



A STUDY OF THE POSTCOLONIAL ELEMENTS IN THE NOVEL, *A GRAIN OF WHEAT*

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ABSTRACT

Ngugi wa Thiong'O is a distinguished Professor of English and Comparative literature and Director of the International Centre for writing and translation at the University of California, Irvine. He was born at a village called Imuru in Kenya and hails from a large peasant family. He pursued his education from Alliance High School, Kenya, Mekerere University college, a campus of London university, and the University of Leeds, Britain. He is a versatile genius with several achievements to his credit. He is a novelist, short story writer, essayist, playwright, journalist, and a social activist. He has published various novels such as Weep Not Child, The River Between, A Grain of Wheat, Home Coming and Petals of Blood. and various collections of short stories, plays, essays and a memoir. His novel, A Grain of Wheat was published in the year 1967. He wrote this novel while studying at Leeds University. Colonialism and post colonialism are significant themes in the novel. The present paper highlights the colonial and post colonial aspects in the novel, A Grain of Wheat. Colonialism is a kind of concept or a thing where a superior country occupies the land by force as they regard others (weaker countries) as inferiors. Britishers invaded different countries of Asia and Africa in order plunder its wealth and legacy. They felt that their endeavour is to civilize the African countries from their savage, barbaric and cannibalistic nature.

INTRODUCTION

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Ngugi wa Thiong'O is a distinguished Professor of English and Comparative literature and Director of the International Centre for writing and translation at the University of California, Irvine. He was born at a village called Imuru in Kenya and hails from a large peasant family. He pursued his education from Alliance High School, Kenya, Mekerere University college, a campus of London university, and the University of Leeds, Britain. He is a versatile genius with several achievements to his credit. He is a novelist, short story writer, essayist, playwright, journalist, and a social activist. He has published various novels such as *Weep Not Child*, *The River Between*, *A Grain of Wheat*, *Home Coming* and *Petals of Blood*. and various collections of short stories, plays, essays and a memoir. His novel, *A Grain of Wheat* was published in the year 1967. He wrote this novel while studying at Leeds University. Colonialism and post colonialism are significant themes in the novel. The present paper highlights the colonial and post colonial aspects in *Ngugi'wa Thiong'O's* novel, *A Grain of Wheat* which was published in the year 1967. Ngugi wrote this novel while studying at Leeds University, London. Colonialism and post colonialism are the significant themes in the novel. Colonialism is a kind of concept or a thing where a superior country occupies the land of others by force as they regard them (weaker countries) as inferiors. Britishers invaded different countries of Asia and Africa in order plunder their wealth and legacy. They felt that their endeavour is to civilize the African countries from their savage, barbaric and cannibalistic nature.

Post colonial literature is the literature that is produced by colonized countries such as India, Canada, Australia, Nigeria, South Africa and other African Countries. Suppression and oppression are the most important attributes of colonialism. The novel '*A Grain of Wheat*' presents a picture of Kenya's colonial History. Colonization of Kenya is the context against which its characters are formed. The author, Ngugi Wa Thiongo argues that, although both the colonizer and the colonized feel morally justified in their pursuits, colonialism is ultimately an immoral and oppressive practice, justifying the colonized people's struggle for freedom. It is portrayed in the story by the characters of John Thompson and Kihika. John Thompson, the English regional governor, an evangelist of British colonialism, believes religion to be a moralizing and purifying force of human progress. Ngugi through the novel criticizes the white man, Mr Thompson in particular and many other whites in general who act as representatives of colonialism. They start off with an idealistic purpose of "embracing the people of all colors and creeds" under the label of British nation. The English characters in the novel such as Mr Thompson and his wife Margery profess and preach the people about the Christian love and brotherhood. But in reality they consider them as blacks and as inferiors and don't even treat them on par with their dogs.



The purpose of the Postcolonial writings is to reform the chronicles, cultures, civilizations and identities misrepresented and distorted by the West. These post colonial writers portray the celebration of native traditions, myth and rites. *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o published in 1967 chronicles the Kenyan freedom struggle, Mau Mau uprising and independence through the life of the protagonist Mugo. The characters in the novel evolve in close relation with the freedom struggle as they recollect their experiences during the emergency, on days leading up to the *Uhuru* celebrations. The author's involvement with guerilla warfare played a major role in shaping the novel and sharp criticism of the atrocities committed by the British authorities.

