English Studies at NBU, 2026
Vol. 12, Issue 1, pp. 23-35
https://doi.org/10.33919/esnbu.26.1.2

pISSN 2367-5705
eISSN 2367-8704
www.esnbu.org

EXCLUSION AND REVOLUTION: AN EXPLORATION OF JJ AMAWORO WILSON'S NOVEL *NAZARÉ*

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Abstract

With exclusion and domination common themes in many world literatures, this exploratory study examines the portrayal of these topics in *Nazaré*, a prize-winning 2021 novel by JJ Amaworo Wilson. The book, which is set in a fictional dystopian city-state called Balaal, charts the story of Kin, a young street urchin who is prophesised to lead a revolution against the territory's hated ruling clan, the Matanzas. After briefly outlining the author's background and previous works, the study presents and analyses how aspects relating to exclusion and domination are depicted in the novel. It takes four selected excerpts from different sections of the work as a point of departure which were chosen for the way in which they particularly highlight these themes. Using close reading as the chosen method of textual analysis, these sections are evaluated with the aim of illustrating how these aspects are portrayed and transformed over the course of the narrative as a whole.

***Keywords*:** domination, exclusion, dystopian fiction, revolution, 21st-century literature, *Nazaré*

Article history:

Received: *2 January 2026*
Reviewed: *3 February 2026*
Accepted: *10 March 2026*
Published: *20 June 2026*

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Citation: Hoyte-West, A. (2026). Exclusion and revolution in JJ Amaworo Wilson's novel *Nazaré*. *English Studies at NBU, 12*(1), 23-35. https://doi.org/10.33919/esnbu.26.1.2

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Aspects relating to exclusion and domination are widespread in contemporary culture and society, and as such represent a classic theme in many different world literatures (Vandello, Goldschmied, & Michniewicz, 2016). The notion of upstarts fighting against dominant hegemonies, or underdogs struggling against (and ultimately overcoming) adversity is a common topic – for example, as demonstrated by the strong social consciousness displayed not only in the oeuvre of canonical nineteenth-century authors such as Honoré de Balzac (see Pasco, 2016) and Charles Dickens (see Andrews, 2012), but also as recurrent motifs in many different settings and eras across various literatures (e.g., see Gubrium, 2014; Lalagalli, 2024; Kołakowski & Montes, 2024; Hoyte-West, 2025a, etc.). Many of these works explore how the struggle against domination and exclusion is embedded in various factors. These can include stringent social structures, contrasts between social classes, economic aspects such as wealth and poverty, as well as ideological and political aspects such as freedom and oppression capitalism and communism.

As such, literary portrayals of different forms of discrimination and exclusion exist both at the micro level (i.e., relating to specific characters) as well as at the macro level (e.g., relating to a specific setting or context). These depictions may be especially relevant with regard to discussions of race, gender, sexual identity and orientation, social class, and privilege. A further aspect is when such issues coalesce and potentially form multiple sources for discrimination and marginalisation, as Kimberlé Crenshaw's well-known conceptualisation of intersectionality outlines (see Crenshaw, 1989) and which has additionally been applied to literary studies across multiple time periods and contexts (see Armengol, 2019; Ilmonen, 2020; Fernée, 2020; Hoyte-West, 2025b, etc.).

Nazaré, a recent novel by JJ Amaworo Wilson – a writer not only of fiction but also of highly-regarded textbooks for non-native learners of English as a foreign language (British Council, 2017) – was born in Germany at the end of the 1960s. He has a diverse cultural background, with his website and materials presenting his identity as Anglo-American-Nigerian, and he has extensive international experience, having lived in almost a dozen different countries and having visited over 70. Currently based in the United States, Amaworo Wilson is currently affiliated with two universities, holding posts as writer-in-residence at Western New Mexico University, as well as a lecturer in the creative writing MFA programme at the University of Southern Maine (Amaworo Wilson, 2026).

His own fictional works include two novels – *Damnificados* (Amaworo Wilson, 2016), aspects of which were briefly analysed in Hoyte-West (2023) – and the subject of the present analysis, *Nazaré* (Amaworo Wilson, 2021). As will be summarised here, both works deal with themes relevant to the topic of domination and exclusion, and do not seem to have drawn much scholarly attention to date.

