

A GRAIN OF WHEAT: FROM EVANGELICALISM TO EGALITARIANISM

Dr. Inturi Kesava Rao

Lecturer in English VSR&NVR College Tenali,
India

Abstract

A Grain of Wheat was written at Leeds where Ngugi was a student. Arnold Kettle, who himself was a Marxist also influenced Ngugi's thinking considerably. The novel has a religious dimension to it with Socialist/Marxist ideology. There cannot be much of a dichotomy between the essence of true religion in its profundity and truth and Socialism (or Marxism in its ultimate analysis). The novel is a celebration of Uhuru (independence) in Kenya. The story of the novel relates itself to the events of the four days preceding Uhuru celebrations and terminates with the event. The novel moves back and forth fairly frequently taking the reader to the early days of colonialism through the heroic struggles. The novel sets before itself a much more complex and ambitious framework in terms of its sweeping thematic range so as to cover the national history of Kenya underlining the heroic struggles against colonialism. The novel is 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. The novel marks a radical departure from the established tradition in the concept of heroism. Marginal people, who are never part of the recorded history of a nation, are sought to be given due recognition and are portrayed as makers of the history in the novel. The complex and contradictory motifs are religion and rebellion, frailty and fallibility in human nature, the burden of alienation and the sense of belonging to the community. The colonial attempts at civilizing a "dark continent" and the native's search for identity through nationalist struggles, hopes and aspirations of the people at the birth of a new nation, white violence and counter-violence, irony and mimicry, a sense of gloom and of hope - constitute the comprehensive matrix of the novel. Ngugi chooses a Christian myth and a religious framework to depict the violent freedom movement in Kenya.

Key Words: colonialism, nationalist struggles, Christian myth, religion, and rebellion etc

Ngugi chooses a Christian myth and a religious framework to depict the violent freedom movement in Kenya. The title of the novel, *A Grain of Wheat* is itself from the Bible.

Thou fool, that which Thou sowest is not quickened, except it die.

And that which thou sowest thou sowest not that body that shall be,

But bare again, it may chance of wheat or some other grain.

(I Corinthians 15:36)

This epigraph appended to the novel is an attempt by St. Paul to answer queries by some Corinthians as to the possibility of the resurrection of the mortal body of Christ. St. Paul hints at the „potentiality“ of the mortal frame to get itself renewed in life for a second coming. But like a sown seed, it has to die first before it can be born again. The image of dying to be born again runs recurrently and is central to the novel i.e. the alchemy of “rebirth and regeneration” (Sharma Govind Narain: 1979, p.167.) Always lies embedded in a dying seed as a strong “potential” only waiting to be born again

Arnold Kettle, his research supervisor, was a Marxist also influenced Ngugi’s thinking considerably. Before he started writing *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi stumbled on Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. The novel is 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 whom reflect on it on the eve of the Uhuru, Ngugi is able to weave, extremely skillfully, a multi-faceted but a powerful picture of the struggle. “A unique feature of the novel is that “different characters are linked with one another socially and psychically.” (Nazareth Peter: 1978 p.132)

A Grain of Wheat is the story of a group of people from a particular village, Thabai, who is about to celebrate the Uhuru day, which is, only four days due. 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 the „Mau Mau“ phase of the struggle. Mugo, now a village hero, 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 which was trying its best to „civilize“ the Africans.

Ngugi, recalls through his characters, many raids by the freedom fighters. They raided to obtain rations and ammunition, as also to cripple and destroy the machinery of oppression. Kihika and his fellow fighters were not a gang of terrorists who derived sadistic pleasure out of such raids and killings. As Kihika tells Mugo: We can't just kill anybody.....we are not murderers. (Ngugi: 1986, P.16)

The torture of civilians had begun on a mass scale simultaneously with the militant struggle. The concentration camps and the pipelines were common during the four years of the emergency. Kihika was tortured. Several women had played a very heroic role in the freedom movement - the names of Me Kitilili and Mary Nyanjiru spring to the mind immediately and through Wambui and Mumbi, Ngugi pays a tribute to those heroic women warriors. In fact, with *A Grain of Wheat* Ngugi began a conscious attempt not only to create positively powerful women characters but also began to make them more „visible“ by providing them with greater“ space“ in his books.

The suppression of the movement brings untold miseries on a very large section of the civilian population. The novel highlights this through the story of Gikonyo and Mumbi, a very poignant portrayal of their love for each other through the tribulations of detention and physical suffering during the emergency. Here is Gikonyo on his own and Mugo's detention. Kihika is an ideal freedom fighter. He realizes that Christianity has come to have a hold on the minds of many. The priests are using it as a weapon to damn the freedom struggle using the same religious sentiment to arouse the people into action. Referring to the death of Christ, he says: In Kenya, we want a death which will change things, that is to say, we want a true sacrifice. I die for you, you die for me, and we become a sacrifice for one another. So I can say you, Karanja, are Christ. I am Christ. (Ngugi: 1986,) He thus considers Kihika's speeches to be labored. This is uncharitable, to say the least since Kahoka's speeches have a very forceful impact because of their spontaneity and directness backed as they are by his conviction.

The imposition of the Emergency created a host of other social problems for not only forest fighters like Kihika but for others as well. More men were rounded up and taken to concentration camps named detention camps for the world outside Kenya. The platform at the railway station was not always empty; girls pined for their lovers behind cold huts and prayed that their young men would come quickly from the forest or from the camps.

Ngugi shows them very resolute for their cause. The detainees had agreed not to confess the oath, or give away details about Mau Mau. Anybody could reveal the binding force of the Agikuyu in their call for African freedom. They bore all the ills of the Whiteman, believing somehow that he would endure unto the end would receive leaves of victory. The torture

grew as the struggle gained strength. Throughout the struggle, African collaborators played an important role on behalf of their white masters, not only justifying all that the colonial government did but also emphasizing the futility of challenging the invincible might of the Mzungu.

