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### Revisiting History in NgugiWaThiong'o's fiction A Grain of Wheat.

Abstract: The historical process of colonization has always been the subject of Postcolonial writings. The writers of Africa are deeply concerned with the past and present history of their country and this concern is reflected in their works. The Kenyan national movement, its history, the violent phases have been the subject of many literary works of Kenyan writers writing in English. As such in Kenya's history of struggle for independence, the Mau Mau movement occupies an important setting. Nguwi Wa Thiong'o's engagement with history in A Grain of Wheat has been dealt extensively. It provides his vision of Kenyan history from the 1920s to the time of its independence. The novel weaves together several stories set during the state of emergency in Kenya's struggle for independence. It is set in Kenya on the eve of independence dealing mainly with the events leading up to independence. Through the employment of devices like several narrative passages, interior monologues, dialogues, recollections Ngugi, reveals the state of mind of the characters their pain, struggle, hope and fears. The fragility of human life is revealed through the state of mind of the characters that are the product of violence of the independence of struggle. The novel is set in the contemporary Kenyan society, though the characters are all fictitious Ngugi however eludes prominent historical figures like Jomo Kenyatta, Henry Tukhu and Waiyaki who are unavoidably part of the history of Kenya. Descriptions of pain and sufferings, situation and problems mentioned in the novel are all part of history.

Key words: representation of history, community.

Historical events embedded in local and national politics stands as the core in Thiong'o narrative. The plot of the novel derives events from the Mau Mau uprising. In Kenya's history of struggle for independence, the Mau Mau movement occupies an important setting. The birth of this popular movement dates back to 1947 arising out from a faction among the KAC (Kikuyu Central Association) and the KAU (KIKUYU African Association). The split between the KAC and the KAU led to the birth of the movement known as the Mau Mau movement. This movement came up to keep the campaign against the British settlers. The Mau Mau movement grew into a paramount important force in the history of Kenyan struggle for its independence. The Mau Mau movement is thus said to represent the whole of Kenya's genuine voice of the suppressed Kikuyu. As the movement grew in strength the Britishers began to use repressive measures against the Kenyans at large and the Gikuyu in particular. The British government let loose most foul propaganda to paint the entire movement in black.

News of atrocities on common Kenyan people in the reserves, those in the detention camps and those who sought for refuge in the jungles was suppressed. The magnitude of atrocities imposed upon the people during its emergency revealed a number of killings. No detainee was released until he has been passed along a security clearance channel known as "pipe line". With all sophisticated weapons and machinery the British Government could not however crush the whole of Kenyan despite the brutalities and atrocities meted out upon them. The guerillas covered themselves with glory by continuing the struggle for more than four years which earned them an acclaimed position.

This in brief is the history of Mau Mau struggle on various aspects of which many Kenyan writers writing in English including Ngugi Wa Thiongo who have based their writing upon.

The novel weaves together several stories set during the state of emergency in Kenya's struggle for independence. Ongoing Parallel to this however is the story of the Britishers ie the Whiteman who in every possible ways tries to suppress the freedom struggle by means of capturing and imprisoning members of the Mau Mau. Those who dared to stand up against the colonial government were captured and put behind detention camps where they were brutally tortured. All over Kenya people were forced to leave their land and their villages were placed by military guards.

Ngugi through his fictional work presents all the horrific experiences faced by the community of Kenya and he does this through multiple of narratives who share their own experiences of struggle. As such the novel moves back and forth frequently taking the readers to the early days of colonialism through the heroic struggle against it by Waiyaki, Jomo Kenyatta in the 50's and finally Kihika the fictional leader of the Mau Mau rebellion. Through his fictional heroic leader Kihika, Ngugi presents the causes of resistance, he symbolizes the freedom fighter. Ngugi is trying to assert that, the fight which the community of Kenya has taken up against the colonial government is that of pure genuine struggle. It presents the consequences, both physical and psychological minds concerning emergency.

The title of the novel *A Grain of Wheat* serves an important theme. It is the idea that, before a seed can grow into new plant, it must dry out and sacrifice its own life. Grain of Wheat is therefore a symbol for the people who started the Kenyan independence movement. Waiyaki a warrior who fought against the Britishers was one of those people. It is said that he was buried alive at Kibwizi with his facing towards the centre of the earth as warning. He symbolizes the first seed that grows into freedom movement. Thiong'o writes "Waiyaki's blood contained within it a seed, a grain, which gave birth to a movement whose strength thereafter sprang from a bond with the soil." (Thiongo, 12).

Ngugi has included a multiple of narratives who recounts the pain, suffering, torture and brutality that the people of Kenya faced – each narrative recreates the history of Kenya. Various protagonists are discussed – Warui, Wambui, General R. Lt. Konia, Gatu, Gikonyo, Kihika, Mugo and Mumbi. All of them have their own part of history to narrate. “Marginal people who are never part of the recorded history of a nation, are sought to be given due recognition and are portrayed as makers of the history in the novel.”(Reddy, 68) Although individuals are important to shape the history it is only through collective attempt which provide a meaningful direction and an impetus to the sense of history of a people, “They are like cogs in the wheel of history- both in its making and its onward march”(Reddy 74). Each narrative recreates the history of Kenya, the pain, suffering, torture and brutality faced by the people is shown in the novel. Ngugi draws a picture of how life in detention camps is through the character of Mugo. Mugo is one of those characters in the novel who is the most complex of all. He is seen as a hero by his own people until towards the end the truth is revealed. Mugo is an orphan raised by his cruel drunkard aunt who derides him at every opportunity. When his aunt dies Mugo is left completely all alone in the world. He remains isolated from the rest of the community never to indulge in any movements or problems. He hopes to get through the emergency without anyone bothering him. However one cannot remain totally isolated from the society as he is also a part of the community. The people considered him as a hero for his daring act to save a pregnant woman from being tortured, for sheltering the freedom fighter Kihika and for not confessing the oath which of course he has never taken any oath unlike his other detainees. When Mugo was arrested he was taken to Tigoni Police Station and then to Thika detention camp where forest fighters were taken. They were treated as criminals, also on their way to the Manyani detention camps they were made to squat in large queues with their hands on their heads. The coaches were covered with barbed-wire at the windows bar so as to avoid any escape.

