

# The Struggle of Reconciliation and Survival in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *A Grain Of Wheat*

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## Abstract

Human life is precious, limited in time, delicate and unpredictable. In this world we come across so many people in our life, some people have compassion and genuine concern for others and some with no such kind of ethics. After so many years of human existence, the world of humanity starts facing its odd side which ends with endless wars of death and destruction. The thirst for power ends with colonisation, slavery, injustice and oppression. *A Grain of Wheat* is a wonderful novel by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. This novel tells a story of human suffering under colonialism and their strength of survival. The dominated thing on this novel is Ngugi's humanism which is revealed through his care for his people and his understanding of what inspires them to do action. The novel is concerned with the democratic values of people who are ready to learn and nurture the habit of living in harmony with one another in a spirit of shared trust, respect and acceptance for each other, which is a needful quality for moral configuration for humanity.

**Keywords:** exploitation, freedom, struggle, emergency, colonialism.

Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* is set in Kenya on the eve of independence, focuses on the events that lead to independence. It is the story of whites who try to suppress the struggle for freedom and capture the freedom fighters and imprison members of Mau-Mau are put in detention camps, where they are brutally tortured because they dare to rebel against the colonial government. The colonizers who deliberately ignore the chaos and destruction they have caused still regard a real movement for freedom of exploited. Ngugi has interest in the social circumstances of his characters who live their lives in the background of a Mau Mau confrontation. He shows the causes of the confrontation which is expressed through the speeches and actions of Kihika, who symbolizes the freedom fighter. The writer mainly wants to explore the weakness of human life, which is revealed by the moods of the characters who are the product of the violence of the struggle for independence.

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The four main characters in this novel are Mugo, Gikonyo, Mumbi and Karanja. Their lives are subjugated by their remembrance of Kihika, who was betrayed and hanged by one of the villagers by the British. Some of his fellow men, who have survived in the battle, came to the village of Thabai to find out the traitor and expose him in Uhuru celebrations. Uhuru Day was the dream of these characters from their young age, but there is no overall joy in their lives because they remember the four days of war experiences and the setbacks. Ngugi located his characters in situations intended to test their moral strength and also examines the condition by presenting their guilt memoirs and their personal motivations of the mind. Betrayal is one of the central themes and the subsequent need for the traitor to change his sense of guilt, resulting in spiritual suffering.

Ngugi is anxious about the four main characters who have had to deal with the pattern of betrayal. Gikonyo, Mumbi and Karanja are from the same village but Mugo is a stranger. Though they have a common goal, they are not only incapable to accomplish like Kihika, but are also incapable to sustain their individual honesty. Mugo is the most intricate of these characters because he acts as the vehicle for solving the problems of all other characters. Mugo is Orphaned by a drunken aunt in an environment of poverty, dirt and perpetual odor of vomit, got an experience for seclusion from his young age. In spite of all this, he decides to leave the depression of his life behind and compel society to identify his success. He is provoked by reality of life. In this way he is insulted and challenged by Kihika's idealism. When Kihika talks about the "great sacrifice" his jealousy reflected as:

Mugo felt a constriction in his throat. He could not clap for words that did not touch him. What right had such a boy, probably younger than Mugo, to talk like that? What arrogance? ... Mugo experienced a twang of jealousy as he too turned and looked at the speaker. At that moment their eyes met, or so Mugo imagined, with guilt. (p. 19).

Ngugi evokes difficult reactions about Mugo. His betrayal to Kihika is partially caused by the disturbance of the country frightening his purpose to never again experience poverty that he faced in his young age. At the end of the novel, he expressed his confessions as follows: I wanted to live my life. I never wanted to be involved in anything. Then he came into my life, here, a night like this, and pulled me into the stream. So I killed him. (p.210) This confession is not completely satisfactory or even true because it is obvious from his jealousy that made him to approach Thompson. Mugo's betrayal of Kihika is to some point balance by the misery he suffers in the different detention camps where he is placed because of his protection of the wambuku.

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He then moves by the influence of Mumbi to declare his betrayal. Karanja is the reason of his confession. Mugo does not want Karanja to bear the blame for Kihika's death. At the same time his need to purify his soul is very strong. So he confesses to the villagers who had assembled for the Uhuru day. But for a second his act bounced on him. He seeks refuge from the raindrops in the hut of the crazy woman, the mother of Gitigo, who was the first victim of the village in an emergency. In this circumstance, in an instant of visionary sharpness makes the pitiable and tragic gratitude that one cannot flee from his own destiny:

Life was only a constant repetition of what happened yesterday and the day before. Only this time she would not escape... The smile still lingered on her face. She did not move or make the slightest stir. And suddenly he knew: the only person who had ever claimed him was dead. He buried his face in his hands and stood thus for a few seconds, (p. 269)

Mugo's sight of the decisive truth purifies his mind from the evils. The fall of water that frightens to overcome it from the tortured dream. The cleansing rain that symbolizes regeneration. In the end, his death in the present is compared to Kihika's death in the past. Kihika sacrifices himself to create a new heaven and a new earth instead Mugo sacrifices his life in the lowest level, sacrifices himself to defend the sins of others. Accidentally, Mumbi was Mugo's regenerative mediator just as he becomes a mediator for her and for her husband Gikonyo.

