

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Abstract approved: 

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The relationship between literature and nation-building has been one of the most crucial issues in postcolonial studies. The novel in particular is regarded as a means by which writers forge national consciousness among the colonized during the time of colonization. Many African writers themselves, for example, conceive of their work as an arena of resistance to European colonialism which disfigures the identities of Africans and denies their history. In this study, I investigate how Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the foremost Kenyan writer, attempts to construct what Benedict Anderson calls "imagined communities" in Kenya during the colonial era, decolonization, and the post-independence period as reflected in three of his novels: *The River Between* (1965), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), and *Petals of Blood* (1977).

Far from being an unchanging entity, nationalism is a social construct that is constantly redefined and historically contingent. In *The River Between*, Ngugi draws upon Gikuyu cultural practices, especially the contested and value-laden rite of female circumcision, as sources of collective identity on which Kenyans might build to construct a nation. As he moves toward *A Grain of Wheat*, he identifies Kenyan nationhood with the Mau Mau struggle against British rule. In this novel, Ngugi not only contests the British account of the national liberation movement as

barbaric, criminal and tribal, but also critiques the government that urges the Kenyan to forget about the Mau Mau because of its violence. In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi delegitimizes the nation-state as it betrays the hope of the people in post-independence Kenya. Instead of materializing the ideals of the nationalist movement, the nation-state controlled by the elite and the national bourgeoisie fully embraces the ideology of capitalist neocolonialism which, like its cousin colonialism, exploits the marginalized peasants and working-class people. The clear-cut class divisions engendered by neocolonialism indicates that Ngugi's imagined "Kenya," a civil society that gives full value to its people, has not yet come into being, and the struggle of the masses for independence will continue.

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Imagining Kenya in Ngugi's Fiction

by
Ram Prasansak

A THESIS

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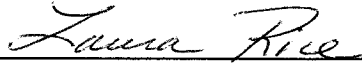
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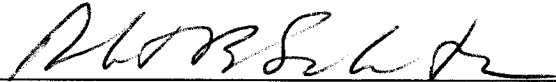
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Ram Prasansak, Author

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With love, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents who cannot read English, yet can enlighten my life more than any teachers and books.

Last but not least, this thesis is also for you, Yuka.

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For the freedom fighters who died in the Mau Mau liberation war

Imagining Kenya in Ngugi's Fiction

1. INTRODUCTION

Colonial Discourse on African History

Negation is one of the defining characteristics of the nineteenth-century colonial discourse. The rhetoric of nothingness and absence is manifested not only in figures of speech in narratives about the colonized landscape and people, but also in the realm of history. That the history of the non-Western is emptied out is perhaps best seen in Hegel's *The Philosophy of History*. Having discussed the absence of African political institutions which he regards as a major element of historical movements, Hegel states that Africa

is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it—that is in its northern part—belong to the Asiatic or European World. . . . What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History. (99)

The passage perfectly demonstrates that the Hegelian concept of history is very Eurocentric in that it revolves around the dualistic mode of Western thinking. The binary opposition between history as a form of human development and nature as a given entity indicates that “the World's History” Hegel mentions is hierarchical, for it locates Europe at the center and non-Europe on “the threshold.” The center/periphery polarization ultimately legitimates Europe as the subject of history, while Africa, subject to nature and incapable of making historical movements, is rendered the object of history.

The denial of African history is also expressed by Hugh Trevor-Roper, the Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford. In 1963, he made a claim that “[p]erhaps, in the future, there will be some African history. . . . But at present there is none; there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness, . . . and darkness is not a subject of history” (qtd. in Mazrui 7). It is worth-noticing that, in Trevor-Roper’s view, Africa can enter “the World’s History” only when it is under European colonial rule which makes Africa, the “dark” continent, visible to the rest of the world. In other words, to use Chinua Achebe’s words in his criticism of Joseph Conrad’s portrayal of Africa in *Heart of Darkness*, Africa is reduced to merely “setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor” (Achebe 257). Since it is conceived of as having a “condition of blankness—of distance and ignorance, of sleep” as Christopher Miller calls it (62), Africa is never the speaking subject of its own history; on the contrary, it functions as a footnote to the history of European colonization. The mystification of the non-existence of African history is well articulated by Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana:

It is said that whereas other countries have shaped history and determined its course, Africa has stood still, held down by inertia. Africa, it is said, entered history only as a result of European contact. Its history, therefore, is widely felt to be an extension of European history. (qtd. in Mazrui 3-4)

The Empire Writes Back

The Eurocentric concept of history was vigorously challenged by African thinkers and writers who attempted to recover the suppressed history of Africa which existed before the advent of colonialism. Perhaps the most influential

thinker who laid a foundation for national liberation is Frantz Fanon. In his monumental work *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon remarks on the profound cultural and psychological effects of colonization on the colonized people. As he puts it:

Every [colonial] effort is made to bring the colonized person to admit the inferiority of his culture which has been transformed into instinctive patterns of behavior, to recognize the unreality of his “nation,” and, in the last extreme, the confused and imperfect character of his own biological structure. (1963: 236)

Fanon contends that colonialism engenders cultural estrangement and psychological inferiority in the natives by devaluing their pre-colonial past: “it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it” (1963: 210). Therefore, Fanon proposes that if the African wants to gain independence, he not only needs to engage in armed struggles against colonial rule, but he also needs to recover the pre-colonial past wherein lies national culture:

The Negro, never so much a Negro as since he has been dominated by the whites, when he decides to prove that he has a culture and to behave like a cultured person, comes to realize that history points out a well-defined path to him: he must demonstrate that a Negro culture exists. (1963: 212)

Recovering pre-colonial culture and history is of great import to the national liberation project because it is a means through which the colonial subjects can regain their identities which have been destroyed by colonial domination. The role of culture as a source of collective identity and thus a site of contestation and resistance in a time of decolonization is also seen in the work of the Guinea-Bissau critic Amilcar Cabral. He argues that the recognition of their

own culture is the means through which the colonized might liberate themselves from colonization and thus restore their own history because culture is “simultaneously the fruit of a people’s history and a determinant of history” (41).

Problems of Cultural Nationalism

Despite its appeal to “reconstitute a ‘shattered community, to save or restore the sense and fact of community against all the pressures of the colonial system’” (Said 209), cultural nationalism is rendered problematic because it presupposes the unity of African culture and history before the arrival of colonization. In the first place, since Africa is an invention of European colonization, forging national consciousness and culture is not an easy task because the pre-colonial history of Africa is tribal and heterogeneous rather than national and monolithic. Mazrui is among the first critics who see the myth of cultural nationalism:

Much of the pre-European history of Africa is in fact “ethnohistory.” The unit of historical identity was the ethnic group or the tribe rather than the territorial state that we now see. The heroes were therefore ethnic heroes rather than national ones. One task of cultural engineering after independence is thus to nationalize these heroes. Kikuyu heroes must somehow be nationalized into Kenyan heroes; and heroes of other tribes should be re-evaluated and given a national stature. (18)

Implicit in Mazrui’s remark here is the idea that nationalism is a discursive formation invented to give a people a concrete shape in a specific context, that is, decolonization. The problem that arises from the myth of “the nation” is what to nationalize and what not. Or to put it in Ernest Renan’s phrase, what to forget and what to remember: “Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is

a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality” (11: bracket original).

Literature and Nation Formation

In “On National Culture,” Fanon argues that since African history, culture and identity have been displaced, disfigured, or destroyed by colonialism, it is the task of the native historians, intellectuals and artists to illustrate “the truths of the nation” (1963: 225) in order to affirm the existence of African culture. In order to produce “a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature” (1963: 223), according to Fanon, the native intellectual “must realize that the truths of a nation are in the first place its realities. He must go on until he has found the seething pot out of which the learning of the future will emerge” (1963: 225). What Fanon is suggesting here is that merely to return to the past in a narrative is scarcely sufficient for the artist who aims to evoke a national consciousness in the colonized to encourage them to liberate themselves from the occupying power. The artist must instead delve into and interrogate the conflict that colonialism has imposed on the native and thus “write back” to the colonizers not only for the sake of the present moment but also to reclaim the past in order to forge a national future.

James Ogude has observed that “[e]arly African narratives have always been seen as writing against colonial discursive practices in an attempt to validate Africa’s historiography denied by colonialism” (1). In literature, he notes, this process of regeneration was marked by the emergence of cultural nationalism.

African writers also consider their work as a means by which the Africans can recover from the impacts of colonization and restore their culture. Achebe, for example, says:

I would be satisfied if my novels (especially the ones set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them. (qtd. in Williams 19).

Narratives of cultural regeneration are indeed an attempt to forge a national consciousness and engender a feeling of nationhood. In his often quoted definition of the nation, Benedict Anderson says that the nation is “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” because

the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. . . . In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. (6)

Anderson argues that the “imagined” community comes into being because of the emergence of “print-capitalism” which helps disseminate the “national” language and ideas shared among those who never actually meet each other. Despite its original insight into the process of nation-building through imagination,

Anderson’s theory is criticized by Partha Chatterjee. In *The Nation and Its Fragments*, Chatterjee argues that anticolonial nationalism should not be taken merely as a political movement modeled on Western nationalism and concepts of liberty, freedom and self-determination as Anderson claims. On the other hand, it is based on the concept of difference, drawing its revolutionary inspiration from the sources *within*. In other words, the colonized attempt to establish their

sovereignty and autonomy within colonial society by defending their “spiritual” domain which is marked by their cultural identity distinguishable from that of the colonizer. As he puts it:

The colonial state . . . is kept out of the “inner” domain of national culture; but it is not as though this so-called spiritual domain is left unchanged. In fact, here nationalism launches its most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a “modern” national culture that is nevertheless not Western. If the nation is an imagined community, then this is where it is brought into being. In this, its true and essential domain, the nation is already sovereign, even the state is in the hands of the colonial power, the dynamics of this historical project is completely missed in conventional histories in which the story of nationalism begins within the contest for political power. (6)

Chatterjee’s argument enables us to see that anticolonial nationalism is not entirely derivative; local communities do not simply imitate “certain ‘modular’ forms already made available to them by Europe and Americas” (Chatterjee 5). Rather, they also draw upon their own sources, that is, their own culture to fight against colonial power.

Linking the idea of “imagined community” with the novel, Timothy Brennan argues that the novel is one means by which nationhood can be imagined:

It was the *novel* that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the ‘one, yet many’ of national life, and by mimicking the structure of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles. Socially, the novel joined the newspaper as the major vehicle of the national print media, helping to standardize language, encourage literacy, and remove mutual incomprehensibility. But it did much more than that. Its manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that was the nation. (49)

Using Anderson’s concept of the nation as “imagined community,” this study discusses the style and the rhetoric of nationhood as employed by Ngugi wa

Thiong'o, the foremost Kenyan writer, to construct an "imagined" Kenya during colonization and after independence. In this study I trace and investigate Ngugi's efforts to forge Kenyan nationhood and Kenyan identities from colonial period to post-independence as reflected in his novels: *The River Between* (1965), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), and *Petals of Blood* (1977).

Even though Chatterjee's criticism allows us to see nationalism as a cultural construct as well as a political movement, I would argue that his analysis seems binaristic in that he clearly separates the political domain from the cultural. He does not articulate the possible connection between these two spheres as they contribute to the emergence of anticolonial nationalism and the construction of nationhood. In addition, he does not seem to acknowledge that the extent to which the political and the cultural are used in anticolonial struggles depends on the historical contexts within which the struggles are formed. In other words, in a certain historical period the anticolonial movements might find their strength in the cultural domain while in another period their strategy might shift to the political battle with the imperial power.

In my reading of Ngugi's novels, I would argue that Ngugi draws upon *both* the cultural and political spheres in order to forge Kenyan nationhood. As a malleable construct, nationalism is historically contingent. Any attempt to understand Ngugi's construction of Kenyan nationhood and identities requires the historical contextualization of Kenya as it transforms itself from a British colonial state to a modern nation-state in the multi-national capitalist era. The three novels, set in different historical epochs (*The River Between* in colonial era, *A Grain of*

Wheat at the moment of decolonization, and *Petals of Blood* after independence), function as arenas where power struggles of various kinds – cultural, political and economic – are dialectically played out. As M. M. Bakhtin puts it in his proposition of the concept of “heteroglossia” which is usually found in the novel:

at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form. These “languages” of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying “languages.” (291)

The recurring historical moments forming the backdrop to Ngugi’s fictional works are the conflict between Christianity and Gikuyu culture, particularly over the rite of female circumcision and colonial education, the Mau Mau decolonization movement against British rule, and the emergence of the elite and the bourgeoisie in the neocolonial nation-state.

