**The Function of Dreams in Syl Cheney-Coker’s Fiction**

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Syl Cheney-Coker, regarded as one of Sierra Leone’s foremost writers and a major African poet, is the author of two novels of epic scope. *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* (1990), recounts the interwoven paths of multifarious characters as they navigate their destinies and re-create the history – from the settlement of freed slaves through British imperialism to corrupt post-independence leadership – of a fictional land in West Africa called Malagueta. The story is presented as the recollections of General Tamba Masimiara who, in the Prologue, is waiting to be taken to the gallows after acting on the message of his wife’s dream, featuring a cooking pot of lizards, to stage a coup d’état. Masimiara ‘pieced the threads of her dream together, sewed them into a fine patchwork of colours […] conscious that a dream like a patchwork has a hundred layers of meaning.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

In his second novel, *Sacred River* (2014), Cheney-Coker returns to Malagueta, now a city in the modern West African nation of Kissi, where the incumbent president, Tankor Satani, has a dream, ‘so extraordinary it cancelled out all notions of time and place’,[[2]](#footnote-2) in which he is instructed to carry out the unfinished work of the late Haitian emperor Henri Christophe. Tankor’s attempts to pull the puppet strings of his apparition ultimately lead to his own destruction while the dreams of other characters help weave the fabric of the hopes and tragedies that give colour to the future Malagueta, which is at once the present and the past.

*Last Harmattan* and *Sacred River* present a complex web of legend, myth, folklore, superstition and magic, of which dreams form part of a unique and culturally specific narrative approach. While the possible influence of Latin American literature has been noted[[3]](#footnote-3) a comparable approach can be seen in the work of other West African writers such as Amos Tutuola,[[4]](#footnote-4) Kojo Laing[[5]](#footnote-5) and Ben Okri.[[6]](#footnote-6) Like Ben Okri, Cheney-Coker is concerned to describe a ‘multidimensional, uniquely African cosmos’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Both writers reject the assertion by critics that their work belongs to the ‘magical realist’ tradition with distinctive African traits.[[8]](#footnote-8) Cheney-Coker goes so far as to state that his use of the myths and legends of his West African heritage has nothing to do with the ‘intellectual humbug called “magical realism”’ and that such a label ‘shows gross ignorance of the multi-layered African sense of reality’.[[9]](#footnote-9) It has been commented that:

In the fiction of Ben Okri, Kojo Laing and Syl Cheney-Coker, the contiguity of living and unliving, earthly and supernatural worlds, all occupying the same geographical space, is an unchallenged given of the genre, requiring no defence or explanation, and the coterminous nature of the animate and the inanimate, and of perceived and dreamed phenomena, is taken for granted.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Understanding the worlds these writers create involves seeing with a ‘third eye’ that is open to the language of dreams.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The aim of this essay is to isolate the treatment of dreams in Cheney-Coker’s fiction and to measure the success of his technique both in conveying an African sense of reality and in illuminating and amplifying the characters that inhabit his world. Four themes will be taken up in this analysis: dreams as prophesies; dreams as a tool to reveal character and motivation; dreams as a representation of the continuity of time; and dreams as an expression of hope for the future. A dream in this context may be either sleeping or waking and is understood broadly to mean ‘a compelling vision sometimes uncalled for and often undesired, taking shape through figures of memory, erupting out of an imagination schooled by fact, drawn from oblique images and narrative scraps, driven by fear and desire.’[[12]](#footnote-12)

The prophetic capacity of dreams was acknowledged as far back as Homer’s *Iliad*.[[13]](#footnote-13) The Old Testament contains numerous references to divine intervention through dreams.[[14]](#footnote-14) In the mid-second century AD, Artemidorus wrote the *Oneirocritica*, an influential encyclopaedia in the art of prophecy through dream interpretation.[[15]](#footnote-15) Artemidorus was responding to a threat to divination posed by philosophers such as Aristotle, who argued that dreams merely reflect the past.[[16]](#footnote-16) Historically, and today, the place and role of dreams in society varies across cultures and religions.[[17]](#footnote-17) An important foundation for Cheney-Coker’s novels is the belief that dreams occur when the gods intend to reveal something momentous.[[18]](#footnote-18) In an interview in which Cheney-Coker describes the ‘African cosmology’, he states that his mother ‘absolutely believed in divination’.[[19]](#footnote-19) One layer of his ‘multi-layered African sense of reality’ is therefore an acceptance of the truth of dreams as integral to society both on the macro-level of heralding the destiny of a place and its people, and on the micro-level of predicting individual fates.