The love between Mumbi and Gikonyo started in their teenage years. He was uncomfortable to propose his love for her because he was scared that she would refuse him. But Mumbi shows her favors for Gikonyo over the other suitors. Gikonyo goes to jail with solid faith in the useful outcome of the emergency. But he is extremely weakened by the news that Jomo lost his test and he was tried and found guilty. He is more damaged when Gatu, the lasting good spirit among the Yala camp prisoners and in misery. He is going through a period of insanity caused by the psychological fear of life. When he improved, he renounced the vow and returned to Mumbi. He is decided to live with the betrayal that entails his rejection. Accidentally Mumbi has to take care of Karanja's child, out of love for which he acted. This leads to his refusal of Mumbi. There are many associations between Gikonyo and Mugo.

Both are an orphan: Mugo's parents died and Gikonyo's parents have sent him out of their home. The only disparity is that Mugo is a farmer and Gikonyo a carpenter and they consider their job as their life. Gikonyo's love for the forest with which he works is a nature of that of Mugo for the land that he cultivates. The emotional well-being of Mugo and Gikonyo is

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determined by their way of their approach to life. Particularly for Mugo who carries his guilty secret and his soil becomes a metaphor for his soul, after the emergency: dry and hollow, in the dryer (p.9).

Gikonyo is unable to bear the harassment of the prison and give up his promise and returns to find out that his wife has betrayed him. Then he decides to leave the life of his job as carpenter and become a successful little merchant. But he finds no passion in this current work. In the end of the novel, when his soul was purified from jealousy that had engaged him for so long, again he started the plan to make a chair for Mumbi as a wedding gift which she wished in the past.

The new birth of Mugo's life happened within four days leading to Uhuru reaches in the momentary glow of deep insight. The same approach is reflected in the spirit and life of Gikonyo also. In the time of the celebration he wants to participate in a running race and his major challenger is Karanja. This race recollects his past in same railway platform where Gikonyo lost himself to Karanja but who ironically earned him Mumbi. The same thing happens again but this time it is not for Karanja but between them for Mumbi. Gikonyo is wounded and he is in the hospital. There he comes to know Mugo's confessions and that becomes a reason for his personal catharsis.

Mumbi is the least complex among his four main characters. Her exploration of life is so simple that she obviously shows to Mugo. She yields to Karanja when he tells her about Gikonyo's release from prison. Her extensional joy in hearing the news of her husband's release becomes the cause of the sexual encounter and Karanja played only an influential role in the course of action. What else is there to tell you? That I remember being full of submissive gratitude? That I laughed - even welcomed Karanja's cold lips on my face? I was in a strange world, and it was like if I was mad. And need I tell you more? I let Karanja make love to me. (p, 171)

Mumbi's adulterous affair with and Karanja explains Gikonyo's dissatisfaction for her and made him to run away and he never knew Mumbi's position. She is too worried by Gikonyo and his attitude towards her. Later he tries to find her situation that he can admit: Will you - will you come tomorrow? He asked, unable to hide his anxiety and fear. He knew, at once, that in future he would reckon with her feelings, her thoughts, her desires - a new Mumbi. (p.280)

Gikonyo expresses his decision to get rid of Mumbi's burden that he can forget and forgive the past and he loves Mumbi as he does in the beginning. She now knows that he will

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accept the child and it also signals that she will accept the wedding stool that Gikonyo made for her. It symbolizes a new start and a new birth.

Karanja is the most pathetic character among Ngugi's other characters in the novel. In other characters fall by unknown forces that is beyond their control. This also applies to Karanja to a large extent. But he is not innocent like the others. Karanja's character is the representation of the attitude of the colonized African and he became a puppet of white men. He holds many positions first as a housekeeper and a chief in the time of emergency. Ngugi thinks that this kind of betrayal is personified in Karanja's approach toward Mumbi after he seduced her. Ngugi humanises Karanja and gossip on his deeds by describing Karanja's assurance to show the world that the world is cruel and insensitive. The picture of the cover hangs over Karanja when he leaves Thabai at the end of the Uhuru day celebrations and this Symbolizes that the accuser becomes the accused. The three main characters Mugo, Mumbi and Gikonyo got freedom from guilt and from fear on Uhuru Day but for Karanja, this freedom is unclear.

Ngugi thoroughly investigates the many evils of human life that inherits our soul. The novel deals with the problems in the lives of the protagonists who resolve their tensions, conflicts, doubts and guilt. Gikonyo, Mugo, Karanja and Mumbi don't have interest in politics but to hold on to life and to organize wish of the heart. The novelist genuinely examines the mind of his characters to depict them with their excellence, their follies, their mistakes, their weaknesses and their power. The novel *A Grain of Wheat* deals with the problems of poverty, growing inequality around the world and the rising resistance between capitalism and communism. In fact, this novel is about the democratic values of people who are ready to learn and nurture the habit of living in harmony with each other in a spirit of shared trust, respect and tolerance towards each other.

The novelist invites the people to discover his own inner self to realize its limits and weaknesses to correct them in the public interest of the community which is defined through historical context of colonialism. His characters undergo a growth of process in contact with their social environment and their experience of life around the world and the characters are typical of their maturity by fighting against the certainty of colonialism. The entire truth of the colonial encounter is exposed through the contact between man and his difficult situation which influences social and cultural structure and laid foundations of true traditional African society. At the end of the novel *A Grain of Wheat*, people react in different ways to the outcome of independence. The natives consider this new situation, a situation of freedom to a renewal and a new start for Africans because it gives a chance to declare their humanity. There is a sense of

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starting it all over again, a longing to explore social relationships and to decide its place in relation to others and the past, and hopefully to hope for the future.

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