Ngugi shows the complete dehumanization of Karanja by the colonial machinery when he shot the freedom fighters or innocent citizens. Later, this consciousness of power is able to dispose of human life by merely pulling a trigger, so obsessed that it became a need.

People belong to various African tribes, white settlers and Indians acted and reacted to events of violence in a highly emotionally surcharged and often in a contradictory manner. As P. Ochola - Ojero puts it: In *A Grain of Wheat* the author probes into the psychology of those characters who have undergone serious difficulties and consequent disillusionment but who during the time of emergency have found some meaning and purpose in life in the tough fight for their country's independence.? (Ojero: P.81)

The novel presents a very complex portrayal of the freedom struggle, the role of various sections of the society, their hopes and fears on the threshold of freedom. The hopes of Warui, Wambui, General R and Lieutenant Koinandu, the fears of Mugo and of Karanja and the conflicting feelings of Gikonyo and Mumbi. Mixing fact with fiction, Kenyatta, and Thuku with Kihika and Karanja. Ngugi creates a unique picture of freedom struggle, which is truer than history and more imaginative than ordinary fiction. Killam observes that Ngugi is at „pains ... to ensure that his readers know that the struggle was a just on“ (Killam: 1980.P 53)

The villagers of Thabai, represent the ordinary people of Kenya who, with all their human frailties and foibles, were forced to make compromises under terror and torture but still uphold the cause. Kihika represents the revolutionary youth who saw a basic unity in the struggle of the colonial world and who sacrificed everything for freedom.

Ngugi also hints at the shape of things to come in independent Kenya. Although people danced and sang on the streets on the Uhuru day, showering praise on „Jomo and Kaggia and Oginga“ and although they „recalled Waiyaki“'s heroic deeds“, they were not unaware of their dream of independent Kenya as a Shamba for all turning sour. The way their M.P. grabs Mr. Burton“'s Green Hill Farm, denying Gikonyo and other villagers a chance to start a cooperative farm, is symbolic of the ensuing struggle between the people and their leaders in new Kenya. *A Grain of Wheat* is concerned with the egalitarian values of people who seem determined learn and cultivate the habit of living in harmony with each other in a spirit of mutual trust, respect, and tolerance for one another. The novel urges the reader to examine his

own inner self so as to discover his limitations and weaknesses, with a view to correcting the same in the larger interests of the community.

Ngugi's "commitment" in the novel, his quest for a "just society" and egalitarian values, "remains the same throughout his career. (Nwankwo, Chimalum: 1984, P2). Interestingly, his tools are religion and rebellion. A Grain of Wheat is also a "committed novel" as it "looks into the future because of its implied faith in the ability of people to change their society." (Gikandi: 1987, P108). The novel ends on a note of reconciliation and optimism. Mugo's confession compels Gikonyo to indulge in introspection. Besides, Gikonyo's mother is unhappy with him towards Mumbi. She tries to convince him how he has "broken his home" by refusing to realize what had "happened" during his absence from home. She says: "Read your own heart, and know yourself." (Gikandi: 1987 P.177)

The image of the "broken home" makes him realize the need to set it right, or probably build a new one, and above all, the need to read one's own heart in order to know oneself is also the message and an important motif in the novel. The novel seems to suggest that "one's goal in life should be to live heroically, to seek the truth about oneself, to face one's choices honestly, and to bear responsibility for one's deeds." (Eileen:1983 P.144) Prompted by Mugo's confession, and his mother's wise counsel, Gikonyo invites his wife, Mumbi, to join him again and implores her to return to the house, light the fire, and see things don't decay (Eileen 1983 p,247) Mumbi is mellowed but a little hesitant in accepting the proposal, allows a little time for the message of Gikonyo to sink in her fully. She says: No, Gikonyo. Things are not so easy. We need to talk, to open our hearts to one another, examine them, and then together plan the future we want (Eileen, P.247)

There lies a ray of hope. The readiness to come together "to talk" and sort out the problems as equals (both man and wife) is itself a positive pointer towards reconciliation. The idea of planning together a new chapter in a man-woman relationship is itself significant. The stage is set for a reunion between Mumbi and Gikonyo. On his part, Gikonyo, at last, gives a definite and concrete shape to the pattern he proposes to carve on the stool he has been contemplating for long to present to Mumbi as his marriage gift.

The novel, blissfully, closes on the image as though to break the sense of shame and the spell of gloom generated by Mugo's confession. The proposed fresh pattern on the stool as contemplated by the carpenter husband of Mumbi is both regenerative and creative. It symbolically heralds the birth of "a new Kenya" in the image of Mumbi as a pregnant woman both as the mother of the Kikuyus and as the wife of Gikonyo.

A Grain of Wheat stresses the importance of struggle and sacrifice in the cause of freedom just as the grain of wheat as a seedling has to shed its identity and destroy itself in order to

sprout into a sapling. Freedom of a nation blossoms out of the suffering and martyrdom of patriots to regenerate the nation and, as it were, die into life. It is also a transitional novel marking the novelist's progressive movement towards a socialist order as envisaged in his *Petals of Blood*.

The religious dimension of the novel is oriented to the socialist principle. There is an element of what we now call liberation theology in the utterances of Kihika who refuses to take a narrow, dogmatic view of organized Christianity. The effort and the struggle are paramount for achieving justice and egalitarianism which far from contradicting the Christian position as the sinequanon of religion and godly dispensation; Religion which is ordinarily associated with no-changers who uphold the status quo should be radically interpreted to signify change, reformation even rebellion to realize humanistic values and socialistic goals. The novel ends with a note of reconciliation and optimism.

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