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**ORIGINAL ARTICLE****'Historical Falsehood and the Therapy of Truth: A Reader-Response  
Interrogation of Mukoma wa Ngugi's *Mrs. Shaw*****Anthony Ebebe Eyang | Augustine Ayilewu Edung**<sup>2</sup>Lecturer, Department of English & Literary Studies,  
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**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the portrayal of two contrasting historical accounts about the African past in Mukoma wa Ngugi's *Mrs. Shaw* (2015). The text is analysed from the point of view of Reader-Response and, eclectically, with insights from theories of Deconstruction and Postcolonialism. By this theoretical approach, the study examines the author's redefinition and re-rendition of an African historical past which hitherto had been a source of vilification, demonization and mischaracterization of Africa with the attendant denigration and unjust treatment of the people. The paper also interrogates the author's language as a facilitator of the realization of the theme of historical re-orientation and deconstruction. The paper concludes that African writers involve in the undertaking of nation-building through literary creativity. Also, like the traditional griots, they are guardians of sacred history, as this manifest in the interrogation and re-imagining of false accounts about the people's past.

**Keywords:** re-imagining, reader-response, deconstruction, post-colonial, historical re-orientation

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**INTRODUCTION**

By defining character as a reflection of society and habits, literary production engages the anxieties and tensions experienced by people in a given time and space (Eyang, 2004; Eyang & Okune 2004). Though fictional, time and space and the temperament they generate under a certain climate of values and milieu form an essential ingredient for creative writing; thus making clearer the dialectical relationship between literature and socio-historical realities (Okpiliya & Eyang 2003; Eyang 2016; ). Put differently, literature and history can be said to be indivisible as one facilitates

the production and/or understanding of the other. On this, Aisha Karim and Lee Suster opine that "history and the text...have melded together to the extent that they have become almost undistinguishable" (p. 12). Through literary narratives, readers can be given an insight into their past and some key events that have come to define them as a people.

Social and political history can be re-enacted as part of the craft of a writer in the much welcome attempt to re-present certain accounts that have either been inadequately rendered or have been marked by subjectivity and falsehood. This representation of history by the writer is an act of serious involvement aimed at challenging the problematic orthodoxy that people appear to have comfortably settled in. In his essay, "Politics, Culture, and Literary Form", Bernth Lindfors (2007) argues that contemporary writers of Africa are greatly inspired by the political happenings around them, which he considers in the light of historical transformation. More directly, Lindfors (2007) proceeds to argue that writers are "chroniclers of history" and "advocates of social change" (p. 22). Lindfors' position here corresponds with that of Chinua Achebe (1999) who contends in "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation" that the African writer should put at the fore of his creativity the need to correct the prejudices labeled against the African identity by Eurocentric detractors. This is a charge that implies the social involvement of African writers in the collective quest to free the continent from the yoke of systemic and epistemic violence against the black race. Literature, consequently, becomes a veritable instrument, nay a platform to preserve aspects of history that will guide the people in their aspiration towards building a stable nation. In this direction, the primary focus of this paper is the exploration of the writer in the assumed role as a historian in Mukoma wa Ngugi's *Mrs. Shaw* as a way of deepening the understanding of the relationship between literary craft and history; and how a historical re-orientation of the people becomes the crux of literary creativity.

## **READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM: A CONCISE SURVEY**

Reader-Response theory or approach to literary criticism emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in the United States and Germany. The theory places primacy on the reader of a text and the engagement of the same reader in the interpretation of literary works. This approach to textual study and interpretation emerged with contrast to earlier theoretical approaches and schools of thought such as New criticism, Psychoanalysis, structuralism, and so on, which emphasized either the text or the author as the principal elements that bear the meaning in a literary work. Katie Wales (2011) makes this clear where she contends succinctly that:

Reader response criticism, like post-structuralism, tried to move away from the text as critical focus, and even more so from (the intentions of) the author. To some

extent, it prefigured current preoccupations in ethical criticism with the reader being responsible for meaning-making and responding responsively to a work of art (pp. 354-355).

