UNIT 5 A GRAIN OF WHEAT – SUMMARY

Structure

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this Unit is to provide a chapter-by-chapter summary of A Grain of Wheat, focusing not only on the story-line but also on the theme, major events and main characters. While doing so, relevant quotations from the text have been reproduced with the intention of drawing the attention of the students to their significance in the study of the novel.

Since Ngugi had divided his novel in different sections—not formally but by separating them with a quotation—we have also clubbed the summaries of the chapters accordingly into different sections.

The objective of this Unit is to whet the appetite of the students to read the text in original and not make do with the summary provided here. Let me repeat that the summary is not a substitute for the text. Please read the text attentively, making notes as you go along.

5.1 SUMMARY—CHAPTERS 1, 2 AND 3

1

The novel begins with Mugo getting out of his bed in the morning to go to his shamba—a small piece of land for cultivation. This was a routine that he had followed since his coming out of the detention camp. As he walked through the village—Thabai—on this particular day, he met a number of people who, like him, had suffered during the Emergency. For instance, Warui, a village elder, whom Mugo met en-route to his shamba, had lost his piece of land through confiscation while he was under detention. The basic character of Thabai had remained the same since its founding in 1955. Mugo next ran into Githua who was dressed in tatters and who we are told has sustained bullet wounds at the hands of whitemen during the freedom struggle and had as a result become a little soft in the head. Mugo felt uneasy on meeting him on this particular day, particularly after he saw children making fun of him.

Mugo suddenly recalled the old woman who lived at the end of the main street of the village—the woman who had a grown up son—Gitogo—who was deaf and dumb. Gitogo ‘worked in eating houses, meat shops, lifting and carrying heavy loads’ thereby supporting his old mother. Mugo recalled how during one of the police raids for screening of villagers during the Emergency, Gitogo had been shot dead by soldiers in cold blood while he was running away—out of fright—on seeing the policemen. The official version had been—‘Another Mau Mau terrorist had been shot dead’. The old woman they said had refused to grieve her son’s death and her eyes
had haunted Mugo ever since. In her presence, he had ‘always felt naked, seen’. On this particular day, Mugo felt like entering the hut of the woman and talking to her but his courage failed him and he continued on to his field.

Soon Mugo was at his 
\( \text{shamba} \), working, but he felt that the soil was ‘dry and hollow’ and he realised that the soil did not ‘fascinate’ him as much as it did before the Emergency. Ruminating over his past, Mugo recalled how his parents had died when he was quite young and he had been brought up by an aunt—Waitherero—who was also drunk and who abused him so much that Mugo wanted to kill her. After his aunt had died of ‘age and over-drinking’, Mugo took to working on the 
\( \text{shamba} \), dreaming of a peaceful, prosperous life.

‘But then Kihika had come into his life’...

Mugo did not linger much longer in the field and went home early, walking ‘like a man who knows he is followed or watched, yet does not want to reveal this awareness by his gait or behaviour’. In the evening he was surprised by the visit of a group of people from the village, led by Warui, the village elder. He was accompanied by Wambui and Gikonyo, who had married Kihika’s sister. After welcoming them into his hut, Mugo’s first instinct was to run away from them.

‘We are only voices sent to you from the Party’, said Gikonyo and others agreed with him. Mugo asked, intrigued—‘The Party?’—and they repeated—‘Yes... mere voices from the Party’.

2

The mention of the word ‘Party’ in the previous chapter provides the author with an opportunity to intervene and trace, in this chapter, the history of Kenya from the time when the first missionaries arrived to the present, when Kenya is about to gain independence from the colonial British who had followed on the heels of the missionaries.

The Party was an entity whose existence had been taken for granted, particularly by the younger generation for whom it was a ‘rallying centre for action’. On ‘the eve of Uhuru, its influence stretched from one horizon touching the sea to the other resting on the great lake.’ Its origin, Ngugi suggests, could be ‘traced to the day the white man came to the country, clutching the book of God in both hands, a magic witness that the white man was a messenger from the Lord.’ Ngugi then goes on to trace the history of the entrenchment of missionaries among them who told them of a woman ruler in a far off land. The reference to a woman ruler gives Ngugi a chance to recall a bygone era when the Gikuyu were ruled by women. He remembers particularly one beautiful woman ruler—Wangu Makeri—who lost her throne because of overreaching herself and dancing naked in public.

Ngugi then goes on to dilate on the strategy employed by the missionaries, first, in converting the Africans into Christianity and later in helping the colonising British in overpowering them:

They looked beyond the laughing face of the white man and suddenly saw a long line of other red strangers who carried, not the Bible but the sword.’ (p.12)

Soon the resistance offered by Waiyaki and others was overcome with Waiyaki himself being buried alive by the colonisers. Ngugi suggests that Waiyaki’s blood contained ‘within it a seed, a grain which gave birth to a political party whose main strength thereafter sprang from a bond with the soil.’ (p.13)
Harry Thuku then became their leader, their Moses, who asked them ‘to join the Party and find strength in unity’. People followed Harry’s advice and ‘waited for something to happen. The revolt of the peasant was at hand.’

The whiteman clamped Harry into chains and put him in jail which made the people only more determined and they held a major demonstration in Nairobi demanding Young Harry’s release. Waiyaki, then a young man, had walked all the way from Thabai to Nairobi to join the procession. In 1953, when Jomo Kenyatta was arrested by the whiteman, Waiyaki recalled the 1923 procession for Harry Thuku:

We came from ridges here, ridges there, everywhere. Most of us walked. Others did not bring food. We shared whatever crumbs we had brought. Great love I saw there. A bean fell to the ground, and it was quickly split among the children. For three days we gathered in Nairobi with our blood we wrote vows to free Harry. (pp. 13-14)

In the firing by the soldiers on the processionists, fifteen Africans died. Waiyaki’s regret was—‘Perhaps if we had the spears...’ The movement failed and ‘the man with the flaming eyes came to the scene’—one who came to be known later as ‘the burning spear’.