In adopting a thematic approach, the present article asks how the interrelated themes of exclusion, domination, and revolution are developed across the narrative of *Nazaré*. Rather than treating these motifs as static background elements, the study considers them as part of a thematic progression that moves from marginalisation and systemic oppression to collective resistance and symbolic justice. The four excerpts discussed below were chosen to represent key stages in the narrative development of the themes under discussion.

Damnificados* and *Nazaré

As mentioned above, the first of Amaworo Wilson's two novels to date is *Damnificados* (Amaworo Wilson, 2016), which was published by the independent American publishing house PM Press. As mentioned elsewhere (Hoyte-West, 2023, p. 9), the book has been translated into European languages such as German (Marivat, 2019) and French (Cochet, 2019; Barragán, 2020) and has received several prizes (Amaworo Wilson, 2026). The novel is notable for its setting, a dystopian nameless fictional world inspired by the real-life Torre de David, a derelict skyscraper in Venezuela's capital Caracas which has been utilised as an informal settlement (see Irazábal-Zurita, Sosa, & Schlenker, 2020). In Amaworo Wilson's first novel, a group of the so-called 'damnificados' take over and occupy the derelict tower. The narrative thus charts their struggle to survive against harsh external threats, which includes a multitude of natural and man-made disasters (see Hoyte-West, 2023). Yet, despite the oppression, the damnificados manage to overcome these disasters and create their own functioning society under the eagle-eyed stewardship of Nacho, the novel's capable hero. Though fictional, the book's setting is certainly influenced by Latin America, as demonstrated by various aspects including the use of Spanish, and magic realism (see Slemon, 1988) does indeed play a role in the novels and its otherworldly fantastical events. Additionally, many names of places and characters also reference a range of other languages.

Many of these elements also influence Amaworo Wilson's second novel, *Nazaré*, which is the object of the present analysis. Similarly to its predecessor, it was also published by PM Press and was awarded a range of prizes, including the 2022 New Mexico-Arizona Book Award for Literary Fiction (Amaworo Wilson, 2022). The book has additionally been reviewed by both online and print publications (e.g., Fernandes, 2022; Yiyi, 2022). Similarly to Amaworo Wilson's previous novel, *Nazaré* is also set in a dystopian world, although this time it has a name: a city-state with shifting territorial boundaries called Balaal. It is also inspired by Latin America, as again exemplified by the frequent use of Spanish words and terms, as well as certain culturally-inspired features and descriptions. Indeed, Balaal is ruled (and has been for generations) by a despotic family, the Matanzas. With their surname identical to the Spanish noun commonly translated as 'slaughter', 'killing', or 'massacre' (Collins Dictionary, 2026a), the Matanzas exercise their terrifying and murderous power through their secret police, the so-called Tonto Macoute. Indeed, the very name of Balaal's secret police is redolent of the real-life *Tontons Macoutes*, the nickname for the armed paramilitaries who enforced the lengthy dictatorships of 'Papa Doc' and 'Baby Doc' Duvalier on the Caribbean island of Haiti during the 20th century. Though the name *Tontons Macoutes* originated from the Haitian Creole for 'bogeymen' (Lawless et al., 2024), the nomenclature of the Matanzas' hated henchmen, the Tonto Macoute, additionally evokes the Spanish and Portuguese noun *tonto* – variously translated as silly, stupid, foolish, etc. (Collins Dictionary, 2026b; 2026c) – thus providing a comical touch and symbolising their ineptitude.

The novel's characters and setting draw inspiration from a vast panoply of ethnicities, traditions, languages, and cultures both real and fictional (PM Press, 2021); indeed, among its other origins, it could be advanced that the name given to the city-state, Balaal, is seemingly redolent of the Biblical Hebrew verb בָּלַל (*bālal*), meaning to confuse or confound (see Wiktionary, 2026), as well as being evocative of the resultant linguistic disarray which followed the destruction of the biblical Tower of Babel (see Kamusella, 2024, p. 149). The book's characters and location are all interspersed with judicious references to magic realism and associated fantastic events – for example, as shown by the roles played by prophecies, shapeshifting personages, and other inexplicably bizarre events that go far beyond the realms of conventional reality.

