

CHAPTER III

A GRAIN OF WHEAT : WOMAN AS A REDEEMER OF THE PAST

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A Grain of Wheat¹ by the Kenyan novelist, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (b.1938), may be regarded as the novelist's attempt to comprehend the role of a woman in the most crucial stage of the country's political history - the stage when it is about to step into the new era of freedom. Mumbi, the heroine of the novel belongs to the peasant community of the forties and fifties of Kenya. By identifying the gender-oriented role of Mumbi as a wife and mother, with her gender-transcendent role as mythical symbol of Earth, the novelist projects the heroine as a redeemer of the past.

Ngugi was educated at the Makerere University College, Uganda and the University of Leeds. He taught at Nairobi, Makerere and North-Western Universities. He was the Head of the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi, when he was arrested for political reasons and was detained without trial. After his release he settled down in England. Through his work he portrays both the pre-independent and post-independent Kenya.

Ngugi's best known novel Weep Not, Child² was followed by The River Between³ and A Grain of Wheat which confirmed that Ngugi was writer of great ambitions. Many of these ambitions were realised in Petals of Blood⁴ which represents 'new Kenya'. He wrote his next novel Devil on the Cross⁵ in Gikuyu, his mothertongue, and he continued this effort in Matigari⁶ and brought the features of oral literature into his written fictional works. His work shows his concern for the changing society and political events.

The action of A Grain of Wheat moves around the events of the four days preceding Uhuru celebrations and terminates with a few days after the event.

Mumbi, the beautiful sister of Kihika, the leader of the nationalist Mau Mau Movement, loves and marries Gikonyo, a carpenter in Thabai by rejecting Karanja, one of Kihika's friends. Kihika murders Thomas Robson, the white officer. During emergency Kihika is hanged and Gikonyo is taken to the detention camp for six years. Karanja chooses to work as a homeguard for the whites so that he may be able to meet Mumbi whom he still loves. But the power corrupts him into being the killer of his own people as the Chief of the homeguards.

In Gikonyo's absence Karanja helps Mumbi. On one occasion, by pretending to convey the happy news of Gikonyo's return to Mumbi,

Karanja takes undue advantage of Mumbi's excitement and rapes her. Gikonyo betrays the movement by confessing and returns to find Mumbi as the mother of Karanja's child. He hates Mumbi and Karanja's child in his own home. He does not drive Mumbi away from his home but does not go to her bed. After suffering this humiliation for four years as a rejected wife, Mumbi leaves Gikonyo's home and goes to live with her parents.

People of Thabai make Mugo, Kihika's spiritualist friend, their hero. The villagers respect him for the courage and patience in detention camp. The villagers want Mugo to speak on the Uhuru day but he denies. Gikonyo confesses before him about his own betrayal by Mumbi. Before requesting Mugo to speak, Mumbi confesses her own betrayal and rape by Karanja. Her honesty impresses Mugo and he confesses to Mumbi that he betrayed Kihika. On the other hand, people suspect Karanja as Kihika's traitor and want to kill him on the Uhuru day. On the Uhuru day, Mugo confesses his crime publicly.

Mugo's confession makes Gikonyo, lying injured in hospital, think of his own life. He now wants Mumbi. The novel ends with Mumbi's suggestion to Gikonyo to wait, think and open their hearts, first, to each other and then together plan for future.

In view of the rich amount of criticism of Ngugi's A Grain of Wheat, it will be useful to review briefly that criticism in order to understand Ngugi's concerns in the novel in general as a background for comprehending his portrayal of Mumbi, the heroine, in particular. There is general agreement among critics over the novelist's concern with the future of Kenya which is linked especially to the nationalist Mau Mau Movement in the country. For instance, Shatto Gakwandi calls the novel as 'a creative interpretation of national history in a favourable light'⁷ and finds the novel to be a warning to Ngugi's society 'against an overhasty process of setting up heroes to worship and traitors to persecute.'⁸ According to Indrasena Reddy, 'A Grain of Wheat is concerned with the egalitarian values of a people who seem determined to learn and cultivate the habit of living in harmony with each other in a spirit of mutual trust, respect and tolerance for one another.'⁹ Harish Narang thinks that Ngugi 'hints at the shape of things to come in independent Kenya.'¹⁰

The critics respond variously to the novelist's mode of treatment of the apparently political theme. They have emphasized how the political concerns of the novelist are a means to delve deep into the psychology of a society through the psychology of the persons

concerned. The critics point out how the personal and the political thus merge in the novel.

