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The poetics of repair: Cultural practice, ritual and language in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Matigari* and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dust*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the similarities in the deployment of cultural practice, ritual and language to foster the restoration of community in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Matigari* (1987) and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dust* (2014). It argues that both novels, despite belonging to different literary generations and adopting different narrative strategies, locate the work of communal repair in the same cultural resources: the reclamation of names, the practice of oral testimony, embodied ritual gesture, multilingual code-switching, ritual engagement with land, and acts of hospitality and shared provision. Working within postcolonial theory, drawing on Frantz Fanon's account of national culture as material resistance, Wa Thiong'o's theory of orality and linguistic decolonisation, Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, Gayatri Spivak's subaltern problematic, and the model of abrogation and appropriation developed by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, the article shows that both novels stage cultural practice as a self-generated, community-authored act of restoration that operates independently of, and frequently in defiance of, the postcolonial state. It concludes that this restorative vocabulary, while genuine, remains incomplete and unevenly distributed across each community's members.

KEYWORDS: cultural practice, ritual, language, communal restoration, postcolonial theory, orality

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1. Introduction

Wa Thiong'o's *Matigari* (1987) and Owuor's *Dust* (2014) are separated by markedly different narrative techniques, and by different generational vantage points on Kenyan history, yet both novels return their characters, again and again, to a small set of cultural practices when the work of repairing a fractured community must be done. This article asks what these shared practices are, and why they recur across two novels otherwise so different in ideology and form.

The community that each novel's characters must repair has been fractured by colonial and postcolonial violence: the Mau Mau war and its betrayal in *Matigari*, the security operations carried out against pastoralist communities in northern Kenya from the 1960s onward, and the violence following the disputed 2007 presidential election in *Dust*. In neither novel does an external body, whether the state, a tribunal, or an international mediator, undertake the work of repairing this fracture. Instead, both novels stage restoration as something the community must do for itself, using resources it already possesses: names, stories, rituals, languages, land, and food. This article treats these resources as postcolonial cultural practices in the specific sense developed by Frantz Fanon, for whom the reconstruction of national culture is itself a form of resistance and a precondition for a self-determining community, rather than as instruments of any formal reconciliation process.

The article proceeds as follows. It sets out the theoretical framework used to interpret cultural practice, ritual and language as restorative resources. It then reviews the existing scholarship bearing on ritual, naming and language in both novels. Subsequently, it sets out the comparative method used to identify shared restorative strategies across the two texts. It presents, under numbered thematic headings, the resulting evidence for six shared restorative strategies and finally concludes by summarising the article's central claim.

2. Theoretical Framework

This article draws on five strands of postcolonial theory, each supplying a distinct lens for interpreting cultural practice, ritual and language as instruments of communal restoration, and each bearing on the others in ways that the analysis below makes use of throughout. Fanon's chapter 'On National Culture', in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), argues that colonialism does not merely dispossess the colonised of land and labour but denies them a culture, and that the reconstruction of national culture is therefore itself a form of resistance and a precondition for the restoration of a genuinely self-determining community. Crucially, Fanon insists that this reconstructed culture cannot be a simple return to a romanticised precolonial past, since that past no longer exists in an unmediated form. National culture must instead be forged in and through the ongoing struggle of the people themselves, so that cultural practice and political resistance become inseparable activities. This supplies the study's central premise: that the naming, storytelling, ritual and linguistic practices examined below are constitutive acts through which both novels' communities reconstruct themselves as communities, not incidental cultural colour.

Wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) extends Fanon's argument specifically to language and oral performance, proposing that the communal, participatory structures of African orature, proverb, call and response, the performed telling and retelling of a shared story, carry within them a model of community itself, in which meaning is made collectively rather than transmitted from a single authorial source to a passive audience. Where Fanon supplies the general claim that culture restores community, Wa Thiong'o supplies the specific mechanism, orality, through which that restoration is enacted in speech and performance. This theory is applied here as a lens for reading each novel's deployment of oral convention as a substantive claim about how community is restored, through active, participatory retelling rather than through the passive reception of an externally imposed settlement.

Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity (1994) is applied to the specific question of how a restored community can include, rather than erase, the differences among its members. A restorative practice grounded in hybridity does not demand that a fractured community return to a single, pure, pre-conflict identity, which is in any case unrecoverable; it instead builds restored community out of the mixed, multiple cultural and linguistic resources the community's members actually possess. Bhabha's contribution qualifies Wa Thiong'o's emphasis on communal orality by insisting that the community being restored through storytelling and ritual is never internally uniform, so that hybridity becomes the condition under which Fanon's national culture and Wa Thiong'o's orality can accommodate real linguistic and ethnic difference rather than presupposing a single, shared tongue.

Gayatri Spivak's subaltern problematic (1988) is applied as a necessary check on any overly celebratory reading of the cultural and ritual restoration that Fanon, Wa Thiong'o and Bhabha together describe. Spivak's question, can the subaltern speak, translates here into a further question. Does a given restorative ritual

genuinely restore voice of a fractured community, or does it, even in its ostensibly communal form, continue to route restoration through privileged intermediaries, whether a male protagonist, a dominant ethnic group, or a mediating narrator? This lens is applied throughout the analysis to prevent the article's central claim from becoming an uncritical celebration of cultural practice as such, and it works against the grain of the other four theorists by asking who, within the restored community each of them describes, is actually permitted to speak.

Finally, the model of abrogation and appropriation developed by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989) is applied specifically to the practice of naming examined in the first thematic category below. Abrogation, the refusal of the coloniser's authority over meaning, and appropriation, the active reshaping of language, including proper names, to carry a different cultural weight, together supply the vocabulary for reading acts of naming in both novels as restorative acts, attempts to wrest the power of naming away from a colonial or neocolonial order and to return it to the community being named. Taken together, these five strands interact across the analysis that follows in a consistent way. Fanon establishes why cultural practice matters for restoration; Wa Thiong'o and Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin each specify a mechanism, orality and naming respectively, through which that practice is enacted; Bhabha qualifies both by insisting on the hybrid, non-uniform character of the community being restored; and Spivak questions, throughout, whether that restoration genuinely reaches the community's most marginalised members.

3. Literature Review

Kouakou (2023) offers directly relevant existing analysis for this article's concerns, reading Matigari's onomastic construction, the deliberate, allegorically loaded naming of its protagonist and other characters, as a site of postcolonial liminality in which linguistic abrogation and appropriation confer a hybrid framework on the narrative as a whole. Kouakou's reading supports the study's premise that naming in Matigari operates as a restorative cultural practice in its own right, reclaiming for the community the power to name its own experience rather than accepting the names imposed upon it by colonial and neocolonial authority. Raghavan (2007: 153 to 163) further establishes the novel's grounding in Gikuyu myth and oral performance, while Maxwell (2011: 218 to 247) emphasises the collective, participatory register of the novel's oral address. Taken together, this scholarship establishes that Matigari's restorative cultural work operates substantially through naming and oral performance, even though none of these studies frames this work explicitly as restorative community building.

Scholarship on *Dust* converges on a related but distinct set of concerns. Mourning, burial, and the ritual acknowledgement of the dead as sites where the novel's fractured family, and by extension the fractured nation it represents in miniature, attempts to reconstitute itself. Njovane (2023) reads the family's eventual, painful acknowledgement of buried violence as a form of ritual disclosure that, while incomplete, allows the family to begin to function again as a family rather than as a set of individuals bound only by shared secrecy. Pandey (2025: 11 to 31) develops a related argument concerning the novel's investment in storytelling as a form of protest and repair, arguing that the act of finally telling a story that has been withheld constitutes, in itself, a restorative act. Neither study systematically compares this ritual and narrative work in *Dust* to the comparable, if formally different, cultural work performed by naming and oral performance in Matigari.

Both novels draw their restorative concerns from specific, datable moments of Kenyan political violence. The Mau Mau war of 1952 to 1960 supplies Matigari's direct historical referent and the promise of land restoration that structures its plot. *Dust* layers over this same referent two further moments: the security operations against pastoralist communities in Kenya's Northern Frontier District from the 1960s onward, including the 1984 Wagalla massacre at Wajir documented by Anderson (2014), and the ethnically inflected violence following the disputed December 2007 presidential election. This layering of three historical moments within a single family narrative makes the community-authored restorative practices examined in this article not incidental but necessary, since scarce external bodies have undertaken the work of repair on the community's behalf in either text.

The existing scholarship on cultural practice, ritual and language in Matigari and in *Dust* has developed along separate tracks, oriented respectively towards naming and oral performance on one side and mourning and disclosure on the other. Few studies place these two bodies of scholarship in direct comparative dialogue in order to ask what they share, despite the two novels' considerable differences of ideology and narrative form. This article addresses that gap, keeping the analysis focused on cultural practice as a self-generated, community-authored form of resistance and repair.

