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## **The Messiah Motif and Biblical Epigrams as Emblems of National Patriotic Culture in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967)**

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**Abstract:**

*This research interrogates Ngugi's use of the messiah motif and biblical epigrams in *A Grain of Wheat*. It analyses how the writer manipulates biblical allusions and symbols of martyrdom in order to articulate national patriotic culture. The thesis advanced in this research is that national patriotic culture shows itself through biblical epigrams that Ngugi employs in order to lend morale to the African people's struggle to liberate themselves and determine their destiny. He adopts from the Christian doctrine those fundamental humanitarian ideals that are parallel to Kenya's political history in order to advance national patriotic culture. The research argues that in the hands of patriots, Christianity can be employed to formulate a philosophy of liberation while in the hands of reactionaries it can be anti-liberation.*

**Keywords:** *messiah motif, national patriotic culture, biblical epigrams*

### **1. Introduction**

This research adopts the definition of national patriotic culture given below in its analysis of Ngugi's engagement of the messiah motif in *A Grain of Wheat*. The novel records the Mau Mau struggle and the betrayal of the hopes and aspirations by the new African leadership that assumes power at independence. The article contends that national patriotic culture manifests itself through biblical epigrams that Ngugi employs. The study argues that where Achebe commits himself to doing "unheard of things" with the English language, Ngugi sets out to do "unheard of things" with biblical allusions. The research shows that the political struggle of the Kenyan people to emancipate themselves from the imperialist yoke is expressed mainly in Christian motifs. The writer puts to prominence Kenya's historical figures like Jomo Kenyatta, Harry Thuku and Waiyaki who martyred themselves in the struggle for independence. The article argues that the artistic blending of Kenyan heroes and biblical heroes serves to locate the novel in mainstream Kenyan exigencies of existence. Commenting on the relevance of engaging some Christian doctrines in his art, Ngugi in David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe (1997:4) points out that "The Gikuyu society is somehow lacking in mythological background and the bible conveniently provides one with relevant framework, for instance the idea of destiny with regard to the Israelites and their struggle against slavery. The Gikuyu have had similar experiences".

### **2. National Patriotic Culture**

In this research, national patriotic culture is conceived as a body of ethos, principles and standpoints that constitute a people's worldview in matters that relate to politico-economic, cultural and social survival. There are important socio-historical and cultural differences between nations, which engender variations in the form of national patriotic culture. National patriotic culture therefore entails commitment and allegiance to the dreams of life that are cherished in a society. For Africans, national patriotic culture means commitment to the socio-economic, political and cultural survival and security of the indigenous African institutions. An African patriot should be committed to the projected goals of Africa that is loyalty to defend the dignity and integrity of African people. An African patriotic culture then is the pursuit of African people's collective aspirations and hopes in the light of the gory background of Europe's onslaught on Africa in which she is assisted by some African people who also purport to be vessels of African patriotic culture. With particular reference to Kenya, Ngugi contends that national patriotic culture reflects Kenya's interests against those of imperialists. Ngugi (1981: XV) posits that "It is my hope that the essays should in a small way help in the continuing struggle of a national patriotic culture reflecting Kenya's interests against the onslaught of a foreign based culture reflecting imperialist interests". These imperialist interests stand in opposition to the aspirations of African people. The white colonial Government existed to protect the white settlers' interests and ensure white settlement at the expense of African aspirations. Thus, national patriotic culture entails being at one with the yearnings of the 'victims' of slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism and post-colonial African autocrats. It, therefore, is the basis for participation in the struggles of our times against imposed identities, enslaving restrictions, and incapacitating mythologies created about ordinary people. National patriotic culture is the basis for struggle against a morbid kind of awareness, which stultifies the creativity of the Africans fighting against oppression. For Birt in Gordon (1997:65) it therefore invites participation in the emancipatory struggles of our times in which oppressed people are called upon to declare "No to scorn of man. No to the degradation of man, No to exploitation of man. No to butchery of what is most human: freedom". Robert Birt in L.R. Gordon ed. (1997:65).

National patriotic culture is founded upon and celebrates dialogue, mutual respect and equality among those who seek to participate in the altruistic struggle to transform their society for the better. Patriots respect and approach each other as defenders of the limitless possibilities represented by the human spirit. Their actions are based on hope in the inevitable success of their revolution. Patriotism does not imply turning Zimbabwean people into loyal machines or their rejection of progressive Government policies. It entails standing by the country showing allegiance to socio-economic, political and moral ideals embodied in the African worldview. It is patriotic to support leaders in so far as they efficiently serve the nation. It is unpatriotic not to oppose them to the exact extent that by inefficiently or otherwise they fail their duty to stand by the country. Patriotic culture should exude a national orientation. This means that within African nations, it is retrogressive to fight for the hegemony of one part of the nation while excluding other parts. The various ethnic groups should group and fight as an organic entity in defending and advancing their country's interests and total liberation. The other African nations should join them in fighting neo-colonialism and authoritarian regimes for the total liberation of Africa.