In briefly summarising the novel, the book is essentially the story of Kin, a young, orphaned street urchin who lives in the port of Balaal. However, it transpires that he has a magic ability; he is able to summon Nazaré, a giant wave. Indeed, the very word 'Nazaré' carries important symbolism, most notably as the Portuguese name for the city of Nazareth, the biblical birthplace of Jesus; it is also a town on Portugal's Atlantic coast which is world-famous among surfers for its huge waves (see PM Press, 2021; Azevedo, 2023, etc.). As has been prophesied (to the ire of the ruling Matanzas), the young boy holds the fate of Balaal in his hands. The novel, therefore, is the narrative of Kin's attempts to avoid being murdered and to bring about the foretold uprising, a peasants' revolt against the hated yet omnipotent ruling dynasty. Accordingly, as was also apparent in *Damnificados*, *Nazaré* holds significant potential for thematic analysis. Taking an approach based on four selected scenes excerpted from the novel, the principal aim of this contribution is to explore how exclusion and domination are depicted in the work, taking the example of Kin's putative revolt against the rule of the Matanza family. This will be done through presenting and analysing four selected excerpts – taken from different stages in the novel – which were chosen for the way in which they particularly highlight these themes.

Exclusion and domination in *Nazaré*

The analysis below follows the thematic progression outlined previously, moving from marginalised spaces and social exclusion to historical oppression, revolutionary mobilisation, and finally symbolic justice.

Peripheral poverty and social exclusion

The first excerpt takes place immediately after the so-called 'Popcorn Rebellion', where the inhabitants of the nameless fishing village where Kin resides join forces to overthrow a corrupt judge in dramatic style. Jesa, a poor widow who acts almost like a surrogate mother to the orphaned Kin, escapes from the fishing village to the inland settlement of Bujiganga. Indeed, Bujiganga has its own reputation as "a village of collectors and madmen, tinkers and scrap merchants" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 82), its name displaying a distinct lexical similarity with the Portuguese word *bugiganga*, which can be variously translated as a 'knick-knack' or 'trinket' (see Collins Dictionary, 2026d).

On arrival in the town, Jesa meets a local woman wearing a nun's habit, who says: "'You're here to stir up trouble. Or at least we hope so'" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 84), thus exemplifying the degree of antipathy towards the ruling Matanza regime. Indeed, the woman in nun's clothing goes on to say to Jesa that "we welcome you with open arms. Here, the government keeps attacking us. The Tonto Macoute raid our stores, take away our women. Sometimes they kidnap our children. They make us pay taxes, which go into their pockets" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, pp. 84-85). Accordingly, the fervent desire for change amongst the townspeople is clear: "The woman adds: 'We're planning a revolution. People say we're insane, but it's not true. We're just poor. And the reason we're poor is that the Matanza family has stolen everything. All we have left is dry land'" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 85).

By drawing attention to the barren landscape and the poverty of the settlement, the above quotation illustrates how the inhabitants of the village have been excluded from wider society. In addition, it highlights how these economically-deprived people, who are among the poorest residents of the city-state, have been taken advantage of by Balaal's corrupt power structures and rotten elite. As such, this sense of marginalisation is reiterated by the very fabric of the settlement itself; in terms of its construction, it is described as being made of "found materials" that had been "used and reused until the residents could no longer remember the original purpose of anything" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 82).

Historical domination and ideological control

The issue of domination comes to the fore in the second excerpt from the novel and shifts the thematic focus from local marginality to the historical and ideological mechanisms through which domination is reproduced. It takes place when Kin has also escaped to the countryside of Balaal, albeit with the hated Tonto Macoute secret police hot on his heels. Emaciated and exhausted, the youth fortuitously meets some hospitable people – a band of men known as the 'barbudos' (Spanish for 'the bearded ones'). These barbudos take him to their hobbit-like settlement, where Kin recovers from his ordeal on the run. The most important of the group of bearded men is nicknamed 'The Professor' – Kin meets him, and it transpires the barbudos are, in fact, "librotraficantes. Book smugglers" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 108). Indeed, life in their settlement is subject to

the following requirement: "There's only one rule. Everyone reads every day. At least an hour. No excuses" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 108). Fortunately, Kin is literate, as Jesa had taught him how to read. The young hero starts with a 'History of Balaal', a weighty tome which, in demonstrating the interlinkage between dynasty and state power, is essentially the story of the various members of the city state's ruling family. As the quotation below demonstrates, it provides a veritable chronicle of the oppression endured by Balaal's populace under the Matanza regime:

