

A LINGUISTICS EXPLORATION OF CHARACTERS AND EVENTS IN A *GRAIN OF WHEAT*

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon called language remains at the very heart of man's existence. It can be seen to permeate and pervade virtually every aspect of his life. Also, it has been established in literary circle that language and literature are inseparable. In the light of the above, this paper examines how Ngugi wa Thiong'o has disciplined himself within the literary canon and used the instrument of language to communicate his literary sensibility in the exploration of characters and events. This has enabled his readers to appreciate his message and aesthetics in *A Grain of Wheat*.

Introduction

It is an indisputable fact that the main feature which distinguishes literature as a discipline from other arts is that literature is a verbal art. Thus, the literary artist is by this empowered to have language as both the sole raw material and the sine qua non in his enterprise. All literature regardless of its genres have two basic components: the form and content; the form embodying the artist's techniques of expressing the content. The form is highly dependent on the employed language, a technique on its own, much as characterization, imagery, symbolism, flashback, point of view, among others also come to shape through language.

The literary artist is always poised to experimenting on new and divergent techniques, such that he at times ventures into the use of non-standard language in creating his fictional art. Most features of the non-standard language include the use of vernacular, literary translations and transliterations; used to express some unfamiliar "native" concepts or ideas and or add local colours to the prose fiction. At times, such occasional deviations from the norms are termed 'incompetence'. But Teilanyo (1997) has warned that:

We must be (very) careful not to lable such ungrammaticalities as "errors". We (must) consider them only as deviations since the author deliberately abandons the rules of the language. It is done not out of ignorance – as is the case with errors – but for (a) special stylistic effects. (36)

Rather than view this language experimentation as absurd, irrational and erroneous, it should be acclaimed a mark of intelligence, excellence and versability, for in the words of Wallwork (1985):

... the more flexible and wide – ranging a person's language is, the richer is likely to be the quality of his (work). Conversely, the more restricted and limited his language (and its application to

literary works), the more restricted and limited may be his work
(11 - 12)

Ngugi as a literary artist, far surpasses the latter postulation to be adjusted an incompetent writer; no, not even with his first published novel. Ngugi's language is characterized by multitudinous literary and linguistics elements, intertwined at divergent occasions, for efficiency and relevance of these themes, thus lending credence to this characterization.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Ngugi's postulation in *A Grain of Wheat* is entirely didactic, a calculated attempts at teaching man the necessary for purity and selfless commitment to the service of mankind and society. In this vein, the author opts for a quiet tone; a mechanism weaved into his language in a bid to grapple effectively with the major thematic pre-occupation of the text – the coming of Uhuru. The voice, from inception to denouncement is always mellow, even when the incidence in question is of serious nature, like the following:

People suddenly stopped rumbling and shouting.
They say tensed – up, eyes turned in the same
Direction, to see the man who was standing. He was
Tall, imposing, but those near him could see his face
Was agitated. Nobody had seen Mugo come to the
Scene. He wore a dirty coat and sandals made from
an old lorry tyre. It is Mugo, somebody whispered.
The whisper spread and became louder. People
Clapped, people shouted. At least, the hermit had
come to speak. The other drama was forgotten. (GOW,193)

Ngugi's adherence to this linguistic style illuminates a reader, avenues for personal assessment of events in the novel. Therefore, the author can never be privy to unarticulated judgement done in haste and emanating from errors of individual idiosyncrasies. To quote Emmanuel Ngara (1982) :

Although it is not evident on every single page, the Quiet (and controlled) tone is maintained even where the author describes things that involve emotions, fear and suffering... The control of language and tone extends to the writer's treatment of sex and to physical appetites and taboos generally, (like making love, passing water, toileting, and so on, and mirrors the aesthetics in them. But) in the dialogue, there is less control, as is appropriate to the character speaking. (82 - 84)

Ngugi's control of tone and language hinges on his infrequent use of verbose words and complicated sentences. For clarity, Ngugi has recourse to short, simple sentences, and this

captivates and motivates the readers. This succeeds as Ngugi effectively drives home his arguments.

