UNIT 6 A GRAIN OF WHEAT – AN EVALUATION

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this Unit is to present an evaluation of A Grain of Wheat as a piece of fiction based on the history of the Kenyan National Movement, setting up a comparison wherever possible with another work of fiction based on the same theme. As T.S. Eliot reminds us, a literary critic must compare and analyze. Thus a comparison between A Grain of Wheat by Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Carcase for Hounds by Meja Mwangi, another Kenyan novelist fictionalising the Kenyan National Movement would be offered during the course of discussion in this Unit.

6.1 THE CONTEXT

6.1.1 The Colonization

The Kenyan national movement—particularly its violent phase—has been the subject of a number of literary works by Kenyans in English. We shall, in this Unit, analyze and evaluate A Grain of Wheat (1967) by Ngugi wa Thiong’o. But before we do so, we may like to go into the details of the Freedom struggle itself. These details form the pre-text of the novel and only in the light of these details can we evaluate the treatment of this aspect of Kenyan history by Ngugi wa Thiong’o.

As stated in an earlier Unit, the covert colonisation of the Kenyan people began towards the end of the 19th century through the granting of a Royal Charter for Trade to the Imperial East African Trading Company within the bounds of what was then known as the East Africa Protectorate. The annexation, however, became overt and formal when the company withdrew for financial reasons and the British government took over the control of the territory in its own hands and appointed a Commissioner for the Protectorate. The resistance against the colonial government began almost
simultaneously with the annexation of the region, but such resistance was in the form of isolated incidents involving small groups of people who were immediately affected by the British control of the region. The government decision to bring in foreign settlers from Europe, Asia and South Africa further complicated the situation and made the freedom struggle by Kenyans not only a prolonged one but also a more bitter one. In the words of Nkrumah:

Kenya under colonial rule, unlike the average colony in West Africa, was plagued with settler problems. Consequently, the liberation struggle in Kenya was bound to be one of the most dramatic in the history of the Continent. (Not Yet Uhuru: p.xiv)

The struggle after decades of peaceful constitutional moves both inside and outside the legislative council, took a violent turn in the early fifties when the cup of Kenyans' patient suffering and humiliation at the hands of both the settlers and the colonial government began to overflow.

The freedom movement was the result of ills of colonisation affecting almost all tribes in Kenya. Their lands were taken away from them by the Europeans. Their education cut, their freedom curtailed through forced labour, their wages made miserably low and their pride and dignity trampled through disallowance of observance of tribal customs and rituals and finally through the practice of obnoxious colour bar. (Mau Mau from Within p.74)

Although, the struggle against colonisation began almost simultaneously with the act of colonisation, such acts of resistance were both spontaneous and sporadic. These acts, obviously, did not have much impact because of a lack of perspective, proper planning and coordination among various sections of the society.

6.1.2 Freedom Struggle—the Militant Phase

The most violent phase of the freedom movement occurred between the years 1952 and 1957. It all began when the most moderate demands made in 1951 were turned down by the British Socialist Government and a tougher attitude became apparent in the inner councils of the Africans. The basic reason had, of course, been the British government's policy of taking over the most fertile land from the Africans and giving it to the Europeans to cultivate. This led to a chronic shortage of land in the African reserves. As a result, thousands of unemployed youths were forced to work on European farms at miserably low wages and in appalling conditions.

The post-second world war phase saw a new revolutionary atmosphere in Kenya. The social and economic grievance became plainer as more and more Africans became educated and they began to understand that the social system was not immutable. Moreover, thousands of Kenyan soldiers who had recently returned from war duties abroad, had travelled widely and seen Europeans at close quarters in their own home grounds.

The granting of independence to India and Pakistan also inspired ordinary Kenyans, who were now getting more impatient with each passing day. Their revolt against the colonial masters manifested itself in many ways. They, for instance, resented the patronising attitude of the clergy, who though professing Christian brotherhood, regarded the African Christians as inferior beings. Kariuki sums up this resentment in the following words:

When the British came with their missionaries, traders and administrators we felt they had something to teach us which were good. Education, medicine, farming and industrial techniques, these we welcomed. As a tribe the
Europeans had certain characteristics which were perhaps, not pleasant. Quick to anger, inhospitable, aloof, boorish and insensitive, they often behaved as if God created Kenya and us for their use. They accepted the dignity of a man as long as his skin was white. (*Mau Mau Detainee* p.41)

The trade unions too were clamouring for more rights and better working conditions. There were a number of strikes. This brought an offensive from the settlers and the government in the form of 'Kenya Plan'. As the details of this notorious move to convert Kenya into 'whiteman's country' became known in 1949, the radicals among the Kenyans whose political awareness had been steadily increasing over the years, decided to launch a final 'do or die' battle for the liberation of Kenya, accepting the alternative of violence, 'fully realising the suffering it would bring on all of them'.

**The Oath:**

Once the decision was taken to go for militant actions, the first step was to ensure mass support for those who had gone underground. This was achieved through the administration of an 'oath' to groups of people. The unity of numbers was our strongest, indeed almost our only weapon, and plans for cementing that unity with the Movement of the oath were put in train. (*Mau Mau Detainee* p.43)

The moment the government came to know about the administration of the oath, it came down heavily on not only those who were involved in it but also on a large number of innocent people. The harsh and brutal measures taken by the government to stop the oath proved to be counter productive as more and more young people impatient for a change took the oath.

6.1.3 **Mau Mau—the Origins**

It was during a raid on the oathing ceremonies at Naivasha that the police party is first reported to have heard the term 'Mau Mau', a name with which they subsequently tried to damn the entire national freedom movement in Kenya, although as Kaggia says, 'we ourselves had no particular name for it in the early days'. The world 'Mau Mau' has no meaning in either Gikuyu or Swahili and there are interesting speculations about its origin. Some suggested that the expression was arrived at through transposition of the world 'Uma-Uma'—out, out—in Gikuyu, which referred to the desire of the Africans that the Europeans leave Kenya. Another explanation offered is that a witness at the Naivasha trial used the expression 'mumumumu', referring to the whispered voices at the oathing ceremonies. This was misheard by journalists as 'Mau Mau' and so reported in the story. Njama, however, links the expression to the Gikuyu word 'Muma' meaning oath, used by a witness at the Naivasha trial and which a police officer was unable to pronounce or spell correctly. He, therefore, created his own pronunciation--Mau Mau.