In his nationalist discourse as reflected in his novels, Ngugi makes use of both the cultural and the political domain to construct Kenyan nationhood and identities, and sometimes these two are connected, strengthening Kenyan nationalist movement. In *The River Between*, it is apparent that he draws upon the concept of culture as a source of collective identity against the colonial power as the Gikuyu defend the female circumcision ritual criticized by European missionaries. In *A Grain of Wheat*, he clearly identifies Kenyan nationhood with the anticolonial political movement called Mau Mau. Interestingly, the Mau Mau draws upon some cultural practices like the oath-taking ceremony to unite people together so as to strengthen its political movement. This incident suggests the

interconnectedness between the cultural and the political domains missed in Chatterjee's argument. In the post-independence era, as *Petals of Blood* depicts, Ngugi no longer aligns himself with the nation-state as a unifying force of Kenya but delegitimizes it as it betrays the hope of the masses who fight for freedom. In this novel, he seems to identify Kenyan nationhood with the working class and the peasant. *Petals of Blood* also shows that after independence, the political and the cultural domains as sources for molding national identity become less important than the economic as the nation-state embraces multinational capitalism. The widening gap between the rich and the poor that the neocolonialist nation-state controlled by the elite and the bourgeoisie generates testifies the fact that Kenya is a fragmented nation divided along the line of class. Ngugi's "imagined" Kenya will come close into being only when the gap is lessened. The changing sources of energies from the cultural, the political and the economic that Ngugi draws upon to forge Kenyan nationhood are a testimony that nationalism is indeed a malleable social construct subject to the immediate sociopolitical context within which the writers live.

2. NGUGI'S *THE RIVER BETWEEN*

Constructing Kenya in a Time of Cultural Divisions

Ngugi's first novel, *The River Between* (1965), though published after *Weep Not, Child* (1964), tells the story of cultural divisions between two ridges, Kameno and Makuyu, within Gikuyu tribe in Kenya in the 1920s. The conflicts are engendered by the growing impact of British colonialism as the two ridges react differently to colonial practices. The divisions are projected onto the landscape as the two ridges become the embodiment of internal differences which represent competing attempts to construct national culture during colonialism:

The two ridges lay side by side. One was Kameno, the other was Makuyu. Between them was a valley. It was called the valley of life. Behind Kameno and Makuyu were many more valleys and ridges, lying without any discernible plan. They were like many sleeping lions which never woke. They just slept, the big deep sleep of their Creator.

A river flowed through the valley of life. . . . The river was called Honia, which meant cure, or bring-back-to-life. Honia river never dried: it seemed to possess a strong will to live, scorning droughts and weather changes. . . .

Honia was the soul of Kameno and Makuyu. It joined them. And men, cattle, wild beasts and trees, were all united by this life-stream.

When you stood in the valley, the two ridges ceased to be sleeping lions united by their common source of life. They became antagonists. You could tell this, not by anything tangible but by the way they faced each other, like two rivals ready to come to blows in a life and death struggle for the leadership of this isolated region. (1)

Ngugi apparently means the Honia river to serve symbolically as a medium through which all different social units could be unified to form Kenyan nationhood under British domination. The name of Honia river, which means "cure, or bring-back-to-life," has a political implication in a sense that it

powerfully suggests a situation which drives Kenyans to heal the scar of colonization and restore their community. In this light, it can be argued that *The River Between* is a nationalist novel in which Ngugi attempts to forge national consciousness among the Kenyans who are compared to “sleeping lions” when pre-colonial traditions and culture are on the verge of being destroyed by British colonialism.

Even though Ngugi tries to create “a strong will to live” and to wake people up from a colonial nightmare, Ngugi also reveals the difficulty of willing the nation into being. As the quoted passage shows, Ngugi uses the landscape to point out the contradictions in the valley. The landscape, which involves two ridges, changes radically depending upon the perspective of the viewer. From a bird’s eye view, one can perceive tribal harmony between the two united by the river of life. Nevertheless, an inside look at the valley renders the unity an illusion as these two ridges oppose one another in terms of leadership in the time of rebuilding their community. To put it in a broader historical sense, Ngugi’s portrayal of the landscape, whose symbolic meaning can be derived differently depending on where the viewer stands, challenges the nationalist grand narrative that nationalism in the former colonies is a uniform phenomenon devoid of conflicts among its advocates. The contestation between the two ridges as they strive to lead the tribe out of colonial domination implies that nationhood is always in the process of re-imagining, redefining and reinventing, and it is dependent upon the ideological frameworks of the interested groups in a given immediate and specific sociopolitical context.

Ngugi seems to suggest that far from being a stable and natural entity like the peaceful and unaffected Honia river when viewed from above, national identity is always subject to fierce contestation and change. Even within one ridge such as Makuyu, as I shall illustrate, communal consensus on the anti-colonial project is difficult to achieve. It is apparent that the foremost factors contributing to the conflict in a colonized society are the legacies of colonialism. Indeed, it is the question of how to deal with the colonial ghost that is largely at issue in *The River Between*, a novel that reflects Ngugi's biography, particularly in the wake of cultural nationalism in the 1920s.

Tracing Ngugi's career as a writer, Simon Gikandi notes that he is greatly influenced by three things: the Protestant Church, the mission school, and Gikuyu cultural nationalism. It is noteworthy that all three are colonial inventions. This is because "Ngugi was . . . born into a culture that was eager to embrace colonial modernity, but one that had serious doubts about the wisdom of a radical negation of its newly invented collective identity" (39). It is the unresolved tension between the acceptance of modernity and the desire to go back to the pre-colonial past as a resource for identity reconstruction that Ngugi attempts to navigate in *The River Between*. As the novel progresses, the early geographical separation between Kamenno and Makuyu facing each other across the Honia river transforms itself into a cultural conflict within each of the two ridges. The antagonisms that the landscape foreshadows primarily arise from the clash between modernity, in the form of Christianity and education brought to the native population by

colonialism, and traditionalism seen by the native population as a vehicle for resistance and liberation.

Controversy over Female Circumcision

The first internal conflict within Gikuyu society engendered by colonialism that I would like to discuss is the clash between Christian beliefs and the indigenous beliefs in the rite of female circumcision. The character who fully embraces Christianity as a new faith and a new way of life is Joshua, the first convert residing on the two ridges. In the novel, Ngugi shows that the advent of colonialism in guise of Christianity has a strong impact on the natives because it has annihilated their traditional ways of life and thinking. A good example of how Christianity undermines the indigenous culture is the attempted abolition of female circumcision by European missionaries. The rite of female circumcision is denounced by the converts as a heathen custom: "Every man of God knew that this was a pagan rite against which, time and time again, the white missionaries had warned Joshua" (25). Historically, the attempt to outlaw the female circumcision was particularly made in missionary schools. The Church of Scotland Mission to Gikuyu demanded, beginning in 1929, that those who wanted to attend westernized schools must not support the practice. To counter this cultural bias, the Gikuyu founded independent schools, as the protagonist Waiyaki of *The River Between* does, where the custom of circumcision was allowed (Kenyatta 1962: 125-126).

Female circumcision became the most important issue in Kenya during the 1920s because for the natives it was the rite of passage that underlay their cultural

selfhood. To preserve it not only means to preserve the traditional custom but also to reconstruct their collective identity which was disrupted by British rule. As Jomo Kenyatta, the foremost leader of Kenyan nationalism and the first president of Kenya, has noted, “the moral code of the tribe is bound up with this custom and that it symbolises the unification of the whole tribal organisation” (1962: 129). In other words, female circumcision is “the very essence of an institution which has enormous educational, social, moral, and religious implications, quite apart from the operation itself” (1962: 128). A radical break from it as vigorously reinforced by the European missionaries would result in a crisis of identity, both individual and collective, which would eventually bring about social disintegration among the Gikuyu. As Kenyatta explains:

it is the secret aim of those who attack this centuries-old custom to disintegrate their social order and thereby hasten their Europeanisation. The abolition of *irua* [circumcision] will destroy the tribal symbol which identifies the age-groups, and prevent the Gikuyu from perpetuating that spirit and collectivism and national solidarity which they have been able to maintain from time immemorial. (1962: 130)

In *The River Between*, the female circumcision controversy is clearly raised in the character Muthoni, one of Joshua’s daughters, who runs away to join the circumcision ceremony on the other ridge. As an uncircumcised Christian female, Muthoni feels culturally isolated from the majority of the Gikuyu. To (re)gain cultural identity by participating in the rite of passage is what Muthoni desires. As she reveals the secret to her sister Nyambura: “I want to be a woman. I want to be a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges” (26). When Nyambura tells her that Joshua would reject the idea, Muthoni argues that: “I too

have embraced the white man's faith. However, I know it is beautiful, oh so beautiful to be initiated into womanhood. You learn the ways of the tribe. Yes, the white man's God does not quite satisfy me. I want, I need something more" (26). Muthoni's case generates different reactions towards the initiation rite. As for the protagonist Waiyaki, he has quite an ambiguous attitude towards female circumcision. While he sees the significance of the ritual underlying the cultural identity of the Gikuyu, he is concerned that the operation is dangerously unhealthy to women:

Circumcision of women was not important as a physical operation. It was what it did inside a person. It could not be stopped overnight. Patience and, above all, education, were needed. If the white man's religion made you abandon a custom and then did not give you something else of equal value, you became lost. An attempt at resolution of the conflict would only kill you, as it did Muthoni. (142)

Despite the ambiguity, Ngugi seems to suggest that personal health should be considered as important as the symbolic meaning of the ritual, yet this change needs to happen gradually. "A people's traditions could not be swept away overnight. That way lay disintegration. Such a tribe would have no roots, for a people's roots were in their traditions going back to the past, the very beginning, Gikuyu and Mumbi [the father and mother in the Gikuyu mythology]" (141).

The conflict over female circumcision which remains unresolved causes not only the death of Muthoni, but also the end of Waiyaki's role as the tribe leader. His problem lies in the fact that he falls in love with Nyambura, Joshua's other uncircumcised daughter. His desire to marry her goes against the will of the tribe which upholds the rite of female circumcision as its foremost cultural

institution. In the end, since he chooses to follow his individual will rather than sacrificing it completely to the communal collective force, Waiyaki is expelled from leadership and is going to be punished by the ridge council. At this point, Ngugi seems to suggest that in the colonial period when tribal unity is needed, the individual self should succumb to the collective force. The female circumcision ritual becomes a site of resistance where the Gikuyu construct their cultural identity against the growing power of British colonialism.

Colonial Education

While tribal custom does not allow for an individual self, colonial education purports to champion individualism of colonial subjects. Like Christianity, Western education is an imported product of colonialism which engenders divisions among the Gikuyu. In fact, the relationship between Christianity and education is very close, for the mission education is another means by which the colonizers convert the natives and impose on them their values which are in conflict with indigenous learning. Gikandi is perceptive about the ambiguities of education provided by Christian-based institutions: “education marked an irreversible move away from the existing foundation of identity and community of what came to be known as tradition” (40). He also notes that even though Gikuyu independence schools are founded in separation from mission schools, their educational philosophy is problematic since it rests on the paradoxical “belief that one could be educated in the colonial sense and still maintain a certain measure of affiliation with Gikuyu (traditional) culture” (40).

The River Between is Ngugi's demonstration that far from being a complement to the indigenous way of life and identity construction, western-style education dislocates the natives from their culture. Such a conflict is obviously played out in Waiyaki, who tries to reconcile the conflict between the two ridges mainly by means of education.

Despite his good will to restore the community from the colonial ruins, Waiyaki believing that "the white man's education was an instrument of enlightenment and advance if only it could be used well" (119) finds his identities both as a member and a leader of the community disfigured. Starting with his selfhood as a member of the Gikuyu, one cannot fail to acknowledge that the white man's education has created in Waiyaki a sense of cultural alienation. After having studied in a mission school in Siriana outside his ridge, the western-educated Waiyaki feels distant from the traditions of his tribe. This is best captured when he comes back home for the initiation rite:

Waiyaki's absence from the hills had kept him out of touch with those things that most mattered to the tribe. Besides, however much he resisted it, he could not help gathering and absorbing ideas and notions that prevented him from responding spontaneously to these dances and celebrations. But he knew that he had to go through the initiation. (39)

In the dance, Waiyaki does not lose himself in frenzy as other boys and girls at his age do. While hesitating to join the celebration, he instead imagines what Livingston, his school headmaster, would say if he found him in "the chaos created by locked emotions let loose" (42). This incident shows that even though he does not reject it, a moment of hesitation indicates that Waiyaki does not fully embrace the custom as he is culturally supposed to. Waiyaki is not unaware of the fact that

he is culturally contaminated by western schooling. We learn that through the narrator's omniscient point of view he asks himself: "Was the education he was trying to spread in the ridges not a contamination?" (72). The choice of words the narrator uses to describe Waiyaki's faith in education, such as "enlightenment" (119), "advance" (119), "order" (72) and "light" (72), strikingly reminds us of the colonial discourse on education, constructed by the colonizers as a means to civilize the savage natives. By implication, as he advocates western education for his people, Waiyaki somehow speaks the language of the oppressor and does not know how to apply the way of the white man to that of the indigenous group without destroying the latter. Despite this self-doubt, Waiyaki still sees education as the only vehicle for colonial resistance: "Education was the light of the country" (101). It is this insistence that causes Waiyaki's failure as a leader who strives to awaken the people from the colonial nightmare:

His role, however, did not satisfy him. He still felt hungry and yearned for something that would fill him whole, a thing that would take possession of the whole of himself. That something seemed beyond him, enmeshed, as he was, in the ways of the land. . . . It was his eyes that spoke of that yearning, that longing for something that would fill him all in all. (69)

For many critics, Waiyaki is the embodiment of the unresolved conflict between modern education and the traditional wisdom of the Gikuyu as the tribe tries to recreate nationhood during colonization (Ogude 126; Williams 41). It is quite obvious that Ngugi in his construction of binary oppositions to reinforce the conflict between the two tribes puts Waiyaki's belief in education in sharp contrast with Kabonyi's in politics. While Waiyaki's strategy of communal regeneration rests on education which he hopes would equip children with knowledge of the

West, Kabonyi, who vies with Waiyaki for leadership, is more concerned with the immediate needs of the people. Kabonyi not only advocates for cultural purism of the Gikuyu, but he also tackles the economic problems facing the tribe such as land dispossession, poverty, forced labor and tax. Through the narrator's voice, we get to know Kabonyi's mind:

And instead of Waiyaki leading people against these more immediate ills, he was talking of more [school] buildings. Were people going to be burdened with more buildings? With more teachers? And was the white man's education really necessary? Surely there was another way out. It was better to drive away the white man from the hills altogether. . . . He would rid the country of the influence of the white man. He would restore the purity of the tribe and its wisdom. (95)

Waiyaki thinks of changing himself and becomes more political in his anti-colonial plan as he realizes that “[e]ducation for an oppressed people is not all” (138-139). However, the fact that he is captured by the order of the ridge council suggests that the idea of tribal purity and traditionalism is the most powerful nationalist rhetoric or at least more powerful than “mixing two ways” (86) during that time. The meta-narrative of cultural nationalism culminates in the ceremony of oath which binds the people in the village together under the law of cultural purity. That Waiyaki wants to marry the uncircumcised Nyambura is a taboo in the oath. Waiyaki's notion of love that is “untainted with religion, social conventions or any tradition” (76) transcends the new cultural code created in the milieu of anti-colonialism. Ngugi seems to suggest that individual will should give way to public force. Even though everyone in the tribe considers Waiyaki as “the reincarnation of that former dignity and purity – now lost” (92), Waiyaki's

intention to marry Nyambura works against convincing them that he means well for the tribe, and thus his opinions hold less weight.