In *Last Harmattan*, ‘the spirits stand constant guard over the destinies of the living’.[[20]](#footnote-20) The destiny of Malagueta and its inhabitants has in fact been foretold in the looking-glass of Sulaiman the Nubian (later known as Alusine Dunbar), an ‘itinerant medieval sage, magician and mystic occultist,’[[21]](#footnote-21) and a dream manipulator who intervenes in people’s lives visually, in the case of the superhuman characters, or surreptitiously, in the case of ordinary humans. One of the founders of Malagueta, Jeanette Cromantine, ‘had been prophesied in the looking-glass of the Nubian…a hundred years before’.[[22]](#footnote-22) Sulaiman himself comes to the realisation that ‘the fate of all men had been written many years ago before his time’.[[23]](#footnote-23) Towards the end of *Sacred River*, the sorcerer-eunuch, Pallo, sees in the constellations that ‘all the things that had been foretold about the future of Malagueta by that vagabond mystic Alusine Dunbar three hundred and fifty years earlier always came to pass’.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Through dreams, characters have visions or receive warnings of what is predestined to occur. Cheney-Coker employs symbols, frequently birds, to convey these messages. When Ahmed the Elephant, Sulaiman’s acolyte, falls under the spell of Suliaman’s daughter, Fatmatta, he dreams that Fatmatta transforms herself into a bird, carries him across the desert in her beak and drops him. Her rejection of him in favour of another causes Ahmed to dream he is an ostrich dancing at her wedding and just as he is about to grow feathers and fly away from the scornful laughter of the guests, someone cuts off his neck and offers it to Fatmatta.[[25]](#footnote-25) He deduces that his dream signifies a ‘most apocalyptical and horrible end’ to Fatmatta’s marriage, and this changes the course of Malagueta’s future.[[26]](#footnote-26) Jeanette’s husband, Sebastian, dreams that he turns into a prehistoric bird, ‘losing its body in the atmospheric listlessness of another time’.[[27]](#footnote-27) He believes that the ‘asomatous nature of the dream’ warns of a disaster.[[28]](#footnote-28) Disaster strikes in the form of a war that takes away his son, Emmanuel.

Almost all violent deaths in both books are foreseen in dreams, whether by the character whose end is near or by that character’s wife. As a consequence of his wife’s dream, Masimiara sees himself ‘already shaven, smooth like a lizard, marching blindfolded to the hangman’.[[29]](#footnote-29) In *Sacred River*, the Chief Justice, who is being persecuted by Satani, has a dream of being trapped inside his house in the middle of the ocean which causes him to throw himself into his wife’s arms, crying ‘the light is about to go out of our lives.’[[30]](#footnote-30)

The function of prophetic dreams in Cheney-Coker’s novels is more complex, however, than simply offering pre-knowledge of a foretold destiny. Cheney-Coker makes liberal use of dreams, especially in *Sacred River*, not just to predict but also to determine outcomes. Hawanatu takes revenge on Habiba, her rival for Theodore Iskander’s affections, by conjuring up a dream shared by others in the community in which a thousand birds fly through and wipe out the houses of those of Middle Eastern descent known as the Corals.[[31]](#footnote-31) The dream results in Habiba giving birth to an albino boy who dies within a week. Satani’s mistress, Jenebah, a superhuman character who can transform herself into a mermaid, orchestrates Satani’s suicide through her dreams.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Cheney-Coker’s technique is effective in showing the interaction between the real world and the spirit world where neither side comes up trumps. Alusine’s predictions, aided as they are by his glowing testicles, have at times an air of ‘I told you so’ playfulness about them despite the fact that most of the dreams predict negative outcomes. He is not a god, and there is never a sense that he is completely in control. Therefore, far from there being a *Hardyesque* sense of tragedy in the face of an uncaring universe, the universe is in a constant dialogue with characters through their dreams.

The emphasis on pre-determination is restrictive, however, in that it becomes difficult to invest fully in characters who merely meet their destinies while lacking human agency to meddle with prophesies. In *Last Harmattan*, Emmanuel realises that he has no control over the future of Malagueta, just as Thomas Bookerman, who fought against the colonial invaders, ‘had been unable to determine the course of the last war’.[[33]](#footnote-33) In a rare example in *Sacred River* of a character potentially changing her destiny, Madeleine Makassa ends her relationship with Satani’s successor, Doggo, because of a dream in which she is naked, riding Doggo who has turned into a horse. The horse, or centaur, asks whether she is sure she wants to go where it is taking her.[[34]](#footnote-34) The dream offers her a choice. She feels compelled to visit her husband’s grave and she tells Doggo, despite the pain it causes her: ‘The dream prefigured death for both of us if we continue to see each other. So please, go away.’[[35]](#footnote-35) Madeleine is not a central character, however, and without more such examples the risk is the creation of flat characters where the focus is on the movement of a world through time rather than the people who caused it to move in a certain direction.

One way in which Cheney-Coker avoids this pitfall is by using dreams to develop character. The term ‘dream-hole’ may be used to describe this function of dreams. A dream-hole is defined as ‘one of the holes left in the walls of steeples, towers, barns etc for the admission of light.’[[36]](#footnote-36) The term was originally applied to the holes in church towers and belfries by which the sound passed out. Thus, a dream-hole allows light to pass inside and sometimes sound to escape, providing an image that suggests the development of character through the conscious and sub-conscious. The dream enlightens, and possibly motivates action.