As the movement grew in strength, simultaneous with the most repressive measures used against the Kenyans at large and the Gikuyu in particular, the British government let loose most foul propaganda to paint the entire movement in total black.

The entire propaganda machinery of the government swung into action. L.B.S. Leakey in his *Defeating Mau Mau* has painted a one-sided and completely distorted picture of the Kenyan reality:

...the noble whiteman, who fervently engaged in bringing civilisation, Christianity, education and the 'good life' to Kenya's backward natives, was suddenly forced to defend self and property, law and order, peace and morality against the treacherous attack of atavistic savages gone mad with a blood lust.
The freedom movement, contrary to the false propaganda unleashed by both the settlers and the colonial government, was the result of colonisation affecting almost all tribes in Kenya. The forcible 'alienation' of land for exclusive European use, the acts of forced labour at miserably low wages, the disallowance of observance of tribal customs and rituals and the observance of the colour bar all compounded together. led to a situation wherein a solution to all these ills was sought to be achieved through the single demand for national freedom.

As in the case of motives of the movement, so also with respect to the details of the sufferings of Kenyans during the struggle, the colonial government told blatant lies. News of atrocities on common Kenyans in the reserves, on those who had been detained in especially created camps and on those who sought refuge in the jungles was suppressed while details of raids by guerrilla fighters were blown out of proportion to malign the movement. But the truth, they say, is like sand held in a closed fist, which always manages to slip out and be revealed. So did the details of gory killings and cruelties perpetrated on Kenyans, particularly during the emergency:

A significant sector of the European settler community tended to interpret the emergency declaration and legislation as promulgating a sort of 'open season' on Kikuyu, Embu and Meru tribesmen. Forced confessions, beatings, robbery of stock, food and clothing, brutalising of various sorts and outright killings were frequent enough occurrences to arouse a fear in the heart of most Kikuyu that the intent of the white men was to eliminate the whole Kikuyu tribe. (Mau Mau from Within p.71)

**Emergency—the crackdown:**

The magnitude of the toll of this 'Open season' can be gauged from the fact that during the emergency alone some 10,000 Africans were killed by the security forces and over 80,000 were detained in various camps. Here they were subjected to indescribable brutalities. No detainee was released until he had been passed along a security clearance channel known as 'Pipe line'. Among the Emergency casualties not recorded are the victims of the 'Pipe line' who were injured and permanently disabled by torture to extract confession.

**Detention Camps:**

Manyani was the largest and perhaps the most notorious camp. This is what Kariuki, himself a detainee at the camp, has to say about the conditions there:

'Manyani', the largest camp, capable of holding up to 30,000 of us, is now a word deeply entrenched in the language of every tribe in Kenya, and no one hopes to understand the present temper of Kenya African politics without some awareness of the life led by our 80,000 detainees during those emergency years. (Mau Mau Detainee p.27)

Conditions in the reserves were no better either, where the chiefs, the home guards and other such henchmen ruled the roost with the help of local administrative authorities.

With all their sophisticated weapons and war machinery, as also trained troops, the British government could not crush the freedom movement. Fighting against heavy odds of scarce resources, lack of training, etc., and against superior forces, the guerrillas covered themselves with glory by continuing the struggle for more than four years, which earned them universal acclaim.
In *A Grain of Wheat*, General R. and Lieutenant Koinandu—together with Kihika, who of course is dead before the action of the novel takes place and is only recalled by various characters—represent the Forest fighters. Not only do they tell the readers—through their reminiscences on the eve of Uhuru—their life in the jungles but they also pursue the betrayer of Kihika with a single-minded devotion that is symptomatic of their unflinching devotion for the cause of the national freedom struggle.

We will now discuss Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*. It will be our endeavour firstly to discover his point of view from his writings and secondly evaluate this first vis-à-vis the views of another major writer on the same theme—Meja Mwangi in his *Carcase for Hounds* (1974)—and then the truth about the struggle as enumerated above by major participant historians like J.M. Kariuki, Karari Njama, Bildad Kaggia and Oginga Odinga.

## 6.2 *A Grain of Wheat and Carcase for Hounds*—History as Fiction

*A Grain of Wheat* is a novel about the freedom movement. Through a series of flashbacks in the lives and experiences of his principal characters—Mugo, Gikonyo, Mumbi, Kihika, Karanja and Thompson—all of who reflect on it on the eve of the Uhuru, Ngugi is able to weave, extremely skilfully, a multi-faced but a powerful picture of the struggle. Both through direct narration and through reflections by his characters, Ngugi creates an atmosphere of hopes and fears, successes and defeats, loyalties and betrayals that were, as we have seen above, typical of the period of the struggle. *A Grain of Wheat* is the story of a group of people from a particular village—Thabai—who are about to celebrate the Uhuru day which is only four days later. This however is also the occasion when each one of them including the white D.O. Thompson, takes stock of his or her role in the freedom struggle, particularly during the emergency and the 'Mau Mau' phase of the struggle. Mugo recalls his betrayal of Kihika, the legendary youthful revolutionary who was hanged. Gikonyo recalls his confession of the oath during interrogation in the detention camp. Mumbi recalls the circumstances under which she was forced to submit herself to Karanja, the village Chief and a collaborator of the colonial administration. Karanja recalls his subservience to the D.O., while Thompson and his wife recall their role as a part of the white colonial administration that was trying its best to 'civilise' the Africans.

