From Quest to Rebellion: A Comparison of George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four and Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s Matigari

Théodore Bouabre
Université Félix Houphouet-Boigny
Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire
tbouabre@yahoo.fr

Abstract

This paper discusses George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four and Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s Matigari. By having their main characters search for freedom and happiness in the oppressive social and political circumstances of their respective societies, the two authors manifest the same views against human oppression. A further analysis of Orwell and Ngugi’s backgrounds also indicates that these writers are committed humanists, who are concerned with the welfare of human society. Also, from a comparative perspective, the paper thus shows common themes between British literature and African literature.

Keywords: Orwell, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, oppression, rebellion, freedom, humanism.
From a traditional comparative perspective, this paper is to be seen as a discussion of the “relationships between two literatures” (Wellek and Warren, 36) because it deals with texts and authors coming from two different cultural horizons. George Orwell is from England and Ngugi wa Thiongo from Kenya. Orwell lived during the first part of the twentieth century and published Nineteen Eighty-Four in 1949. Ngugi wa Thiongo is still alive. His novel Matigari was published in 1987. So this comparative work will deal with novels that although culturally and temporally distant, share the same pivotal themes of the quest of freedom and happiness that in the two texts result in a rebellion.

Quest and rebellion are classical themes that can be found in various literary genres across time and space. A quest results from a lack and from a certain dissatisfaction. A person starts a quest because he/she experiences a sense of incompleteness that can be fulfilled only by the object of the quest or an equivalent substitute. So someone can set out on a quest for material or psychological reasons or both, the one being able to trigger the other. Characters who embark on a quest can do so either by pure abstract idealism, without being prompted by any outside pressure, or as in most cases due to a frustration caused by a certain social or political order. These characters consequently decide either to leave the contexts where that order prevails or simply try to subvert it by rebelling. Winston Smith in Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four and Matigari in Ngugi’s Matigari are not comfortable with the social conditions of their existence and thus embark on a quest for a certain truth, a quest that ends up in a rebellion.

The ultimate objective of this paper is to show that Orwell and Ngugi are humanists. It will identify the fundamental features shared by the two authors and highlight their unflagging desire to rekindle the values of humanism through their literary works. As mentioned above, the main characters of the two novels start a quest that later transforms itself into a rebellion against the socio-political systems that rule them. To start with, what are the contexts of Winston and Matigari’s quests and subsequent rebellions?

I. Contexts of the Quest
I.1 Oppression in Nineteen Eighty-Four

The action in Nineteen Eighty-Four is set in Oceania, a totalitarian state where the government controls both the minds and the bodies of its citizens, in other words, their entire lives. People are under permanent surveillance. Inside their homes are telescreens which are electronic devices that receive and transmit both sounds and images and can never be turned off. Through them and with the helicopters that constantly hover over people’s roofs, the citizens’ movements are monitored, which engenders in them a sense of permanent fear. In the streets and every landing of stairwells in buildings, omnipresent posters whose caption reads “Big Brother is watching you” show the face of Big Brother, the god-like leader whose eyes actually seem to scrutinize their viewers’ souls, thus asserting his power on them.

The state also exerts its power on the citizens through information control. The Ministry of Truth conditions the information made available to people. In the state of Oceania, the news is never true. Actually it always consists of counter truths released to bamboozle the
citizens. This practice enables the government never to be in contradiction with itself, or helps them to match past contradictions with current policies. That is why in Oceania the past can mutate. It can be altered. This principle concerns ordinary measures such as economic and social facts as well as historical events. For instance, the period of the revolution which brought Ingsoc (the ruling party) to power was rewritten to make the current leader Big Brother its only hero. This is in fact the job of Winston the main character of Nineteen Eighty-Four who works in the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth. He “corrects” and rectifies documents, for the party says that “who controls the past controls the future” (284).

The ruling single party also controls its people through early indoctrination of children. For the party to be able to control people totally, it will indoctrinate them from the outset. The children of the Parsons’ family, Winston’s neighbors, are members of the party’s children Youth League and Spies that according to Winston has transformed them into little tiger cubs. They recognize in Winston a thought criminal when he goes to help their mother unclog her kitchen sink. Mr. Parsons is even proud of his daughter for catching a spy:

D’you know what that little girl of mine did last Saturday, when her troop was on a hike out Berkhamsted way? She got two other girls to go with her, slipped off from the hike and spent the whole afternoon following a strange man. They kept on his tail for two hours, right through the woods, and then, when they got into Amersham, handed him over to the patrols. (66)