For instance, the psychological concerns underlying the political concerns of the novelist are pinpointed by Peter Nazareth in his statement that the novel has a 'psychological subtext'¹¹ and that the novelist portrays history as the, 'living reality' through 'the consciousness'¹² of his characters. David Cook points out that the psychological analysis of the freedom fighters during Mau Mau Movement is one of the achievements of the novel because, 'while the emergency was a unique situation, we do not feel that these individuals are exceptionally or unbelievably evil. We can explain psychologically and sympathetically the state of mind that led to these doings in each case.'¹³

The critics are also aware of the identification between the personal and the political in the novel. This is rightly clarified by P. Ochola - Ojero when he says, '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.'¹⁴ Barry Andrews specifies the two levels of significance - the personal and the national in his

statement that, 'out of the disintegration and disillusionment something new can be built-at the personal level, a marriage, at the political one, a nation.'¹⁵ However, he does not attempt to explore the process in which the personal becomes the national.

The crucial significance of Mumbi, the heroine, has encouraged a number of critics to interpret her character. There are two major approaches followed - Mumbi analysed as a woman, and as a symbol. The stages of her growth from a young girl to a mother have been adequately emphasised by critics. Mumbi's journey from innocence to experience is sketched by critics from various perspectives. For instance, as a young girl with the romantic vision of Gikuyu women sacrificing for people, Mumbi appears to have, 'at this stage of her life... no desire to assert herself as a woman ... she thrives in the world of men'¹⁶ for S.W.Perera. But according to him, 'confronted by a husband who refuses to communicate, and denied the opportunity to function as a typical wife, Mumbi becomes a more vocal and useful member of the community.'¹⁷ Indrasena Reddy notes Mumbi to be one of 'the strong breed of Ngugi women with an inherent ability to rise to any occasion and stand upto any diverse situation.'¹⁸

Some critics concentrate on the gender-oriented role of Mumbi as a woman who is supposed to represent the woman in her society.

According to Narang, A Grain of Wheat is the first novel in which Ngugi "began a conscious attempt to not only create positively, powerful women characters but ... also began to make them more 'visible' by providing them with greater 'space' in his books."¹⁹ Mumbi's courage as a woman to rebel against patriarchal society is particularly forefronted by the critics. For V. Shivaramkrishnan, 'Mumbi, the woman scorned, is also Mumbi the defiant.'²⁰

Mumbi's relationship with Gikonyo as a beloved and a wife has also been considered by a number of critics. For instance, Barry Andrews remarks about the sufferings of Mumbi and Gikonyo after marriage when, 'their separation has passed beyond isolation to alienation.'²¹ In spite of Mumbi's sufferings and humiliation due to Gikonyo's rejection of her, David Cook thinks that Gikonyo should not be blamed because, 'blame is irrelevant : the pain he gives Mumbi increases his own.'²² Charles Nnolim summarizes Mumbi as an ideal woman in his comment that she is 'the ideal beauty, the ideal wife, the ideal woman, the ideal daughter-in-law, the ideal and sympathetic friend.'²³ Mumbi's moral courage in disclosing the most private problems of her marital relationship to Mugo in the hope of recovering Gikonyo's faith in their love, leads Reddy to remark that, 'not many women can be expected to share a secret of their conjugal relations with

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others - men in particular.'²⁴ Narang regards the study of Gikonyo and Mumbi to be a very poignant portrayal of their love for each other through the tribulations of detention and physical suffering during the emergency.'²⁵

The gender-transcendent role of Mumbi has been underlined by some critics. For instance, Cook explains the significance of Mumbi-Gikonyo union in Rung'ei woods by describing it as, 'an image of human union.'²⁶ Govind Sharma describes Mumbi as an, 'embodiment of Ngugi's humane vision.'²⁷

