Ngugi's Dialectical Vision: Individualism and Revolutionary Consciousness in *A Grain of Wheat*

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Abstract

In A Grain of Wheat, *Ngugi exposes the socio-economic forces at work in producing the colonial consciousness in order to critique the forms of psychological imprisonment that inhibit political engagement. Those characters who passively accept colonial domination prove to be the most individualistic, while those able to embrace a vision of community do so only by breaking free of the fetters of a philosophical pessimism that would have them believe that the world is a static, unchangeable entity. In the novel, individualism and passive consent prove to be mutually reinforcing features of the process of dehumanization endemic to colonial domination. The tension between individualism and solidarity provides the dramatic focus of the novel and conveys a dialectical vision of the conditions which give rise to a revolutionary consciousness capable of surmounting the traumatic psychological and material effects of colonial domination and creating a just social order.*

> The colonialist bourgeoisie had hammered into the native's mind the idea of a society of individuals where each person shuts himself up in his own subjectivity, and whose only wealth is individual thought. Now the native who has the opportunity to return to the people during the struggle for freedom will discover the falseness of this theory (Fanon 47).

Presenting a powerful critique of European imperialism that dramatizes the ideological limitations of individualism, Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* exposes the extent to which the social and economic domination endemic both to colonialism and capitalism is enabled by various forms of social isolation. At the same time, the work demonstrates the degree to which the historical/psychological trauma they produce provides the material foundations for a consciousness that can only perceive its relation to others and the world as profoundly discontinuous. Throughout the novel, individualism is presented as a product of the exploitation and competition for survival endemic to the process of colonial domination. Set primarily during the "Emergency" in Kenya and in the days preceding political independence from Great Britain, *A Grain of Wheat* focuses on the consciousness of the collaborator, Karanja; the political prisoner, Gikonyo; and Kihika's betrayer, Mugo, in order to present a dialectical vision of human emancipation. In this vision, the psychological and historical trauma initiated by British rule generates a set of objective forms of social and economic domination that reinforce a perception of the world as a static, unchangeable entity. In turn, this condition creates a feeling of powerlessness and a psychological disposition towards passive acceptance that leads individuals to perceive their own fate as disconnected from the fate of others. Separated from their community due to historical forces beyond their individual

control, each of the characters in the novel experiences difficulty tying his or her fate to that of the community. This struggle constitutes the central dialectical process depicted in the novel: a consciousness informed by knowledge of interconnectedness, solidarity, and resistance to oppression proves to be the antithesis of one imprisoned by a perspective grounded in individualism, social isolation, and passive acceptance of colonial domination. Through the conflict of these antagonistic categories, Ngugi presents a vision of a community that would be capable of balancing the needs of the individual with a common good.

Collaboration and the Colonized Consciousness

As a character who has been thoroughly inculcated with the ideology of the colonizer, Karanja abandons all commitment to such a common good in favor of his own self-preservation. Standing on the platform of the train station after being passed over by Mumbi for Gikonyo, Karanja experiences a vision of his social world that plays a critical role in his political choices in the conflict between the Land and Freedom Army and the British colonial authorities. As his world seems to spin out of control, Karanja finds himself confronted by a "white blank abyss" (Ngugi, 93) before envisioning the coming social upheaval that will take place during the Emergency:

> Everybody was running away as if each person feared the ground beneath his feet would collapse. They ran in every direction; men trampled on women; mothers forgot their children; the lame and weak were abandoned on the platform. Each man was alone, with God. It was the clarity of the entire vision that shook him. Karanja braced himself for the struggle, the fight to live. I must clear out of this place, he told himself, without moving. The earth was going round again. I

> must run, he thought, it cannot be helped, why should I fear to trample on the children, the lame, and the weak when others are doing it? (94).

Karanja's stance of radical individualism emerges immediately after he realizes that Mumbi has chosen Gikonyo, an experience of loss that provides the catalyst for a psychologically destabilizing moment that can only be described as profoundly traumatic. His response to his growing awareness of rootlessness involves a shift in perspective through which he adopts the values and philosophical standpoint of an individualist. This standpoint has a significant bearing upon his later actions as a collaborator, for it conforms to the underlying system of values informing colonialism in Kenya. Although Karanja experiences the knowledge of his isolation as a frightening vision of a Darwinian universe, Ngugi draws explicit attention to the socially constructed nature of this world by having Karanja's vision take place at the train station. The construction of the Uganda railway at the turn of the twentieth century played a critical role in giving the British access to the interior of the country and opened the region to settlement (Edgerton 4). Thus, the fact that Karanja's vision takes place at the train station is no accident: Ngugi links Karanja's consciousness to the historically specific processes of imperialism. Karanja's transformation appears to him subjectively as an objective assessment of the nature of reality. However, by linking it thematically to the railway, Ngugi suggests that Karanja's consciousness is formed as a result of the contingent historical processes of colonization by which the colonized are drawn "into the position of social isolation and consequent moral doubt" (Gurr 103).

