

Fragmenting and Disrupting Gikuyu Society: A Study of Ngugi wa Thiong'O's *A Grain of Wheat*.¹

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Abstract:

The proposed research paper will undertake a study of Ngugi wa Thiong'O's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) with regard to the two revolutionary and historical movement Mau-Mau Revolt and the eight years of long Kenya Emergency (1952-1960) the reference to which are quite discernible and conspicuously found in Kenyan literature. Ngugi's novels are a projection of socio-cultural, and ethnic disintegration of Gikuyu (Kenyan) society by domineering Western imperialistic forces and an attempt to recognise the identity and individuality for the indigenous people subverted by various means of colonial ideologies and politics. The term Gikuyu implies the race of people and the language in Kenya which provides the common basis for sharing emotion and sentiments of people. Disillusioned by the various form of allegiance as collaborators, cowards, betrayers and political opportunists to the colonial regime *A Grain of Wheat* addresses the collective revolutionary action taken by the young to ensure the cultural and political decolonisation. Ngugi's novel irrevocably affirms and reinforces this through manifestation of political, social and cultural standpoint.

Keywords:

Mau-Mau, Cultural-decolonisation, Disintegration, Gikuyu, Domineering, Self-definition, Self-determination.

Significant African writers, critical of neo-colonial Africa, use literature as the medium through which socio-cultural and political disenchantment is articulated. The views of Ngugi wa Thiong'O, Kenya's most prominent writer and dissident, on the relationship between aesthetics, cultures and politics have established his works among the most important to come out of Africa. His novels portray the postcolonial history of Kenya and the changes which happened on account of the contact with the Europeans culminating in disruption of socio-cultural and religious fabrics and continue to affect the inter-relationship between individuals and their communities. In this respect Ngugi's work his treatment of the changing nexus within traditional Gikuyu society and indigenous social structure in the context of colonial and post-colonial Kenya forms the bases of this research work.

Postcolonial literature focuses on a number of issues and not the least on the ways in which Europe come to dominate those people who are gathered often unwillingly into the embrace of its extended empires. The era specifically investigates the way in which colonially imposed socio-economic structures altered the lives of the colonised, forcing many off their lands and into the labour market as part of a docile, malleable and essentially

powerless work force. Later, they are forced into accepting colonial rule and the consequent plundering of local natural resources, particularly land, whilst and imported colonial culture denigrated Africa and the African.

No writers escape the influence of cultural context. Educated overseas, Ngugi is in a position to draw attention on both Africa and Europe. Familiar with the myths, legends and history of his people, he has grounded all his fiction in the cultural heritage and history of the Gikuyu. He has also come to endorse those Western philosophies which have proved particularly useful to his articulation of the post-independence conditions in Africa. The views of Marx and Fanon, for example, are highly relevant to his savagely satirical portraits of neo-colonialism as it obtains in Africa. Highly critical of the Kenyan elite, Ngugi argues for the value of literature in the process of cultural decolonisation and believes implicitly in the power of writing to effect change. Before making a statement of intent for this study a few introductory remarks about the writer is in order.

An essayist, novelist and Lotus Prize laureate, Ngugi wa Thiong'O is a renowned and celebrated writer hailing from Kenya. Likewise, the Ghanaian novelist Armah, Ngugi's novels specifically deal with the contemporary post-independent socio-cultural scenario of Kenya and explore the failure of African ruling to cope up with the new situation in the post-independence era. A true embodiment and emblematic of the African culture and tradition Ngugi explores that how the pre-colonial socio-cultural cohesiveness is disrupted by the imperialistic politics constitutes the sole concern of this study. His earlier novels *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965) expose the dissolution of Gikuyu's social and cultural life which is marked by the manifestation of various domineering colonial ideology.

