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## The Resistance for Preeminence and Serenity: *A Grain of Wheat*

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### **Abstract:**

*A Grain of Wheat* is a conventional account of Kenya's struggle for sovereignty seen through the character sketches of people in Thabai, a small Kikuyuni village. It is sated with political, religious and social observations along with crystallization of mid twentieth century history. The novel entwines numerous narratives together during the state of emergency in Kenya through a series of flashbacks in the lives and experiences of main characters, focusing on quiet Mugo (the village's chosen hero and a man haunted by a terrible secret), Mumbi, Kihika, Karanja and Thompson. The plot revolves around Mugo's village's preparations for Kenya's Independence Day celebration - Uhuru day. The novel weaves stories within stories, the narrative interwoven with allusions to real life leaders of the nationalist struggle like Jomo Kenyatta and others. As events unfold, compromises are forced, friendships are betrayed and lovers are tested.

"Resistance" is a part of temperament and a part of our history and civilization. This yearn for social transformation is the theme of Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) depicting the Kenyan nationalist struggle for sovereignty presenting an insider's version of the Mau Mau insurgency. Ngugi reveals in authentic terms the anti colonial struggle dominated by a nationalist sentiment and subverted by the agents of colonizers. Undoubtedly freedom movements like Mau Mau have succeeded only in elevating new ruling elite replacing the white oppressor with the black ones. Ngugi's literary voice has however been instrumental in the depredations of imperialism, the highest form of capitalism. Ngugi's political outlook is shaped via cultural and social environment of Kenya and he reflects its positive aspects and loopholes as well.

It is not sheer a work of historical fiction offering illustrations and interpretations of Kenya's struggle for independence, it is an unswerving political creative venture. By means of direct narration and via the actions of its characters Ngugi portrays an atmosphere of hopes and fears, successes and defeats, loyalties and betrayals, typical of the period of struggle. The novel is a story of a group of people from Thabai village in Kenya, which is in the last years of its struggle for independence, the goal is Uhuru. The people of Thabai are about to celebrate the Uhuru day, which is only four days ahead. History clearly projects the sum of their efforts, the eventual victory against the British, the lowering of the Union Jack in December 1963 and its replacement with Kenya's black, red and green flag. However, via fiction Ngugi delineates far more than this, making one perceive history developing through the experience, the suffering, the commitment, the inadequacies and the treachery of the people who lived through the times.

Thabai has a small town's usual share of freedom fighters, collaborators, colonial officers, whites of both sexes - ambitious men and beautiful girls. There are Christians, traditionalists, traitors, old codgers and number of others who claim to be called humans. The novel opens with Mugo, a strange old man who appears to be seeing phantoms where there are none and often appears like guarding something within him which according to him everyone is out to seek and unravel on the fateful Uhuru day. He is a resident of Thabai, a civilian who had suffered extensively at the hands of government during the freedom movement.

Mugo evokes the unreserved cruelties, nonsensical killings and tortures that the whitemen cossets in on innocent dwellers, who were disabled during the struggle. Mugo, a hero of the British Concentration Camp is visited by a group of elder people - Warui, Wambui and Gikonyo - who want him to lead the celebration of the Uhuru by delivering a speech on the day reminds him of the history of the nation:

... the day the whiteman came to the country, clutching the book of God in both hands, a magic witness that whiteman was a messenger from the Lord. His tongue was coated with sugar; his humility was touching. (11)

This was just propaganda of the Britishers, who actually in the guise of religion have come to colonize Kenya towards the end of the nineteenth century. The whitemen attack the people firstly through clergy and secondly by means of its soldiers. Mugo remembers a man named Harry Thuku who exposed the game of deceit played by the colonizers, for instance the discontent with taxation, forced labour on white settler's land and of uprooting thousands as a result of resettlement schemes for British soldiers: "Soon the people saw whiteman had imperceptibly acquired more land to meet the growing needs of his position. He had already pulled the grass-thatched hut and erected a more permanent building. Elders of the land protested. They looked beyond the laughing face of the whiteman and

suddenly saw a long line of other red strangers who carried not the Bible, but the sword" (12). Harry Thuku in a while formed a party against the whites, but was soon arrested. His arrest agitated people and the first protest rally took place in 1923 which culminated in changing the mental set up of the common masses from one of insolence to that of militant struggle. Kihika, a forest fighter, is a very receptive youngman, greatly inspired by Indian National Movement and with maturity identifies the commonness of all such struggles against the British. Apprising his young friends Gikonyo, Mumbi, Karanja and others regarding the success of Indian struggle against Britishers he states: "Do you know why Gandhi succeeded? Because he made his people give up their fathers and mothers and serve their one Mother - India. With us Kenya is our mother" (78).

