

Ngugi Wa Thiongo's A Grain of Wheat : Heroic Elements & Cultural Significance

Gracy Devi

B.A, 6th Semester

ABSTRACT:

Africans went through harsh racism, and they still are. Many authors, writers, and poets used literature as their source to speak against the harsh racism and inequality faced by Africans. Some writers step forward to aware others people of the inequalities they face due to their skin color. Many writers sometimes add some extra stories or exaggerate things to make their stories more interesting.

In my paper, I have tried to analyze Ngugi Wa Thiongo's A Grain of Wheat, how the writer has tried to portray reality without covering up with heroic elements which will elevate his own culture. This paper also focuses on the struggles that Africans go through just because of their skin color.

INTRODUCTION:

The Grain Of Wheat is a novel written by Ngugi Wa Thiongo, a Kenyan author and academic. Thiongo portrayed the struggles of being black but this novel can be seen as more focused on the damage greed for money can cause. In the novel the protagonist can be seen betraying his people for money, teaming up with the opposition party. His one lie caused the death of innocent lives. Unlike most of the other novels, where the protagonist helps everyone and puts himself before anyone, A Grain of Wheat doesn't end up like that.

MOSAIC, VOLUME : I, 2025

The protagonist himself turns out to be the cause of the death of their people the protagonist portrayed in the novel is very realistic as a human with flaws and not perfect like most of the heroes are portrayed in other stories or novels.

To keep my interpretations in order I organized my paper into four major sections, one of which is about the author, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, about his birth, his place of birth, and a little background about his life and his beliefs, in the second section I provided some information about Kenya the third section includes some instances from the novel and the need for money which caused damage to relations and lives in the novel, and some biblical references. The fourth section includes how, mainly African literature, is affected when written by Europeans or other writers other than Africans. The last section is the conclusion, an overall summarization of my paper.

NGUGI WA THIONGO'S LIFE

Ngugi Wa Thiongo's real name is James Thiong'o Ngugi, in an interview, he revealed that he kept his name Ngugi Wa Thiongo, because there were many Ngugi, so to identify himself he included his father's name, Thiongo, and kept his name Ngugi Wa Thiongo meaning Ngugi son of Thiongo. Ngugi Wa Thiongo was born in January 5, 1938, at Limuru, Kenya. He joined a school "The Independent School Movement" where he acquired knowledge about Christianity and somewhere all his works are related to Christianity, even *A Grain Of Wheat* can be related to Christianity with the concept of *The Fallen Angel*. His popular *Weep Not, Child* (1964) was the first major novel in English by an East African. Thiongo in an interview talked about the one problem with African Literature, that is, it is largely written in the European language. He wants African history or African literature to be written by African writers in the African language. This is why we can see a rawness in his novel *A Grain Of Wheat*, where he doesn't sugar-coat his people and portrays them as normal human beings with both good and bad qualities. He is also into Christianity which can be found in his novel too. The concept of karma, the concept of the fallen angel, and so on.

THE CONDITION OF COLONISED KENYA

Kenya falls within the African Continent which has varied geography, history, demography, governance and economies. For thousands of years Kenya has been home to a great diversity of societies and cultures. Kenya was colonized by Great Britain between 1901 and 1960. Thiongo was also born in Kenya, so even if the village mentioned in the story is fictional, we can say that the author might have meant his place of birth. Kenya was and still is a very resourceful place, its comfortable climate attracts people, and so it attracted the British people to colonize Kenya. The Britishers forced the Kenyan farmers and herders to work on European-owned farms and plantations. Treated them like slaves, and as they were politically clever, they played with the minds of the people of Kenya and made them fight among themselves, the Britishers created ethnic conflicts between various groups. According to the Britishers “MAU MAU” was a secret savage society among Kenyans who pledged to kill the Europeans and remove them from Africa. The colonisation happened through education too, in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s “Decolonising the Mind” (1986) he mentions Education was used as an apparatus by the colonisers to subjugate the natives. Colonialism was practiced through burying the cultural identities and ideologies by educating the young students of Africa about the western ideologies or identities. An example of such incident where the implications of western education burying the cultural identities can be found in Chinua Achebe’s “Arrow of God” where the youngsters of Africa goes against its culture due to the education it got from the Christian missionaries.

About the novel a GRAIN OF WHEAT

The novel A Grain Of Wheat is written by East African author Ngugi Wa Thiongo, and published in the year 1967, first published as part of the influential Heinemann African Writers Series. It is a fictional historical novel about the villagers of Thabai a fictional village. The name of the novel perfectly signifies the novel, in the novel the protagonist betrays and led the death of his people because of greed, Mugo the protagonist teamed up with the Britishers for

MOSAIC, VOLUME : I, 2025

money. Although Mugo was wrong for betraying his people, this is how the Britishers played the minds of the people of Africans by offering them money which the Africans need. Money provides food, and so, money and wheat can also be called the same thing for the Africans, as they sometimes died due to starvation, so, for a grain of wheat Mugo betrayed his people. For the Africans, even a Grain of wheat is like a coin of gold. In the novel, we can also find some biblical references, the first being *THE FALLEN ANGEL*, Mugo can be considered as the representation of the fallen angel, he was kept to look after the people of his village as an angel figure, but just like Lucifer he got greedy and committed a sin, even though Mugo realized his mistake and didn't feel bad about receiving punishment for what he did, his actions can be linked to the concept of the fallen angel. The Christian doctrine of "one reaps what one sow", is prevalent in the novel too, Mugo got what he deserved and even though Kihika wasn't the one to commit the crime he still was working for the people against his own people, so his betrayal was a sin too, and he got what he deserved.

EFFECTS OF AFRICAN LITERATURE WRITTEN BY EUROPEAN WRITERS

Ngugi Wa Thiongo confessed that there's only one problem with African literature that is, African literature written by European writers. When a culture is represented by another culture, lots of misinterpretations, misconceptions, and stereotypes are created by the writers due to a lack of knowledge and the stereotypes they already have in their minds. When African culture is written by European people they tend to write or create African characters as unruly people, dangerous and uncivilized. Even if they write good things about the Africans or create a civilized character they tend to represent those African characters as being guided by Europeans or being under the good influence of the Europeans. When written by African writers about their own culture they tend to showcase the original Africans and especially when written in their own language the true and raw culture of Africa can be seen. When a European writes about African culture they miss out on several

MOSAIC, VOLUME : I, 2025

minor details which hold major value in the lives of the African people. During the colonisation the Britishers while providing education to the African children the literature they provide them as study materials only highlighted western culture which later on leads to loss of cultural identity.

Although it's good when writers write about their own culture, sometimes writers try to hide the dark side and only show the positive side of their culture which doesn't bring out the real culture, Ngugi Wa Thiongo even though didn't sugar coat his characters, he did not make anyone the villain or having bad intention either, he represented the characters as being bound to do so with a good heart.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Ngugi Wa thiongo presented his real culture, with flaws without exaggerating anything. *A Grain of Wheat*, portrays themes like greed, passion, fraud, politics and so on. The novel highlights how the British played mind games and were successful in turning the people of the same community against each other it also highlights how greed for money and power can not only destroy you individually but it can also make you go against your own people. The impact of African literature by European writers or in general any culture represented by other cultures always created stereotypes, and misconceptions of the culture they know less about. A point of view about a culture we don't belong to can differ from the actual cultural beliefs, ideologies or values.

WORK CITED

<https://youtu.be/FOXqc-8zCPE>

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3819414>

– X – X –