The party also imposes on the citizens of Oceania an intellectual discipline called “doublethink.” It is a form of mental exercise whose goal is to believe two contradictory truths at the same time. Since the control of the past also implies the control of everybody else’s memory and perception of reality, people must then lose the habit of recognizing the contradiction between what seems to be and what they think has been. So to abolish in people the principles that oppose the party’s grasp of the collective thought, each and everyone must cultivate from their early childhood that subtle mental technique called “doublethink.” So doublethink is the peaceful coexistence of these two kinds of knowledge. The citizens must then know that the past is modifiable and must be convinced that the official truth of the moment is the only one that has been. The party is even in the midst of creating a new language, Newspeak, in order to restrict the thought range of the citizens and thus guarantee their political orthodoxy. Syme, a philologist working on that project tells Winston:

Don’t you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thought crime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. (60)

The above is the socio-political context that Winston, the book’s main character does not understand and will try to subvert later. In Ngugi’s novel, the main character goes through the same experience.

1.2 Oppression in Matigari

In Ngugi’s Matigari, Matigari, a former guerilla freedom fighter has just come out of the forest and starts a search for what he calls his family. “I am now looking for my people,
my daughters, my sons, my in-laws, my wives…” (38). He is searching for them to find out what has become of them during all the time he was absent, and above all what their situation is after the war. During this quest Matigari notices that his fight for independence and for people’s freedom and welfare has yielded no positive result. The novel describes a society actually full of ills that crumbles under economic exploitation, poverty, corruption and physical violence. The following tableaux are indicative of the condition of society at large.

Guthera, a bar woman and prostitute tells Matigari:

Today there is no corner of the land where you will not find women looking for something with which to quell the hunger of their children and husbands. Most of the women are casual labourers in the tea, coffee and sisal plantations. If you want to know where to begin your search, go the plantations. Go and rescue those; don’t worry about us, for we lost our souls in these bars a long time ago. (39)

What the woman is telling Matigari is actually a confirmation of what he had seen earlier, children rummaging in a garbage yard:

The children raced the tractor to the garbage yard, a huge hole fenced around with barbed wire, while others sat on branches of trees nearby. Hawks hovered dangerously in the sky. A pack of stray dogs walked about, sniffing here and there at the rubbish. Two men stood at the only entrance to the yard, arranging the children into a queue….The driver tipped the rubbish in three heaps. No sooner had he finished than the dogs, the vultures and the children went scrambling for the heaps of rubbish. He now understood what was going on. Each child had to pay a fee to enter. A ticket to enable them to fight it out with dogs, vultures, rats, all sorts of scavengers and vermin, for pieces of string, patches of cloth, odd bits of leather, rotten tomatoes, sugarcane chaff, banana peels, bones…anything! (11)

Matigari watches the same woman being brutalized by the police and their dogs because although she is a prostitute, she refuses to give in to their advances.

A crowd of people stood near Guthera, watching the policemen unleash terror on the woman. She was kneeling on the ground. The dog would leap towards her; but each time its muzzle came close to her eyes, the policeman who held the lead restrained it. Guthera’s wrapper lay on the ground. Each time she stood up to retreat, the dog jumped at her, barking and growling as though it smelled blood. Some people laughed seeming to find the spectacle highly entertaining. (30)

So when he comes out of the forest, Matigari thus finds out that his world is upside down and thinks that it needs to be corrected. Matigari will begin with a quest: the search for truth and justice, like Winston in Nineteen Eighty-Four.

II. The Quest for Truth Justice and subsequent Rebellion
II.1 Winston’s Quest in Nineteen Eighty-Four

Confronted with an oppressive system that seems absurd to him, Winston starts a quest which is driven by one question, a question summarized in the following statement: “I understand how, but I do not understand why?” (91). In fact, the primary objective of Winston’s quest will be to get rid of the conditioned man of Nineteen Eighty-Four. It will be a quest of the “self.” Winston is looking for the sense of subjectivity, the quintessential condition of personal existence that the state of Oceania is denying.
Winston’s search for subjectivity is materialized by the act of writing. He writes: “Down with Big Brother” many times (21) and opens a diary where he plans to note down his daily experiences. The act of writing, a first step in Winston’s quest of the self can already be seen as an act of self-deliverance because the goal of this act is not necessarily to make himself understood or to communicate, but to help him keep his sanity. Winston wants to free himself from the alienation imposed on him by the totalitarian system of Ingsoc, the political philosophy that informs the State’s behavior.