The revolt against the colonial masters manifests itself in multifarious ways. Kihika realizes the deceitful role of Christianity intending to make a strong hold on the minds of public, and the priests are using it as a weapon to thwart the independence struggle: "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 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 treasure in heaven where no moth would corrupt them. But he laid his on earth, our earth" (15). The last sentence, "But he laid his on earth, our earth", portrays the two-pronged attack of the colonizers firstly through settlers and secondly through Church.

Kihika's speeches have a forceful impact because of their spontaneity and directness backed by his conviction. Among the younger generation are Gikonyo, a well-known carpenter in the village of Thabai, and Mumbi, his wife, one of the most beautiful women in the area who listens to Kihika as one of their peers. Kihika speaks before a large crowd and encourages guerrilla warfare against the British. Mugo also listens, but, unlike Gikonyo and Mumbi, he hates what Kihika says. Mugo thinks native Kenyans have no chance of successfully opposing the British, and he decides to do his job quietly to succeed in the new order of things. Karanja, who unsuccessfully sought the hand of Mumbi, feels even more strongly that the best policy is to accept the British as invincible, but Kihika by using the same religious sentiments as used by the Britishers to distract the minds of the common man, arouses people into action by referring to the death of Christ: "In Kenya we want a death which will change things, that is to say, we want a true sacrifice. But first we have to be ready to carry the cross. I die for you, you die for me, we become a sacrifice for one another. So I can say that you, Karanja, are Christ. I am Christ. Everybody who takes the Oath of Unity to change things in Kenya is a Christ" (83).

The tribulations of peace and reconstruction are problems of human relationship. If one approaches civil affairs with the heroics of a campaign, one runs away thrusting the responsibility on others, and this will result in disillusionment being in the hands of cynics and demagogues. The imposition of the Emergency creates a lot of social problems not only for forest fighters like Kihika but for many others as well. More men were rounded up and taken to concentration camps, named detention camps, outside Kenya. The platform at the railway station was never empty; girls pined for their lovers "from the forest or from the camps" (90), but they are quite determined for their cause:

The detainees had agreed not to confess the oath, or give away details about Mau Mau; how could anybody reveal the binding force of the Agikuyu in their call for African freedom? They bore all the ills of the whiteman, believing somehow that he who would endure unto the end would receive ... victory. (91)

From the accounts of various freedom fighters it is clear that the torture of the civilians had begun on a mass scale, a fact that is borne out by the passing of over a million Kenyans through the concentration. The torture grew as the struggle gained strength: "Kihika was tortured. Some say that the neck of a bottle was wedged into his body through the anus as the white people in the Special Branch tried to wrest the secrets of the forest from him" (17). It is a pointer to the extremely brutal and pathetic ways of the whites, turning them out of the list of humans. Even those left behind in the village were not spared from such torture. *A Grain of Wheat* portrays the story of Gikonyo and Mumbi, a very poignant portrayal of their love for each other through the tribulations of detention and physical suffering by means of emergency. Gikonyo states facts about their detention: "Do you know what it was to live in detention? It was easier, perhaps with those of us not labelled hard-core. But Mugo was. So he was beaten, and yet could not confess the oath" (26). Being in detention is in many ways worse than being in a prison, for in prison one knows his crime and the day of his release, but in detention, there runs a state of hope and despair simultaneously, and the very suspense of being guilty or innocent gnaws at one's vitals, permanently killing something inside. This proves apt in case of Mugo who suffers for years in detention.

