

# Debating Socio-Cultural Identity: Spaces of Negotiation in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*

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Set in the wake of the 'Mau Mau' rebellion and on the cusp of Kenya's independence from Britain, *A Grain of Wheat* follows a group of villagers whose lives have been transformed by the 1952-1960 Emergency. At the centre of this novel is the reticent Mugo, the village's chosen hero and a man haunted by a terrible secret. Chinua Achebe in his *Message* said:

Africa is a huge continent with a diversity of cultures and languages. Africa is not simple - often people want to simplify it, generalize it, stereotype its people, but Africa is very complex. The world is just starting to get to know Africa. The last five hundred years of European contact with Africa produced a body of literature that presented Africa in a very bad light and now the time has come for Africans to tell their own stories . . . . Storytelling is a creative component of human experience of human experience and in order to share our experiences with the world, we as Africans need to recognize the importance of our own stories (*A Grain of Wheat: 'Message' 1*).

Many writers have striven to demonstrate how colonialism suggests certain ways of seeing, specific modes of understanding the world and one's place in it, that assist in justifying the subservience of colonized people to the "superior", civilized order of the Western colonizers. These ways of seeing are at the root of the study of colonial discourses. Colonialism is perpetuated in part by justifying to those in the colonizing nation the idea that it is right and proper to rule over other peoples, and by getting colonized people to accept their lower ranking in the colonial order of things - a process we can call "colonizing the mind."

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o was born in Limuru, Kenya, in 1938. One of the leading African writers and scholars at work today, he is the author of *Weep Not, Child; The River Between; A Grain of Wheat; Petals of Blood; Devil on the Cross; Matigari; Decolonizing the Mind; Moving the Centre; Writers in Politics; and Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams*, among other works, which include novels, short stories, a memoir, and plays. Ngugi's numerous honors include the East African Novel Prize; UNESCO First Prize; the Lotus Prize for literature; the Paul Robeson Award for Artistic Excellence, Political Conscience and Integrity; etc. He has taught in many Universities including Nairobi, northwestern, and Yale. He was named New York University's Erich Maria Remarque Professor of Languages and Professor of Comparative Literature and Performance Studies. Currently he is distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature and Director of the International Centre for Writing and Translation in the School of Humanities at the University of California, Irvine.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is now established as a major African writer and one of continent's foremost intellectuals, among the few most important of that gifted decolonizing era. He wrote *A Grain of Wheat* at Leeds University in England, in the years 1964-6, when he was a postgraduate student there on a British Council Scholarship. It was also during this period that he first read Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched*

of the Earth, as well as Marx and Engels, and later cited these writers, and Engels in particular, as important to the writing of the novel. Ngugi revised *A Grain of Wheat* in 1987, to make the 'world outlook' of his peasants more in line with his ideas of the historical triumph of the oppressed. The present-time of *A Grain of Wheat* is the four days leading up to Kenya's independence from British colonial rule in December 1963, although the unconfessed events which are the drama of the narrative mostly took place during the emergency in the 1950s. The Emergency was declared in 1952 to suppress the 'Mau Mau', an armed rebellion against European settlements in the highlands of Kenya.

Colonialism operates by persuading people to internalise its logic and speak its language; to perpetuate the values and assumptions of the colonisers as regards the ways they perceive and represent the world. Theories of colonial discourses call attention to the role language plays in getting people to succumb to a particular way of seeing that results in the kind of situation. Colonial discourses form the intersections where language and power meet. Language is more than simply a means of communication; it constitutes our world-view by cutting up and ordering reality into meaningful units. The Kenyan novelist, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, says :

Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through oratory and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other human beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world (18)

As Ngugi stresses, language does not just passively reflect reality; it also goes a long way towards creating a person's understanding of their world, and it houses the values by which we live our lives. Under colonialism, a colonised people are made subservient to ways of regarding the world which reflect and support colonialist values. A particular value - system is taught as the best, truest world - view. The cultural values of the colonised people are deemed as lacking in value, or even as being "uncivilised", from which they must be rescued. Candidly speaking, the British Empire did not rule by military and physical force alone. It endured by getting both colonising and colonised people to see their world and themselves in a particular way, internalising the language of Empire as representing the natural, true order of life.

