

Received : 11-09-2020

Published : 30-12-2020

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *A Grain Of Wheat* And Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*: An Intertextual Study

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to study the intertextual relationship between Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*. The hero of Conrad's novel Razumov is a literary twin-brother of Mugo, the anti hero of Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*. The theme of betrayal of trust, which is central to Ngugi's concern in *AGOW*, bears certain resemblance to the same theme treated in Conrad's *UWE*. We attempt to show that this intertextual thematic focus is a means to comment on some of the universal problems of man; that is modern man irrespective of geographical setting, cultural affiliation and social status, is complex and fragile.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to study the intertextual relationship between Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*. The hero of Conrad's novel Razumov is a literary twin-brother of Mugo, the anti hero of Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*. Razumov in *UWE*, strives courageously to lift himself from poverty and obscurity. He therefore resents any claims upon him by causes or individuals. Revolutionary colleagues often mistake his constant aloofness as signs of his austere dedication to the cause. The same situation leads Mugo in Ngugi's novel to be far from the Mau Mau fighters. The young revolutionary hero, Haldin in Conrad's novel visits Razumov immediately after an undisguised assassination. This is the case of Mugo who is also visited by Kihika in Ngugi's text. As Kihika expresses faith in his taciturn and unwilling host Mugo, so does Haldin express faith in Razumov. The theme of betrayal of trust which is central to Ngugi's concern in *AGOW*, bears certain resemblance to the same theme treated in Conrad's *UWE*. This intertextual thematic focus is a means to comment on some of the universal problems of man; that is modern man irrespective of geographical setting, cultural affiliation and social status, is complex and fragile.

Before starting our study, it is worth beginning by a short definition of the term intertextuality. It is derived from the Latin *intertexto*, meaning to intermingle while weaving, and is generally understood as meaning the structural relations between two or more texts. This concept became popular mainly in the late 1960's with the French Semiotician Julia Kristeva, a member of the *Tel Quel* school of French theorist, among whom was also Roland Barthes. Though she was the first to coin the term intertextuality, it is Mikhail Bakhtin who is

regarded as having initiated the concept. She, in fact, was influenced by his ideas which she popularised afterwards. *Desire in Language* demonstrates Bakhtin's influence on Kristeva and how she transforms, revises, and redirects his work. In "The Bounded Text" included in the same work, she focuses on setting the manner in which a text is built out of already existent discourse. According to her, the authors do not create texts from their own minds, but they rather take them from previous texts. For her intertextuality "situates the text within history and society, which are then seen as texts read by the writer, and into which he inserts himself by rewriting them" (quoted in Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein.1991: 63). In the same sense, Kristeva insists on the fact that all texts embody the ideological structures and struggles expressed in society through discourse. The theory of intertextuality leads to the principle that no text operates in isolation and that " tout texte se construit comme une mosaïque de citations, tout texte est absorption et transformation d'un autre texte" (Julia Kristeva. 1969:146).

Intertextual Relation between Ngugi's AGW and Joseph Conrad's Under Western Eyes

In his *A Grain of Wheat* Ngugi follows Conrad, mainly in the way this writer handles his characters, for he often sets them in situations that examine their moral strength. He also displays their inner thoughts, reflections and mainly their feeling of guilt. This is the view of G. D. Killam in his *An Introduction to the Writings of Ngugi* (1980:55). Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and *Under Western Eyes* certainly carry these characteristics. Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* is mostly compared to the latter mainly at the level of characterisation and theme. Benaouda Lebdaï has pointed to these comparisons when he writes that "[I]n the structure of the novel, the meeting of the two men [Kihika and Mugo] is a pivot because of its consequences, like Haldin and Razumov's meeting in *Under Western Eyes*" (1995:321) and that *A Grain of Wheat* carries on the exploration of the theme of betrayal and guilt inherent in Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* but within a specific Kenyan history. (Ibid.,326).