Since the government controls the official past of the country, Winston’s quest also takes him through an investigation of the proletarians’ quarter where he hopes to discover the vestiges of the real historical past. He goes through the little streets and enjoys their smells. He visits old churches and listens to old songs on the lips of the proles (proletarians). The survival of all these elements, Winston believes, will perpetuate the old civilization that the political system of Oceania is trying to suppress with its ideology.

Winston’s dreams can also be inscribed in his quest for humanity. When for example he dreams about his mother, Winston experiences a sense of tragedy, the tragedy that precisely presided over the demise of his mother, and which does not exist in the current society of Oceania:

Tragedy, he perceived, belonged to the ancient time, to a time when there was still privacy, love and friendship and when the members of a family stood by one another without knowing the reason. His mother’s memory tore at his heart because she had died loving him, when he was too young and selfish to love her in return. (35)

So dreaming is also for Winston a form of self-reinvention, a form of resistance to the alienation of the system of Nineteen Eighty-Four. This quest for humanity will drive Winston to a genuine move to action, to a real rebellion.

Winston’s move to action manifests itself through a love relationship with a girl called Julia. When Winston and Julia meet in private for the first time, it is in the country. There, Winston is overwhelmed by the richness of the landscape, a landscape with trees, a stream with fish in it, and a bird singing a gorgeous melody. The act of love performed by Winston and Julia in those surroundings is a symbolically powerful one, because it thus fulfills earlier dimensions of Winston’s quest. Effectively this is the meaning given by the narrator to his sexual encounter with Julia:

The animal instinct, the simple undifferentiated desire that was the force that would tear the party to pieces. He pressed her down against the grass, among the fallen bluebells. Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act. (144-145)

Then both of them get bold enough to rent a room in the proletarians’ quarter and treat themselves to other real pleasures of natural life such as drinking real coffee, eating real chocolate and Winston watching Julia dress up like women used to do in the past with high heeled shoes and make up. The protagonist himself thus summarizes his moves:
The first step had been a secret, involuntary thought, the second had moved from thoughts to words, and now from words to action. (184)

Winston’s action moves a step higher when he is lured into a brotherhood by O’Brien, a prominent party member, allegedly in order to work against the party and resist its hegemony. Winston is made to believe that one day there will be a mass uprising that will overthrow the Party. In front of O’Brien Winston takes an oath in which he pledges his allegiance to an alleged underground rebellion:

‘You are prepared to give your lives’  
‘Yes’
You are prepared to commit murder?’
‘Yes’ (…)  
‘You are prepared to cheat, to forge, to blackmail, to corrupt the minds of children, to distribute habit-forming drugs, to encourage prostitution, to disseminate venereal diseases—to do anything which is likely to cause demoralization and weaken the power of the party?’
‘Yes’
‘If for example, it would somehow serve our interests to throw sulphuric acid in a child’s face – are you prepared to do that?
‘Yes’. (199-200)

But this encounter with O’Brien is just a trap into which Winston falls. There is no such thing as an underground rebellion in the country. The system is so tight, the grip of the Party over the military, the economy, the press and the minds of people is so total that nothing of the sort happens. So Winston’s attitude has just become an act of defiance that has attracted the attention of the Thought Police. He is arrested, tortured inside the Ministry of Love and is made to love the system and Big Brother before his inevitable “vaporization,” the eventual fate of the party’s enemies.

Thus, in Nineteen Eighty-Four, Winston’s quest and rebellion are crushed. In Ngugi wa T’hiongo’s Matigari, the hero at the beginning follows the same course as Winston. The society he lives in does not make sense to him.

II 2. Matigari’s quest in Matigari

When he comes out of the forest, Matigari first looks for those he calls his “people.” In fact he thinks that people’s living conditions should be better than before independence. But Matigari notices that their situation has not changed and that the society is eroded by many ills. He then sets out for a more difficult and somewhat abstract quest: that of truth and justice. This quest comes from the fact that the country is going through what Ngugi himself has called the paradox of history (241) and which Matigari redefines as the fact of “reaping where one has not sowed” (46).

