

# **Mugo's Public Confession as a Purveyor of Moral Guidance to the Kenyan Community in its Project of Building a Post-Independence Nation in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat***

إعتراف «موغو» بالذنب كواعظ خلقي للأمة الكينية في بناء وطن ما بعد  
الإستقلال في رواية «حبة القمح» للكاتب «نغوجي واثيرونغو»

## **L'aveu public de Mugo comme guide moral de la communauté kenyane dans son projet de construction d'une nation post-indépendance dans *A Grain of Wheat* de Ngugi wa Thiong'o**

Mohamed Chaabane Ali  
Université de Blida 2

### **Introduction**

This paper is primarily intended to read Mugo's public confession of his shameful act of betraying the national hero during the Kenyan war of independence in Ngugi waThiong'o's novel *A Grain of Wheat* in relation to the author's idealistic vision of his nation's future. In spite of having been traitor during the war, Mugo through his act of confessing publicly this "secret" conveys partly Ngugi's moral vision in this novel in the sense that, as will be discussed subsequently, this act underscores the need of the community to re-assess critically its moral past if it seeks to build the nation that has been dreamt of during the war of liberation. In other words, Ngugi's main moral message behind the story of Mugo is that the celebration of the heroes and the vilification of the traitors are not all that the people who set themselves the task of healing their nation need right after independence; and because these people are neither simply good nor simply evil, they are called upon to revisit the moral commitment towards their nation that they have displayed so far.

Arguably, Mugo's confession does not only result in his own redemption but also inspires the people to morally redeem themselves in their struggle to establish social justice in the post-colonial period. If nothing else, Mugo's confession establishes, however symbolically, social justice after the Kenyan war of liberation since it has led to the execution of the true traitor of the village hero. But more importantly, apart of achieving personal salvation, Mugo's act of confession in a public space has a great impact on his community whose

members appear to have an idealistic view of reality motivated by their celebration of independence rather than engaging in re-assessing the morality of their actions during the war of liberation. And this begs the following question: how can Mugo's confession in *A Grain of Wheat* provide moral guidance to the Kenyan people who are entrusted by the author with the task of building their long-awaited nation?

In this novel, which is mainly about the Kenyan war of independence (also known as the Mau Mau war), Ngugi suggests some remedies to his community so that a new Kenya is built, and since Mugo's confession has a tremendously positive impact on his local community, the examination of this impact offers insights into Ngugi's proposed moral solutions to the actual predicament of his nation. By being written in the post-colonial period that is marked by disenchantment with the status quo, this novel is also duly regarded as a work that is intended by its author to be a call for the Kenyans to revisit their past so that a healthy nation characterised by social justice will be built. However, the past that needs to be revisited does not only consist of the glorious acts of the freedom fighters but also the mistakes committed by the people during the liberation war as these mistakes, if they are not profoundly analysed, run the risk of being repeated after independence. Mugo's confession, as will be discussed later, at least heightens his people's awareness of their moral flaws, and at best encourages them to strive indefatigably in a bid to overcome these weaknesses.

At the level of its structure, *A Grain of Wheat* contains a number of subplots but its main plot is the villagers' attempt at unravelling the mystery surrounding Kihika's death. As aptly argued by Simon Gikandi, "the central movement of the novel concerns the nationalists' slow discovery that Mugo, the ostensible hero of independence, was a traitor" of Kihika, the mythical hero of their village Thabai where the major events of the novel are set (Gikandi 2000:101). Kihika was "crucified" by the colonial authorities during the State of Emergency and Karanja, who obviously collaborated with these authorities, is suspected by the villagers to have been involved in their hero's death. To their surprise, they finally discover that Mugo is Kihika's "Judas" as a result of his public confession.

At the level of its ideology, *A Grain of Wheat* is a novel of political commitment. It must be emphasised that the political commitment in African literature implies far more than providing a bitter critique of the status quo but can also take the form of suggesting a redemptive course of action so that a new (or healthier) post-independence African nation is constructed (Simatei 2001). African writers have tried to function as enlighteners of their people by inviting

them to take an active part in creating a new social order marked by the end of the current social stratification. For example, Ngugi mainly opts for the socialist solutions to the neo-colonial woes of Africa in general and his country Kenya in particular. Yet Ngugi's socialist discourse appears very prominently in his post-*A Grain of Wheat* literary production (Cook and Okenimpke 1997:100). Without much ado, Socialism in postcolonial African literature is an ideological discourse that invites the peasants and the workers to challenge the neo-colonial system in which they are ruthlessly exploited by using different means such as strikes or even violence in the hope of creating a classless society.

More significantly, this paper rests on the premise that morality is not a personal or individual matter; it is a communal concern and thereby resides at the heart of imagining a new nation in post-colonial Africa (see Eze 2011). However, a vision of a renascent nation should not solely be based on its founding myths (for instance, the Gikuyu myth that is evoked in Ngugi's presently discussed narrative) or the great moral ideals such as the ideal of sacrifice as embraced by Kihika but also one has consider the morality of the very people who are supposed to be the true agents for optimal social change. In other words, envisaging a better future for Kenya need not be solely inspired by the remembrance of its glorious past but also by the moral re-assessment of all the decisive actions of the people. Seen in this way, if Mugo through his public confession succeeds in drawing his people's attention to the complexity of the moral situation in their country, this means that he plays some role, however minimal, in heightening their consciousness so that they will be placed in a better position to face their future challenges.

