

The Ghost Character in Mia Couto's "Under the Frangipani"

Kirimi Joseph Kainga, Dr. Jackson Gikunda Njogu, Dr. Antony Mate Mukasa
M.A Chuka Univesity, Kenya Chuka University, Kenya Chuka University, Kenya

Abstract: Characterization is an essential element of the African novel. Writers often use characters in novels to communicate their messages. In Africa, the use of ghosts as characters in creative texts has been a recurrent factor, probably because African fiction has a connection with African oral narratives, which often feature ghost characters. This paper seeks to interrogate how ghost characterization is used to reflect the social, economic, and political Mozambican environment in Mia Couto's *Under the Frangipani*. The study has used magical realism theory strand by Wendy (2004) as the interpretive grid. The novel exhibits ghost Characters that use their telepathic abilities to pry into the bizarre Mozambican environment. Their reincarnation endows them with exceptional ability to oscillate the two realms giving the reader an opportunity to compare the two realms thus, allowing one to analyze the Mozambique contemporary environment and envision her future.

Keywords: economic, oscillate, political, realism, social.

I. Introduction

Mia Couto's *Under the Frangipani* is a novel from Mozambique exploring the social and historical circumstances of his social literary milieu by use of ghost characters. Originally, the text was written in Portuguese as *A Varanda do Frangipani* in 1996 and translated into English by David Brookshaw. His text heavily uses the magical realism narrative mode, a style popular in Modern Latin American literature (Boydell & Brewer 2016). The text is viewed as having been influenced by Mozambican contact with the Europeans through migration, wars, slavery, colonialism, nature, and establishment of contemporary state, which subverted their social, economic, and political environment (Goncalves 2009). It is therefore important to study how ghost characters operate in the text to reflect the social, economic, and political environment in Mozambique.

Mia Couto was born Antonio Emillio Leite in Beira, Mozambique in 1955. In 1974 FRELIMO asked Couto to suspend his studies for a year to work as a journalist for *Tribuna* until September 1975 and then as the director of the newly created Mozambique information Agency. During this period, he began writing earnestly, having earlier published a couple of poems. His first book of poems, *Raiz de Orvalho*, was published in 1983. Latter, he recommenced his studies in 1985 and became an environmental Biologist. He continued to write and he has published poetry, short stories, and a number of novels. His work is highly renowned in Portuguese speaking world, and has been translated into a considerable number of European languages. *Under the Frangipani*, *The last Flight of the Flamingo*, *A sleepwalking Land* and *A River Called Time* have all been published in English Translation by Serpent's Tail.

Couto has managed to win several awards. In 2014, he won Neustadt International Prize for Literature and the 2013 Camoes Prize for Literature, one of the most prestigious international awards honoring the work of Portuguese language writers created in 1989 by Portugal and Brazil. In April 2007, He became the first African Author to win the prestigious Latin Union Award of Romanic Languages, which has been awarded yearly in Italy since 1990. These awards make Couto remain as one of the outstanding African literary writer.

II. Ghost Reflection of Social Aspect in Mozambique

Couto explores the African social aspects using ghost characterization. According to Collins English Dictionary (1994), the phrase "social aspect" is used to refer to the commonalities among people within a specific culture. This commonality may include the norms, the language, and the rules. This delineation has provided a spectrum through which the social is analyzed in this study.

Couto in the *Under the Frangipani* explores the concept of myths and superstition surrounding death in African community using ghost characters. King (2013) observes that African communities view death as a natural transition from the visible to the invisible or spiritual ontology whereby the spirit or the essence of the person is not destroyed, but moves to live in the spirit ancestor's realm. Therefore, in his death Emerlindo Mucanga is portrayed as grumbling about the unprecedented and indecent death he underwent. He says that:

Though I was an upright citizen while alive, my death was inglorious. My burial lacked both ceremony and tradition. There wasn't even anyone to bend my knees. People are supposed to leave the world just as they entered it, curled up as if saving on space. The dead should be humble enough not to take up much of the earth. But I wasn't given a small grave. My resting place stretched from one end to the other of my whole length. No one unclasped my hands, as I grew cold. I crossed over into death with my fists clenched, summoning curses upon the living. And to make matters worse, they didn't turn my face towards the Nkuluvumba mountains (P.1).