Ngugi's complex treatment of trauma both as a psychological and historical event cutting across political, economic, and cultural spheres of human activity suggests that the extreme individualism expressed by Karanja's consciousness is an effect of the dislocations, violence, and

economic exploitation endemic to the process of colonization in Kenya and a direct inheritance of a system of values that owes its continuing existence to the imperialist expansion of European capitalism into Africa. Furthermore, imperialism, and the individualism it reinforces, is implicitly depicted as a form of psychological illness that, given the specific historical circumstances under which it has been constructed, requires the intervention of revolution as its cure. The Darwinian universe that Karanja envisions derives its inspiration from some of the central ontological assumptions of European capitalism. Significantly, the existential abyss that Karanja confronts is a "white" one, a description that aims to challenge the negative connotations associating "blackness" with despair and pessimism in order to attribute the responsibility for Karanja's individualism to the ideology of the white settlers who have appropriated the land and set up a system of social and economic privileges based on racial distinctions. In accepting the implications of his vision as ineradicable features of the human condition, Karanja lays the psychological foundations for his role as a collaborator in the coming conflict between the Mau Mau and the British colonial authorities. Karanja comes to understand individuals as self-contained subjects without any essential connections or ethical responsibilities towards others. From this newly discovered perspective, every individual participates in a desperate war for survival where all ethical values are suspended.

Through a comparison with the other characters, it becomes clear that Karanja's self-imposed isolation and individualism are merely symptoms of the traumatic historical process taking place in Kenya. At the same time, individualism is shown to rest upon basic assumptions concerning human nature that are subjected to criticism by the very structure of the narrative. Ngugi's depiction of the Emergency and the five days before independence demystifies the ideological depiction of the Mau Mau movement in the British colonial imagination from a

collective standpoint informed by emancipation by presenting the socio-economic causes of the uprising and their psychological impact on the lives of Kenyans. In this process, the collective narrator plays as crucial a role in challenging colonial domination as do the individual narratives. As Kandioura Drame aptly summarizes it: "the collective narrator embodies the consciousness of a collective quest for freedom" (94), while the secondary narratives serve as case studies testifying to the traumatic experiences of individuals. By depicting the effects of the colonization of Kenya both in psychological and historical terms, Ngugi calls into question the ontological assumptions that underwrite individualism and replaces them with an ontology grounded in communal values which address the social and political needs of all individuals. The sense of human frailty, fallibility, and vulnerability conveyed through each of the case histories suggests that communal values provide the only reasonable foundation for a society that hopes to provide for human needs, while pointing out the destructive and irrational limitations of individualism and the moral bankruptcy of the tradition of European humanism that informs it. The brutality of colonial domination and the political repression that takes place during the Emergency produce forms of collective and individual trauma that find symptomatic expression in chronic hopelessness, moral paralysis, and philosophical pessimism.

In turn, the Emergency itself is shown to have its origin in an earlier set of traumatic material dislocations which include: the expropriation of the land from the Kikuyo people in the fertile highlands, the creation of a permanent underclass of impoverished laborers to ensure the availability of cheap labor for white settlers, and the creation of a social hierarchy founded upon unbridgeable political and economic distinctions based on European conceptions of race and cultural superiority. Although they differ in degree and intensity, the traumatic experiences that the characters in *A Grain of Wheat*

endure derive from systematic forms of violence and socio-economic oppression that share a common basis in collective experiences of powerlessness. These experiences destroy the conditions that make human solidarity and community possible by undermining autonomy. The contrast between Gikonyo and Mumbi and Karanja and Mugo constitutes a radical opposition between the values of community and common purpose formed in the struggle against oppression and the values of self-interest, egotistical calculation, and ruthless individualism inherited from the colonial invaders. Those who begin to come to terms with their traumatic experiences are those who become capable of embracing a collective vision and laboring for its attainment, while those who passively succumb to domination are those who accept social isolation as a fundamental feature of the human condition.

The dramatic tension between these diametrically opposed positions constitutes the dialectical method through which the text presents a vision of a just social order. This method finds symbolic expression in the guiding metaphor of the grain of wheat that must die in order for a new life to come into existence. Rather than serving as a Christian message of redemption,[1] the Biblical allusion throws down a mocking challenge to the so-called Christians responsible for colonial oppression by initiating an intrinsic critique that calls attention to their moral blindness. The basic framework of the story suggests an historical process in which the grain of wheat serves as a metaphor for revolutionary change and the promise of a just social order. The epigraph from I Corinthians is addressed to the colonial authorities and the wealthy Africans taking their place who, in sowing the seeds of violence, dissension and exploitation, have ensured only their own destruction in a coming revolution. In sowing the seeds of oppression, they have sown "not that body that shall be," but the social contradictions that will bring a new social body into being. Through this metaphor,

Ngugi suggests that the individualism that informs the consciousness of those who have betrayed the people is far from a natural characteristic grounded in human nature, but merely a product of oppressive forms of socio-economic organization that militate against the psychological well-being of individuals as much as communities.

