

Nyawiras as communal liberators: Accounting for life preservation roles among African women

**Author:**Julius M. Gathogo^{1,2,3} **Affiliations:**

¹Research Institute for Religion and Theology (RITR), Faculty of Humanities, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

²Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Kenyatta University, Mombasa, Kenya

³Faculty of Theology, ANCCI University, Texas, United States

Corresponding author:

Julius Gathogo, juliusgathogo@gmail.com

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In his book, *Wizard of the Crow* (2007), the renowned Kenyan novelist, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, expresses the view that a successful society is only guaranteed when women issues are well settled. In light of post-colonial Africa and the era of COVID-19, African women – like the biblical Miriam, the co-liberator with Moses and Aaron (Mi 6:4) – are seen as *Nyawiras* (plural for *Nyawira*, the hardworking woman), as their critical role in preserving the family and society is evident. While relying on a critical review of wa Thiong'o's works and in engaging a selected religio-cultural literature, the article seeks to explore the role of African women [*Nyawiras*] in societal sustenance. With postcolonial Africa encountering a hotchpotch of challenges, are *Nyawiras* the best suited persons to deconstruct the status quo and eventually reconstruct the 'sick' society under greedy-grabbing male-leaders of nation-states (Aburirias) that have lost their moral compasses? Are women best suited to bring back sanity; and have they crossed the Rubicon in the 21st century? In drawing from diverse examples from Africa and beyond, the research article will be significant in helping the modern African society understand the myriad of problems they are facing in the local and global scene, and eventually appraise women's heroine roles.

Contribution: This research uses a multi-disciplinary approach and engages a dialogue between African literature and Africa's religio-cultural discourses in order to better understand the complex situation facing Africa.

Keywords: African indigenous knowledge; COVID-19; Miriam; Moses; liberation; *Nyawiras* (African-women); Ngugi wa Thiong'o; Rubicon.

Introduction

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel, the *Wizard of the Crow* (2007), which introduces the critical role of *Nyawiras* (hardworking African women) in preserving life and society in general, appears as a revision and/or a continuity of his previous novels. This includes: *The Black Hermit* (1963), *Weep Not Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Petals of Blood* (1977), *Devil on the Cross* (1983), and *Matigari* (War Remnants 1986), among others. This can be seen in terms of themes, characterisation, style, and epistemology. The *Wizard of the Crow* goes beyond his previous novels by putting more emphasis on women as *Nyawiras* (hardworking and reliable citizenry), and where the most illustrious, intelligent, and sensible lady leader named Nyawira (a Kikuyu name which means, 'a hardworking person'). It seems like this is the first time in wa Thiong'o's (2007) works when women take the centre stage in concrete terms and are paraded as the present and future of Africa. They are the *de facto* persons who glue the society together right from the domestic domains, and theirs are voices of conscience. As subtle advocate of indigenous heritage, at least in his previous novels, wa Thiong'o (2007) comes out like a reborn writer who announces his discovery to the world that the future is safe under African women (the *Nyawiras*) who will ironically make the various Free States of Aburirias (corrupt-grabbers' countries) genuinely free from the two hyphenated vices. Unlike men who told the Egyptian Pharaoh, in the words of Moses, 'let my people go' (Ex 8:1), women would go the extra-mile to preserve the society, and will not abandon the oppressed comrades after liberation, or become oppressors after the promise has been delivered. They will not suffer from the "Big Men Syndrome" or become deities who deserve worship from their respective citizens. Wa Thiong'o (2007) gives the impression that *Nyawiras* are genuine well-wishers, as everyone is a child of a woman; for how can a mother hurt her own child (society) whom she patiently hosted for nine months non-stop? Is the writer overconfident with *Nyawiras'* role even though we have a fallen creation (Gn 3) who are outside

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paradise, and indeed the 'modern' generation has been variously described as permissive and largely immoral?

Indeed, Exodus 3 describes the period when the Hebrew God sent Moses (a man), Miriam (a woman), and Aaron (a man) to lead the people out of slavery; and promised to get the Hebrews out of misery that they were encountering in Egypt. Through Moses' leadership, they were to escape these miseries and enter into better lands of 'the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites – a land flowing with milk and honey' (Ex 3:17–18). In Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (2007) case, the *Nyawiras* (hardworking African women) are the best poised to take over society and lead it to better lands that flow with milk and honey.

