds for Marching to Heaven...If we are always scheming against one another even when the stakes are low, imagine what's going on now. I own many quarries. All I want is to become the chief supplier of cement, stone, and sand for Marching to Heaven. But believe me, Sir Wizard, my enemies are many, they are everywhere, they are ruthless, and they want what I want. (2006, p.149).

In the same manner, John Kaniuru, a young commissioner of the regime, is working hard against Tajirika, the biggest businessman, so that he can take over the position of business ownership in the country.

The irony is that when we finally get the secret of all these messes and conflicts of interest, African businessmen and African leaders are greedy. Money and power never satisfy them. As a result, they suffer from psychological disorders expressed through their obsession with money and power. They are facing an identity crisis. The cause of the identity crisis of these businessmen, as depicted in the novel, is their greediness towards wealth and power. Therefore, rulers, who are suffering from this kind of psychological disorder, cannot bear the problems of the people in their minds. On the contrary, the business and political rivalry they raised between themselves complicated matters of the post-colonial nation-states. Again, the spread of the malady of words over most cabinet ministers and businessmen shows the dysfunction or the failure of African leaders to address the public demand. Generally, in Africa, we can see that the political elites along with the businessmen fall apart.

As Kamiti had questioned Tajirika about his malady, a picture of the nature of the illness had also formed in her [Nyawira] mind, and she felt as if Kamiti understood it as pervasive among the rich and educated of Aburiria. Perhaps this explained in part what was wrong with the leadership of the land and the incredible turns the country had taken since independence. (2006, p.196).

Lastly, Kamiti had also a strong sense of smelling stench in the country. Kamiti detected stench in the body, the stench in the town, the stench in the building, and the stench in the government's offices and institutions. It spread everywhere in the country.

"Smell? What smell are you talking about? Oh, yes, you said you had tidied up to remove the smell of the police officer. Surely it could not have been worse than the stench of uncollected garbage in our streets," Nyawira said.

*"I don't know what it is," he began quietly, as if talking to himself. "I can't quite explain it, but the smell was stronger than that of rotting garbage, a rancid belch, or a ripe fart. Sometimes when I am walking the streets I can detect it from among all the other scents in the air and often I come across **people** and **buildings** that have it about them more often and more strongly than others. (2006, p.122).*

Hence, 'Wizard of the Crow' is an instrumental body for change and transformation of the nation, which is under the grip of dictatorial leadership that messes with its socio-economic and political predicaments. He plays a significant role in indicating the way out of the nation's weighed-down crises. The eponymous 'Wizard of the Crow' is an important epitome of African wit and wisdom that can be a source of resolution for multiple arrays of problems on the continent. Therefore, robust characters like this have the power to inspire and enlighten the people of the post-independent nations to take persistent courage and stirring initiatives to change the old national political guiles and/or political betrayals. In this regard, Frau (2020, May 17) also conforms to the important role of "Wizard of the Crow" as follows: "Kamiti is an educated young man, endowed with an extraordinary sensitivity and ability to intuit the true character of people. Descended from a family of herbalist sorcerers, he assumes the role of the Wizard of Crows."

Ogre: The novel, *Wizard of the Crow*, contains the story of 'the Ogre and the woman' in its narration. In the novel, what does the ogre imply? Ogre can have a variety of implications for different cultures and traditions. In many West and Central African countries, for example, the ogre is a powerful humanoid creature that has unique mythological significance and symbolic meanings. Some symbolic associations of the ogre include duality (both good and evil), morally malevolent force (acts in a cruel manner), selfishness, gluttonousness, and rapaciousness (Nnolim, 2010). Usually, the ogre's appetite for consumption metaphorically represents the selfish desires of those in positions of power who exploit public resources for personal satisfaction.

The particular meaning it portrays in this novel unravels based on the context in which it is used. Accordingly, the ogre is employed in the novel to reveal selfishness and oppression, as the following analysis shows.

The ogre is a fairy creature that is believed to feed on human flesh. It also has two mouths, one at its front and the other at its back. It is told that a man went to a faraway place, leaving his pregnant wife at home. In the meantime, the woman gave birth to two twin children before her husband came back to her. The ogre, disguised as good at first, took on the responsibility of nursing her by cooking food. However, rather than serving the food to the woman, the ogre ate every meal by saying, "Let me eat for you". In the end, there were four tummies: one was the ogre's stomach. Its

stomach bloats because it feeds excessively, and the other three were the mother's and her twin children's stomachs. They bloat with kwashiorkor, which is resulted from severe malnutrition.