Description of the detention camp at Manyani shows the rigid policy adopted by the government to suppress the forest fighters so as to confess their oath. “Manyani was divided into three big camps: A, B and C....Every compound was then subdivided into smaller compounds, each enclosing ten cells. One big cell housed about six hundred men” (Thiongo, 127). Again Ngugi gives glimpse of detainees at Rira camp which was located in remote part of Kenya. After a series of screenings Mugo and few others were taken off to Rira camp with their hands and feet tied. It was said that detainees taken there consisted a few who swore never to co-operate with the government so long as Kenyatta was in prison. They refused to work or even answer to the questions being asked. A common game i.e. punishment at Rira camp had been to bury a man, naked in a hot sun sometimes leaving him there overnight. However Thompson put an end to this means of exhorting confession instead lectured to the detainees in group about the joys of home and that they will be released if they confess their oath. However his method proved weak as no one came forward to confess their oath. In such a situation Mugo was picked and questioned “How many oaths have you taken? ‘None’ ‘Liar!’ he shouted, sweating” (Thiong’o, 129). He was picked for punishment 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. Through the above description Ngugi gives an insight about the details of the detention camps as well as the deplorable conditions, the punishment inflicted upon them so that the detainees will confess their oath. Innumerable atrocities were afflicted upon the detainees were treated as criminals...

In the novel Ngugi has employed multiple of narratives who share their own part of pain and hardships and brutalities that they faced at the hands of the government as they fought for their independence. Many innocent villagers became victims they were displaced from their land, and their houses being burned down. An insight into real historical figures like Jomo Kenyatta, Harry Thuku their fight with the British government is told through the narration of

the characters. The novel recreates the history of Kenya which is done artistically by capturing the anxiety and desires of the people on the eve of Uhuru.

Warui's a wise elder of the village who was active in freedom movement in prior decades, yet again opens up to the story of the movement. Wairu remains as the living witness to the 1923 procession. Young Harry was clamped in chains, narrowly escaping the pit into which Waiyaki was buried alive. He recalls the 1923 procession against the arrest of Harry Thuku and the events of 1952 when Jomo Kenyatta and other leaders of the movement were arrested. He represents the collective conscience of the rural people of Kenya.

Kihika the leader of the Mau Mau rebellion during the Emergency is the only character who is not alive in the present time setting of the novel. Kihika unrolled the history of Kenya the coming of the Whiteman and the birth of the party. He talked of great struggle and sacrifice. Kihika lived the words of sacrifice. Ngugi gives account of how people like Kihika out of frustration joins the movement to liberate Kenya from the colonial government and to restore what is theirs. Ngugi recalls through his characters the pains of Kenyan community during the phase of Emergency. The result of going against the government is shown in the way in which Kihika was brutally killed. He was later hanged in public, one Sunday, at Rung'ei Market, not far from where he had once stood calling for blood to rain and water the tree of freedom. The police and the home guards whipped and drove people from Thabai and other ridges to see the body of the rebel dangling on the tree, pointing out a lesson to learn for the people, that those who ever goes against the government will meet the same end as Kihika.

Besides male characters whose narratives gives an account of the various stages of pain and torture as they fought for freedom, women characters also had played heroic role in the freedom struggle. Characters like Wambui and Mumbi are projected as heroic who occupy a greater space in the novel. Atrocities experienced by the male members in the detention

camps was also experienced by those who were left behind in villages mostly women, old people and young children. Women were the ones rebuilding their huts as their huts were burned down to ashes. The hardship which Mumbi faced after Gikonyo was sent to detention camps represents the tens of thousands of families whose lives broke down during the emergency. Mumbi recalls as he spoke to Mugo” I remember the red flames. There were two huts. One belonged to my mother, the other was mine” (Thiongo, 135) the leader of the home guards struck a match and threw it at the roof which burned down their hut. The whole villages were forced to dig trenches in most inhuman working conditions Mumbi recalls women were allowed out for two hours before sunset to go and collect food. Nobody else was allowed out: even school-children had to remain in the village. Within days the two hours of freedom were reduced to one. The people were treated as prisoners in their own village. Soldiers built their camps all around to prevent any escape. The atmosphere was filled with tension, pain and struggle. The imposition of iron hand upon the village served as a warning to other village never to give food or help to those fighting in the forest

The imposition of Emergency- the-so-called Mau Mau created a host of problems not only for freedom fighter like Kihika but the whole of community as well. In the set of events in the village, Ngugi portrays a set of individual characters that represents different ideas and disposition to clarify how their participation in the colonial struggle acquires a meaningful purpose, but some like Mugo provides an insight through their own contrasting position. In the novels Ngugi alludes to historical figures like –Kenyatta and Thuku with Kihika, - by mixing facts with fiction he creates a unique picture of freedom struggle of Kenya. Ngugi presents the history of Kenya the common people, the brethren, the Mau Mau forest fighters etc. The villagers of Thabai, represents the ordinary people of Kenya were forced to make compromise under terror and torture but still uphold to their cause. Kihika represents the

revolutionary youth , characters like Mumbi and Gikonyo represents thousands of ordinary people whose life were torn apart under emergency through sheer separation for long period.

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