**A Grain of Wheat—Mugo Recalls**

The novel opens with Mugo, a resident of Thabai village in Kamanduru district and a civilian who had suffered extensively at the hands of the government during the freedom struggle, getting up early in the morning for going to cultivate his shamba. Our first impression of him is that he is a strange old man who appears to be seeing phantoms where there are none; one who, like Hester Pryne in Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, seems to be guarding something within him which he feels every one is out to seek and unravel on this fateful day. Among the first persons he meets is Githua, a fellow victim of the state violence who had not only lost a leg in it but who seems to have gone soft in the head too: "I tell you before the Emergency, I was like you before the white man did this to me with bullets, I could work with both hands." (*A Grain of Wheat* p.4)

As we already know from the accounts of Kariuki, Njama, General China and Bildad Kaggia, the story of Githua is the story of thousands who were disabled during the struggle and Githua's remarks put Mugo in a mood for reminiscing on the cruelties of the white man, the utter senseless killings and tortures that they indulged in. Passing by the hut of an old woman, Mugo recalls how her only son Gitogo, who was both...
deaf and dumb, was killed by the government troops during one of their raids on the village:

People were being collected into the town square, the market place, for screening. Githogo ran to a shop, jumped over the counter and almost fell into the shopkeeper whom he found covering amongst the empty bags...'Halt!' the whiteman shouted. Githogo continued running. Something hit him at the back. He raised his arms in the air. He fell on his stomach. Apparently the bullet had touched his heart. The soldier left his place. Another Mau Mau terrorist had been shot dead. (A Grain of Wheat p.6)

The last sentence—Another Mau Mau terrorist had been shot dead—seems to 'touch' the readers with the same force as the bullet that had killed Gitogo. With this one sentence Ngugi had nailed all those lies which talked of 'Mau Mau' terrorists being killed in 'encounters' with the troops.

Back from the Shamba, Mugo is visited on behalf of the party by a group of village elders: Warui, Wambui and Gikonyo, who want him to lead the celebrations for the Uhuru by making the main speech of the day. Sitting with them and discussing the history of the country, Mugo recalled—"...the day the whiteman came to the country, clutching the book of God in both hands, a magic witness that whiteman was a messenger from the Lord. His tongue was coated with sugar: his humility was touching." (A Grain of Wheat p.12) Gradually, however, something else happened which surprised the people around:

Soon the people saw the whiteman had imperceptibly acquired more land to meet the growing needs of his position. He had already pulled the grass-thatched hut and erected a more permanent building. Elders of the land protested. They looked beyond the laughing face of the whiteman and suddenly saw a long line of other red strangers who carried not the Bible, but the sword. (A Grain of Wheat p.14)

There could not have been a more precise yet more forthright portrayal of that part of Kenyan history towards the end of the nineteenth century when the British launched a two-pronged attack by the clergy and the soldier to colonise Kenya. It was then, Mugo recalls, that Harry Thuku had appeared on the scene telling them of the discontent with taxation, forced labour on white settler's land and of uprooting of thousands as a result of resettlement schemes for white soldiers from abroad. It was after he had formed a party and had been arrested that the first protest rally took place. It was 1923, Warui, another elder of the village who was in the crowd, vividly recalls:

On the fourth day they marched forward singing. The police who waited for them with guns fixed with bayonets, opened fire. Three men raised their arms in the air. It is said that as they fell down they clutched soil in their fists. Another volley scattered the crowd. A man and a woman fell, their blood spurted out. People ran in all directions. Within a few seconds the big crowd had dispersed; nothing remained but fifteen crooked watchers on the ground, outside the State house. (A Grain of Wheat p.14)

Mugo then goes on to recall the changing mood of the people—a change from one of defiance to one of militant struggle. Kihika, a fighter who had inspired hundreds of young men had said in an address: "This is not 1920 What we now want is action, a blow which will tell." Kihika, like many others before, had exposed the game of deceit played by the colonisers in the guise of religion:

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 treasure in heaven where no moth would corrupt them. But he laid his on earth, our earth. (A Grain of Wheat p.15)

Once again, the last sentence—But he laid his on earth, our earth—exposes the two-pronged attack of the colonial British—through settlers as well as the church--more forcefully then many a long document on the issue.

After the arrest of Kenyatta, Mugo recalls. Kihika disappeared into the forest, later to be followed by a handful of young men from Thabai and Rung'ei. Ngugi's message is clear: this is how Mau Mau was born--out of the frustrations of the people to persuade the colonial masters to restore to them what was theirs.

It may not be out of place here at this juncture to refer to another novel based on the same theme written by Meja Mwangi--Carcase for Hounds--which suggests an altogether different reason for the beginning of Mau Mau activities. General Haraka, the hero of Mwangi's novel, who is the leader of a group of guerillas, recalls how he had become a Mau Mau activist:

Haraka remembered well when the white man struck him. It came as a resounding surprise, right across his face and into his heart. Though he was stunned, his reaction was quick. Spontaneous. He struck back a blow full of hate and distaste and protest against oppression. The D.C. collapsed and lay unmoving on the dusty floor of the office. For a second, a surge of well-being, of selfish revenge flooded him so that he stood rooted to the spot. Then a splinter of fear wedged its way into his mind. Had he killed him? No, the man was only unconscious. Then the magnitude of his crime sank in. Striking a white man was unheard of. Striking a District Commissioner senseless was unthinkable. The other white men would surely take revenge. An affront to the Queen! They might even shoot him...He had to run. Where to? Naturally into the forest, to the little terrorist leader. (Carcase for Hounds p.20)

Thus Maguru, son of Nyaga, is transformed into a freedom fighter by exchanging blows with his boss, the D.C. and by fleeing from punishment. The subtle use of the word 'Naturally' in the last sentence cleverly suggests that most freedom fighters were such criminals fleeing from the law.