> Kin read until his eyes were heavy. The more he read, the more he understood Balaal. Starving workers, aimless wanderers, desperadoes, desaparecidos, escaped camels, and ragged armies of street children, of which he had been one. They were nameless masses, huddled in corners of mines or put to work in factories. Occasionally they appeared in protest marches, chanting slogans and waving their fists, but nothing ever seemed to come of these marches. (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 108)

As he makes his way through the volume, Kin notes that the chapters would always finish in a similar manner – i.e., with the protestors being sprayed by water cannons, arrested and imprisoned, or – in the worst cases - shot by the regime's secret police. As shown by the actual 'excerpts' of the book which feature in the novel, the volume demonstrates that throughout the history of the state, resistance has ultimately been shown to be futile, with the oligopoly dominating Balaal's poor, unfortunate, and oppressed inhabitants. Kin continues reading the book, which contains important information about the tribulations endured by the citizenry:

> "the massacres / the assassinations / the slaughters / the imprisonments without trial / the insane decrees / the absurd proclamations / the massive statues / the gargantuan palaces / the colossal castles / the browbeaten masses / the bullied underclasses / the cowed communities." (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, pp. 115-116)

Myth, prophecy, and revolutionary mobilisation

In aggregating the catalogue of abuses enacted by the Matanzas, the list illustrates the scope of the dynasty's repressive acts. The themes of exclusion and domination become linked to mythic and prophetic structures, which begin to mobilise revolutionary action. As attested above, the acts of repression range from severe atrocities (such as large-scale murders and unlawful incarcerations) to ridiculous caprices (such as the

construction of gigantic residences and monuments), all leading to one key aim – to demoralise Balaal's populace, thereby weakening their willpower and removing their sense of humanity. Therefore, this litany of the Matanzas' misdeeds serves as a motivator for Kin and the others to revolt against their hated rulers. Yet, as Kin's ultimately successful campaign proves, the strategy of the Matanzas has not been fully successful. An illustration of this can be seen in a further excerpt from the novel where, seeking revolutionaries to join them in their cause, Kin and Jesa arrive at the temple of Kakurega, with the name of the religious site referring to the Japanese 隠れ家 [/*kakurega*/], meaning hideout, shelter, or den (Collins Dictionary, 2026e). In imploring the warriors who reside there, Jesa asks them to:

> Help us to overthrow Matanza. […] Because the family is a cyclone. It sucks up everything in its wake. It kills and robs. It throws the people to the four winds. If we don't stop them, they'll destroy everyone and everything. So we're doing it for liberty and justice. (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 161)

Building on the facts that Kin has gleaned through reading about the city state's history, Jesa's bold proclamation utilises weather-related terms to highlight the destructive capabilities of the ruling dynasty. She also evokes the classical concept of the four winds, evoking ancient mythology to draw attention to how, if no action is taken, the population of Balaal will be scattered and ultimately disappeared. In appealing to the warriors, she also highlights to their sense of liberty and justice, key concepts underpinning democracy and human rights which the Matanza clan have wantonly disregarded during their reign.

Subsequently, Kin and Jena move on to the bombed-out town of Sklonište, which is described as a "war zone" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 162), despite the word directly denoting a shelter or refuge in several South Slavic languages (such as Serbian – see PONS, 2026). Here, the duo meet the one-eyed Bashir, who goes by the sobriquet of King of the Rats. On asking for his support, Bashir affirms that "'We'll help you kill Matanza'" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 163). Indeed, again evoking broader notions of responsibility, he notes that he and his gang believe that "'it's our civic duty. And besides, what's it the scripture says? An eye for an eye. He [Matanza] plucked out mine'" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 163). As a result, given the physical torture he suffered at their hands, Bashir feels

an almost communal obligation to remove the hated Matanzas from power. As an aside, in quoting directly from the Bible, it is also noteworthy (as exemplified by the title of the novel) that scriptural allusions abound in the work, including with regard to names and nomenclature as well as the role that prophecies play in the narrative.