The burial he was given contravened the precepts and norms of the African people. As a result, he feels offended in his grave. He fails to be promoted to the level of the ancestors. Couto's illustration of Emerlindo Mucanga's state of dilemma borrows from the rich African beliefs that are embedded in unfounded myths and superstitions surrounding the dead. This shows that Africans respect the deceased and it is expected that they be given burials that uphold their beliefs and other laid down norms and ethos.

Additionally, he explores the social aspect of taboos and superstitions. Babbie & Mouton (2001) observes that an indigenous African may not categorize their lived worlds in terms of a distinction between the supernatural and natural, but may view these worlds as inextricably linked. Emerlindo Mucanga in his grave enumerates the obnoxious implications associated with breaking or disobeying any of the African taboos and superstitions. He reports that:

I wasn't just denied a proper funeral. Their negligence went even further: as I had no other possessions, they buried me with my saw and hammer. They should not have done that. Metal should never be allowed into a tomb. Iron takes longer to rust away than a dead man's bones. And what's worse, a shiny object attracts a curse. With my tools by my side, I risk being one of those dead people who wreak havoc on the world. All these upsets happened because I didn't die in my rightful place (P.2).

He links a burial with a hammer and a shiny object next to him as the causes of curse among the living. Although critically these objects have no effects on the dead, Couto explores this area to show how Africans maintained fidelity to their customs.

The ghost character captures the aspect of superstitions and mythical beliefs through various interviews that Izidine Naita, the police inspector carries out with the refugees at Sao Nicolau. Navaia Caetano confesses that:

I navaia Caetano, am the victim of a curse that weighs heavily upon me: I suffer the illness of premature age. I'm a little child who grew old the moment he was born. That is why I am forbidden to tell my story. When I finish my tale, I shall be dead (P.22).

The excerpt reveals that African communities' perception, retention, and subscription to myths and superstitions are veiled in their blood stream. Navaia Caetano, who exhibits a dual existence that is, spirit and physical, is portrayed as entangled in a labyrinth of taboos and superstitions. The beliefs weigh him down to an extent he concedes that if he tells his story, he will die. Couto uses ghost characters to tell the African belief system in a mysterious and bizarre manner.

Couto also uses Little Miss No as an embodiment of legendary superstitions. Her confession to the inspector leaves the reader astounded and mystified by her capability to interweave and fabricate falsehood about her abilities and strengths. She says that:

Every night I turn myself into water, I take the shape of liquid. That is why my bed is a bathtub. The old folk have even borne witness: I lie down and begin to perspire abundantly, so much so that my body is rendered down into sweat. I drain away into liquescence. It is so painful to watch that the others withdraw in fear. No one was ever able to stay until the end when I vanished into transparency in the bath. You don't believe me, sir. Come and watch, then. This very night, after this talk of ours. Are you scared? You have nothing to fear. For when morning comes, I immediately return to my former substance. First, my eyes take shape, like fish submerged in some makeshift aquarium. Then my mouth, my face and the rest are reformed (P.79).

Reading this story lunges the reader's faculties of imagination to the fanciful realm. One has to struggle to extricate the essence and reality exhibited by ghost characters. There is the likelihood of the critical reader to regard Little Miss No's confession as lies and deceit used by the Africans to command respect and maintain

order. What is revealed about the character is that she is highly feared in the refugee camp because of the existent belief that she possesses supernatural powers.

III. Ghost Characterization as the Embodiment of Economic Situation in Mozambique

Since the 1950s, magical realism mode has been used as a weapon, particularly by post-colonial writers to represent the realities of the post-colonial African countries (Diller 2016). Mia Couto has endeavored to portray the economic instability of the Mozambique using magical realism. He has painted a picture of the poor Mozambicans living in dilapidated state, while the rich continue to shine throughout their journey at the expense of the masses. Couto has successfully used ghost characters to amplify this case in a concealed manner. This enables him to express the naked truth, without the fear of being accused of mentioning specific communities and their leaders, which would lead to automatic intimidation and harassment from the political class.