As such, the reconstruction of history from the perspective of those who have been disposed by colonial rule takes on a central importance both in the collective narration of the struggle for freedom and the subjective histories of Mugo, Gikonyo, Mumbi, and Karanja. In *A Grain of Wheat*, this reconstruction takes place through a recognizably Marxian and psychoanalytic theoretical framework in which both systems of thought are deployed to convey the multiple levels of powerlessness produced by colonial domination and the capitalist exploitation that informs it. Just as Marx's critique of capitalism consists in part of a diagnosis of the psychological effects of a mode of production that systematically inhibits the autonomous development of individuals, so Ngugi's depiction of the effects of colonialism in Kenya diagnoses the social ills plaguing the country in the wake of the Emergency. Serving as a diagnosis of capitalism, Marx's term for this historical phenomenon, alienation, has its most striking analogue in the psychoanalytic concept of trauma. In psychoanalytic terms, trauma represents the crippling of an individual's capacity to integrate a traumatic event into conscious awareness. In its perpetual return, trauma inhibits psychological development by placing an event outside the subject's conscious control. Deploying both the psychological and the historical implications of trauma, Ngugi presents the struggle of individuals to understand their history through a narrative that is itself a rewriting of history designed to liberate the colonized consciousness from its subjection to the disempowering representations of history immanent in colonial ideology.

To the degree that it reconstructs the past with the intention of using history to address the struggles

and contradictions of the present, *A Grain of Wheat* serves as a weapon in such struggles. Viewing the novel, with certain qualifications,[2] as a mode of historical discourse capable of using history as a political weapon of revolutionary struggle, Alamin Mazrui and Lupenga Mphande write:

> Before anything else, therefore, there is a need for historical reconstruction directed towards *freeing* the minds of the oppressed. However, the political activist is interested not only in expunging historical myths from the mind of the oppressed, but also in *mobilizing* it . . . it is not enough to reconstruct the past; that past must also be recreated in sharp orientation to the specific intricacies of present confrontations and struggles (48).

As a committed writer, Ngugi has in mind both freeing and mobilizing the minds of the oppressed. By focusing on the class divisions and social contradictions already emerging even in the days before independence, Ngugi orients the novel towards a critical understanding of the exploitation of the poor peasantry by a new elite class who aim for self-enrichment at the expense of the majority of Kenyans. What he includes in his representation of continued exploitation is the insight that, working in tandem with colonial ideology, psychological trauma produces social effects that serve as powerful forms of mental imprisonment inhibiting political engagement. The rewriting of personal history serves as the first step in a process thorough which individuals will acquire the capacity to collectively transform the oppressive structures of their social world. In *A Grain of Wheat*, the movement towards self-discovery is always simultaneously a move away from individualism and social isolation towards an active consciousness of social responsibility and solidarity with the oppressed.

Resistance and Betrayal

The effects of widespread trauma induced by colonial domination are given a powerful representation in the description of Gikonyo's experience of detention and his reaction to Mumbi's act of infidelity with Karanja. After discovering that Mumbi has had another man's child, Gikonyo experiences a traumatic moment that expresses the cumulative experiences he has endured in the concentration camps:

> The quick, bitter pang he had experienced a few minutes earlier was replaced by a heavy dullness. Life had no colour. It was one endless blank sheet, so flat. There were no valleys, no streams, no trees – nothing. And who had thought of life as a thread one could continue weaving into a pattern of one's choice? (115).

Not simply the effect of his discovery that Mumbi has borne another man's child, Gikonyo's psychological response is linked to the betrayal of his oath to the resistance movement. Throughout the time he spends in the concentration camps, Gikonyo maintains his stability by constructing an idealized vision of his relationship with Mumbi. His connection with Mumbi provides a psychological defense against the suffering that he endures. During the six years that he spends in detention, Gikonyo feels "that life's meaning [is] contained in his final return to Mumbi" (116). Once his idealized vision of their relationship comes to occupy the sole source of meaning for his existence, he gives up on the possibility of finding any purpose in political life by betraying his oath. Because he has placed the entire burden for the meaning of his life on his return to Mumbi, her betrayal leaves him without a reason for living. The subsequent revelation that the child is his friend Karanja's offspring

only intensifies his sense of profound alienation. Losing the ability to feel anything, Gikonyo experiences a profound sense of the futility of all struggle and loses all hope for the future.

