

THE BETRAYED HOPE OF THE AFRICANS: AN EXAMPLE OF A GRAIN OF WHEAT

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Abstract

Ngugi has a passionate love for his country, Kenya as shown in his A Grain of Wheat as well as some other of his works. He has a tender feeling for his home country. He therefore wanted freedom for his people. The passion of this longing for freedom is echoed in Kihika's war cry that they must kill and put to sleep the enemies of black man's freedom. But the saddening thing is that when the long awaited freedom was achieved, it turned out to be a sham. The freedom turned out to give birth to the "man eaters"; the people of Kenya who have been set free, so to say, turned out to be enemies of themselves. Instead of people being their brother's keepers in the wake of independence, many played the Biblical Cain: there were betrayals here and there. There was the dashing of the hopes of Kenyans with the dawn of Uhuru. That notwithstanding, the novel does not end on a pessimistic note; for no matter how dark the tunnel is, there is always a light at the end of the tunnel.

Keywords; A Grain of Wheat, Black man freedom, man eaters, enemies of themselves and brothers keepers

Introduction

Before 1963, Kenya was ruled by the British government. On 12th December, 1963, Kenya became an independent nation after gaining independence from her colonial masters. As it turned out to be, with the wake of independence, Kenyans started ruling their people, and it did not take long for the politicians to exhibit the corrupt and selfish tendencies in them. This probably gave rise to what can be termed the "Novels of Disillusionment", for the people were disillusioned with what was obtainable among the politicians. Before the

independence the people were hopeful. As far as they were concerned, the country would be better off when handled by people indigenous to Kenya.

But no sooner had white man left than the hopes of the people were shattered on the altar of self-rule. There was a lot of corrupt activities going on in the national polity; the whole system was corrupt, to say the least. It may be pertinent to say that as the leaders were corrupt in Kenya, so also other African leaders were corrupt. And this prompted writers to write about the happenings around them.

Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* was published in 1967, four years after Kenya gained independence. It was obvious that within four years, it had dawned on the people of Kenya that the so called independence granted to them was a farce. Ngugi did not relent in his efforts to show that thousands of Kenyans who died during the struggle for independence died in vain as "Uhuru" did not bring the fruits for which the people shed their blood, as the politicians became corrupt and selfish, turning out to be interested in only what concerned them.

In fact, Ngugi is not alone in this disillusionment. With the wake of independence, a new and disappointing set of circumstances and situations jolted the sensibilities of a number of African writers. This development, as pointed out earlier, gave rise to the second phase of African writing, which Arthur Ravenscroft has referred to as "Novels of Disillusionment" (120). These are novels that are prompted by the excessive corruption and maladministration of our so called leaders of African countries. As Ngugi was busy writing against the behaviours of the political leaders in Kenya, so also we can talk of Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1960), Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965), Aluko's *Chief, the Honourable Minister* (1970), Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are not Yet Born* (1968), to mention but a few.

On 30th December, 1977, Ngugi was arrested by the police and clamped into detention at the Kimati Maximum Security Prison. Arap Moi, the then Home Affairs Minister, and who later became the president of Kenya signed the detention order. This can be seen from an excerpt from *Detained: A Writer's prison Dairy*:

(At Kimati Maximum Security Prison) we all shared a common feeling: something beautiful, something like the promise of a new dawn had been betrayed, and our presence and situation here was a logical outcome of the historical betrayal... (Ngugi 63).

It becomes ridiculous and ironical too that the then president of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, who seemed to be an advocate of freedom, and was himself incarcerated by the colonial masters should turn around to detain anybody who did exactly what he did to the whites: advocating for freedom. Ngugi was detained because of the play, *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, which he jointly wrote with Ngugi Mirri in Gikuyu.

It is important to point out here that Ngugi Wa Thiong'O suffered terribly in the prison. He must have pondered at his loss of freedom, and may have wondered whether the prison was his destiny in Kenya as a Kenyan or whether his depravity was just to allow a few scoundrels who call themselves leaders carry on the colonial philosophy that countless poor men, women and children had sacrificed their lives.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi embodies complex feelings, ideas and incidents. The setting is in the battered village of Thabia, and it can be said that the developments is in Kenya as a whole. It is four days to "Uhuru"; the people are planning to celebrate it and

during the course of events, Ngugi takes us back to the period of emergency, which is replayed in the people's consciousness, and then leaps forward to what lies ahead.

The political interest in *A Grain of Wheat* is made manifest in the epigraph:

Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it dies. And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain (1).