African literature and conceptual clarifications

While appreciating the broadness of African literature, it is worthwhile to recall that the celebrated Nigerian playwright, novelist, poet, and essayist who was awarded the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature, Akinwande Oluwole Babatunde Soyinka, popularly called Wole Soyinka (1976), wrote an academic treatise on West African religiosity, where he explicated the myths, traditions, rituals, and pantheons, among other areas, and went on to show its significance to African literature. Like wa Thiong'o (2007), he still did not abandon his 'secular social vision', and indeed his critique of religion (Soyinka 1976:xii). Furthermore, like other critiques of African literature (refer to Achebe 1958; Soyinka 1976), wa Thiong'o (2007) views Christianity as an imperialistic tool. Indeed, Christianity is not spared in wa Thiong'o's (2007) *Wizard of the Crow*, as its adherents and leadership are seen as displaying hypocrisy and double standards. In light of this, Gikandi (2009) has noted that:

Christianity is represented, in canonical African texts [*by its critiques in African literature*], as the cultural arm of imperial expansion and as the major agent in the alienation of Africans from their traditional cultures, the source of self-hate and mimicry, and one of the sources of the violence that separates families, communities, and nationalities. (p. 108)

He goes on to say that Christianity appears as the 'ambiguous force of civilisation and Europeanisation' when it is 'not represented as an agent of colonial domination and violence'.

In his article, 'African theology and African literature: Rediscovering a daring intellectual project', Abraham Ng'ang'a (2018) has responded to these critiques by first underlining the value of reacting to the various critiques of religion. This prepares the ground for setting the record straight. African theologians should therefore respond specifically to literary scholars who speak with finality in an area where they are not the most proficient. While appreciating fiction as a reflection of the reality on the ground, it is therefore incumbent upon scholars of religion to engage literary scholars and highlight their commonalities and points of departure.

Ng'ang'a (2018) takes us to the reality that we cannot understand the concerns of African literature unless we engage the relevant writers adequately because we could be saying the same thing in different words. Furthermore, the outsider perspective of religious scholarship is always necessary as criticism helps us to improve ourselves. It is not clear why some of these critiques of Christianity and religion in general are by-products of missionary education. In particular, Soyinka (1976), Kenyatta (1938), and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2007), among others, are initial trainees of the 19th and 20th century European missionary schools. Kenyatta and wa Thiong'o were trained in the Church of Scotland Mission (CSM) in the present day Kiambu County in different historical times. While Jomo Kenyatta was baptised Johnstone Kamau in August 1914, Ngugi wa Thiong'o legally abandoned his baptismal name, James, in 1977 (Gathogo 2022a). Can they be viewed as backsliders? Certainly, the mention of spirits, pantheons, divinities, gods, rituals, and beliefs in the supernatural cannot be enough of a yardstick to prove that their literary interpretation of religion is adequate. Nevertheless, Mugambi's (1992) engagement with scholars of African literature in his *Critiques of Christianity in African Literature: With Particular Reference to the East African Context* is a major step forward as he is an insider scholar of religion, just as Ng'ang'a (2018); and 'responds' to the critiques of the latter effectively.

Women and humane treatments (Ubuntu)

In his 'Book Three' (out of his 'six books in one') on 'Female Daemons', wa Thiong'o uses his key characters to discuss African religio-indigenous healing properties. He also utilises religio-indigenous terminologies such as seers, diviners, medicine men and women, shrines, and their antithesis (witchcraft and sorcery). He allows Nyawira and Kamiti to speak thus:

Kamiti and Nyawira adjusted their role as Wizard of the Crow to the imperatives of the occasion. Their fee was the same for the rich and the poor, set according to what Kamiti and Nyawira thought an average working person could afford. But they were mindful hence they did not turn away people who did not have money. (wa Thiong'o 2007:274)

They would invariably promise:

[T]o pay when they could and always kept their word. Nyawira never knew whether they did so out of honesty, gratitude, or simply [*for*] fear of the wizard and his sorcery. (wa Thiong'o 2007:275)