Wales' (2011) notion, here, underscores the innovation brought about to the act of literary criticism by the practitioners of the Reader-Response approach. By giving relevance to the reader (or critic), they broadened the scope of literary criticism and established, more solidly, the author-text-reader relationship that best describes literary criticism. In the observation of Peter Rabonwitz, the theory sprang up to respond more directly to New Criticism and to fill the void left in the assumption of the New Critics that a text is an autonomous object that can and should be analyzed without regard to its context. Therefore, the approach has brought the reader into the spotlight, considering his/her role to be vital in textual analysis.

Notable founders of the theoretical line are Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Hans-Robert Jauss, Norman Holland, Roland Barthes, and a host of others. The approach was also influenced by I. A. Richards who analysed a group of Cambridge undergraduate misreadings in 1929. The Reader-Response theory puts forward the strong argument that literature is comparable to performing art, which stands to be viewed differently by different readers. About this, M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham (2014) state:

Reader-response critics of all theoretical persuasions agree that, at least to some considerable degree, the meanings of a text are the "production" or "creation" of the individual reader, hence that there is no one "correct" meaning for all readers either of the linguistic parts or of the artistic whole of a text... we are unable to demonstrate that anyone reading is the correct reading (p. 266).

Abrams and Harpham (2014) here stress the flexible nature of this theory as it allows every reader of a text the liberty to interpret its meaning based on their distinct perception of the text. It is of utmost importance to note here that there is no underlying methodology to textual analysis that is stressed or emphasized by the Reader Response critics to textual analysis. Charles Bressler (1999) makes this clear, thus:

...reader-response criticism does not provide us with a unified body of theory or a single methodological approach for textual analysis. What those who call themselves reader-response critics, reader-critics, or audience-oriented critics share is a concern for the reader. Believing that a literary work's interpretation is created when a reader and a text interact and/or transact, these critics assert that the proper study of textual analysis must consider both the reader and the text, not simply the text in isolation (p. 50).



This shows that the approach is centred on the reader, allowing him/her the free will to interpret meaning just as it is perceived. Hence, the Reader Response critics draw inspiration from other theoretical methodologies in establishing the arguments they highlight from their reading of a text. Bressler (1999) points this out in his observation that "Because the term reader-response criticism allows for so much diversity in theory and methods, many twentieth-century schools of criticism, such as deconstruction, feminism, Marxism, New Historicism, declare their membership in this broad classification. Therefore, it becomes clear that the Reader-Response theory taps from other approaches in the evaluation of a work of art. This is so because in reacting adequately to a text, the reader (whose role is considered most significant to the critical procedure) might be compelled to borrow certain strands of other theories in order to aid his/her interpretation of the text in question.

The lack of definite tenets and methodology in the practice of the Reader-Response approach is considered a shortcoming by Rabonwitz who views the theory to be lacking a definite sense of direction and purpose. He contends that the critics in this school of thought "...are not working together from the same assumptions toward the same common end; they have neither a shared methodology nor a clear pattern of growth" (p. 82).

These critical observations do not, however, invalidate the Reader-Response theory as a tool for literary interpretation, except of course the necessity for the theory to be applied with support from other theories. Therefore, this approach in the analysis of this text is complemented by aspects of deconstruction and postcolonialism in examining the author's re-imaging of African history through a literary rejection of a long-told account that is deliberately false and aimed at unjust exploitation of the African people.

## **SYNOPSIS OF WA NGUGI'S *MRS. SHAW***

Through a resilient bloody resistance, the fictional Republic of Kwatee has just escaped colonial oppression only to be launched into a chaotic and corrupt post-colonial regime. Ruled by an insensitive dictator, the people are silenced and any opposition is crushed. A failed coup attempt pushes Kwatee into great turmoil, resulting in the brutal massacre of many who are perceived to be enemies of the State. Amongst those executed in this show of unrestrained brutality is a pastor, Baba Ogum, whose church sermons are considered to incite dissent and resistance against the regime. Kalumba, the protagonist, escapes execution and is left with no other choice but exile. He disguises himself as a Samari hunter to help him evade the heavily armed militia of the government who have a list in which Kalumba's name is written, alongside the names of others to be executed. He ends up in the United States of

American where he finds a new home, though devoid of the internal craving for his native land.