This by implication refers to the need for "continual struggle, suffering and even death in order that the millennium may be achieved" (Palmer 25). Of Waiyaki, the earliest nationalist, we are told:

Then nobody noticed it; but looking back we can see that Waiyaki's blood

contained within in a seed, a grain, which gave birth to a political party whose main strength thereafter sprang from a bond with the soil (13).

David Cook and Michael Okenimpe see this as the "core of the work", and according to them, "Our grain of wheat is the political will of the people planted at this earliest stirring of the demand for social justice" (70). From the legendary Waiyaki's blood that had to be shed in order that the party may be born that would eventually lead the people to the promised land, Ngugi gave the work a more concrete expression by emphasizing the role played by a young educated nationalist leader, Harry Thuku, before the emergency period in Kenya. He also gives it a universal significance by linking it to the biblical story of the people of Israel in their struggle to free themselves from the oppressive rule of the Pharaohs:

So in Harry Thuku, people saw a man with God's message: Go unto Pharaoh and say unto him: let my people go, let my people go . . . (13).

Worthy of mention is the fact that just as the Israelites placed implicit confidence and trust in Moses, so also did the people place their confidence and trust in Harry Thuku. They swore to follow Harry through the "desert" until he brought them to the "promised land" of Uhuru. They flocked to his meetings where he denounced the white man and his oppressive strategy that denied the people their land and freedom. As Erasto Mugo rightly puts it, "The first political movement was the Kikuyu Association formed in 1920 by Harry Thuku" (188). Mugo further claims that the party's major concern was to recover the people's stolen lands. As a result, Thuku became a living legend among the Gikuyu. However, it was tough for Harry as the imperialist leaders were after him to the extent that he was "clamped in chains, narrowly escaping the pit into which Waiyaki was buried alive" (Ngugi 13).

The people demonstrated a lot of solidarity when Harry was arrested. The people marched to Nairobi and insisted that they would spend all their days and nights outside the "State House" till Harry was released. After Harry, the political burden devolved on Jomo Kenyatta. According to Erasto Mugo:

The Kikuyu Central Association received a new leader, Jomo Kenyatta who returned to Kenya in 1946 after fifteen years in England. The Kikuyu Central Association was replaced by the Kenyan African Union with Jomo Kenyatta as the president (192).

And Ngugi recalls how "Jomo and other leaders were arrested in October, 1952" (16). After this incident, "Kihika disappeared into the forest, later to be followed there by a handful of young men from Thabai and Rung'ei, and his greatest triumph was the famous capture of Mahee" (16). Kihika also succeeded in murdering the district officer of Rung'ei, Mr

Thomas Robson (otherwise referred to as Tom, the terror). A month later, Kihika was arrested and hanged in public.

At this stage, it is necessary to recall the role of Kihika vis –a- vis Mugo because of their central role in the novel. When Jomo Kenyatta did not turn up at a political rally, a number of other people spoke, including Kihika from Thabia, and he was one of the speakers who received “ A big ovation from the crowd” (14). He did not talk of sending letters to the white man as in the days of Harry.

As Kihika states:

This is not 1920; what we want is action, a blow which will tell. . . We went to their church. Mubia in white robes, opened the Bible. He said: let us kneel down to pray. We knelt down. Mubia said: let us shut our eyes. We did. You know his eyes 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 ground. A day comes when brother shall give up brother, mother her son, when you and I have heard the call of nation in turmoil (15)(emphasis mine).

Kihika received ovation from the audience, and they later saw him as one of the heroes of deliverance. He narrated the history of the tribe and the birth of the party. His interest in politics was borne out the stories he listened to from Warui of how the land was taken from blacks.

All these experience hardened his heart against the imperialists as Ngugi opines: “From early on, he had visions of himself, a saint, leading the Gikuyu people to freedom and power”(73). Kihika stressed the need for unity; they would surmount every obstacle. He compared the situation on ground to what was obtainable in Ghana. With Ghandi at the centre of things, the people rallied around him, and Indians were able to fight with one mind. After their sufferings they were able to gain their independence from their British oppressors.

On the spiritual level, Kihika called on the people to imitate the sacrifice of Christ. He argues that Ghandi was able to succeed because “ he made his people give up their fathers and mothers, and serve their one mother- India. “With us, Kenya is our mother” (78). Kihika, thus demonstrates the total commitment of the Mau Mau, one that calls for the greatest sacrifice that man can offer: “everybody who takes the oath of unity to change things in Kenya is a Christ” (83).