In view of this, wa Thiong'o (2007:274) raises the status of women by displaying their honesty amid deep religiosity that captures the people who often frequented 'the House of Modern Witchcraft and Sorcery' for healing and treatments. In this context, women display great responsibility in preserving society in an environment where most 'clients' believed that 'all diseases were rooted in sorcery and could not imagine a proper diagnosis or relief not requiring some

kind of divination ritual' (p. 274). It is from there that Nyawira and Kamiti took responsibility or offered leadership and were not exploitative. They made everyone feel equal irrespective of gender and status. It is a huge display of Ubuntu (humanness) that Nyawira and Kamiti are not sorcerers, wizards, or witches, but genuine saviours of the family and larger society. In view of this, wa Thiong'o (2007:274) raises the status of women by firstly displaying their honesty amid deep religiosity that captures the people who often frequented 'the House of Modern Witchcraft and Sorcery' for healing and treatments. Secondly, wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* is heavily infused with biblical symbolisms as he takes on societal vices that hurt the family and larger society. In the words of his characters (Nyawira and Kamiti), he quotes their medical prescriptions of healthy living, thus: 'Take care of the body, for it is the Temple of the soul [...] Life [ecology] is a common stream from which plant, animal, and human draw' (p. 275). The latter compares with Genesis 1:30 which says:

And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground – everything that has the breath of life in it – I give every green plant for food.

Wa Thiong'o's words (as seen in Nyawira and Kamiti who display genuine care for the cosmos) also compare with the Psalmist (24:1) who says, 'The Earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it'. In Nyawira and Kamiti's 'Take care of the body ...' wa Thiong'o's biblical symbolism reminisces Pauline theology that cautioned thus: 'Don't you know that your body is a temple of the Lord [...] So glorify God in your body' (I Cor 6:19–20). In all these cautious and moral undertones, wa Thiong'o elevates *Nyawiras* (concerned women) as the true voice of reason for the entire society.

Thirdly, in amplifying the theme of healing in his *Wizard of the Crow*, wa Thiong'o shows a decayed or rotten society where wizards pretend to heal or help the society, yet it is they who ironically do more harm than good. His first sentence describes the Free Republic of Aburiria (meaning 'corrupt and grabbing nation') as a non-free country, not fully republic, and poignantly enslaved society, and whose genuine hope for cure is through *Nyawiras*. It is no wonder that he views the real measure of societal progress as depending on how good the condition of women is (wa Thiong'o 2007:253). He goes on to say, 'you imprison a woman and you have imprisoned a nation ...' (p. 253). This comes after the very responsible observations about the State of the Nation by the key woman character, Nyawira, who said, thus:

I can only assume that the sewage system installed by the colonial administration [before the 1960s] and never since maintained or repaired had run amok. But at the moment of our triumph our thoughts were not on whether or not there had been a pool or even its implications; we simply basked in the afterglow of having made it clear that not every Aburirian was happy with incurring more debt to finance marching to heaven or being ruled by a heartless despot. You do not have to look too deeply into it to know that a man who could so imprison his own wife in her home

is a beast in human form! ... If a woman who had been at the mountaintop of power and visibility could be made to disappear, be silenced forever while alive, what about the ordinary woman worker and peasant? (wa Thiong'o 2007:252–253)

In demonstrating these sicknesses of the Free Republic of Aburiria, wa Thiong'o starts with the sick leadership, in a society that appreciates that a rotting fish starts from the head. Hence, a sick, depressed, or a troubled leader in a communal society means more for the nation as it speaks volumes on the irony of a Free Republic that is not factually a republic or free indeed. A society where the leadership is sick, and in need of the services of women to nurse it and eventually fix its ailments is not free or republic enough. He explains the five theories and rumours on people's lips as follows: First, the strange illness of the second ruler of the Free Republic of Aburiria was 'born of anger that once welled up inside him [...] till it consumed his heart' (p. 3). Second, the ruler's illness was 'a curse from the cry of a wronged he-goat [...] deeply troubled by the sight of blood flooding the land [...]' (p. 5). Third, his long reign had made him forget when his reign began. The fourth theory 'had its origins in all the tears, unshed, that Rachel, his legal wife, had locked up inside her soul after her fall from his grace' (p. 7). The fall of the ruler and his wife was caused by his immoral behaviours that caused her to ask questions about the schoolgirls who were 'often invited to the State House to make his bed' (p. 8). The fifth theory had it that the ruler's illness was the:

[S]ole work of the daemons that the Ruler had housed in a special chamber in the State House, who had now turned their backs on him and withdrew their protective services. (wa Thiong'o 2007:10–11)

The sicknesses of the ruler symbolise the sickness of the society under irresponsible patriarchal leaderships that suppress women. Ironically, the oppressed [*Nyawiras*] are the ones who will ultimately liberate themselves as well as the rest of the society. The rumours are not reliable means of communication, but are used to show the extent to which the society is in dire need of liberation. In a dictatorial state, where genuine freedom is a pipe-dream, citizens communicate through rumours, whose sources are diverse, unreliable, and ambiguous.