Here, we see that the ogre is such a greedy creature that feeds everything only to itself while there is a hungry woman with her little children who begs for food just in front of it. It gets fatter while the woman gets thinner because she lacks food. She and her little babies suffer from malnutrition because the ogre takes away the food to itself alone. This selfish nature of the ogre represents the African rulers in the post-colonial period.

At the same time, it is also oppression because the ogre deprives the food that the woman saved for herself. Confiscating/or dispossessing the helpless like the woman in the story shows that oppression is at its peak condition. It also shows how human values are shattered. Leaving such a helpless woman with her little children in dire poverty undermines humanity and human values. However, African leaders in the post-independent period do the same against their citizens. The citizenry suffers from poverty while the rulers and businessmen enjoy a luxurious life, or they are involved in accumulating the country's national property for themselves. Similarly, it indicates that the ruling class in Africa is treacherous, or disloyal to their people. What they say and what they do are different. It shows the dual nature of the leaders, which results in political anomalies (Conteh-Morgan, 2000). They could not keep the promise they had pledged to prosper and bring about freedom and democracy.

Termites: termites are a group of insects that consume a wide variety of materials. The actions that termites outperform are told in the Novel. What socio-cultural implications do they signify? The following discussions explain the implications based on the socio-cultural behaviors given to them. In the rich diversity of African culture and tradition, termites have a variety of implications. They frequently appear in African folktales, myths, and legends as characters of community, cooperation, resilience, perseverance, and fecundity/fertility (Fairhead & Leach, 2003). In the Luhya community of Kenya, termites hold similar thematic significance, in addition to being a source of food (Van Huis, 2017).

The "Ruler" of the country (the fictional country) is the mighty ruler that no one could dare to wish his power. If anyone is found to even think of this unthinkable and untouchable venue, his final fate would be "self-disappearance". A squad of eliminators that was set to evacuate any dissident against

the regime would be given the secret command to eliminate him. Therefore, the nation was found in the grip of total subjugation and exploitation. Knowing his mighty power, the "Ruler" had no tip of fear about his autocratic government. However, "Wizard of the Crow" came to the rescue of the nation. He provided a signpost that directed the people on how to act. This has shaken the mighty "Ruler". "Even the Ruler seemed shaken. Wouldn't you if you saw termites building anthills on the floor and walls before your very eyes? The Ruler knew as I knew that this was the work of the Wizard of the Crow ..." (p.561). They multiplied and spread from the cities to the Ruler's palace.

What do these termites signify here? They are expressed as "infinite" to show that they are too numerous to put them in numbers. They are normally known to work in colonies or cooperation. These small insects are also hard workers that can build mounds of mountains on the plain of land. Similarly, they can effectively damage a force that is against them, or they can turn it into decay or bring it into their use.

By implication, this reminds us that the collective power of the masses of the people is more important than the mighty power of the dictatorial regime. In other words, the unity of the populace is central to liberating the country from the grip of dictatorship. Similarly, the socio-political change that the post-colonial nation requires can be achieved by the strong unity of the masses. However, a conscious and hardworking campaigner is equally important to incite the campaign and manage the movement of the people in such a way that a fair political system can be endured.

3.2. Socio-Cultural Symbols in *Starbook*

Ben Okri, the author of the novel *Starbook* was influenced by ancient Greek mythology, which encapsulates ancient Greek classical tradition, philosophy, beliefs, history, literature, art, and wisdom. Myth is not restricted to ancient Greece alone. We can find similar mythological stories everywhere including African countries. Hence, Ben Okri explores many ancient mythical stories from his homeland, Nigeria, and employs them in his modern literary writings to retrieve African culture and traditions. We could say his reading of ancient Greek mythology later triggered him to contemplate his homeland's diverse cultures and traditions, which contain abundant myths. Again, these myths become a source of his modern literary writing as well. He glimpses Greek mythology to discover the Nigerian myths. Consequently, he is fond of the diverse oral storytelling tradition of

his motherland, as he ostensibly describes at the beginning of his novel, *Starbook*. “This is a story my mother began to tell me when I was a child. The rest I gleaned from the book of life among the stars, in which all things are known.” (Okri, 2007,p.1).