Mugo recalled, he had once attended a meeting of the Party at Rung’ei Market. Gikonyo was there and so was Mumbi, said to be one of the most beautiful women on all the eight ridges. Sometimes she was compared with Wangu Makeri. Kihika from Thabai, Mumbi’s brother, was one of the speakers who received a big ovation from the crowds when he said—‘This is not 1920. What we now want is action, a blow which will tell’. Kihika summed up the great betrayal by the whiteman in the following words:

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 treasures in heaven where no moth would corrupt them. But he laid his on earth, our earth. (p. 15)

Kihika had spoken of blood and Mugo had hated him for his arrogance. Also he had felt a twang of jealousy as he had seen everyone look at the speaker with admiration.

After the 1952 arrest of Jomo Kenyatta and others, Kihika had disappeared into the forest, later to be followed by a handful of young men from Thabai and Rung’ei. Kihika had raided the transit prisoner’s camp of Mahee, carrying fresh supplies of men, guns and ammunition to continue on a scale unheard of in the days of Waiyaki and young Harry.

A year later Kihika was arrested, tortured and ‘hanged in public’, one Sunday at Rung’ei Market, ‘not far from where he had once stood calling for blood to rain on and water the tree of freedom.’

The Party had, however, remained alive even after Kihika’s death, growing, as people put it, on the wounds of those Kihika left behind.

3

The narrative reverts back to the delegation sitting in Mugo’s hut. We now understand that they had come to persuade Mugo to lead the Uhuru—Independence—celebrations. Gikonyo, Ngugi tells us had worked hard to become ‘one of the richest men in Thabai’, four years after returning home from detention.
Warui, the second person in the delegation to Mugo’s house, was the seniormost of the villagers whose ‘life was, in a way, the story of the Party: he had taken part in the meetings of Young Harry, had helped in building people’s own schools and listened to Jomo’s speeches in the ’twenties.’ The third person in the delegation was Wambui, a woman who ‘carried secrets from the villages to the forest and back to the villages and towns’ during the Emergency. Sitting there, talking about the celebrations for the Uhuru, they observe that they cannot forget their sons who sacrificed their lives for freedom. ‘And Kihika was such a man, a great man. ’Before Mugo reacts to their proposal, they are joined by two more persons—Lieutenant Koinandu and General R—both of whom were in the forest with Kihika. Sitting there all of them—except Mugo—reminisce about Kihika. General R, in fact, brings out the Bible which Kihika always carried on his person, except that he did not carry it with him on his last mission when he was captured—betrayed as General R says. Observing that Mugo was the last man who had given Kihika shelter a week before his capture, both Koinandu and General enquire from him whether Kihika had mentioned the name of the person he was going to see the week after. Mugo denies any knowledge, saying that Kihika did not mention the name of Karanja even, whom all suspect to be the betrayer of Kihika.

Asking Mugo to give them an answer about leading the celebrations soon since December 12—the day of the Uhuru—only four days away, the members of the delegation leave.

Back in their hut, both Lieutenant Koinandu and General R go over the circumstances under which Kihika had been captured and express their resolve to find the traitor who had betrayed Kihika. Warui and Wambui, on their part, wonder about the strange behaviour of Mugo who had shown no enthusiasm for the celebrations. They also recall that during the detention while he had been beaten very badly by the authorities, he had refused to confess that he had given shelter to Kihika.

On his way home, Gikonyo focusses on his personal life, particularly the chasm that had come between him and his wife Mumbi—Kihika’s sister—since his return home from detention. While we are given a glimpse of it when Gikonyo—back home—refuses to eat food, we are not made privy to the reasons behind this tension between the two. It is on this note that the chapter ends.

5.2 SUMMARY—CHAPTERS 4, 5, 6, 7 AND 8

Ngugi now shifts the focus to Githima—Githima Forestry and Agriculture Research Station—where the thoughts of Europeans as well the African employees are focussed on the forthcoming Uhuru and the changes it is likely to bring in their lives—both personal and professional. It is also an occasion for some of them to review their past in Kenya.

Karanja, for instance, is apprehensive about the rumour that the Europeans working in the Research Station were about to leave for home for good. This would affect his own status in a big way since he derived all his power over fellow Africans from his so-called proximity to the white masters, particularly John Thompson, the Administrative Secretary. Already, Karanja feels that his fellow Africans are defying him, answering back to him and are showing signs of not being scared of him.

John Thompson, on the other hand, is worried about the Research Station going to the dogs once the Europeans leave:

Would these things remain after Thursday? Perhaps for two months: and then—test-tubes and beakers would be broken or lie unwashed on the
cement, the hot-house and seed beds strewn with wild plants and the outer bush which had been carefully hemmed, would gradually creep into a litter-filled compound. (p.38)

John Thompson also senses a sense of defiance and open hostility among his African employees—with the exception of Karanja, of course, who was simply servile in their presence even now. The way the employees had talked back to Dr. Lynd whose dog had charged them, makes Thompson recall the incident at Rira detention Camp where he was once the Commanding Officer. His detainees had gone on a strike, refusing even food. When he had ordered their beating in order to break their defiance, as many as eleven had died and then his name had been bandied about even in the British Parliament.

Dr. Lynd, a research officer, recalls the unfortunate incident during the Emergency when three Africans including her houseboy had raped her when she was staying at Muguga. Apparently, she had become the victim of the Africans' hatred towards the white people since, as she herself puts it, 'she had never harmed anybody.'

On the eve of Uhuru and their departure back home, Thompson’s wife, Margery, recalls the period of their stay in Kenya as one in which personal relations between her husband and herself had come under a lot of strain, thanks to John’s preoccupation with official work. Stressed after the Rira disaster, she had sought solace in the arms of Dr. Van Dyke, by letting him ‘make love to her’ and had experienced, ‘for the first time, the terrible beauty of a rebellion.’ On this particular day, when Karaja comes home to deliver to her a message from her husband, she feels a similar sensual urge towards him but Karanja, for whom a cup of coffee offered by the white Memsahib was more than what he could hope for, had refused to pick up the hints which had left her feeling both frustrated and miserable.

Thompson continues to ruminate over the prospects of the Research Station under his successor, worrying about the place falling apart after his departure while in fact what pained him was the realization that he was not indispensable. He tries to transfer his frustration to his wife and wants to ask her if in case of his death would she consider marrying another man but he lacks the courage to confront his wife with such a question.