Against an environmentally insensitive project

The climactic role of *Nyawiras*, in moving the society forward, comes out clearly when Titus Tajirika (Tajirika, which means 'grow rich') abandoned his job as a classroom teacher and joined the construction industry so as to grow rich quickly by hook or by crook. With a godfather in the name of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Marclus Macho Kali (Macho kali means, 'sharp eyes'), Tajirika is tasked with an immoral responsibility of constructing a skyscraper in honour of the dictator's birthday. As a contractor, Tajirika grows immensely rich after taking bribes from tender-entrepreneurs (wa Thiong'o 2007:106), a phenomenon that made his wife Virginia concede that 'Black is beauty' after realising dangers

in her husband's wish that he had European skin (pp. 179–180, 188). In a sense, Virginia, although enjoying the proceeds of corruption from her immoral husband, demonstrates the future of Africa, just as Nyawira, that women's voice of reason might turn out to be the proverbial stone that the builders rejected (Ps 118:22); and which turned out to be the chief cornerstone. As men get drunk with wealth acquisition, without hard work or morality, women will chip in to bridge the gaps wrought.

The construction of the skyscraper in honour of the dictator's (ruler or *Mwathani*) birthday, under Tajirika, was bound to be an environmental disaster, as it will be 'the highest building ever to be built on earth; in fact it has been planned along the biblical story of the Tower of Babel' (Muhia & Gathogo 2018:6). Building it at the recreational park in the city centre will create more inconveniences besides its negative effect on the environment. Besides this, the whole project is being opposed by members of an underground movement, *Kiama Kia Mugambo wa Muingi* [The Voice of the People] who realistically realise that the bloated loan, borrowed from the Global Bank, will reduce the citizens to perpetual slaves (2018:6). Nyawira, the key woman character has a key role in organising demonstrations against this environmentally insensitive project. She, however, risks heavily in leading an underground movement in a totalitarian Aburiria State. Nyawira graduates from a mere activist of social and environmental justice to a public educator who helps the citizenry to understand the environmental dangers inherent in the construction of the tallest building in human history, ranging from food insecurity, shelter, deaths, quality of life, hunger, despair, poverty, and so on, till she put up a global pressure that saw the whole idea abandoned altogether (wa Thiong'o 2007:179–180, 188). Again, Nyawira's heroine acting amid great odds further demonstrates wa Thiong'o's contention that a progressive society is only evident when women's voices of conscience are not stifled. It is only when *Nyawiras'* (hardworking women) place in society is guaranteed that a society will genuinely move forward.

Miriam and Nyawira's symbolism

Besides the biblical Moses, who is theologically viewed as the symbol of liberation, wa Thiong'o portrays African women, in the Free States of Aburirias, like the triumphant Miriam (Ex 15:1–21) who celebrated the Exodus after the 'battle' was won. In turn, Miriam was Moses' elder sister (Mi 6:4). She, along with Aaron, her other brother, provided leadership in doing God's work of liberating Hebrews from Egyptian slavery, as God had sent them (Mi 6:4). Miriam is largely seen as the forerunner of Mary, the mother of Jesus (who is also referred to as Miriam or Maryam) in New Testament studies. She appears for the first time in the Hebrew Bible, shortly after the birth of Moses. During that time, Moses' mother had concealed him in a basket along the river Nile. It is from there that the courageous Miriam spoke to Pharaoh's daughter about it (Ex 2:1–10), a phenomenon that demonstrates responsibility for family and the larger 'nation' of God. Overall, Miriam's illustriousness, courage, responsible