In his *Moving the Centre*, Ngugi famously declares that *A Grain of Wheat* is "a celebration of [Kenya's] independence and a warning against the pitfalls [of national consciousness]" (Ngugi 1992:4). Our reading of this novel suggests that those pitfalls are partly traced in the examination of Mugo's life since he betrayed his nation during the war of liberation, and worse still, he is falsely considered by the villagers of Thabai to be one of their prominent heroic figures. Accordingly, the perils of decolonisation in this work are foreshadowed on the Uhuru day during which, and following Mugo's confession, the ceremony that is meant to celebrate people's victory turns into a chaotic situation of confusion. The Thabai people are warned that their expectations could be wrong and that they have to be careful about any collective decision that they need to make. As will be shown later, the scene of Mugo's confession provides the novel with one of the tropes of arrested decolonisation.

In order to shed light on the ways in which Mugo's public act of confessing his betrayal of Kihika provides a moral guidance to the Thabai villagers, and by extension the larger Kenyan community, in the project of building their nation after independence, a number of issues need to be addressed. Chief among these include the following: the allegorical importance of Mugo's confession, its function as a driving force for collective moral introspection in a bid to attain communal redemption, and last but not least, the alarm bell it rings about the perils of decolonisation.

## 1. Mugo's Weird Character in the Novel

The far-reaching implications of Mugo's confession of his national betrayal for his community cannot be fully understood unless a due attention is paid to the psychological condition that compels him to confess his crime to the crowd of villagers on the independence day. Obviously, *A Grain of Wheat* opens with the narrator's depiction of a state of restlessness from which Mugo, the most important character of the novel, suffers.. The novel's narrator tells the reader that:

Mugo felt nervous. He was lying on his back and looking at the roof. Sooty locks hung from the fern and grass thatch and all pointed at his heart. A clear drop of water was delicately suspended above him. The drop fattened and grew dirtier as it absorbed grains of soot. Then it started drawing towards him. He tried to shut his eyes. They would not close. (Ngugi 1967:1)

Still, the reader learns later that Mugo's work on the land is spasmodic and unproductive. His inability to work regularly on his land can also be attributed to his uneasy mental condition. As the story unfolds, the reasons for his anxious state are gradually made explicit. However because of the novel's structural complexity as it is characterised by the author's excessive use of the flashback technique, the reader takes some pain to understand the real causes of Mugo's permanent state of anxiety. As pointed out by Eustace Palmer, this novel shows Ngugi at "at his most baffling and exasperating, withholding information, supplying it belatedly when he chooses, employing flashback within flashback" (Palmer 1972 :125).

Mugo is an orphan who was raised by his cruel aunt, whose maltreatment has affected negatively his personality development. His traumatic childhood experiences account partly for his reluctance to listen enthusiastically to Kihika's speechifying that encourages all Kenyans to be "saviour figures" of their nation. Mugo is shown to be utterly disinterested in Kihika's call for his com-

patriots' involvement in the fight against British imperialism. After all, Mugo does not feel any urgent need to save a community from which he is completely alienated. His unpreparedness to take part in the anti-colonial struggle is clearly revealed in the following interior monologue that is taken from the novel:

Why should Kihika drag me [Mugo] into a struggle and problems I have not created? Why? He is not satisfied with butchering men and women and children. He must call on me to bathe in the blood. I am not his brother. I am not his sister. I have not done harm to anybody. I only look after my little shamba and crops. And now I must spend my life in prison because of the folly of one man. (Ngugi 1967:22)

Also, Mugo's jealousy of Kihika's good position in society constitutes another reason for his reluctance to assist Kihika in his self-appointed mission of fighting the coloniser. Worse still, Mugo betrayed Kihika to the whiteman. However, as James Stephen Robson puts it, "Mugo is not a traitor by nature, but he is confused and irritated by the responsibility Kihika burdens him with" (Robson 1972:86). Thus, Kihika's fatal mistake is entrusting Mugo with a mission that he is unable to fulfill. Despite betraying Kihika, who is viewed by James Ogude as "the symbol of revolutionary values in the novel" (Ogude 1999:52), Mugo has never been portrayed to be against the Mau Mau revolution. His repentance at the end indicates that he has never been satisfied with what he did.

Nevertheless, in spite leading a lonely life, the Mau Mau war veterans, namely, General R. and Lieutenant Koinandu, insist that Mugo deliver the main speech of the ceremony where the freedom martyrs, especially Kihika, will be honoured. Mugo's courageous deeds during his detention such as organising a hunger strike in Rira and saving a pregnant woman from being severely beaten by a homeguard led people to weave heroic stories about him. In addition, he is popularly believed to have sheltered Kihika once the latter killed a colonial officer. Therefore, it is no wonder that he is appointed by General R. and Lt. Koinandu to be the main speaker during the Uhuru ceremony organised by Thabai villagers. As Simon Gikandi notes, "the greatest irony of the novel ... is that Thabai community has come in invest all its desires and aspiration" in Mugo (Gikandi 2000:109). Thus, Mugo is the most complex character in the novel. He embodies the contradictions of the lives of the Kenyan people during the Mau Mau war. He was a traitor when he was thought to be a hero and he becomes a hero when he confesses his treason act.