Public accusation and symbolic justice

In demonstrating a final example of exclusion and repression in the novel, the last excerpt is taken from a scene where Kin's revolutionaries have eventually overpowered the rulers. This represents the thematic culmination of the narrative, in which accumulated experiences of exclusion and domination are transformed into collective accusation and symbolic justice. The head of the dynasty, Porfirio Matanza, is captured alive, imprisoned, and then put on trial. The proceedings take place in a converted warehouse in the same nameless fishing village where everything began, and a huge crowd of the formerly oppressed populace begins to gather, eager to see their erstwhile ruler condemned:

> 'What are the charges brought against him?' […]. The people waved bits of paper, clenched their fists and began their accusations […] 'He bombed our villages and murdered our families!' […] 'He exploited the miners for thirty years.' […] 'He destroyed our town and took out my eye.' […] 'He stuffed my parrot!'. More shouts went up about ransackings and bribes and assassinations and stuffed animals. (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, pp. 230-231)

Now, at long last, the people of Balaal finally have the chance to air their grievances. As the quotation demonstrates, these vary from deadly-serious atrocities to quasi-comical acts, committed both on a large scale (e.g., against whole villages) as well as against individuals (through blinding someone in one eye). This wave of anger felt by the people culminates when Matanza himself is given the right to speak and to attempt to defend his actions, leading Kin to interrupt in dramatic fashion, shouting that "'this land belongs to the people of Balaal! Your family has no rights to it'" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 232). Matanza continues by arguing the contrary, justifying the actions through the notion that "'My family kept you safe'" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 233). It is at this point that a strange noise is heard:

> "[…] cries of help rent the air and the sounds of battering, the warp and whoosh of flames, buildings set alight, the cracking of roof beams. Old ransackings. Shouts from the Night of the Sixteen Daggers. Cries from the Slepvak Massacre." (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 233)

The din is described as "an echo of hell on earth that resounded through time, that was now in the very pores and creases of Balaal" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 233), thus demonstrating the pain and suffering that the city state's population had experienced during the regime. In providing auditory evidence, it is clear that "the music of mayhem was playing in their ears, turning Matanza's pleas to dust" (Amaworo Wilson, 2021, p. 234). By building on a musical aspect which is present elsewhere in the novel, this mysterious sound which resonates through Balaal's entire territory provides a fitting coda to the revolutionaries' struggle as they seek justice and renewal. Through judicial means, the fate of Matanza is sealed as he finally gets his comeuppance. And ultimately, the voices of the unheard can be heard once again, as the citizens recount – at length – the evildoings of the Matanza family and their henchmen.

Concluding remarks

In summing up, the core objective of this brief exploratory study has been to explore depictions of exclusion and domination in Amaworo Wilson's novel *Nazaré* through the prism of the revolutionary stirrings depicted in the work. The novel's thematic structure progresses from marginalisation and systemic domination to revolutionary mobilisation and public judgment. In this way, *Nazaré* presents revolution not as an abrupt rupture, but as the narrative culmination of accumulated exclusion, thereby framing justice as the symbolic reappropriation of power by the formerly marginalised. Indeed, as has been outlined, these aspects have featured in myriad ways, most notably via the pillaging and plundering of Balaal's people and its natural and economic resources, the resulting poverty, and the ever-present sense of fear, exclusion, and domination felt by the population. Yet, as ultimately comes to pass, the anger of the people is palpable, and this emotion proves to be a driving force in removing the hated ruling clan; as the prophecy details, it is Kin who motivates the population to rise up against their detested oppressors. Accordingly, in overcoming their excluded and marginalised status, the resolution of the novel demonstrates that power is ultimately given to the previously dispossessed, the voiceless, and the oppressed, who seek to use it in a positive and beneficial way.

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