Ben Okri, a prominent modern Nigerian writer, is also known for employing Nigerian ancient traditions including Nigerian myths, fairy tales, beliefs, and legends in his his literary writings. For instance, in his prize-winning novel, *The Famished Road* (1991), he employed the spirit child, Abiku, as the protagonist of the story. Abiku is “a Yoruba term meaning ‘children of the spirit world’ or ‘ancestral soul being reborn’. It refers to the belief that abiku children are those who died in one life and continually return in succeeding ones” (Falola and Genova, 2009, p.4).

In a similar way, in his *Starbook* (2007), he abundantly uses the traditional form of telling the story of the novel. The myths, fairytales, legends, and fantastic elements of the ancient Nigerian kingdoms, especially the ancient Igbo and Yoruba traditions, are used. For the purpose of this paper, some traditional elements, which are seized for their socio-cultural symbols, are tried to be explored and interpreted below.

A brief summary of *Starbook*

In a certain mythical forestland where dream-like spirits pervade, the prince of the kingdom and the maiden of a tribe of artists made dialogue in the form of questions and answers accidentally by the shore of the river without the actual observation of the maiden. At first, each of them was seen to move in his or her respective realm. The prince is the son of the king of the kingdom, and the maiden is the daughter of a happily married couple whose origins are from the ancient tribe of artists. They promised to meet again at the same spot where they first virtually met. Unfortunately, the maiden failed to fulfill her promise because of unexpected difficulties in her way of keeping it. Consequently, the prince wandered out through different environs on her quest. Their delay in meeting again exposed the two lovers to persistent confrontations and temptations, such as suitors and the cynical council of elders who run for tough competition to win the maiden’s hand for marriage. In the course of his quest, however, the prince met the maiden’s father, who is the master of artists. By disguising himself as an apprentice, he then got permission to serve this master of artists and to hide himself among the statues at the artist’s workshop, where he also conducted thorough surveillance on the maiden without her awareness when she came to stay at the workshop. At last, patience, as it was his strategy, helped him to enjoy his love with the maiden.

Heron: certain birds like heron in Yoruba tradition symbolize “the diviner’s ability to chant and the mystical power of the women (Bartok and Christine, 1993, p.13). African folktales and myths also indicate the virtues of patience, perseverance, and determination in the face of adversity (Yoruba, Akan, Maasai, and Kikuyu communities).

In the same way, the heron is assumed the bearer of culture and tradition, but the young prince in the *Starbook*, is represented as it is the bearer of wisdom and knowledge. Heron is such a liminal creature that could be barely perceptible. It is taken as the lowest necessity to produce a particular effect on the minds of common people. It has the ability to live in the air, on the ground, and on the water. In addition, heron is believed to be a truly beautiful creature. This creature has a higher ability to conceal its presence because it does not like to be noticed distinctively. Thus, the way it flies is so strategic in such a way that no one could notice it.

As a result, the prince is made to have a special connection with the heron. According to the ancient tradition of Igbo, which was accustomed to offering personal gods to every member of society, this creature (Heron) is made to be his personal god.

From this creature, then, the young prince learned how to survive disasters and evil deeds. He also learned the act of humility and tenacity. The way the heron flies, walks, and catches fish provided him great insight. The great attention the prince paid to the white heron’s every bit of movement helped him to achieve great wisdom.

The prince was very fond of herons. He loved their ability to be great and small, visible and invisible, majestic and minor, tall and insignificant. The heron could conceal its own magnificence and appear to be a raggedy creature not worthy of being noticed. It was a royal creature that understood that to survive in the world you must not overly dazzle out your brilliance, otherwise you wouldn't catch true fish, and you would be hunted for your beauty. Only a truly beautiful creature could so conceal its own beauty for a higher purpose.

And, in love, and fascination with a creature of marvels that didn't want to be noticed so that it could go about its business of making the miraculous ordinary, the prince kept his enraptured but awakened and vigilant gaze on that most cunning of birds. (Okri, 2007, pp. 34-35).