The determination and zeal with which Jomo Kenyatta had fought against the Britishers for the emancipation of his nation inspired a large number of youngmen including Kihika. Jomo Kenyatta, an African socialist served as the first Prime Minister (1963-1964) and President (1964-1978) of Kenya is considered the founding father of the Kenyan nation. He entered politics after taking interest in the political activities of James Beuttah and Joseph Kang'ethe, the leaders of the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA). He joined KCA in 1924 and rose upto the ranks of the association by becoming the KCA's general secretary in 1928. In 1947 Kenyatta was elected President of the Kenya African Union (KAU). He began to receive death threats from the white settlers after his election. Soon the Mau Mau rebellion began in 1951 and KAU was banned with a state of emergency declared on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1952. Kenyatta was arrested in October 1952 with five others on the charges of managing and being a member of Mau Mau society, a radical anti colonial movement engaged in the Mau Mau Rebellion.

After the arrest of Kenyatta, Kihika disappears into the forest and is followed later by a handful of youngmen from Thabai and Rung'ei. A year later they successfully raid a police station which infuriates the British and the Whites declare a state of emergency imprisoning numerous youngmen like Gikonyo. Even Mugo is arrested for intervening when a woman is being beaten. Despite the efforts by British to quell the Kenyan resistance, the violence continues, and the District Officer Thomas Robson is assassinated. Ngugi's message is thus clear: This is how Mau Mau was born out of the frustrations of the people to persuade the colonial masters to restore to them what was lawfully theirs. These raids were to obtain food and ammunition and to cripple down the machinery of

oppression and moreover, Kihika and his fellow fighters were not a gang of terrorists who felt sadistic pleasure out of such killings and raids. Even Mugo is also taken to Rira detention camp where John Thompson is the warden.

Though Mugo respects the British, but in these circumstances he feels unjustly accused and refuses to cooperate. He begins to get a reputation among other detainees as an instrument of courage. Mugo does nothing to justify their hopes but he does feel vague with grandiose religious impulses and begins to see himself as a possible messiah for his people. Finally, there is an uprising in which Mugo plays no part, and twenty one prisoners are killed. This episode places a blot on Thompson's career, the British believing he over reacted, nevertheless he is replaced by Robson as a district officer. Soon Mugo is released and after his return to the village, Kihika, a hunted man, pays him an unexpected visit. Kihika reveals that he, disguised as an old man, killed Robson, the district officer. This news terrifies Mugo, oblivious of Mugo's cowardice, Kihika encourages him to lead an underground movement in the village and asks him to think about it and to see him next evening. Mugo resents the ethical choice that Kihika thrusts upon him. He decides to betray him and secretly tells Thompson where Kihika will be the next night. The soldiers arrest Kihika and murder him ruthlessly.

The perpetration of atrocities imposed by the whites are gruesome and even at this moment, the fighters as well as the civilians are however not scared of the naked show of sadistic brutalities exhibited by the colonial bosses. They now become more powerful in turning out their oppressors from their land. Throughout the struggle, African collaborators played an important role on behalf of their bosses, white masters, thus, justifying people the strengths of the whites and also emphasizing the futility of challenging the invincible might of the Mzungu. Karanja, a collaborator with the British, states: "The whiteman is strong. Don't ever forget that. I know because I have tasted his power. Don't you ever deceive yourself that Jomo Kenyatta will ever be released from Lodwar. And bombs are going to be dropped into the forest as the British did in Japan and Malaya" (130). Karanja, a man who betrays his own people by becoming a chief and working with the colonial bosses during the emergency has sunk deeper into the logic of surrender and collaboration. He, being an apt example of thorough dehumanization by the colonial machinery, is obsessed with the sight of power. For him, humans, especially his natives, carry no importance and he feels delighted to shoot the freedom fighters or innocent citizens.