Ngugi, like Mwangi in Carcase for Hounds, also recalls through his characters, many raids by the freedom fighters but unlike Mwanti he places these raids in their proper perspective. They raided to obtain rations and ammunition, as also to cripple and destroy the machinery of oppression. Kihika and his fellow fighters were not, a gang of terrorists who derived sadistic pleasure out of such raids and killings. As Kihika tells Mugo "We can't just kill anybody...we are not murderers. We are not hangmen like Robson--killing men or women without cause or purpose." (A Grain of Wheat p.166)

As we know from the accounts by various freedom fighters, the torture of civilians had begun on a mass scale simultaneously with the militant struggle—a fact that is borne out by the passing of over a million Kenyans through the concentration camps and the 'pipeline' during the four years of the emergency:

"Kihika was tortured. Some say that the neck of a bottle was wedged into his body through the anus as the white people in the Special Branch tried to wrest the secrets of the forest from him." (A Grain of Wheat p.17)

Compared to the stories of atrocities or detainees in Manyani, Hola and Lari camps, Ngugi's above description appears to be an artistic understatement.
6.3 WOMEN AND THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT—A GRAIN OF WHEAT

Warui, the oldest of those who survived, recalls the role of Wambui:

"Wambui was not very old, although she had lost most of her teeth. During the Emergency, she carried secrets from the villager to the forest and back to the villagers and towns. She knew the underground movements in Nakuru, Elburgon and other places in an outside Rift valley." (A Grain of Wheat p. 19)

Several women had played a very heroic role in the freedom movement—the names of Me Kitilili and Mary Nyanjiru spring to the mind immediately—and through Wambui and Mumbi, Ngugi is paying a tribute to those heroic women warriors. He was to do this again through the character of 'the woman' in his The Trial of Dedan Kimathi (1976). In fact, with A Grain of Wheat 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. This effort culminated in his portrayal of Wariinga as the protagonist in his Devil on the Cross.

The suppression of the movement, as observed earlier, had brought untold miseries on a very large section of civilian population particularly the women. A Grain of Wheat, highlights this through the story of Gikonyo and Mumbi—a very poignant portrayal of their love for each other through the tribulations of detention and physical suffering during the emergency. Women’s suffering is also highlighted by references to an old woman in the Thabia village whose son—a deaf and dumb young man—was shot dead by soldiers in cold blood during a raid on the village and who had since then lost all interest in living.

In all Ngugi writings—novels, stories, plays—there are always women characters with qualities of unmatched patriotism, stoicism and suffering. These represent the ordinary Kenyan women who played a very significant role during the freedom struggle. However, the highest tribute paid to such womenfolk of Kenya was paid by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo in their joint play—The Trial of Dedan Kimathi—wherein a very powerful character has been created who is called Woman—simply—and who represents the women of Kenya.

6.3.1 Freedom Movement and Social Tensions: Gikonyo and Mumbi

The story of Gikonyo and Mumbi which, apart from that of Mugo, is the central story of the novel, represents the social tensions spawned by the disruption of traditional African life with the intervention of colonialism and its aftermath. The hardships which Mumbi has to undergo to sustain herself and her parents-in-law after Gikonyo had been arrested and sent to the detention camp, represents the hardships suffered by tens of thousands of families whose lives broke down, thanks to the crackdown after the imposition of the Emergency. Inhuman oppression was let loose by soldiers through bulldozing of whole villages and uprooting people including the raping of women. Even the henchmen of the colonial administration—home guards and village chiefs—exploited the situation to stamp their authority by letting loose a reign of terror and withholding basic needs like food and extracting all kinds of price from their fellow villagers, including sexual gratification from women of the village. The way Karanja went after the people of his village, killing some, severely beating others and bartering food for sex, represents this very ugly face of the Emergency. The manner in which he stalks Mumbi—now cajoling, now threatening, now telling the truth about the atrocities in detention camps, now telling blatant lies about the detainees—is a sordid story which had a thousand replications in real life. And finally, when Mumbi gives in to him and lets him make love to her—the circumstances ironically are more
favourable to her at that point of time because Gikonyo has been freed and is on his way home—only shows that such social disruption would continue to have its negative impact on the lives of people even after the Uhuru is achieved. And this is what precisely happens when Gikonyo discovers that Mumbi has had a child from Karanja in his absence. Refusing to accept the bizarre and abnormal circumstance under which it must have happened—and we do know that the circumstances were both bizarre and very abnormal—he nearly gives up his wife, something quite rare and unusual in the traditional African way of life.

6.4 A GRAIN OF WHEAT: JOHN THOMPSON, MAU MAU AND THE COLONIZATION OF KENYA

Ngugi also presents in A Grain of Wheat, the whiteman's response to the Uhuru. Thompson, the D.O., a loyal British bureaucrat, cannot reconcile himself to this changed new reality and has therefore decided to quit his job as well as the country. He too reminiscences. He believes that all that they had built in Kenya with so much of hard work would now be wasted since the blacks are incapable of maintaining it, let alone building on it. "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 houses and seed beds strewn with wild plants and the outer bush which had been carefully hemmed, would gradually creep into a litter-filled compound." (A Grain of Wheat p.38)

Thompson also recalls another milestone in his career in Kenya: the strike at the Rira detention camp when he was the officer in-charge. "At Rira, the tragedy of his life occurred. A hunger strike, a little beating and eleven detainees died: the fact leaked out. Because he was officer incharge, Thompson's name was bandied about in the House of Commons and in the world press." (A Grain of Wheat p.42)

His regret is over two things: the leaking of the news and the bandying about of his name. Thompson's regret, like that of most whites at that time, was also because of the realisation that they, the whites, too were dispensable. "Thompson felt that silent pain, almost agony that people feel at the knowledge that they might not be indispensable after all." (A Grain of Wheat p.42)

His wife too has similar feelings which she too like her husband tries to hide behind her doubts about the capabilities of their African successors: "Was she really using this kitchen for the last time? Would she never, never see Githima again? Would her flowers mean anything to whoever would take her place in this house." (A Grain of Wheat p.44)

Thompson is one of those who considered the British colonial expansion to be an act of moral crusade to civilise the world. The British, he believed, were like 'Prospero in Africa'—the land of Calibans. Having accepted that position, he goes on to justify the British action against the freedom fighters:

No government can tolerate anarchy, no civilisation can be built on this violence and savagery. Mau Mau is evil: a movement which if not checked will mean complete destruction of all the values on which our civilisation has thriven. (A Grain of Wheat p.72)

However, it was left to Kihika and scores of young men who had heard the stories of whiteman from their elders to discover the real face of Prospero:

Kihika's interest in politics began when he was a small boy and sat under the feet of Warui listening to stories of how the land was taken from black men. Warui's tales about politics were supported by the leader of Warukin.
A Grain of Wheat

and other warriors who by 1900 had been killed in the struggle to drive out
the whiteman from the land: of young Harry and the fate that befell the 1923
procession; of Muthirigu and the mission schools that forbade circumcision
in order to eat, like insects, both the roots and the stems of the Gikuya
society. Unknown to those around him, Kihika's heart hardened towards
'these people', long before he had even encountered a white face. Soldiers
came back from the war and told stories of what they had seen in Burma,
Egypt, Palestine and India; wasn't Mahatma Gandhi the saint, leading the
Indian people against the British rule? Kihika fed on these stories, his
imagination and daily observations told him the rest: from early on, he had
visions of himself, a saint, leading the Gikuya people to freedom and power.
(A Grain of Wheat pp.72-73).