This shows that Africans have many culturally iconic creatures from which we can learn wisdom. The connection between nature and humans is so strong. This provides a vigilant eye for Africans to see things wisely and carefully. African method of learning the quality of things helps to acquire skills that are used to identify the meaning of different socio-cultural conditions. Therefore, African values are an important repository of knowledge and philosophy. This again encounters the Western attitude that Africans must import Western thoughts for the purpose of their (African) literacy. As the Western culture is important to the Westerns, the African culture is equally important to the Africans. However, Africans can learn the way the Westerns maintain and promote their culture and tradition.

We can also see that the young prince had particular concerns with the women of the kingdom. Although he had seen them deprived, the prince believed that women had a powerful value for the continuation of the kingdom. As such, the young prince admitted that women had essential power for the safety and continuity of the kingdom. “The responsibility for women to be wise is truly great. The greatness of a people is a tribute to the wisdom of its women. ... The strength of women is the backbone of the land” (p.29).

He also believed that a strong connection with women would keep his secret power; the power that kept him enlightened to know what was going on in the kingdom. In this regard, the heron also represented women, as it was the power of art and illumination to the prince. Therefore, it seemed that he had been enchanted with special initiation by the heron, his personal god, to maintain focus on women. This belief is taken from the Yoruba tradition, which upholds that women have the power to support the king to govern his kingdom.

“Birds are viewed by the Yoruba both as symbols of the diviner’s ability to chant and the mystical power of women. The Yoruba word for mystically powerful women is eleye (eh leh YEH), or ‘owners of birds’. Images of birds are used to decorate the king’s beaded crown, representing female power and the king’s need for women’s support in order to rule.”(Bartok and Christine, 1993, p.13).

Hence, certain birds are important in Yoruba culture and tradition. In this regard, the heron is the most important bird to signify this tradition. It is also considered as the mother of all birds as mentioned in the novel as follows: *“they were all children of the golden heron”* (Okri, 2007, p. 130). This tradition challenges both colonial and patriarchal ideologies that undermine race and gender equality respectively. This kind of tradition has important lessons not only for Africans but also for the

world at large. Therefore, the study of African culture and literature is the investigation of the rich traditions and customs, which provide a resolution for unfairness and injustices.

On top of this, heron also represented the whole generation in the kingdom. The threat to the heron was the threat to the people and the land of the kingdom. Again, as evident in the novel, the threat of the heron was the threat of the ancestors and the descendants of the imaginary kingdom. This is also the same in Yoruba tradition where the heron is used for similar purposes in ancient kingdoms. Ironically, the presence of slavery and colonialism in Africa was a threat to African culture and African people as the following extract implies:

Beautiful white birds descended on the heron and tore off all its feathers broke its wings and left it dying on the riverbank where it lay sick for ninety-nine years, sick and dying, but not dead. The birds had also fallen on the nest of the heron and carried off many of its children and many died on the seas and many others were borne off and scattered about the world in horrible conditions, and they did not know one another anymore, and forgot that they were all children of the golden heron. (Okri, 2007, p. 130).

Shortly, heron is one of the ideal representations of women, generation, and a nation in the African nation's tradition. It shows you how to acquire wisdom. Paying attention to the heron signifies paying attention to the aforementioned elements all in one. You have to embrace the nature of heron to love and serve your nation with all your effort.

The Swan Song: we could come across the tale about the swan song in the novel. Why did Ben Okri invoke the Swan song in the novel?

The image of a swan appears in different myths and folklore throughout the world. The swan is depicted to signify the fabulous emblem of nature in different cultures. In Greek mythology, the swan song is held to be a metaphorical phrase that signifies the final gesture, effort, or performance offered just before death or retirement. Accordingly, in ancient Greek beliefs, the song of a swan represents the upcoming death. In most of their lives, swans are silent creatures. However, they could have a beautiful song in their lifetime that could be interpreted as an immediate death or migration, like a death note in the Ethiopian experience.

Another aspect of the swan in myth was the power to prophesy. When Apollo slew the Python at the temple of the oracle, he gained prophetic power. The swan, his sacred bird, was honored to draw his chariot of the sun

across the sky to the land behind the north wind and back again, an association with the swan's natural migrations. The most noted example of the swan's mythic powers as a creature endowed with prophecy, and therefore a kind of spiritual being, is in the writings of Greek philosopher Plato when he reported the great Socrates' last words before death. Socrates compared himself to the swan, saying that the swan because it was sacred to Apollo, "sings joyfully before its death," for the bird more than any other could "see into an afterlife with the god it served."(Price, 1994, p.17).