### 3. A Critique

The title of the novel is derived from the book of Corinthians 1:15-36 "Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it dies. And that which sowest, that body shall die, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat or of some other grain". The verse underscores the need for sacrifice in the political struggle. It emphasizes the ultimate sacrifice which the Kenyan must pay in order to attain independence as Steve Biko (1978:23) asserts "No group, however benevolent, can ever hand power to the vanquished on a plate. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress". In support of Biko's contention Fredrick Douglas in Lewis Gordon (ed.) (Ibid :2) argues that "The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims, have been born of earnest struggle. This struggle may be a morale one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both morale and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without demand".

For liberation to become a reality, the masses themselves must initiate a revolution and be prepared to sacrifice their lives. Sacrifice is the major defining trait of national patriotic culture. It entails selfless commitment to communal survival and continuity. The dedicated patriot prioritises the well-being and fulfillment of his or her nation. He seeks the eradication of forces that undermine cherished national ethos, values, projects and goals. He is also a guardian and custodian of the political, social, economic and cultural projects, values and achievements of his nation. The freedom, dignity and fulfillment of his people stand predominant in his agenda of life. Ngugi inscribes Kenya's historical figures who martyred themselves during Kenya's struggle for independence. These include Jomo Kenyatta, Harry Thuku and Waiyaki. The artistic blending of Kenyan heroes and biblical heroes serves to locate the novel in mainstream Kenyan exigencies of existence.

In support of the above argument, Eustace Palmer (1972: 25) notes that the verse refers to the need for continual suffering and even death in order that the future may be achieved. The legendary Waiyaki had to die in order for the party which eventually led the people to independence to be born. Such a sacrifice is the value of the spirit of national patriotic culture. Kwame Nkrumah (1973:96) correctly observes that "Suffering and sacrifice are inevitable in revolutionary struggle since no reactionary regime makes a voluntary surrender of its power". The symbol of a grain of wheat is related to Waiyaki's sacrifice and death at the hands of colonialism. Waiyaki's death gives birth to a resistance movement and a leader Harry Thuku who organises political meetings where political conscientisation occurs. Ngugi writes that "Waiyaki's blood contained within it a seed, a grain, which gave birth to a movement whose main strength thereafter sprang from a bond with soil". (p.21). The death of Waiyaki, Harry Thuku and Kihika has a positive impact on the people of Kenya. The deaths are signals of loyalty to the existential interests of the Kenyan people, a tough line stance that is against the toleration of the African people's oppressed condition. Such a position is the essence of national patriotic culture and it helps to re-energise the people to fight for their dignity and integrity. In this connection, Steve Biko in Hilda Bernstein (1978:13) argues that "I am the liberator no white can liberate me only black man can liberate himself".

In Thabai village, Kihika is the grain of wheat and his death by hanging at the hands of the settler Government indicates commitment and martyrdom. It shows the essence of sacrifice in a political struggle. Kihika is hanged by imperialist forces for challenging imperialists and Ngugi renders his death in Christian motifs of resurrection and sacrifice. Kihika leaves an indelible legacy of resistance to the system that denies the African people freedom and happiness. Kihika is a revolutionary and an embodiment of national patriotic culture. He epitomizes Malcom X (1970: XV)'s observation that "All thinking people today who have been oppressed are revolutionary". Kihika synthesizes the political aspects of the Christian doctrine with the concepts of national patriotic culture. He shows through biblical allusions the necessity of the struggle against colonial injustices. He also underlines the importance of unity in that struggle "Take up the cross, is what Christ told his people; Kihika resumed in a more light-hearted tone. 'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it' (p103).

By evoking biblical motifs as these, Ngugi's vision of national patriotic culture hinges on commitment to the cause of freedom. Self-denial enables the national patriot to identify with the oppressed. It facilitates the dissolution of the individual will into the national will. Allusions to the motif of 'taking up the cross' is an encouragement to assume positive and responsible action. It is an invitation to participation and contribution without which national patriotic ideals remain utopian and unfulfilled. For Ngugi, national patriots who die in the thick of the struggle do not die in vain. Their contributions remain a source of inspiration and their efforts, exploits and their names, will be evoked forever by posterity. Thus, Ngugi's reference to biblical images helps in forging national patriotic culture because he evokes those images which help in convincing potential patriots to realise that through their selfless actions in the struggle for freedom they will continue to live after their death. All these are allusions that are crucial in forging national patriotic culture. They invite the masses to assume responsibility and take up the challenge to negate the negation that colonialism is.