The republic of Kenya - abode of legendary Gikuyu and Mumbi - is an ancient land, lying on the east-central coast of Africa. Kenya is a former British colony which at one time was known as the East Africa Protectorate. Anthropologists would have us believe that man first appeared on earth in these parts of Africa, as also in many other parts of the continent, about a million years ago. Like in other parts of the world, the people in this region too passed through various stages of development. The first colonization of these people and of the coastal region began with the arrival of Arab Muslims in the eighth century, who came to propagate Islam but stayed on to trade in ivory, gold, timber, iron and black slaves. The beginning of the 19th century, however, saw more European powers, particularly the British, the Germans and the French becoming

more interested in Africa in general and the East Coast in particular. A number of explorers and missionaries traveled into the interior and made contact with the Africans. The East Africa Protectorate was proclaimed in 1895, with Lord Harding as its first Commissioner. By 1896, the British control over the area had stabilized, and the work on railway started.

With the completion of the railway in 1901, the idea of European settlement in the area was taken up in earnest so that the traffic derived from settlement would make the railway a profitable undertaking. Reports of the fertility of land attracted a number of Europeans and as per the available records, the first batch of settlers mainly from Great Britain and South Africa arrived in 1902. The settlers occupied large chunks of land for both farming and trading. Through a number of ordinances, the government reserved the Highlands exclusively for the White Europeans, excluding the native Africans and Indians. The principal sufferers were of course the Gikuyu, since it was they who primarily inhabited the area and who were dislocated more than once after their land had been 'alienated' and given way to the European settlers. As the land-lust of the settlers increased, other tribes were deprived of their land as well. The resistance against the colonial government began almost simultaneously with the annexation of the region, but such resistance was in the form of isolated incidents involving small groups who are immediately affected by the British control of the region. The government decision to bring in foreign settlers from Europe, Asia and South Africa further complicated the situation and made freedom struggle by Kenyans not only prolonged one but also a more bitter one. The struggle after decades of peaceful constitutional moves both inside and outside the legislative council, took a violent turn in the early fifties when the cup of Kenyans' patient suffering and humiliation at the hands of both the settlers and the colonial government began to overflow. The most violent phase of the freedom movement occurred between the years 1952 and 1957. It all began when the most moderate demands made in 1951 were turned down by the British Socialist Government and a tougher attitude became apparent in the inner councils of the Africans. The basic reason had, of course, been the British government's policy of taking over the most fertile land from the Africans and giving it to the Europeans to cultivate. This led to a chronic shortage of land in the African reserves. As a result, thousands of unemployed youths were forced to work on European farms at miserably low wages and in appalling conditions.

The post-second world war phase saw a new revolutionary atmosphere in Kenya. The social and economic grievances became plainer as more and more Africans became educated and they began to understand that the social system was not immutable. Moreover, granting independence to India and Pakistan also inspired ordinary Kenyans, who were now getting impatient with each passing day. The revolt against the colonial masters manifested itself in many ways. They, for instance, resented the patronizing attitude of the clergy, who though professing Christian brotherhood, regarded the Africans as inferiors. The trade unions too were clamoring for more rights and better working conditions. As a result there were a number of strikes. As a result the government came down heavily not only on those who were involved in it, but also on a large number of innocent people. The harsh and brutal measure taken by government to stop the 'oath', proved counterproductive as more and more young

people impatient for a change took 'oath'. As the movement grew in strength, simultaneous with the most repressive measures used against the Kenyans at large and the Gikuyu in particular, the British government let loose most foul propaganda to paint the entire movement in total black, a one-sided and completely distorted picture of the Kenyan reality. The freedom movement was the result of colonization affecting almost all tribes in Kenya. The forcible 'alienation' of land for exclusive European use, the acts of forced labours at miserably low wages, the disallowance of observance of tribal customs and rituals and the observance of colour bar all compounded together, led to a situation wherein a solution to all these ills was sought to be achieved through the single demand for national freedom. With all its sophisticated weapons, war machinery and trained troops, the British government could not crush the freedom movement. Fighting against heavy odds of scarce resources, lack of training, etc., and against superior forces, the guerrillas covered themselves with glory by continuing the struggle for more than four years, which earned them universal acclaim. In General R. and Lieutenant Koinandu - together with Kihika, who of course is dead before the action of the novel takes place and is only recalled by various characters - represent the Forest Fighters. Not only do they tell their life in the jungles but also they pursue the betrayer of Kihika with the single-minded devotion that is symptomatic of their unflinching devotion for the cause of the national freedom struggle.