A Grain of Wheat depicts the events leading to the coming of Uhuru, but the focus is not on the major events that are recorded in history books. The novel is precisely about the freedom movement. Through a series of flashbacks in the lives and experiences of his principal characters --Mugo, Gikonyo, Mumbi, Kihika, Karanja, and Thompson -- all of whom reflect on it on the eve of the Uhuru, Ngugi is able to weave, extremely skillfully, a multi-faceted but powerful picture of the struggle. Both through direct narration and through reflections by his characters, Ngugi creates an atmosphere of hopes and fears, successes and defeats, loyalties and betrayals that were typical of the struggle. The novel is about a group of people from Thabai, who are about to celebrate Uhuru within the four days during which the story takes place. This however is also the occasion on which each of these characters remembers his or her role in the freedom struggle particularly during the Emergency and the 'Mau Mau' phase of the struggle. Mugo now a village hero, recalls his betrayal of Kihika, Gikonyo recalls his confession of the oath during interrogation in the detention camp. Mumbi recalls the circumstances under which she was forced to submit herself to Karanja, the village chief and the collaborator of the colonial administration. Karanja recalls his subservience to the D.O., while Thompson and his wife recall their role as a part of the white colonial administration.

This story, indeed, reminds us of the story of Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*. Actually, Conrad's novel opens on the narrator's presentation of himself and of Razumov, the central character in the story. Razumov is an illegitimate Russian student who lives alone in an autocratic Russia with which he identifies himself. Even though he is orphaned at an early age, he is satisfied with the life he leads since he holds out hope for a better life in Russia. However, an upheaval in his life has transformed his existence into an insuperable crisis. The revolutionary Haldin appears and makes him live an endless nightmare. Razumov denounces him to the authorities. In Geneva, he encounters the dead Haldin's sister and some other Russian immigrants for whom he is considered as a brother. Yet, it is there that his further ordeal takes place where he confesses his deeds to the assembled revolutionists and endures torture.

The first striking resemblance between the two works is the scene where the heroes meet their betrayers. The section where Razumov and Haldin meet in Conrad's novel is skilfully reworked in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* with the meeting of Mugo and Kihika in almost the same manner, the same tone, and if not the same words. This, we are going to confirm by comparing the characters in both works. Thus Mugo's counterpart in *Under Western Eyes* is Razumov; Kihika is Haldin; and Mumbi is Nathalie.

Like Razumov who is "as lonely in the world as a man swimming in a deep sea"(1947:10) without a family or home, Mugo is a poor orphan brought up by a drunken aunt whom he cannot but hate because of the atmosphere of misery, insecurity, and poverty she inspires through her eccentric behaviour. From this follows his tendency to aloofness and preference for isolation. But he sometimes revolts against this isolation and "wanted somebody, anybody, who would use the claims of kinship to do him ill or good" (1988:08). Both characters have not led a normal life, and this brings about a profound effect on the formation of their personalities. In their adult lives, they grow selfish and endeavour to avoid any kind of commitment. For Razumov, "to be implicated meant simply sinking into the lowest social depths amongst the hopeless and the destitute" (1947:25-26) and Mugo, in his turn, affirms that he "never wanted to be involved in anything" (1988:185). Their attitude is certainly the expected result of their deep experiences in loneliness and isolation. Overwhelmed with confusion and despair Razumov says "[I]f I must suffer let me at least suffer for my convictions, not for a crime my reason -- my cool super-reason -- rejects" (1947:35). Similarly, Mugo expresses his hesitation and mainly his confused mind when he owns up "[I]f I don't serve Kihika he'll kill me... If I work for him the government will catch me" (1988:154). This is evidence of Mugo's weak and distorted personality as it shows in his fear of involvement.

The most important feature the two characters share is betrayal. Razumov, who is supposed to have helped Haldin to flee the authorities informs on him and is executed on the spot. From the first meeting with Haldin, Razumov is thinking about the situation in which he finds himself involved without his consent. He is so resentful that at a certain moment he says "I'll kill him when I get home" (1947:32). Like Razumov, Mugo betrays Kihika who wants to take refuge in his hut. Mugo's betrayal can be explained by two reasons: first, that he is attracted by the reward destined for the one who indicates Kihika's refuge; and second, that he is

jealous of Kihika, who is regarded as the hero of the community. This feeling of jealousy grows mainly out of the fact that unlike Mugo Kihika, in addition to his being young, has a family by whom he is loved. From the beginning of both works and through the presentation of Razumov and Mugo, we can predict their thoughts and behaviour. They reach the decision to betray Haldin and Kihika respectively and try to justify their deeds in advance. Razumov thinks that he would save Haldin but affirms that “no one can do that -- he is the withered member which must be cut off” (1947:36). Besides, he is sure that they have nothing in common, neither faith nor conviction. It is for this reason that he reaches the point that he is not obliged to give him the opportunity to involve him in such a trouble. He asks “am I obliged to let that fanatical idiot drag me down with him?” (Ibid.,38). Mugo, likewise tries to justify his betrayal by saying “why should Kihika drag me into a struggle and problems I have not created?” (1988:194). Moreover, he thinks that Kihika may play with death because he has his mother and sister who will feel desolate for his end. But Mugo himself has no one who would remember him in case he dies.