At the same time, his wife, Margery, too is preoccupied with her thoughts. She remembers the kind of life they had led after coming to Kenya which had taken her husband away from her. Also she is depressed about leaving her home at Githima:

Would she never, never see Githima again? Would her flowers mean anything to whoever would take her place in this house? Every corner of the house, the chairs, the table and even the walls held a memory for her; in her wanderings from district to district all over Kenya, no other house, no other place was so intimately bound up with her. No other place had given such a sense of relief, of freedom, of power. (p.44)

It was in Githima that she had met Dr. Van Dyke with whom she had carried on an affair despite the fact that she did not like his uncouth behaviour. However, on the eve of Uhuru which had created a new crisis in their lives, she wanted Thompson and her to renew this dialogue, their sharing of anxieties and fears with each other.

The author also takes this opportunity to narrate in his own voice, the story of John Thompson’s coming to East Africa riding high on the colonial morals of serving humanity through the development of the native Africans. From the first day of his arrival he had treated his work as a mission and had decided to write a book about it which he had titled as Prospero in Africa. Towards this end, he had been keeping
notes of his work in a notebook. The author lets us have a peep into the notebook which reveals a typical colonial mindset. Among the notes are his observations on the Mau Mau which he considers to be ‘evil: a movement which if not checked will mean complete destruction of all the values on which our civilization has thriven.’(p.49)

Ngugi now focusses on the life of Gikonyo, who, he tells us was ‘among the first of detainees to pass through the pipe-line back to the village. He set himself up as a carpenter, worked hard, refused to give indefinite credit and built himself a good reputation. Simultaneously, he got into retailing food grains by buying immediately after the harvest when the prices were low and selling when the stocks in the market were low. His wife and his mother helped him in his business and soon he prospered.

The chapter also gives Ngugi an opportunity to dilate on the life of an M.P. since Gikonyo visits the M.P. of his area to get a recommendation for a loan from a bank for buying a piece of land. He is quite amused at the mannerisms of the M.P. including the way he dressed, which was a blind aping of their white masters. In fact, the M.P. also spoke like the whiteman, holding no promise for help.

In the meanwhile, people began to speak about the courage shown and sacrifices made by Mugo, who was quite upset by their proposal asking him to lead the celebrations:

Why did they want him to lead the Uhuru celebrations? Why not Gikonyo, Warui, or one of the forest fighters? Why Mugo? Why? Why? (p. 56)

Mugo had made only one real speech in his life. It was about the demand by the Party for Kenyatta’s release from detention. Mugo spoke of the injustice of the whiteman in arresting him:

They took us to the roads and to the quarries even those who had never done anything. They called us criminals But not because we had stolen anything or killed anyone. We had only asked for the thing that belonged to us from the time of Agu and Agu. Day and night, they made us dig. We were stricken ill, we often slept with empty stomachs, and our clothes were just rags and tatters so that the rain and the wind and the sun knew our nakedness. In those days we did not stay alive because we thought our cause strong. It was not even because we loved the country. If that had been all, who would not have perished? (p. 58)

Although Mugo became a recluse thereafter, people had spoken of his powerful speech for a long time.

This time, however, he was apprehensive too. Why had, he wondered, General R. asked those pointed questions. Meeting somebody after a week? Karanja? Yes, could they have really asked him to carve his place in society by singing tributes to the man he had sotreacherously betrayed? (p.59)

He is visited by Gikonyo who reminds him of the hunger strike at Rira and Mugo remembered vividly the Rira detention camp and the beating he had received at the hands of Thompson. While he comments that ‘the government says we should bury the past’, Gikonyo says that he cannot. He also tells him that he had confessed his oath while he—Mugo—had not and that’s why they admired him all the more. He also observes that those who had made no sacrifices for freedom were enjoying its fruits while true patriots like Mugo were suffering.

Mugo consoles Gikonyo by saying that his confession was understandable since he wanted to be united with his wife Mumbi. While agreeing with Mugo that he loved
Mumbi very much and wanted to be united with her, Gikonyo remarks that everything had changed—even Mumbi:

'She too had changed,' Gikonyo said, almost in a whisper.
'God, where is the Mumbi I left behind.' (p. 61)

Chapter seven begins with Ngugi tracing the history of the Thabai ridge which had developed as a market for the area where even some Indians had set up shops. More Indians had come from Nairobi, bought grains and vegetables and sold them at a higher price in the city. The passing of the railway line from near Thabai had helped in all this. Ngugi, in his authorial voice, recalls the early days when the railway line—the Iron snake—had reached Thabai, people had run away considering the snake to be harmful.

Later the railway platform became the meeting place for the young. They talked in groups at home, went for walks in the county, some even went to church; but in their minds was always the train on Sunday. On Sunday afternoon, the passenger train to Kampala and the one to Mombasa met at Rung’ei station. Love affairs were often hatched there; many marriages with their attendant cry of woe or joy had their origin at the station platform...

The train became an obsession: if you missed it, sorrow seized your heart for the rest of the week; you longed for the next train. Then Sunday came, you went there on time, and immediately you were healed. (p. 63)

Resuming his story, Gikonyo tells Mugo that he rarely missed the train and—

'Yet the day I missed the train was the happiest in my life.' (p. 64)

Gikonyo, an outsider settled in Thabai, had become an adept carpenter, thanks to his mother Wangari who encouraged him to learn the trade. Gikonyo had come to admire Mumbi, a beautiful girl of the area whose father Mbugua was a village elder. While Gikonyo admired Mumbi quietly, it was Karanja, another youth from the village who amused all—including Mumbi—by his funny manner of telling stories and episodes. One day, Mumbi had asked Gikonyo to play the guitar for her and she had sung along. Thereafter, she felt very peaceful. On another, she came to him to have the handle of her panga fixed by him and admired his skills. She teased him in her youthful ways when Gikonyo came to return the repaired panga. This way intimacy between the two grew.