Ngugi as a writer can be rightly called a psycho-analyst. Using the medium of prose, he dissects and examines the psychic components of the various characters to unearth the meaning of Uhuru to each of them. This clinical precision is achieved through the omniscient narrator technique. The workings of Mugo's mind (and abstract concept), a mind laddened with fear and how the same mind attains cleansing amidst mounting tensions in Kenya, becomes Ngugi's obsession. According to Ngara (1982):

The writer attempts here to capture, through linguistic technique, the mind of a man haunted by guilt. The language in its jerks and broken rhythms, reflects not only the way Mugo thought and spoke... but also the crushing guilt that had dogged him since the betrayed of Kihika... (and this is apt). (87)

In all, Ngugi makes the reader a partaker in the diverse experience of his various characters, especially Mugo and Mumbi, and urges him still to draw his conclusions.

Thus, the coming of Uhuru to Ngugi, has complex impacts in the diverse ways it affects the individual psyche. The novelist, according to Ngara (1982):

By using the omniscient narrator technique, gives Himself the power to enter the minds of his Characters and probe their deepest thoughts... (Consciously therefore,) he penetrates into the minds of the suffering, the mentally tortured, (the disappointed) and those on the verge of mental derangement (, among others). (87)

These characters include Mugo, Karanja, Mumbi, Gikongo, Kihika, General R. Lieutenant Koinandu, Thompson; and of course, Warui and Githua, among others.

Mugo is the anti-hero of the novel. Hunted by the fear of the unknown, a resultant effect of the ignoble role in betraying Kihika, he wallows in illusive heroism and invariably becomes a hermit. The Thabaians, ironically mistaking his taciturnity and dumbness, two inherent disabilities in him, for brevity, almost made him a hero-king, but for his confessional outburst on the day of Uhuru celebration – he betrayed Kihika to the imperialist forces. Though expiated, Mugo, the ex-champion of the oppressed, automatically metamorphosed into a Judae figure, who, must pay the supreme price – death, for his heinous crime, for his society to attain purgation.

Karanja, like Mugo, is also a betrayer, not only of his immediate society, but the course of Mau Mau struggles in Kenya. He took the oath, together with Kihika, Gikonye, General R, and some others. But at the turn of events, during imperial ruthlessness on Kenyans, he denounces his avowed membership of Mau Mau militants, preferring to be a stooge to the white man. Ngara (1982) echoes this when he writes that: "Karanja takes upon himself the role of a

traitor to his people, the white man's lackey and willing instrument in the oppression of the Africans. (96).

Karanja in all ramifications is both a traitor, a rebel, and a villain. He rejects his mother's advice and goes ahead to pitch tent against his community. Being an arch-enemy to Gikonyo, he begets through Mumbi, the latter's wife, an illegitimate child that almost disintegrated the married life of the couple. Karanja is a sycophant, a secret admirer of the Thompsons and a rumour monger. His ignominious role during the emergency earns him the mockery of Ngugi's pen. He is a prime suspect over Kihika's death and almost got lynched but for providence.

Mumbi symbolizes steadfastness, in love and beauty; little wonder why Gikonyo at Yala prison, incessantly dreams of his re-union with her: "...He told him (Gatu) of Thabai, of Wangari of Mumbi. (By unspoken agreement, family and home were forbidden subjects among them). But now Gikonyo told Gatu of his one desire to see Mumbi JUST ONCE". (GOW, 6)

Braving danger, she remains committed to her mission, thus bringing about Mugo's expurgative confession, firstly, in his personal home, and later, before the entire congregation gathered on Uhuru ground. She remains courageous and undaunting during the trench - digging incident, hence the care for her relations and mother-in-law. But ironically, in the words of Ngara (1982): (This) epitome of feminine love, is given a child by her husband's arch - enemy, Keranja [the only ageless rival to Gikonyo over Mumbi's love]. (96)

Resolute as ever, she becomes the catalyst that reinvigorates Gikonyo's health, when he is hospitalized, thereby making for the final resolution of their conflicts and eventual reconciliation.

Gikonyo as a character is virtually at the centre of every event. He is not only a 'professional' carpenter but also an erstwhile political convict, who by dint of hardwork becomes one of the affluent in Thabai. He is a childhood friend to Kihika and Karanja, but later becomes an enemy of Karanja (who often than not, tries to outwit him in the content over Mumbi's love and who eventually succeeds). Though an active participant in the preparations towards Uhuru's celebration, he has before then confessed the oath, thus joining the countless number of Black traitors.