He asked himself over and over again: In what corner of the earth, of this earth are truth and justice hiding? For how long shall my children continue wandering, homeless naked and hungry, over this earth? And who shall wipe away the tears from the faces of all the women dispossessed on this earth? (88)
During Matigari’s quest for truth and justice, he goes around saying “Where can one find truth and justice in this country?” (77). And in his discussion with people, he tells them what he means by truth:

How can I let John Boy, a messenger, and the settler—the whole breed of parasites—grab the house that I built with my own hands? How can I let him keep the home for which I shed my blood? How can my wealth remain in the hands of the whole breed of them—who reap—where-they-never sowed and their black messengers? (88)

Like Winston’s, Matigari’s quest becomes a rebellion when the state starts running its oppressive machine in the face of his growing popularity. In fact, he has become a legend overnight and people are looking for him everywhere. They want to see him and know him. So the government says: “He is a very dangerous person, and he has very dangerous intentions in his head” (124). Matigari is thus arrested, tried and condemned to be taken to a mental hospital. There he makes the decision to remove the belt of peace he had worn earlier to put on the belt of war. He realizes that

One could not defeat the enemy with words alone. One had to have the right words; But these words had to strengthened by the force of arms. In the pursuit of truth and justice one had to be armed with armed words. (131) … Words of truth and justice fully backed by armed power, will certainly drive the enemy out. When right and might are on the same side, what enemy can hold out? (138-139)

When he escapes from the prison due to some mysterious help (in fact Guthera bribes some guards with sex), Matigari starts applying his new philosophy by going to the house of John Boy, a member of the new ruling class and blowing it up along with his Mercedes in defiance of an army of soldiers and policemen. A crowd of supporters standing nearby is heard singing:

Everything that belongs to these slaves must burn! Yes, everything that belongs to these slaves must burn!! Their coffee must burn! Yes their coffee must burn! Their tea must burn! Yes their tea must burn! (167)

Then Matigari, Guthera and her young friend Muriuki run to the bush followed by policemen and their dogs. With Guthera on his back, he jumps in the river that separates them from the tree under which he had hidden his weapons. Thus, although Matigari has not toppled the system, he has won a symbolic victory through the blows he has given to the people who represent it: John Boy and Williams the son of an ex-settler.

Matigari’s quest, although not immediately fruitful, is nonetheless full of promises. Muriuki, the boy who goes to retrieve Matigari’s weapons represents another generation who will take up arms again and continue the search for truth and justice that the Mau Mau fighters had started. But Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four does not end on such an optimistic note. In contrast to Matigari, Winston is defeated by the totalitarian system. He is beaten while Matigari escapes defiant and promising to continue the fight.
III. Orwell and Ngugi as Humanists

Humanism being a general concern for the welfare of humanity, I call humanists people who in their endeavors take that welfare as a goal. George Orwell and Ngugi Wa Thiong’o are both humanists in the sense that they are both political writers whose commitment approaches militancy. Besides, Orwell clearly states that serious writers should show a moral commitment by not only participating in political movements, but also by addressing political themes in their work (Bounds, 87). Most of Orwell’s and Ngugi’s works deal with socio-political issues in a crucial way. In that regard, critic Gorgui Dieng writes that this kind of writers are primarily humanists:

[Un] humanisme qui trouve son fondement dans le souci permanent de traiter des souffrances de l’homme, souffrances engendrées, le plus souvent par l’action négative des hommes politiques peu soucieux du bien-être de ceux qu’ils gouvernent. (38)
[A] humanism based on the authors’ primary concern which is to address human suffering, a suffering often caused by the negative action of politicians indifferent to the welfare of the people they rule] 1

Orwell is well known for his first novel Animal Farm, an allegorical parable in which he satirizes dictatorship and power abuse, and of which Nineteen Eighty-Four is a sequel. In his writings, be they fiction or essays and also in his real life, Orwell has always shown a concern not only with the fate of the masses, but above all with the freedom of the individual. For example in Shooting an Elephant (1936) an essay he wrote about his work conditions as a policeman in Burma, Orwell says explicitly:

I had…made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing. And the sooner I chucked up my job and got out it the better. Theoretically (…) I was for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British. As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make it clear. In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters. (266)

Orwell remained so faithful to his belief that N.R. Sawant thus summarizes the writer’s life as a novelist:

He used his talent against injustice and totalitarianism and toiled his whole life and career for the emancipation of the down trodden (…). He aspired for common decency embedded in Democratic and Ethical Socialism. (21)

The above facts and reasons are why in Nineteen Eighty-Four, Orwell’s character Winston Smith tries to resist Ingsoc. But the reason why he fails or is ultimately defeated not only shows Orwell’s pessimism, but indicates that Orwell wanted his book to be a warning about the future of humanity.