*A Grain of Wheat*, is a novel about the freedom movement. Through a series of flashbacks in the lives and experiences of his principal characters - Mugo, Gikonyo, Mumbi, Kihika, Karanja and Thompson - all of them who reflect on it on the eve of the Uhuru, Ngugi is able to weave, extremely skilfully, a multi-faced but a powerful picture of the struggle. Both through direct narration and reflections of his characters, Ngugi creates an atmosphere of hopes and fears, successes and defeats, loyalties and betrayals that were typical of the period of the struggle. *A Grain of Wheat* is the story of a group of people from a particular village - Thabai - who are about to celebrate the Uhuru day which is only four days later. This however is also the occasion when each one of them including the white D.O. Thompson, takes stock of his or her role in the freedom struggle, particularly during the emergency and 'Mau Mau' phase of struggle. Mugo recalls his betrayal of Kihika, the legendary youthful revolutionary who was hanged. Gikonyo recalls his confession of the oath during interrogation in the detention camp. Mumbi recalls the circumstances under which she was forced to submit herself to Karanja, the village Chief and a collaborator of the colonial administration. Karanja recalls his subservience to the D.O., while Thompson and his wife recall their role as a part of the white colonial administration that was trying its best to 'civilize' the Africans.

The novel begins with Mugo getting out of his bed in the morning to go to his *shamba* - a small piece of land for cultivation. This was a routine that he had followed since his coming out of the detention camp. As he walked through the village - Thabai - on this particular day, he met a number of people who, like him, had suffered during the Emergency. For instance, Warui, a village elder, whom Mugo met en-route to his *shamba*, had lost his piece of land through confiscation while he was under detention. The basic character of Thabai had remained the same since its founding in

1955. Mugo next ran into Githua who was dressed in tatters and who we are told has sustained bullet wounds at the hands of whitemen during the freedom struggle and had as a result become a little soft in the head. Mugo felt uneasy on meeting him on this particular day, particularly after he saw children making fun of him.

Mugo suddenly recalled the old woman who lived at the end of the main street of the village – the woman who had a grown up son – Gitogo – who was deaf and dumb. Gitogo ‘worked in eating houses, meat shops, lifting and carrying heavy loads’ thereby supporting his old mother. Mugo recalled how during one of the police raids for screening of villagers during the Emergency, Gitogo had been shot dead by soldiers in cold blood while he was running away – out of fright – on seeing the policemen. The official version had been – ‘Another Mau Mau terrorist had been shot dead’. The old woman they said had refused to grieve her son’s death and her eyes had haunted Mugo ever since. In her presence, he had ‘always felt naked, seen’. On this particular day, Mugo felt like entering the hut of the woman and talking to her but his courage failed him and he continued on to his field.

Soon Mugo was at his *shamba*, working, but he felt that the soil was ‘dry and hollow’ and he realized that the soil did not ‘fascinate’ him as much as it did before the Emergency. Ruminating over his past, Mugo recalled how his parents had died when he was quite young and he had been brought up by an aunt – Waitherero – who was also drunk and who abused him so much that Mugo wanted to kill her. After his aunt had died of ‘age and over-drinking’, Mugo took to working on the *shamba*, dreaming of a peaceful, prosperous life. Mugo did not linger, much longer in the field and went home early, walking ‘like a man who knows he is followed or watched, yet does not want to reveal this awareness by his gait or behaviour’. In the evening he was surprised by the visit of a group of people from the village, led by Warui, the village elder. He was accompanied by Wambui and Gikonyo, who had married Kihika’s sister. After welcoming them into his hut, Mugo’s first instinct was to run away from them.

The Party was an entity whose existence had been taken for granted, particularly by the younger generation for whom it was a ‘rallying centre for action’. The mention of the word ‘Party’ provides the author with an opportunity to intervene and trace the history of Kenya from the time when the first missionaries arrived to the present, when Kenya is about to gain independence from the colonial British who had followed on the heels of the missionaries. On ‘the eve of Uhuru, its influence stretched from one horizon touching the sea to the other resting on the great lake.’ Its origin, Ngugi suggests, could be ‘traced to the day the Whiteman came to the country, clutching the book of God in both hands, a magic witness that the Whiteman was a messenger from the Lord.’ Ngugi then goes on to trace the history of the entrenchment of missionaries among them who told them of a woman ruler in a far off land. The reference to a woman ruler gives Ngugi a chance to recall a bygone era when the Gikuyu were ruled by women. He remembers particularly one beautiful woman ruler - Wangu Makeri - who lost her throne because of overreaching herself and dancing naked in public.