The second common point between Ngugi’s *A Grain of Wheat* and Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes* in terms of characterisation is the opposition they have set between the supposed heroes and the real ones. Kihika and Haldin’s representation by the respective authors is the same. We are acquainted with them only through the stories told by other characters though to a certain extent, it is not the case with Haldin. People speak about their heroism, their commitment to establish justice and truth, their principles in general. Both Haldin and Kihika are the heroes who combat injustice to secure a peaceful life for their communities. Yet they are peripheral to the novels because they are spoken of and evoked as legendary figures but never as characters in the stories. Both works show Haldin and Kihika as messianic figures. This is due to the fact that they lay their lives for the well-being of the people.

We can also make a comparison between Haldin’s sister Nathalie and Kihika’s sister Mumbi. The two are the closest parentage of both Haldin and Kihika. As their brothers, they are animated by a strong feeling for justice and truth. Actually, Nathalie’s mother thinks of her as being “the slavish echo of [her] brother Victor” (1947:106). Besides, like Kihika, his sister Mumbi is the kind of woman who does not submit to any pressure. Like Nathalie, she has a strong personality. She once says “[I] may be a woman, but even a cowardly bitch fights back when cornered against a wall” (1988:181). This shows her determination never to let anybody trample on her dignity. Yet in comparison to Nathalie, Mumbi has a more significant role in the novel. The main theme that springs from the reading of the two works is betrayal. It is intertwined with that of guilt, doubt, and fear. The revolutionary Haldin in Conrad’s novel is betrayed by his fellowmen, Razumov, who is as Russian as him. Similarly, Kihika the freedom fighter in Ngugi’s novel is denounced to the white man by his brother Mugo. In order to treat this theme, both authors create a situation in which the revolutionaries have no other issue than to seek refuge with someone who would provide them with security. Ironically, those who are supposed to help the heroes prove to be no more than selfish betrayers themselves. Moreover, they are thought to be the heroes who risk their lives for the sake of the revolutionary Haldin and the freedom fighter Kihika. It is for this reason that they are well received and respected by their communities and especially by the heroes’ sisters who consider them as their brothers’ ‘saviours’.

Conrad and Ngugi make use of some expressions addressed mainly to the supposed heroes in order to intensify the irony underlying both novels. Indeed, the kind of irony they resort to is the verbal one, which mostly fit both authors' aim in creating and developing the feeling of guilt in the characters. For instance, Razumov is told "you are one of us [...] You are clearly a superior nature" (1947:210) or else the General says of him "[H]e inspires confidence". (Ibid.,217). And among the expressions addressed to Mugo is "you have a great heart. It is people like you who ought to taste the fruits of independence" (1988:68). This irony is meant to show the extent to which Razumov's and Mugo's supposed heroic deeds are valuable and since such expressions are directly addressed to them, they are meant to arouse the feeling of guilt in them. Both Razumov and Mugo are sunk in a deep feeling of guilt, which they fail to overcome. It is, in fact, this feeling of culpability that leads them to confess. Razumov wants "to be understood" and "longed desperately for a word of advice, for moral support" (1947:39) and Mugo also confesses that since he has informed the British on Kihika "this thing has eaten into my life all these years" (1988:223). The two characters are in a strong need to get rid of this tormenting feeling. That is why they decide to confess in order to release themselves from such a heavy guilt.

The theme of betrayal is very significant in the two novels in that it goes beyond the individual betrayal. It represents the betrayal of the entire society by those in power. The case in *Under Western Eyes* is that some revolutionaries who pretend to fight the autocratic rule of the Tsarists prove to have diverted themselves from their mission once they have got a certain power, and Razumov's betrayal of Haldin somehow represents the betrayal of this power elite of the whole Russian society. The idea of betrayal in *A Grain of Wheat* is very complex in that it is not so significant at the personal level but somehow symbolises the betrayal of one person, Jomo Kenyatta. The latter, who had been considered as a nationalist leader whose position he acquired after having been arrested in 1952 for having helped the Mau Mau movement, is soon proved to ignore it. However, while the betrayer in Conrad's novel is only one person, in Ngugi's work there are four kinds of betrayers. It is mainly this point that differentiates the two novels. Lebdai quotes Ngugi who says in an interview (1966)