6.5 PORTRAYING THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE: NGUGI
AND MWANGI

One has only to contrast this with general Haraka's reminiscences about his youth and
the way he became a freedom fighter, (Carcase for Hounds p.20) to know the
difference between Meja Mwangi's portrayal of the freedom struggle and Ngugi's:

He thought back to the time when he was not a general, not general Haraka,
but simply Maguru son of Nyaga. And the Chief—he was no Chief but
merely Kahuru son of Wamai. Haraka then though further back to the time
when they first met at the forest station, when it was first started. Their
families came from different parts of the country to work for Mr. Jackson,
clearing the jungle and planting trees. The two youngmen were no more
than fifteen. There was no chief in the village then. The tree men were organised
by a foreman under the Forest Officer, Mr. Jackson. As the village grew it
knit in the vast family of over thirty families. The younger generation
formed a society of their own. This was split into sections of adolescent
gangs, each led by a self-appointed youth able to dominate the others. They
stole green maize from their parents' gardens and raped village maidens in
hordes. (Carcase for Hounds p.18, emphasis added)

In fact, Mwangi makes general Haraka, an ex-accomplice of the colonial government:

He remembered back to the time he headed the village security police before
becoming the first chief of Pinewood Forest station that was before the
Emergency and the Curfew and the forest fighters were heard of. (Carcase
for Hounds p.19)

So here is the leader of a group of freedom fighters in the jungles—general Haraka—
who was in his youth a juvenile gangster, expert at stealing green maize and raping
village maidens in hordes. No wonder the general himself refers to a group as a 'gang'
and Captain Kingsley considers them to be nothing but 'murderer Haraka and his
band of cut-throats.' (Carcase for Hounds p.11)

In sharp contrast Ngugi, as we have seen above, has made use of the actual events--
struggle by Waiyaki and the Procession in Nairobi for the release of Harry Thuku in
which scores of Africans were killed—as a background for his fictional characters like
Kihika.

6.5.1 History and Ideology: Ngugi's Kihika versus Mwangi's Haraka

Ngugi's forest fighter Kihika, incidentally, is dead before the action of the novel
begins and we never meet him. Unlike Mwangi's general Haraka, he is a very
sensitive young man who drew inspiration from the Indian National movement.
thereby showing a remarkable maturity of approach in recognising the commonness of all such struggles against the colonial British. "Do you know", he told his youthful friends, Gikonyo, Mumbi, Karanja and others, "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." (A Grain of Wheat p. 83). Kihika is an ideal freedom fighter, who realising that Christianity had come to have a hold on the minds of many and that the priests were using it as a weapon to damn the freedom struggle, uses the same religious sentiment to arouse the people into action. Referring to the death of Christ, he says:

In Kenya we want a death which will change things, that is to say, we want a true sacrifice. But first we have to be ready to carry the cross. I die for you, you die for me, we become a sacrifice for one another. So I can say you, Karanja, are Christ. I am Christ. Everybody who takes the oath of unity to change things in Kenya is a Christ. (A Grain of Wheat p.83)

Kihika is, in fact, a shrewd leader who uses various kinds of arguments to expose the real designs of the colonial masters. "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 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?" (A Grain of Wheat p.85)

G.D. Killam in his essay on A Grain of Wheat in his An Introduction to the Writings of Ngugi, observes that Ngugi is at 'pains... to insure that his readers know that the struggle was a just one.' (1980:53). He thus considers Kihika's speeches to be laboured. This is uncharitable, to say the least, since Kihika's speeches have a very forceful impact because of their spontaneity and directness backed as they are by his conviction. Once again, in contrast, are the speeches of general Haraka who had only heard about land and other problems from his little leader and repeated them parrot-like (Carcase for Hounds p.54) which appear to be contrived completely.

The imposition of the Emergency created a host of other social problems for not only forest fighters like Kihika but for others as well. "More men were rounded up and taken to concentration camps named detention camps for the world outside Kenya. The platform at the railway station was not always empty; girls pined for their lovers behind cold huts and prayed that their young men would come quickly from the forest or from the camps." (A Grain of Wheat p.90). Unlike Mwangi, who shows general Haraka, lieutenant Kimamo and others having serious doubts about their cause, (Carcase for Hounds p.102) Ngugi shows them very resolute for their cause. "The detainees had agreed not to confess the oath, or give away details about Mau Mau: how could anybody reveal the binding force of the Agikuyu in their call for African freedom? They bore all the ills of the Whiteman, believing somehow that he who would endure unto the end would receive leaves of victory." (A Grain of Wheat p. 91). The torture grew as the struggle gained strength. "A common game in Rira had been to bury a man, naked, in the hot sand, sometimes leaving him there overnight." (A Grain of Wheat p.116). Even those who were left behind in villages--mostly women, old people and young children--were not spared such torture. Mumbi Gikanyo's wife, recalls:

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
A Grain of Wheat

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 leaped to the sky. They went to my hut. I could not bear to see the game repeated, so I shut my eyes. (A Grain of Wheat pp.122-123).

Whole villages were forced to dig trenches in most inhuman working conditions. Once again, Mumbi recalls: "They drove us into it, for, you see, there was a time limit. Women were allowed out two hours before sunset to go and look for 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. And as the time limit neared, even one hour of freedom was taken away. We were prisoners in the village, and the soldiers had built their camps all round to prevent any escape. We went without food. The cry of children was terrible to hear. The new D.O. did not mind the cries. He even permitted soldiers to pick women and carry them to their tents." (A Grain of Wheat p.166)

It is the perpetration of such atrocities that makes Mugo remark that "a Mzungu is not a man--always remember that--he is a devil."