Most critics have found the final image of Mumbi as Gikonyo sees it - Mumbi 'big big with child' to be symbolic of Ngugi's vision of new Kenya about to be born. For instance, Shubhangi Raykar relates the title of the novel 'A Grain of Wheat' to this vision of Mumbi in her comment, 'it is in the womb of the soil / Mumbi that a grain of wheat will die in order to germinate. That germination will give birth to New Kenya.'²⁸

Although various critics have thus responded to the significance of the novel and, especially, to the significance of the role of Mumbi in the novel, these explorations appear to be inadequate because there is no attempt to explore the multidimensionality of the significance of Mumbi in the context of the novel.

The choice of Mumbi as the protagonist of the novel originates in Ngugi's faith in Mumbi as the mythical symbol of earth, land, nation or people. Political freedom in Kenya became synonymous with the repossession of the land and this struggle is central to A Grain of Wheat. In Kenya land is not only held to be of much greater importance than money or cattle but it has spiritual associations also. The reference to the song in the novel tells about the importance :

Ngai has given Gikuyu beautiful country,
Never without food or water or grazing fields,
It is good so Gikuyu should praise Ngai all the time,
For he has ever been generous to them. (p.155)

In the story of creation the legendary figures of a first man and first woman are Gikuyu and Mumbi who were gifted with a land by God. Gikuyu and Mumbi are the East African counterparts of the biblical Adam and Eve. Their association with the land is linked to their freedom struggle about which Reddy says, 'This movement is originally linked to the soil of the people so as to provide succour, strength and inspiration to them in designating and building a new nation corresponding to their aspirations.'²⁹ It also fulfils, according to Shivaramkrishnan, Ngugi's idea that, 'one must have roots in one's own culture however strong the attraction be of alien culture.'³⁰

The novelist, it is true, focuses Mumbi as a woman in her traditional roles of a daughter, wife, and mother. But the novelist projects her on triple levels – she is a woman, a symbol of her land and also a symbol of human self. On the national level, the stages of Mumbi's life as daughter, wife, and mother epitomise the stages of Kenyan history – the primordial Kenya, the colonised Kenya and the new Kenya respectively. On the spiritual level, they stand for three stages of evolution of human self – the essential pure or innocent self, the self exposed to experience of the external world, and the self redeemed. Hence, the process of evolution of Mumbi on the personal level embodies, at the same time, the process of evolution on the national and spiritual level. Therefore, the three stages of this evolution can be studied as follows :

I Mumbi as a young girl

II Mumbi as a wife

III Mumbi as a mother

I Mumbi as a Young Girl

Mumbi as a young girl marks the first stage of her evolution on the personal, national and spiritual level. As a young girl, on personal level Mumbi is 'the most beautiful woman on all the eight ridges.'(p.14) People call her Wangu Makeri, the legendary queen, for her beauty. She

is an innocent romantic dreamer. 'Her eyes had a dreamy look that longed for something the village could not give.' (p.67)

The young Mumbi is an affectionate daughter, sister, friend, and a beloved. She 'yearned for a life in which love and heroism, suffering and martyrdom were possible.' (p.67) She likes stories in which Gikuyu women fight the terrors of the forest to save their people and the girls sacrificed to gods before rains.

Mumbi instinctively refuses Karanja, who later joins and is corrupted by the colonial exploiters, and falls in love with Gikonyo. Eventhough Karanja is bold and has 'ease and general assurance in the presence of women', (p.71) Mumbi prefers simple Gikonyo, a skilled carpenter. However, Karanja is a friend for her.