leadership, like wa Thiong'o's Nyawira's, are best known for her leadership in the freedom songs and dances, as well as playing drums, as the weary Hebrews were crossing the Red Sea and eventually earned freedom. In this historical episode, Prophetess Miriam emerged with her tambourines and danced heartily. She sang to them thus, 'Sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously; Horse and Rider He has thrown into the Sea' (Ex 15:20–21). This does not, however, reconcile Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Nyawira with Miriam fully, as the latter got into trouble, not for criticising Pharaoh (as in the case of Nyawira who criticises the dictatorships and the environmental degradations in the Free State of Aburiria), but for opposing an emerging strong-man show and/or Big Man's syndrome in her younger brother Moses' leadership. This reminisces the lopsided approaches in post-colonial African leaderships, a phenomenon where the temptation to keep strong men and/or women at bay rather than encourage strong institutions, remains a troubling temptation. For criticising Moses' leadership, Miriam was ironically 'punished' with leprosy for 7 days (Nm 12:1–15). She subsequently died and was buried in the desert (Nm 20:1). Nonetheless, Miriam and Aaron's (her other brother) leadership prowess are also seen when they sought more responsible and inclusive actions and authority in Moses' stewardship. The quest for collegiality among the trio (Moses-Miriam-Aaron axis) was certainly the most responsible thing to do, as consultations and structured dialogue is always the better way in leadership. In this case, Moses does not appear consultative nor a respecter of his elder sister who was initially his liberator during his infancy when he was put in a shopping basket (Ex 2:1–10). It is in this first encounter that Miriam first demonstrated responsible leadership and the desire to preserve life; and it reached its zenith when she became a co-liberator with Moses and Aaron. Among the trio, she was indeed the most charismatic.

An impression has been created by the writer of the biblical book of Numbers (12) that the duo (Miriam and Aaron) were protesting against Moses' leadership because they were not comfortable that Moses had married a dark African woman from Ethiopia (Nm 12:1, 4, 9–10). This drives one to wonder: Does this confirm that every historian is biased towards his or her context? Is it possible to have a neutral historian? Guzik (2022) contends that the marital concern was not the main issue, as the real dispute was ideologically and intellectually driven by the quest for an inclusive leadership that recognised the collective role of Aaron, Miriam, and Moses. Miriam is thus portrayed by the writer as a clueless, irritating, racist, quarrelsome, and undeserving of forgiveness; hence she erred for criticising things she had no control over. In my view, Miriam was a farsighted and charismatic leader who was a good communicator (Ex 4:10). Indeed, it is Miriam who raised the morale of the team through her redemptive songs and dances. However, her voice as a co-leading liberator (with Aaron and Moses) is largely suppressed by liberation theologians in North America, Latin America, and Africa (refer to Boff & Boff 1987; Bonino 1975; Cone 1970, 1972; Gathogo 2007a, 2021; Gutierrez 1973; Mugambi 1989). Yet, liberation history and

theology cannot be complete without her; and indeed, the trio (Miriam-Moses-Aaron) were equally sent by God (Mi 6:8) as the liberators of the Hebrew nation from the Egyptian Pharaoh. Moreover, Miriam only died after the assignment had been completed, after which she rested in eternal and genuine peace.

As a symbol of liberation, Miriam complemented Moses whose oratorical prowess was not immaculate (Ex 4:10). As the person who was older than Moses, in their family tree, she knew his younger brother's growing challenges, his temperaments, his epistemological breadth and width, eloquence concerns, consultative concerns, and other weaknesses. Miriam was therefore the best placed person to advise him. She would only protest when her pieces of advice were ignored altogether. Her protest against Moses (with Aaron) was therefore legitimate, as demonstrations are the globally accepted norms in cases where ones' rights are trampled on by past, present, or post liberation 'Pharaohs'.

Besides this, Miriam's portrayal as a singing-dancing co-leader of the liberation movement resonates well with African liberators and pan-Africanists who employed such charismatic appeals. Such appeals include: slogans as in the case of Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah's 'one Africa – one country', the case of Marcus Garvey's 'One love' and 'Africa for Africans' mantra, Kenneth Kaunda's use of symbolic white trademark handkerchief, the use of a flywhisk by Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta, and Malawi's Kamuzu Banda, among others to psychologically capture the attention of the masses, as well as symbolically take the relevant messages in poetic and witty ways (Gathogo 2001). She also resonates well with Idowu's (1973:84) contention that singing and dancing are always a vehicle of 'conveying certain sentiments or truths', which provides an outlet for all our 'joys and sorrows...hopes and fears about the future'. Furthermore, as noted in Gathogo (2007b:163), dance in African indigenous society was used to express more than just entertainment. When accompanied by song, it became a manifestation of the feeling of the individual or group, thus communicating their inner sentiments, expectations, and aspirations. Movements, gestures and externals such as costume and decorations gave it lively expression. These might also be used for symbolic reasons, as part of a religious or social ceremony.