In *Under the Frangipani*, Couto uses magical realism to capture the bizarre state of poverty in Post-independence Mozambique. He uses a ghost character that acts as a narrator and tells the story from an interspace position. Emerlindo Mucanga's indeterminate position offers a comparative state of things in the two realms. He throws a critical eye to the state of life in a refugee camp. It is reported that:

Nor was the work at the infirmary easy. At first, I almost gave up. I would go into a room and be hit by the stench of putrefaction. I asked what the source of such smells was. The old folk pointed to their open mouths. The stench came from their pillows, from the nightly dribbling of the toothless. I even believed it. Afterwards, I saw it wasn't true. The smell came from the leftovers of food they were hiding under their bolsters. They were guarding these crumbs for fear of being robbed. Folk made up so many stories that sometimes they would invent food under their bolsters they didn't even get near to having (P.125-126).

In the excerpt the Old Portuguese are seen to be starving. Any time they got food, they would guard it jealously to avoid losing it because they were afraid of starvation. Couto portrayal of the refugees suffering in their camp represents the pain that engulfed Africans after the attainment of independence. The poverty increased rather than decreasing. The ghost character observes these things while hidden in the body of the inspector. Couto uses the ghost character to reveal these things in order to appeal more to the African people and particularly the leaders because Africans have special place for the supernatural over the natural (Finnegan 1970). Since majority of the Africans were considered as semi-literate, magic would appeal more to them and would manipulate their thinking.

Additionally, Couto sees the poverty menace as a disease that afflicted the Africans and derailed their progress. He uses Emerlindo Mucanga, a ghost character to unravel this reality. In a conversation between Navaia Caetano and Izidine Naita, whose body Emerlindo Mucanga occupies, the two are shown quarreling over who had tampered with his bag:

But now let me ask you: was anything taken? It's just that the old folk here are all takers. They don't steal. Just take. They take things without even getting as far as stealing them. Let me explain: here in this fort, no one owns anything. So if there are no owners, there's nothing to steal. Isn't that so? Here, it's the grass that eats the cow. I deny any theft but I confess to the crime (P.21).

The quote explains the level of poverty in the refugee camp. Couto humorously scorns the creation of refugees, which left many Africans poor and miserable. In general, the old people are expected to be at their homes being nursed by their children. They are expected to have accumulated wealth during the days of their youth. However, these old timers are rotting in refugee camps in dire poverty. Couto uses Emerlindo Mucanga one of the liberalist who succumbed while fighting for the freedom of Portuguese to pour out his unsatisfactory state of things in Mozambique. He stands a better place to unravel these ugly turnouts of events after the independence. He does not give a biased picture because he is angry with the leaders and other opportunistic Africans who got a chance to control resources of the country leaving the majority, like those Portuguese poor.

Corruption and bribery rocked majority of the African nations after the independence. Couto in *Under the Frangipani* uses ghost character to unravel the horrifying situation that unexpectedly struck the Africans who had hoped for the freedom of mind and economy. He employs a dead and buried narrator Emerlindo Mucanga who feels irritated by the happenings in the world of the living. In a conversation with Halakavuma he says,

"Don't you want to be a hero? But a hero of what, beloved of who? Now that the country is a harvest of ruin, why do they call for me, a humble carpenter?" (p.6). The narrator hints on the oppression and corruption that surrounded the Portuguese country. Bone (2017) notes that the conflicts in Africa are caused by few individuals who want to continuously control the resources. Couto criticizes such individuals in a harsh way using a dead narrator who feels irritated by their conduct.