In *A Grain of Wheat*, I look at the people who fought for independence – I see them falling into various groups. There were those who thought the white man was supreme...There were others who supported the independence movement and who took the oath. Of these some fought to the last but others, when it came to the test, did not live up to their faith and ideals...Finally there were those who we might call neutrals -- you know the uncommitted. But these soon find that in a given social crisis they can never be uncommitted. (Quoted in Lebdai, 1995:318)

The betrayers in *A Grain of Wheat* somehow represent these categories. The first traitor in the novel who may correspond to the first group is Karanja, who gives himself to the white man and works for him. He is the one who believes in the superiority of the European. For this reason, he sells his fellowmen's cause to gain sympathy and reward from the part of the white man. He, as G.D. Killam says in the work cited above, "represents the mentality of the colonized African as exactly as Kihika represents the opposite" (1980:68). He works as an informer on those involved in the Mau Mau movement. He afterwards becomes a home guard and chief during the Emergency. Karanja feels disgust at hearing about the deeds of Kihika,

the hero, like Mugo who often shows his dislike and jealousy of the man. Karanja also knows that he can never reach Kihika's status. That is why his seeing Kihika hanging from the tree arouses no pity in him. Instead, he feels only disgust and asks himself: "what is freedom? Was death like that freedom? Was going to detention freedom? Was any separation from Mumbi freedom?" (Ngugi.1988:199). It is after the sight of this scene and his questioning of freedom, which his fellows try to achieve that Karanja confesses the Oath and begins to work for the white man in order to save his life. During these years and with the presence of the white man and his supremacy, Karanja is content to serve the white man. But with the coming of Uhuru, he feels that he ought to leave his land, which presents a threat on him. For this reason he emigrates after independence. Because of all his deeds, and especially his selling of himself and his brothers to the white man, the punishment he deserves is exile from his community. Of all the evils he has committed the one done to Mumbi is worth examining since it shows the real self of this character. Indeed, Karanja is Gikonyo's rival who does everything to gain Mumbi's love. Yet from her youth Mumbi tends towards Gikonyo whom she afterwards accepts as a husband. Consequently, unable to admit Mumbi's refusal of him, Karanja decides to regain her. It is for this reason that Gikonyo has been in detention, he offers her and her mother-in-law his services and helps them mainly in providing food for them. Nevertheless, though he owes Mumbi something, she has not yielded to him. But when Karanja brings her the news that Gikonyo would be released from detention, she is so happy that she lets Karanja make love to her. Karanja is so obstinate in gaining Mumbi since he never accepts his failure in front of Gikonyo that he resorts to all means to have her. And it is the last one which brings fruit to his former temptations.

The second traitor is Gikonyo who is a fervent believer in the freedom fighters and their cause. He takes the Oath and supports the Mau Mau movement very much. Yet when he is detained, he no more bears the separation from his Mumbi. In a strong longing for her and after having been tortured, he confesses the oath. After that, he is released and comes back to her bearing with him a very bitter feeling of guilt of which he does not get rid until he confesses his betrayal of the Oath. Ironically, instead of finding the Mumbi he knows, to his extreme disappointment, he finds that she has been unfaithful to him with his rival and enemy Karanja. Besides, it is almost the same situation which pushes both Gikonyo and Mumbi to betray others. Gikonyo confesses the Oath when he wants to return to Mumbi whom he misses so much and the latter falls in Karanja's arms the very moment he speaks to her of Gikonyo's release from detention. In detention, Gikonyo believes in the coming of a new day when he lives with Mumbi in peace and in complete happiness. For this reason, he at the beginning withstands all the humiliation and torture he has been subject to. He sticks to the hope that after his bitter experience he "would come back and take the thread of life, but this time in a land of glory and plenty." (1988:90-91). Unfortunately, because of the terror he experiences in the camp, which draws him to near madness he renounces the Oath and comes back to Mumbi. From this, we notice that though Gikonyo starts as a strong supporter of the independence movement as well as a great believer in the freedom fighters' cause, he ends a betrayer of this same cause. Nonetheless, this is not to say that he is on a par with Karanja, who deliberately chooses to betray his brothers. Thus Gikonyo falls in the second group to which Ngugi refers. That is to say the one in which a person, for some reason or another, does not keep up to his / her ideals. Because of his deed, Gikonyo, as Mugo enters in a labyrinth of

isolation, for the feeling of guilt has already begun to plague him incessantly. This state is provoked not only because he forswears his Oath, which keeps tormenting him but also his wife's infidelity of which he never thinks because he always has an image of perfection of her. He is so disappointed that he isolates himself in hard work, which is a sort of self-punishment to him. Indeed, the idea of betrayal is not dealt with in separation from the idea of guilt and self-punishment. It is not only the case of Gikonyo but all the characters, who in some way or another fall in betrayal and suffer from concealed guilt.