On a particular Sunday, when they—Mumbi, Karanja, Gikonyo and others—were running to catch a glimpse of the train, Mumbi drew him back and they went to a wood en route. There he made love to her:

She lay against his breast, their heart-beat each to each. It was all quiet. Mumbi was trembling, and this sent a quiver of fear and joy trilling in his blood. Gradually, he pulled her to the ground, the long grass covered them. Mumbi breathed hard, but could not, dare not, speak. One by one, Gikonyo removed her clothes as if performing a dark ritual in the wood. Now her body gleamed in the sun. Her eyes were soft and wild and submissive and defiant. Gikonyo passed his hands through her hair and over her breasts, slowly coaxing and smoothing stiffness from her body, until she lay limp in his hands. Suddenly, Gikonyo found himself suspended in a void, he was near
breaking point and as he swooned into the dark depth he heard a moan escape Mumbi’s parted lips. She held him tight to herself. Their breath was now one. The earth moved beneath their one body into a stillness. (p.80)

Karanja had thus lost Mumbi to Gikonyo and he now hated not only both of them but also her brother Kihika who had by now become an outstanding orator, speaking of the usurpation of their land by the whiteman and was thinking of himself as ‘a saint, leading the Gikuyu people to freedom and power.’ (p.73)

Kihika had earlier left the Mahiga mission school on contradicting his teacher who had called circumcision of women a heathen custom. He had then gone to work in Nairobi, attended political meetings and discovered the Party. “He had found a new vision.” (pp.76-77)

In his speeches, Kihika often referred to the example of India that had shown a rare unity in fighting the British:

“The example of India is there before our noses. The British were there for hundreds and hundreds of years. They ate India’s wealth. They drank India’s blood. They never listened to the political talk-talk of a few men. What happened? There came this man Gandhi. Mark you, Gandhi knows his whiteman well. He goes round and organizes the Indian masses into a weapon stronger than the bomb… 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.” (pp.77-78)

Later they all—Karanja, Kihika, Wambuku and others went to the forest, where Kihika again spoke of freeing Kenyan land from the clutches of the British:

‘My father’s ten acres? That is not the important thing. Kenya belongs to black people. Can’t you see that Cain was wrong? I am my brother’s keeper. In any case, whether the land was stolen from Gikuyu, Ubabi or Nandi, it does not belong to the whiteman. And even if it did, shouldn’t everybody have a share in the common shamba, our Kenya? Take your whiteman, anywhere in the settled area. He owns hundreds and hundreds of acres of land. What about the black men who squat there, who sweat dry on the farms to grow coffee, tea, sisal wheat and yet only get ten shillings a month?’ (p.85)

All this Gikonyo recalled while sitting with Mugo. He also recalled the day Kihika ran away to the forest ‘to fight’. This was after Jomo Kenyatta had been arrested. More men were rounded up. Gikonyo recalled his own detention and release after six years, during which he had aged but he had clung to the dream of being united with his mother Wangari and wife Mumbi. It is this intense desire to be united with Mumbi that had forced him to confess his oath—he did not name anyone of the oath administrators—he had got an early release.

On his return, Gikonyo was shocked to discover that Mumbi had mothered a child while he was in detention. He also discovered that Karanja who had become the village chief, had blackmailed her into this. Gikonyo felt shattered. His dream had soured into an ugly reality. When he went to see Karanja, he played the chief part openly, telling Gikonyo—

Listen carefully. You have now come back into a normal life in the village. People here obey the law, hear? No meetings at night, no stories about Gandhi and Unity and all that. The whiteman is here to stay. (p.103)

Gikonyo could not believe his eyes:

…the man with whom he had taken an oath to fight the whiteman was talking to him about the power of the white people, the man with whom he used to
play the guitar, the man who often came to the workshop for gossip, was now shouting at him. (p. 104)

8

However, while narrating that past to Mugo, Gikonyo could not recall clearly the way he lived during those early days after his release. After he had left, Mugo felt that he too should have told Gikonyo something. However, he was apprehensive too—

Suppose I had told him... suppose I had suddenly told him... Everything would have been all over... all over... the knowledge... the burden... fears... and hopes... (p. 107)

His memory was of a particular day in May 1955, after the Emergency had been in force for about two years. A week after that day D.O. Robson had been shot dead and Kihika had come into his life.

Mugo felt like a cup of tea and went to Kabui shops. There, he met Githogo again who reminded him of the excesses of Emergency as also the negligence by their own government of their sacrifices:

'The government has forgotten us. We fought for freedom. And yet now!' (p. 110)

Mugo suddenly felt like a saviour—saviour of people like Githua, the old woman whose deaf and dumb son Gitogo had been shot dead. He told himself that 'Nobody need ever know about Kihika. To the few, elect of God, the past was forgiven, was made clean by great deeds that saved many. It was so in the time of Jacob and Esau; it was so in the time of Moses.' (p. 110)

5.3 SUMMARY—CHAPTERS 9, 10, 11, 12, AND 13

9

This chapter details out the detention of Mugo that began from Thika detention camp and then they—there were others from Embu, Meru and Mwariga—were transferred to Manyani. Thereafter, they were taken to Rira—a desert. John Thompson had been transferred there after his success at Yala. He tempted the detainees to confess their oaths by providing them with better living conditions and promising them reunion with their families. However, he also applied strong arm tactics on the detainees. As for Mugo, Thompson often picked him up for whipping personally but Mugo did not confess his oath. Thus Mugo's prestige rose among his fellow detainees. This gave them also enough courage to demand better facilities, including increased ration, or else, they threatened, they would go on a hunger strike. And then the strike happened. The day and night beating of the detainees in order to break their unity led to the killing of eleven but Mugo had survived the torture.