Kenya was a colony of Britain or colonized from 1895 to 1963. Kenya was under the imperialistic rule of Britain. The present novel, *A Grain of Wheat* depicts the conflict between Western imperialism and Kenyan tradition. The novel explores perspectives on colonialism from the white man's as well as the native's point of view. The prime focus is on the moral aspects of colonialism. Colonialism is presented as an immoral and oppressive practice whereas the Kenyan freedom struggle as a fight to maintain land, tradition and identity by its people.

Ngugi wa Thiong'O is a hybrid author or a convert into Christianity who was baptized as James Gugi and educated in Christian missionary schools. But later he changed his English name as a protest to Gugi Wa Thiang O. *A Grain of Wheat* was a turning point in the author's life who later on rejected Christianity, the English name James, and started writing only in Gikuyu, Kenyan language. Hence, hybridity as a major theme surfaces throughout the novel in the form of quotations from Bible passages and the mixture of Christian hymns and traditional songs in *Uhuru* celebrations. Karanja's character reflects the notion of mimicry propounded by well renowned postcolonial thinker Homi K Bhabha, which implies an imitation of the culture of the colonizers by the members of a colonized society. Karanja's identification with his masters stems from his desire to be reformed and recognize the other. However, as Bhabha remarks, he ends up being almost the same but not quite.

Thiong'o's characterization of John Thompson explains the concept of the white man's burden throughout the novel. White colonizers believed that it was their duty to impose western civilization on less developed non-white people. Colonialism was therefore justified as a mission to civilize and encourage progress in the colonies. Following his interaction with African students in the university, Thompson considers Africans to be primitive beasts and colonialism as a solution to make them moral and human. He believes that "to administer a people is to administer a soul" (Thiong'o 68).

On the contrary, Kihika's character acts as an antagonist to the values and beliefs held dear by John Thompson. Kihika perceives colonialism as an evil social order and champions the



Kenyan freedom struggle. Thiong'o brings references to Mahatma Gandhi to comment on the influence on Africans by various freedom struggles in British colonies. Kihika perceives himself as Moses who led Jews to the promised land, "Kihika fed on these stories: his imagination and daily observation told him the rest; from early on, he had visions of himself, a saint, leading Kenyan people to freedom and power"(96).

Although *A Grain of Wheat* addresses the issue of violence on both sides of the freedom struggle, the novel sanctions moral high ground to Kenyan freedom fighters. The violence committed by the Mau Mau uprising is pale when compared to the barbaric atrocities of the colonial regime. For instance, John Thompson who enjoys a respectful stature among his colleagues for the mass murder of political prisoners counters the imperial narrative of the west being civilized and East being barbaric.

Gikuyu's firm holds on to their traditional rites over Christian practices despite British efforts, represents their ideological victory over colonialism. The novel provides several instances of cross-cultural interaction such as Biblical influence in the psyche of Mau Mau rebels, the fusion of Christian hymns and traditional initiation songs of the natives, etc. Moreover, the author succeeds in dismantling the colonial power and fights back using the same tool which was used to subjugate Africans, i.e., Christianity. Kihika's powerful statement on colonisation and Christianity exhorts the people to fight back against the empire,

We went to their church. Mubia, in white robes, opened the Bible. He said: Let us kneel down to pray. We knelt down. Mubia says: 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 (30).

Kihika subverts and morphs Biblical narratives to instil vigour and passion for revolution in the people. The title of the novel itself is inspired by the Gospel according to St. Matthew. Thiong'o subverts the dominance and authority of colonisers over God's word and uses it to represent the sacrifice of Kenyan freedom fighters.

In the novel '*A Grain of Wheat*' the author Ngugi Wa Thiongo tries to show that all of the characters' lives are affected by colonialism, whether they are in detention camps or the Movement or losing their homes and land or trying to fix their separated families or dealing with paternalistic colonial administrators. Colonialism is an inescapable reality, even after the country is free from its dominance. Moreover, the context of the novel plays a significant role in implying the ongoing colonial influence on the postcolonial nations. The novel is set during the days leading up to Kenyan independence and closely examines the conflicting attitudes and ambivalence of its people. Karanja is anxious about the departure of White men



whereas, the trauma inflicted by the capture and incarceration during the freedom struggle torments both Mugo and Gikonyo throughout their lives. Overall, it can be said that *A Grain of Wheat* undoubtedly succeeds in debunking the western image of Africa by sketching the harrowing experience of colonialism and Kenyan freedom struggle in detail.

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