

## Our Lives Are a Battlefield

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### Abstract

*A Grain of Wheat* demonstrates Ngugi's pessimistic treatment of African history. The lives of Africa are a battlefield. It is between the forces that are pledged to confirm humanity and those determined to dismantle it; those who strive to build a defensive shield around it, and on the contrary those who wish to prohibit and to pull it down; those who seek to mould it and those committed to breaking it up; those who awaken the masses, to see the light of hope and look to tomorrow. It is a complex novel exploring the psychology of Mugo, haunted by an act of treachery to a hero of Kenya's freedom movement. On the eve of Kenya's freedom, the Thabai villagers want to honor Mugo. The experience of colonial history involves alienation from the remote past and, in the present, alienation from self and one another.

**Keywords:** battlefield, humanity, colonial.

*A Grain of Wheat* is a third novel of Ngugi. The novel demonstrates Ngugi's pessimistic treatment of African history. It is a complex novel exploring the psychology of Mugo, haunted by an act of treachery to a hero of Kenya's freedom movement. On the eve of Kenya's freedom, the Thabai villagers want to honor Mugo. The experience of colonial history involves alienation from the remote past and, in the present, alienation from self and one another.

Mugo, a well-known freedom fighter dominates the story. He is obsessed with his own guilt, the betrayal of Kihika. The detention camps located in Kenya are the houses of tortures. Hola, Manyami, Lari are the names of detention camps. The novel is about the Kenyan freedom movement. It is a story of a group of people from a Thabai village. It is a portrayal of the freedom struggle and the role of various sections of the society in it, their hopes and fears on the verge of the freedom. It portrays the hopes of Warui, Wambui, General R. and Koinandu, the fears of Mugo, Karanja and feelings of Gikonyo and Mumbi.

In *A Grain of Wheat* Ngugi explores the psychology of Mugo, the protagonist by an act treachery to a hero associated with the Kenyan freedom movement. Thabai village is the centre of action in the novel. The natives of Thabai decide to offer the honour to Mugo, the leader. He has faced many sufferings and incidents of grief as challenge with courage on the occasion of eve of Kenyan freedom on December 12, 1963. The native's protest is the outcome of evils of colonialism. It has badly influenced every aspect of Kenya. The native culture is over-

burdened by new religious preaching. Consequently the natives are prohibited to celebrate the tribal rituals and customs. These are the causes of protest. During 1952 to 1954 the Whites acquired the productive land of natives.

*A Grain of Wheat* is about Kenyan freedom movement. It records the experiences of the characters like Mugo, Gikonyo, Kihika, Mumbi, Thompson and Karanja. Ngugi in this novel paints the picture of natives' struggle against White by using the flashback technique and direct narration. Ngugi describes the human nature aspects like success, failure, cruelties, hope, weaknesses, threatens of characters on the eve of independence. It is a story of Thabai villagers. They are about to celebrate the Independence Day. Mugo now reminds the betrayal of Kihika and his hanging. Gikonyo recollects the confession of oath in the detention camp. Mumbi remembers the situation in which she has been compelled to submit herself to Karanja, a village chief. The novel presents the picture of Thabai village of Kamandaru district and the natives suffering during the colonial tenure. Mugo being a resident of Thabai, gets up early in the morning for cultivating the shamba (field). When Mugo is on the way of shamba, he met Githua who is the victim of Whites exploitation. The physical exploitation of Githua is expressed, "I tell you before the emergency, I was like you before the White man did this to meet me with bullets. I could work with both hands man" (Thiong'o, 1967, 5). Its effect on Githua is physical as well as mental level. Githua represents those thousands of innocent natives. He is the

victims of colonialism. Another example of exploitation is Gitigi. He is dumb and deaf; the only support of his old mother is killed by colonial police during the raid in the village.

The party members ask Mugo to deliver a speech on the occasion of uhuru celebration. In the discussion Mugo recalled, "....the day the Whiteman came to the country, clutching the book of God in both hands, a magic witness that Whiteman was a massager from the Lord. His tongue was coated with sugar. His humanity was trouncing" (Narang, 81). This is religious exploitation in the name of God. The Whiteman demands more land to meet his needs. The Whites prefer to live in concrete construction. Later comes another Whiteman's group with the sword. Mugo then remembers the entry of Harry Thuku on Kenya's political horizon. He appeals the Kenyans not to pay any taxes to the colonial masters. He also strongly tells the colonial masters not to force the natives for working on their farms. As a part of protest, they organized a rally. The police open firing on the innocent people, who are peacefully marching forward singing on the occasion of celebrating the independence. In this incident three natives are died. It is a cruel misuse of power by Whites. Mugo then records the change in the natives from innocence to radical strugglers. Kihika is a revolutionary by nature and master in event management. He appeals youths by saying action is the need of time. The Whiteman appeared in Kenya with a noble objective of reformation. Later he has used the book as an instrument for exploitation. At the time of praying in church the natives have compelled to follow the instructions of the head without questioning. The height of the physical exploitation by the colonialists is that, "Kihika was tortured. Some say that the neck of the bottle was wedged into the body through the anus as the White peoples in the special branch tried to wrest the secrets of forest from him"(Thiong'o, 17). In detention camps, all kinds of tortures and brutalities are practiced. It is very different from prison. In the prison one should know his guilt and the punishment is, of course, time bound. But in detention camp no one knows the guilt and span of the release. It is the house of evil practices. The death hovers always in detention camp. Thompson, the loyal bureaucrat reminds the past and his entry in Kenya as an officer. He knows the fact that their rule will not last for long time in

