

Power and the Ephemeral Nature of Truth in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Matigari*

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Abstract: This article examines how power constructs, distorts, and suppresses truth in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Matigari*. Through the lens of counter-narratives, oral traditions, and symbolic resistance, the novel reveals the mechanisms used by elites to control history and public discourse. However, the resilience of alternative truths, carried by marginalized voices and collective memory, challenges the hegemony of dominant narratives. The analysis highlights the fragile balance between domination and opposition, showing how every attempt to erase truth sparks renewed resistance. Ultimately, the study raises broader questions about contemporary mechanisms of information control and the role of literature in preserving alternative perspectives.

Keywords: Power, Truth, Counter-Narratives, Resistance, Oral Tradition.

INTRODUCTION

Truth, far from being an absolute and universal entity, is a construction shaped by power structures that determine what is accepted as real or legitimate. In postcolonial societies, this dynamic is particularly evident in the manipulation of historical narratives, the instrumentalization of institutions, and the suppression of dissenting voices. Engaged literature serves as a critical space where this fabrication of knowledge and truth is questioned, revealing how it becomes both a tool of domination and a site of resistance.

In *Matigari*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o illustrates the precarious nature of truth in the face of power, which molds it to serve its own interests. Through the protagonist, whose identity oscillates between myth and reality, the novel presents a society where truth is constantly redefined by dominant forces. The repression of counter-discourses and the fabrication of an official truth highlight the instability of reality within an authoritarian system. This raises the following questions: to what extent does power, in *Matigari*, impose a fluctuating truth, and how do forces of resistance challenge and reconstruct this truth? In other words, how does truth become an instrument of domination, and what strategies allow for its reclamation?

To analyze this dynamic, this study will rely on Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, as reinterpreted in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Said highlights the role of dominant discourses in constructing

ideological truths that justify and perpetuate power systems. This postcolonial approach will help examine how, in *Matigari*, post-independence elites use institutional narratives to shape truth while facing counter-narratives emerging from collective memory and popular resistance.

This study will be structured as follows: first, we will analyze the mechanisms through which power imposes its own truth; next, we will examine the unstable and contradictory nature of this truth within the novel; finally, we will explore how counter-discourses and collective memory contribute to the reclamation of truth.

1. The Machinery of Power: Constructing and Controlling Truth in *Matigari*

In *Matigari*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o depicts a system where power imposes and modifies truth through dominant institutions such as education, justice, and religion. Controlling the official narrative allows rulers to manage not only individuals' actions but also their perception of reality. Education is one of the primary instruments through which power enforces its version of truth. In the novel under study, the school does not function as a space for transmitting objective knowledge but rather as a site of ideological conditioning. For instance, during a conversation between Matigari and some children, he asks: "Who tells you that the rich are rich because they worked hard and the poor are poor because they are lazy?" This phrase highlights how

inequalities are justified through biased teaching, instilling in children a truth that naturalizes social injustice. The works of Henry Giroux on "critical pedagogy" support this analysis by demonstrating that education can be instrumentalized to perpetuate power structures. In this context, *Matigari* illustrates how schooling becomes a means of indoctrination, depriving citizens of critical awareness.

The judicial system in *Matigari* functions as a repressive apparatus designed to impose a single truth and silence any opposition. Matigari is quickly identified as a threat to the established order, not because of any real crimes, but because he questions the official truth. When he approaches the police station to demand justice, he is told: "You are either a madman or a dangerous rebel. Which one are you?" (p. 79). This statement reveals a classic strategy of authoritarian regimes: delegitimizing opposition by labeling it as dangerous or irrational. According to David Garland, the penal system plays a central role in consolidating power by criminalizing certain ideologies to maintain the dominant social order. In *Matigari*, this strategy is evident in the arbitrary arrest of the protagonist and the justification of repression through state discourse.

Religion is another tool used to impose the official truth and discourage dissent. In the novel, the priest encourages people to accept their fate rather than resist. He asserts: "The kingdom of heaven is for those who endure suffering on earth with patience and humility." (p. 102). This discourse aims to convince the oppressed that their suffering is a necessary trial and that they should remain passive rather than demand justice. James C. Scott, in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, demonstrates that religion is often mobilized to justify social order, making injustice acceptable. *Matigari* illustrates this manipulation through the contrast between the official message of the church and the reality of social conditions.