4. Procedure

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative literary design appropriate to a research question concerned with

shared cultural, ritual and linguistic practice. *Matigari* and *Dust* were purposively selected as the two primary texts on four grounds. Both are set substantially in Kenya and engage the memory of the Mau Mau war. They were composed a generation apart, allowing a genuinely generational comparison. Both foreground characters explicitly engaged in repairing inherited injustice; and finally, both novelists are major figures who have already attracted substantial postcolonial scholarship, against which the present analysis can be triangulated.

Data collection proceeded through repeated close reading of both novels with attention to instances of naming and renaming; oral proverbs, prophecies, testimonies and storytelling; embodied ritual gesture, including oath-taking, blessing, mourning and burial; multilingual code switching and translation; ritual or symbolic engagement with land; and acts of hospitality and shared provision. These instances were coded manually under six corresponding thematic categories, derived inductively from an initial reading of both texts and subsequently refined against the theoretical framework set out above. For each category, passages from *Matigari* were placed alongside comparable passages from *Dust*, and the resulting pairings were interpreted for their similarity, rather than their difference, in restorative function. Fanon's account of national culture was used to assess whether a practice functions as a constitutive, community building act. Wa Thiong'o's theory of orality was used to assess the participatory structure of storytelling. Bhabha's hybridity was used to assess whether practices accommodate rather than erase difference. Spivak's subaltern problematic was applied as a critical check on whose voice a given practice actually restores; and the Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin model was used, in particular, to interpret naming practices.

Reliability and validity were supported through triangulation with the existing criticism reviewed above. The analysis makes no claim to statistical generalisability, resting instead on the coherence and textual grounding of its interpretive argument. The study is delimited specifically to cultural, ritual and linguistic practices bearing on communal restoration; other thematic dimensions of the two novels fall outside its scope.

5. Results and Discussion

Close comparative reading of the two novels reveals six recurring, structurally similar strategies through which cultural practices, rituals and language are deployed to restore a fractured community. The analysis below presents this convergence across six thematic categories, moving from textual evidence to interpretation within each, before a final subsection draws the categories together.

5.1 Naming and renaming as reclamation

Both novels invest significant narrative weight in the act of naming. *Matigari*'s own name, generally glossed as referring to the patriots who survived the colonial bullets, is not a conventional proper name but a communal title, claimed by the protagonist on behalf of all who endured the anti-colonial struggle, such that to mention his name is already to invoke a collective rather than an individual referent. Other characters, including Muriuki and Guthera, likewise carry names whose meanings resonate with the novel's larger themes of endurance and moral testing. *Dust* performs a structurally similar operation around its central family, the Ogandas, whose members' names, Ajany, associated with displacement, and Odidi, whose associations with solidity the plot itself ironises, carry inherited meaning that the characters must actively reinterpret in light of the family's buried history. In both novels, naming functions as an act of appropriation in the sense developed by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin: an act of reclaiming, for the community itself, the power to determine what its members' identities mean, rather than accepting an externally imposed, colonially or ethnically inflected identity.

This reclamation operates differently for the two novels' most marginalised figures. Guthera, in *Matigari*, is introduced through the stigmatising label of prostitute before the narrative allows her to reclaim a fuller identity through her own acts of courage and solidarity with the resistance. Her name only gathers restorative weight once the novel has granted her actions that exceed the label first attached to her. *Dust* performs a comparable reclamation around Akai Lokorijom, whose reputation within the family and the wider community has long been simplified into that of a remote, unstable mother, a simplification the novel spends much of its length undoing as it allows her own history of violence and endurance to surface. In both cases, naming as reclamation is not a single act but a process the narrative must earn on behalf of its most vulnerable characters. Read through Spivak's subaltern problematic, however, this reclamation remains, in both novels, substantially mediated. *Matigari*'s restorative naming is channelled through a single male protagonist's judgement of who deserves a fuller name, and Guthera's and Akai's own reclamations are narrated for them rather than fully in their own voice, a qualification that recurs across the categories examined below.