As the Senegalese poet Birago Diop wrote in his poem *Breath*, ‘Those who are dead have never gone away’[[37]](#footnote-37) and in Cheney-Coker’s novels the dead often appear in dreams to guide the living. Isatu, a character in *Last Harmattan*, has a dream in which her dead husband tells her to put away her widow’s cloak and start living again. As a result she re-discovers happiness. Her focus shifts from personal issues and she determines to pray for the future of Malagueta.[[38]](#footnote-38) Sebastian suffers from nightmarish hallucinations until he feels someone touch him on his shoulder and call his name in a friendly and reassuring voice.[[39]](#footnote-39) It turns out it is his father who died a slave ten years earlier, and is back to awaken Sebastian from his ‘intolerable burden’.[[40]](#footnote-40) The father re-appears in dreams, representing turning points in Sebastian’s life. The effect of his appearance is always comforting and beneficial, causing the depression-prone Sebastian to confront life with a new vigour.[[41]](#footnote-41) At one point Sebastian descends into a gloom after a hurricane nearly destroys his wife’s potato crop, and he dreams that he is shipwrecked on a remote island amongst malachite kingfishers. ‘In that world of dazzling luminosity he felt a certain gaiety, listening to the melodic voices of the birds, to their morning serenade.’[[42]](#footnote-42) Sebastian’s father, himself an upbeat character, visits Sebastian in the dream and tells him of his happiness living as a spirit on African soil. In an interesting twist on a Freudian understanding of dreams, the father’s wishes are fulfilled through the dreams of his son. This has a profound effect on Sebastian who wakes up feeling ten years younger and tells his wife: “‘Life ain’t one season […] Gotta change, change, change, whichever way you look at it.”’[[43]](#footnote-43) He finds new meaning in life, contained in his own son’s future.

Habiba’s life is governed by her dream-cycles which she keeps hidden from her husband Theodore.[[44]](#footnote-44) When she discovers she is pregnant again after losing the albino child, ‘the enigmatic threads of a dream that she had one night tempered her joy.’[[45]](#footnote-45) She dreams she is a bride about to get married, and the groom is one of her former lovers, General Kotay. ‘Habiba Mouskada’s dreams had sometimes been so real they did not need an interpreter, but this dream was different.’[[46]](#footnote-46) She visits Pallo to interpret the dream and he advises her to atone for past mistakes. To cleanse herself, Habiba buys three coffins and performs a ritual for her dead lovers. Although she dreams again and again about her albino son, gradually ‘the labyrinths were not so intricately woven’.[[47]](#footnote-47) She achieves deliverance though her dreams and this inspires her to go to her son’s grave and beg for his forgiveness. Exceptionally, Habiba has a pleasant dream where she and Theodore move to an island and this motivates her to builds a house for her family by a river where they live happily.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Sebastian and Habiba are central characters in *Last Harmattan* and *Sacred River* respectively and illustrations of Cheney-Coker’s skill at opening wide dream-holes to create characters that come to life and leave a lasting impression. The technique is not used consistently, however, and is less effective for minor characters. When Emmanuel’s wife, Louisa, dreams that Emmanuel is lying dead in a gutter with his throat cut while ‘great Egyptian vultures flew high in the clouds waiting for him to decompose,’[[49]](#footnote-49) she goes to see a diviner. She is told that the dream revealed the evil eye of a woman who wanted to steal her man and was trying to bewitch her unborn child. While it is believable that she would follow the diviner’s instructions to kill a black duck and throw it at an intersection, we learn nothing more about the impact on Louisa of a dream which caused her to wake up screaming ‘convinced that some bad omen had been revealed to her’.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Dreams sometimes provide the motivation for evil, the suggestion being that corrupt politicians receive their impetus for action from a different realm and one that is purely inward-looking, contrary to the service to society they have undertaken to perform. After his first visitation by Henri, Satani makes plans to build what he calls his Xanadu[[51]](#footnote-51) and wonders ‘how many diamonds he would have to sell to accomplish his dream’.[[52]](#footnote-52) Henri appears in a dream a second time, promising to send help and warning Satani about a mermaid.[[53]](#footnote-53) Satani wishes for Henri to reappear. He has by now become dependent and cries, ‘don’t desert me’.[[54]](#footnote-54) Eventually, Henri reappears and tells Satani to be tough with his people, ‘Otherwise they will put capsicum in your nostrils.’[[55]](#footnote-55) Satani becomes ever more suspicious, corrupt and autocratic. Henri appears one last time, and tells Satani to go to an isolated beach where there is a beautiful woman, adding, ‘You will find what you have always wanted, but it will probably cost you your life; then you will have become me: so good-bye.’[[56]](#footnote-56) Satani appears oblivious to the warnings, perhaps believing by this stage that he is invincible. Indeed, he becomes convinced that he is Henri and, while at the isolated beach, steals the mermaid’s comb thereby sealing his fate. When he dreams of his own death he tries to read the augury in his dream but being proud and foolish, he dismisses it.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Satani is too much of a caricature to represent a real re-incarnation of evil. It appears that Cheney-Coker’s intention was to expose Satani’s ridiculousness, his self-obsession and consumption by greed. While the appearance of Henri in Satani’s dreams is an effective device, it does not survive as a central thread in *Sacred River*. Satani might have been a more credible character if he had learnt from his dreamed relationship with Henri that not all corrupt dictators are identical and that the same evil motivations may lead them down divergent paths. Towards the end of the book, dreams become a vehicle to expose a dark comedy when Doggo has such bizarre and perplexing dreams about succeeding Satani as president, as willed by Doggo’s guardian angel, that ‘it would have required two hours of divination by a Marabout to extrapolate some meaning from it.’[[58]](#footnote-58) Once installed as president he is a hopeless drunk and has nightmares, as the country falls to ruin, where Satani is yelling at him from his ocean grave, calling him a ‘half-baked ignoramus’.[[59]](#footnote-59) By this point in *Sacred River*, the original and compelling dream relationship between Satani and Henri has completely unravelled.