In *A Grain of Wheat* Uhuru seems to be the occasion when each of them including the white D.O. Thompson takes stock of his or her role in the freedom struggle, especially during the emergency and the Mau Mau phase of the struggle. Kenya regains its independence (Uhuru) on 12<sup>th</sup> December, 1963. Thabai, like the other towns, celebrates the occasion with a large assembly of villagers. Warui, Wambui, General R., and Lieutenant Koinandu, a former Resistance Fighter, who worked in the Movement for many years, are planning to use the occasion to unmask Kihika's betrayer. All their suspicions fall upon Karanja who is the most notorious collaborator in the village. Their plan is to have Mugo, whose reputation as a hero has grown by leaps and bounds, to present a speech that will climax with the naming of Karanja. Mugo, burdened with guilt, refuses and asks to be left alone. Mumbi tries to change his mind by telling the truth. She warns Karanja not to attend the rally, but he ignores her advice, and the people dispatch a delegation that drags Mugo into their midst, where they await his triumphant speech, and designate him as "Kihika born again" (156), contrarily he stands before them and reveals himself as the traitor.

On independence, Karanja resigns from the position of the Chief and goes to work in the library. He also serves, however, as a messenger for John Thompson and his wife. His life most obviously amounts to waste and failure, swayed as he is by the impulse of the moment, living only in the present, solving only the immediate problems which disturb his mental peace, and at last he walks out aimlessly heading nowhere:

Thompson has gone, I have lost Mumbi. His mind hopped from image to image, following no coherent order. Incidents in his life would pop up and then disappear. (199)

Gikonyo, an ambitious carpenter and businessman who is married to Mumbi, confesses of taking an oath of resistance while in a concentration camp. He is moved from one detention camp to another - seven in all - and finally, after six years, has most of his revolutionary zeal drained out of him. He thinks only of Mumbi and thus signs a confession and is released. There are rumours that freedom is coming to the country, and when Gikonyo returns to the village, however, he receives two unwelcome surprises. The first is that Karanja, whom he has never respected, has risen from the leader of the homeguards (who report to the British) to the village Chief. The second is that his wife Mumbi gave birth to a son in his absence and the father is Karanja. Gikonyo is thoroughly embittered and disillusioned.

Delving deep into human sadness, the novel encourages adopting a tolerant perspective on man's delinquency. If one comprehends how men suffer, one shall not want to gloat even over Karanja in his fall. Gikonyo still struggles to come to terms with the knowledge that Mumbi has borne Karanja's child and also seething with the awareness of his dishonorable deed in the detention camp. He hates himself as his self respect is deeply hurt, and to reassert this pride he projects all his guilt onto Mumbi, making her the scapegoat for his weakness and thus magnifies his failure. He justifies his betrayal of his comrades in the prison by idealising Mumbi to whom he wishes to return, but Mumbi too has undergone the mill of experience, who is now not simple and pure but has suffered and faltered. Utterly disappointed Gikonyo heaps all his inner rage against himself on her - and all too familiar forms of self delusion. He cares more about vindicating himself by condemning Mumbi and clings obstinately to the hardcore pride within him as a troubled and imperfect individual. Since Gikonyo has not yet yearned to forgive himself, so he is not able to forgive Mumbi too; for acceptance of forgiveness means one must admit that one is not self sufficient. Gikonyo cannot humble his masculine arrogance so far as to confess his need, however, later he confesses his fault and realizes that only love and understanding can conquer pride. His stubborn, individualistic, arrogant rage slowly melts and he starts missing Mumbi and finally reconciles with her.

Public responsibility runs as a major theme in the work. Are we going to take the benefits of Uhuru for granted? Are we going to lean on the achievements of those who fought for freedom without facing the new challenge which their success has created? If so, we

shall be bitterly disappointed. We shall find the new power magnate taking over from the old, and acquiring the whiteman's estate for himself, not helping the cooperative group to purchase it. We shall be saying with Mugo, "the day ahead would be just like yesterday, and the day before" (3). We may even find ourselves asking with the deflated Karanja, "Was death like that Freedom? Was going to detention freedom?" (199).