Mumbi and Gikonyo communicate their feelings of love towards each other in terms of responses to their arts. Mumbi appreciates Gikonyo's hand and song. When Gikonyo plays on guitar, 'Mumbi's voice trembled with passion as she weaved it round the vibrating strings.' (p.69) Gikonyo's romantic longing for Mumbi is described through his guitar-playing; 'Mumbi's voice sent a shudder down his back. His fingers and heart were full ... he knew his heart fed power to his fingers.' (p.91) Mumbi, too, 'felt the workshop, Thabai, earth, heaven, felt their unity.' (p.69) According to Eustace Palmer, 'The

treatment of the love affair between Gikonyo and Mumbi is one of this book's greatest claims to excellence.'³¹

On the human level, Mumbi is the Mother and Gikonyo the Father of Mankind and so their union is not just a union of individuals. The forest where it takes place is the primordial forest rich and pure. On an open place at the centre of the forest Gikonyo faces Mumbi who herself has stopped him from running in the race. He surrenders 'himself to a power he knew drew them together'. (p.80) Alone in the wood Gikonyo pulls Mumbi to the ground, the long grass covers them and 'one by one Gikonyo removed her clothes as if performing a dark ritual in the wood' (p.80) and 'the earth moved beneath their one body into a stillness.' (p.80)

On the national level Mumbi represents the primordial Kenya while Gikonyo represents Gikuyu community with its age-old cultural past. In the primordial Kenya the political, economic and social changes have not yet polluted the purity either of the forest or the life people lived. The capitalistic exploitation has not yet entered this Kenya. Its faith in the pure ways of life is expressed in Gikonyo's decision. Inspired by Mumbi he decides to make chairs, tables, cupboards, restore leaking roofs and falling houses, repair doors and windows in all Thabai without a cent in return. He wants Mumbi and

for her 'he would never make money, he would remain poor, but he would have her.'(p.72) The novelist notably describes Mumbi - Gikonyo union, as remembered by Gikonyo afterwards in the concentration camp as 'a ritual myth of a forgotten land, long ago.' (p.86)

On the spiritual level, Mumbi as a young girl stands for the earliest stage of the human self in its process of evolution. Mumbi concretises the idyllic stage of self - pure and simple-the self in the state of innocence. She stands for the untainted culture of the earliest Kenya when everything is serene as there is no evil. As Ngugi describes again, she appears before Gikonyo during his detention as 'pure, an incorruptible reality in a world of changing shadows.' (p.98) It is 'self' not yet exposed to the external reality of the political, social and economic environment.

II Mumbi as a Wife

Mumbi as a wife marks the next stage of evolution of Mumbi on the personal, national and spiritual level. On the personal level, her life can be divided in two parts-her early life of complete bliss before Gikonyo's arrest and her later life of isolation and alienation from the husband during the state of emergency.

Mumbi is an ideal and happy wife of Gikonyo. Gikonyo expresses Mumbi's importance in his life as remembered by him while confessing to Mugo, 'Before I was nothing. Now I was a man.' (p.86) His short happy married life with Mumbi makes him believe that he 'had made a covenant with God to be happy.' (p.86) Mumbi wins the love of Gikonyo's mother, Wangeri, too. Wangeri finds a daughter in Mumbi with whom she could share woman's joys and troubles.

Gikonyo's absence makes Mumbi a supporter not only of Wangeri but also of her parents, and her young brother Kariuki. She boldly rejects the villagers' teasing comments and builds a new hut all by herself like a man. The colonial exploitation increases Mumbi's hardships and at this crucial moment Karanja deliberately comes close to Mumbi, first, by visiting her as a friend, second, by helping her brother Kariuki, and third, by giving her food during her starvation. She went with 'a head bowed down' (p.125) many days after receiving the food from Karanja. When he sees that Mumbi's love for Gikonyo is unshaken he tries to change Mumbi's mind by telling her quite arrogantly that Gikonyo would never come back. But Mumbi is ready to wait for Gikonyo, even if, she 'was fated to rejoin him in the grave.' (p.131)

The most humiliating experience during her husband's absence that changes Mumbi's life completely, is Karanja's rape on her. Listening to the news of Gikonyo's return from Karanja Mumbi feels as if 'blood and life was now entering' (p.131) her. Though she rejects Karanja she has found it impossible to refuse his help as a woman separated from her husband. For S. W. Perera Mumbi's surrender to Karanja is 'a very weak piece of writing'³² and for Cook what he does not 'find convincing is Mumbi's surrender to Karanja.'³³ However, it is important to note that Mumbi accepts Karanja in a sense of gratitude for the news of her husband's return. In her excited state her union with Karanja is for her the union with her husband about to return. The conflict between her desire to avoid any contact with Karanja and the actual need of depending on him in crucial moments gives rise to a sense of shame for herself.