Neither the fighters, nor the civilians are, however, scared of this naked show of sadistic brutalities. Nor do they turn their other cheek anymore: "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. Your back to the wall, you strike back." (A Grain of Wheat p.126)

Throughout the struggle, African collaborators played an important role on behalf of their white masters, not only justifying all that the colonial government did but also emphasising the futility of challenging the invincible might of the Mzungu. Thus Karanja says:

The whiteman is strong. Don't 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. (A Grain of Wheat p.130)

Once caught into the logic of surrender and collaboration, Karanja sinks deeper into such dependence:

He sold the party and oath secrets, the price of remaining near Mumbi. Thereafter the wheel of things drove him into 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." (A Grain of Wheat p.182)

Ngugi, in fact, goes on to show the complete dehumanisation of Karanja by the colonial machinery. When he shot the freedom fighters or innocent citizens, "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 that it became a need." (A Grain of Wheat p.199)

6.6 THE TITLE

You may have wondered what the title of the novel A Grain of Wheat means. Ngugi chooses a Christian myth and a religious framework to depict the violent freedom movement in Kenya. The title of the novel is itself from the Bible:
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 again, it may chance of wheat, of some other grain.

(I Corinthians 15:36)

This epigraph appended to the novel is an attempt by St. Paul to answer queries by some Corinthians as to the possibility of the resurrection of the mortal body of Christ. St. Paul hints at the ‘potentiality’ of the mortal frame to get itself renewed in life for ‘a second coming.’ But like a sown seed, it has to die first before it can be born again. The image of dying to be born again runs recurrently and is central to the novel. In other words, the alchemy of “rebirth and regeneration” always lies embedded in a dying seed as a strong “potential” only waiting to be born again “through the will of God.” (African Literature Today No.7 p. 111)

Ngugi applies this Christian epigraph to the gory nationalist struggle against colonialism. Referring to the martyrdom of Waiyalu during the early phase of this struggle, the novelist observes: “Waiyaki’s blood contained within it a seed, a grain, which gave birth to a movement whose main strength thereafter sprung from a bond with the soil” (p. 12) Waiyaki sacrifices his life. But he rises again Phoenix-like in the form of a potential and formidable movement. This movement is organically linked to the soil of the people so as to provide succour, strength and inspiration to them in designing and building a new nation corresponding to their aspirations. Emphasising the need for sacrifice by one and all for a national cause, Kihika says:

I die for you, you die for me, we become a sacrifice for one another. So I can say that you, Karanja, are Christ. I am Christ. Everybody who takes the Oath of Unity to change things in Kenya is a Christ. Christ then is not one person. All those who take up the cross of liberating Kenya are the true Christs for us Kenyan people(p. 95).

According to Govind Naraian Sharma, “Kihika is a true Christ who, through sacrifice, not only justifies himself but also brings about a revolution in the lives of his friends and followers by showing them the way to the spiritual regeneration.” (African Literature Today No.10 p. 170) Such a spirited defence of Kihika seeks to transcend the limitations of a religious principle so as to cover and embrace a secular pursuit; a social ethic; a national aspiration and a sense of commitment. Obviously, Kihika’s sense of religion is not confined to its meaning in an abstraction but it is sought to be applied to a people engaged in a grim battle against colonial forces.

Kihika feels stung by a remark made by his friend, Karanja, who reminds Kihika of his own saying that “Jesus had failed.” (p. 94) Karanja even wonders whether Kihika is trying to resort to religious revivalism. For a moment, Kihika is nonplussed. But he does not give in to the sarcasm or the logistics of Karanja. He continues to argue forcefully:

Pressed people have a cross to bear. The Jews refused to carry it and were scattered like dust all over the earth.....In Kenya we want deaths which will change things, that is to say, we want true sacrifice. But first we have to be ready to carry the cross. (P. 95)

This passage has several layers of meaning and inferences. It points out categorically that Christ had failed in the Kenyan context. This is a common phenomenon in any colonial situation where the alien religion of Christianity always tended to support an oppressive regime causing hardships to the colonised. Ngugi is of the view that Christianity as an organised institution, paved the way for the coloniser and unhesitatingly supported him in consolidating his position in the colonies. Along with religion the imperial enterprise also used language as a tool of continued colonisation.
For example, English continues to occupy a superior status vis-a-vis indigenous languages in most colonised cultures.

Africans were also taken away from their places as slaves and scattered “all over the earth.” Hence, the novelist appeals to the suffering masses the world over “to carry the cross” and bear the burden and take the fire right into the midst of the enemy’s camp using the tools of the religion and the sword or the gun which had been used so far by the colonial master. In short, Ngugi is using Christian mythology to inspire a feeling of regeneration and revolution among oppressed peoples.

6.7 CHARACTERISATION

The portrayal of various characters in *A Grain of Wheat* is discussed in terms of their distinct peculiar circumstances and their sense of identity with the community.

6.7.1 Warui

“Warui’s life was.........the story of the movement”, (p. 18) which itself came into being imperceptibly as soon as the prophecy of Mugo wa Kabira about the arrival of “a people with clothes like the butterflies” (p. 10) became a reality. Warui is the living symbol, an important witness and an active participant in the 1923 procession against the arrest of Harry Thuku and in a similar upsurge against the imprisonment of Jomo Kenyatta and others in 1952. It is only in the fitness of things that he is given a place of prominence at the Uhuru celebrations of Dec. 12, 1963. It is an honour to a rural individual peasant who represents the collective conscience of the rural peasantry of Kenya.

6.7.2 Wambui

Wambui is not as old as Warui. She is an active participant in the Movement during the emergency in Kenya. She is something like a “courier” of the modern Liberationist struggles entrusted with the job of carrying messages to and from the forest. Once she “carried a pistol tied to her thighs near the groin.” (p. 19) She was interrogated and searched by a homeguard. As the fellow was about to touch the vital spot, she screamed and teased the fellow saying, “I’ll lift the clothes and you can have a look at your mother, it is so aged, and see what gain it’ll bring you for the rest of your life.” (p. 19-20) She made a gesture to lift her clothes, but the fellow leaves her alone and she is let off. Wambui is assigned the role of a judge to try Mugo for the latter’s betrayal of Kihika. She is of the view that they “should not have tried him.” (p. 243) But, nevertheless, she feels the need “to sweep the room” and “light the fire” as she realizes how “dirt can so quickly collect in a clean hut.” (p. 243) Ngugi fulfils his commitment of historicizing marginal men and women as represented by Warui and Wambui.