5.2 Oral testimony as communal binding

Both novels also deploy oral storytelling conventions as a means of binding a fractured community back together through shared, actively retold narratives. Matigari's protagonist repeatedly draws on Gikuyu proverb and a self-consciously prophetic register to frame his demand for truth and justice, and the novel stages the spread of his story from listener to listener as itself a restorative act, gradually reconstituting a scattered, intimidated populace into an audience, and eventually into a collective actor, simply through the communal retelling of what Matigari has said and done.

Dust performs a related, though more fragmented, operation. Its characters slowly piece together a shared family story through partial, repeated narrations, each of which adds detail that a previous telling withheld, so that the family's eventual capacity to speak its own history aloud constitutes a restorative achievement structurally comparable to the communal retelling that spreads Matigari's message across the novel's wider community. In both cases, restoration is achieved not through a single authoritative disclosure but through the active, repeated, communal work of telling and retelling that Wa Thiong'o identifies as the defining feature of African orature, in which meaning is made collectively rather than delivered from a single source to a passive audience.

5.3 Embodied ritual gesture: oath-taking, blessing and burial

A third shared strategy involves embodied ritual gesture. Matigari's exchange of a belt of peace for a belt of war, and his broader deployment of gestures drawn from Gikuyu practices of oath-taking and blessing, mark key transitions in the plot through physical, ceremonial action rather than speech alone, consistent with Fanon's insistence that national culture must be enacted materially, through the body and through struggle, rather than merely asserted in the abstract. Dust stages a structurally comparable reliance on embodied ritual at the moments of its plot most directly concerned with communal repair. The family's eventual, proper acknowledgement and burial of its dead, delayed and incomplete for much of the novel, functions as the embodied ritual act through which the Oganda family, and by extension the wider communities implicated in their history, can begin to reconstitute themselves.

In both novels, the withholding or delay of a communally sanctioned ritual marks the community's continuing fracture, while its eventual performance marks the beginning, however partial, of restoration, a pattern that confirms Fanon's broader claim that cultural restoration is never merely declared but must be materially and physically enacted before a community can consider itself repaired.

5.4 Multilingual code switching as a bridge across difference

A fourth shared strategy involves the deliberate mixing of languages and registers as a means of holding together a community that colonial and postcolonial history has divided along ethnic and linguistic lines. Matigari's Gikuyu inflected narration, read alongside its explicit address to workers, students and peasants drawn from across Kenya's ethnic communities, stages language itself as a potential unifying resource, even as the novel's primary register remains predominantly Gikuyu. Dust extends this strategy considerably further, moving between English, Kiswahili, and words drawn from Turkana, Dholuo and other languages spoken across the ethnically plural setting of the novel's northern Kenyan scenes, such that the text's own linguistic hybridity becomes a formal enactment of the multi-ethnic community it depicts attempting to hold itself together. Read through Bhabha's concept of hybridity, both novels' linguistic strategies model a restored community founded not on the restoration of a single, pure, pre-conflict linguistic identity, which neither novel treats as recoverable or desirable, but on the active, ongoing negotiation of linguistic difference within a shared, necessarily hybrid space, a finding that qualifies any reading of either novel as straightforwardly nostalgic or nativist in its cultural politics.

5.5 Land-based ritual: the reclaimed and the returned to homestead

Among the ritual strategies, both novels locate a significant share of their restorative work in ritual engagement with land. Matigari's demand for the return of the house and land he built with his own labour functions as a demand for material restitution, but it also functions as a ritual demand in Fanon's specific sense. The reoccupation of the land is staged as a necessary precondition for the restoration of the community's dignity and self-possession, not merely as an economic transaction. Dust performs a structurally comparable operation around the family homestead, Wuoth Ogik, to which its scattered characters must physically return, and within whose grounds the family's dead must eventually be properly buried, before any of the novel's characters can begin moving forward. This physical return to, and ritual reconsecration of, contested ground functions, across both novels, as an indispensable material anchor for a restoration that could not be achieved through speech, naming or storytelling alone.

5.6 Hospitality and communal provision

Finally, closely related to but distinct from ritual gesture, is the offering and acceptance of food, shelter and material provision as a restorative act binding strangers, exiles and returning kin back into a community. In *Matigari*, small acts of feeding and sheltering the protagonist by ordinary workers and peasants along his journey function as a quiet, cumulative counterpart to the novel's more dramatic confrontations. Each act of hospitality affirms that the community the protagonist addresses is willing to risk something on his behalf before it is willing to rise with him. *Dust* performs a structurally similar operation around the return of its exiled and travelling characters to Wuoth Ogik, where the preparation and sharing of food accompany the family's halting steps towards mutual acknowledgement, such that commensality becomes, in both novels, a modest but indispensable precondition for the larger, more explicitly ritual and linguistic work of restoration examined above.