In exile, Kalumba meets and falls in love with a fellow exile, Melissa, who has escaped similar circumstances in Puerto Rico. He also meets with a white woman, Mrs. Shaw of British ancestry, whose husband, Mr. Oliver Shaw, was the head of the British National Security in the British colonial administration in Kwatee. Kalumba and Mrs. Shaw engage the history of Kwatee in a manner that reveals a long-kept secret in the accounts of Kwatee's past. Mrs. Shaw makes it clear that her husband, Mr. Oliver Shaw, was not killed by pro-independence agitators as generally believed, but by her very self. She narrates to him the gruesome manner in which she killed her former husband, providing proof with his skull which she has kept for more than forty years to back her claim.

Discovering this truth leaves Kalumba in shock, but he feels a great sense of joy because to him, such details will help in rewriting his people's history. Upon the collapse of the Dictator's regime, Kalumba returns to Kwatee hoping to see a nation that would be home to all its citizens once again.

## **HISTORICAL FALSEHOOD AND THE THERAPY OF TRUTH**

*Mrs. Shaw* presents us with an interrogation of African history and an attempt to correct the wrongs done to the people of the African continent by a false account of their past which has continued to be passed down for many generations. The author builds his narrative around history, bringing together characters who have divergent views of the same, and who bring their different fragments of truths to fix the cracks in the hitherto believed accounts. This is made focal because the importance of history to a people cannot be over-emphasized. Chinua Achebe (2012) underscores this relevance of history in *There was a Country*, where, drawing from an Igbo proverb, he notes that a group of people must know where the rain began to beat them to know where their bodies got dry. Hence, to a group, history provides the light that guides their existence and direction.

For decades, it has been believed that Mr. Oliver Shaw, a former head of British national security (and once a district commissioner) in colonial Kwatee had been kidnapped and murdered by members of the Kwateean resistance against colonial rule. This has been the account told by teachers of history, like Baba Kalumba (Kaumba's father). Kalumba makes it clear, thus:

I remember my father's history lessons as Ogum and I listened in fascination: The ebb and flow, resistance and repression had gone on for years. Then Kwateans made one bold move that changed everything. They kidnapped the head of British National Security...who had proved to be very able in native pacification

campaigns. They held him for a few days, and when there was no sign that the white government would cease its campaign, they killed him and buried him in an unmarked grave. The colonial government went on the rampage and killed hundreds of Kwateans as it searched for “black terrorists” (my father would say *terrorists* with a wink) (p. 68).

It is this account of history that has been handed on through the years. The Africans have been made to believe that they are savages who cannot be controlled or tamed; and uncivilized people deserving of ‘the hard lessons taught’ them by the white men. Conversely, the Europeans are by this history believed to be justified, if not glorified, in their pernicious campaign against the Africans and crime against humanity.

However, Kalumba's contact with Mrs. Shaw opens new layers of history and uncovers new shades of truth. She (the eponymous character) boldly declares that “I am part of history even though history doesn't know it” (p. 71). She gives her own account of how the head of the British National Security, who also doubled as her late husband, had actually been murdered. Stroking the man's original skull (which she has kept as a mark of her triumph), Mrs. Shaw recounts:

I tied him to his favourite chair and sat all night waiting for him to wake up.... Then I killed him.... Seven o'clock in the morning. I opened up the curtain and told him to look at the rising sun.... I took tobacco and paper from his shirt pocket and rolled him one—just like he taught me—lit it and held it to his lips—his first thank you to me. I took the gun off his belt, placed it on his forehead, and shot him (p. 69).