With the establishment of East Africa Protectorate in 1895 the process of colonization of Kenya is started and until 1920 it is known as Kenya colony. Having witnessed the tragic and brutal experience of seven years Emergency lasts from 1952-1959, the independent Republic of Kenya is eventually formed in 1964. The present study examines that Kenya's particular mode of resistance to foreign intrusion to imposed colonial jurisdiction, to land alienation, to the privileging of an alien culture over a devalued indigenous one, and to a subsequent erosion of human rights has determined Ngugi's portrayal of the changing traditional socio-cultural and religious scenario in postcolonial Kenya.

The two primary concerns of African art and literature, as with the entire gamut of post-colonial literature, has been to seek cultural self-definition and political self-determination which was denied to the third world countries and their inhabitants as a strategic measure to enslave their minds and lives. An integral part of this political strategy was to destroy history, literature and culture which form the root identity of their existence.

A Grain of Wheat is a detailed account of the two historical events as already mentioned earlier which are interconnected to one-another the Mau-Mau revolt, the seven years of long Emergency; independence and its impact on the community of Thabai. Thabai itself is centric spatially and symbolically to the unfolding of history

and the sequence of events in the novel. The establishment of new Thabai is a ramification of the emergency and can be taken as a microcosm of entire Kenyan society. The Gikuyu's do not have traditional villages but is scattered homesteads and clusters of huts on the various ridges, slopes and valleys. During the emergency, the colonial government to facilitate patrolling and control of the people have decided to dismantle their scattered homesteads and ordered to build rows of huts within a given parameter.

This homesteads and huts constitute their cultural heritage which those colonial authorities have systematically broken. *A Grain of Wheat* makes little description of the actual fighting during the Emergency but conspicuously establishes the collective suffering of the villagers and detainees. The villagers many of whom are innocent civilians and not involved in either side of the conflict, heroically endured forced relocation, starvation, savage beating, forced labour, rape, torture and even execution without trial. With shops and business closed down and time allocated for farming severely limited, hence survival becomes difficult. During the Emergency detainees are not considered as political and war prisoners rather treated as criminals who are subjected to forced hard labour, beating, abusing, and offering solitary confinement. By 1955 the military has gained control of all government reserves and strong punitive measures are carried out against any Kenyans suspected of being involved with the freedom fighters. Karari Njama has rightly stated that the "villagisation program" started in early 1954 was "an attempt to break down the traditional dispersed – homestead settlement pattern of the Kikuyu and place the Kikuyu peasantry in easily guarded, prison-like villages, located handily near the roads and grouped around the home guard and police posts" (Karari Njama, *Mau-Mau from within: Autobiography and Analyses of Kenya's Peasant Revolt* 332)².

The condition of the nearby villages is so appalling that it emanates the spirit of repugnant not only to Home guards (agents of colonial repression) but also for Mau-Mau fighters who bring punishment and pain to these people. Home Guards is perceived as the collaborator of colonial repression who are rejected by the community as are the Mau-Mau fighters whose successful attacks against colonial forces often served to bring collective punishments to these poor people.

Ngugi's evocation of space and various significant episode happening at that location the place where Mugo works before and after the Emergency, the trenches which are dug by forced communal labour, the woods and forests near Mumbi's house, and the place where the young people meet show the interlocking of past and present through space and integrates the life of the community with the land they live on and fight for. The symbolic significance and association which are represented make the village of Thabai as an essential socio-cultural-historical force of the time. Thabai has to be seen not as a unique case, but as a representative of such others villages all over the ridges of the Gikuyu land.

Various characters from this community have been introduced to the reader whose life more or less get affected by colonial occupation by the Mau-Mau war, the seven years of Emergency and in turn which have provided and contributed a critical phase to the history. The five significant protagonists whose complex psychological attitude constitutes the theme of the novel can be seen as an emblematic of different thought of people at the time. The lives, motivations and actions of Kihika, Mugo, Gikonyo, Mumbi and Karanja are in some sense representative of the various categories of people in the ridges of Kenya. The thematic strands reveal Ngugi's interest in "the social circumstances of his characters and especially in the background of the Mau-Mau resistance against which these figures live their lives and as they are altered by it" (G.D.Killam, *An Introduction to the writing of Ngugi* 53-54)³.