Cultural Hybridity and Purism

Perhaps considering Waiyaki as a cultural hybrid may be helpful in our understanding of his failure. It is Homi K. Bhabha who advances the concept of hybridity in colonial relationships:

Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the 'pure' and original identity of authority). Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. (1994: 112)

Hybridity, in other words, is the cultural intermingling between the dominating West and the dominated Rest, forming an unstable or ambivalent identity and cultural space, or what Bhabha calls the "Third Space of enunciation," which destabilizes the Manichean oppositions between the colonized and the colonizer (1994: 37). The relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is never simply oppositional but relational in that each encounter shapes and reshapes what it means to be the colonizer or the colonized: each exchange is a negotiation around identity. Therefore, for Bhabha, hybridity denies 'pure' identity of both the colonizer and the colonized: "The meaning of the utterance is quite literally neither the one nor the other" (1994: 36). This ambivalent space is obviously played out in Waiyaki. Educated in the western-style school, Waiyaki is definitely a hybrid character who fluctuates between the culture of the oppressor and that of the

indigenous people. The language he speaks is double-voiced in that he evokes the colonialist rhetoric of education, an import of colonialism, to reconcile the antagonism within the two ridges and restore the Gikuyu from colonial domination: “With the little knowledge that he had he would uplift the tribe, yes, give it the white man’s learning and his tools, so that in the end the tribe would be strong enough, wise enough, to chase away the settlers and the missionaries” (87). Waiyaki’s strategy of using the master’s tool to bring down his own house indicates the subversive power effect of hybridity: “it unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identification in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power” (Bhabha 1994: 112). In this case, Waiyaki is not a passive colonial subject *per se* as defined in opposition to the domineering colonizer, for he uses the colonizer’s values drawn from colonial education to undermine their power. He does not simply ape the colonizer or become his mirror image, for he uses education for the sake of his own tribe.

Bhabha’s theory of the “third space” denying binarism and advocating the “in-between” in the colonial world is, however, rendered invalid in the novel. Rather than evoking subversion to colonial domination, the hybridity characterizing Waiyaki renders him impotent and indecisive in his project to restore Gikuyu culture and unite his people under colonial rule. Blindly embracing colonial education as the way out from colonial domination, he does not take into consideration the political, economic and cultural impacts of colonialism on the colonized. In other words, he fails to relate the usefulness of colonial education to

the immediate needs of the people in a concrete way. This failure thus renders his project abstract. As JanMohamed has noted:

Waiyaki's notion of "education" is just as abstract and vague as that of Njorge [the protagonist of *Weep Not, Child*], and he has not the slightest idea about the nature of the ultimate goal toward which he is supposed to lead his people. . . . He never makes an effort to think concretely or to resolve specific problems; he seems to have been paralyzed by the awesome nature of his mission. Similarly, Waiyaki keeps repeating to himself that he must reunite the tribe which has been bifurcated by Muthoni's death into the antagonistic camps of traditional Gikuyu and Christian converts, but again remains a vague and empty dream. (204-205)

The conflict that Waiyaki embodies is a reflection of the predicament of the colonized nations in the time of anti-colonial resistance as they are faced with the question of where the nation is, or should be, located: backward into the past or forward into modernity. While Waiyaki wants to modernize his community by building more schools in the image of the colonizer: "Later he would want a college, the sort of institution that Reverend Livingstone used to talk so much about" (82), Kabonyi represents the opposite force, aiming to "restore the purity of the tribe and its wisdom" (95). This ambivalence of the nation is that it must establish itself both places. As Mazrui has commented:

But involved in that very concept of birth was a paradoxical desire – the desire to be gray-haired and wrinkled as a nation, the desire to have an antiquity. This is directly related to the problem of national identity in Africa. Insofar as nations are concerned, there is often a direct correlation between identity and age. The desire to be old becomes part of the quest for identity. (20)

It is indeed "the paradoxical desire to modernize and ancientize at the same time" (Mazrui 20) that *The River Between* raises for us. It is a paradox that happens in the wake of cultural nationalism in Kenya in the 1920s. Apparently, Ngugi avoids

closure in at the end of the novel. The fate of Waiyaki is left open to interpretation. The reader has no access to what kind of punishment would be given to him by the ridge council. Even though it seems that Ngugi privileges communal solidarity over personal fulfillment, he does not suggest any solution for Kenya's situation at the time of national liberation. Rather, he leaves the reader afloat with a sense of uncertainty as to where Kenya and Waiyaki would go. This is suggested in the last paragraph of the novel:

The land was now silent. The two ridges lay side by side, hidden in the darkness. And Honia river went on flowing between them, down through the valley of life, its beat rising above the dark stillness, reaching into the heart of the people of Makuyu and Kameno. (152).

The description shows that a search for a homogenous Kenya will continue in the same manner as the Honia river, a symbol of Kenyan nationhood, "went on." Yet, since nationhood is a socially constructed and ever-changing entity, it is always subject to contestation between at least two different ideologically-interested groups as represented by Makuyu and Kameno, which "lay side by side" but never become united. The unresolved conflict of the character Waiyaki, therefore, symbolizes the dilemma of Kenya as it strives to rebuild itself from the ruins of colonialism.

3. NGUGI'S *A GRAIN OF WHEAT*

Published in 1967, *A Grain of Wheat*, which is Ngugi's third novel, is essentially about the story of Thabai, a Gikuyu village, at the moment of Kenyan decolonization. In terms of content, the controversies concerning the roles of colonial education and Christianity raised in *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child* are less emphasized in this novel as it focuses more on the socio-political domain, depicting the long-standing struggle of the peasants against British rule. What makes *A Grain of Wheat* especially different from *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child* is its formal structure which perfectly corresponds to its thematic concern. Even though the three novels are narrated by a narrator with an omniscient point of view, *A Grain of Wheat* involves a more complicated narrative technique and deployment of time. It displays multiple narratives of different characters in an achronological manner. Even though the actual time in the novel lasts for only four days, with the techniques of flashback and retrospection, the novel covers the period of Kenyan decolonization between the 1950s and 1963, the year which saw official Kenyan independence. With such a sophisticated handling of narrative structure, Ngugi allows the reader to delve more deeply into the complicated psychology of the main characters both as individual subjects and community members who are profoundly affected by colonialism in different ways.

By presenting their diverse conflicts, Ngugi leads us to an understanding of the complexities of the colonial situation in Kenya as we witness how different ideologies, namely, nationalist and colonialist, are contrasted, conflicted and even

compromised in a very specific socio-political context, especially during the years of the State of Emergency (1952-1960) which saw the birth of the Mau Mau movement. Even though the Mau Mau rebellion has been known in Africa and worldwide as an anti-colonial movement, it has been recorded in the British memory and history as an atavistic and fanatic movement which resisted Western modernity and civilization. This chapter focuses on how Ngugi attempts to contest the Eurocentric representations of the freedom movement while also focusing how he problematizes/deconstructs the grand narrative of nationalism in Kenya in the wake of independence. The double tasks enable the reader to see the dilemma confronting Ngugi as he tries to write a nationalist history of Kenya as a homogenous nation based on consensus in the face of internal divisions within the Kenyan population itself.

The Representations of the Mau Mau Movement

“*What’s this thing called Mau Mau?*” (Ngugi 1967: 55)

A Grain of Wheat can be called a transitional novel for Ngugi as its thematic focus moves toward militant nationalism, while *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child* are concerned chiefly with cultural nationalism. And it is the Mau Mau movement which the novel is all about. Mau Mau has long been a controversial historical topic not only among the Europeans but the Kenyans themselves as they argue over whether or not it was a primitive and irrational movement led by the religiously fanatic Gikuyu and how it should be remembered in national history. In a nationalist reading, *A Grain of Wheat* can be said to be

Ngugi's project to speak for the Mau Mau movement as he tries to contest the history of the Mau Mau as written by the British. The contestation is significant in a sense that it aims at reconsolidating the collective identity of Kenyans in the post-independence era.

Colonial Discourse on the Mau Mau as an Apolitical Force

In his study of nationalism, Neil Lazarus notes that nationalist movements in the so-called Third-World countries are usually classified under "the rubrics of atavism, anarchy, irrationality, and power-mongering" (1999: 69). Such a generalization, which no doubt aims at undermining the Third-World national solidarity against foreign oppression, can be found in the British account of the Mau Mau Movement during the 1950s and the early 1960s. Studying how this anti-colonial movement is represented by its colonizers, John Lonsdale remarks: "It has lived in British memory as a symbol of African savagery, and modern Kenyans are divided by its images, militant nationalism or tribalist thuggery" (1993: 37). Lonsdale's statement leads us to the recognition that not only is the Mau Mau movement regarded by the British as primitive, irrational and even apolitical, but it is by no means seen as a national movement but a tribal one that is limited to the Gikuyu. In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi seems to dispute these two claims, suggesting that the movement is a politically motivated one which transcends tribal boundaries in Kenya. Such an image is what Ngugi wants the Kenyans to remember and identify with when the name of the Mau Mau is evoked.

The representation of the Mau Mau Movement as a naturally primitive force is best captured in the colonial government's charge against Jomo Kenyatta

in 1952 when he was on trial for allegedly being one of the leaders of the Mau Mau Movement. The Prosecution had it that:

looking at Mau Mau quite dispassionately and quite objectively and quite outside this trial there can be no one who can say that it does not do the most appalling criminal things and that it appears to be a purely barbarous movement negative in everything it does and accompanied by circumstances of revolting savagery. (qtd. in Rosberg 283-284)

Opposing the claim, Ngugi, however, argues that what gave birth to the Mau Mau Movement is essentially the land problem arising from the fact that the Europeans took over the most agriculturally developed area known as the “White Highlands.” At the same time, the native Africans were compelled to work as hired labor for the white man for cheap wages. Ngugi’s remark corresponds to what Harish Narang has said about the emergence of national liberation in Kenya in 1946:

The freedom movement, contrary to the false propaganda unleashed by both the settlers and the colonial government, was the result of colonisation affecting almost all tribes in Kenya. The forcible “alienation” of land for exclusive European use, the acts of forced labour at miserably low wages, the disallowance of observance of tribal customs and rituals and the observance of colour bar all compounded together led to a situation wherein a solution to all these ills was sought to be achieved through the single demand for national freedom. (127)

The passage demonstrates that the Mau Mau movement is by no means an irrational rebellion by a barbaric people against civilization as the Colonial State claimed. In fact, it is a direct product of the new economic structure which saw the transformation from subsistence agriculture to forced labor and capitalist production. The new mode of production had a profound effect on the native Kenyans in that it alienated the natives from their own land, causing cultural disintegration. Therefore, to understand the freedom movement, it is necessary to

take into account the interrelation of culture, economics and politics as factors contributing to the rise of the Mau Mau. As Ngugi has pointed out:

It will be therefore be seen that in the Kenyan scene of the last sixty years [under British colonization] you cannot separate economics and culture from politics. The three were interwoven. A cultural assertion was an integral part of the political and economic struggle.

Only in terms of all these different and yet closely interrelated planes of conflict can the Mau Mau revolution of 1952 be understood. (1972: 26)

In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi shows that the Mau Mau movement is a revolution with a noble cause that needs to be carried out in a culturally specific way. To represent the Mau Mau as a just resistance movement, Ngugi has created two characters who stand in opposition to one another. While Kihika is a voice of the freedom movement, Thompson represents the British occupying power. In his diary which he intends to be a philosophical text called *Prospero in Africa*,¹ Thompson mentions the murder of Colonel Robson by the Mau Mau:

Colonel Robson, a Senior District Officer in Rung'ei, Kiambu, was savagely murdered. I am replacing him at Rung'ei. One must use a stick. No government can tolerate anarchy, no civilization can be built on this violence and savagery. Mau Mau is evil: a movement which if not checked will mean complete destruction of all the values on which our civilization has thriven.
(55)

¹ By entitling Robson's book *Prospero in Africa*, Ngugi might be here echoing Fanon's critique of Octavio Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonialism* in *Black Skin, White Masks* (Chapter 4: "The So-Called Dependency Complex of Colonized Peoples). Fanon disagrees with Mannoni's racist idea that colonialism is naturally engendered by psychological difference between the colonized and the colonizer. He argues that 'dependence complex' of the colonized is in fact a result of colonization which conditions the colonial subject to feel psychologically inferior and thus to need the colonial master.