This piece of history means a lot to the people of Kwatee. It is also a reminder that most of the history of Africa has been replete with false accounts that have been told to give a positive face to the colonial masters while at the same time destroying the image, culture, and identity of the African people. The author, here, sets out to deconstruct an order that has persisted for many decades. Through the voice of Kalumba, it is pointed out that “No matter what, people deserve to know how their history was made” (p. 71). And knowing how one's history is (or was) made means ensuring that facts are embedded in the narrative.

Mukoma wa Ngugi (2015) creatively gives an account of Kwatee Republic, a metaphorical representation of all of Africa. The people of this sovereign nation have passed through cold and unforgiving times—right from the colonial days to what the author refers to as a “stillborn independence” (p. 69). Their lives and hopes are shown to be shrouded in betrayal—they are betrayed by history, betrayed by their leaders, betrayed by love. The protagonist, Kalumba exiles himself from Kwatee to escape the festering and crushing regime of the Dictator, ruler of Kwatee. Betrayed by his

homeland and his sense of belonging to his ancestry, Kalumba finds a haven in America where he lives out the next decade of his life trying to understand what has gone wrong with his continent. This chain of events—colonialism, independence, post-colonial calamity—is a mutual denominator in the narrative of the entire continent. The focus in the text is however on military dictatorship which reflects regimes such as the Ugandan Idi Amin, the Nigerian Gen. Sani Abacha, and so on, who in the words of Peter Onwudinjo (2011), “rode rough-shoed on the good” of all (p. 149). These regimes are shown by the author to be dehumanizing and stifling to the masses and the hopes of nationhood. The brutality of the regime in Kwatee, compared to colonial times, is shown by the author in Kalumba’s reflection, thus:

Perhaps this massacre was the culmination of generations upon generations of sacrifices. Massacres and genocides: how much can a people endure? He thought back to the thousands killed by the British administration during the uprising that finally gave way to the first independence.... And now they were at it again. Was this the culmination? Death as a constant no matter who led the country? (p. 8).

The question that ends the extract here puzzles the average African. Dispensations have changed but the story of grief and torment has remained unaltered. The priest, Baba Ogum (a martyr) is unable to keep silent in the face of this betrayal of nationhood. Hence, he alludes to the characters of Judas in the Bible to express the betrayal and denial the people of Kwatee have suffered in recent times. He creates powerful mental impressions in the minds of the reader in his description of the “starved, bruised, and battered bodies [that] walked into his church every Sunday” (p. 2). He contends:

There is Judas and there is Peter.... Judas betraying, Peter denying. Let me ask you, whose sins were greater? The one who betrayed or the one who denied? In our times, whose sins are greater? Those that betray us for thirty pieces of silver or the pious that stand by, denying the injustice of it all? We, the people, are the body of Christ; the State, Judas. Need I tell you who Peter is? Go home—you have much to do (p. 2).

By drawing a comparison with the persecution and crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the author shows in a vivid sense the unfair persecution suffered by post-colonial African nations in the hands of insensitive leaders who only think of self-indulgence rather than the good of the masses.

From the title of the novel itself, named eponymously after Mrs. Shaw, the author makes a powerful statement about her as an embodiment of the history of Kwatee. Mrs. Shaw is seen as a bearer of true history, and as a carrier of a fact, that overwhelms the entire Kwateean nation. She understands her significance and goes on to tell

Kalumba: “Hey! You there! You know what you need? A white mother” (p. 52). She says this, referring to herself, and highlighting the central position she occupies in the past events of the Kwateean people. Yet it is on account of her cruel and premeditated murder of her husband that the Africans have been demonized, brutalized, and killed in their thousands.

It is important to note that in the depiction of the characters of Mrs. Shaw, Baba Kalumba, and Kalumba, a historical triangle is configured as they respectively stand for the maker of history, the teacher of history and the guardian of history. Baba Kalumba has been teaching history for more than four decades, unknown to him that one of the most significant parts of what he teaches is an outright falsehood. Kalumba is interested in unearthing the truth behind their history but with the concern of putting pieces of it together to help carve out a better future for the people of Kwatee. He joins the dissenting group, Second Independence Democracy with Content Forum (SIDCF), because he believes that the Dictator's regime can be opposed and brought to an end for the good of all. Mrs. Shaw, being in possession of truth, and having kept it safely concealed, understands that it would be a grave injustice to an entire continent to die without letting the people know what has happened to them. Hence, she reveals it all to Kalumba as a way of atoning for the injustices done to the nation of Kwatee by the colonial lords. Truth, thus, becomes therapeutic as it is seen to bring about a sense of restoration and redemption to Kalumba.