Significantly, his initial response to this traumatic homecoming is to develop philosophical justifications for his feelings of despair and powerlessness that are almost identical to those that Karanja formulated years earlier on the platform at the train station:

> She had betrayed the bond, the secret, between them: or perhaps there had never been any communion between them, nothing could grow between any two people. One lived alone, and like Gatu, went into the grave alone. Gikonyo greedily sucked sour pleasure from this reflection which he saw as a terrible revelation. To live and die alone was the ultimate truth (117).

Like Karanja, Gikonyo responds to loss by adopting a stance of extreme philosophical pessimism that only leads him to complete isolation. Furthermore, after his return, Gikonyo abandons his craft as a carpenter for the career of a petty trader, an instance of abandoning fulfilling, non-alienating labor for a role in the developing capitalist economy that has a clear parallel with Marx's depiction of the social processes that produce alienation. The imagery used to describe this revelation also suggests that his condition of alienation existed long before he learns of Mumbi's betrayal. Despite the fact that the "milk" has been soured, Gikonyo continues to derive a twisted satisfaction from the injury that has been done to him as he "greedily" wallows in his own misfortune. Through this imagery, Ngugi suggests that Gikonyo's moral and psychological paralysis derives partly from his unfair idealization of Mumbi whom he expects to have remained unchanged during the six years of his absence. Even here

there is a subtle form of individualism nurtured by the narcissistic disposition Gikonyo develops after so many years of torture and isolation. His obsessive focus on Mumbi's imperfections enables him to repress his own feelings of guilt and failure over the betrayal of his oath. His completely unsympathetic view of Mumbi's betrayal (he seems to lack any idea of the desperation and powerlessness she has endured) is symptomatic of his inability to forgive himself. Gikonyo's experience of psychological trauma has its basis in interpersonal, political and economic factors that all conspire in bringing into existence an individualist stance virtually indistinguishable from the one adopted earlier by Karanja.

In much the same way, Mugo lacks any awareness that he has any connection with other human beings or the social world. Although he is unlike Karanja to the extent that he makes no active attempts to dominate or do violence to others, Mugo remains dominated by egotism and self-interest. His betrayal of Kihika is driven, in part, by the same desire for self-preservation that impels Karanja to join the Homeguards and hunt down Mau Mau rebels. However, unlike Karanja, Mugo's individualism has its origin in the loss of his parents at an early age and the extreme psychological abuse he suffers at the hands of his aunt. Mugo's traumatic childhood instills in him a profound fear of abandonment, yet, tragically, the very experiences that produce this fear lead him to adopt attitudes and ambitions that further isolate him from others. Despite his desire to be accepted by the community, his powerful need for recognition steers him towards a profession and a set of values that isolate him:

> He turned to the soil. He would labour, sweat, and through success and wealth, force society to recognize him. There was, for him, then, solace in the very act of breaking the soil: to

> bury seeds and watch the green leaves heave and thrust themselves out of the ground, to tend the plants to ripeness and then harvest, these were all part of the world he had created for himself and which formed the background against which his dreams soared to the sky (8).

Although Mugo's relationship to the natural world seems to be a source of life-affirming growth, the "solace" he discovers in communion with nature is extremely ironic. His dreams include no one but himself, and his profession separates him from the community. Although he maintains an active relationship to the earth, he remains a passive spectator in relation to his community. Mugo is driven by an ethic of individual achievement that encourages him to perceive wealth and success as the path towards acceptance in his community. His clear affection for his work and appreciation for the natural world, although positive qualities in themselves, provide no opportunity for him to participate in a wider sphere of communal interests since they serve only as a means of recognition rather than as ends in themselves. Rather than discovering a connection to the community in his work (as Gikonyo is able to do as a carpenter), Mugo labors in relative isolation in order to gain the acceptance and admiration of others. It is perhaps the most powerful irony of his life that, driven by a profound fear of being alone, he adopts an individualist ontology that all but ensures his continuing isolation.

Viewed in terms of Mugo's psychological development, his individualism appears as a symptom of his inability to move beyond the traumatic experience of his childhood and link his own destiny with the fate of his community. Through Mugo in particular, individualism and alienation are exposed as features of the historical process militating against the formation of a collective consciousness among the oppressed peasantry

in colonial Kenya. The process of colonization, and the progressive dehumanization which it entails, is part of the broader process of capitalist domination, and generates a pervasive attitude of philosophical pessimism that convinces individual subjects that they are passive victims of circumstances beyond their control. Imprisoned in this perspective, Mugo lives in a perpetual state of "disconnectedness" that makes him into a passive victim of events:

> Previously he liked to see events in his life as isolated. Things had been fated to happen at different moments. One had no choice in anything as surely as one had no choice on one's birth. He did not, then, tire his mind by trying to connect what went before with what followed after. Numbed, he ran without thinking of the road, its origin or its end (172).