In this understanding, it is Miriam, and not Moses, who captured and appraised the joys, moods, sorrows, fears, hopes, and the future of the Hebrew nation as they sought liberation. Seen from the African context, and in utilising wa Thiong'o's symbolism, she is the proto-Nyawira (the hardworking African woman) who is able to gauge the mood of the nation as the male leaders who emerged after independence, in 1960s and afterwards, failed to comprehend the full picture of the task ahead. Thus, with the coming of Miriam, who compares with Nyawira in wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* (2007), charismatic leadership, insightfulness, far-sightedness, poetry, riddles, sayings, drama, dance and songs, and eloquent speeches become the new norm, and a buoyant future is promised.

Another critical observation is that while Miriam suffered from a deadly skin disease for 'speaking against' her brother Moses (as the writers' make-believe shows), Aaron who equally did the same escaped the 'punishment'. This leads me to wonder: Did Miriam die of other age-related sicknesses, exhaustion, and not necessarily related to her protests? Didn't Moses 'protest' to God that he was a poor orator and not charismatic enough for the task, but still went on to become one of the three key figures of the Exodus, together with Aaron and Miriam (Ex 4:10)? If God did not punish him for the initial protest, how could Miriam die for disagreeing with her junior or younger brother? Nevertheless, the writer of the biblical book of Numbers gives us an image of Moses and Aaron watching as their sister was going through the pain. Was there something that they could have done to save their ailing sister or does the writer want to contrast the responsible leadership of the Nyawira with the leadership of men? It is also explained that Moses interceded on behalf of Aaron so as to save him from danger while he did nothing for Miriam (Ex 32). Does this countercheck the racist tag on Miriam as it portrays Moses as heartless, revengeful, and anti-women? Accordingly, Aaron had previously begged Moses to forgive them (Nm 12:10–12). Aaron was later given a lighter punishment when Moses stripped him of his priestly garments and handed it over to Eleazar (Dt 9:20). In a society where dissent is equated with conspiracy to overthrow the established constitutional order, Miriam and Aaron had the courage to protest immoral laws, structures, and systems that are not consultative or consensus-seeking enough. All this was done in their bid to seek a more all-encompassing leadership that had checks and balances; and a leadership that respected the cultural heritage of the Hebrew people. Far-sightedly, Miriam understood leadership as an all-inclusive enterprise, open to diverse views, respectful to existing traditions, and as going above gender and ethnic stereotypes.

Another critical implication of Miriam's protests is that they were meant to bring up their stifled but sensible and realistic voices. Guzik (2022) contends that Miriam took the lead in these protests, as:

[T]he feminine singular verb that initiates [*Numbers* 12] the chapter (lit., 'and she spoke,' verse 1) and the placement of her name before that of Aaron indicate that Miriam is the principal in the attack against Moses. (p. 1)

The writer of Numbers (12:10–12) further employs a suppressive and/or silencing literature that portrays her as one who had no humility or courtesy, unlike Aaron who sought forgiveness from Moses. Miriam's protests are equated with sinning against God for 'offending' the 'one who was sent' by God; yet she too was a messenger of God (Mi 6:4). In protesting, they (Miriam and Aaron) were simply saying:

[W]e too are God's appointees, sent by God to carry out this all-important task of liberating the people, just as Moses himself. Why then should our voices be ignored or criminalized?

This is affirmed by the words: 'I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent

Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam' (Mi 6:4). Thus, her voice symbolises women's determination in the making of a better family and the larger society and/or the nation of God. Nyawira, the key woman character in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (2007) *Wizard of the Crow* is largely a replica of the biblical Miriam.

Women and hospitality

As a true demonstration of the post-colonial Africa where 'life presidents' and immortalised presidents replaced colonial authority and polluted political environments till 1990s when multiparty democracy began to shake-off some, *Nyawiras* remained optimistic in wa Thiong'o's (2007) *Wizard of the Crow*. For in the politics of Aburiria, where *Mwathani* [ruler] leads poor ideo-morally led country and began ruling 'before the world began and would end only after the world has ended' (wa Thiong'o 2007:6), it is the *Nyawiras'* role that will ultimately provide the last straw that broke the camel's back. This is demonstrated through their dispensation of hospitality (refer to social, political, economic, and religio-cultural generosity), irrespective of some inherent risks that would hurt their humanness [Ubuntu] from time to time.