Power does not merely impose its truth; it also constructs an imaginary enemy to justify its

domination. Matigari is presented as an invisible threat, allowing the regime to reinforce controls and justify repression. A minister declares: "We must protect our nation from chaos and disorder. Anyone questioning our leadership is a traitor." (p. 130). George Orwell, in *1984*, describes a similar mechanism where the state invents an enemy to maintain population control. This strategy is recurrent in authoritarian regimes and is evident in *Matigari* through the use of fear to restrict freedom of expression.

The analysis of *Matigari* highlights a system where truth is not an objective fact but a construction of power. Through education, justice, religion, and propaganda, the regime imposes a truth tailored to its interests, excluding any challenge. This dynamic, analyzed by contemporary thinkers such as Giroux, Garland, and Scott, shows how dominant systems modify perceptions of reality to ensure their longevity. *Matigari* thus illustrates the ephemeral nature of truth in a world where it is continually reconstructed in the service of power.

2. Truth in Crisis: A World of Contradictions and Uncertainty

In *Matigari*, truth is not a fixed or absolute concept but an ever-evolving entity shaped by power and social perceptions. The protagonist's identity is itself unstable, illustrating the fragile nature of truth in a system dominated by ambiguity. Depending on who perceives him, Matigari is alternately seen as a hero, a madman, a prophet, or even a mythical figure. His existence challenges the official narratives imposed by the state, which struggles to contain him within a single, definable identity. Around him, questions arise: « *Are you a man or a spirit? Are you real or a ghost?* » (Thiong'o 54). This quote illustrates how power prevents any stable definition of Matigari, thus blurring the boundary between reality and myth to hinder any organized opposition.

The state's approach to manipulating truth is not limited to directly suppressing facts but also involves spreading confusion and delegitimizing alternative perspectives. Rather

than countering Matigari's calls for justice with logical arguments, authorities discredit him by portraying him as delusional. A police officer exclaims: « *Anyone who claims justice is either naïve or a criminal.* » (Thiong'o 79). This statement highlights a classic authoritarian strategy: framing any legitimate demand as either a threat or an absurdity to deter public mobilization.

This manipulation of truth takes various forms in the novel. For instance, the regime circulates contradictory narratives to create an atmosphere of uncertainty: « *The government has warned that there is a dangerous madman on the loose, claiming to be Matigari ma Njiruungi* » (Thiong'o 103). By describing Matigari as merely insane, the state diverts public attention from his legitimate claims and prevents any form of organization against injustice. Additionally, the police and media are mobilized to rewrite history, imposing an official version of events: « *We cannot allow the people to be misled by myths and ghost stories* » (Thiong'o 121). Here, the state seeks to reduce Matigari to mere legend, rendering his fight harmless and stripping it of its subversive potential.

The novel also highlights how contradictions imposed by the state serve to neutralize resistance. Matigari's existence as both a real person and a legend disrupts the distinction between reality and myth, complicating the people's ability to decide whether to rally behind him. Jean Baudrillard, in *Simulacra and Simulation*, theorizes that modern power structures create a state of "hyperreality," where the distinction between real and fabricated truths collapses. This analysis is evident in *Matigari*, where the protagonist's ambiguity reflects the broader confusion imposed by the ruling class, making organized resistance difficult.

The concept of truth in *Matigari* also aligns with Foucault's idea of "power-knowledge," which posits that truth is not an objective reality but a construct shaped by those who wield authority. In this sense, Matigari's identity crisis represents a deeper struggle over who holds the power to define what is true.

The state's effort to destabilize his image is not just about controlling him but also about controlling the very foundations of knowledge and collective memory. A minister explicitly states: « *Truth belongs to those who hold power* » (Thiong'o 136). This declaration illustrates how the ruling elite imposes an official narrative, reducing truth to a tool for maintaining power.

Ultimately, *Matigari* portrays a world where truth is fluid, constantly reshaped by those in power to serve their own interests. The novel illustrates how ambiguity can be wielded as a political tool, leaving the population uncertain, divided, and unable to mobilize. This manipulation of reality, as analyzed by Chomsky and Herman in *Manufacturing Consent*, suggests that controlling truth is not solely about censorship but also about flooding the discursive space with contradictions that erode all certainty. Through this strategy, the regime prevents any opposition by multiplying versions of the truth, making it impossible for a unified resistance to form.

In conclusion, *Matigari* presents truth as a battleground, where the power to reshape reality prevents the emergence of a singular and stable version of the real. By examining Matigari's fluctuating identity, the state's deliberate tactics of confusion, and the instability of knowledge itself, the novel critiques authoritarian regimes' ability to manipulate perception. This analysis connects to broader discussions on political discourse and the distortion of reality, reinforcing the novel's relevance beyond its immediate postcolonial context.