Five main characters each of whom at the centre of the narrative, living through the traumatic events of the fifties has meant widely differing things. Gikonyo the disillusioned carpenter turned entrepreneur, Karanja the opportunist Home Guard who betrays a cause for a woman, Kihika the martyred freedom fighter whose death inspires a movement, Mugo the isolated villager who betrays Kihika and cannot escape the moral, social and political consequences of his action, and Mumbi the peasant woman whose survival of the privations of the Emergency shape her as a monument of personal strength and self-reliance, all except Mumbi share a common alienation from the rest of the community.

Celebrating the end of colonial rule and the assertion of national autonomy, Kenya is a nation engaged in self-assessment. The day leading up to the handing over of political power providing time for both national and individual reflection in Ngugi's depiction of this process, the Emergency comes to be redefined in terms that interrogate previously dominant Eurocentric perspectives. This novel which focuses on the political disunity of Africans, storytelling and the skilful blending of myth, legend and history work to construct a past which reinforces the sense of collective identity that colonialism and then the Emergency undermined. The contrast between the unity of the past and the collective disarray of the narrative present (the five days leading up to the Independence Day celebrations) is thus brought sharply into focus. The revised edition of *A Grain of Wheat* particularly reflects Ngugi's commitment to rewriting the Kenyan past in such a way as to correct colonial distortions. The peasants at the centre of the novel, the transmitters of traditional culture and therefore the stipulated traditional unity of the tribe, are not represented as a passive class on whom history is inscribed, but as a potentially active agent in the historical process.

In *A Grain of Wheat* old order of village life have been superseded by the new regime. These ethnical structures are dramatically dismantled and tried to destabilise the village and the family life. During the Emergency the period has witnessed an increased disintegration of social cohesion among Africans, the random rounding up of males who were then forced into reserves, destabilised village and family life, razing and rebuilding whole villages, not in the traditional circular pattern which enhanced interaction between members of the community but linearly and geographically close to colonial administration centres which had ready access to military support,

reinforced the belief that the old order had been superseded by the new regime. This is the worst consequence of cultural juxtaposition.

During the time of Emergency, the traditional village life in particular, with men in detention, in the forests or employed as Home Guards is not generally supportive to the maintenance of a strong collective unity despite the efforts of individuals like Mumbi. The novel suggests that “the Party” has effectively displaced tribal-based notions of unity along with the tribal exclusiveness to traditional communities.

Ngugi has interwoven the past into the present through the incorporation of myth, legend, traditional story-telling, folktale and proverbs which is the most important part of this novel. Ngugi has also used such literary devices earlier in his first two novels in *Weep Not, Child* and to a lesser extent in *The River Between* to sustain the link between the tribal past and the narrative present. *A Grain of Wheat* corroborates a Kenyan history of resistance, grounded primarily in the Gikuyu peoples and their struggles against the British since the nineteenth century.

The narrative of *A Grain of Wheat* belongs to the five protagonists who are born in colonial Kenya and are invariably at the prime of their youth during Mau-Mau movement. The main character of this novel represents the different generation and sections of Kenyan society. For example, Warui and Wambui who are the village elders, symbolise the older generation in the history of resistance and revolt. Warui is personified as Chege in *The River Between* who educates Kihika and others in the history of the land, the creation of the myth of Gikuyu and Mumbi, the coming of the white man. In the next generation, the resistance to colonialism begins with Waiyaki, later carry on by Thuku and now continues by Kimathi, Kenyatta and other leaders. Warui's involvement in the protest march to free Thuku in the twenties and Wambui's participation in the Mau-Mau revolt in the fifties symbolises the continuation of the history of resistance from one generation to another. Warui in the novel can be seen as a reversal of Ngotho in *Weep, Not Child* and Chege in *The River Between*. Ngotho refuses to take the oath though his son Boro is a Mau-Mau. Warui's son disappoints him by becoming home-guards or moving away to the city and alienating themselves from the peoples struggle. Wambui constitutes the importance of the women's support and participation in the freedom struggle. The image of an older woman infused with a sense of wisdom and courage, inspiring the younger generation especially woman to have heroics acts which are quite evident and recurrent in later novels of Ngugi.