Time for Cheney-Coker is cyclical rather than forward-moving and as illustrated by the character of Satani, it is possible to move backwards through dreams and repeat mistakes of the past, whether one’s own or those of others who have made history. The third function of dreams in Cheney-Coker’s fiction is to reflect, also through the imagery of Alusine’s mirror,[[60]](#footnote-60) this continuity of time. A recent play set in Sierra Leone, *Sweetpeter*, echoes the image presented by Cheney-Coker in terms of the movement of time as it might be understood by the African perception of reality:

‘In Europe,

Time moves forward

But here, in Freetown,

That is only one of the moves

Time makes.’ [[61]](#footnote-61)

In *Sweetpeter* the characters risk becoming slaves again. Similarly, it has been said that Okri ‘revives the African conception of time as Eternal Return’ in *Famished Road* where the character, Dad, has cyclical dreams in which he enters worlds existing before his birth.[[62]](#footnote-62)

When Satani writes to another character in *Sacred River*, Moustapha Ali-Bakr, that ‘[t]he graveyard is beginning to bite’,[[63]](#footnote-63) he is referring to the belief in Malagueta that the dead do not sleep when they go to another realm but continue to show their teeth. The ghost of one of Habiba’s former lovers, Colonel Mango, comes to Habiba in a dream but she exorcises it and moves on.[[64]](#footnote-64) However, Kotay refuses to leave Habiba alone. We learn the dead man’s thoughts, before he eventually decides to set his own soul free and depart from Habiba’s life.[[65]](#footnote-65) The constant shifting of perspectives in the book can sometimes be bewildering, but in this instance it is a welcome surprise to be given direct access to Kotay’s inner world in the sub-terrain of a dream sequence. Cheney-Coker uses this tool sparingly. We find out that Sebastian’s father is happy in the ‘graveyard’ but only through encounters dreamt by Sebastian. Garbage, the poet in *Last Harmattan*, has a similar experience to Sebastian in which ‘a man with the celestial face of an angel hovered above him in his dream’ and apologised for being absent during Garbage’s formative years.[[66]](#footnote-66) He discovers that it was his father, who is content and at peace ‘in spite of the antipodean journeys on which they were traveling’.[[67]](#footnote-67) On those journeys, dreams provide a juncture where travellers on different cycles of time meet and converse.

Sebastian gains insights into the lost world of his ancestry and experiences a re-awakening each time he is transported into Malagueta’s past, paving the way for periods of ‘inordinate optimism’.[[68]](#footnote-68) Dreams permit a reclamation of lost knowledge, values, traditions and beliefs, [[69]](#footnote-69) something that appears of importance to Cheney-Coker in view of his disillusionment with the more recent history of his native Sierra Leone. He uses dreams to reveal history and shows how dreamed history impacts on the present, creating a strong sense of nostalgia. Havelock Ellis, who devotes a section of *The World of Dreams* to memory, suggests that in dreams we may remember things we never knew. [[70]](#footnote-70) Upon his arrival in Malagueta, ‘the whole of the country’s indigenous history and fabulous mythology is revealed to Sebastian in dreams.’[[71]](#footnote-71) He believes he has been to this country before ‘and that he knew all its history so that nothing was hidden from him, and he could retell all that had happened before’. [[72]](#footnote-72) An elephant and a scorpion dance around each other ‘as if they had known each other in another world,’[[73]](#footnote-73) before the elephant carries the scorpion on its back ‘trumpeting the memory of former times’.[[74]](#footnote-74) The scorpion is Fatmatta, now finally at peace with Ahmed the Elephant. Garbage hears Alusine’s voice during the night and waits for him to come and ‘lead him through the labyrinth of the past.’[[75]](#footnote-75) In his essay, *Magic*, Yeats urged us to ‘learn some day to rewrite our histories’ when they touch upon magic.[[76]](#footnote-76) This is one aspect of what Cheney-Coker offers in *Last Harmattan*: a re-telling of history grounded in what Yeats called the ‘visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed.’[[77]](#footnote-77)

Jeanette and Isatu both live to be over a hundred, facilitating the continuity of the story in *Last Harmattan* as so much happens in their lifetimes. The reappearance of the scorpion in the dreams of other characters adds to this continuity. Hammerstone has a dream in which he is ‘dancing alone in a large ballroom whose wall had been lined with pictures of the heroes of his country’.[[78]](#footnote-78) It is a type of revelation in which he is forced to confront the consequences of his actions and their negative impact on Malagueta’s history, but it comes too late. In his dream a woman touches him behind the neck and he feels ‘a lacerating, scorching heat run down his spine’.[[79]](#footnote-79) It is the scorpion heralding his imminent death. In *Sacred River* the mermaid appears to be a reincarnation of the scorpion, or vice versa, as Henri had previously fallen victim to her magic hundreds of years previously in Haiti. Henri himself ‘crossed an ocean of two centuries’[[80]](#footnote-80) to appear in Satani’s dream, establishing not only a temporal but also a geographical linkage.