Heroism is a focal theme in literature, especially in western literature such as *Beowulf* (Heaney, trans.), *The Iliad* (Homer), *The Odyssey* (Homer), and *The Song of Roland* (Sayer, trans.) and many more. Moreover this theme is not limited to European or American literature. Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o certainly toys with this common literary theme in *A Grain of Wheat*. This novel centers on the tumultuous times during Kenya's struggle for independence. There are the obvious heroes such as Kihika, Gikonyo, and perhaps even Karanja. One of the novel's best qualities is the fact that there are heroes who do not seem so at first but then redeem themselves later, such as Mugo. Yet the novel shows human nature as it truly is for each hero has his flaw and even his downfall. Therefore, an analysis is needed of both the obvious and secretive heroes with special attention paid to why they might be heroes as well as a look at their "dark" or deviant side.

*A Grain of Wheat* pays a tribute to those who fought however crisscrossed the moral threads had been. Kihika is not in the events tested amidst the complex demands of peace. He dies during the Mau Mau while the sort of heroic absolutes of urgent action which come natural to his extrovert and ambitious nature are still relevant. Ngugi thus preserves him as a model leader in combat, he may be self-assertive, may be compromising and violent, but he is not guilty because his conduct of affairs represents what was necessary in the given situation; and he has no chance to show whether his idealism and dedication could have been tempered by the requirements of different circumstances. For the time of clearcut vision unambiguous issues are past, once and for all, Uhuru arrives. The novel is structured in such a way so as to emphasise this and Ngugi's major character is an anti hero who contradicts any simplification of the moral issues and draws compassion, not cheers.

Mugo is an anti hero in two senses: First because he himself is taken by surprise by his own defiant bravery in the face of inhumanity - most obviously when he futilely leaps to the defense of Wambuku against the trench guards; Secondly through his being miscast by Rung'ei in the role of hero, an irony which forms one of the main structural features of the novel. His truest moment of heroism is when he publicly confesses his betrayal of Kihika. This is opposed to the heroism of battlefield; it is the heroism of admitting one's guilt and weaknesses.

Perhaps both Kihika and Mugo are grains of wheat, each sacrificing himself in his own fashion so that others may be regenerated. If Kenya of Uhuru has been quickened to life owing to the death of Kihika and his kind; then the new vision inherent in the reunion of Gikonyo and Mumbi - representative figures in this context whose very names make them archetypes - is quickened by Mugo's readiness to face the final implications of his new-found, hard-won integrity. In *A Grain of Wheat*, the military struggle is in the past; the seeds of war have borne fruit; the harvest has been reaped. What, asks the novel, of the next crop? That which must be sown and tended is to be weathered in the new climate of independence and must feed the demands of peace. The old Kenya is dead; has the new Kenya been 'quickened'? Are the living beings willing or able to nurture their inheritance?

*A Grain of Wheat* presents characters who suffer for what they do and struggle to achieve what they want to become. They want to remain faithful to their convictions, but in a time of strife, motives are often provided by the most pressing influences, and often they do not have right on their side. The villagers represent the ordinary people of Kenya who with all their human foibles and frailties are forced to make compromises under terror and torture but still uphold the cause. The characters represent general masses of Kenya: Kihika represents the revolutionary youth who saw a basic unity in the struggle of the colonial world and sacrificed everything for the sake of freedom; Karanja, on other hand represents the collaborationists who are basically cowards and who put self before society; Gikonyo and Mumbi represent thousands of ordinary people, magnifying those personal relationships which went to pieces under the emergency through sheer physical separation. Through other series of traumatic experiences which the ordinary masses face during freedom struggle, Ngugi provides a hint of the things which will make their way to independent Kenya. On the Uhuru day, people are dancing and praising their leaders, still they are not unaware of their dream of independent Kenya turning sour. The way their native leaders aspire to grab property and power possessed by the whites, denying Gikonyo and other villagers a chance to own a cooperative farm, tells more than anything else, thus symbolising the ensuring struggle between common public and their chosen leaders in new Kenya. The collaborators, who used to lick masters' shoes are victims as well, their only advantage is that, for a while, they have power on their side.