## 2. The Allegorical Importance of Mugo's Public Confession

The aim of this section is to explore the allegorical significance of Mugo's confession in Ngugi's story. To this end, two things need to be stressed. On the one hand, Mugo's confession can be taken as a symbol of moral regeneration. On the other hand, Mugo's confession is read as an act that is conducive to another novelistic episode in which the symbol of nation building which takes the form of family reunion comes to the fore. In other words, in addition to achieving his own redemption, Mugo's confession in a public meeting encourages each villager to seek his or her own redemption. The more people redeem themselves, the higher their likelihood of becoming healers of their nation. In his intertextual study which focuses mainly on the affinities between Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* and Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, Oliver Lovesey points to the communalist dimension of Mugo's confession of his betrayal which can be pitted against the confession of Conrad's Razumov before a group of revolutionaries. Lovesey concludes that when compared to Razumov's confession, Mugo's "is more wide-reaching" because it takes place before his community on the Uhuru day (Lovesey 2012:48).

Thus far, much has been said about the Christian symbolism related to Mugo's confession. The latter has commonly been understood as an act of expiation. Before his betrayal act, Mugo displayed a propensity towards Messianic self-projection. In one instance, he identified himself as Moses. If anything, this indicates that Mugo's consciousness has been influenced by Christianity. But, unlike Kihika's idealistic vision which stems from the biblical narrative (by identifying himself as a Christ-figure), Mugo's Christian vision of his potential heroism as a prophet who could deliver his people from slavery to the land of Canaan has not been transformed into action. If put differently, while Kihika's idealistic thought is put in the service of his community, Mugo's idealism detaches him further from the community. In this vein, Richard Lane avers that "Mugo has rejected the time of the crisis that society is experiencing (i. e., the crisis of colonialism and its violent rejection, and the concomitant increase in repressive counter-measures) in favour of the time of prophecy, where he merely waits for destiny" (Lane 2006:48). He explains better this point in the following lines:

From Mugo's isolated perspective, the process whereby those ideals are transformed is messy, troubling and problematic. He wants to rely on some undefined transcendent force, some

external agency, that will eventually put everything right. (Ibid : 48-49)

While Mugo's idealistic thought has not been translated into a redemptive action, his deep understanding of the social reality which he has gained as a result of the psychological torture he suffers from following his act of betrayal pushes him to take a redemptive action which is manifested in his public confession. Thus, he represents people whose heroic actions are based on a thorough understanding of real experiences rather than being solely motivated by any idealistic dogma.

Mugo's confession enables him to regenerate his morality. Even more so, for Govind Narain Sharma, this act allows for his integration into the community. Sharma indeed argues that the novel's "real theme ... is not betrayal or disillusionment but rebirth and regeneration, the end of brokenness and alienation and the restoration to wholeness and community" (Sharma 1979:201). He further states that:

The concept of regeneration is applicable to the individual as well as to society. Personal salvation is visualised as the end of alienation and return to community through self-discovery, which involves acceptance of responsibility as a human being and a willingness to be honest with oneself. Mugo's decision to purge the guilt in his own soul by confessing to his betrayal of Kihika indicates his growth to a man's state and symbolizes the end of his alienation. (Ibid : 204).

The argument that Mugo's confession symbolises the Christian concept of regeneration is further supported by the rainfall that follows his act of confession in that this rain symbolically suggests that his soul has been cleansed. In addition, Mugo's sense of relief that he feels after his confession is starkly contrasted with his state of anxiety from which he suffers before. After all, Mugo does not take advantage of the mistaken praise heaped on him by his fellow villagers as they see him as their hero in order to end his state of alienation and possibly involve himself in social matters as a highly respected individual. He purges himself from his guilt and comes what may.

Ngugi's novel shows that individual alienation leads nowhere; it is an unhealthy condition for both the individual and his community. As averred by David Cook and Michael Okenimpke, "in Mugo, Ngugi dramatizes the sad folly and futility of a life of uncommittedness" (Cook & Okenimpke 1997:72). Importantly, in this novel, it is made visible that Mugo's heroic action of confessing his betrayal is more important for the entire community than his previous

heroic actions of, say, saving a woman from being whipped by a homeguard during the war of liberation. Through Mugo, then, Ngugi reveals that a person can shift from the state of being so morally flawed to the point of acting against the will of his community to a new moral state in which his actions will be taken in accordance with the values of the community.