Ngugi then goes on to dilate on the strategy employed by the missionaries, first, in converting the Africans into Christianity and later in helping the colonizing British in overpowering them:

They looked beyond the laughing face of the Whiteman and suddenly saw a long line of other red strangers who carried, not the Bible but the sword.' (pp. 11-12)

Soon the resistance offered by Waiyaki and others was overcome with Waiyaki himself being buried alive by the colonizers. Ngugi suggests that Waiyaki's blood contained 'within it a seed, a grain which gave birth to a political party whose main strength thereafter sprang from a bond with the soil.' (p.12) Harry Thuku then became their leader, their Moses, who asked them 'to join the Party and find strength in unity'. People followed Harry's advice and 'waited for something to happen. The revolt of the peasant was at hand.' The whiteman clamped Harry into chains and put him in jail which made the people only more determined and they held a major demonstration in Nairobi demanding Young Harry's release. Waiyaki, then a young man, had walked all the way from Thabai to Nairobi to join the procession. In 1953, when Jomo Kenyatta was arrested by the whiteman, Waiyaki recalled the 1923 procession for Harry Thuku:

We came from ridges here, ridges there, everywhere. Most of us walked. Others did not bring food. We shared whatever crumbs we had brought. Great love I saw there. A bean fell to the ground, and it was quickly split among the children. For three days we gathered in Nairobi with our blood we wrote vows to free Harry. (p. 13)

In the firing by the soldiers on the processionists, fifteen Africans died. Waiyaki's regret was – 'Perhaps if we had the spears . . .' The movement failed and 'the man with the flaming eyes came to the scene' – one who came to be known later as 'the burning spear'. (pp. 13-14)

Mugo recalled, he had once attended a meeting of the Party at Rung'ei Market. Gikonyo was there and so was Mumbi, said to be one of the most beautiful women on all the eight ridges. Sometimes she was compared with Wangu Makeri. Kihika from Thabai, Mumbi's brother, was one of the speakers who received a big ovation from the crowds when he said – 'This is not 1920. What we now want is action, a blow which will tell'. Kihika summed up the great betrayal by the Whiteman in the following words:

We went to their church. Mubia, in white robes, opened the Bible. He said: Let us kneel down to pray. We knelt down. Mubia said: Let us shut our eyes. We did. You know, his remained open so that he could read the word. When we opened our eyes, our land was gone and the sword of flames stood on guard. As for Mubia, he went on reading the word, beseeching us to lay our treasures in heaven where no moth would corrupt them. But he laid his on earth, our earth. (pp. 15-16)

Kihika had spoken of blood and Mugo had hated him for his arrogance. Also he had felt a twang of jealousy, as he had seen everyone look at the speaker with admiration. After the 1952 arrest of Jomo Kenyatta and others, Kihika had disappeared into the forest, later to be followed by a handful of young men from Thabai and Rung'ei. Kihika had raided the transit prisoner's camp of Mahee, carrying fresh supplies of men, guns and ammunition to continue on a scale unheard of in the days of Waiyaki and young Harry.

A year later Kihika was arrested, tortured and 'hanged in public', one Sunday at Rung'ei Market, 'not far from where he had once stood calling for blood to rain on and water the tree of freedom.' The Party had, however, remained alive even after Kihika's death, growing, as people put it, on the wounds of those Kihika left behind. Ngugi now focusses on the life of Gikonyo, who, he tells us was 'among the first of detainees to pass through the pipe-line back to the village. He set himself up as a carpenter, worked hard, refused to give indefinite credit and built himself a good reputation. Simultaneously, he got into retailing food grains by buying immediately after the harvest when the prices were low and selling when the stocks in the market were low. His wife and his mother helped him in his business and soon he prospered. In fact, Ngugi also here gets an opportunity to dilate on the life of an M.P. since Gikonyo visits the M.P. of his area to get a recommendation for a loan from a bank for buying a piece of land. He is quite amused at the mannerisms of the M.P. including the way he dressed, which was a blind aping of their white masters. In fact, the M.P. also spoke like the whiteman, holding no promise for help.