Kihika was a true nationalist whose actions were motivated by purely altruistic reasons. In a conversation with his beloved Wambuku who reminded him that he had nothing to lose by the white man’s occupation as his father’s land was intact and that at any rate the land in the Rift Valley did not belong to their tribe, he told her that the important thing was not the individuals that own the land. The issue at stake is that the land belongs to black people. He admonishes them not to act as the Biblical Cain and stressed the need for all Kenyans to be their brothers’ keeper (85). He reiterated the immense hardship and oppression under which the people lived and the great deprivation that they suffered in the midst of plenty:

Take your white man, anywhere, in the settled area. He owns hundreds and hundreds of acres of land. What about the black men who squat there, who sweat dry on the farms to grow coffee, tea, sisal, wheat and yet only get ten shillings a month (85).

Thus, through the actions of men like Kihika, an unconscious resistance was built up against the Whiteman.

The heroism displayed by Mugo became a legend among the people. When he was captured, he was taken to Tigoni Police Station and later to Thika Detention Camp where captured forest fighters were kept. He was there for six months before being taken to Manyani Camp. From him we learn that Manyani Camp was a very big prison divided into sections, and had about one thousand and eight hundred men. The prisoners were kept in different sections depending on their degree of involvement in the nationalist cause. Mugo was put in the section for the “hardcore” – those who bluntly refused to co-operate with the administration.

Through the sufferings of Mugo our eyes are opened as to the extent of the atrocities perpetrated by the British imperialists during the emergence of the Mau Mau in Kenya. However, Mugo proved himself a very brave man as no amount of whipping made him to cry out in pain. As a result, he gained a high reputation among the other detainees. The beatings were very serious that eleven men died after being beating. Recalling this incident Ngugi states:

Learned men will, no doubt dig into the troubled times which we in Kenya underwent, and maybe sum up the lesson of history in a phrase. Why, let us ask them, did the incident in Rira Camp capture the imagination of the world? For there were other camps, bigger, scattered all over Kenya, from the Manda Islands in the Indian Ocean to the Magata Islands in the Indian Ocean to the Magata Island in Lake Victoria (115).

On the eve of independence, the ritual celebration was carried into the forest where the soldiers offered sacrifices in honour of Kihika and Mugo. What a tragic irony as people wished that their names were never linked together. Spinning the same web of irony, Ngugi made the celebrants on the eve of independence surge to Mugo’s hut. They sang songs of praise in honour of Kihika and Mugo, “the two heroes of deliverance from our village” (178). But ironically, when they knocked at Mugo’s door, he did not open. Be that as it may, this is not surprising as it adumbrates Mugo’s character portrayed at the very opening of the book - a solitary and somewhat mysterious figure: “Christ-like, saintly, respected by his fellow villagers as the most heroic example of resistance to the Whiteman during the emergency period.”

This ironic portrayal of Mugo is relevant in the sense that it applies to most of the major characters in the novel including Jomo Kenyatta and the independence itself. The paranoid state of Mugo is revealed on the night that Mumbi was sent to him to persuade him to speak on Uhuru day. After he nearly strangled Mumbi, he burst out in a frantic manner:

Imagine all your life you cannot sleep – so many fingers touching your flesh- yes, always watching you- in dark places- in corners-in the streets- in the fields-sleeping, waking, no rest- ah! Those eyes- cannot you for a minute leave a man alone- I mean let a man eat, drink, work- all of you- Kihika- Gikonyo- the old woman- that general- who sent you here tonight? Who? Aah! Those eyes again- we shall see who is stronger-now... (161). Here, one sees Mugo weighed down by an insupportable sense of guilt.

One interesting aspect of Ngugi is his psychological penetration of his characters. Commenting on this, Charles Larson says, “The most noticeable difference in methods of characterization between James Ngugi and Chinua Achebe is Ngugi’s use of impressionism, the internal rendering of his characters’ emotional reactions to the external world” (155). After opening the novel with Mugo’s paranoid and nervous imbalance, Ngugi gradually leads us on to the reasons for this situation. Mugo had a lonely and miserable childhood as a result of the premature death of his parents. He was, therefore,

brought up by a drunken aunt and his attempt at heroism led to his detention and terrible suffering. Despite this Mugo's background, after his release from detention, he was determined to make a meaning out of his life by working very hard.

Unfortunately, it was at this point in Mugo's life that he came in contact with Kihika. It could be said that Kihika intruded into Mugo's life when he (Mugo) wanted to have peace, and quiet. Kihika tried convincing Mugo that he is resilient, altruistic and patriotic according to Kihika, that it is the kind of man that they needed: someone who can organize an underground movement in the village and fight the white men. Kihika, therefore, outlined to him the code of conduct that guided the Mau Mau in their operation:

We don't kill just anybody; we are not murderers. We are not hangmen like Robson-killing men and women without cause or purpose. We only hit back... We must kill. Put to sleep the enemies of black man's freedom (166).