Not simply a rationalization that functions to suppress his guilt over betraying Kihika, Mugo's conviction that human beings have no power to change their condition ensures his passive consent to oppression and collaboration with the social order. Although they seem to be opposing principles in a superficial sense, through Mugo, individualism and passive consent are exposed as mutually reinforcing features of the dehumanizing process endemic to colonial rule. Mugo cannot bring the meaning of his life into focus, nor see the connection between his fate and the fate of others because his passive acceptance of an undefined cosmic order directing the course of human events prevents him from assuming any moral responsibility for his actions. Dominated by self-interest, he lives with a fragmented consciousness that prevents him from piecing together his experiences into a comprehensible pattern. As David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe aptly put it, "in Mugo, Ngugi dramatizes the sad folly and futility of a life of uncommitedness" (72).

Furthermore, his flight from social responsibility places him at the mercy of both his internal impulses and the historical forces transforming his society. Mugo remains incapable of narrating his experiences in a way that might enable him to find a purpose in his existence. In short, he acts incoherently because he is incapable of commitment. Not surprisingly, an egotistical assessment of his importance is what convinces him to betray Kihika. Deluding himself into believing that he is "destined to be a great man" (197), Mugo impulsively decides to turn Kihika into the colonial authorities after living in agonizing uncertainty for a week. As he walks towards Thompson's office, his "lofty sensations" are "mixed up with thoughts of the money reward and the various possibilities opened before him" (197). Indeed, the act of betrayal promises to provide him with the means to realize his desire for success and wealth. What drives Mugo to betray Kihika ultimately proves to be a desire for personal power:

> He would flash his victory before the eyes of his aunt's ghost. His place in society would be established. He would be half-way on the road to power. And what is greatness but power? What's power? A judge is powerful: he can send a man to death, without anyone questioning his authority, judgment, or harming his body in return. Yes – to be great you must stand in such a place that you can dispense pain and death to others without anyone asking questions (197).

In the depiction of Mugo's underlying motivations, Ngugi illuminates the complex relationship between individualism, alienation, and colonial ideology by exposing how all conspire to produce the objective conditions under which power becomes the primary object of desire for colonizer and colonized alike. Working to disrupt any sense of community, place, or moral

obligation, the process of colonial domination reproduces in the very subjects that it traumatizes a powerful impulse to brutalize and dominate other human beings.

When he betrays Kihika, Mugo succumbs to this impulse while simultaneously convincing himself that he is engaging in an act of moral courage. Experiencing "a pure delicious joy at his own daring, at what he [sees] as a great act of moral courage" (199), Mugo deludes himself into believing that he occupies a position "beyond good and evil" (199) as he revels in the power over life and death that his knowledge gives him. However, this taste of power is exceedingly short-lived, and right after he betrays Kihika to Thompson reveals itself to be motivated by servility to the forces of colonial domination. As he stands in Thompson's office, Mugo experiences the passivity in response to oppression that goes hand in hand with individualism:

> He felt a deep gratitude to the whiteman, a patient listener, who had lifted his burden from Mugo's heart. Who had extricated him from his nightmare. He even dared to look at the whiteman, the new-found friend (199).

Mugo's submission to the blind working of fate and his submission to colonial rule prove to be one in the same. His betrayal runs much deeper than mere servility to Thompson and the power he represents. Seduced by fantasies of power, Mugo betrays the community that has nurtured him by accepting the very logic of domination that has eroded the community's inner cohesiveness. The foundation of Mugo's later psychological imprisonment by guilt and remorse has already been laid once he accepts power as the only force worthy of recognition. The logic of domination necessitates servility to those who are more powerful, and cruelty or indifference to the less powerful and defenseless. Mugo's most significant defeat is a psychological one and resides in his acceptance of the pessimistic assumptions that

inform colonial ideology—that is to say, the individualist ontology that sees human beings as isolated subjects whose interests are always antagonistic and irreconcilable. As the ironic depiction of his interactions with Thompson suggests, Mugo, like Karanja, is a moral coward driven by a selfish need for self-preservation no matter what the price to the community.

At the same time, when Mugo saves a woman from being beaten by a member of the homeguards, he demonstrates that there are contrary impulses within him towards sympathy and identification with others. Mugo's betrayal has resulted not only in Kihika's death, but also brought the attention of the colonial authorities to the village. The repression that follows—indeed, the forced labor the villagers endure digging a trench to separate them from any contact with resistance fighters—is a response to the evidence of Mau Mau activity in the region provided by Mugo. A clear reference to the Great Barrier Ditch, a fifty mile long ditch begun in 1953 to prevent the sympathetic population of the villages from providing food, weapons, and ammunition to the forest fighters,[3] the events in the trench testify to Mugo's growing awareness of the destructive consequences of his actions. Mugo is directly responsible for the forced labor and abuse that each individual in the village has become subject to after Kihika's capture and execution. Although he struggles against this growing awareness of responsibility, it asserts itself against his will when he saves the woman from punishment:

> 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 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 (173).