*A Grain of Wheat* ends on an optimistic note. The final chapter which resolves the fundamental issues between private individuals, is entitled "Harambee" (211) symbolising communal solidarity. Mumbi and Gikonyo resolve their misunderstandings in a new harmony. Mumbi has set her face against revenge upon her brother's betrayer because she is convinced that this is the last thing that Kihika himself would have wished. And Rung'ei, on the verge of gloating over Karanja as the victim of just such a revenge, instead comes away from Mugo's confession, humility and respect. Yet, Mugo begins to unite the knots towards the end. It is he who first reverses the destructive process by confessing in public. One does not suspect the positive nature of this act: he was free, sure, confident. Though it lasts 'only for a moment,' the transformation in Mugo is complete. Inevitably he abandons this brave project when he discovers that his Uhuru speech is to be the occasion for the public accusation of Karanja for the crime Mugo himself had committed and his vision reveals the man buried within Mugo. These earlier occasions lead up to the simple, stark, carefully prepared, yet breathtaking climax, when Mugo voluntarily confesses his crime before the Uhuru celebration. Ngugi emphasises that this is the moment when the events in Mugo's life fall into place. It is a brief experience substantially poignant enough for the metal of his existence to enter into a new mould:

As soon as the first words were out, Mugo felt light. A load of many years was lifted from his shoulders. He was free, sure, confident.... He was conscious of himself, of every step he made, of the images that rushed and whirled through his mind with only one constant thread; so he was responsible for whatever he had done in the past, for whatever he would do in the future. The consciousness frightened him. (204)

His fear is justified and the acceptance of responsibility is fatal for Mugo. "Your deeds alone will condemn you" says General R., "No one will ever escape from his own actions" (206). Mugo does not escape and his dignified acceptance, his calm confrontation of his deeds, changes the course of action for times to come.

In counterpointing various aspects of his characters' lives in *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi calls on to moderate judgments of the individuals with profound human compassion and this is his major manifestation. Secondly he instructs to move out of a period of simple heroics into much more baffling and complex realities of freedom, where again one has to face the hard facts of human greed, selfishness, deceit and self deceit, where the enemy is now ourselves, but where one can still find love and peace in community if one stops shouting slogans and living in the past. The history of Kenya - the Mau Mau revolution - has been powerfully delineated by Ngugi. Mau Mau is a phase wherein numerous sections of extremely complex community consisting of people of various African tribes acted and reacted emotionally and often contrarily to the events of violence, as Ochola-Ojero observes:

In *A Grain of Wheat* the author probes into the psychology of those characters who have undergone serious difficulties and consequent disillusionment but who during the time of emergency have found some meaning and purpose in life in the tough fight for their country's independence. ("Of Tyres and Broken Handles, Ngugi Preaches" 81)

The novel, however, is not only about betrayal wherein every individual is guilty. Undoubtedly there are a number of characters in the work which acted contrarily to what was actually expected of them. For instance Mugo betrays Kihika, Gikonyo confesses the oath and Mumbi sleeps with Karanja but certainly it cannot be held against them especially keeping the context of freedom struggle in view. Later Mugo redeems himself before his final confession when at Rira detention camp he was singled out by Thompson for severe beatings. "Sometimes he would have the warders whip Mugo before the other detainees. Sometimes, in naked fury, he would snatch the whip from the warders and apply it himself" (117). Moreover Mugo had also saved a woman, Wambuku and number of other ladies from being beaten up in the trenches.

The Christian allegory, taken into consideration in *A Grain of Wheat*, not only constitutes the basic framework of the story but also incorporates the author's message. It is a mythological, realist work of postcolonial fiction set in the real world of Africa, detailing both African and European characters' perspectives on Kenya's struggle for independence. The novel exemplifies the gospel narrative of Jesus, a man wrongly accused of crimes he did not actually commit. Gikonyo is used to emphasise the central theme of betrayal, he is a symbol of the real fighter who was betrayed by Mumbi and Karanja, when he was out for freedom struggle. Joseph and Mary here are Gikonyo and Mumbi, an original coupling of the legend. Gikonyo is even a carpenter and Mumbi's child belongs to someone else, Karanja, a man tainted with the sins of a previous age and definitely passes these on to his child.

The child, evidently, is new Kenya born with all the injustices and sins of the past to develop into its unknown future; the fact that it is offered in sacrifice on the cross of capitalism. The only foretaste of valuable Uhuru Ngugi provides with is the reconciliation of Gikonyo with Mumbi and her son offering hope for shining days ahead.

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