However, Mugo does not "believe in heroism through death; it is his view like Silas, in Okeke- Ezeigbo's " *Caught in the Web* " that "whoever opted to die (should) do so without dragging unwilling people into it"(108). With this in his consciousness he made his way to John Thompson's office, the district officer to say, "I know where Kihika can be found tonight" (173). The betrayal of Kihika by Mugo is as unnatural as Eve's plucking of the forbidden fruit, with which she brought destruction on humanity. This was the great burden that lay like a huge millstone on the neck of Mugo till he confessed his crime on Uhuru day:

You asked for Judas, he started; you asked for the man who led Kihika to this tree here. That man stands before you, now. Kihika came to me by night. He put his life into my hands and I sold it to the Whiteman. And this thing has eaten into my life all these years (193).

The issue of mistaken identity which is a major aspect of the novel is linked with Kihika's betrayal. Lieutenant Koinandu said, "In betraying Kihika to the Whiteman, Karanja had really betrayed the black people everywhere on earth" (134).

Betrayal is a major issue in the novel. Gikonyo while in detention focused his mind on his beautiful wife, Mumbi. His main interest was on how he will be re- united with his wife, and this led him to betray the Mau Mau oath. Unfortunately, on his return, he met a painful betrayal: the so called beloved wife of his was nursing Karanja's child. Gikonyo was so disgusted with the situation he met after his release from detention.

Ngugi, on the other hand, condemns Karanja's amoral attitude; his selfishness, callousness and opportunism. This is shown at Rung'e Railway Station one day, when amidst the confusion caused by the departure of the train, people were trampled underfoot, he said, " Why should I fear to trample on the children, the lame and the weak when others are doing it" (82)? He is the character in the novel whose life amounts to a waste and failure as he walks out the novel aimlessly. As Riddhi Jari enunciates:

Another betrayer . . . is Karanja. Karanja deliberately takes side of British people. He cruelly treats his own people. That is when Karanja became chief. Soon he proved himself more terrifying than the one before him. He led other home guards into the forest to hunt down the Freedom Fighters (*web*).

Worthy of mention is the fact that Karanja also betrays Gikonyo and Mumbi. As a result, his mother warns him saying, "Don't go against the people. A man who ignores the voice of his own people comes to no good end." (*web*).

Mr. Thompson betrayed his own cause as well as humanity at Rira Camp. His wife betrayed him by becoming the concubine of Dr Van Duke. And he himself felt betrayed by

the British Government for giving Kenya independence. He is part of the general scheme of exposing human shortcomings. As a colonial administrator he was “the symbol of Whiteman’s power, unmovable like rock...” (136). He is the exponent of the ethics of imperial colonialism. As far as he is concerned, colonization is the Christian and philanthropic process of civilizing a people and putting them in contact with the benefits of European inventions. In fact, “it is the implementation of a great moral idea” (47).

Ironically, when the time came for the people he had been labouring to convert to European ways of thinking and living are on the verge of acceding to nominal equality with himself, far from rejoicing in such evidence of progress, Thompson in anger withdraws from the colonial service. He embodies for Ngugi the most odious form of political authority. Of all the characters, he is the one on whom Ngugi pours the greatest scorn.

The individual betrayals are representative of the vast betrayal of a whole society by its power elite. Ngugi touched on this in his preface to the novel:

Although, set in contemporary Kenya, all the characters in this book are fictions. Names like that of Jomo Kenyatta and Waiyaki are unavoidably mentioned as part of the history and institutions of our country. But the situation and the problems are real-sometimes too painfully real for the peasant who fought for the British, yet who now see all that they fought for being put on one side.

This sense of loss, frustration and disappointment is re-echoed by Gikonyo who observed that the people who are now seen “riding in long cars and changing them daily as if motor cars were clothes” (60), were those who did not take part in the struggle for independence. He said that they were the people who took shelter in the schools and universities. The same sense of disappointment and disillusionment is relayed by the one-legged Githua as he hobbles on crutches, in dirty and tattered clothes. He is a poor specimen of the transition. As Cook observes:

The leader of Kenya at the moment of Uhuru are drawn from among neither the Mau Mau campaigners nor those who cherish the ideals for which the freedom fighters made their sacrifices. The men at the top are a tribe of operators and manipulators who in their narrow interests are replacing colonialism with neocolonialism (70).

This is borne out by the personal experience of Gikonyo and other people from Thabai when they went to Nairobi to see their M.P.

We are made to understand that trying to see their representative can be likened to “trying to meet God” (54). The M.P. for Rung’ei could not honour the invitation to attend the Uhuru celebrations given to him by the local branch of the party for the mere fact that he was busy in Nairobi attending parties.