Later, Ngugi has recognized the heroic deeds of lieutenant koina and general R to some extent, who are having spent many years with Kihika in the forest, fighting under his leadership, and are now looking for the need to avenge his death. They are still haunted by the past memories and are difficult falling back into healthy life after the Emergency. As a boy, General R's childhood and personal life is governed by a colonial political situation in Kenya. As a boy, his anger against his father who happens to be the white messenger who beat and abused his mother turned him into a rash and angry young man.

Ngugi has figure out the points, and questions which are raised by General R in his speech at the Uhuru (independence) ceremony are most significant and worth considering. Freedom fighters like him have fought against white, put them and their family lives at stake and achieve independence for the land. But who stands to profit now? What is the purpose of Uhuru celebration and martyr memorial that Kenya has made? Will the injustice of the part be rectified and will they continue in the future? These are the questions of General R's the former fighter's speech raises during Uhuru celebrations are highly suggestive. Ngugi lays the responsibility of ensuring that Uhuru dovetails with the aspirations for which they are fought with the freedom fighters themselves a theme that becomes central in Matigari. Lt. Koina, a cook in the world war II, is abused and misbehaved by his white men, overcomes his sense of inadequacy and inferiority when he joins the fighters in the front. Becoming the part of the Mau-Mau activities gives him a new self and an awareness of black power. Koina exemplifies the psychological need and catharsis of violence that the black person has to undergo before self-discovery. The rape of Dr Lynd by Koina has further reflected Fanon's idea on violence. Koina's violence towards Dr Lynd is an act of retaliation of the physical and psychological abuse that he and his people have made at the hands of the white.

The rape of Dr Lynd by Koina can be viewed as an example of political and colonial violence, devoid of sexual implications. Therefore, violation of white women by a black/brown native is a recurrent motif in many novels about colonial situations. In the context of the colonialism, rape is viewed not as a physical act but an act of power and control in the patriarchal worldview. Hence, colonisation sees a rape of the land, where men take control and possess it. The colonised becomes 'weak women' – mere subordinates. It has been observed that the aggressive maleness of the colonizers becomes in a paradoxical way a model for the militant nationalist native also. Koina is quite assuring that independence would drive the white away and there would be no room for colonial rulers and white oppressors.

At the Uhuru celebration, Koina's statements and general R's questions force the readers to the uncertainties about the future. Would Uhuru bring about a real change in the social, political and economic structure of the country and would the present injustice and inequalities continue and worsen? These themes are further handled and anticipated by Ngugi in his next novel *Petals of Blood* – the emergence of neo-African – colonialism.

In this novel, Dr Lynd, John Thompson and Margery Thompson represent the colonial rulers and white settlers. Margery's extra marital affairs with Dr. Van Dyke reinforces the theme of betrayal and guilt, and are pervading all sections of Kenyan society. Margery's parasitic existence is also a paradigm of the colonizer. Living off the land and the people, her idleness leads her to have the liaison with other men. This also shows Thompson's failure as a husband.

Thompson comes to Africa (Kenya), full of naïve idealism and inbred arrogance, completely captivated by the myth of the white man's burden. Thompson dreams to write a book entitled 'Prospero in Africa', and consider himself as an agent of white to civilize the 'savage.' He considers himself as a saviour of the 'heathens' and the

'uncivilized' and acts genuinely as a prototypical British Officer. As a District officer, Thompson lacks sensitivity, is devoid of any understandings of the people he is governing. It is during Thompson's tenure as commandant that eleven detainees at Rira camp die of police violence. His strategy of the carrot and the stick to get the detainees to confess the oath does not yield any results. In this context cook and Okenimkpe has rightly stated, "Thompson is a supreme example of those who refuse to admit the logical links between past action and present outcome. As Africa international arena in its own right, this proponent of reorientation is appalled, not triumphant" (*Ngugi wa Thiong'o: An Exploration of His Writings* 72).⁴