6.7.3 Koina

Koina was conscripted as a cook during the Second World War. He is fiercely independent and bold. After the War, he worked in a white man’s shoe factory. When he demanded better wages, a decent house and a car, he was fired. It sobered him a little. Then, he joined Dr. Lynd as a house boy. Dr. Lynd was a spinster but lived in a house which was like a mansion. Her dog had its own room in the house, with a bed and sheets and blankets! while most of his fellow countrymen went without a proper roof over their heads. He thought about all this, took the Oath to join the Kenya Land and Freedom Army and became its lieutenant. He is propelled by a passion to drive away the likes of Dr. Lynd and her dogs from Kenya, a blackman’s country. He leads two of his colleagues and storms into Dr. Lynd’s
home, snatches her two guns and a pistol, and leaves the place after gang-raping her with vengeance. He also kills her dog with his panga and says, “Let me never see you again in this country.” But to his shock, Dr. Lynd and her dog (another one) continue to live in the post-independence Kenya as though to mock at the blackman’s sense of independence.

6.7.4 General R.

It is General R. (Russia) under whose direction the celebrations of Uhuru are conducted at Rung’ei. He is obliged to deliver the main speech in place of Mugo. He evolves his own theory of violence and advocates the need for its use in a colonial situation.

According to Frantz Fanon, the ‘race’ dimension is a significant factor in addition to the class conflict in a revolutionary struggle. General R. like Fanon, lends legitimacy to violence against the oppressor, General R. justifies why they “killed and split blood.” He says:

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. But what’s the meaning of “Uhuru”? It is contained in the name of our Movement: Land and Freedom…….

We want a Kenya built on the heroic tradition of resistance of our people. We must revere our heroes and punish traitors and collaborators with the colonial enemy. (p. 221)

General R. is hardened because of his parents, his harrowing experience of the white man’s war, his own underground life in the forest for seven long years. He is on the look out for a sacrifice as part of the Uhuru celebrations. Consequent upon the betrayal of Kihika as confessed by Mugo himself, General pronounces: “The trial will be held tonight………your deeds alone will condemn you.” (p. 238)

6.7.5 Gatu

Gatu is a detainee in a detention camp. He is probably the most lively character (next to Mumbi) in the novel. He provides fun and laughter in the midst of irony and suspense, tension and violence which are built into the novel. His gruesome murder in cold-blood casts a spell of gloom on the fellow detainees evoking a sense of the macabre on the one hand and empathy on the other. Gatu’s sense of the history of the peoples of the world in relation to their liberation struggles in India, America, Russia and Africa is tremendous. His endless narration of stories marked by fantasy and fun and his sense of performance while telling them relieves the fellow detainees from their monotony, alienation and disgust.

He joins the Movement fairly early in life. His unflinching faith in it inspires the fresh oath seekers to whom he administers the Oath. He takes the beating and the tortures like a funeral ram. Often he would be confined in a cell alone because of his skill in “mimicking the English voices and miming their features.” (p. 108) Gatu becomes the symbol of the collective resistance to colonialism.

Gatu is a loner in the world without anybody to call his kith and kin. Yet his sense of the community is much more than those who are privileged to enjoy the warmth, comforts and the love of a family life. It is also possible for him “to laugh at himself and others.” (p. 111) He was taken away one evening, tortured and hanged in his cell. The death of Gatu thoroughly demoralises the fellow detainees. This unnerves and unsettles Ginkonyo who admits his Mau-Mau oath. Gatu’s death underlines the tension between hope and human weakness.
6.7.6 Gikonyo

Gikonyo has in him the potentialities of a capitalist. He has a farm plot of five acres, a shop at Rung’ei and a lorry. On top of it all, he is the local Chairman of the Movement. He achieves all this within four years of his release from detention. The key to his success is due to a sense of application and hard work. He is aware of and very frank about the weak side of his personality. He tells Mugo praising the latter while conceding his own frailty: “I would have sold Kenya to the white man to buy my own freedom.” (p.68) He says further “you have a great heart.” (p.68) It is again Gikonyo who pays tributes to Mugo on the latter’s confession of his guilt in public.

‘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.’ He paused and let his eyes linger on Mumbi. ‘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.233-34)

Gikonyo’s assessment of the heroic streak in Mugo’s character is highly incisive and discerning. It points out the need to indulge in self-introspection by one and all to know their weaknesses and limitations.

6.7.7 Mugo

Mugo is the most complex character in the novel. He is a fascinating person and a great betrayer at the same time. The novel in a way is a study in human nature and human psychology attempted through the psyche of Mugo. His attempt to wriggle out of a tension between his inescapable reality of loneliness and his need to return to the community is sought to be dramatized by the novelist. According to Robson, Mugo is often “in a state of limbo, poised between the several different images he possesses - the hero, the sufferer, the betrayer, the hermit.” (p.53) This, precisely, is the complex nature of Mugo’s personality. On the one hand, he consciously attempts to be free from any involvement with others. On the other hand, he craves for the company of somebody or the other.

Mugo seems to be haunted by a desire “to kill” by strangling with his strong arms. He relishes the image of his attempt to strangle his aunt. The details of the same make one sit up and think about what sort of man Mugo is:

He would get her by the neck, strangle her with his naked hands. Give me the strength: give me the strength, god. He watched her struggle, like a fly in a spider’s hands; her muffled groans and cries for mercy reached his ears. He would press harder, make her feel the power in his man’s hands. Blood rushed to his finger-tips. He was breathless, acutely fascinated by the audacity and daring of his own action. (p.8)

He tells Mumbi that he had strangled her brother, Kihika. This is a distortion of the fact. He threatens to strangle Mumbi too and he nearly strangles her. After he shares the secret of Kihika’s betrayal by him to the white man with her, he becomes hysterical and speaks incoherently, and in a flash jumps at her giving her no chance to escape. She is terrified as he “closed in on her, one hand on her mouth, the other searching her throat. She panted and whimpered horribly.” (p.186) But Mugo comes to his senses soon and releases her from his grip.