As mentioned previously, besides being a symbol of individual's moral regeneration, Mugo's confession serves in the development of Ngugi's story where a potent symbol of nation building is brought to prominence. Noticeably, Mugo acts as a catalyst to the resolution of the problems of some of the other characters, namely, Gikonyo and Mumbi whose happy ending at the closure of the story as they resume their marital relationship after having been on the verge of divorce symbolises the possibility of national regeneration amidst a state of anomy. The reconciliation between Gikonyo and Mumbi is the main note of hope with which the novel ends. The resolution of Gikonyo's conflict with his wife foreshadows the emerge of a new nation (Jabbi 1985:211).

The novelist establishes an interesting relationship between Mugo and Mumbi. Mugo helps Mumbi in resolving her personal problem and vice versa. More precisely, Mumbi ceases to be estranged by her husband as a consequence of Mugo's public confession, and yet it is Mumbi who has already acted as Mugo's *Confiteor* and hence helping him to restore his connection with the community since Mugo's private confession to Mumbi who happens to be Kihika's sister paves the ground for his public confession.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, the female character Mumbi functions as "the symbolic mother of the nation" (Gikandi 2000:119), and hence whoever helps her restore her earlier position as Gikonyo's loved wife is said to contribute symbolically to the process of nation building. It is indeed Mugo whose public confession motivates Gikonyo to end his conflict with Mumbi. Though Mugo's confession results in his execution, thanks to his act that Gikonyo and Mumbi become happy once again. As far as this point is concerned, Mark Mathuray interestingly notes that Mugo's "confession at the end of *A Grain of Wheat* facilitates the reconciliation of Mumbi and Gikonyo, which Ngugi figures metonymically as a promise of hope for the Kenyan nation" (Mathuray 2009:42).

While in detention, Gikonyo betrayed the Mau Mau Movement by confessing the oath in the hope of being reconciled with Mumbi. In effect, he betrayed all the detainees who "had agreed not to confess the oath, or give any details about Mau Mau: how could anybody reveal the binding force of the Agikuyu in their call for African freedom?" (Ngugi 1967:103). Soon after his return to Mumbi, he discovered that she had betrayed him during his detention. So both



Gikonyo and Mumbi are betrayers: the former betrays the oath and the latter her husband.

However, Gikonyo's reconciliation with her is only made possible after Mugo's confession, whose positive effects on Gikonyo's battered psyche resulting from his shattered expectations about Mumbi's fidelity to him are clearly mentioned in the following passage:

For the last three days he [Gikonyo] thought of Mugo and the confession. Could he, Gikonyo, gather such courage to tell people about the steps on the pavement? ... Mugo had the courage to face his guilt and lose everything. Gikonyo shuttered at the thought of losing everything. (Ngugi 1967:245)

Following his discovery of Mumbi's betrayal, Gikonyo feels reluctant to listen to anyone including his mother Wangari about the possibility of pardoning Mumbi. Yet it is only after hearing Mugo's confession that he considers seriously the idea of forgiving her. If nothing else, Mugo's confession reminds him of his moral lapse during his detention and that everyone can be wrong at any time. Furthermore, Gikonyo is ashamed of his unpreparedness to be honest to other people by confessing his betrayal of the Mau Mau Movement during his stay in detention camp, and thus it is with renewed moral integrity that he asks the following question: "what difference between him and Karanja or Mugo or those who had betrayed people and worked with whiteman to save themselves?" (Ngugi 1967:278). In this vein, Caminero-Santangelo remarkably notes that "[a]s a result of his reflection on Mugo's confession, Gikonyo begins the healing process with his estranged wife Mumbi by being willing to listen and open his heart to her" (Caminero-Santangelo 2004:62). More significantly, Gikonyo's response to Mugo's confession which he makes instead of delivering the Uhuru Day speech is just one instance of the positive impact of Mugo's courageous confessional act on the entire community.

Furthermore, through sharing secrets with each other, the Thabai people can promote a communalist culture which is in firm opposition to the culture of self-interest and individualism that is endemic to the neo-colonial regime. As far as this point is concerned, Caminero-Santangelo additionally writes that:

In this extremely symbolic text, the promise of reconciliation through sharing stories represents the hope that Kenya will be able to combat the neo-colonialism foreshadowed in the text, in part by forging a collective culture that counters the values of self-interest and exploitation. (Ibid : 62-63)

Although Mugo's main intention behind his confession is to heal his troubled psyche, he appears to initiate a healing process of his ailing nation in the long run. That is to say, despite the fact that his confession is "ego-driven" (Bewes 2010:119), he contributes to the development of his people's moral consciousness without which their nation can hardly if never be cured of its maladies.

In short, besides seeing the reconciliation between Gikonyo and Mumbi in symbolic terms for it may represent the beginning of a new nation, the main characters of the novel, in the words of Brendon Nicholls, "desperately need to reconcile themselves to their unavowable histories of mutual betrayal before embracing a collective future" (Nicholls 2010:85). It is therefore Ngugi's way of saying that the people cannot build a healthy nation in the future unless they reach some atonement with their past.

All in all, Mugo's confession contributes to the process of nation building if only at the symbolic level. Cleansing his soul in a brave confessional act inspires others such as Gikonyo and Mumbi to follow suit. Mugo's confession has a catalytic impact on Gikonyo as the latter tries to resolve the dilemma of his marriage. However, not only does Mugo's confession serve Gikonyo's personal life, which, in turn, is often seen to be emblematic of the life of the community, but has a real effect on the life of the community as well. And to this last point we now turn.