Furthermore, Couto kills some characters to pave way for the analysis of their corrupt misdemeanor. It is through the death of Vastsome Excellency that his rotten character is brought to limelight. In a letter seen by the police inspector, Izidine Naita, who is investigating his death, the following is revealed:

When I came to the refugee, I came face to face with my husband's wickedness. Excellency was selling the provisions destined for the refugee. The old folk weren't even fed the basic necessities so they were wasting away. Sometime I had an impression they were dying skewered by their very bones. But Vastsome really did not care about their suffering. (P.102)

The quote explains Vastsome extremity of corruption. His callous attitude towards the refugees who were fighting for the country liberation is recounted. Williams (2017) observes that in colonial government people were united against their ruler, the white. However, when the liberators took over, only a few people benefited. Majority read about freedom in books and did not experience it in reality. This is evidenced by corrupt people such as Vastsome Excellency who shows little concern for people in the refugee camp.

IV. Ghost Characterization as a Reflection of Bizarre Political Climate in Mozambique

Cambridge International Dictionary of English (1995) defines political climate as the aggregate mood and opinions of a political society at a particular time. The expression is generally used to describe a state of mood and opinion that is changing or unstable rather than at equilibrium. The phrase traces its origin to both ancient Greece and Medieval- era France. Couto uses ghost characters to depict the woes of post-colonial governments that were marred by political assassinations. Little Miss No who lingers between life and death uses her telepathic ability to pry into the cause of Vastsome Excellency's death. She tells the police officer investigating his death that, "It was they who murdered Vastsome Excellency. It was them, the same people who are going to kill you, inspector. Tomorrow, they're going to come and kill you" (p.142). "They" here represents the government officials who would land in a helicopter. The government officials murdered Vastsome because he lost the war weapons. This is an attack on the government's irresponsible manner of handling the people and their fellow political leaders. Couto achieves to reveal all this using characters that have the ability to oscillate the two realms and bring out the weird actions of postcolonial leaders.

The dead narrator Emerlindo Mucanga is used to portray the white hegemony. Emerlindo's acerbation reveals the oppression perpetrated by the whites. The description given about the cell that he is locked in tells it all. He says:

I went back to my hut. I shut myself away in total darkness, as was my custom. There was no clothing in my room. The door and curtains were made of wood; there was not a ray of light that could penetrate the room. That night, I could hardly contain myself. My eyes gazed into the distance to the point where they harvested ancient sadness. My eye lashed flooded, soaked with sorrows but what was I crying for? (p. 118).

This excerpt explicates the psychological torture the black liberators were subjected to by their white masters. Keeping one in a darkened room that has no light tortures one health wise and emotionally. Generally, human beings are social beings. It is unfortunate that the colonizers would lock one in an isolated place withdrawing him from the rest of the people. These painful episodes are made possible to recount by reincarnating the dead to give firsthand information.

Ghost characters are used to unmask concealed cruelty of the white colonialist. Couto depicts the colonialists as rapists and killers of the Africans. For instance, Emerlindo Mucanga's reincarnation brings to publicity how his death occurred. He professes that he had developed an affair with a woman whom he had never seen face-to-face. Once he comes to know who the uninvited visitor in the cube was, she decided to kill him. He says:

Her hands touched me and I felt that familiar shivers electrify my body. I knew what was coming and offered my neck. I was waiting for her lips, her teeth, and her tongue. The woman lingered in a careless. Until I felt her hot breath moistening my ear. That was when her teeth plunged violently into my flesh. What surprised me mostly were my own screams. I didn't

know whether anyone heard the other howls. I failed to stifle. For this latest intruder, I discovered too late was my executioner (p.120).

This is indicative of the government plans to exterminate all the Africans who were involved in insurrection like Emerlindo Mucanga. It is more worrying to learn that he was killed by the wife of the supervisor. This shows extra judicial killing and maiming of most of the African people. The author mocks and scorns the whites for their elaborate hypocrisy when handling affairs of the Africans. They maimed, killed, and oppressed them while pretending to help.