Experiencing both a growing sense of moral responsibility and a powerful feeling of identification with the woman, Mugo impulsively intervenes and takes the blows meant for her. After the event, Mugo has no idea why he put himself at risk and can only see the incident as "a nightmare whose broken and blurred edges he could not pick or reconstruct" (173). Although his actions are clearly motivated by a sense of solidarity and perhaps even a need for expiation, his lack of conscious commitment makes him unable to comprehend the act in a way that might give his life direction or purpose. Unable to consciously conceive of his connection with others despite his actions, Mugo continues to find himself adrift in an unintelligible universe devoid of higher meaning or significance. Ironically, he will only be able to find his responsibility and connection to the community at the cost of being expelled from it.

A Dialectical Vision

Indeed, Mugo's confession is central to the vision of social justice that Ngugi offers at the close of the novel, a vision that emerges through the contrast between Mugo and Karanja. When Mugo confesses to his act of betrayal at the Uhuru celebration, he is finally able to fully comprehend the moral responsibility that he bears towards others:

> No sooner had he finished speaking than the silence around, the lightness within, and the sudden freedom pressed heavy on him. His vision became blurred at the edges. Panic seized him, as he descended the platform, moved through the people, who were now silent. He was conscious of himself, of every step, he made, of the images that rushed and whirled through his mind with only one constant thread: so he was responsible for

> whatever he had done in the past, for whatever
> he would do in the future (235-6).

Mugo's sudden sense of responsibility for his actions suggests a departure from the social isolation that has plagued his existence and a discovery of an obligation to the community that transcends individualism. Through this newly-discovered ability to link his actions in a coherent narrative, Mugo finds his connection to the community. His willingness to sacrifice himself constitutes both a perception that he can have no place in the new social order and an awareness that he must accept the verdict of the new society in order to take full responsibility for his act of betrayal. He chooses his fate with the knowledge that it is part of the process by which the community might overcome the obstacles of the past. At the same time, the cruel irony of Mugo's execution is that his acceptance of the necessity of his death makes him more a part of the community than he could ever have been if he had given into the impulse to flee and begin another life someplace else.

In this regard, Mugo's moral courage finds an implicit contrast in the cowardice and self-interest of Karanja who, fleeing Rung'ei for another life, suffers a far worse fate than Mugo. Still driven exclusively by an impulse for self-preservation and the pursuit of power, Karanja can only shudder with fear as he imagines himself as a helpless rabbit torn apart by dogs. His fear for his own safety causes his thoughts to turn instinctively to his power as a member of the homeguard when he could "dispose of human life by merely pulling a trigger" (230). The contrast between Mugo and Karanja is laden with irony because Karanja, unlike Mugo, seems to "escape from his own actions" (238) despite his greater guilt. Nonetheless, within the hierarchy of values that Ngugi presents in the concluding chapters of the novel, Karanja suffers from a profound form of psychological imprisonment that is a product of the very value system

he had adopted at Rung'ei station years earlier. Perhaps so as to suggest the moral blindness and futility that follows from the individualistic ontology Karanja adopts from his colonial masters, we last see him at the very train station where, years earlier, he had resigned himself to struggle only for his own survival. In the final portrait of Karanja, Ngugi depicts the pursuit of power as a fruitless and ultimately self-destructive undertaking. As he reflects upon his past actions as an informer, the full extent of his betrayal becomes evident:

> One by one they went past him, and Karanja inside the hood recognized many people and knew with pleasure that none of them could see him . . . The picture of Mugo at the platform, like a ghost, rose before him, merging with that of the hooded man. Karanja stood near the crossing, contemplating the many eyes that had watched Mugo at the meeting. The train was now so near he could hear the wheels screeching on the rails. He felt the screeching in his flesh as on that other time at Rung'ei station. He was conscious too, of many angry eyes watching him in the dark . . . When the train disappeared, the silence around him deepened; the night seemed to have grown darker. (231)

While providing specific details of Karanja's role in sending scores of people to concentration camps, the passage emphasizes the pleasure he derives from concealment in a way that suggests the psychological motivations that impelled him to collaborate with the colonial authorities. Concerned only with preserving himself, Karanja derives great pleasure from the feeling of invulnerability that his position affords him. As yet one more example of the logic of domination that informs colonial ideology, this feeling of power is indistinguishable

from the one Mugo experiences before betraying Kihika. The negative psychological consequences of adopting a set of values that recognize no obligations to others are clearly suggested by Karanja's profound social isolation and growing feelings of remorse. Karanja's moral choices have expelled him from the community and made him worthy only of the severe condemnation implicit in the image of angry eyes watching him from the darkness.