Kihika, the protagonist, is the nucleus around whom all actions revolve. As a champion of the people's course, he symbolizes the metaphorical 'grain of wheat' that must die for others to live. His radical posture dates back to his school days when he challenged the false teachings of his teacher. In the forest, he excelled as a no-nonsense commandant of the Kenyan Mau Mau revolutionary movement. Tapping from his intellectual wealth, he manipulates the scarce resources at his disposal to waging guerilla warfare against white oppressors. He, as destined, a Judahs (Mugo) betrays him. He is eventually captured and hanged on a tree, a symbolic cross and death that give birth to the party thus ushering freedom to the people.

General R., originally called Muhoya, and Lt. Koinando, on several occasions assisted Kihika in his punitive exploits against the forces of imperialism. After Kihika's death, both take over the leadership mantle of Mau Mau and vow to flush out and bring to judgement Kihika's betrayer. The ardent zeal unravels the mystery beclouding the 'messiah's' death. And as true revolutionaries, their vow is fully implemented. Mugo, the actual culprit is brought to book and the drama ends: "Your deeds alone will condemn", General R. continued without anger or

apparent bitterness. 'You – No one will ever escape from his own actions'. General Lt, Koinandu led him out of the hut". (GOW, 206)

Thompson is a white official of the colonial administration; and as a District Officer, is destined to witness the termination of British imperialism in Kenya. As a colonial fanatic, he remains immersed in the illusive insurmountability and limitless expansivity of the British Empire all over the world. He symbolizes colonial brutality in Africa and upholds imperial idea of oppression against blacks and Mau Mau activists. He is uxorious husband, but unwittingly, his wife (an incarnate of infidelity), derides his avowed intelligence.

Warui, Wambui and Githera, the triumvirate of the Uhuru celebration, feature prominently in their complementary role toward the liberation of Kenya from the ramshackle state of imperialism to impendence. Warui, the old man, along with Wambui, the female activist, in their wisdom co-ordinated and guided the activities of the other characters toward attaining the much needed Uhuru in Kenya.

Githua, the cripple, is Ngugi's channel for achieving comic relief in the narrative. Through his character, the mounting tension is eased from a reader's mind, as often times, the reader is forced to laugh it off with Githua's bawdy utterances. Githua retraces his disability to his unparalleled activism during the Mau Mau campaigns, until the truth dawns, linking it (the disability) to an accident he had as a driver. In his usual garrulous manner, he chides and scolds the false –hero, Mugo, after the latter's confessional outburst that he betrayed Kihika to the whiteman. As Mugo moves from the Uhuru arena, the crippled Githua:

Suddenly... rose from his corner and followed [him].
He laughed and raised one of his crutches to point at Mugo, and shouted: "A liar – a hyena in sheep's clothing". He denounced Mugo as imposter and challenged him to fight. 'Look at him! Look at him – the man who thought he would be our Chief. Ha! ha ! ha !' Githua's laughter and voice only sharpened the profound silence at the market place. (GOW, 193)

often Ngugi fuses historical events into his narration. At times he turns biographic. The trial of Jomo Kenyetta, and actual historical event which occurred during Kenya's agitation for independence, is embedded in the fictitious story of Gikonyo's imprisonment, as in chapter seven:

Gikonyo walked towards detention with a brisk step and an assurance born in his knowledge of love and life. This thing would end soon, anyway. Jomo would win the case, his lawyers having come all the way from the land of the white man and from Gandhi's India. The day of deliverance was near at hand. (GOW, 90)

Ngugi dwells extensively on the biological, social, economical, political and psychological backgrounds of his characters. This highlights the roles played by them and makes for a sound judgement of events. As such, the narration becomes logical and a cohesive whole. Mugo's inability to take decisions, we are told, dates back to his childhood neurosis:

He had always found it difficult to make decisions
Recalling as it by instinct from setting in motion a
course of action whose consequences he could not
determine before the start, he allowed himself to drift
into things or be pushed into them by an uncanny
Against, he rode on the wave of circumstances and lay
Against the crest, fearing but fascinated by fate. (GOW, 23)

All events become realistic whenever Ngugi claims to be one of "us from Thabari" and addressed his audience as "you", a linguistic device that illuminates the history in his story.