### **3. The Confession of Mugo as a Driving Force for the People's Collective Introspection of their Moral Commitment to the Nation**

Apart from playing a key symbolic role in the novel, Mugo shows that even with independence, the community has not yet attained full self-consciousness. Ngugi through Mugo's confession demonstrates that the cleansing of the individual soul can pave the way for the purification of the communal soul. If anything, Mugo's confession draws his people's attention to the necessity of scrutinising their actions during the Mau Mau war so that they can overcome the moral challenges they may be faced with in their struggle to realise their aspirations.

Indeed, it is not surprising that Byron Caminero-Santangelo sees Mugo's confession as "an act of self-sacrifice for the good of the community" (Caminero-Santangelo 2004:60). Mugo is executed by the people whom he has taught about the complexity of the moral situation in the village. As pointed out by Michael Vaughan, "[i]t is possible that Ngugi intends him [Mugo] to act as the

surrogate for some missing principle of the community itself, since his community appears unable to heal its wounds” (Vaughan 1981:31). Until Mugo confesses publicly his part in Kihika's death, the community members, including the Mau Mau war veterans, appear to have been victims of their misunderstanding of the complex realities. This is clearly reflected by the fact that they have mistaken a traitor for a hero. Accordingly, Mugo “becomes the symbol of the community's absent self-consciousness” (ibid : 31). Mugo's speech during the Uhuru ceremony makes them aware that the moral condition of Thabai is too complex to be summarised by the heroic deeds of Kihika and the evil character of his betrayer. People are not simply divided into virtuous and wicked. This is in line with David's cook's statement when he says that:

To see someone as a hero or a villain is always an oversimplification: it is to see him at one time in one set of circumstances only; but a man is more than one thing. In counterpointing various aspects of his characters' lives in *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi calls on us to moderate callow judgements of individuals with a more human compassion. (Cook 1977: 96-7)

The villagers are therefore made aware that the trouble with their nation is not over once the traitor of Kihika is executed publicly. True, they need to remember the heroism of the freedom fighters and condemn the villainous action of the nation's betrayers. However, the freedom fighters are not necessarily morally “pure” individuals; nor are the traitors of the nation satanic figures.

In spite of having sacrificed his life for the well-being of the community, Kihika is not “idealised” by the novelist since he is by no means presented as a flawless character. His major flaw, indeed; is that he identifies himself as the arbiter of the people. He places himself in a superior moral position that, he thinks, allows him to judge the morality of others' actions. Ironically, it is Mugo's confession that allows his people to understand that Kihika is not a morally pure hero. In this respect, Eileen Julien makes the following comment:

Mugo's act calls upon the people of Thabai to look at themselves honestly as he has done and to accept the unvarnished truth that “pure” heroism is an ideal. Real people are rarely so pure, or their antagonists simple. (Eileen 1983:142)

Similarly,, the traitor of Kihika is not necessarily constructed by the author the epitome of villainy. Even though it is Mugo rather than Karanja who betrayed Kihika, Mugo is portrayed by the novelist to be morally superior to Karanja. Fundamentally, Karanja is the only main black character in the novel who never eases his troubled conscience and who continues to lead an unful-

filling life. On the contrary, Mugo shifts from an old psychic state characterised by moral failure to a new moral state which is ushered in by his expiation as a result of his confession.

If only the morally “pure” individuals who could take part in the process of building their nation in the post-independence, then a few individuals who could be involved in such project. A nation is not only to be built by people who have a heroic past; everyone, regardless of his guilt, could be involved in this national project provided that he shows remorse. Though it rarely happens, the villain of the past can be the hero of the present.

Moreover, by being an exceptional hero, Kihika is not easy to follow by his fellow countrymen. On the other hand, Mugo is a fallible character and hence people can easily identify themselves with him. Interestingly, Taiwo Ogundare and Isaac B. Lar argue that Mugo’s confession does not only result in the expiation of individual guilt [as] the episode helps other characters to evaluate themselves realistically” (Ogundare & Lar 1998:34). Thus, the villagers could take two role models for the course of action that they have to take for their future. Obviously, Kihika is the first role model, and yet his ideals are difficult to be translated into real action. Mugo, despite his previous treachery, appears to provide them with moral guidance. Interestingly, it has been put forward by Byron Caminero-Santangelo that Mugo is really the kind of individuals whom the Kenyan community needs after independence. He says that:

Kenya already has heroes like Kihika who embody values such as a willingness for sacrifice in the pursuit of common goals. But the new nation now needs heroic figures who represent the notion of sacrifice through public confession because of the growing irony of false heroes. (Caminero-Santangelo 2004:61)