It is no surprise for the reader to understand why Thompson perceives the Mau Mau as an evil whose destructive force would deprive humankind of values. Apparently, Thompson epitomizes colonial authority. He is greatly influenced by the nineteenth-century colonial discourse which operates mainly in this case on principles of negation and the myth of progress: the African are essentially inferior to the Europeans because they live in a state of nature which is opposed to civilization which only the Europeans are capable of creating. While colonial rhetoric empties out the history of the Africans, it naturalizes the process of Western domination by reinforcing the notion of what Johannes Fabian calls “evolutionary Time” in which the West and the Rest “were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time—some upstream, others downstream” (17). Placing themselves upstream, the Europeans turn back and see the Africans living in “the earliest beginnings of the world” as Marlow of *Heart of Darkness* calls it when he is going up the Congo River (Conrad 59). Coming along with the myth of evolutionary Time is the rhetoric of the white man’s burden which justifies imperialist intervention in Africa made in the names of civilization, modernization and development.

As a District Officer fully embracing British Imperialism, Thompson sees himself as a man with a clear mission who sees Africa as a “dark” continent and the Africans as always-dependent children. Implicit in this myth is the idea that England is the center of the natural order of things. As Thompson’s diary reads:

In a flash I was convinced that the growth of the British Empire was the development of a great moral idea: it means, it must surely lead to the creation of one British nation, embracing peoples of all

colours and creeds, based on the just proposition that all men were created equal. (54)

Influenced by a desire to hegemonize other nations, Thompson, who sees the British Empire as the only thing capable of creating “the just ordering of human society” (54), totally rejects the freedom movement of the Mau Mau. Believing this, before his departure from Kenya he says, “Africa cannot, cannot do without Europe” (166). For him, therefore, the freedom movement is merely a black force fueled by fanatics who seek to disrupt “the just ordering of human society” (54).

While the movement is seen as a primitive and irrational rebellion, in the same fashion its adherents are regarded as criminals and their actions terrorist. In the novel, when Colonel Robson is murdered by some Mau Mau, the newspaper headline reads: “a District Officer had been senselessly murdered by Mau Mau *thugs*” (187: emphasis mine). This is how Mau Mau is represented in the official version in the form of newspaper reporting. In addition, the Mau Mau is seen as criminals not only in terms of representation, but also in a material sense. The Mau Mau-related suspects who are put into the detention camps complain that they are treated more like criminals than political prisoners: “Among other things they wanted to be treated as political prisoners not criminals. Food rations should be raised. Unless these things were done, they would go on hunger-strike” (134). It can be said that the British treated them that way because of the extreme violence they used as a means to achieve their goals. The violence is described, for example, when Rev. Jackson Kigundu is killed: “His body was one morning found hacked with pangas into small pieces: his house and property were burnt to charcoal and ashes. His wife and children were not touched. But they were left

without a home” (85). The incident may appear violent and irrational if considered as an isolated incident unrelated to its surrounding context; however, the terrorist act by the Mau Mau is more revolutionary than irrational and criminal because it is a well-organized plan in pursuit of a particular political ideology. Martha Crenshaw Hutchinson gives a definition of revolutionary terrorism that:

Revolutionary terrorism is part of the strategy of insurgents who are attempting to gain political power through the overthrow of an incumbent government; thus it has to do with fundamental political change. Terrorism used for this purpose is not an isolated event or a string of random deeds, but a series of deliberate, interrelated, premeditated actions. (18)

The description of the murder of Rev. Jackson allows us to see that despite its violence, the terrorist act is directed only at the loyalists who support British power and their use of state terrorism. And in this case, it does not harm the innocents, his wife and children, physically, even though it does psychologically. Burning down the house is not a matter of irrational arson; rather, it functions more like a sign or a public spectacle aimed at provoking fear and terror among the viewers.

It is apparent that in the novel Ngugi uses Kihika to defend the terrorist strategy of the Mau Mau. Persuading Mugo to join the movement, Kihika reasons why they have to kill: “We are not murderers. We are not hanging men – like Robson – killing men and women without cause or purpose” (190). Kihika is here implicitly drawing a distinction between murderers and political terrorists. A difference between these two groups rests on the fact that while criminals commit a crime out of personal malice, political prisoners carry out their action, no matter how violent, with a clear political end. As Kihika further explains to Mugo:

We only hit back. You are struck on the left cheek. You turn the right cheek. One, two, three – sixty years. Then suddenly, it is always sudden, you say: I am not turning the other cheek any more. Your back to the wall, you strike back. . . . We must kill. Put to sleep the enemies of black man's freedom. . . . Strike terror in the heart of the oppressor. (191)

Kihika's explanation leads us to an understanding that there are at least two kinds of violence. While the first kind is carried out to control the subaltern group, the other kind is made in the name of social justice. Ngugi seems to suggest that looking at violence at only its surface is insufficient to determine what kind of violence it is since what distinguishes these two types of violence lies in the intention of the agents: "Violence in order to change an intolerable, unjust social order is not savagery; it purifies man. Violence to protect and preserve an unjust, oppressive social order is criminal, and diminishes man" (1972: 28).² What is

² In *The Wretched of the Earth* on the chapter "Concerning Violence," Fanon argues in the context of Algerian decolonization that the use of violence is necessary in anti-colonial movements: "The exploited man sees that his liberation implies the use of all means, and that of force first and foremost. . . . colonialism only loosens its hold when the knife is at its throat, no Algerian really found these terms too violent. The leaflet only expressed what every Algerian felt at heart: colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence" (61). It is important to note that in *A Grain of Wheat* violence is not the "first and foremost" means of Kenyan liberation because the struggle against British colonization is made first in a constitutional way. As the narrator of *A Grain of Wheat* tells us: "Harry [Harry Thuku, the first chair man of Kenya Africa Study Union (KASU) founded in 1944, later changed to Kenya Africa Union (KAU)] denounced the whiteman and cursed that benevolence and protection which denied people land and freedom. He amazed them by reading aloud letters to the whiteman, letters in which he set out in clear terms people's discontent with taxation, forced labour on white settler's land" (12). But since their political letters or proposals are turned down by the colonial government, their recourse to violence becomes a must-do alternative. This is how the Mau Mau movement emerges. As Kihika says in the novel, "'This is not 1920. What we now want is action, a blow which will tell'" (14). "He talked no longer in terms of sending letters to the whiteman as used to be done in the days of Harry" (14).

more important is that any judgment or justification of an act of violence will be valid only when the context in which it is made is taken into consideration. By having Kihika talk about violence, Ngugi makes it clear that it is colonial suppression that has caused political violence in Kenya in the first place. The violence of the British authority and that of the Mau Mau are not comparable because while the first is made to take an advantage of a people, the latter is made to protect their own rights and liberties. As Ngugi has noted, “Mau Mau violence was anti-injustice; white violence was to thwart the cause of justice. Should we equate the two forms?” (1972: 29).

It is noteworthy that while Ngugi uses Kihika as a collective voice of the Mau Mau, he describes the violent acts of Robson in opposition to those of Kihika. Ngugi draws this comparison to render the Mau Mau a more just political movement and critiques British justification of their power in Kenya. The image of Robson as seen by the natives is that of the savage. Generally known as Tom, *the Terror*, he is

the epitome of those dark days in our history that witnessed his birth as a District Officer in Rung’ei – that is, when the Emergency raged in unabated fury. People said he was mad. They spoke of him with awe, called him Tom or simply ‘he’ as if the mention of his full name would conjure him up in their presence. . . . Some village men saw his jeep in their dreams and screamed. He was a man-eater, walking in the night and day. He was death. He was especially brutal to squatters who were repatriated from the Rift Valley back to Gikuyu-Ini. (186)

If the Mau Mau are “brutes” (187) as Robson’s deathbed outcry suggests, his reputation as “death” and “man-eater” indicates that his violence on the colonial subjects is not unlike that of cannibals which is a typical metaphor for the Africans

in the colonial rhetoric. Such a portrayal of Robson enables us to see that Ngugi is beating colonial authority at its own game. He reminds us that far from being a reality, the image of the primitive Africans is merely a social construct whose meaning is ideologically interested.

The issue of violence is not the only factor contributing to the barbaric image of the Mau Mau in the British colonial narrative. Oathing is another that renders the freedom movement most despicable. Carl G. Rosberg, Jr. and John Nottingham, for example, have pointed out that in the 1950s “the use of an oath by the Kikuyu nationalists was used by the Europeans as the most important element in the thesis that Kikuyu politics at this time had reverted to primitive atavism” (261). It is also believed that “in employing secret oaths, the African was rejecting modernity and reverting to primitive behavior patterns” (Rosberg 321). One cannot fail to acknowledge that these claims, like that on violence by the Mau Mau, are apparently aimed at depoliticizing the meaning of the movement. The colonizers do not or pretend not to conceive of the oath as an instrument used to unite the Kenyans politically. As for the importance of oathing, Ngugi says:

The oath is not a simple avowal to attend a Sunday afternoon picnic; it was a commitment to sabotage the colonial machine and to kill if necessary. . . . to have taken it was a measure of one’s total commitment to the group and to the African cause. . . . The point is not whether oaths are ‘bestial’ or not, but the nature of the particular historical circumstances that make them necessary and the cause they serve. (1972: 28)

In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi clearly demonstrates that oath-taking is a very significant thing for the Mau Mau as a movement and individuals as its members during the years of Emergency, for it unites people together for a political cause

and creates a sense of identity for its takers who have completely committed themselves to the new community. Disputing the apolitical explanation of oathing, Ngugi shows that the oath is essentially what consolidates the political movement of the Mau Mau. It is a symbol with which the oath-takers identify and thus uphold. When Mugo refuses to acknowledge to the British prison officials that he has taken an oath, other detainees see his refusal as an act of rebellion against colonial authority even though he just does not want to talk because of the pain from punishment: “But the other detainees saw his resignation to pain in a different light; it gave them courage; they came together and wrote a *collective* letter listing complaints” (134: emphasis added). It can be seen that, like taking the oath, the refusal to confess it despite the use of force by the British authorities is very powerful in that it creates the binding force among the Mau Mau adherents.

Ngugi not only attacks the biased representation of the Mau Mau oathing by the British, but he also emphasizes how the meaning of the oath has been constructed and then remains crucial/influential for those who have taken or betrayed it. Despite its significance as a sacred symbol for social and political solidarity, oathing is not the foremost factor contributing to the success of the Mau Mau revolution since it is merely a sign whose meaning is subject to slippage and can be emptied out. This idea is advocated by Kihika as he talks with Mugo, learning that the latter did not take any oath:

But what is an oath? For some people you need the oath to bind them to the Movement. There are those who'll keep a secret unless bound by an oath. . . . In any case how many took the oath and are now licking the toes of the whiteman? . . . The decision to lay or not to lay your life for the people lies in the heart. (192)

Ngugi explicitly suggests that what is more important than participating in the secret oath-taking ceremony is one's self-sacrifice to the movement. It is the action that matters. One need not take the oath to get involved in the freedom struggle as long as he commits himself to the movement, transcending his personal obligations and fighting alongside his fellows. Kihika believes this because those who have taken the oath may betray the movement by serving as Chiefs or homeguards for the British as Karanja does.

Indeed, it is this ambivalence of meaning that concerns *A Grain of Wheat* which questions the absolutist category of the key concepts like hero and traitor in the nationalist narrative. As it binds individuals to a larger group, the oath draws a sharp distinction between friends and enemies, believers and betrayers. Nevertheless, since the colonial situation which Ngugi presents us in this novel is more complicated than that Manichean categorization, things seem elusive and ambiguous. Can Gikonyo, who confesses that he has taken the oath to the British authorities so that he can go back home to see his wife Mumbi, be considered as a traitor as Mugo is? Can Mugo be regarded as a hero after he prevents a pregnant woman from being beaten up by a colonizer even though he has not actually taken the oath and he kills Kihika? In other words, Ngugi is raising questions about how individuals will fit in with the community as it is forging a nationalist narrative at the dawn of independence. How will the community negotiate the distance between its narrative desire for national solidarity and the harsh reality the individuals have gone through during the Emergency years? The Emergency years will become key commemorative event when they try to (re)construct their

identity. Indeed, it is the question of how one will come to terms with what happened during the Emergency years that matters, especially for Gikonyo. I shall return to this point later in this chapter.

Colonial Discourse on the Mau Mau as a Tribal Rebellion

In the British historiography, the Mau Mau Movement is regarded not only as comprised of a primitive gang of thugs, but it is also considered as a tribal rebellion by the Gikuyu, not a Kenyan national movement. Since Gikuyu is the tribal majority living in Kenya, they are most affected by the land alienation by Europeans. Given this, it is not surprising that the Gikuyu formed the majority of the movement, but not the whole. As Lonsdale has pointed out, the movement “was mainly, but not entirely, a Kikuyu movement” (39). A close reading of *A Grain of Wheat* allows us to recognize that the novel is Ngugi’s attempt to dispute the claim that the Mau Mau Movement is tribal.