Reminiscing all this the next day, that is the day after the delegation had visited him, Mugo went to see Gikonyo at his place. There he met Mumbi—Gikonyo's wife and Kihika's sister—who too reminiscenced about those days. She reminded Mugo how they all had dreams. Kihika had dreams of liberting their land from the clutches of the whiteman, Wambuku, Kihika's girl-friend had dreamt of settling down peacefully with Kihika. Njeri, who too had a crush on Kihika, dreamt of fighting by his side from the forests. And then Mumbi told Mugo that she wanted to talk to him about Gikonyo, her husband. To spite her, Mugo told her that Gikonyo had shared his thoughts with him only the previous evening—even about the child she had had in Gikonyo's absence. Mumbi, however, insisted on telling him about her life after
Gikonyo and Mugo and other men had been taken away to detention camps. She told him how the administration had asked them to move to a new village and those refusing had homes destroyed right before their eyes:

‘Even now, at night, in bed,’ she started, ‘I remember the red flames. There were two huts. One belonged to my mother, the other was mine. They told us to remove our bedding and clothes and utensils. They splashed some petrol on the grass thatch of my mother’s hut. I then idly thought this was unnecessary as the grass was dry. Anyway, they poured petrol on the dry thatch. The sun burnt hot. My mother sat on a stool by the pile of things from our huts and I stood beside her. I had a gikoi on my head. The leader of the homeguards struck a match and threw it at the roof. It did not light, and the others laughed at him. They shouted and encouraged him. One of them tried to take the matches from him to demonstrate how it could be done. It became a game between them. At the fourth or fifth attempt the roof caught fire. Dark and blue smoke tossed from the roof, and the flames leapt to the sky. They went to my hut. I could not bear to see the game repeated, so I shut my eyes. I wanted to scream but I must have lost my voice because no sound left my throat. I suddenly remembered my mother beside me, and I wanted to take her from the scene, to prevent her from seeing it all to the end. For those huts meant much to her because she had built them after Waruhiu, her husband from the Rift Valley, had divorced her from his side. Anyway, she pushed my hands away and she shook her head slightly and she went on staring at the flames. The roofs were cracking. I remember the pain as the cracking noise repeated in my heart. Soon the roofs of the huts fell in, one after the other, with a roar. I heard my mother gasp at the first roar. But she never let her eyes from the sight...something gave way in my heart, something in me cracked when I saw our home fall.’(p.123)

Mumbi told Mugo that she had then, like a man, built her house at the new site. Karanja who had been her friend since childhood and who had helped her once in a while, tried to show his old affection now that Gikonyo was not around—Gikonyo who had beaten Karanja in the race to possess Mumbi. Mumbi however spurned him as she had done years ago.

And then Kihika was caught and hanged, shattering her parents and herself. It was whispered that Karanja had betrayed him, although Mumbi could not believe it since they had taken the oath together. The trench digging to which women were subjected by the soldiers brought more misery to their lives since it also meant that soldiers picked up women at random at night and took them to their huts to satisfy their lusts. Many had died. Also, there was hardly any food at home and in these circumstances Karanja, who had become a home guard, had brought her some food which she had refused to take. When he came with food, a second time, he said to her—

“You don’t understand. Did you want us all to die in the Forest and in Detention so that the whiteman could live here on this land alone? The whiteman is strong. Don’t you 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. And those in detention will never, never see this land again. No, Mumbi.” The coward lived to see mother whilst the brave was left dead on the battlefield. And to ward off a blow is not cowardice.(p.130)

And again—

Karanja always pointed out to me that my faithfulness was vain. The government forces were beating the Freedom Fighters. We never got a letter
or heard a word from those in detention. The radio no longer mentioned them. And with years, Karanja became arrogant towards me. (p. 131)

And then one day, out of the blue, he had told her about Gikonyo’s return. He even showed her the list and in that moment of weakness she had given herself up to him:

‘That I remember being full of submissive gratitude? That I laughed—even welcomed Karanja’s cold lips on my face? I was in a strange world, and it was like if I was mad. And need I tell you more? I let Karanja make love to me...When I woke and realized fully what had happened, I became cold, the whole body. Karanja tried to say nice things to me, but I could see he was laughing at me with triumph. I took one of his shoes and threw it at him. (pp.131-132)

At this point General R. came to Mumbi’s place and joined them in their reminiscences. Soon, however, he was back to his obsession of catching Kihika’s betrayer and said that he suspected Karanja to be the man. When he reminded Mugo about the celebrations on Thursday by which time they hoped to catch Kihika’s betrayer and asked Mugo to lead them, Mugo refused by saying—

‘That cannot be,’ he said. ‘I came here to tell Gikonyo and the Party that I am not a fit man to lead them. The Party should look elsewhere for a leader.’ (p. 134)

Chapter ten focusses on General R. and Karanja. To General R. the decision that ‘Karanja should die on Independence Day seemed just: that he should be humiliated in front of a huge crowd, if he gave himself up, or else he made uncomfortable, was only a necessary preparation for the ritual.’ (p.135)

Ngugi now fills the readers with the details of General R.’s life in his authorial voice, as he has done about other major characters in the novel. Before the war of Independence, General R., we are told, had lived in Rung’ei, working as a tailor. Nobody knew for sure where he came from originally: Nyeri or Embu. They did not even know his real name and called him Ka-40 because once or twice in those few moments of lowered self-defence, he had had said thus:

‘See me, a young man of ’40. I was born in 1940, circumcised in 1940, went to fight Hitler in 1940, and married in 1940. So me, I am a young man of ’40.’ (p.135)

While General R. was pronouncing the death sentence on Karanja, Karanja, we are told, was busy trying to find out whether John Thompson was really leaving Kenya. He was obviously very worried because—

...to Karanja, John Thompson had always assumed the symbol of whiteman’s power, unmovable like a rock, a power that had built the bomb and transformed a country from wild bush and forests into modern cities, with tarmac highways, motor vehicles on two or four legs, railways, trains, aeroplanes and buildings whose towers scraped the sky—and all this in the space of sixty years. Had he himself not experienced that power, which also ruled over the souls of men, when he, as a chief, could make circumcised men cower before him, women scream by the lift of his finger? (p. 136)

When Mwaura asked him whether it was true that John Thompson was leaving and that ‘an African, a man with a black skin like you or me is coming to replace him’ Karanja screamed at him, denying the rumour: ‘You may think what you like, but Thompson is not going anywhere.’
However, soon thereafter, when Karanja asked Thompson, in a halting voice about his rumoured departure, John Thompson confirmed his worst fears by answering quickly, 'yes, yes'.