Mugo’s story shows that an individual can overcome his moral weaknesses. More remarkably, his confession accelerates the process of punishing Kihika’s “Judas”, and hence Mugo seems to initiate the process of healing his nation soon after independence. Whereas Kihika dies so that others live, Mugo dies so that others may recognise their moral lapses. That seen, we can safely say that Mugo sacrifices his life for the sake of his personal redemption and yet his personal redemption pushes other to redeem themselves too. A nation is not to be built solely by people with no guilt at all. In Eileen Julien’s words, “Mugo is a character who, in his complexity, resembles the reader ... [he] is human in both the most glorious sense and in the most pathetic sense” (Julien 1983:142). In this regard, it is interesting to further note that Gikonyo sees Mugo as a good example for the people who will remember more his immensely courageous act

of public confession on the Independence Day than his awfully treacherous deed during the Mau Mau war. Gikonyo says,

He was a brave man, inside ... he stood before much honour, praises were heaped on him. He would have become a chief. Tell me another person who would have exposed his soul for all the eyes to peck at... Remember that few people in the meeting are fit to lift a stone against that man. (Ngugi 1967:202)

Surprisingly, our contention is that Mugo's popular reputation as a village hero is more firmly established after his confession. Importantly, Mugo, though unwittingly, prompts the villagers to accept that human nature is a complex mixture of strengths and weaknesses and reminds them that man can be morally weak in one instance and can become morally strong in another. Mugo enables them to move beyond the simplistic view of equating some individuals with virtue and others with vice.

Consequently, nation-building is not a process that has to be invigorated by the idealistic vision of the freedom fighters which divides people into heroes and villains but also has to be guided by a thorough understanding of the moral challenges that lie ahead. Kihika fought the people's external enemy (i. e. the coloniser) and Mugo indirectly exhorts them to identify their internal enemy which is the moral frailty that inhibits them from taking the right action vis-à-vis their community. As astutely argued by Julien, Ngugi's text "shifts its focus from the external threat to well-being, such as the infamous colonial powers, to the more frightening internal menace of weaknesses, fears and doubts" (Julien 1983:143). Just as people can be invigorated by the heroic stories of the freedom fighters, they can also learn from the mistakes of the morally weak or flawed people. The post-colonial project of building a healthier African nation should not be based on the vilification of the external enemy but also on the moral assessment of the African self.

Mugo's confession, therefore, draws the villagers' attention to the need for embarking on the internal struggle of overcoming moral weaknesses before they build their long-awaited nation. By gaining independence, this does not mean that they are on the right moral path and that evil is only to be found in people whom they consider to be traitors or villains. Each one of them might have betrayed his nation in his own way on one occasion, and, more seriously, there is also a risk of betraying the nation in the future. Thus, the need for moral self-examination becomes so urgent, and it is only after Mugo's confession that they start to re-assess, whether publicly or privately, their moral conduct

towards each other and towards their nation in general. Léon Mugesera argues that

Mugo's courageous act redeems his soul but not his body because he is to be killed. However, his confession has a positive impact on other characters, showing them the right way to follow even though they do not die for their guilt. (Mugesera 1983:222)

In other words, if Mugo confesses his guilt and is executed accordingly let alone others whose possible guilt or moral weaknesses do not require capital punishment. Mugo, thus, becomes the hero of people on the day on independence. As Kenneth Harrow aptly observes, Mugo's confession which makes him subject "to punishment is "taken an act of resistance and courage" which in turn elevates him to "the status of a hero" (Harrow 1985:258). It can therefore be argued that, though he is not aware of it, Mugo sacrifices his life on the Uhuru Day so that a collective introspection in the hope of attaining communal redemption is made.

In brief, Mugo is indeed one of the rare characters in Ngugi's novels who act as a guide to other people without intending to be so. This is mainly because Mugo's public confession, as contended elsewhere, arouses "the messianic potential sleeping in every individual" (Zida 1991:71). If nothing else, the people are reminded by the scrutiny of Mugo's psyche as it is revealed in his speech on the independence day that that their struggle does not end with the celebration of their victory over the coloniser. As interestingly observed by Leslie Monkman, "[f]inally, the villagers realise that the possibility of rebirth and growth lies not in the elevation of heroes and condemnation of villains from the past but in *the union of all men in an objective recognition of their interdependence and of their common potential for future achievement*" (Monkman 1975:113, *emphasis added*). Had Mugo commemorated Kihika's heroism in his speech on the independence day, it may be argued, he would not have affected positively his community's psyche in the way he does by confessing his act of betraying Kihika.

#### **4. Mugo's Confession as a Warning against the Pitfalls of the Perils of Decolonisation**

Mugo's public confession makes people aware of their moral lapses during the Kenyan war of liberation on the one hand, and warns them against the problem of false heroism on the other. Since the man chosen to lead Uhuru celebrations is actually Kihika's traitor, the people are warned that any leader could have been or will be a traitor. Mugo's confessional act in a public space proves that people can be wrong and hence the myths that they have developed about the heroism of many individuals cannot be always taken on trust. Therefore,

this scene, according to James Ogude, 'serves to undermine the false rhetoric of post-liberation politics by calling for a thorough examination of the motives and actions of [the post-independence] national leaders' (Ogude 1999:75). Mugo is created by the novelist to remind the reader that individuals who are viewed as heroes by their people can betray their community or nation and act out of personal ambition.