Ngugi has also written many novels, plays and essays that illustrate his political militancy and his humanism. His first novel Weep not Child (1964) is a criticism of colonialism which has dispossessed people from their land. A Grain of Wheat (1967), Ngugi’s second novel, set during Kenya’s struggle for independence, also shows the writer’s nationalism and hatred of imperialism. In the same vein, Ngugi wrote Petals of Blood (1977),

1 My translation
a novel against capitalism. In its background is the Mau Mau guerillas’ fight for independence. Like Orwell, Ngugi was a political activist, which made him go to prison or into exile for many years. Matigari is another narrative about Ngugi’s battle against political systems that oppress the masses through exploitation and care nothing about their welfare. What Ngugi is clearly suggesting here is the continuation of the struggle, as Matigari the character is doing not only with words, but also with arms. In an essay titled “Moving the Centre” Ngugi actually says:

We have been oppressed a great deal, we have been exploited a great deal and we have been degraded a great deal. It is our weakness that has led us to our being oppressed, exploited, disregarded. Now we want a revolution, a revolution which brings to an end our weakness so that we are never again exploited, oppressed and humiliated. (in Dieng, 74)

Like Orwell, Ngugi does not subscribe to the art for art fashion. Focusing on Africa the Kenyan writer further states that “unless we African writers embrace such a vision- a vision anchored in the struggles of the people, we shall succumb to self despair, cynicism and individualism, or else we become mesmerized by superficial bourgeois progress…” (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 64)

Orwell and Ngugi are thus writers whose political awareness and commitment are apparent in their writings, and particularly in Nineteen Eighty-Four and Matigari. But one could wonder why the protagonists of the two novels have different fates. Why is Winston defeated when Matigari escapes defiant and promising to continue the struggle? After the two World Wars which caused a terrible manslaughter allegedly in the name of the defense of freedom and liberty, the world was divided into two entrenched camps. This situation started what was referred to as the cold war. This cold war unfortunately did not guarantee human freedom either. Freedom restricting measures were taken on each side in order to protect themselves, which implied infringement on human rights. In that sense, I think Orwell wanted his novel to be a warning to the world. The pathos that pervades the novel is meant to arouse people’s emotions about the fate of the individual and humanity as a whole in the face of new totalitarianisms. So Nineteen Eighty-Four is a deliberate act of pessimism. On the contrary Matigari is more optimistic. Matigari in a way ridicules the state. He succeeds in escaping from police custody and a mental hospital, as well as destroys the house and the car of John Boy before disappearing into the forest. Ngugi is thus still in the mode of the Mau Mau’s historical victory over the British colonists. He probably thinks that if the fighters are today as determined as they were during the first fight for independence, they will succeed in getting rid of imperialism and its stooges.

Conclusion

This comparative study of Nineteen Eighty-Four and Matigari has shown that George Orwell and Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, although culturally different, have one major preoccupation in common: the fate of the welfare and the freedom of the masses. Orwell has experienced the two major wars that humanity has waged against itself, and Ngugi has essentially been marked by the war of liberation that his people fought against the British. These experiences are surely the foundation of both authors’ commitment. Orwell’s book was not a prediction or a prophecy per se. But since it was set in the future, we can ask ourselves if Winston would have embarked on such a quest had he been a man of our time. In other words, would
Winston feel stifled as he is in Nineteen Eighty-Four, due to a lack of freedom? Today, the progress of technology has actually made the people of the world freer in the sense that they can communicate more easily than in the past. But overall, freedom is not an absolute given. The surveillance of ordinary citizens is the main activity of the police in some big countries for the sake of security. The news is controlled by governments. In many countries, public opinion is influenced by official lies or by rewritten history. Governments have become Big Brothers. Also, with the rise of religious extremism, the world is drifting further away from freedom.

Today, Africa, the continent where Ngugi’s Matigari is set, is still the object of neo-colonial coveting after many decades of independence. The socio-economic and political woes of certain countries can be frankly attributed to the grip of neo-colonial powers. As shown above, the themes developed in both novels are still very relevant. Human beings are still not entirely free. On the contrary, the contemporary world lives more and more under the threat of all sorts of extremisms, all of which endanger human freedom and democracy. Under such circumstances, one could quote N.R. Sawant’s view of Orwell, which mutatis mutandis could also be applied to Ngugi:

Orwell had remained a dazzling star and a peaceful volcanic voice against injustice and trampling down of human values in any form and any age. So he has remained an everlasting fountain source of inspiration to posterity who desires to keep alive the flame of liberty, equality, fraternity and good human values. He is again eulogized as a “decent man,” as a “saint” and as the “conscience of his generation” (29)

Orwell and Ngugi both want to influence society in the sense that people can model their lives upon the lives of their heroes. This comparative example shows that human beings whatever their origins have the same fundamental existential or spiritual needs that often surface through their art, religion and their political and social actions (Brunel & Al, 15).
References