This discourse considers truth which is held back from those who deserve to know it as a form of robbery. The people of Kwatee are seen to have been robbed of truthful history which they should know as it constitutes an integral part of their being. The author, through the voice of Ogum shows the healing brought about by a restoration of what has been stolen. He clarifies that “Returning what was stolen makes everyone see once again. The aggressor is no longer blinded by the guilt of theft and fear of revenge, and the aggrieved is no longer blinded by the constant need for revenge” (p. 34). Consequently, Mrs. Shaw brings about a sense of healing with the revelation of truth that is backed by an important piece of evidence in the skull of the former head of British National Security.

## **LANGUAGE AND STYLE**

Mukoma wa Ngugi's approach to style in the novel is unique in its facilitation of the realization of the theme of historical re-orientation. This is seen in the narrative technique employed by the author. In most of the novel, the authorial voice drives the narrative. However, in accounting for Kalumba's time in exile where he discovers “truth”, the narrative approach changes to the first person technique as Kalumba tells his own story through his diary entries. This diary approach is a form of record-keeping which is highly important in the task of interrogating history. Through this in-



diary documentation, Kalumba preserves daily facts which will constitute valuable fragments of history that will be held sacrosanct in time to come.

Also, the concept of exile plays a vital role in Kalumba's quest to unravel the facts behind his people's history. Too busy with political activism in Kwatee, exile presents Kalumba with the time, space and tranquility needed to engage history and deconstruct aspects of it that have been defaced by fabrications. For instance, Kalumba bares this:

The paradox of exile—years and years at home, and I never really thought about these questions. I was too busy living and fighting. Here the downtime is like being in jail. Every wound, big or small, eventually gets excavated and reexamined by time (p. 56).

Exile, here, enhances Kalumba's inquiry into the history and his quest to discover truthful evidence for the good of his people. In exile, Kalumba is able to recollect how his father continually recounted the history Kwatee to him as a growing child. However, he refutes the validity of this history by referring to it as "His [Kalumba's father's] version of it" (p. 56). Mukoma wa Ngugi also employs the device of code-mixing in the novel. This is evident in expressions such as "ilkiliyani" (p. 15), "changaa", (p. 27), "murrum" (p. 29), and many more. These expressions are used in their indigenous forms to reflect the African experience more vividly. This stylistic strategy, in the view of Ayo Banjo (1996), illustrates the boundless lexico-semantic possibilities of African languages (p. 130). Hence, wa Ngugi creates room for the African speech pattern as a way of realizing a cultural representation of the continent.

The author's style can therefore be summarized to have been deliberately employed to achieve the thematic thrust of redefining the identity of the African people through historical interrogation and re-orientation.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the role of the writer in shaping the history of African society. Mukoma wa Ngugi's *Mrs. Shaw* has been examined as a text that deconstructs a false and negative historical account of the people by digging up the truth as the first step towards healing a continent that bears the scars of the colonial experience. History has been examined to be central to the advancement of a people, as illustrated in wa Ngugi's narrative. It has also been argued that the author configures the narrative technique in the novel to enhance his quest to reconstruct the history of Africa which is metaphorically represented by the history of Kwatee Republic. The concept of exile has also been examined as a facilitator of the interrogation of history and a catalyst for truth discovery.

The political upheavals in Africa as experienced in the recent history of the continent have also been explored with a focus on the role of the writer in engaging

political matters which affect the society of which he is part and parcel. The study also revealed that the literary artist plays a vital role in the quest for socio-political redemption in whatever society of his intervention.

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