Even Ngugi himself has already admitted that Mugo can be an inspiring character for the Kenyan people who might be victims of some popular delusions. Ngugi writes that '[i]n the novel *A Grain of Wheat*, I tried, through Mugo who carried the burden of mistaken revolutionary heroism, to hint at the possibilities of new Kenyatta' (Ngugi 1981:90). A nation cannot be well-built unless its enemy is unmistakably recognised.

As mentioned previously, Mugo's story provides the novel with one of the tropes of arrested decolonisation. This term has been popularised by Biodun Jeyifo and is usually used to refer to the unfinished project of independence in Africa as this project has given rise to black nations characterised by misrule and corruption (Jeyifo 1990:33-42). With respect to Ngugi's novel in question, Richard Lane opines that Mugo's story is emblematic of the ways in which independence has failed to lead to the creation of an ideal Kenyan nation as dreamt of by the Mau Mau freedom fighters and the Kenyan people in general. In this vein, he says that "Mugo's narrative is ... symbolic of the way in which decolonization can be arrested or even transformed into neo-colonialism" (Lane 2006:47). In this novel, Mugo's speech during the Uhuru ceremony turns the euphoric mood of the audience into a state of confusion and this can be seen as an allegorisation of the political situation of Kenya in which independence has been followed by a state of disillusionment. The Uhuru celebrations, which are symbolic of people's aspirations and social dreams, break up in confusion and disappointment. Shatto Arthur Gakwandi states that '[f]ar from being an occasion for jubilation the ceremony uncovers the unpleasant realities which the community has so far been unwilling to face' (Gakwandi 1977:232). Mugo's speech on the Uhuru day does not as much spoil the villagers' happiness as it compels them to consider some painful realities that they prefer to forget during the celebration of their independence.

## Conclusion

In sum, Mugo's public confession, as the foregoing discussion reveals, is not a simply a matter of an individual who seeks moral atonement; rather, it is, more importantly, an act that has a tremendously positive impact on the community

so that the latter will be more conscious of the moral challenges that can be raised by dint of its involvement in the project of building a post-independence nation. If anything, Mugo's confession serves as an invitation to his community to engage in some sort of moral self-examination. The project of nation building should not solely be motivated by the heroic history of the Kenyan people's anti-colonial resistance but should also be informed by an acute awareness of the individuals' moral frailties. All in all, the major lesson that the villagers can learn from Mugo's confession is that their external struggle against the coloniser has to be followed immediately by an internal struggle against their moral weaknesses if a healthy nation is to be sought. Mugo's confession is at once a result of the growth of the individual's moral awareness regarding the impact of betraying his nation on his psyche and an impetus for the development of the community's moral consciousness so that its members who are supposed to build their nation cease to base their actions solely on an idealised vision of their moral past. Ngugi's main moral message that can be inferred from Mugo's story is the following: besides taking the heroic deeds of the freedom fighters as a source of inspiration for the community's project building their long-awaited nation, the Kenyan people have to analyse their own mistakes and the mistakes of others committed during the war of liberation otherwise these mistakes run the risk of being reproduced after independence.

## Bibliography

### Primary Source

Ngugi, wa Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*. London: Heinemann, 1967.

### Secondary Sources

Bewes, Timothy. *The Event of Postcolonial Shame*. Princeton University Press, 2010.

Caminero-Santangelo, Byron. *African Fiction and Joseph Conrad: Reading Postcolonial Intertextuality*. SUNY Press, 2004.

Cook, David. "A New Earth: A Study of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*". Ed. David Cook. *African Literature: A Critical View*. London: Longman, 1977, pp. 95-112.

Cook, David & Michael Okinempke. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: An Exploration of his Writings*. London: James Currey, 1997.

Eze, Chielozona. *Postcolonial Imagination and Moral Representations in African Literature and Culture*. Lexington Books, 2011.



Gakwandi, Shatto Arthur. *The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa*. London: Heinemann, 1977.

Harrow, Kenneth. "Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*: Season of Irony". *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 16, No. 2, Summer 1985, pp. 243-263.

Jabbi, Bu-Buakei. "The Structure of Symbolism of *A Grain of Wheat*". *Research in African Literatures*, 16 (2), 1985, pp. 210-242.

Jeyifo, Biodun. "The Nature of Things: Arrested Decolonization and Critical Theory". *Research in African Literatures*, 21 (1), 1990, pp. 33-41.

Julien, Eileen. "Heroism in *A Grain of Wheat*". Ed. Eldred Durosimi Jones & Eustace Palmer. *African Literature Today: Recent Trends in the Novel*. London: Heinemann, 1983, pp. 136-145.

Lane, Richard. *The Postcolonial Novel*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006.

Larson, Charles R. *The Emergence of African Fiction*. Indiana University Press, 1972.

Lovesey, Oliver. *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o*. Modern Language Association, 2012.

Lutz, John. "Ngugi's Dialectical Vision: Individualism and Revolutionary Consciousness in *A Grain of Wheat*" *Ufabamu: A Journal of African Studies*, vol. 29, No. 2, 2003, pp. 171-198.