Another shocking experience is the betrayal of their M.P. with the dawn of independence. Mr Burton was ready to go and he wanted to dispose of the large acres of land that he owned. Gikonyo and a few others negotiated with him to buy the land to start a cooperative enterprise. As they did not have enough money to buy the land, they approached their M.P. for a loan of which he promised to be of help. Unfortunately, not only did the M.P. fail in his promise, he went behind them and bought the land from Mr. Burton.

Be that as it may, the greatest sense of betrayal is that of the Kenyans by Jomo Kenyatta. In fact, Mugo is modelled on Jomo Kenyatta. Like Mugo, he bears a false revolutionary identity. The hope that Kihika placed on Mugo is like the hope the Kenyans placed on Jomo Kenyatta. If Ngugi articulated this in vague terms in 1964 when *A Grain*

of *Wheat* was published, his position was very clear when he published *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*. As he succinctly puts it:

In the novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, I tried through Mugo who carried the burden of mistaken revolutionary heroism, to hint at the possibilities of the new Kenya. But that was in 1965-6 and nothing was clear then about the extent to which Kenya had negated neither his past, nor the sheer magnitude of the suffering it would cause to our society today (90).

Obviously, General R. was addressing Jomo Kenyatta and his government in his speech at the Uhuru celebrations as to why they took refuge in the forest and lived with beasts. As he enunciated, “the Whiteman went in cars. He lived in a big house. His children went to school. But who tilled the soil in which grew coffee, tea, pyrethrums and sisal? Who dug the roads and paid the taxes” (192)?

It was clear that they took the actions they took as a result of the Whiteman's oppressive attitude, and it becomes pertinent, therefore, that things should be righted, and the oppression and injustice that was the order of the day should stop if there was to be peace in the land. Jomo Kenyatta's treachery, his deception of the masses, his ambivalent roles and his negation of the aspirations of the tenets of the Mau Mau and the Kenya people are well articulated in *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*:

He was a black Moses who had been called by history to lead his people to the promised land of no exploitation, no oppression, but who failed to rise to the occasion, who ended up surrounding himself with colonial chiefs, home guards and traitors; who ended up being described by the British bourgeoisie as their best friend in Africa (162).

CONCLUSION

In the novel, hopes were betrayed. According to Riddhi Jani, Gikonyo breaks the oath of Mau Mau. In the words of Gikonyo's mother:

See how you have broken your home. You have driven a good woman to misery for nothing, let us know what profit will bring you, to go on poisoning your mind with these things when you should have accepted and sought how best to build your life. But you, like a foolish child, have never wanted to know what happened. Or what woman Mumbi is (web).

That notwithstanding, many critics are of the view that the novel, despite all the things suffered by the poor masses in the hands of the white men as well as their fellow Kenyans, does not end on a pessimistic note. The ray of hope, according to them, is brought to the fore by Mugo's confession:

Nevertheless, in spite of all the disillusionment, the unexpected revelations and personal antagonisms, the novel does not end on pessimistic note. Mugo, having relieved himself of his burden of guilt achieves 'freedom' and goes to meet death willingly; Gikonyo and Mumbi begin a new life; the whole village goes about its business with stoical determination for there is work to be done. Life must go on (Palmer 46).

Writing in the same vein, Leslie Monkman states, “the new citizens of Kenya must recognize that in the sins and failures of the past the potential for positive achievement and rebirth has not been lost (114). David Cook and Michael Okenimpe exhibit the same optimism. According to them, “Mugo's remorse which leads him to speak out the truth and denounce his own treachery can in death fire others to a new self examination (85).

It can be said that Ngugi is calling for a re- assessment and re- appraisal. As far as he is concerned, every Kenyan should re- examine himself on the role each played in the struggle for independence and try to decipher whether he is wearing a garment not meant for him like Mugo. In other words, he wants the politics of the present to be built on the understanding of the past. He also calls for the rebuilding of the nation based on spiritual regeneration. His statement on the death of Kenyatta seems to demand this:

For me, his death, even though he had wrongly gaoled me, was not an occasion for rejoicing but one that called for a serious re- evaluation of our history; to see the balance of losses and gains and work out the options open to us for the future of our children and the country (163).

To say the least, Mugo's tragedy must surely inspire us to eschew social treachery of any degree whatsoever and to be positively involved in our community and its aspirations before it is too late. If Mugo's experience leads us to contemplate the terrible possibilities within ourselves, the novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, will have affected change in us and will have an active ingredient in the struggle which the author preaches.

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