3. The Psychological Dimension of Truth: Perception, Fear, and Internalized Oppression

Beyond institutional control and propaganda, *Matigari* reveals how power operates on a psychological level, shaping individual perceptions of truth and reinforcing submission through fear. Oppression is not merely external; it becomes internalized, making individuals complicit in their own

subjugation. This aspect of power control is crucial in understanding why systems of domination persist despite widespread suffering.

Fear plays a central role in conditioning the population to accept imposed truth. When Matigari denounces injustice, those around him react with apprehension rather than support: « *If you speak too much, you will disappear.* » (Thiong'o 1987, 67). This statement illustrates the deep-rooted self-censorship in society, where individuals silence themselves to avoid persecution. This fear is fueled by visible repressive acts, such as the arbitrary arrest of those who challenge authority. For example, when Matigari asks: « *Where are the patriots who fought for this land?* », the response is harsh: « *They are in prison, or they have been silenced.* » (Thiong'o 1987, 73). This response highlights the brutality of a regime that punishes all dissent, instilling a climate of terror. As an elderly character in the novel states: « *In this country, truth is the fastest way to the grave.* » (Thiong'o 1987, 91), illustrating the relentless repression that weighs on any attempt at resistance.

The novel also illustrates how prolonged exposure to propaganda distorts the perception of reality. The population is so conditioned by the dominant ideology that it struggles to distinguish oppression from justice. When Matigari demands accountability from leaders, some dismiss his ideas as unrealistic: « *What you are saying sounds like a dream, not reality.* » (Thiong'o 1987, 89). This reaction aligns with Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of *false consciousness* in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which the oppressed unknowingly adopt the worldview of their oppressors, making true resistance difficult. This ideological blindness is further reinforced by religious discourse used to legitimize mass passivity: « *Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.* » (Thiong'o 1987, 105). The clergy, by spreading this message, acts as an extension of power, encouraging submission rather than action. As summarized by a priest in the novel: « *The only justice is*

that of God. Be patient, my son. » (Thiong'o 1987, 122), further reinforcing the people's resignation in the face of power abuses.

Matigari himself is not immune to this psychological battle. His fluctuating identity—oscillating between a real revolutionary and a symbolic figure—reflects the difficulty of maintaining ideological clarity under an oppressive system. He finds himself struggling with his own doubts, wondering if the fight still has meaning: « *Am I the only one left who remembers what justice is?* » (Thiong'o 1987, 116). This questioning reveals the corrosive effect of a power that rewrites history and erodes collective memory. Authorities exploit this uncertainty to further discredit him, describing him as « *a ghost from the past, haunting the present* » (Thiong'o 1987, 112). This strategy echoes Hannah Arendt's (1951) analysis in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where she explains that authoritarian regimes thrive by creating permanent instability, preventing the oppressed from fully grasping their situation. As Matigari himself bitterly notes: « *The people have forgotten their past struggles. They have become slaves in their own land.* » (Thiong'o 1987, 135), highlighting the collective amnesia imposed by power.

The internalization of oppression is also visible in the servility of domestic workers and laborers, who repeat the rhetoric of power without recognizing its contradictions. A worker declares: « *If the rich have the land, it is because they worked harder.* » (Thiong'o 1987, 132). Such discourse justifies inequality and prevents any form of rebellion. Frantz Fanon (1961), in *The Wretched of the Earth*, analyzes this submission as a psychological effect of colonialism, where the exploited eventually adhere to the system that oppresses them. Another worker, questioned by Matigari, expresses the same resignation: « *We are nothing but ants before the masters.* » (Thiong'o 1987, 147), illustrating the lack of class consciousness that hinders any organized resistance.

This psychological manipulation is reinforced by a lack of historical awareness. Throughout the novel, the younger generation is depicted

as disconnected from the true history of their country's struggle. When Matigari recounts past battles for liberation, many of his listeners seem indifferent or incredulous: « *That was another time. Things are different now.* » (Thiong'o 1987, 142). This detachment from historical memory weakens collective resistance, making it easier for oppressive regimes to rewrite the past in their favor. As George Orwell (1949) warns in *1984*, « *Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.* » This dynamic is evident in *Matigari*, where knowledge of past injustices is deliberately obscured to prevent future uprisings.

Ultimately, *Matigari* demonstrates that power functions not only through force or deception but also through deep psychological conditioning. By instilling fear, reshaping perception, and fostering internalized oppression, the regime ensures submission even in the absence of direct coercion. The novel highlights the necessity of both ideological and psychological liberation as prerequisites for true resistance. This analysis aligns with Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman's (1988) theories in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, explaining how elites manipulate public thought by disseminating an official narrative designed to justify their domination.