Here, Ben Okri used "the swan song" in his novel, *Starbook*, to signify the immediate diminishing of the tribe of artists from their forest kingdom by the appearance of the white wind, as it is discussed below.

*Its strength was no longer able to hold out against the dissolution wrought on it by the destruction of its old ways. The tribe survived long enough as a people to have one last stage of almost great flowering. It was **the swan song of their golden age**. It was the last days of their old dispensation before they vanished into the dust of time. (2007, p.414). The phrase in bold is my emphasis.*

There was a distinct tribe of artists in a separate village who were busy crafting artworks on their entire days. In the forest kingdom in which freshness and purity reigned across the entire subjects and villages, tranquility and cultural richness were plentiful. The social beliefs and customs were secured. Loyalty of the people to the king and loyalty of the king to the people were truthfully maintained and strongly grounded by the law of the land, which was imagination.

Besides, Art was the central and communal property of their survival at that time. It was part of their belief system. By using the wisdom of art, they believed in communicating with their creator. Communicating with the oracles, gods, and ancestors of the tribe was supposed to be held through art. Enigmas of human life, dreams of the tribe, and the secrets of events were understood and interpreted through art. Therefore, they engaged in making and appreciating art.

However, such tranquility and richness of the tribe came to the stage of disaster. A strong plague in the form of a cool white wind appeared. In the beginning, this white wind seemed peaceful and calm. It appeared with the delicacy of fragrance and hilarious scenes. After sometime later, this new white wind changed from its nature of coolness and harmony to the other side of its nature of calamities and erasures. It looked friendly when it first emerged to the people. Nevertheless, it was converted into a horrific spirit that resulted in many disappearances in the land of the kingdom including its natural resources, beliefs, and traditions.

By implication, these represent the beliefs, traditional customs, and values of the people that have been perished. Their ancient ways of morality, philosophy, and peacekeeping methodologies were also erased following the appearance of the white wind. In the same manner, at a time when European slave traders appeared in the land of Africa, many forms of long-lived traditional properties had been taken away. Following the aforementioned forms of erasure, the condition of the land of the kingdom turned upside down. Suspicion, misinterpretation, fear, enmity, and rumors became prevalent among the people. Negative forces replaced positive forces, which were abundant for a long period. As a result, confusion resided in the land. On top of this, masses of the population were kidnapped and taken away to the coast of the sea. It had been seen that people (men and women, children and young) were chained hand in hand and ankle to ankle by the metal chains, and then large ships carried them off across the sea.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Socio-cultural symbolic representation is used as an important device to reveal the socio-cultural conditions of a certain nation. This further portrays the socio-political circumstances of the nation. In this essence, there are symbolically significant elements in the African culture, which are often employed in African literary works. These elements provide lessons and wisdom. Symbolic illustrations to describe the situations more vividly in the African nations along with their symbolic implications to reveal the thematic concerns that the authors want to communicate with their readers are employed in the novels under study.

Accordingly, Ngugi writes the novel *Understudy* by incorporating nationally significant fables. As it is discussed, he refers to the main traits of the Crow, Ogre, and termites to describe the socio-political conditions of the postcolonial nation. Similarly, he uses the socio-cultural symbols that these creatures signify in society to portray the nature of leadership in the post-independent nations. He also indicates the corruptive nature of African leaders can be alleviated by the African Indigenous knowledge system and the unity of the people. On the other hand, Okri's novel is mythical. He uses it to demonstrate the quality of the African culture in the ancient political administration system. He reminds mythically significant birds whose socio-cultural and belief values are important in one of the ancient African societies. By this, he reclaims that Africa's indigenous

socio-political administration system eases the Western political influence that was imposed on African nations both ideologically and forcefully. In this regard, Ngugi usually incorporates stories of fables, while Okri depends on mythological stories to achieve their respective goals.

Therefore, culturally significant elements are used to symbolize the socio-political situations of the nations. They also help us to learn African truths and values. Therefore, symbolism that is derived from the culture is one of the literary techniques that portrays and addresses the aims of the writers. Generally, Africans' wit and wisdom are found in African culture and traditions. They are important tools to find solutions for the present socio-political problems of Africa. Therefore, negotiating with the African culture and tradition is crucial to recreate the sense of harmony in the continent.

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