All the characters in these novels are linked together and interwoven where each action, decisions have an impact on more than one person. Therefore, the cause and effect of relationship is not among individuals alone, but also between past action and present consequence. This aspect is highlighted by the narrative method of *A Grain of Wheat*, which is different from the chronological historical linear accounts found in *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child*. Kihika's influence on Gikonyo, results in Gikonyo's detention. Mugo fears Kihika and betrays him. Karanja becomes a home guard because of his love for Mumbi. Mumbi bears him a child, which leads to estrangement between her and Gikonyo. Mumbi's confession leads to a mellowing in Gikonyo, paving the way for a new beginning. Therefore the author's perception of history is reflected in the narrative strategies employed in *A Grain of Wheat*.

As far as the narrative of *A Grain of Wheat* is concerned, it is quite evident that preoccupation of historical, cultural and political events in colonial Kenya has been juxtaposed by the writer. This is a narrative strategy about this novel which makes him different from *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child*.

Though physically absent from the narrative, Kihika is a central figure of this novels who sacrifices his life for the movement. As far as the novel's thematic and political dimension is concerned, he is concretized through the memories of others. A childhood episode is recalled where Kihika questioned the Christian teacher on the issue of female circumcision. The issue of female circumcision is a historical fact about banning of which gives way to the establishment of independent churches and school movements in Kenya. Like Waiyaki and Njoroge of earlier novels, Kihika is the inheritance of a dual tradition of education. From Warui, the village elder, he learns the history of the land and the people, the coming of colonialism and the early rebellions. He also attends the missionary school where he discovers another version of history. But unlike Waiyaki and Njoroge, Kihika sets no store for his western education and renounces it to work on the fields.

The narrative of Kihika in this novel is specifically dealt with the three major episodes, the reference to him, his action, life and martyrdom. The first chapter begins with general R and lieutenant koina who are eager to discover Kihika's betrayal and avenge his death. The villagers of Thabai are assembled to make Uhuru celebration a memorial for Kihika and another martyr. This novel is an attempt to study Kihika with parallel to Dedan Kimathi who is considered a great fighter of the national moment. The specific parallels between Kihika and Kimathi are

also worth mentioning here. The disrespect for colonial education, the non-compromising attitude towards the colonies and the African collaborators, their commitment, their inspirations of fellow fighters are some of the areas of similitude. There are however differences between Ngugi's depiction of Kimathi in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) and Kihika in *A Grain of Wheat*. It would, ultimately, be more profitable to see Kihika as an individual in his own right, rather than a fictional recreation of the historical figure-Dedan Kimathi. The novel can be read as the psychological sub-text concerning guilt, betrayal, inadequacy and human fallings. Among most of the characters, it is significant to note that Kihika alone stands untarnished and pure, free of guilt.

In the Novel, Mugo has identified himself primarily with the land (shamba), and he wants to cultivate it in peace. Mugo's wretched childhood – orphaned at a young age, unwanted by his aunt who brings him up out of the sense of duty than love goes a long way in conditioning his responses to an adult. This is Mugo's tragic flaw the overwhelming need to lift alone, to keep the outside world at bay by shutting the door. He wants to prosper in life, thereby achieving some social recognition. When Kihika talks of the sacrifices the people would have to make, of brother giving up brother for Kenya.

Mugo who is scheduled to be honoured by the community on the day of independence repudiates the honour by making a confession. Mugo's betrayal of Kihika has grown out of his desire to be disassociated from his community. His confession in the end has significantly resulted from the need to be integrated with the community. In spite of having possessed a tragic flaw, Mugo emerges as an individual with intrinsically worthy qualities.