Through the ghost narrator, a glaring picturesque of racism during post-colonial period is portrayed. Ernestina expresses how her husband would mistreat Domingo Mourao in the process of trying to cover up the fears of being accused of racism. She says, "You don't understand his wickedness, do you? No. It's because you're white. He has to mistreat you. Why? He's scared he'll be called a racist" (P.48). Ernestina is used here as a mollifier and cleanser of her husband's evilness. The dilemma of half cast forces Vastome to mistreat the white in order to identify with the blacks after the independence. He mistreats Domingo Mourao who is a white in order to win acceptance in the world of the Africans. This is a depiction of how the structure of racism used to work in African countries after the departure of the white colonialist.

Couto uses ghost characters to explore political mendaciousness in Mozambique. He achieves this through giving a dead man a voice to speak from a grave. Emerlindo Mucanga expresses his dissatisfaction with the current ruling government in Mozambique. He terms their move to give him a promotion as a national hero as a deception. He says:

Until one day, I was awoken by a thumping and shaking. Someone was interfering with my grave. I pried into their conversation and understood: the governors wanted to turn me into a national hero. They needed a hero, but not just any old one. They wanted one of my particular race, tribe, and region. To satisfy discord and placate the aggrieved. When I realized what was happening, I didn't know what to do. ..I had to undo their deception (P.4).

Through the ghost narrator, Couto is able to navigate into Mozambican politics. This study argues that a ghost character gives him free space in which he succeeds in attacking African hypocritical leaders. The ghost character makes their deception more real and appealing as opposed to allegations, which could be laid against the leaders by their subjects thus appearing as fallacious to the eyes of an outsider.

Moreover, Couto ridicules incompetence, and negligence in leadership using ghost characters. Unwillingness of the novel's protagonist Ermelindo Mucanga to return as a Shipoco to the world of the living speaks much about the situation in Africa. When instructed by Halakavuma that the only way he would avoid being made the national hero would be through becoming a Shipoco, he tells him that:

Don't you want to be a hero?
But a hero of what, beloved of whom? Now that the country is a harvest of ruins, why do they call for me, a humble carpenter? The anteater began to prey upon my interest.
Wouldn't you like to be alive again?
No, I wouldn't. Not in the state, my country is in. (P.6)

The complaint shown in the quote mimics the cry of the African liberators whose lives were cut short by death before independence. When fighting, they had a dream of a free and economically viable country, but unfortunately, those who took over the leadership failed to meet their expectations severely. They perpetrated vices beyond human imagination (Moussa, 2012). Couto uses magical realism because it is able to bring out those vices in the crudest way possible.

The reincarnation of the dead reveals the effects of war in post-colonial Mozambique. Ermelindo Mucanga outlives the death, thus figuring horrific effects of war in his country. He reveals that the war has destabilized the country. It is reported that:

The culprit you seek, my dear Izidine, isn't a person. It's war. The war is to blame for everything. The war killed Vastome. The war tore to shreds the world in which elderly folk could shine and had a role to play. These old timers who are rotting away here, were loved before the conflict (P.123).

The quotation above reveals that the effects of war in African countries are disastrous. They made the country ungovernable and underdeveloped. Couto employs ghost characters, which come in the mode of magical realism to depict this sad picture. Nguni (2001) in an interview with Bronwyn argues that socio-political situation in

African has reached a point where the novelist's imagination must go beyond realism if he/she is to adequately represent it. He suggests fables and fantastical worlds as the best method of presenting it. Similarly, Couto adopts a mode that helps him paint the effects of these wars as clearly as possible.

V. Conclusion

This paper has shown that the use of ghost characters enabled the author to explore the social economic and political Mozambique environment during and after postcolonial government. The ability of the ghost characters to oscillate the fanciful and material world enables them to reveal the detailed human experiences, which ordinary human beings cannot. They achieve to explicate the rich African myths surrounding death and life. They also have been able to bring to limelight the weird exploitation of the Mozambican by the white masters and their fellow blacks after the independence both economically and politically. Therefore, this study concludes that the use of ghost characters has proved to be an effective tool to narrate Mozambican colonial and postcolonial history, contemporary and the prospects of future in a mysterious manner.

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