Chapter eleven focusses on the farewell of John Thompson and the fears and anxieties lurking in the minds of the white people, bringing a state of uncertainty to the fore in every heart. For instance, the departure of John Thompson was considered a kind of sacrifice being made by the colonial government to appease the Africans—

What was he going to do? Had he found a job? Wasn’t it a shame the way the British government abandoned men she had encouraged and sent abroad? It came from her yielding to African violence and International Communism. Didn’t you see what was happening in Uganda and Tanganyika? The Chinese and the Russians had rushed to establish embassies. Mrs. Dickinson, the librarian, was always the more outspoken in politics and predicted a holocaust after Uhuru (pp. 142-143)

Driving back from the party, both John Thompson and his wife Margery are in a sombre mood. Thompson, particularly, is still agitated over the impending loss of all that they, the British, had done for Africa:

‘Perhaps this is not the journey’s end,’ he said, at last.
‘What?’
‘We are not yet beaten,’ he asserted hoarsely. ‘Africa cannot, cannot do without Europe.’
Margery looked up at him, but said nothing. (p. 144)

This chapter focusses on the relations between Gikonyo and Mumbi which seem to have gone from bad to worse ever since Gikonyo had discovered about Mumbi’s child from Karanja. After he came back, Mumbi tried to engage him in a conversation telling him about the visit by Mugo and his refusal to lead the celebrations. Gikonyo was in a foul mood because of his M.P. having double-crossed him in procuring the Green Hill Farm. In this mood, he picked up a quarrel with his wife, hit her and received a dressing down from his mother Wangari who called him a coward who was not ready to know about and face the circumstances under which Mumbi had given in to Karanja. In the meantime, Mumbi had left his place to go back to her parents since she found it difficult to live with Gikonyo anymore.

Gikonyo went to consult with Warui about the forthcoming celebrations and the crisis created by Mugo’s refusal to lead the celebrations. He also told Warui about his disappointment over the Green Hill Farm. They decided to go to Mugo’s hut once again.

In the meantime, Mugo having returned from Mumbi’s place who had reminded him of his heroic deed in saving Wambui from the homeguard’s whipping, recalled the whole incident in its entirety:

The whole scene became alive and vivid. He worked a few yards from the woman. He had worked in the same place for three days. Now a homeguard jumped into the trench and lashed the woman with a whip. Mugo felt the whip eat into his flesh, and her pained whimper was like a cry from his own heart. Yet he did not know her, had for the three days refused to recognize those around him as fellow sufferers. Now he only saw the woman, the whip, and the homeguard. Most people continued digging, pretending not to hear
the woman’s screams, and fearing to meet a similar fate. Others furtively glanced at the woman as they raised their shovels and jembes. In terror, Mugo pushed forward, and held the whip before the homeguard could hit the woman a fifth time. More homeguards and two or three soldiers ran to the scene. Other people temporarily stopped digging and watched the struggle and the whips that now descended on Mugo’s body. ‘He’s mad,’ some people later said, after Mugo had been taken away in a police van. To Mugo the scene remained a nightmare whose broken and blurred edges he could not pick or reconstruct during the secret screening that later followed. (p. 150)

Mugo’s persistent refusal to participate in the Independence Day celebrations, earned him more respect:

The man who had suffered so much had further revealed his greatness in modesty. By refusing to lead, Mugo had become a legendary hero. (p. 153)

Chapter thirteen opens with the Thabai women in the Rung’ei market watching with curiosity Mugo shopping around in the rain, on the day before the celebrations. They were proud of him: ‘Tonight Kenya would get Uhuru. And Mugo, our village hero, was no ordinary man.’ Wambui went about, asking women to ‘force the issue’ with Mugo—persuade him to lead the celebrations since ‘Mugo was Kihika born again’. (p. 156) It was decided to send Mumbi to Mugo. Mumbi, at her parents’ place, was however, more worried about what General R. had told her: that Karanja should be killed on the Independence Day.

Should this be done in the name of her brother? Surely, enough blood had been already shed: why add more guilt to the land? She woke up in the morning with the problem still unresolved. (p. 158)

She sent a note to Karanja, asking him not to ‘come to the meeting tomorrow.’ Having done this and feeling a little relieved, she went to Mugo’s place to request him to join ‘the meeting tomorrow.’ However, Mugo declined the invitation, saying that he did not want to reopen the wounds of the past:

‘When I was young, I saw the whiteman, I did not know who he was or where he came from. Now I know that a Mzungu is not a man—always remember that—he is a devil—devil... I saw a man whose manhood was broken with pincers. He came out of the screening office and fell down and he cried: to know I will never touch my wife again, oh God, can I ever look at her in the eyes after this? For me I only looked into an abyss and deep inside I only saw a darkness I could not penetrate. (p. 160)

Mumbi then appealed to him to talk about himself—his experiences. Suddenly Mugo began to act strange, claiming he had strangulated Kihika and now he was going to strangulate her—Mumbi.

Ngugi then uses his authorial voice to recall the events leading to the shooting of D.O. Thomas Robson, who as D.O. of Rung’ei had become a legend among the villagers due to his ruthless terror wherein he’d force innocent people to dig their own graves—literally—and then shoot them into it. In May 1955, Kihika shot him dead and then he sought shelter in Mugo’s hut. On being questioned by Mugo about their motivation in shedding blood, Kihika had told him—

‘We just don’t kill anybody... We are not murderers. We are not hangmen—like Robson—killing men and women without cause or purpose...
We only hit back. You are struck on the left cheek. You turn the right cheek. One, two, three—sixty years. Then suddenly, it is always sudden, you say. I am not turning the other cheek any more..."(p. 166)

Then Kihika had set up a meeting with Mugo ‘in a week’s time’ to ‘organize our underground movement in the new village.’ Mugo was confused and ‘the fatal day’, Friday, therefore, caught him undecided on a course of action. He was shocked to see a poster announcing a price on Kihika’s head. In such a state of mind, Mugo went and saw John Thompson the D.O. and informed him about Kihika—about his proposed meeting with Mugo. Having given out the details, Mugo felt giddy—‘He did not want to know what he had done.’(p. 174)