As noted in Karume's (2009:xvii-xix) book, *Beyond Expectations: From Charcoal to Gold*, many people from Arabia, India, and China were constant visitors to East Africa prior to the coming of Islam, Portuguese traders of the 15th century, Christianity, and colonialism, and were always treated hospitably. In these shores, the *Nyawiras* were critical in the dispensation of hospitality, especially in terms of providing sustenance (food and drinks). As providers of prenatal and antenatal care, in the indigenous society, women would set a date on which:

[T]hey would bring firewood, porridge, cooked food, sorghum, millet, corn, sugarcane, sweet potatoes, and yams to an expectant mother or to the one who had just delivered [...] In most cases, the mother of the newly born could get fuel and supplies enough for four months; this gave her ample time for regaining her energy and nursing her baby without worrying about food and firewood for her family. (Gathogo 2001:15)

In the second half of the 20th century and the 21st century, however, *Nyawiras'* life-preserving roles go beyond the domestic domain. Certainly, *Nyawiras* are communal liberators whose life preservation roles are immeasurable and hard to account-for. It is the *Nyawiras* who will liberate both themselves and the rest of society under threats of diverse forms of wizardry.

Women crossing the Rubicon

Furthermore, *Nyawiras'* hospitality in ancient Africa was seen in the division of labour where industries were discharged across gender lines. Certainly, there were some duties that were performed by both male and female 'as part of a mutual celebration of life' (Gathogo 2001:14). In the post-colonial era, the *Nyawiras* have idiomatically crossed River Rubicon, as General Julius Caesar did on 10 January 49 BCE when he entered today's Northern Italy and began a civil war

that marked the end of the Roman Republic. Hence, *Nyawiras* have conquered retrogressive traditions that are inimical to the general welfare of postcolonial Africa and taken up duties that were previously done by men in ancient times, as wa Thiong'o (2007) demonstrates. Furthermore, as the former President of the Republic of Liberia and founder of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Presidential Center for Women and Development, HE Sirleaf (2022), has noted, *Nyawiras* in African history were great problem-solvers, combatants who led pre-colonial militaries, freedom seekers during the colonial period, and intermediate leaders during times of national strife and health crises. Indeed, women's contributions during the climactic moment of COVID-19 is fresh in our minds, as key handlers were largely women nurses and ordinary *Nyawiras* who made indigenous concoctions to ward it off (Gathogo 2022b). Equally, the *Nyawiras* have remained critical members of national movements, and as transitional leaders in some of Africa's worst drought-stricken and economic disorders.

As proto-*Nyawira* (ideal hardworking African woman), depicted in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's imagery, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (born in 1938) became the 24th president of Liberia in 2006. She led in the national reconstruction of Liberia after years of conflict and massive destruction of life and property for 14 years (2006–2018). Being the first female Head of State in patriarchal Africa, and for inheriting a country that had been irredeemably destroyed by war and counter *coup d'états*, she did not disappoint as sceptics had feared (ed. Britannica 2023; Sirleaf 2022). Reconstructing a post-civil war Liberia appeared to be an impossible mission to accomplish. Nevertheless, President Sirleaf, who was an accomplished, economist, mother of the Liberian nation, and as a proto-*Nyawira*, had the magic ward that eventually fixed the hotchpotch of issues that were facing the masses of her country folk and pretentious city slickers who were walking on the valleys and shadows of death (cf. Psalm 23). During the life-threatening Ebola outbreak in Liberia in 2014, Sirleaf strategised with community health workers (CHWs) to stop its rapid gains that had begun to reverse the gains they had made in their post war recovery, development, and growth. Ebola which was largely caused by factors such as bushmeat consumption, impingement into forested areas, population advance, direct contacts with wildlife, among others, led Sirleaf to put up community-inclusive health structures whose workers (CHWs) were relied upon to stop the gains of COVID-19 (Sirleaf 2022). This is indicative that Sirleaf was ahead of time?