4. Counter-Narratives and the Reappropriation of Truth

Counter-narratives serve as an essential strategy for challenging dominant discourses and reclaiming an alternative truth. In *Matigari*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o highlights how marginalized voices, oral traditions, and symbolic acts of resistance contribute to deconstructing oppressive systems that control history and knowledge. This process of reappropriation emphasizes that truth is not a fixed entity but a dynamic construction shaped by collective memory and the struggle against injustice.

In *Matigari*, characters excluded from official power structures play a crucial role in resisting hegemonic narratives imposed by the state.

Matigari himself embodies this resistance, not only as an individual but also as a symbol of the collective struggle for justice. His words challenge official accounts of history and encourage people to question the legitimacy of the ruling class: « *Who owns this land? Who eats from its wealth?* » (Thiong'o 1987, 78). Through this question, he exposes the function of dominant discourses in perpetuating inequality and legitimizing those in power.

Women and children also contribute to constructing counter-narratives. Guthera, a female character who has suffered under patriarchal oppression, refuses to submit to the silence imposed on her: « *If men do not fight for justice, then we women must.* » (Thiong'o 1987, 149). Her statement illustrates the ability of marginalized individuals to articulate alternative versions of truth that contradict the official rhetoric of the ruling class. By speaking out, she subverts the idea that only those in power have the right to define reality.

In the novel, oral transmission plays a central role in preserving history and contesting the erasure of past struggles. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o highlights the importance of oral traditions in perpetuating counter-narratives across generations. As an elder asserts: « *Our fathers fought for this land, and we shall not let their voices be buried.* » (Thiong'o 1987, 121). In a society where written records are controlled by the ruling elite, orality becomes a means of resisting dominant ideology and keeping the memory of resistance alive.

This dynamic aligns with Walter Ong's (1982) analysis in *Orality and Literacy*, where he argues that oral cultures preserve knowledge in an evolving manner, adapting narratives to new contexts of struggle. Similarly, *Matigari* illustrates that storytelling is not merely about transmitting the past but constitutes an active form of resistance that challenges imposed truths. Remembering and narrating history through spoken word disrupts official narratives and offers an alternative framework for understanding justice and power.

The novel's conclusion reinforces the idea that truth does not reside in a single individual but

is anchored in the collective consciousness of the people. When Matigari disappears, his absence becomes a powerful metaphor for the continuation of resistance beyond the limits of one individual: « *Matigari is not a man; Matigari is the voice of justice, and he will return.* » (Thiong'o 1987, 172). His disappearance suggests that truth cannot be silenced as long as it is carried forward by those who refuse oppression.

This idea echoes Michel de Certeau's (1984) analysis in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, where he asserts that resistance manifests through daily practices that undermine dominant ideologies. Matigari's disappearance ensures that the struggle for truth does not end with him but continues through counter-narratives and the memory of those who persist in defending justice.

Ultimately, *Matigari* presents counter-narratives as an essential tool for reclaiming truth in the face of oppressive systems. Through the voices of marginalized individuals, oral traditions, and symbolic resistance, the novel demonstrates that truth is not dictated by the powerful but is continuously redefined by those who challenge authority. By rejecting the state's monopoly on truth, *Matigari* affirms the transformative power of alternative discourses in the ongoing struggle for justice and liberation.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of *Matigari* highlights how power shapes, distorts, and suppresses truth to maintain its dominance. Through the manipulation of historical narratives, censorship, and the construction of an official ideology, elites seek to impose a singular version of reality. However, the novel demonstrates that truth, though oppressed, is never entirely erased. The resilience of counter-truths, carried by the voices of the oppressed, oral traditions, and collective memory, ensures the continuity of resistance against dominant discourses.

In response to the central question of whether truth can exist independently of power,

Matigari suggests that truth is always shaped by power dynamics and social struggles. Yet, it is not entirely subject to it. The resistance of individuals and communities creates spaces of contestation where alternative truths can emerge and oppose those imposed by authority. The novel thus illustrates a fragile balance between domination and opposition, where every attempt to erase truth is met with renewed resistance.

This reflection raises broader questions about contemporary mechanisms of information control and the manufacturing of consent. In an era where media and digital technologies redefine knowledge production, how can alternative truths and marginalized narratives survive against misinformation and the monopolization of discourse? *Matigari* invites us to think of truth not as a fixed entity but as a political issue in constant negotiation, whose preservation depends on the vigilance and engagement of citizens.

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