On the national level, Mumbi, the land of Kenya, is betrayed by Karanja, the agent of colonisers. Karanja's sexual blackmailing can be interpreted as the colonisers' rape of Kenya. Colonisers hypnotised the masses by their power and their civilization. But the civilization brought by the white masters is only a strategy to perpetuate their control over the land, that is, Mumbi.

The pre-colonial Kenya which was safe in its world of tradition and culture is the victim of the capitalistic strategies of the British colonisers. The financial conditions of the people collapse with the colonial politics. People get less money for their work on the colonisers' tea plantations. They work in most inhuman working conditions and try to fight with all the evils like Mumbi who earns money and keeps her family alive. Kenya symbolised by Mumbi is made politically weak and is exploited by the colonisers. About the emergency brought by colonisers for their political power, Narang observes that Gikonyo and Mumbi represent, 'thousands of ordinary people, magnify those personal relationships which went to pieces under emergency through sheer physical separation for long periods.'³⁴

On spiritual level, Mumbi as a wife represents the second stage of the evolution of the self. It is a stage when the self or human consciousness emerges from its state of innocence and is introduced to the external world with his complex political, social and economic exploitation.

III Mumbi as a Mother

Mumbi as a mother marks the third stage of evolution of Mumbi on the personal, national and spiritual level. On the personal level, Mumbi as the mother of Karanja's child reveals her essential faith in

motherhood. The child alienates her from her beloved husband for whom she waits for more than ten years.

Mumbi accepts punishment for her weakness in responding to Karanja when Gikonyo rejects her as his bed partner for four years. But she is convinced that she is right in protecting her child fathered by Karanja. She 'had learnt to school her desires to accept what life and fate gave her'. (p.27) She confesses her own weakness of her intense love for Gikonyo, which led, to her fault of allowing Karanja to blackmail her sexually. The extended period of alienation from the husband and the hard labour forced by the white masters on the Thabai village during the state of emergency are responsible for her lack of stamina to bear alienation from her husband any longer. However, when Gikonyo calls her 'a whore' (p.146) Mumbi loses her patience and becomes bold to leave Gikonyo's home with her child. According to Judith Cochrane, Mumbi, 'learns the necessity of compromising ... she grows in understanding, compassion and independence.'³⁵

On the national level, Mumbi's motherhood symbolises redemption of the past. Her child, though fathered by Karanja is as much 'new Kenya' as her unborn child from Gikonyo. Karanja stands for the native community corrupted by the power and civilization of the white masters. His weakness for enjoying the position of power over

the masses is human. His love for Mumbi even after her marriage makes him choose the job of a homeguard for whites instead of going into the jungles. Everybody has such human weakness. Mumbi's devoted love for Gikonyo becomes her weakness in her sexual encounter with Karanja. Gikonyo confesses the oath because he wants to come back to his home. Mugo betrays Kihika, because he does not want to be involved in the matters related with Kihika and is afraid of the punishment when whites would come to know that he had sheltered Kihika. General R. attempts to kill his father because he hates his father's cruel behaviour with his mother. Lieutenant Koinandu rapes Dr. Lynd as a revenge for what the whites did with his people. Kenya, in its task of building the future has to be aware of such human weakness of its own people.

In spite of their crimes, the people of Kenya have to be accepted as part of Kenya going towards its future. They should be pardoned because they together represent the weaker self of Kenya, if Kihika stands for its stronger self. Mumbi forgives Karanja because after all he is a native from amongst her own people. She is sympathetic with Mugo because she knows ^{the} fear created by the whites. Mumbi does not absolutely reject Gikonyo's offer to come together but she suggests to him : 'we need to talk, to open our hearts to one another, examine them

and then together plan the future we want.' (p.213) As a mother of Karanja's child, Mumbi struggles to forge the future that merges the weaknesses with strength of Kenyan masses.