The cross itself in biblical mythology, symbolizes suffering and inevitable death. It means pain and sacrifice. Death by crucifixion is a horrendous reality that is too dastardly to contemplate. Therefore, Ngugi's national patriotic culture invites people to participate yet it also makes clear to them that the path of liberation demands preparedness to lay down one's life for the cause. Thus far, national patriotic culture is driven by sacrifice, pain and death. One has to be prepared to lose one's life in order to find it. Muchugu Kiiru (1985:20) asseverates that Kihika uses what he considers as the authoritative and unquestionable power of the Bible to rally people around the struggle for national liberation. By referring to Kenya as our mother, the patriotic culture has a national appeal. He suggests that every Kenyan must contribute to the cause and that they should not expect one man's death to bring about their freedom. As a patriot, his vision of a liberated Kenya stresses the importance of unity in the struggle of the Kenyans to liberate themselves as Amilcar Cabral (1980:33) observes "... the more persons who join together, the more united we become, the better we reflect what everyone knows: union makes for strengths... unity and struggle mean that for struggle unity is necessary, but to have unity it is also necessary to struggle".

The biblical images are employed to support the cause of liberation. Ngugi's employment of biblical allegories facilitates in articulating the dynamics of national patriotic culture. Kihika is able to imbue biblical analogues with political implications. He draws parallels between Jewish and Kenyan histories as a means of inspiring the Kenyans to resist imperial domination. These parallels also confer political legitimacy to the Kenyan people's struggle for political liberation from colonial encirclement. Kihika's understanding of the parallels between the Jewish and Kenyan struggles starts during his days at Mahiga, a church of Scotland School. As a missionary institution, the school is an extension of European evangelising mission. Reverend Butler in C. Zvobgo (1991:86) once remarked that schools offer them an opportunity to instill biblical teachings and the Christian faith into the hearts of African students. For Kihika, the biblical messages have positive impact as he becomes aware of the historical role which Moses played in the liberation of Jews from Egypt:

The boy was moved by the story of Moses and the children of Israel, which he had learnt during Sunday school – an integral part of their education – conducted at the church by the headmaster. As soon as he learnt how to read, Kihika bought a Bible and read the story of Moses over and over again, later recounting it to Mumbi and any other person who would listen (p.99).

The religious education imparted to Kihika at the early stage of his life form the foundation of his understanding of national patriotic culture. The education leaves an indelible imprint on his conceptualisation of basic concepts of political freedom and liberty. He comes to understand how the Jewish history can provide a basis for the political struggle of the African people. The reason is, it is a history of oppression, struggle, sacrifice and liberation. Kihika, the freedom fighter carries a bible and in it, verse 1 from the book of Exodus Chapter 8 is underlined in red "And the Lord spoke to Moses, go unto Pharaoh, and say unto him, thus saith the Lord, let my people go". (p37). The Jewish people suffered in Egypt at the hands of Pharaoh who subjected them to enslavement and dehumanisation. Pharaoh, in the political history of Kenya, refers to the imperialists and those Africans who collaborated with the imperialists to advance colonialists' aspirations, Moses refers to Kihika and all the Kenyan patriots who resisted enslavement. Kihika's political life is actually modeled on this founder of the Jewish nation. He makes avid use of the biblical teachings in the political struggle especially those that refer to the necessity of self-sacrifice and the significance of resurrection. Kihika's course of action is, therefore, closely modeled on those lines he has underlined in the bible. The biblical references also help to articulate national patriotic culture as they espouse political action and the need to combat prejudice and to change the existing oppressive system. A political struggle is, therefore, advocated as a means of crushing imperialist exploitative structures. Vladimir Lenin in Phillip Foner (ed.) (1970:8) rightly attests that "Without struggle there is no progress. No sound effort is in vain, least of all struggle with high ideals and personal integrity".

The biblical motifs employed by Ngugi invite people to stand up and challenge the oppressor as Amilcar Cabral (1980:75) contends "A basic principle of our struggle is that it is the struggle of our people, and that it is our people who must wage it, and its results are for our people". Like the Hebrews toiling in ancient Egypt "People swore they would follow Harry Thuku through the desert. They would tighten their belts around their waist, ready to endure thirst and hunger, tears and blood until they set foot in Canaan's shore (p15-16). Thus, through biblical allegories Ngugi portrays national patriotic culture as the embodiment of the hopes of freedom for the mass of the people. It is clear that for Ngugi as an author, the struggle that proceeds from, and is inspired by national patriotic culture, seeks to defend the cherished hopes of the masses. Cabral (ibid: 77) argues that struggle is effectively a people's struggle if the reason for that is based on the aspirations, the dreams and the quest for justice and progress of the people "Our struggle is for our people, because its objectives, its purpose, is to satisfy the aspirations, dreams and desires of our people: to lead a decent and worthy life, as all the people in the world want, to have peace in order to build progress in this land, to build happiness for the children".