A Grain of Wheat can best understood in the context of the flashback technique. At times, episodes are portrayed in the past, back to the present and later in the future. Often one narration is abruptly terminated to usher in another, even an unrelated event to that matter. This signals a reader to defer his judgement (of an event and a character) till the end of the text. The fact is clear that the characters have their individual faults, the innate weaknesses that make for their downfall. Therefore, conclusions rooted on inconclusive narration, become anomalies, exemplary contrast to Ngugi's posture that each character is imbued with such compassion that we are forced to accept them as humans. In the words of Cook and Okenimkpe (1983):

It is fierce, passionate examination of heroism and Treachery. Socially positive behaviour is lauded; all that is essentially anti-social is condemned. At the same time it is an infinitely complex work, exploring the nature and causes of frailty and failure, and expressing a humane concern for social misfits and even delinquents, provided they are in some degree capable of self-examination and readjustment. (69).

A Grain of Wheat is replete with Biblical quotations and references, used before and within chapters to elicit our indebted attention on the unique theme of discourse. These biblical references liken the text to a societal constitution. The novel in this becomes not only "a social document but a social force" on which yardsticks the roles of characters can be upheld or decried. Cook and Okenimkpe (1983) write that:

...at one level the novel judges its character, and condemns the guilty. At another it is a compound of insight, concern, regret, hope and involvement. Yet ultimately the two planes are interdependent, and it is this dovetailing which accounts for the book's depth and richness. (70)

Most of these quotations and references are symbolic while some are ironic. Others are linguistic constructs aimed at intensifying the language content of the text. Kihika is the grain of wheat, which most die if many fruits are to grow. The growth and sustenance of the party also rest on this same grain. The referents "Christ" and "Moses" pinpoint two major ideas: one, that

the story centres in salvation of people and the bringer of this freedom, must like Jesus the Christ, face trials and eventually die on a 'cross'; second, that the people are to undergo a kind of exodus similar to the Israelites' under Moses. Kihika came and died for the Thabaians but Mugo like the Biblical Moses could not lead the Thabaians to the promised land; his betrayal of Kahika is symbolic of Moses; episode of the golden calf.

Conclusion

Ngugi in an attempt to seek a medium to appraise heroism and condemn betrayal, literally transplants into Kenyan history actual stories from the Bible. He reconstructs them using the characters of Kahika and Mugo whose experiences are better understood in relation to other characters. For better results, he parodies biblical passages but often delves into outright quotations. These enrich the language of the text, improve its textual quality and make for a better grasp of its Marxist fixation. Expatiating, Ngara (1982) writes:

The quotation and references to the Bible function on two levels. At one level, we are led to think mainly of the symbolic significance of Ngugi's use of the Bible; at another level the language of the Bible and of religion in general becomes an object of Analysis in its own right; it becomes a variety of language which contributes to the internal stylistic features of the novel... (88-89)

In this narration, even in character delineation, Ngugi applies the Standard English language for maximum effect. Examining the diverse episodes in the story, the diction of the language is apt. Though imbued with some Gikuyu words like; 'Agikuyu', 'Uhuru', 'Irimu', 'Kanzua', 'Harambee', among others, the channel of expression remains undiverted from the Standard English. The audience becomes disposed to greater understanding of the text, most especially Africans familiar with the lexis of traditional Agikuyu society.

It is through this same medium that the various characters articulate their innate consciousness, but to contrast in the English given to Thompson and Githua. According to Cook and Okenimkpe (1983):

Thompson embodies for Ngugi that most odious Form of political authority, colonialism, so of all his Characters it is on Thompson that he pours most scorn. [, hence the acceptable language that depicts his philosophical and political bias against development in Kenya.] Thompson is a supreme example to those who refuse to admit the logical links between past action and present outcome. (72)

Githua, that hilarious cripple, is so comic that his utterances are implicated in the pornographic images of his lexis. Ngugi through Githua, often times finds cloaks for indecency

concerning sexual matters, like in the following: "I was not always like that, I swear by my mother's aged cunt, or that of the old woman". (GOW, 109)

Thabai on the verge of Uhuru is unstable, and just like Githua leans on crutches, uncertain of her political climate. *A Grain of Wheat* in the words of Cook and Okenimkpe (1983):

Occupying primarily the last five days before the Ritual enactment of Kenyan independence... revisits the turmoil of the emergency and sets it against the outcome of the struggle for Uhuru, while lamenting that as things have transpired, the ceremony is "like warm water in the mouth of a thirsty man". (70)

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