As a result, COVID-19 found Liberia with community-inclusive health structures that acted as buffer zones that prevented the intrusion of the disease. Thus, COVID-19, in 2020, found well-coordinated structures that easily disseminated credible information to the general populace, and which had already built strong partnership within Liberia's territorial space and abroad. Utilising community leaderships, empowering communities as assets in the national development, and creating inclusive-responsive structures, in a manner that is in tandem with governance in

the African indigenous society, were some of Ellen Sirleaf's landmark imprints that will continue to inform leadership conversations in the 21st century Africa. In my view, this was the reason that led wa Thiong'o (2007:253) to pontificate that only a society that strives to uphold good conditions for women will authentically progress. Like Prof. Wangari Maathai (1940–2011) who went on to become the first African woman Nobel Peace laureate in 2004 for her critical quest for environmental justice, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became another Nobel Peace Prize recipient in 2011. She, however, co-shared the glory with another *Nyawira* (born in 1972) from Liberia, who was honoured for her nonviolent efforts that sought to ensure the safety and rights of women in their peace-building efforts (ed. Britannica 2023; Sirleaf 2022). A third person who co-shared the revered Nobel Peace Prize with Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, was a Yemeni women's rights activist and a journalist, Tawakkul Karmān (born in 1979) whose role in leading a pro-democracy protest movement was given global recognition. As a journalist pushing for tolerance and democratic space for all, including the secessionists whose demand was met with *Ubulwane* [beastly combat] by the Yemen government, she teamed up with her colleagues to co-found Women Journalists Without Chains, in 2005. Their movement risked facing government forces, as they sought to secure the future of the citizenry through sit-ins. They also demonstrated against the raising of the legal marriage age for women, encountered multiple arrests, and general harassments among other ugly encounters. They eventually came out strongly as authentic and dedicated advocates for civil rights and freedom of expression in Yemen (ed. Britannica 2023). Hence, in wa Thiong'o's strong portrayal of women as the future of the Free Republic of Aburiria and beyond, he evidentially captures African and global realities. In view of this, women's self-sacrifice and/or hospitality in wa Thiong'o's (2007) works, and in the sampled cases in this research article, goes beyond the traditionally assumed domestic domain. It now takes medical, economic, political, ecological, and religio-social dimensions.

Conclusion

From the outset, the research article sought to explore the *Nyawiras'* (hardworking African women) role in preserving life, as in the era of COVID-19, from the perspective of the images created in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel, *Wizard of the Crow*. Although wa Thiong'o's (2007) works do not point out the actual and/or the single most Wizard of the 'innocent' crow, and neither has it helped us to distinguish between the black magic (also called sorcery or witchcraft – utilised for destruction of the cosmos) and white magic (utilised by African medicine men and women for kind-hearted gestures), it has helped us appreciate our wizardness and/or *ubulwane* or *unyama*, a phenomenon where an otherwise Ubuntu (humane and indigenously caring society) continent became a landmass of wizards who cannot allow the crow (her vulnerable citizens) to grow or even live a worthy life (Gathogo 2022b; ed. Olupona 1986). Struggles thus become the defining characteristic of post-colonial Africa, a phenomenon where Pharaoh (the wizard)

becomes the corrupt grabbers (Aburiria) who are ironically the crocodiles which are entrusted to preserve 'meat' for the naïve and innocent crow (ordinary clueless citizen). With African women's hospitality going beyond the domestic domain, hope is re-assured, for they [*Nyawiras*] come out as incorruptible advocates for human rights, corruption-grabbing free society, environmental sustainability, and as 'real' mothers of the society, ready to suckle the hungry society with their breast-milk of Ubuntu [humanness], and joyfully enjoy the sharp pangs of birth of a new society that is free of corrupt-grabbing leaders. In their songs and dances of hope for the future, the hope of the vulnerable crow is assured, as they communicate the language of preserving the troubled society. Like the biblical Miriam, a co-liberation heroine with Moses in the Hebrew history, women will not abandon their crusades for a *laissez faire* society. Not even arrests, beatings, jailing or deaths will dampen their spirits. In light of COVID-19 that entered Africa in early 2020, women came out as not just trained nurses to stop it, or as CHWs, but even as hardworking ordinary women [*Nyawiras*] with extraordinary strategies of arresting the pandemic. Rather than remain as the poor helpless crows, *Nyawiras* comes out strongly as the real saviours of both the wizard (socio-political sorcerers) and the wrongly assumed clueless crows (marginalised masses) themselves. While liberation theologians have failed to appreciate the role of Miriam as the symbol of liberation, as much as they do with Moses, this research article has clearly strived to demonstrate the real heroine. Certainly, the *Nyawiras* of the 21st century have crossed the Rubicon and taken up preservative duties beyond their traditional zones.

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Author's contributions

J.M.G. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

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