While Karanja, Gikonyo, and Mugo's betrayal is of a national character, Mumbi's betrayal is of another kind, marital. Like that of Gikonyo, we can say that Mumbi's betrayal is not deliberate. Her longing for her husband makes her yield to Karanja the same moment he informs her about the possibility of Gikonyo's release. She has impatiently waited for such good news that she immediately gives in to her husband's rival. What is ironical here is that during the six years she lives in a thoroughly desperate state she resists Karanja and never thinks of meeting him or living with a man other than Gikonyo but the moment she hears of her husband's release she immediately offers herself to Karanja as a reward for the good news he brings her. Consequently, the price for her infidelity is too dear since Gikonyo now cannot see her as he used to do before his detention. He is too hard on her, cannot and does not want to understand her behaviour. However, after having thought over the situation, he cannot but try and find an issue to his life with Mumbi. He reaches the point of reconciliation and accepts willingly Karanja's child. In so doing, he aspires to a better life with independence, mainly after his getting rid of the concealed guilt, which torments him ever since he has been released from prison.

The character who mostly represents the last category to which Ngugi refers, meaning those who claim neutrality, is Mugo. The latter, as already stated, avoids whatever kind of involvement. Yet time comes when he has to choose whether or not to adhere to the freedom fighters' cause. Mugo, who on many occasions claimed neutrality, now betrays his brother Kihika and becomes no more neutral. Ironically, his avoiding involvement leads him to be implicated in an affair against his own fellowmen. Finally, tormented with guilt, in his confession he says "[I] wanted to live my life. I never wanted to be involved in anything. Then he came into my life, here, a night like this, and pulled me into the stream. So I killed him." (Ngugi.1988:161). These words express Mugo's justification of his betrayal. Seeming to ignore it, the personal motive leading to Mugo's betrayal is like that of Karanja. It is the end of the story which brings a climax whereby Mugo fully realises the atrocity and cowardice of his deed. For this reason, he can no more bear it and decides to put an end to his torments through a public confession.

Of all the kinds of betrayal and betrayers discussed, Mugo's is the most important one since, as already written, he stands for the betrayal of Jomo Kenyatta, one of the most notorious figures in Kenyan history. Indeed, Mugo represents Kenyatta who pretended not to have any link with the members of the Mau Mau movement and who more than this denied his former revolutionary feelings. Furthermore, Mugo's case conveys Ngugi's idea that, however hard one claims neutrality in his life, a specific situation may push him to make choices. But what is ironical here is that instead of working for the sake of the freedom fighters' cause, Mugo

breaks his neutrality by betraying them through his betrayal of Kihika. Besides, General R. himself considers neutrality in general as a kind of betrayal, for he says “[H]e who was not on our side, was against us.” (Ibid.,191-2).

The importance of Mugo lies also in the fact that he is the one to encourage Gikonyo, through his confession, to revise his position and see that he is also a betrayer, who has to seek redemption. Because of what he has committed, he somehow sympathises with Mugo. After the latter’s confession, Gikonyo says “[R]emember that few people in that meeting are fit a stone against that man. Not unless I-we-too-in turn open our hearts naked for the world to look at.” (Ibid.,202). This means that Mugo’s confession opens the way to all those who, in a sense or another, have betrayed the revolution.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, we can say that Ngugi’s *A Grain of Wheat* has an apparent intertextual relationship with Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes*. In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi identifies with the form, the manner and techniques of the Conrad of *Heart of Darkness*. The novel shows how the lives of individuals are determined by the social, political and economic forces in the society. Besides, as with Razumov, Mugo’s tragedy represents the collision of the individual with what others expect of him. This clash is between the individual’s aspiration and the moment when he is bound to take a decision. It is this very clash, which leads the individual to a tragic end. Therefore, as Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes*, Ngugi’s *A Grain of Wheat* is a voyage into the complexity of human consciousness and life.

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