Mugo's death can be seen as containing a grain from which something positive shall spring forth. General R tells Mugo his deeds would be used to judge him, the reader is moved to acknowledge Mugo's positive actions as well. Though the act of betrayal can never be forgiven, Mugo's death is ennobling for him and his community. The other betrayer in this novel is Karanja, whose 'acts' of treachery is less damaging than Mugo. In this novel he is personified as the servile African who waits at the master's table for the crumbs thrown his way. Unlike, Mugo, Karanja does not have the excuse of a wretched childhood. Though he is a friend of Kihika and Gikonyo, the difference in his personality is brought out when he has lost his race for Mumbi to Gikonyo,

At the end of the novel, Karanja finds himself no place in independent Kenya, has no identity, importance and future and is reduced to a state of pathetic being. He cannot identify himself with any of national events and heroes. Compelled by his fear and alienation, he leaves his village to live himself in the anonymity of the city. The final verdict of the novelist on Karanja is not death but something more terrible. He is nobody, a mere shadow without substance or essence, one who has no part to play and no place in independent Kenya.

In the novel, the hope of new life in independent Kenya is worked out through Gikonyo and Mumbi who are archetypal representations of traditional Gikuyu man and woman. Their names personify the same as the first man and woman in the Gikuyu creation myth. Gikonyo is not a freedom fighter active in war or collaborators and disassociated observer but he is one whose loyalties are clearly defined by the various forces. Gikonyo is an artisan, the cultured hero with whom the hope of revival rests. His strong kinship with the land is expressed through his love and expertise in carpentry. The ease with which he identifies the different kinds of wood and relates it to the landscape and history is indicative of a symbolic oneness with his natural and physical environment.

In this novel, various themes and issues have been highlighted which in the course of this novel has been discussed by Ngugi at multiple stages. Among these issues, the themes of guilt, a major concern in the novel have linked with this fluid notion of judgement and perception. Those who are condemned guilty discovered to be innocent later, those presumed to be heroes and martyrs turn out to be betrayers. Ngugi's subtle statement is the dismissal of the Mau-Mau movement as barbaric or savage and hence based on limited perception. His own earlier hesitation and misperception to consider Mau-Mau as a brutal movement is a result of his partial knowledge. During this movement Ngugi was a school boy who would have had little direct contact with the movement and its participants. His initial understanding would have shaped up mainly by the colonial historiography as he is got his education at the missionary school. But the various revolutionary and oral narratives like Kariuki and Njama helped to transform his vision and ideology about Mau-Mau to a greater extent. Now Ngugi looks at Mau-Mau as a heroic movement of resistance and a glorious struggle for freedom.

In this novel which follows *A Grain of Wheat* Ngugi explores the failure of Independence to rebalance Kenya's socio-economic structures focusing on the way in which the living conditions of ordinary Africans were not ameliorated by political decolonisation but on the contrary were made to deteriorate further. Ngugi's primary concern in the first three novels had been to restore or reassert African (particularly Gikuyu) cultural roots and traditional values in the context of social change. From *Petals of Blood* on his commitment is increasingly to politicising the masses to bring about political reform. The restoration of cultural values is still there but metamorphosed to suit the current political needs, the push for an African sense of community has been transformed into a call for socialism.

The novel *A Grain of wheat* ends up with various contradictory and opposing views. Most critics find the fact that the novel ends with a note of hope. During the time of 'uhuru', people in spite of the shattered illusions, lingering fears, fragile expectation they perceive a new beginning which has been well portrayed in the last chapter entitled 'Harambee'. A ray of hope is seen in Gikonyo's perception and motif for the stool he plans to carve a woman with big child...underlining the possibility of growth that is inherent in the title of the novel. According to Malcom page, the word 'Harambee' in Swahili means 'pulling together' as ironic, since the only other textual reference to this word is made by the new M.P. who cheats Gikonyo and the other peasants and is absent from even the local

Uhuru celebration. This word is glorified by Jomo Kenyatta during the period of independence that is hardly considered the hero of this movement. C.B. Robson considers Gikonyo as the saviour figure and personification of the spirit of Harambee,⁵ whereas Malcom Page and Adrian Roscoe see the end of the novel as one of disillusionment and despair⁶. They consider Gikonyo as a sordid businessman, who rules out the very possibility of hope in the future.

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