The condemnation of those angry eyes is reserved not only for Karanja, but represents the collective judgment—from the standpoint of the disenfranchised, oppressed peasantry—of those who have betrayed the people. Ngugi's socialist vision finds expression through the criticism directed at those members of the new elite who are already, even at the moment of independence, betraying the movement's promise of land and freedom. This betrayal becomes apparent in the doubts and anxieties about the future in the minds of those who fought and suffered for independence. These feelings are in the forefront of Gikonyo's mind as he speaks to Mugo about the meaning of independence:

> But now, whom do we see riding in long cars and changing them daily as if motor cars were clothes? It is those who did not take part in the Movement, the same who ran to the shelter of schools and universities and administration. And even some who were outright traitors and collaborators . . . At political meetings you hear them shout: Uhuru, Uhuru, we fought for. Fought where? (68-9).

Through Gikonyo's growing awareness of a new caste of wealthy Africans reaping the benefits of independence, Ngugi depicts the extent to which the nationalist bourgeoisie has betrayed the movement for their own self-interest. Those who took little or no part in the struggle against colonial rule or even collaborated with it in order

to preserve themselves and their selfish interests are the ones moving into positions of political and economic power.

In passages such as the one above, Ngugi criticizes the political discourse of African officials that conceal the class antagonisms and social injustices that continue to be a part of Kenya's socio-economic structure, in order to clear the way for a regenerative vision and a positive mythology created from the ashes of the old system (Drame 2). The description of the members of the new privileged caste as cowards and collaborators evokes an implicit comparison with the individualist Karanja who recognizes no moral obligations to others. The clash of values between this new rising wealthy class and the peasants who fought for independence in the movement is given explicit attention when Gikonyo and five associates attempt to purchase a settler's farm and are betrayed by their own political representative:

> Following yesterday's talk with the M.P., Gikonyo called on the five men concerned with the scheme. They reviewed their position and decided to enlarge the land company, raise the price per share, and invite people to buy shares. In this way, they would raise enough money for Burton's farm . . . The first thing they saw at the main entrance to Green Hill Farm (as Burton's farm was called) was a new signpost. Gikonyo could not believe his eyes when he read the name. They walked to the house without a whisper among themselves, but all dwelling on the same thought. Burton had left Kenya for England. The new landowner was their own M.P. (169).

Using the knowledge given to him by Gikonyo concerning the farm, the M.P. acquires it for himself. Occurring only a day before official independence, this episode suggests that the underlying economic structure of the society has remained unchanged. As the European settlers leave, a

new class of wealthy individualists comprised of former collaborators are swiftly occupying their place. The consciousness of Gikonyo and the others involved in the enterprise suggests Ngugi's endorsement of a set of values grounded in a sense of solidarity with others rather than ones governed by brutal self-interest. Their attempt to purchase the farm is a collective project based on cooperation that, through their intention to offer shares, includes the interest of the community as a whole. This model of collective ownership exists in stark contrast to the self-interested purchase of the farm by the M.P., an act that is registered with profound irony in the solitary name on the "new" signpost. Viewed in connection with the social relations and values reproduced by the colonial system, the only new thing is the name itself. The M.P.'s betrayal makes it clear that the means of production are merely changing hands without any essential changes to the colonial system itself.

The emergence of a new ruling class, comprised of an indigenous minority who were able to gain limited privileges for themselves under British domination, finds equally powerful expression in General R.'s troubled thoughts concerning the future of Kenya:

> "We are still here. We whom you called traitors and collaborators will never die!" And suddenly General R. recalled Lt. Koina's recent misgivings. Koina talked of seeing ghosts of the colonial past still haunting Independent Kenya. And it was true that those now marching in the streets of Nairobi were not the soldiers of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army but of the King's African Rifles, the very colonial forces who had been doing on the battlefield what Jackson was doing in churches. Kigondu's face was now transformed into that of Karanja and all the other traitors in all the communities in Kenya (220-1).

General R.'s thoughts before making his speech at the Uhuru celebration suggest his clear recognition of the coming betrayal of the people by a new set of oppressors. A movement intended to culminate in the acquisition of land and freedom for all Kenyans has already failed to bring about any substantial changes to the system itself. Nonetheless, in his obsessive focus upon the individuals who betrayed the movement during the struggle for independence, General R. loses sight of the broader social and economic forces at work in the betrayal of the people. As Gerald Moore notes: "[the] search for the betrayer of Kihika years before is truly an irrelevance, the betrayal is going on all around [him] at that very moment, as those who stayed in the wings during the struggle step forward to occupy the seats of power" (273). Like many other characters in the novel who are inhibited by the traumatic experience of colonial domination and unable to collectively make their own history, General R. remains imprisoned in the past on a futile quest for retribution. At the same time, despite the limitations of his perspective, General R.'s consciousness, along with the descriptions of class domination and the hopes and misgivings of other characters, paint a portrait of continuing exploitation and socio-economic inequality unlikely to be overcome merely by political independence.