5.4 SUMMARY—CHAPTERS 14, KARANJA, MUGO, WARUI, WAMBUI, AND HARAMBEE

Chapter fourteen describes the happenings on 12th December 1963 in an anonymous voice from the village: ‘In our village and despite the drizzling rain, men and women and children, it seemed, had emptied themselves into the streets where they sang and danced in the mud.’(p. 177) At midnight, the time of the Uhuru, people ‘broke into one long ululation. Then the women cried out the five Ngemi to welcome a son at birth or at circumcision. These they sang for Kihika and Mugo.’(p. 178) They danced Muthuio, Mucungwa and Ndumo. A three mile race was organized in the morning. Mwaura persuaded Karanja to join the race. Mumbi was shocked to see him there. She was particularly embarrassed to see both Gikonyo and Karanja present at the same place at the same time, in her presence. However, circumstances had changed. She had by now known that Mugo and not Karanja was Kihika’s betrayer. While trying to strangle her when she was at his place, Mugo had told her—

‘Listen, Mugo! I saw my brother die. The District Officer was there and the policemen.’
‘You have eyes and ears. Don’t you know who betrayed your brother?’
‘Karanja! You were there. General R. told us.’
‘No!’
She recoiled from him. In his hollow cry, in his look, she knew.
‘You!’
‘Me—yes—me.’ (p. 181)

In the meantime, she had told Wambui that Mugo did not want to take part in the ceremonies. However—

The knowledge she carried inside her involved her in a new dilemma: either Karanja or Mugo. But she did not want anybody to die or come to harm because of her brother. She wished she could talk to Gikonyo, who might find a way out. (p. 181)

Gikonyo, while running in the race, recalled another one. In fact, he heard a train’s whistle in his mind:

He heard a train rumbling at the Rung’ei station. He thought of his father in the Rift Valley provinces. Was he really alive? What did he look like? He traversed the wide field of his childhood, early manhood, romance with Mumbi, Kihika, the Emergency, the detention camps, the stones on the pavement, the return home to betrayal passed through his mind in rapid succession. How Mumbi had dominated his life. Her very absence had unarmed him and made him break down. He angrily jerked his head,
compelling himself to concentrate on the present race. He and Karanja were rivals again. But rivals for what? For whom were they competing? Karanja is only mocking me, he thought. He seethed with hatred as he panted and mopped sweat away from his forehead. He ran on, the desire to win inflamed him. He maintained his place close behind Karanja. His aim was to keep a certain pace, reserving his energy for the last lap or so, when he would dash forward, trusting his muscles would obey his will. (pp. 181-182)

Karanja too recalled

'a scene, long ago, at the Railway Station, when he stood there fighting his knowledge that Gikonyo and Mumbi were left behind, alone. How he had yearned for the woman... Later when he proposed to her, she refused him—with a smile. And that refusal irrevocably bound him to her. He waited for his chance... He sold the Party and Oath secrets, the price of remaining near Mumbi. Thereafter the wheel of things drove him into greater and greater reliance on the whiteman. That reliance gave him power—power to save, to imprison, to kill. Men cowered before him; he despised and also feared them. Women offered their naked bodies to him; even some of the most respectable came to him by night. But Mumbi, his Mumbi, would not yield, he could not never bring himself to force her. Ironically, as he thought later, as he thought now, she only lay under him when he stood on the brink of defeat. He had felt a momentary pang of intense victory which, seconds later, after the act, melted into utter isolation and humiliation. He had taken advantage of her. For this, so he thought, she despised him. He could not face her—not after that shoe which caught him in the face and provoked blinding tears. He had always wanted Mumbi to come to him, freely because he was important to her, irresistible. (pp. 182-183)

And now with the security provided by the whiteman already gone, he walked in the dark corridors. He could not see the sun, and then the letter had come.

Why? He had ignored Mumbi's warning and come. A new hope had rekindled his heart after learning that Mumbi had left her husband.

The race had now been reduced to two men leading—Gikonyo and Karanja. General R. running next to them, recalled his childhood in Nyeri where he had a chequered childhood and youth, what with a drunken father and a cowering mother. He had finally managed to get away by joining the British army during the war.

Koinandu, who was in the race too, recalled his own youth, the experience during the war and thereafter. He had once raped a white woman he had worked for and we are now told that she was none other than Dr. Lynd.

The race therefore turns out to be a kind of journey down the memory lane for almost all principal characters of the novel.

The race was soon was reduced to a battle 'between Gikonyo and Karanja. Few knew that there were hidden motives and passions behind this battle; the crowd merely felt its peculiar ring and tension.' (p.186)

Then an expected turn of events had seen Gikonyo tumble and Karanja, running close behind him, falling along with him. General R. had won the race.

In the meantime the sun brightened up the sky and the celebrations began. The secretary of the Party made a speech, a preacher gave a sermon and finally it was announced that General R. would speak. He recalled for the audience the reason for their fighting:
‘You ask us why we fought, why we lived in the forest with wild beasts. You ask why we killed and spilt blood.
The whiteman went in cars. He lived in a big house. His children went to school. But who tilled the soil on which grew coffee, tea, pyrethrum, and sisal? Who dug the roads and paid the taxes? The whiteman lived on our land. He ate what we grew and cooked. And even the crumbs from the tables, he threw to his dogs. That is why we went into the forest. He who was not on our side, was against us. That is why we killed our black brothers. Because inside, they were whitemen. And I know even now this war is not ended. We get Uhuru today. Tomorrow we shall ask: where is the land? Where is the food? Where are the schools? Let therefore these things be done now, for we do not want another war...no more blood in my...in these our hands...’ (pp.191-192)

And then General R. said—

‘May be he who betrayed Kihika is here, now, in this crowd. We ask him to come forward to this platform, to confess and repent before us all.’ (p.192)

No body had seen Mugo come to the scene who was now standing up. People waited for him to speak:

‘You asked for Judas,’ he started. ‘You asked for the man who led Kihika to this tree, here. That man stands before you, now. Kihika came to me by night. He put his life into my hands, and I sold it to the whiteman. And this thing has eaten into my life all these years.’ (p. 193)

The sun had faded; clouds were gathering in the sky. Nyamu, Warui, General R., and a few other elders remained behind to complete the sacrifice before the storm.