Henri gives Satani the chance ‘to look beyond the present’.[[81]](#footnote-81) Drawing parallels between Haiti and Malagueta, both of which were established by former slaves, ‘who had been deprived of their kings’,[[82]](#footnote-82) He urges Satani to start acting like an emperor. Initially, Satani objects, arguing weakly that ‘this is a democracy’. [[83]](#footnote-83) But ‘inspired by the belief that he was about to become an emperor’,[[84]](#footnote-84) he makes plans to turn the fantasy into reality. Thus, through his dreams, Satani witnesses the history of another country and transforms it into the future of his own country. Cheney-Coker’s point, perhaps, is that it is impossible to eliminate bad governance and corruption as there will always be those in a position of power who learn the wrong lessons from history.

Cheney-Coker has been described as a ‘visionary poet and social transformer’.[[85]](#footnote-85)

He tempers his overt pessimism about politicians with one big dream, that of the place, Malagueta, which is future oriented.[[86]](#footnote-86) In both novels there is a constant juxtaposition of the inevitability of political turmoil with the dream of a better future, constituting the fourth function of dreams in Cheney-Coker’s fiction. Sebastian ‘was not a dreamer’[[87]](#footnote-87) until, waiting for his freedom from slavery in America, he dreams that he arrives with a beautiful black woman riding a white horse at the most beautiful valley the two of them have ever seen.[[88]](#footnote-88) The dream is surely of the Malagueta that Sebastian is about to discover and which is eventually betrayed both by the British colonisers and the greed and corruption of those who have forgotten their origins. When the first child of the freed slaves is born on African soil his birth ‘among these dreamers who had been toughened by the sea and the treachery of the misadventure in Malagueta restored their fortitude’.[[89]](#footnote-89) The next generation views Malagueta as a starting block for more ambitious dreams. Emmanuel does not understand his father because he belongs as much to a ‘Malagueta teeming with people who were free, assertive, deliberate and determined to go places as Sebastian had been part of another world where they could only dream of being free.’[[90]](#footnote-90) Malagueta is arguably the dominant character in *Last Harmattan*, ‘“human” in its possibilities and complexities.’[[91]](#footnote-91) It is beautiful and welcoming – ‘straddled on the one side by a rugged mountain of green and golden forest and on the other by a coast of white sand and rocks’ – a source of happiness and despair.[[92]](#footnote-92) Like its inhabitants, Malagueta undergoes a transformation from wilderness, to a small settlement of freed slaves, to a thriving metropolis. It has a fatal flaw – diamonds – the source of its near destruction in *Sacred River*. In *Sacred River*, Malagueta fades into the background so that the story feels less like a ‘true national saga.’[[93]](#footnote-93) It is not so much the place that dreams as the people, and what matters to them is: ‘that they wanted, occasionally, in the harshness of their pain, or even in the iron of their souls, to dream of a world that was larger than theirs, incomprehensible.’[[94]](#footnote-94)

Despite the cloud of gloom that pervades in *Sacred River*, Malagueta is the embodiment of too much hope for it to be beyond perception and accessible only at the level of a nightmare.[[95]](#footnote-95) In this respect, Cheney-Coker’s technique differs from that of other West African writers such as Bandele-Thomas who employs surrealist horror in *The Sympathtic Undertaker and Other Dreams* to expose corruption in his native Nigeria. A story within Bandele-Thomas’s main narrative describes the ‘dream land’ Zowabia where ‘dream people lived in an endless stream of misery and nightmare.’[[96]](#footnote-96) Cheney-Coker’s preference is to describe the horrors of war, for example, in realist terms while reserving dreams for other purposes. Yeama, the daughter of Habiba and Theodore in *Sacred River*, experiences a lived nightmare. She is so connected to her origins that she stays behind when her family seeks safety from civil conflict abroad and is raped by rebel soldiers. In the Prologue we are told that she sees this as a test and that rather than being defeated by pain, ‘she wanted to leave her choices open’.[[97]](#footnote-97) While it is hard to imagine she could be so forbearing, the book ends on an optimistic note, for despite everything ‘there was a stubborn hope in Yeama.’[[98]](#footnote-98) There is a shadow in Cheney-Coker’s novels of Okri’s spirit-child, Azaro, whose struggles are never ‘truly concluded’. [[99]](#footnote-99) In addition there is a hint in characters such as Sebastian, Habiba and Yeama that we can ‘re-dream our lives’ to create more light, however dark it is at the precise point we find ourselves on the continuum of time, because life is not just one season.