When a meeting of the movement is held at Rung’ei Market, through the narrator’s narration, we know that: “People learnt that Kenyatta would not attend the meeting. There were, however, plenty of speakers from Muranga and Nairobi. There was also a Luo speaker from Nyanza showing that the Movement had broken barriers between tribes” (14). The description is self-evident in that the Mau Mau Movement is composed of more than one tribe. Not only does Ngugi include the participation of other tribes in the first phase of the movement, but he also demonstrates that when the victory over the British is achieved non-Gikuyu heroes are not unsung. On 12 December 1963, Kenyan Independence Day, “People moved from street to street singing. They praised Jomo and Kaggia and

Oginga. They recalled Waiyaki, who even before 1900 had challenged the white people who had come to Dagoreti in the wake of Lugard” (203). It is noteworthy that people not only celebrate such Gikuyu leaders as Waiyaki, Jomo Kenyatta and Kaggia, but also Oginga, who represents the Luo involvement in the Mau Mau movement.³ Oginga himself also recognizes the Mau Mau as a national movement as advocated by Kenyatta, who coins the term “Kenyan” to transcend tribal boundaries: “With the arrival of Kenyatta, Luo people began to think in terms of the whole country for the first time. Up to the Second World War, teachers [in Luo schools] taught in terms of the tribe; they did not think in terms of a nation. Kenyatta’s role was one of political education” (qtd. in Rosberg 217). From Oginga’s statement, it can be concluded that long before and during British colonization in what is now called Kenya, people were living in tribal groups. Given that, we can see that far from being a natural entity, nationalism is a social construct grounded in specific socio-political situations: that is, the land alienation which consequently results in cultural disintegration among tribes dwelling on what is now Kenya whose territory is geographically arbitrary. In “Kenya: the Two Rifts,” Ngugi has talked about the forcing of the birth of Kenyan nationalism:

To look from the tribe to a wider concept of human association is to be progressive. When this begins to happen, a Kenya nation will be born. It will be an association, not of different tribal entities, but of individuals, free to journey to those heights of which they are capable. Nationalism, by breaking some tribal shells, will be a help. But nationalism should not in turn become another shackle. Nor should it be the end. (1972: 24)

³ See Bethwell A. Ogot, “Mau Mau & Nationhood: The Untold Story,” for Oginga Odinga’s contribution to the founding of the first national project called the Kenya African Study Union (KASU) (12-13).

Ngugi is here calling people from different tribes to step beyond their tribal background and by the process of imagination to construct a nation. It should be emphasized here that even though Ngugi wants to see the birth of Kenyan nationalism at the time of decolonization, he does not see nationalism as a discriminatory or fixed entity which excludes other non-mainstream groups. Rather he implicitly says that nationalism is ever-changing and is based, at first, on the immediate socio-political context during which the nationalist movement is formed. Ngugi seems fully aware that unless understood properly, far from being a liberating instrument for the subordinated people, nationalism can be yet another constraint which causes yet another form of oppression. Nationalism should distribute power equally to every group of people rather than limit it under the power of one particular group. The issue of the abuse and inequality of power after the nationalist movement achieves its political goal is more evidently raised in *Petals of Blood*.

Deconstructing Grand Narratives of Nationalism

In *A Grain of Wheat*, while he writes a counter-narrative to the prejudiced British representation of the Mau Mau movement in Kenya, Ngugi also demonstrates how the natives attempt to represent the movement themselves under the aegis of nationalism. It is interesting to note that as Kenya as a new-born nation is about to achieve her independence, the mode of self-representation is by no means celebratory. On the contrary, Ngugi portrays the moment of victory with a sense of ambivalence and uncertainty which witnesses the pervasive power of the ghost of colonialism as it still haunts the colonized subjects moving toward the

so-called “postcolonial” period. Still traumatized by his experience in the detention camp, Mugo, for example, wants to live an isolated life, fearing that other people would involve him in political affairs again. In addition, Ngugi problematizes the new nation’s desire to glorify the past and allegorize the decolonization movement by constructing a narrative of great return. During the Emergency years, the characters want to go back to the past where life is not difficult. Independence, however, does not grant them a new life; on the contrary, it is a period of disillusionment in which the characters learn that the past they long for is unattainable and the fruits of Uhuru they fight for are eaten by the elite and bourgeois, the new ruling classes in post-independence Kenya. Ngugi’s deconstruction of the grand narrative of nationalism in this novel is achieved by his use of irony as well as by his creating a narrative of self-doubt to reveal the incongruity between appearance and reality.

Because recuperation of indigenous history is one of the projects that concerns postcolonial societies, the natives attempt to romanticize the pre-colonial past and allegorize the anti-colonial struggle as evidenced by postcolonial narratives, especially novels. In such narratives, characters are represented as the nation; their conflict can be allegorically read as the nation’s dilemma. The idea that the individual can represent a larger national community within which they live is advocated by Fredric Jameson:

Third World texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.* (69)

Even though Aijaz Ahmad attacks Jameson's theory of national allegories on the ground that it reinvokes "Hegel's famous description of the master-slave relation to encapsulate the First-Third World opposition" (100), I would argue still that with nationalism as its central thematic concern, *A Grain of Wheat* can be read as a national allegory in Jameson's sense whereby an "individual destiny" parallels "the embattled situation" of a colonized people as a whole.

In the novel, the reader can see that the lives of the main characters are in an obvious parallel with the situations of Kenya after independence. While Mugo, Gikonyo, Mumbi, and Karanja struggle to live their "normal" lives in Thabai after the difficult Emergency years, Kenya too finds itself trapped in a situation in which it is not quite sure of its post-independence future, nor does it know how to cope with the still smoldering past. The way to come to terms with the past is indeed what mostly concerns the main characters and Kenya, both being in search of their postcolonial identities. To illustrate the validity of Jameson's theory of national allegories in the analysis of the novel, I would like to use Mugo and Gikonyo as case studies.

If "psychology, or more specifically, libidinal investment, is to be read in primarily political and social terms" as Jameson has suggested (72), Mugo's traumatic experience can be read as having something to do with Kenyan predicaments on the eve of independence. The opening chapter of *A Grain of Wheat* describing Mugo's paranoia perfectly epitomizes the interrelation between the private and the public, the psychological and the political:

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. He tried to move his head: it was firmly chained to the bed-frame. The drop grew larger and larger as it drew closer and closer to his eyes. He wanted to cover his eyes with his palms; but his hands, his feet, everything refused to obey his will. In despair, Mugo gathered himself for a final heave and woke up. Now he lay under the blanket and remained unsettled fearing, as in the dream, that a drop of cold water would suddenly pierce his eyes. (1)

Unless read in relation to the Kenyan colonial context, the passage itself reveals nothing but Mugo's fear and despair. Not until Mugo wakes up and goes out to work in his plot, nevertheless, does the reader gain an insight that his psychological trauma is engendered by his unhappy relationship with the community. Having come back from a detention camp, Mugo tries to avoid talking with people and longs to be left alone. His reputation as an anti-colonial hero, however, does not allow him to live his individual life. He is asked by Wambai, Warui and Gikonyo, who represent "[v]oices from the Movement" (9), to give a speech on the Independence Day. The invitation inevitably evokes his guilt as it reminds him of his murder of the young Mau Mau leader, Kihika, which is the main cause of his psychological trauma. And this is how the political comes into play and intersects with the psychological.

By portraying Mugo's moral crisis, Ngugi enables us to see the fissure between what Bhabha calls "the pedagogical" and "the performative" in mode of narrating the nation. (1990: 297). While the pedagogical is a dominant mode of national discourse which seeks homogeneity and consensus within the community, the performative captures the everyday enactments of national subjects. In the

process of writing the nation, Bhabha argues, the performative mode does not necessarily correspond to the pedagogical, for there is “a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it” (1990: 1) In *A Grain of Wheat*, the performative acts of Mugo are assimilated into the nationalist pedagogy.

Before discussing the nationalist desire to imagine Mugo as, and assign him the role of, a national subject, we must look at the narrative tradition which lends authority to the pedagogical mode of narrating the nation. It can be said that anti-colonial nationalism is the dominant discourse among the Kenyans during colonial and decolonization periods. Central to the meta-narrative of nationalism is the recounting of a shared heroic history of resistance. Therefore, one cannot fail to acknowledge that the Thabai community, which symbolizes “imagined” Kenya, struggles to assimilate everything into the nationalist narrative. The heroic deeds of the community leaders in their struggle against British rule in the early colonial period are repeatedly told from one generation to another. I would like to quote at length here the passage that demonstrates how the tradition of nationalist resistance is disseminated and shapes the colonial subjects like Kihika:

Kihika’s interest in politics began when he was a small boy and sat under the feet of Warui listening to stories of how the land was taken from people. . . . Warui needed only a listener: he recounted the deeds of Waiyaki and other warriors, who, by 1900 had been killed in the struggle to drive out the whiteman from the land; of Young Harry and the fate that befell the 1923 Procession; of Muthirigu and the mission schools that forbade circumcision in order to eat, like insects, both the roots and the stem of the Gikuyu society. . . . Kihika’s hearts hardened towards ‘these people’, long before he had even encountered a white face. Soldiers came back from the war and told stories of what they had seen in Burma, Egypt, Palestine and India; wasn’t Mahatma Gandhi, the saint,

leading the Indian people against British rule? Kihika fed on these stories: his imagination and daily observation told him the rest; from early on, he had visions of himself, a saint, leading Kenyan people to freedom and power. (83)

It is noteworthy that the Gikuyu narrative of prophecy, focused on in *The River Between* where one is born to be a prophet and has to warn his people of threats from outside, still pervades this later novel. The small Kihika, who is fed with the stories of anti-colonial resistance, imagines himself, like the character Waiyaki in *The River Between*, as a saint who is going to rescue “these people.” However, unlike Waiyaki, Kihika takes the narrative seriously as he has already accomplished some anti-colonial missions such as the murder of D.O. Robson and the siege of a police station. Moreover, the narrative of resistance has a more realistic sense in *A Grain of Wheat* because it is intermingled with the actual historical events and figures such as the 1923 Procession and Gandhi. It can be said, in Bhabha’s terms, that the nationalist pedagogical mode is perfectly performed by such national subjects such as Kihika. But not everyone can live it.

Since the narration of the nation is structured around allegory, the whole village speaks the language of the freedom struggle in which everything is likely to be seen as having an allegorical function. The effort to make things fit into the allegorical premise is obviously seen in the village’s desire to dub Mugo a legendary hero. Mugo gains his reputation as a hero when he helps a pregnant woman being beaten by a colonial officer and also when he refuses to confess whether he took the oath (which he doesn’t really take). The villagers regard Mugo’s acts of resistance to be allegorical as were other anti-colonial struggles by

the past heroes. Allegorized as a national figure, Mugo is therefore regarded as a national collective self of anti-colonial resistance, an embodiment the villagers want to share as they strive to search for an identity in the coming post-independence era.

However, the allegorical narrative is disrupted by irony. The collective identity that the villagers desperately invest in Mugo appears to be a mystification as it is learnt that Mugo has betrayed the Mau Mau Movement by murdering Kihika. The use of irony is of great importance here, for it questions the meta-narrative of nationalism which tends to suck everything into its allegorical structure. Mugo's case clearly shows that Ngugi is fully aware of the reductive rhetoric of nationalism which seeks to idealize the freedom struggle without revealing its darker side. As Neil Lazarus has warned:

the radical anticolonial writers tended to romanticize the resistance movement and to underestimate – even theoretically to suppress – the dissensions within it. Their heavy emphasis on fraternalism blinded them to the fact that within the movement there were groups and individuals working with quite different, and often incompatible, aspirations for the future. (1990: 5)

The use of irony seems to be the most fitting literary device to expose the blind spot in the nationalist grand narrative. Gikandi has pointed out the same issue:

Ngugi asks his readers to enter his novel through two scenes of reading: an allegorical scene in which we are invited to identify with the grand narrative of nationalism and its desires, and an ironic scene in which we are asked to be alert to the discrepancies between the structure of the narrative and the experiences it represents. (113)

National allegorization is not the only mode of narration characteristic of the nationalist rhetoric. The narrative of romantic return which cherishes the notion of going back to the pre-colonial is also commonplace in postcolonial narratives. After independence is officially achieved, people tend to have recourse to the past in which they believe the “normal” life is still waiting for them to re-live. The good old days, however, are not as beautiful as they expect. This is apparently the case of Gikonyo, a Mau Mau suspect who is taken to a detention camp. In this novel, Ngugi chooses the State of Emergency as a historical moment to portray the profound impacts of colonialism on the colonial subjects. It creates internal antagonism within the community between those who join the Mau Mau war in the forest such as Gikonyo, General R. and Koina and those who become homeguards serving the British masters like Karanja.

After Governor Baring declares the State of Emergency in 1952, those who are suspected of being involved with the Mau Mau Movement are rounded up. Gikonyo is one of those. After having been arrested, he is quite certain that he will come back home soon: “Gikonyo walked towards detention with a brisk step and an assurance born in his knowledge of love and life. This thing would end soon, anyway. . . . Gikonyo would come back and take the thread of life, but this time in a land of glory and plenty” (104). It is noteworthy that the image of life as a thread is mentioned several times when Gikonyo thinks of home and Mumbi. If the thread represents the continuity and progress of life, the State of Emergency cuts it off, serving symbolically as a radical disruption of selfhood.