In the meanwhile, people began to speak about the courage shown and sacrifices made by Mugo, who was quite upset by their proposal asking him to lead the celebrations:

Why did they want him to lead the Uhuru celebrations? Why not Gikonyo. Warui, or one of the forest fighters? Why Mugo? Why? Why? (62-63)

Mugo had made only one real speech in his life. It was about the demand by the Party for Kenyatta's release from detention. Mugo spoke of the injustice of the Whiteman in arresting him:

They took us to the roads and to the quarries even those who had never done anything. They called us criminals But not because we had stolen anything or killed anyone. We had only asked for the thing that belonged to us from the time of Agu and Agu. Day and night, they made us dig. We were stricken ill, we often slept with empty stomachs, and our clothes were lust rags and tatters so that the rain and the wind and the sun knew our nakedness. In those days we did not stay alive because we thought our cause strong. It was not even because we loved the country. If that had been all, who would not have perished? (64)

Although Mugo became a recluse thereafter, people had spoken of his powerful speech for a long time.

This time, however, he was apprehensive too. Why had, he wondered. General R. 'asked those pointed questions. Meeting somebody after a week? Karanja? Yes, could they have really asked him to carve his place in society by singing tributes to the man he had so treacherously betrayed?' (65)

He is visited by Gikonyo who reminds him of the hunger strike at Rira and Mugo remembered vividly the Rira detention camp and the beating he had received at the hands of Thompson. While he comments that the government says we should bury the past, Gikonyo says that he cannot. He also tells him that he had confessed his oath while he — Mugo — had not and that's why they admired him all the more. He also observes that those who had made no sacrifices for freedom were enjoying its fruits while true patriots like Mugo were suffering.

Further, author gives the details of the detention of Mugo that began from Thika detention camp and then they — there were others from Embu, Meru and Mwariga — were transferred to Manyani. Thereafter, they were taken to Rira — a desert. John Thompson

had been transferred there after his success at Yala. He tempted the detainees to confess their oaths by providing them with better living conditions and promising them reunion with their families. However, he also applied strong arm tactics on the detainees. As for Mugo, Thompson often picked him up for whipping personally but Mugo did not confess his oath. Thus Mugo's prestige rose among his fellow detainees. This gave them also enough courage to demand better facilities, including increased ration, or else, they threatened, they would go on a hunger strike. And then the strike happened. The day and night beating of the detainees in order to break their unity led to the killing of eleven but Mugo had survived the torture.

The story of Gikonyo and Mumbi which, apart from that of Mugo, is the central story of the novel, represents the social tensions spawned by the disruption of traditional African life with the intervention of colonialism and its aftermath. The hardships which Mumbi has to undergo to sustain her and her parents-in-law after Gikonyo had been arrested and sent to the detention camp, represents the hardships suffered by tens of thousands of families whose lives broke down, thanks to the crackdown after the imposition of the emergency. Inhuman oppression was let loose by soldiers through bulldozing of whole villages and uprooting people including the raping of women. Even the henchman of colonial administration - home guards and village chiefs - exploited the situation to stamp their authority by letting loose a reign of terror and withholding basic needs like food and extracting all kinds of price from their fellow villagers, including sexual gratification from women of the village. The way Karanja went after the people of his village, killing some, severely beating others and bartering food for sex, represents very ugly phase of Emergency. The manner in which he stalks Mumbi - now cajoling, now threatening, now telling the truth about the atrocities in detention camps, and now telling blatant lies about the detainees - is a sordid story which had a thousand replications in real life. And finally, when Mumbi gives in to him and lets him make love to her - the circumstances ironically are more favorable to her at that point of time because Gikonyo has been freed and is on his way home - only shows that such social disruptions would continue to have its negative impact on the lives of people even after the Uhuru is achieved. And this is what precisely happens when Gikonyo discovers that Mumbi has had a child from Karanja in his absence. Refusing to accept the bizarre and abnormal circumstance under which it must have happened, he nearly gives up his wife, something quite rare and unusual in the traditional African way of life. Thus we can say that Ngugi has succeeded in capturing a very complex reality or what could be called extraordinary times in the history of modern Kenya. While doing so this paper has also presented Ngugi's ideological standpoint of various issues relating to colonialism, nationalism, class structure of post-colonial societies and the role that various sections of society played during the Freedom Movement.

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