Kenya. He remembers the death of eleven detainees in Rira camp. The detainees are on hunger strike in the camp and they are badly tortured by the guards. Consequently, they were dead. Kihika have attraction of politics. He is inspired by the stories of bravery of Waiyaki and Harry Thuku and their struggle against colonial atrocities from his mother's story telling. Kihika represents the interests of the peasants who seek to reclaim a lost land. Ngugi in this novel uses the real events like the heroic struggle of Waiyaki against colonialism. Harry Thuku's release causes the death of many natives. For the background of the fictional character Kihika is a struggler. He uses different dimensions and techniques for unmasking Whites as reformists. The protest in the character of Kihika is praiseworthy. His speeches are full of directness and appeals and inspire the crowd. The emergency in Kenya is a dark period, a blot in Kenyan history. It has introduced all kinds of exploitation. Many are rounded up, many die in detention camps. This situation offers Kenyans a new meaning of life. They get the objective for fighting that is to drive away the shrewd colonialists from Kenya. Some characters are with a sense of betrayal. For example, Mugo betrays Kihika, Gikonyo confesses the oath, Mumbai sleeps with Karanja. The novel, thus, portrays the Kenyan freedom struggle and participation of all the people from all strata of society with their plus-minus natures. So the characters seem more realistic than fictional.

The memories and incidents of war are directly reflected in the novel. It is bitter social protest against colonial brutalities. The horrible memories of emergency still lingering in the natives mind. The independence does not fulfil the ideal social dream of Kenya. The chief incident of celebrating the uhuru and all the rest of incidents in the novel have related with the chief incident. The novel some time advocates and defences the Mau Mau movement. It is a created record of Kenyan national history. As a committed writer, Ngugi portrays the plight of innocent masses and bitterly attacks the White masters. That is why critics called Ngugi as a writer of people. He expresses the mind and aspirations of common people, "The image of White man in Ngugi's novel is fairly representative of what we commonly find in African fiction. The Whiteman especially the colonial administrator is often narrow minded, brutal, cruel, selfish and ruthless in his dealing

with native and cunning, and dishonest with his fellow white men”(Gakwandi, 111). Ngugi is the real critic of human. He not only glorifies the characters but also shows the flaws of them. The major six characters are not only the protagonists but, sometimes, the society seems the protagonists in the novel. Ngugi for the first time in Kenyan literature introduces the new concept of multi-protagonists and presents the marginal people as the heroes of the recorded history of the nation. The novel is a colorful combination of religion and protest, flaws of human nature, emotional attachment with land and community, colonizing view of civilized to the uncivilized and the native's aspiration to prepare him to struggle with the Whites. Ngugi has chosen Christian myths and religion as a source to describe the blooded freedom movement. The title of the novel is taken from Bible. Ngugi uses it for glorifying the Kenyans' struggle against colonial masters. Waiyaki the famous warrior's blood contained within a seed, a grain whose production is movement. It waves all over Kenya. Waiyaki sacrificed his life, but rises like phoenix from ashes in the form of movement. The death of Waiyaki creates a sense of sacrifice among others also.

The novel bears the tenure of colonialism and slavery. It portrays the innumerable cruelties of colonial masters. The suspected young were rounded up and moved them to detention camps. All over Africa such camps were set up by colonizers. In Manda there were eighteen thousand detainees. It was a house of disease and malpractices of colonial brutalities. Rira was another notorious camp. During October 1952 and 1953 the Mau Mau movement emerged in Kenya. It is a natural reaction to the atrocities of colonial rule. It is a peasants' revolt with an objective of getting back the snatched land by White masters. The movement functions both in and out of forest. Many Kenyans attracted to this movement and joined and became the part of national liberation struggle. The aim of Mau Mau activists is to drive the Whites from Kenya. “The

Mau Mau as a revolt of noble proportions, and perceives it as comparable to the French Revolution” (Sircar, 134). The Mau Mau strugglers are fighting for liberty and equality in Kenya. The same are gifts of French Revolution offered to world. This seems a challenge to new religion. The Western view of Mau Mau is that the Kenyans are once again moving to path of primitivity. Ngugi rejects this Western view totally. Emergency remains a source of protest and struggle for them. It has changed their life and provides the purpose to life. It offers them the strength to fight against for the freedom of their motherland from the shackles of colonialists. He advocates the Mau Mau movement as the movement against injustice and glorious phase in Kenyan national struggle. African writers have criticized the changing role of Whites. In Western countries, the Whites advocate such movements as need of time for social awareness.

In short, it is a complex novel exploring the psychology of Mugo, haunted by an act of treachery to a hero of Kenya's freedom movement. On the eve of Kenya's freedom, the Thabai villagers want to honor Mugo. The experience of colonial history involves alienation from the remote past and, in the present, alienation from self and one another.

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