The notion of “reconstructing that which had been broken” (Ngugi 1967: 66) is a defining feature of postcolonial narratives, but Ngugi problematizes it, contending that the process of going back home is by no means romantic. It is worth noticing that Ngugi addresses this issue primarily through the characters Gikonyo and Mumbi whose marriage relationship parallels the process of nation-building. In *Foundational Fiction*, Doris Sommer argues that nationalist fiction uses what she calls an “erotics of politics” to show that “novel nationalist ideals are all ostensibly grounded in ‘natural’ heterosexual love and in the marriages that provided a figure for apparently nonviolent consolidation during internecine conflicts” (6). She also says that since “[r]omantic novels go hand in hand with patriotic history,” they provide “a desire for domestic happiness that runs over into dreams of national prosperity; and nation-building projects invested private passions with public purpose” (7). Therefore, in nationalist narratives heterosexual romance is regarded as a means by which oppositional forces are compromised to sustain the project of nation-building.

In the case of *A Grain of Wheat*, the heterosexual relationship between Gikonyo and Mumbi is invested with the process of national consolidation. Before the Emergency, they are a happy new married couple as Gikonyo tells Mugo: “During our short period of married life, Mumbi made me feel *it* was all important . . . suddenly I discovered . . . no, it was as if I had made a covenant with God to be happy” (99). That Gikonyo feels blessed by God is not only suggestive of his romantic relationship with Mumbi, but also of his political dream of the birth of Kenyan independence: “The air was *pregnant* with expectation” (100: italics

added). After marrying Mumbi, Gikonyo finds himself more politically motivated to fight against British occupying power: “He now sang with defiance, carelessly flinging an open challenge to those beyond Thabai, to the whiteman in Nairobi and other places where Gikuyu ancestors used to dwell” (99).

The parallel between heterosexual love and nation-building also suggests that in nationalist narratives women are portrayed as a symbol of homeland or the nation which men strive to protect and long to return to. In *A Grain of Wheat*, Mumbi clearly functions as the symbol of Kenyan nationhood. Her image is often associated with that of home and mother. Such an association can be captured in the following scene which I would like to quote at length:

A few month after the declaration [of Emergency], Mumbi stood outside her hut looking dreamily at the land. Gikonyo was not at the workshop and Wangari [her mother] had gone to the river. The untrimmed hedges surrounding the scattered homesteads made the ridges appear one endless, untamed bush, but for the curling wisps of smoke from the many huts which made the land homely and peaceful. The sun was about to set. The small hedge outside Mumbi’s new home ripped with the breeze. She silently reveled in the scene before her.

She saw Karuiki, her younger brother, walking in the fields. Mumbi was suffused with warmth; she felt happy the boy was coming to visit her. She loved Karuiki and before her marriage always washed and pressed his clothes with care. (100)

If in colonial discourse the landscape of the colonized is usually compared to a native woman who is mysterious, incomprehensible and yet inviting for European male colonizers to explore and conquer, Ngugi here also feminizes the landscape of Kenya in the personal traits of Mumbi. He obviously associates “the land homely and peaceful” with the caring, warm and motherly Mumbi. In a nationalist

sense, Mumbi symbolizes the nation or the homeland which national subjects sacrifice their lives for and long to return to. In the passage, we can definitely assume that Gikonyo and Wangari who have gone somewhere outside “Mumbi’s new home” will come back to her. This is not to mention Karuiki, her brother, who is on the way to visit her.

To return home and reweave identity from the ruins of colonialism, nevertheless, is not an easy task because what was there has changed. The thread of life that Gikonyo keeps dreaming of after having been taken to the detention camp turns out to be a thread that exacerbates his identity crisis after he learns that his wife Mumbi has a child with Karanja, who is his friend in terms of personal relationship and his enemy in terms of ideological stances toward colonialism. (Karanja serves as a homeguard for the British authorities during the Emergency years, and he gives Mumbi’s family food during this difficult time. Mumbi lets him make love with her with “submissive gratitude” (150) when she learns from Karanja that Gikonyo is coming home). By presenting this incident, Ngugi seems to affirm once more the irony or the gap between the imaginary and the realistic, between the desirable narrative of return and the hard consequential realities of decolonization. He suggests that independence does not really mean the healing of the old wound. Even though Gikonyo and Mumbi live together after the Emergency, their relationship is unhealthy because Gikonyo cannot handle the truth that his wife has been unfaithful to him. The colonial wound will look uglier if the colonial subjects cannot handle with the past. Their postcolonial identity and future would then be disfigured.

Linking Jameson's theory of national allegory to the political process of nation-building, we can argue that the predicaments of the main characters after decolonization correspond to the difficulties of national formation in Kenya; both involve the processes of remembering and forgetting. The historical event which provides the defining moment for the main characters is the Mau Mau war of decolonization. As illustrated earlier, the Mau Mau struggle has such profound impacts on the colonized subjects in that it changes their lives in ways that they cannot live the lives they used to before the Emergency. Rather than promising freedom, the eve of independence witnesses Gikonyo's poisoned relationship with Mumbi, Mugo's alienation from the village, and Karanja's unstable and insecure collaborationist's life after the departure of his colonial boss Mr. Robinson. Although all of them are affected by the consequences of decolonization, the extent to which they suffer differs. Their attitudes towards the Mau Mau are also different. The Mau Mau remains an important historical issue in Kenya because it is a symbol of which the characters need to sense so that they can reconstruct their identities. Since the Mau Mau has impacted their lives, the question of how the characters are going to remember or forget it in the postcolonial future remains a central issue in the novel.

In his essay "What is a Nation?" Ernest Renan says, "Forgetting . . . is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation" (11). Since national history plays a very significant role in shaping national consciousness and identity, to will itself into being the nation simultaneously privileges and suppresses certain histories. While some histories, the heroic ones in particular, are glorified and perpetuated among

the national subjects, others are neglected and erased from national memory. Since the process of writing nationhood is selective, the questions inevitably arising from Renan's theory are: What histories should be remembered and forgotten? Who decides what to remember and what to forget and how? What benefits do they gain from that? These questions lead us to the recognition that national historiography, far from being uniform, is subject to contestation as historians strive to interpret the past in many different, ideologically interested ways.

The Mau Mau has remained one of the most highly contested issues in Kenyan historiography. Its image is ambivalent and contradictory even to the Kenyans themselves. As John Lonsdale and Atieno Odhiambo have noted:

Mau Mau has . . . a special status in Kenya's discourse, [as] a lightning conductor of disagreement rather than a focus of compromise. It has often been seen to be an embarrassment to Kenya's national history. Many Kenyans, it seems, cannot bear to question their anti-colonial struggle too closely. If they do, they expect too much of their past. They expect it to be a shining historical exception, not a rather tarnished rule. (3)

The ambivalence of Mau Mau in Kenyan history rests on the fact that even though some Kenyans want to remember Mau Mau as the national liberation struggle which brings about Kenyan independence, they have to admit that Mau Mau did not gain militant victory but were defeated by the British troops. Moreover, Mau Mau "was not a clean war" as it generated civil war between loyalist Gikuyu guards and Mau Mau combatants (Lonsdale and Odhiambo 3). In addition, Jomo Kenyatta makes the status of Mau Mau memory in Kenyan national history even more ambivalent. In 1962, as the President of the Kenya African National Union (KANU), he asked the Kenyans to forget about the Mau Mau, which he thinks of

as “a disease” in Kenya because they were about to be granted independence from the British in 1963:

If reports in newspapers that some of you are going back to the forests, making guns, taking unlawful oaths, and preparing to create civil war after independence, are true, I request all Kikuyu to stop doing such things. Let us have independence in peace. I am requesting you strongly not to hold any secret meetings or support subversive organizations. We are determined to have independence in peace, and we shall not allow hooligans to rule Kenya. We must have no hatred towards one another. Mau Mau was a disease which had been eradicated, and must be never remembered again. (1968: 188-189)

On Kenyatta Day in 1964, which commemorates the day he was arrested, the President Kenyatta gave yet another speech which makes a reference to Mau Mau: “Let this be the day on which all of us commit ourselves to erase from our minds all the hatreds and the difficulties of those years which now belong to history. Let us agree that we shall never refer to the past” (1968: 241). It is noteworthy that “history” for Kenyatta is something which has passed and is not worth remembering. Of course the history he is mentioning here is only the one full of “the hatred and difficulties.” Moreover, the use of the word “hooligans” suggests that Kenyatta is reinscribing the language of the master to construct Kenyan nationhood. Like the words “criminals” used by the British to label the Mau Mau fighters, the word “hooligans” refers to a group of “uncivilized” people who disrupts order. If the character Robson does not understand Mau Mau as a political movement as he thinks that they mean just “complete destruction of all the values on which our civilization has thriven” (55), Kenyatta too in this speech does not seem to acknowledge Mau Mau as a historical force that brings about Kenyan

independence, despite its military defeat. The political pressure the movement put on the oppressive colonial government cannot be ignored.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi seems to oppose Kenyatta's official urge to forge national amnesia. Despite "the hatred and difficulties" it brings about for the Kenyans, Ngugi asserts that the Mau Mau should be remembered as a national liberation movement which promises freedom for those who fight for it. His criticism of Kenyatta is echoed in the novel when Gikonyo tries to evoke the past in Mugo, who obviously does not want to remember the past:

'Why do you tell me all this? I don't like to remember.'
 'Do you ever forget?'
 'I try to. The government says we should bury the past.'
 'I can't forget . . . I will never forget,' Gikonyo cried. (67)

It is interesting to note that while Gikonyo, speaking in the name of the village, attempts to evoke Mugo's past, he ironically wants to forget about his own which affects his personal life. As illustrated earlier, Gikonyo is one of the main characters who is profoundly affected by the politics of decolonization of the Mau Mau. For the sacrifice he makes for the movement, his reward is that his wife Mumbi has a child with Karanja. His relationship with Mumbi and the child in the post-Emergency is unhappy as he always fights with her and ignores the existence of the illegitimate child: "I would never talk about the child. I would continue life as if nothing had happened" (122). His reaction to the child is interesting here since it reveals that Gikonyo is somehow trying to suppress the past. It should be remembered that the child is literally the product of decolonization; he was born during the Emergency when Gikonyo was in the detention camp and Karanja was

serving as a collaborationist Chief in Thabai. To forget the child implies to forget the past, and the same time, to be in denial about the future.

Gikonyo's attitude towards Mumbi and the child, however, changes. At the end of the novel, he wants to start a new life with Mumbi in the post-independence era and accepts, as well, the child's existence. This can be perceived metaphorically when Gikonyo, who earns his living as a carpenter before the Emergency, wants to carve the figure of the pregnant Mumbi on a stool: "I'll change the woman's figure. I shall carve a woman big – big with child" (247). It is apparent that the reunion between Gikonyo and Mumbi represents the rebirth of Kenya after colonialism. In addition, the names of the two characters refer to the mythical figures of the Gikuyu founders. As JanMohamed has noted:

the regeneration of the whole Gikuyu culture is implied in the symbolic references of two characters, Gikonyo and Mumbi, to the mythic ancestors of their society, Gikuyu and Mumbi. The slight variations between Gikonyo and Gikuyu is reduced further by Kenyatta's claim that in the correct Gikuyu phonetics "Gikuyu" should be pronounced "Gekoyo." (219)

What is more important in this case is that Gikonyo not only wants to carve the pregnant Mumbi, but also the figure of Mumbi's child from Karanja on the stool. Gikonyo's acceptance of the child clearly signifies that to move toward a postcolonial future Kenya as a new nation needs to remember the past no matter how painful and ugly it is.

The issue of remembering and forgetting also concerns the character Mugo. The question of how Thabai is going to remember him and what it is going to do with him are crucial points in regard to the process of nation-building. Mugo's position in the community is ambivalent since he fluctuates between the categories

of hero and traitor. No matter how Mugo thinks of himself in connection to the community, it is clear that he wants to forget his Mau Mau-related past. What is at issue here, however, is not the question as to what category we should allocate to Mugo along the line of the hero/betrayer binary opposition, but rather the villagers' reaction toward Mugo after they learn that Mugo murdered Kihika. JanMohamed makes an interesting point that even though Mugo, who is inflicted with guilt, wants to isolate himself from other people, he is integrated as a member of society who makes the community more open to each other: "Mugo's self-sacrifice, through his confession, is ultimately soothing; it becomes symbolic of the regeneration of open communication and has notable effects on Gikonyo and Mumbi" (218). What JanMohamad is saying here, in other words, is that what Mugo ultimately brings to the community is that he invites other people to redeem themselves in the post-independence era and starts a new life in a new "imagined" community.