Karanja

After the meeting, Karanja came to his mother’s hut. He was in a foul mood although he knew how narrowly he had escaped death, thanks to Mugo. He had decided to go back to Githima when he saw Mumbi. He walked up to her, enquired about Gikonyo and said that he wanted to thank her for the note, the real significance he did not realize then since they had wanted to kill him. On Mumbi’s asking him as to who told him this, he narrated to her what had happened at the meeting: how Mugo had come to the meeting and had confessed. Then he had asked Mumbi to see the child for the last time but Mumbi had said no, asking him to leave her alone.

Riding a bus to Githima, Karanja recalled his past—how he had, after Kihika’s death, confessed his oath, become a homeguard and later a chief. He had been extremely frustrated after Mumbi had declined his offer of marriage. He had first become a ‘hood’—a person who identified—in cognito—the Mau Mau activists and later a ruthless killer on behalf of the whiteman.

When he shot them, they seemed less like human beings and more like animals. At first this had merely thrilled Karanja and made him feel a new man, a part of an invisible might whose symbol was the whiteman. Later, this consciousness of power, this ability to dispose of human life by merely pulling a trigger, so obsessed him that it became a need. Now that power had gone (p.199)

Mugo

Coming back from the hospital where she had been visiting Gikonyo who had refused to acknowledge her presence, Mumbi was in a foul mood. The news about Mugo’s public confession had upset her further and she vowed not to go back to Gikonyo—
ever. Her mother berated her for that, reminding her that as per customs Gikonyo was still her husband until he asked for his bride-price back. Sulking, Mumbi sat with her parents when her father observed about Mugo:

‘He was a brave man inside,’ he said. ‘He stood before much honour, praises were heaped on him. He would have become a Chief. Tell me another person who would have exposed his soul for all the eyes to peck at...Remember that few people in that meeting are fit to lift a stone against that man. Not unless I-we-too-in turn open our hearts naked for the world to look at.’(p.202)

Mumbi, on hearing this, regretted that she had not gone to see Mugo before coming to her parent’s place. She resolved to go the next day, which she did. However, she did not find Mugo in his hut. She also tried to meet General R. but he too was not available in his hut.

While Mumbi is re-enacting in her mind, the scene in Mugo’s hut when she had visited him, the author in his omniscient presence, lets us—the readers into the mind of Mugo after he had made the confession to her:

Why should I not let Karanja bear the blame? He dismissed the temptation and stood up. How else could he ever look Mumbi in the face?...He would stand there and publicly own the crime...As soon as the first words were out, Mugo felt light. A load of many years was lifted from his shoulders. He felt free, sure, confident.(p.204)

After the confession when he had returned to his hut, dismissing the idea of running away, he was visited in his hut by General R. and Lieutenant Koinandu who had told him tersely that the trial was scheduled for later that night and Wambui was to be the judge while they—both himself and Koinandu—would be the only elders present.

‘I am ready,’ Mugo said, and stood up, without looking at his visitors. General R. and Lt. Koinandu had then led him out of the hut.

Warui, Wambui

Mumbi had decided to go to Mugo’s hut the next day. When she went there, she could not find him and when she returned in the night, he still wasn’t there. Then she went to Wambui’s hut to enquire about him, she found both Warui and Wambui sitting and brooding over the happenings of the past few days. First the accident in which Gikonyo had injured his arm, then the confession by Mugo and then the death of the old woman—Gitogo’s mother—who used to live alone in her hut. On Mumbi’s enquiring about Mugo, Wambui did not answer her straight, hiding the fact that on the night of the confession, General R. and Lieutenant Koinandu had visited Mugo in his hut and told him about the trial later that night, in which Wambui was to be the judge and besides himself, Lieutenant Koinandu would be the other person present.

When Mumbi told them that Mugo had confessed to her the night previous to the Celebrations when she had visited him in his hut, both Warui and Wambui were surprised, particularly when Mumbi mentioned that she had seen the pain of guilt in Mugo’s eyes. Both then observed that they had been deceived by Mugo’s eyes. It is apparent, although it is not mentioned clearly that Mugo had had to pay for the crime of betraying Kihika with his life.

Mumbi went home, very disturbed. However, life had to go on:

Perhaps we should not have tried him, she muttered. Then she shook herself, trying to bring her thoughts to the present. I must light the fire. First I must sweep the room. How dirt can so quickly collect in a clean hut!(p.210)
The chapter begins with Gikonyo, convalescing in the hospital, recalling his detention days in Wamumu in the Mweya plains in the Embu district. Here he would often recall his association with Mumbi and would desire intensely to be united with her again. It was there, Gikonyo recalled, that he had first decided to carve out a wooden three-legged stool from a Muiri stem—a wedding gift for Mumbi. He also recalled, lying there in the hospital bed, Mugo’s confession and then his own confession of oath before the authorities. What however, puzzled him was the stoic silence of Mumbi and he shuddered to imagine the consequences of revealing to her his secret of having confessed his oath. He also tried to imagine how his children from Mumbi would look like. This desire to be reunited with Mumbi filled him once again with the desire to carve out the stool and all those various figures he had planned to carve on the legs as well as the face on the seat—the face of a woman.

When Mumbi came to see him next, after a day’s gap, she told him about the illness of the child. Gikonyo showed concern for the child and also offered that they should speak about the child. After a lot of reluctance, Mumbi agreed to do so for the sake of their future relationship. Thrilled, Gikonyo decided in his mind at once, to carve out the image of the woman on the stool as that of a pregnant woman—‘big with child’.

This is the note—a note full of hope represented with the image of a pregnant woman—on which the novel ends. Mumbi represents, clearly, the nation of Kenya, her being big with child representing future hopes of the nation. Their—Gikonyo’s and Mumbi’s—agreeing to talk over the matter about the child represents the attempt of the divided nation to reconcile its various sections—those who had fought the whiteman for the freedom of the nation and those who had sided with the whiteman—without apportioning blame to one other.

5.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have provided a detailed chapter-by-chapter summary of the novel, *A Grain of Wheat*. The emphasis has been on not only summarizing the story but also on highlighting the theme and focussing on the major characters in the novel. Each chapter summary is supplemented by key quotations from the text. The summary, however, has been provided with the objective of encouraging the student to read the text of the novel in the original. This summary is in no way a substitute for the reading of the text.