Mugo is haunted by the burden of his guilt. Whenever anybody looks at him, he feels naked. He can not stand the anamoly of being treated as the village hero. Like Gatu, he bears his torture during his detention stoically. Unlike his fellow detainess, he has never taken any oath nor does he have anyone to return to as and when he is released. In the absence of an oath, he is more free and less bound to any cause. The irony is
that many detainees—Karanja, Gikonyo and several others confess their oath and ensure their release. His daring attempt to save Kihika’s pregnant wife from being tortured becomes a living legend testifying to his humanity.

He walks to the dais like a hero and his daring admission of his betrayal of Kihika is both dramatic and anticlimactic. Following his confession, “Mugo felt light. A load of many years was lifted from his shoulders. He was free, sure, confident.” (p. 235) On seeing Konia and General R., he says: “I am ready” (for the trial). (p. 238) This is heroic indeed for the one who “took refuge in reticence” (p. 66) and lived like a hermit. Eileen Julien treats Mugo as the hero of the novel and identifies him with the reader. She observes: “Mugo – in his complexity, resembles the reader.

He wants desperately to be integrated into the whole but is isolated by his crime and guilt.” (African Literature Today p. 142) Mugo’s courageous confession puts most people to shame as they feel stripped naked from within. Ochola-Ojero comments: “humanity’s task is to face up to the problem of shared guilt, for to err is human.” (Busara No: 2 p. 43) Most people hang their heads in shame for Mugo and on their own behalf due to their own consciousness of their sense of betrays, lapses and for all their misdeeds or indifference during a critical phase of their history. Thus, Mugo “is human in both the most glorious sense and in the most pathetic sense, such that his admission of his human nature is a victory – not for absolute virtue but for humanity.”

6.8 CONCLUSION: A GRAIN OF WHEAT AS A COMPLEX PORTRAYAL OF HISTORY

Here then is Ngugi’s portrayal of a traumatic phase in the history of Kenya—the so-called Mau Mau—a phase in which sections of a highly complex society comprising of people belonging to various African tribes, white settlers and Indians acted and reacted to events of violence in a highly emotionally surcharged and often contradictory manner. As P. Ochola-Ojero puts it:

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. (“Of Tares and Broken Handles”)

However, the novel is not as has been stated by both Ochola-Ojero, and David Cook (1983: 69) about the theme of betrayal alone, in which ‘all are guilty’. While it may be true that most major characters have—during some stage of their respective lives—acted in a manner that may be contrary to the behaviour expected from them at that time—Mugo betrays Kihika, Gikanyo confesses the oath and Mumbi sleeps with Karanja—it cannot be held against them as ‘betrayal’, particularly of the cause in question, namely, the freedom struggle. Mugo, for instance, redeemed himself much before his final confession when at Rira detention camp, he is singled out by Thompson for severe beatings:

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. (A Grain of Wheat p. 117)

Further, he had saved a woman—Wambuku—and many others from being beaten in the trenches.

The novel presents a very complex portrayal of the freedom struggle—the role of various sections of the society, their hopes and fears on the threshold of freedom. The
hopes of Warui, Wambui, General R and Lieutenant Koinandu, the fears of Mugo and of Karanja and the conflicting feelings of Gikonyo and Mumbi. Mixing fact with fiction—Kenyatta and Thuku with Kihika and Karanja—Ngugi creates a unique picture of the freedom struggle, which is truer than history and more imaginative than ordinary fiction.

The villagers of Thabai, represent the ordinary people of Kenya who, with all their human frailties and foibles, were forced to make compromises under terror and torture but still upheld the cause. Kihika represents the revolutionary youth who saw a basic unity in the struggle of the colonial world and who sacrificed everything for freedom. Karanja on the other hand represents the collaborationists who are basically cowards and who put self before society. Gikonyo and Mumbi, once again representing thousands of ordinary people, magnify those personal relationships that went to pieces under the Emergency through sheer physical separation for long periods. While focussing on those traumatic times which the Kenyans faced during their struggle for freedom, Ngugi also hints at the shape of things to come in independent Kenya. Although people danced and sung on the streets on the Uhuru day, showering praise on 'Jomo and Kaggia and Oginga' and although they 'recalled Waiyaki's heroic deeds', they were not unaware of their dream of independent Kenya as a Shamba for all turning sour. The way their M.P. grabs Mr. Burton's Green Hill Farm, denying Gikonyo and other villagers a chance for a cooperative farm, is symbolic of the ensuring struggle between the people and their leaders in new Kenya—a theme which Ngugi was to explore in his next novel Petals of Blood.

6.9 LET US SUM UP

In this chapter we have presented an evaluation of A Grain of Wheat by Ngugi wa Thiong'o as historical fiction. Evaluating it in the background of the Kenyan National Freedom Movement, we have also compared it with another novel—Carcase for Hounds—by another Kenyan novelist, Meja Mwangi whose text is also based on the same theme. Through a thorough analysis of various events and characters we have tried to show that Ngugi has succeeded in capturing a very complex reality or what could be called extraordinary times in the history of modern Kenya. While doing so we have also presented, with the help of relevant quotations, Ngugi's ideological standpoint of various issues relating to colonialism, nationalism, class structure of post-colonial societies and the role that various sections of the society played during the Freedom Movement.

6.10 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the character of Mugo. Do you think that he is the hero of the novel? Why?

2. The Emergency disrupted the social life of Gikonyo and Mumbi. Discuss.


4. Discuss the role played by women—as delineated in A Grain of Wheat—in the National Freedom struggle.

5. In what way does John Thompson represent the colonial point of view? Discuss.
6. A Grain of Wheat is a very complex portrayal of a significant period of Kenyan history. Discuss.

7. Based on A Grain of Wheat, discuss Ngugi’s world-view.

6.11 SELECTED READINGS


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