The main characters all have their own wounds caused by decolonization. Gikonyo is the first one to confess the oath in the detention camp, Mumbi is unfaithful to Gikonyo by having a child with Karanja, Karanja is considered as a traitor as he becomes a Chief serving the colonizers, and Mugo feels guilty after killing Kihika. The question of who is guiltier is unanswerable since everyone has engaged in different kinds of wrongdoings. Opening oneself to the past seems to occupy the novel. This is clearly suggested at the end of the novel where Mumbi talks with Gikonyo in a determined manner: "People try to rub out things, but they cannot. Things are not so easy. What has passed between us is too much to be

passed over in a sentence. We need to talk, to open our hearts to one another, examine them, and then together plan the future we want” (247). What Ngugi is suggesting by having his characters open their hearts to one another is that to regenerate itself the community must acknowledge its painful past. So must the individuals. As much as the characters have to come to terms with their own past, the community has to remember the past which can be forgiven but not forgotten. The rhetoric of forgiveness, which is one of the dominant nationalist discourses in this novel, renders a more inclusive picture of the community which eventually overcomes the divisions and conflicts within it.

A Narrative of Doubt and Uncertainty in Post-Colonial Kenya

Despite the optimistic ending suggested by the reconciliation between Gikonyo and Mumbi, *A Grain of Wheat* is permeated by a narrative of doubt and uncertainty, reminding us that the struggle for independence is far from being over since neocolonialism, colonialism’s offspring, becomes a new obstacle for the Kenyans. As General R. says in his independence celebration speech, “We get Uhuru today. But what’s the meaning of ‘Uhuru’?” (221). Ironically, the effects of neocolonialism are most profound on those who actually fought in the Mau Mau war. Regarding to the politics of memory in the process of national formation, Ngugi contends that to remember Mau Mau as a national freedom movement essentially means to acknowledge those who participate in it. In this novel, Ngugi raises into question the meaning of independence which is manipulated by the nation-state controlled by the elite and the indigenous bourgeoisie. The fruits of Uhuru are not eaten by the working-class people and the peasants, the two classes

which Ngugi thinks form the majority of the freedom fighters. Mau Mau in this case serves another function as it is used by Ngugi to delegitimize the nation-state which does not keep its promise in the postcolonial Kenya. *A Grain of Wheat* is indeed Ngugi's attempt to make the voice of the "subaltern" in the postcolonial era heard.

That the meaning of Uhuru is changed after independence is captured in the ambivalent meanings of rain in the novel. It is apparent that rain is used a central metaphor to convey the theme of uncertainty and fear in the postcolonial era. It has two totally different meanings. Culturally, as an agriculture-based society, the Gikuyu see rain as a divine blessing or a collective symbol of fertility. During colonial period, rain is associated with anti-colonial victory: "People said the falling water was a blessing for our hard-won freedom" (178). Such a belief is confirmed even more by the fact that "[i]t had rained the day Kenyatta returned home from England: it had also rained the day Kenyatta returned to Gatunda [his hometown] from Maralal [the last town where he was imprisoned]" (178). These events soaked with rain strongly suggest a sense of successfulness or a momentous return to the normal. However, Ngugi undermines the belief by assigning rain another more destructive meaning. In the morning of the independence celebration day, it rains so hard that the crops are badly damaged and "[t]he morning itself was so dull we feared the day would not break into life" (205). The negative image of rain foreshadows difficulties the Kenyans are to encounter in the near postcolonial future.

The distorted meaning of Uhuru can also be seen when Ngugi depicts the scene before the celebration:

As usual, on such occasions, some young men walked in gangs, carrying torches, lurked and whispered in dark corners and the fringes, really looking for love-mates among the crowd. Mothers warned their daughters to take care not to be raped in the dark. The girls danced in the middle, thrusting out their buttocks provokingly, knowing that the men in corners watched them. (203)

It can be seen that Independence Day does not convey any meaning for young people. Instead of being a day to be celebrated in remembrance of the long anti-colonial struggle, Uhuru Day is seen merely as an occasion to for the young to mate. When the moment of independence is eminent, the reader witnesses not only the slippage of meaning of Uhuru, but also mixed feelings of expectation and fear for the new-born nation: “Everybody waited for something to happen. This ‘waiting’ and the uncertainty that went with it – like a woman torn between fear and joy during birth-motions – was a taut cord beneath the screams and the shouts and the laughter” (203). The combination of happiness and sadness encodes the birth of Kenya as a matter of life and death. There is a reason for Ngugi to fear and employ the narrative of uncertainty and doubt in this novel, for the birth of the baby does not mean the end of the mother’s suffering and fear. As the narrator says, “What happened yesterday could happen today. The same thing, over and over again, through history” (106). Suppression caused by colonialism, for example, the problem of land dispossession, does not end after Kenya gains her official independence, but it changes its form, done in the mask of neocolonialism.

It has been argued that Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* is an epigraphic text for this novel (Gikandi 98, JanMohamed 209, Ngugi 1986: 63). It is especially

the chapter entitled “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness” that shapes the theme of fear and disillusion. In his prophetic critique of the narrative of nationalism during decolonization, Fanon has noted that:

National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of mobilization of the people, will be in any case an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been (1963: 148)

According to Fanon, the “travesty of what might have been” is engendered by two things: tribalism and control of the nation-state by the elite and national middle class. In *A Grain of Wheat*, this concern is perfectly articulated by Gikonyo:

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. There are some who only the other day were singing songs composed for them by the Blundells: Uhuru bado! or Let us carve Kenya into small pieces! At political meetings you hear them shout: Uhuru, Uhuru, we fought for. Fought where? They are mere uncircumcised boys. They knew suffering as a word. (68-69)

Like many other characters in this novel, Gikonyo is disillusioned with the new nation state. The freedom, equality and rights which it guarantees for people during the nationalist period become merely empty words. After independence, administrative and political power is transferred from the colonizers to the few educated elite and the bourgeois who in the words of Fanon “are completely ignorant of the economy of their own country” (1963: 151). All they want to do is just to reap the benefits which the colonial government once brought from the exploitation of the masses. Gikonyo’s disillusionment can be demonstrated in his futile effort to ask for bank loan from an M.P. in Nairobi. Like the other politicians, the M.P. does not really care about national development. These

politicians function in postcolonial Kenya as the puppets of colonial power, preoccupied with their self-interest and neglecting their own people. As seen in the novel, it turns out that the piece of land Gikonyo wants to buy for his business is bought by the MP whom he asks for help.

Gikonyo's journey to Nairobi contains another revelation. It reflects the stark contrast between the African masses and bourgeoisie:

In fact, Nairobi . . . was never an African city. The Indians and Europeans controlled the commercial and the social life of the city. The African only came there to sweep the streets, drive the buses, shop and then go home to the outskirts before nightfall. Gikonyo had a vision of African businessmen like himself taking all those premises! (61)

Ngugi here is presenting Kenya as the land of conflicts full of gaps between the rich and the poor, between the bourgeoisie and the working-class. He also calls for remembering the latter group, the Africans, who do not eat the fruits of Uhuru even though they fought for it. As Githua, the Mau Mau fighter in the novel, says, "The government has forgotten us. We fought for freedom. And yet now!" Representing the marginal, Githua needs his voice to be heard and his sacrifice as a freedom fighter remembered in the postcolonial Kenya. As he says to General R., "So, Chief. Remember me. Remember the poor. Remember Githua" (126). By focusing on the woeful plights of the "subaltern," *A Grain of Wheat* is Ngugi's writing of "history from below" as he attempts to recuperate the history of anti-colonial struggle from the point of view of the ignored masses – the peasant and the working-class people during the period of decolonization which witnesses the arrival of neocolonialism.

The narrative of doubt and uncertainty in this novel can be perfectly summarized by Koina's questions. Upon seeing Dr. Lynd, a plant pathologist, whom he used to work for, Koina, who used to fight in the Mau Mau war, asks in a distrustful and doubtful manner: "Why was she still in Kenya? Why were all these whites still in Kenya despite the ringing of Uhuru bells? Would Uhuru really change things for the likes of him and General R? Doubts stabbed him" (214). All these questions posed by Koina are perhaps well answered by Karanja's prophetic words: "the coming of black rule would not mean, could never mean the end of white power" (38). The theme of neocolonialist domination and the struggle of the "subaltern" for existence in the postcolonial Kenya is more fully developed in Ngugi's fourth novel *Petals of Blood*.

4. NGUGI'S *PETALS OF BLOOD*

The Problems of the Term "Post-Colonialism"

In her essay "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism,'" Anne McClintock problematizes the term "post-colonial," arguing that it reinscribes the colonialist discourse of linear time and progress and ignores the continuities of imperial power in the post-independence period: "the historical rupture suggested by the preposition 'post-' belies both the continuities and discontinuities of power that have shaped the legacies of the formal European and British colonial empires" (178). She also argues that one of the problems of the term "post-colonial" is that it signals "the privilege of seeing the world in terms of a singular and ahistorical abstraction" and suggests that "post-colonialism" encourages "a panoptic tendency to view the globe within generic abstractions voided of political nuance" (177). What she is warning against, in other words, is the generalization of the term "post-colonial" which is considered to be applicable to all previously colonized nations despite their different cultural, social and historical specificities.

Ngugi's fourth novel *Petals of Blood* (1977) demonstrates the validity of McClintock's argument that imperialist practices continue on into the post-colonial era and are manifested in a variety of forms, particularly in guise of transnational capitalism in post-independence Kenya. Keeping McClintock's framework in mind, an analysis of "the post-colonial" conditions in Kenya requires an understanding of Kenyan historical contexts which shaped neocolonialism in Kenya in specific forms and thus required specific solutions. In this chapter, I

especially focus on Ngugi's critique of the processes and effects of neocolonialism on the colonized subjects of the Kenyan nation-state. The neocolonial nation-state controlled by an indigenous bourgeoisie not only exploits the oppressed economically but also deprives them of their history. As Peter Nazareth notes, "colonizers steal not only labour and resources, they also steal history. If a people believe they had no history before the coming of the colonizers, they can be exploited more easily" (122). Despite the demise of colonialism, Ngugi illustrates that the neocolonial nation-state, far from embodying the new hope of the masses, is a replica of the colonialist master's political system negating the history of its own peoples and perpetuating colonial authority and legacies.

Published in 1977, *Petals of Blood* tells the story of the transformation of a rural community named Ilmorog and of the four major characters coming from outside yet playing vital roles in changing it: Munira, the school headmaster; Abdulla, the ex-Mau Mau fighter, then barkeeper, and now a seller of oranges and sheepskins on the street; Karega, a former teacher and now a trade-unionist; and Wanja, a prostitute and a barmaid at Abdulla's old bar. All of them have unresolved pasts with which they have to come terms in the new era. Aligning with the genre of the detective novel, *Petals of Blood* revolves around the mysterious murder of Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria, the most well-known businessmen in the community. Like *A Grain of Wheat*, the novel is narrated through different points of view by the four main characters and employs the flashback as one of its main techniques to give an overview of Kenyan histories from the pre-colonial to colonial and to "post-colonial" eras. The temporal focus of

the novel is post-independence Kenya in the 1970s, and through his characters Ngugi explores how the fruits of Uhuru (freedom) have been unequally eaten, how the ideals of the national liberation are betrayed by the new ruling classes who align themselves with the exploitative ideologies of a transnational neocolonial bourgeoisie, and how those who actually fight for Uhuru are (un)recognized in Kenyan history. *Petals of Blood* can be said to be Ngugi's attempt to expose the exploitative features of neocolonial capitalism and to speak as a representative voice of the marginal.

Kenya in the Era of Transnational Capitalism

One of the recurring themes that Ngugi introduces in *A Grain of Wheat* and extensively elaborates upon in *Petals of Blood* is the emergence of the local elite and the bourgeoisie as the new ruling classes in the post-independence Kenya who ally themselves with the exploitative ideology of neocolonialism and betray the masses on whose behalf they attained their power. In the novel, the villagers of Ilmorog form a delegation and set out on a journey to see Kimeria their MP in the capital Nairobi to ask for a solution for their drought-stricken community. The drought has a significant meaning in that while it suggests the geographical fragility of the area, it also evidently symbolizes the hardships of the peasants in neocolonial Kenya who suffer from the lack of practical connection between the politicians and the people.

The departure of the British colonizers does not mean the end of colonial power. On the contrary, the educated elites and middle-class people who take over the political and economic controls from the colonizers reconstitute the colonial

regime and exercise power over their own people. Merely seeking to create connections with multinational businesses for their own benefits, they do not, in fact, practically establish economic and political plans that would transform the country after independence. As Fanon puts it:

The national bourgeoisie of underdeveloped countries is not engaged in production, nor in invention, nor building, nor labor; it is completely canalized into activities of the intermediary type. Its innermost vocation seems to be to keep in the running and to be part of the racket. The psychology of the national bourgeoisie is that of the businessman, not that of a captain of industry. (1963: 149-150)

Imitating the role of the Western bourgeoisie, the national bourgeoisie in the post-colonial countries functions as “the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the mask of neo-colonialism” (Fanon 1963: 152). Instead of being the voice of the nation, as they once were during decolonization period, the elite betray the ideals of the nationalist liberation struggle and the hope of the people by fully embracing imperialist capitalism. The M.P. in the novel, for example, aligns himself with transnational companies in tourism business. Given capital from foreign investors, he buys the land from the peasants, transforming Illmorog into a tourist center where tourists from outside come for young prostitutes. He has no mind to modernize agriculture, but concerns himself with only the development of business. As Fanon says, “The landed bourgeoisie refuses to take the slightest risk, and remains opposed to any venture and to any hazard. It has no intention of building upon sand; it demands solid investments and quick returns” (1963: 155).