Adopting a critical attitude to the individualist ideology accompanying independence, the novel clearly suggests, through the promise of reconciliation between Gikonyo and Mumbi, a hierarchy of values in which communal investments triumph over self-interest. The carving of the stool, an act accompanied by Gikonyo's "hands [itching] to touch wood and chisel" (245), culminates in his intention to carve a woman "big with child" (247) on its surface. Not only promising Gikonyo's eventual reconciliation with Mumbi, his return to his craft entails a movement towards overcoming the condition of trauma visited upon Kenya by the colonial system. Gikonyo's return to carving consists of a departure from

alienated labor as a petty trader to fulfilling labor as a craftsman. Forming his original intention to carve the stool while still in detention, Gikonyo's decision at the end of the novel to begin working on it promises a transformation of the suffering of the past into a just and productive future. Not simply an individual act, Gikonyo's return to a traditional aesthetic cultural form serves as "a *leit-motif* of the mythical and socio-political experience of the entire society" (Awuyah 9). The return to tradition signifies not so much a return to the past as a rediscovery of a fundamental link to other human beings effaced by the colonial system.

Ngugi's analysis of the destructive effects of colonialism upon the well-being of his characters is informed by a socialist vision of history that views the primary historical task of the people as the construction of a social order that bases its essential structure upon a consideration of human needs. This vision extends well beyond the values promoted at the end of the novel to embrace a conception of human nature that points to the revolutionary consciousness informing the work. Writing about the status of *A Grain of Wheat* in regard to the consciousness informing it, P.A. Aborisade suggests that although "Ngugi's humanism coincides and coheres in the same region with Marx's and Fanon's" his "hopes and aspirations are based, if not on a providential intervention, on a moralistic piety, a hope that a change of heart will be wrought, maybe through a general regeneration" (66). From Aborisade's perspective, the novel would most likely fail to qualify as a product of revolutionary consciousness. If one takes into account only the values that Ngugi celebrates through the symbolic carving of the stool, then Aborisade's analysis is surely correct. However, Ngugi's treatment of trauma as a crucial determinant in the ideological reproduction of individualism and philosophical pessimism implies both a Marxian theoretical framework and a revolutionary consciousness. As Omafume F. Onage writes in

categorizing the different trends in African literature:

> "[t]he socialist realist artist—or intellectual for that matter—shows the world as changeable. And because of his historical materialist outlook, his prospective vision is a positive statement on behalf of the revolutionary aspirations of the exploited classes" (410).

To the extent that *A Grain of Wheat* not only shows the world as changeable, but also critiques the socio-economic processes that reproduce the forms of philosophical pessimism and individualism that prevent individual subjects from being able to conceive that change is possible, it serves as a powerful example of revolutionary realism. In the final image of the stool, the revolutionary aspirations of the exploited peasantry are given concrete representation in the figure of a woman (Kenya) pregnant with a new future. Through Ngugi's critique of the destructive effects of domination upon those compelled to exist under the colonial system, individualism, self-interest and the need to dominate others emerge as ideological products of an historically specific set of social relations that prevail under capitalism, not as ineradicable features of the human condition.

Notes

[1] For an essay typical of the Christian reading of the novel, see, Govind Narain Sharma, "Ngugi's Christian Vision: Theme and Pattern in *A Grain of Wheat*," in *African Literature Today* 10, London: Heinemann, 1979, 167-176. For Sharma, "rebirth and regeneration, the end of brokenness and alienation and the restoration of wholeness and community" (167) constitute the central theme of the novel and embody Ngugi's interpretation of

Christianity. As in most Christian readings of the novel, Sharma ignores the clear evidence throughout the text that social antagonisms and class differences persist even at the moment of independence, a fact that makes restoration and wholeness far from an accomplished fact but a project to be achieved by the solidarity of the poor, dispossessed peasants who fought against the colonial government during the Emergency.

[2] Namely, the limitations of the European perspective on the novel that understand it either, in its realist mode, as an objective account of reality or, in its modernist form, as the expression of an individual consciousness rather than a collective one. As Mazrui and Mphande present the problem that these perspectives create for the African activist: "For history to serve as a weapon in creative literature, a writer must transcend the boundaries of mere description of reality and negate the notion of individual consciousness." ("The Historical Imperative in African Activist Literature," *Ufahamu* Vol 18, no. 2 (1989-90): 49). In other words, the activist writer must convey the collective consciousness of the oppressed and their unique perspective on history.

[3] For a more complete discussion of the building of the ditch, see, Robert B. Edgerton, *Mau Mau: An African Crucible*, 92-93. The Great Barrier Ditch was approximately ten feet deep and sixteen feet wide, filled with barbed wire and sharpened stakes and patrolled day and night by police posts set up every half-mile. It was constructed almost entirely by forced labor that included women and children who worked an average of twelve hours a day.

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