Dreams are commonly used as a narrative device in literature and it was noted by Alejo Carpentier that ‘dream technicians’ risk becoming ‘bureaucrats’ if they apply a formula that does not create a sense of the marvellous through the ‘unexpected alteration of reality’.[[100]](#footnote-100) Cheney-Coker is perhaps best described as a dream magician, drawing on ‘unconscious urgencies’[[101]](#footnote-101) and integrating them almost imperceptibly into his unique presentation of reality which is both unexpected and accepted. Magic in this sense is indispensable to his depiction of social and historical truths.[[102]](#footnote-102) Cheney-Coker’s technique is most successful in respect of the prophetic and time-defying functions of dreams which permit him to capture the ‘divergence and convergence of “chronological oblivion” (mythical time) and the “ravages of time” (historical time)’.[[103]](#footnote-103)

His success in terms of creating dream-holes whereby characters translate dream-lore into lived experience is more limited. Characters do gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their role in shaping Malagueta’s past, present and future but lack the power to change their fate. Sebastian reacts to his visions by alternately withdrawing and coming to life. He believes in change but is incapacitated by nightmares and portents. Bookerman is oddly defeatist. At an early stage of leading the resistance against Hammerstone, Bookerman sees a flock of crows in his dream and is left with the feeling that he is fighting a hopeless war and that he is walking into a trap.[[104]](#footnote-104) He realises that ‘greed, violence, and stupidity will keep on recurring throughout the history of Malagueta’ and he is haunted by a sense of doom and futility.[[105]](#footnote-105) At times it is difficult to invest in the struggles of these characters with the advance knowledge that those struggles will be futile.

Similarly, more could have been made of the function of dreams as aspirations, especially in *Sacred River* which loses direction in the final quarter. It has been suggested that the ‘personal freedom experienced in dreams may stimulate efforts to seek political freedom in waking life’.[[106]](#footnote-106) This idea matches Cheney-Coker’s own vision of a writer’s role in society as being to intervene in politics when the need is present.[[107]](#footnote-107) However, it may be that he is saying we should listen to poets rather than to dreams.[[108]](#footnote-108) This is reflected in the character of Garbage in *Last Harmattan*, and his descendent Theodore, the poet in *Sacred River*, which has led to the comment that ‘the most extraordinary aspect of [*Last Harmattan*] is surely the idea that poetry can meet a whole society head-on’.[[109]](#footnote-109) It is perhaps ironic that Cheney-Coker’s latest volume of poems is entitled *Farewell to Dreams*. Nevertheless, the enduring legacy of dreams in his fiction may best be captured by his own remark that in the narratives of day-to-day existence in Sierra Leone, ‘people have dreams that go beyond reality’.[[110]](#footnote-110) Malagueta is a dream in flight, chased by wars which break its wings and pillaged by corrupt politicians who are oblivious to its history. But seasons change. After all, ‘Malagueta was like a sun which would disappear for a while but would reappear after the rain.’[[111]](#footnote-111)