Mathuray, Mark. "Resuming a Broken Dialogue: Prophecy, National Strategies, and Religious Discourse in Ngugi's Early Work". *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 40, No. 2, Spring 2009, pp. 40-63.

Monkman, Leslie. "Kenya and the New Jerusalem in *A Grain of Wheat*". *African Literature Today*, 7, 1975, pp. 111-116.

Nicholls, Brendon. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Gender, and the Ethics of Postcolonial Reading*. Ashgate, 2010.

Ngugi, wa Thiong'o. *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1981.

Ngugi, wa Thiong'o. *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*. London: James Currey, 1992.

Ogude, James. *Ngugi's Novels and African History: Narrating the Nation*. London: Pluto Press, 1999.

Ogundare, Taiwo I & Isaac B. Lar. *Conflicting Symbols in the Novels of Ngugi wa Thiong'o*. Deka Publications, 1998.

Palmer, Eustace. *An Introduction to the African Novel*. London: Heinemann, 1972.

Robson, James Stephen. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Fight against Colonialism and Neo-colonialism: AN Exploration of the Theme of Betrayal*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, 1972.

Sharma, Govind Narain. "Ngugi's Christian Vision: Theme and Pattern in *A Grain of Wheat*". Ed. Eldred Durosimi Jones. *African Literature Today: Prospect and Retrospect*. London: Heinemann, 1979.

Simatei, Tirop Peter. *The Novel and the Politics of Nation Building in East Africa*. Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, 2001.

Vaughan, Michael. "African Fiction and Popular Struggle: The Case of *A Grain of Wheat*". *English in Africa*, vol. 8, No. 2, 1981, pp. 23-52.

Zida, Jean. *Commitment as an Aesthetic Form: Ngugi wa Thiong'o and John Steinbeck*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, 1991.

---

## Abstract

This paper is chiefly intended to examine the ways in which Mugo's public confession of his national betrayal in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* provides moral guidance to the Kenyan community which is entrusted by the author with the project of building a post-independence nation marked by the end of social stratification. Apart from being motivated by the remembrance of the heroic history of the Mau Mau freedom fighters, this national project could be guided by the individuals' moral self-examination whose necessity becomes so apparent as a result of Mugo's confession on the Uhuru day. The idealistic vision of the nation that dominated the Kenyan people's consciousness during the war of liberation needs to be reinforced by a deep realistic understanding of the extent to which they have so far been morally committed to their nation. More significantly, their external struggle against the coloniser has to be followed by an internal struggle against their moral frailties so that they will be placed in a better position to face the moral challenges that are likely to be raised by their involvement in the establishment of their long-awaited nation. In short, unless they take Mugo as a model as he proves able to redeem himself by sharing his secret story of betraying the nation with his village community, they can hardly take an active part in healing their nation from such social maladies as self-interest or egoism that begin to loom large just after independence.

---

## Keywords

Mugo's Public Confession, Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, Moral Guidance, Redemption, Collective Introspection, Post-Independence Nation Building.

---

## المخلص

يهدف هذا المقال إلى دراسة مدى تأثير الإعتراض أمام المألا لشخصية "موقو" بخطيئته المتمثلة في خيائته لبطل قومي إبان ثورة التحرير الكينية في رواية "نقوقي واتيانقو" المعنونة بـ "حبة قمح" على الأفراد المصممين على بناء وطن ما بعد الإستقلال وهذا من خلال توعيتهم لضرورة القيام بعملية تحليلية

لأخلاقهم قبل الهم بمشروعهم الاجتماعي الذي لا يبني فقط على التغني بأمجادهم دون الوقوف على أخطاهم. وقد حث الكاتب شعبه عن طريق قصة "موقو" على السعي الجاد وراء إصلاح النفس حتى يتسنى له تطوير رؤية حقيقية تبتعد عن المثالية المستوحاة من الملحقات البطولية لأجل تشييد وطنه المنشود.

---

مفتاحية

الإعتراف بالخطيئة، إصلاح النفس، الإرشاد الاجتماعي، مراجعة أخلاق الأمة، بناء وطن ما بعد الإستقلال.

---

## Résumé

Cet article propose de mettre en lumière la façon dans laquelle la confession publique du Mugo concernant sa trahison d'un héros national dans le roman *Une graine de blé* par l'écrivain Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o guide sa communauté à construire sa nation postcoloniale en tenant en compte la nécessité primordiale pour une évaluation critique de la moralité des individus. Cette confession attire l'attention du peuple kenyan au besoin de lutter contre leurs défauts moraux après avoir vaincu le colonialisme. En conséquence, il n'est pas suffisant pour les kenyans d'avoir une vision idéaliste de leur passé anticolonial sans analyser profondément les fautes commises pendant la guerre de la libération qui risquent d'être reproduites après l'indépendance. En outre, l'acte confessionnel du Mugo qui assure sa rédemption exhorte sa communauté à se purifier moralement pour que une nation égalitaire soit construite après l'indépendance.

---

## Mots-clés

La confession publique, Rédemption, guide moral, Introspection collective,