In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi attacks the status quo, illuminates the spirit of resilience and advocates revolutionary action. His work is, therefore, a literature of combat. The people are filled with the spirit to define themselves and defend their heritage. Malcolm X (1970:49) rightly observes that "The community must reinforce its moral responsibilities to rid itself of the effects of years of exploitation, neglect and apathy, and wage an unrelenting struggle against brutality". Through biblical aphorisms, Ngugi projects an optimistic view of the African struggle. He is very positive about the strength of the Kenyans to overthrow colonialism and subsequently establish a socialist political system. His scriptural inspiration comes largely from the Old Testament is his contextualised understanding of the liberation of the Hebrews from Egypt. He writes that "And I saw a new heaven and new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away" (p229). Ngugi's vision hinges on the feasibility of a new world. The old world of British colonial enslavement under Robson, Thompson and their collaborators like Karanja passes to usher in a new world of independent Kenya.

There is therefore a sense in which the biblical epigrams show that the sufferings and the sacrifice of the African people cannot be in vain. Kihika and Harry Thuku among others, are the biblical grains of wheat. They die physically and spiritually. Their deaths would bring forth sweet harvest for those who had survived the affliction as St John 12:24 suggests “Verily, verily I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit” (p.229). However, Ngugi shows that while Kihika uses the bible in a positive way for the progression of the national patriotic culture, some sections of the Kenyan population especially members of the Revivalist Movement use the bible in a manner that is subversive to national patriotic culture. The revivalist movement in Kenya connived with the colonial Government in perpetuating the oppression of Africans and suppressing attempts by Africans to liberate themselves. Teacher Miniu and Reverend Jackson Kigondi preach against the aesthetics of national patriotic culture “Jackson Kigondi preaches against the Mau Mau in churches and public meetings convened by Tom Robson. He called on the Christians to fight side by side with the white man, their brother in Christ in order to restore order and the rule of the spirit (p14)”. Reverend Kigondi preaches to Africans that obsession with worldly affairs is a sin. His message whose intended aim is the pacification of Africans is a barrier to the promotion of the spirit of resilience. Ngugi in *The Weekly Review* (1978:10) observes that Christianity has been used:

...to rationalise imperialist domination and exploitation of peasants and workers. It has been used to blind people to the reality of their exploitation because Christianity as a whole wants to tell that their lot is God-given, as opposed to man-conditioned. So, you see, if you are poor because God has willed it, you are more than likely to continue to pray to God to right your condition. But if you know that your poverty is not God-conditioned, but is socially-reconditioned then you are likely to do something about those social conditions that are assuring that you are poor.

Miniu and Kigondi as preachers against national patriotic culture resemble Joshua in *The River Between* and Isaka in *Weep Not Child* who support an imperial culture by denigrating African cultural practices. Miniu and Kigondi, as reactionaries, are killed by the Mau Mau patriots and their revivalist colleagues’ view their deaths as some kind of martyrdom. Ngugi thus contrasts the martyrdom displayed by Kihika and that displayed by the revivalists.

#### 4. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that Ngugi employs some biblical epigrams in order to articulate a national patriotic culture. It is in the biblical allusions that Ngugi’s national patriotic culture manifests itself. In *A Grain Of Wheat*, it has been shown that Kihika who represents freedom fighters is an incontrovertible vessel of a national patriotic culture. Through Kihika, Ngugi shows the significance of sacrifice in Africa’s struggles. Ngugi counsels his society not to expect a smooth transition from colonialism to independence. Ngugi sees it as his duty to identify with the struggles of his society and to advance the good of his community. He also sees it as his obligation to condemn and combat forces that he views as economically, culturally, socially and politically contradictory. This study labels such a writer whose artistic prerogative is the advancement of the aspirations of the African people, a patriotic writer. It has also been argued that unlike the African patriots, the revivalists’ concept of religion and martyrdom exudes some hypothetical and other worldly peculiarities. The revivalists’ notion of martyrdom cannot be employed to create a better world for the suffering Africans. It has been argued that the African patriots’ understanding of the Christian ideals of freedom and liberty is progressive and liberatory. One might therefore contend that the juxtapositioning of the two ways of perceiving the biblical allusions helps in the articulation of national patriotic culture. Ngugi makes it categorically clear that in the eyes of African patriots the Christian analogues can be pro-liberation while in the eyes of reactionary elements they can be anti-liberation.

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