1. Syl Cheney-Coker, *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*, Heinemann, 1990, (‘*Last Harmattan*’), p. ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Syl Cheney-Coker, *Sacred River, a novel*, Ohio University Press, 2014, (‘*Sacred River*’), p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Eustace Palmer, *Of War and Women, Oppression and Optimism, New Essays on the African Novel*, Africa World Press, Inc., 2008, p. 261; Paolo Bertinetti, ‘Reality and Magic in Syl Cheney-Coker’s *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*’, in Elsa Linguanti, Francesco Casotti and Carmen Concilio (eds), *Coterminous Worlds, Magical realism and contemporary post-colonial literature in English*, Rodopi, Amsterdam-Atlanta, 1999, 197-207, p. 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Amos Tutuola, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, 1954 (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1962); *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, 1952, (Faber and Faber, 1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. B. Kojo Laing, *Search Sweet Country*, Heinemann, London, 1986; *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, Heinemann, London, 1988. M. Thorpe, ‘Woman of the Aeroplanes by Kojo Laing’, *World Literature Today*, Vol. 65, No. 2, Spring 1991, 348: A ‘magical Scheherezadesque inspiration’ from Tutuola is evident in Laing’s *Woman of the Aeroplanes*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ben Okri, *The Famished Road*, Vintage Classics, 1992; *Songs of Enchantment*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Derek Wright, ‘Introduction: Writers and Period’, in Derek Wright (ed), *Contemporary African Fiction*, Bayreuth African Studies, Breitinger, 1997, pp. 6-7. See also Kim Anderson Sasser, *Magical Realism and Cosmopolitanism, Strategizing Belonging*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 88: Okri constructs a humanism requiring ‘African particularity’; and K. Anthony Appiah, ‘Spiritual Realism’, *The Nation*, August 3/10, 1992, 146-148, p. 147: ‘For Okri […] the world of spirits is not metaphorical or imaginary; rather, it is more real than the world of the everyday.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See generally, Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction, Seeing with a third eye*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998; Paolo Bertinetti, ‘Reality and Magic in Syl Cheney-Coker’s *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*’ (n. 4 above); Patrick Bernard, ‘Magical Realism and History in Cheney-Coker’s *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*’, in Eustace Palmer and Abioseh Michael Porter, *Knowledge Is More Than Mere Words, A Critical Introduction to Sierra Leonean Literature*, Africa World Press, 2008, New Jersey, 153-179, p. 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Sacred River*, p. vii. Robert L. Van de Castle introduces his book *Our Dreaming Mind* (Ballantine Books, New York, 1994, p. xxvi) with ‘the puzzling dilemma of whether “reality” is better glimpsed with open eyes during daylight hours or with closed eyes while dreaming’. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Derek Wright, ‘Postmodernism as Realism: Magic History in Recent West African Fiction’, in *Contemporary African Fiction* (n. 8 above), 181-207, p. 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction* (n. 9 above), p. 67. Cheney-Coker refers to those who can see into the future as having ‘the gift of the second eye’. John Ziebell, ‘Interview with Syl Cheney-Coker’, in Eustace Palmer and Ernest Cole (eds), *Emerging Perspectives on Syl Cheney-Coker*, Africa World Press, 2014, 21-31, p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. E. T. Bender, ‘Androgynous Scribes, Duplicitous Inscription: Isaac Bashevis Singer’s Cinematic Dreamscapes’, in D. Fowler (ed), *The Kingdom of Dreams*, Selected Papers from the 10th Florida State University Conference on Literature and Film, Florida State University Press, Tallahassee, 1986, 114-127, p. 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Homer, *The Iliad*, Translation by Robert Fitzgerald, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2004, p. 7, lines 71-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Katherine Taylor Craig, *The Fabric of Dreams, Dream Lore and Dream Interpretation, Ancient and Modern*, E.P. Dutton and Company, New York, 1918, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Daniel E. Harris-McCoy, *Artemidorus’ Oneirocritica*, *Text, Translation, and Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 2012 (Introduction, pp. 1-43), p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., p. 4. Aristotle, *On Dreams*, translated by J. I. Beare, Raleigh, N.C.: Alex Catalogue; Boulder, Colo, 1918. See also Mark A. Holowchak, ‘Aristotle on Dreaming: What Goes On in Sleep When the Big Fire Goes Out’, (1996) 16 *Ancient Philosophy*, 405-423. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See further David Shulman and Guy G. Stroumsa (eds) *Dream Cultures: Explorations in the Comparative History of Dreaming*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Mary Chinkwita, *The Usefulness of Dreams, An African Perspective*, Janus Publishing Company, London, 1993, p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. John Ziebell, ‘Interview with Syl Cheney-Coker’ (n. 12 above), pp. 25-26. The relationship between divination and political power structures in Sierra Leone has been taken up by Rosalind Shaw, ‘The Politician and the Diviner: Divination and the Consumption of Power in Sierra Leone’, in Palmer and Cole (eds), *Emerging Perspectives on Syl Cheney-Coker* (n. 12 above), pp. 157-182. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Derek Wright, ‘Postmodernism as Realism’ (n. 11 above), p. 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid, p. 193. See also p. 186: A comparison may be drawn with Ben Okri’s Azaro who ‘through his supersensory telepathic and clairvoyant powers, enters the minds of others, existing in their dreams and dreaming their existence’. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Last Harmattan*, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid, p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Sacred River*, p. 264. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Last Harmattan*, p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid, p. 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid, p. 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Sacred River*, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid, pp. 258, 305 and 308. Patrick Bernard, ‘Magical Realism and History in Cheney-Coker’s *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*’ (n. 9 above), endnote 2, notes that in the mythology of the Sherbo people of Sierra Leone, the merman known as Kasila is the god or devil of the water and both ‘the savior who protects from the dangers of the sea and the trickster who dupes human beings who will follow his light’. It has also been noted that Fatmatta is ‘an Africanized version of the mermaid of Western mythology’. See Brenda Cooper, ‘“The Plantation Blood in His Veins”: Syl Cheney-Coker and *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*’, in Palmer and Cole (eds), *Emerging Perspectives on Syl Cheney-Coker* (n. 12 above),183-225, p. 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *Last Harmattan*, p. 313. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *Sacred River*, p. 369. Madeleine’s dream brings to mind Francisco Goya’s *Nightmare* (etching) where a woman is dragged from her sleep and paraded on the back of a raging bull pointing to the occasional departure by Cheney-Coker from purely African myths and symbols. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Sacred River*, p. 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Volume I, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 801. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Birago Diop, *Breath*, quoted in full in W. Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge University Press, 1976, pp. 131-132, ‘[b]ecause of its unusual lyrical possession by an integral reality of the African world.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Last Harmattan*, p. 297. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Last Harmattan*, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Paolo Bertinetti, ‘Reality and Magic in Syl Cheney-Coker’s *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*’ (n. 4 above), p. 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Last Harmattan*, p. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *Sacred River*, p. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid, p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid, p. 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid, p. 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *Last Harmattan*, p. 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Alteration of Shang-tu, the ancient Mongol city founded by Kublai Khan (now in the Chinese region of Inner Mongolia). ‘A place suggestive of the Xanadu portrayed in Coleridge's poem Kubla Khan, with its dream-like magnificence and luxury.’ ‘Xanadu, n.’ OED Online, March 2015, Oxford University Press, available at: http://www.oed.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/Entry/230947?redirectedFrom=xanadu& (last accessed 25 May 2015). Coleridge’s poem was apparently based on a (opium induced) dream vision and he prefaces the poem with an alternative title: ‘Or, a vision in a dream. A fragment.’ Notably, the poem appears to provide the inspiration for the title of Syl-Cheney Coker’s novel, as well as its underlying themes: lines 23-30:

    ‘And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever

    It flung up momently the sacred river.