By locating restorative practice in these community-authored cultural resources rather than in any externally sponsored process, both novels implicitly argue that the work of repairing a Kenyan community fractured by colonial and postcolonial violence cannot be outsourced to a state, a truth commission or an international mediating body, all of which are conspicuously absent, or present only as objects of suspicion, in both texts. Where societies emerging from conflict elsewhere have often relied on formal, institutionally sponsored settlement to perform the work of acknowledgement, both novels depict a Kenyan context in which such institutions are either absent, discredited, or actively complicit in the violence requiring repair. The two novels' shared reliance on naming, oral testimony, ritual gesture, hybrid language, land-based practice and hospitality can accordingly be read as a literary argument, made independently by two writers a generation apart, that in such a context the community itself, its elders, its storytellers, its returning exiles, and its shared meals, must become the resource of last resort for restoration. Neither novel presents this as an ideal arrangement; both register, in different ways, the cost and incompleteness of restoration achieved without formal institutional support, but both present it as the only restoration actually available, which is itself a significant and consistent claim about the limits of the postcolonial Kenyan state as a vehicle for communal repair.

5.7 Summary of findings

Across the six categories examined, naming, oral testimony, embodied ritual, multilingual code switching, land-based ritual, and hospitality, both novels converge on the same restorative vocabulary. In *Matigari*, this vocabulary takes the form of the protagonist's communal, title-like name, the spread of his message through retelling, the exchange of the belt of peace and war, a Gikuyu-inflected address to a plural audience, the reoccupation of the built homestead, and small acts of feeding and sheltering along the road. In *Dust*, the same six strategies recur in different forms: names reinterpreted against buried family history, a family story pieced together through repeated partial narrations, the delayed and then completed burial of the dead, a hybrid mixture of English, Kiswahili, Turkana and Dholuo, the return to and reconsecration of Wuoth Ogik, and the shared preparation of food that accompanies the family's reunion.

The consistency of this pattern, recurring across two texts that differ markedly in ideology and narrative form, strengthens the claim that both novels converge on a shared, specifically postcolonial model of communal restoration, one grounded in the community's own cultural, ritual and linguistic resources rather than in any externally sponsored process. Read together, and in light of the qualification raised throughout by Spivak's subaltern problematic, the six strategies examined above achieve a genuine, if still incomplete and unevenly distributed, form of communal repair. In both novels, the cultural practices concerned remain, to varying degrees, mediated by figures who are not themselves the most marginalised members of the community being restored, so that *Dust*'s more genuinely distributed storytelling still grants its own central family considerably more narrative access than it grants the wider northern Kenyan communities, including Somali and other pastoralist groups, whose historical suffering, exemplified by the Wagalla massacre documented by Anderson (2014), the novel gestures towards without narrating directly through their own voices.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the similarities in the deployment of cultural practice, ritual and language to foster communal restoration in Wa Thiong'o's *Matigari* and Oluo's *Dust*. Working within a postcolonial theoretical framework, the study has identified six structurally comparable restorative strategies shared by the two novels. The reclamation of naming, the communal retelling of oral testimony, embodied ritual gesture, multilingual code switching, ritually significant engagement with contested land, and acts of hospitality and shared provision. These similarities persist despite the marked ideological and formal differences between the two novels, suggesting that Kenyan resistance fiction, across a generation otherwise marked by significant change, retains a consistent, Fanonian

commitment to culture as the material ground on which a fractured postcolonial community must reconstruct itself. Read through Spivak's subaltern problematic, this restorative work remains incomplete and unevenly distributed in both novels, a qualification that points to a further avenue for postcolonial literary research. The article contributes to postcolonial literary scholarship a comparative account of restorative cultural practice that existing criticism of the two novels, read separately, has not offered, and it suggests that Kenyan resistance fiction is best understood as a tradition that returns, across otherwise very different texts, to the same cultural resources when imagining how a fractured community might, however incompletely, become a community again. The study's findings are subject to the limitation of examining only two novels, and a fuller comparative account would benefit from extending the analysis to additional Kenyan texts in which communal restoration is similarly staged through cultural rather than institutional means.

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