The comprehension of the past is a crucial step towards building the future both on personal and national level. Hence, Mumbi and Gikonyo - the Mother and Father of Gikuyu community can build a happy nation only if Gikonyo comprehends the complex nature of events in Mumbi's life during his absence. He has to understand the sufferings of his wife during emergency - her helplessness, her sexual victimization which shows her as the betrayed rather than betrayer.

On spiritual level, Mumbi's motherhood marks a stage at which the self is redeemed. In her willingness to forgive Karanja's crime, Mumbi opens a way to the future for Kenya. Novelist's choice of the title, which is taken from Bible, is significant in this connection :

'Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die. 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.'

I Corinthians 15 : 36

Mumbi's act of affectionate forgiveness guarantees that the grain that is sown will not be 'bare grain' but 'a grain of wheat'. The moment of freedom is not a moment of romantic indulgence but of a wise

recognition of what the country was compelled to lose – the painful process of comprehending the nature of that loss.

The pure self must pass through experience in its process of evolution. When it is exposed to the external world, the pure self is transformed into a new self – innocence is substituted by experience. Mumbi thus defines the novelist's vision of Uhuru or Freedom on the personal, national and spiritual level.

Other Women

The portrayal of other women characters in A Grain of Wheat is supplementary to Mumbi. By showing other positions of women in society they complete Ngugi's picture of African women.

Wambui

Wambui, an elder woman in Thabai, is an active participant in the political activities of her country. Narang observes, 'Through Wambui and Mumbi, Ngugi is paying a tribute to those heroic women warriors.'³⁶ She is respected by the villagers which shows that African men respected brave women in their societies. By assigning the role of a judge in Mugo's case Ngugi emphasises that women will be henceforth the judges and decision-makers for their society. Wambui proves to be a practical woman of Africa who believes in continuing life

(missing subordinate clause)

in spite of the shock of Mugo's confession which is an anticlimax to her 'activities in the fight for freedom.' (p.210)

Wangeri

Wangeri, Gikonyo's mother, represents those African women who suffer patriarchal tyranny. She is driven out by her husband with a child. But she proves to be a bold woman, who, in adverse conditions, educates her son and brings him up well. She understands both 'the pain of the son and the misery of the daughter' (p.100) when Gikonyo is shocked to see Karanja's child. She represents that affectionate woman who understands Mumbi, another woman. So she never opposes Mumbi's correct decisions or forces her to return to Gikonyo. On the other hand, as she herself has suffered husband's exploitation, she warns Gikonyo that by driving Mumbi out without understanding her, he has 'broken his home.' (p.153) She remains 'a woman unequalled, anywhere in her industry and warm heart'. (p.201) She stands opposite to General R's mother who mutely tolerates her husband's beatings.

Wanjiku

Wanjiku, Mumbi's mother, believes in traditional beliefs about woman's place in society and so she advises Mumbi to go back to her husband's home. However, she is successful in making Mumbi sober

towards Gikonyo and bringing them together. The novelist shows that even a woman who believes in traditional roles of women is interested in continuing relations rather than breaking them and is helpful to society.

Wairimu, Wambuki, Njeri, Gitogo's Mother

Wairimu, Karanja's mother, suffers through her life due to Karanja's wrong behaviour. She represents misery of African mothers whose sons were attracted towards the white power. Wambuki, Kihika's beloved, becomes a sad victim of colonisation. The way she 'destroyed herself with soldiers and homeguards, any man' (p.120) after Kihika's death shows the tragedy of African girls who loved the boys who were killed by colonial cruelty. Njeri, who secretly loved Kihika goes to forest to fight with Kihika against the whites becomes a victim of colonial shooting and dies bravely. She, like Wambui, is a brave African woman. Gitogo's mother lives a lonely life as her only son is killed in brutal attacks by the colonisers.

White Women

White women in the novel, Mrs. Margery Thompson, Dr. Lynd and Mrs. Dickinson, remain imperialistic in their views of the blacks. They are disappointed to lose the power over the blacks as they have to leave Kenya.

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