    Five mile meandering with a mazy motion

    Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,

    Then reached the caverns measureless to man,

    And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean;

    And ‘mid this tumult Kubla heard from far

    Ancestral voices prophesying war!’*Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment. Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment. Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment. Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment.* [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. *Sacred River*, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid, p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid, p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid, p. 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid, p. 296. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid, p. 344. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. See further Patrick Bernard, ‘Magical Realism and History in Cheney-Coker’s *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*’, in Palmer and Cole (eds), *Emerging Perspectives on Syl Cheney-Coker* (n. 12 above), pp. 273-296, on symbolism in *Last Harmattan*. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. John Retallack and Usifu Jalloh, *Sweetpeter* (play), in *Six Ensemble Plays for Young Actors*, introduced by Paul Roseby, Methuen Drama, London, 2008, 159-222, p. 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. R. Oliva, ‘Re-Dreaming the World, Ben Okri’s Shamanic Realism’, in *Coterminous Worlds* (n. 4 above), 171-196, pp. 183 and 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. *Sacred River*, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Ibid, pp. 60-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. *Last Harmattan*, p. 296. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. *Last Harmattan,* p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Christopher Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel, Between Faith and Irreverence*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 12, referring to the work of Ben Okri. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Havelock Ellis, *The World of Dreams*, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911, p. 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Derek Wright, ‘Postmodernism as Realism’ (n. 11 above), p. 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. *Last Harmattan*, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Ibid, p. 291. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, London, Macmillan & Co Ltd, 1961, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. *Last Harmattan*, p. 282. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. *Sacred River*, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Ibid, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Ibid, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Ibid, pp. 9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Eustace Palmer and Ernest Cole (eds), ‘Introduction’ in Palmer and Cole (eds), *Emerging Perspectives on Syl Cheney-Coker* (n. 12 above), p. viii. See also Derek Wright, ‘Postmodernism as Realism’ (n. 11 above), p. 184: Cheney-Coker’s work is ‘marked by a deep sense of social relevance and political responsibility, a driving moral concern and a burning polemical intensity’. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. See Patrick Bernard, ‘Magical Realism and History in Cheney-Coker’s *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*’ (n. 9 above), p. 154: ‘In *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*, Cheney-Coker probes the nature of human dreams and possibilities, even when such dreams and possibilities depend on magical and supernatural forces that lie beyond human comprehension.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. *Last Harmattan*, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Ibid, pp. 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Ibid, p. 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Ibid, p. 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Patrick Bernard, ‘Magical Realism and History in Cheney-Coker’s *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*’ (n. 9 above), p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. *Last Harmattan*, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. M.A. Orthofer, The *complete review’s* Review, 22 May 2014, available at: <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/sierraleone/cheneycoker.htm> (last accessed 3 September 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. *Sacred River*, p. 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Derek Wright, ‘Postmodernism as Realism’ (n. 11 above), pp.192-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Biyi Bandele-Thomas, *The Sympathetic Undertaker and Other Dreams*, Heinemann, Oxford, 1991, p. 143. See also Wright, ibid, p. 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. *Sacred River*, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Ibid, p. 425. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Maurice Taonezvi Vambe, ‘Fantastic Subversion of the African Postcolony in *Songs of Enchantment*’, (2012) *Journal of Literary Studies*, 28:4, 57-86, p. 64. See also M. Arana’s review of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s memoir *Dreams in a Time of War* where she states that the picture of Kenya during a terrible war that the author presents is free of sentimentality, describing a child journeying across a bloodied land and continuing his studies to keep his promise to his mother, ‘thinking a dream can forge a better world’. *The Washington Post*, 10 March 2010, available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/09/AR2010030903425\_pf.html (last accessed 12 September 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Alejo Carpentier, ‘On the Marvelous Real in America (1949)’, in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (eds), *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, Duke University Press, 1995, pp. 85-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. D. Fowler (ed), *The Kingdom of Dreams* (n. 14 above), p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Patrick Bernard, ‘Magical Realism and History in Cheney-Coker’s *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*’ (n. 11 above), p. 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Ibid, p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. *Last Harmattan*, p. 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Eustace Palmer, *Of War and Women* (n. 4 above), p. 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Robert L. Van de Castle, *Our Dreaming Mind* (n. 10 above), p. 84, noting that in George Orwell’s *1984*, disobedience to Big Brother starts in a dream. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. John Ziebell, ‘Interview with Syl Cheney-Coker’ (n. 12 above), p. 27: ‘that he should use his voice to create aesthetical values that people can hopefully see as being worthy of emulation, but at the same time make political statements as and when the need arises.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. According to Eustace Palmer this amounts to idealism as ‘[w]riters, then and now, do not influence the African political or even social situation with their writings’. Eustace Palmer, *Of War and Women* (n. 4 above), p. 282. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Paolo Bertinetti, ‘Reality and Magic in Syl Cheney-Coker’s *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*’ (n. 4 above), p. 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Ernest Cole, ‘Interview with Syl Cheney-Coker, June 2012’, in Palmer and Cole (eds), *Emerging Perspectives on Syl Cheney-Coker* (n. 12 above), 39-43, p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. *Last Harmattan*, p. 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)