Petals of Blood is a demonstration and, at the same time, a critique of the processes and impacts of neocolonialism on the marginalized peasants and the workers who for Ngugi are the principle actors in the anti-colonial struggle. These two lower classes are on the verge of disappearing in contemporary Kenyan history. The interventions of imperialist powers manifest themselves in the forms of transnational corporations and international development organizations which are, of course, sanctioned by the national elite and the bourgeoisie. These organizations give loans to the peasants and encourage them to do various kinds of big-scale farming with machines, imported fertilizers and paid labor as well as persuading the workers to sell their plots and invest in commercial businesses instead. Unable to produce agricultural products at the level expected, however, the peasants accumulate debt, and their land is thus confiscated by the bank. This is the second robbery of land after it was once stolen from them by the colonialists during the colonial time. The peasants are disillusioned with independence which does not secure their land against foreign intruders.

The advent of imperialist economic planning inevitably leads to restructuring the mode of production and transforms human and social relations in post-colonial societies. The epitome of a new Kenya affected by capitalism, Ilmorog has gone through just such a transformation. This is perhaps best captured in the consumption of Theng'eta in different historical periods. Theng'eta is a kind of traditional drink made from a medicinal plant and served, for example, during the ceremonies of circumcision, marriage and harvest. It is a drink shared by all the members of the community. During the colonial period, it is outlawed by the

colonialists who think that it makes the natives so lazy that they do not go to work. The traditional drink, however, has changed in the capitalist Kenya. It becomes a commodity produced in a brewery owned by local businessmen and foreign investors and employing six hundred workers. This change in terms of mode of production is a testimony to how Ilmorog has changed from a pre-capitalist society into a capitalist one in which the mode of production has changed from subsistence agriculture to industrial mass production. Actually the Theng'eta business is originally owned by Abdulla on a local, small scale, but he is bought out by Mzigo. Abdulla needs to sell his business to Mzigo because he needs money to help Wanja to buy back her grandmother's land which is being confiscated by the bank. This incident is a good illustration of the vicious circle of the exploitative capitalist system in which money goes round, but at the end it eventually lands in the hands of businessmen.

The changes, symbolized by Theng'eta production, show that Ilmorog, once a drought-stricken community, now fully embraces the ideology of capitalism and transforms itself into national economy controlled by international owners. The once-communal drink made for ritualistic purposes is turned into a commodity produced to make profits in an international market. Mysticism becomes mass marketing. This is a good illustration of Marx's criticism of exploitative capitalism that "turns use value (theng'eta made with care by people for their own use in important community ceremonies) into exchange value (theng'eta commercially produced simply as a commodity to be sold for the greatest possible profit)" (Williams 83). The profits from the drink never return to local people like Abdulla,

but go to black businessmen who share them with foreign investors. Looking at it from a Fanonist perspective, Mzigo, Chui and Kamera – the representatives of businessmen – do not produce anything, but borrow capital from foreigners and buy the Theng’eta business which is initiated by Abdulla. In this sense, they act merely as the intermediaries who seek to construct Ilmorog (Kenya) in the image of the metropolitan mother country.

Postcolonial modernity, materialized in the construction of the Theng’eta factory, the New Ilmorog shopping center, and the New Ilmorog tourist village – at the expense of the land of poor peasants and the working-class people – engenders a new social organization, altering human relations and consciousness. As the narrator testifies:

Within only ten years . . . Ilmorog peasants had been displaced from the land: some had joined the army of workers, others were semi-workers with one foot in a plot of land and one foot in a factory, while others became petty traders in hovels and shanties they did not even own, along the Trans-Africa Road, or criminals and prostitutes who with their stolen guns and over-used cunts eked a precarious living from each and everybody – workers, peasants, factory owners, blacks, whites – indiscriminately. (302)

The invasion of capitalism into Ilmorog has also affected the main characters. After his shop is bought off by Mzigo, Abdulla finds himself selling sheepskin and oranges on the street for tourists whereas Wanja now runs a brothel targeting high-class businessmen. Neocolonialism not only manifests itself in terms of economic oppression, but it also has psychological effects on the colonized subjects. The competitive and exploitative nature of capitalism invites them to think like businessmen who are only concerned about themselves. If they have an opportunity to take advantage of other people, they do not hesitate to so, or else

they would be taken advantage of. As Wanja explains her reason for building a brothel to Karega: “This world . . . this Kenya . . . this Africa knows only one law. You eat somebody or you are eaten. You sit on somebody or somebody sits on you.” (291). She expands upon the theme to him:

You eat or you are eaten. How true I have found it. I decided to act, and I quickly built this house . . . Nothing would I ever let for free . . . I have many rooms, many entrances and four yards . . . I have hired young girls . . . it was not hard . . . I promised them security . . . and for that . . . they let me trade their bodies . . . what’s the difference whether you are sweating it out on a plantation, in a factory or lying on your back, anyway? (293)

Wanja’s worldview – that “you either preyed or you remained a victim” (294) – is a manifestation of how the subjectivity of the colonized is deformed by the exploitative ideology of capitalism. As a product/subject of the capitalist epoch, Wanja defines things along the axis of exchange value where human beings are commodified and deprived of their essence and so she turns women into sex objects for profits. Aimé Césaire has critiqued the oppression of colonialism in his famous equation: “colonization = ‘thingification’” (42). As for neocolonialism, by creating a brothel, Wanja falls into the trap of the vicious circle of capitalism which turns her into an exploiter herself. In this sense, she is the same time a capitalist victim and a predator who eats somebody and is eaten by somebody.

Ngugi points out that capitalist ideology is sustained and perpetuated by a variety of social organizations. In his famous essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser notes that under capitalism, the state creates two kinds of apparatuses to maintain its domination: Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). While the first one is

maintained by overtly coercive institutions such as the army and the police, the latter is enforced by religious, educational, political and cultural institutions such as the church, the school, the political party, the press and by cultural products such as literature and history (143). In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi shows that far from being the hope of the people with a mission to reconstruct the national economy, the Establishment creates obedient subjects who are conditioned to embrace and accept the values of the capitalist system, citizens such as Wanja. They function, in the words of Amuta, merely as “conduits and mechanisms of the propagation and protection of the interests of the ruling class” (146). The groups who control the development of Ilmorog are politicians, represented by Nderi wa Riera; teachers, represented by Chui; priests, represented by Rev. Jerrod Brown; and businessmen, represented by Kimeria.

Educational and political institutions in the novel illustrate how dominant practices and values of capitalism are reproduced. Kareja is the character who has doubts about formal education as a tool to bring about a people’s liberation. Formal education does nothing more than, in the words of the human rights lawyer in the novel, “obscure racism and other forms of oppression. It was meant to make us accept our inferiority so as to accept their superiority and their rule over us” (165). Under the rule of Headmaster Cambridge Fraudsham, the colonial discourse of progress and order is reinforced in the classroom where the students do not study their own history, but rather the history of the Celts, for example. His teaching is colonialist in perspective in that it reinscribes the colonial rhetoric of the master-and-slave relationship: “In any civilised society there were those who were

to formulate orders and others to obey: there had to be leaders and the led” (170). The arrival of Chui, who once led his black fellow students to strike against this Eurocentric education, to replace Fraudsham as a new headmaster, however, does not bring about any change, for he has become merely “a black replica of Fraudsham” (171). Disapproving of the idea of Africanization in school, he teaches canonical English literature such as Shakespeare: “history was history: literature was literature, and had nothing to do with the colour of the one’s skin. The school had to strive for what a famous educator had described as the best that had been thought and written in the world” (172). By speaking the language of Matthew Arnold,⁴ Chui is imposing the cultural values of the colonizers on his students and privileging them over the African values.

In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi not only focuses on Ideological State Apparatuses as seen in the educational institutions, but also on Repressive State Apparatuses in form of the police. Suspected of being involved with the murder of the three businessmen, Munira, Abdulla, Wanja and Karega are put into jail. In this

⁴ Chui is here echoing Matthew Arnold’s definition: culture is “[t]o know the best that has been thought and said in the world” (1908: xxvii: original italics). Arnold’s concept of culture is, however, hierarchical in that he distinguishes ‘low’ culture assigned to the working class from ‘high’ culture associated with the elite, with preference for the latter. In regard to literature which he considers as a means to cultivate people, Arnold values European literature as having “the standard of the best that is known and thought in the world” (1910:39), and thus it should be institutionalized in English national education programs. Robert Young notes that Arnold’s concept of culture is defined not only in terms of class, but also of race: “popular or working-class culture finds no place in Arnold’s scheme. He announces quite bluntly, indeed, that the working class has no culture, and implies frequently that culture’s function is, as it were, to cook the ‘raw and uncultivated’ populace” (56) The words “raw and uncultivated” strikingly remind us of colonial discourse on the barbaric Africans who need to be civilized by the Europeans.

carceral environment, we see the perpetuation of the capitalist ideology by Inspector Godfrey, who helps maintain social stability and order to protect all kinds of industries and foreign investment. As a product of his time, Godfrey, the narrator tells us

had been brought up to believe in the sanctity of private property. The system of private ownership, of means of production, exchange and distribution, was for him synonymous with the natural order of things like the sun, the moon and the stars which seemed fixed and permanent in the firmament. Anybody who interfered with that ordained fixity and permanence of things was himself unnatural and deserved no mercy. . . . People like Karega with their radical trade unionism and communism threatened the very structure of capitalism: as such they were worse than murderers. (333)

It is interesting to note that for Inspector Godfrey, capitalism is synonymous with nature, a necessary phase of human development. As a protector of Nature, he wants to get rid of the harmful weeds from the surface of the earth by the use of force: “The police force was truly the maker of modern Kenya, he had always felt. The Karegas and their likes should really be deported to Tanzania and China!” (334). If Africa is to develop itself, it will need financial support and investment from outside. Nderi wa Riera, the MP for the Ilmorog area who represents another Ideological State Apparatus of the government, also shares this worldview. Once a man of the masses who opposed illiteracy and unemployment and advocated the nationalization of industries and Pan-African Unity, he now allies himself with foreign-owned companies which give him shares and land for the tourist industry. Like Godfrey, he advocates “the need for people to grow up and face reality. Africa needs capital and investment for real growth—not socialist slogans” (174). The cases of Chui, Godfrey and Nderi wa Riera testify to the maintenance of

capitalist ideology by the neocolonial state which uses its power to create docile citizens through sociopolitical organizations.

Writing the History of the Subaltern

In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi not only illustrates for us the plight of the peasants and working-class people in its material aspects, but he also demonstrates how these people are marginalized in Kenyan historiography. Since history is a discourse where language can be a tool of domination and a means of constructing identity, the question of who writes it, who the subject of history is, and how it is written, becomes an important issue. Ngugi's concern is that the sacrifices made by the masses in the war of liberation have been erased from national memory. The groups of people who are given special attention in the novel are the peasants and working-class people who, for Ngugi, are national heroes of Kenya. Despite being agents of historical change, they are not given a place in national history which, like the national economy, is controlled by neocolonial state.

What national development has caused for the masses is a sense of isolation and alienation. Their lives have been neglected by the government since they have no control or power. A cry for historical existence is uttered, for example, by Munira. Munira comes to Ilmorog because he is dissatisfied with his personal life. His father is a priest who preaches against the Mau Mau, and his sister commits suicide because of her failed love affair with Karega. Feeling that life is absurd, he is driven to do something to give him a sense of belonging. As the narrator tells us: "He was an outsider, he had always been an outsider, a spectator of life, history. He wanted to say: Wanja! give me another night of the

big moon in a hut and through you, buried in you, I will be reborn into history, a player, an actor, a creator, not this, this disconnection” (212). The betrayal of the hope of the masses, what Ngugi calls one of “the ironies of history” (127) is also portrayed in the character Abdulla whose leg has been amputated. Ironically, even though he is one of those freedom fighters who make a change in Kenyan history from colonial to postcolonial, he is not recognized by the state but rather marginalized from history:

Abdulla had fought for independence . . . he was now selling oranges and sheepskins to tourists and drinking Theng’eta to forget the forced demolition of his shop. Yes. Nothing made sense. Education. Work. My life. Accidents. I was an accident. I was a mistake, doomed to a spectator’s role outside a window from a high building. (297)

Since history plays a very important role in constructing identity, those who are not written about or remembered in national memory cannot help but feel betrayed, inferior, incapable of doing anything meaningful. As Abdulla bursts out: “I too was foolish enough to lose a leg for a national cause. I say: what right had mothers to send their children to the battlefield when it would have been wiser to make them run putrid errands for the European butchers? Fools all” (313).

The narrative of betrayal and the failed promise which Ngugi introduces in *A Grain of Wheat* is reiterated in *Petals of Blood*. It coalesces in the story of Dedan Kimathi, who is the leader of the Mau Mau guerillas. He is betrayed by his own people. As Abdulla tells us, “Dedan had been caught, delivered to our enemies by our own brothers, lovers of their own stomachs, Wakamatimo” (142). The betrayal of Dedan is put in a stark contrast with the increasing wealth of the MP Kimeria. During the Emergency, Kimeria makes his fortune by being a homeguard who

transports bodies of the Mau Mau killed by the British. After being elected as an MP, he benefits from the new economic development project of Ilmorog along with his friends Chui and Mzigo. The sharp contrast between the Mau Mau and the political elite echoes once again the gap between “the ironies of history, appearance and reality, expectation and actual achievement” (127).

Ngugi makes us aware that Kimeria, once a traitor, is not the only type of person who can exploit the people. Those who fight in the Mau Mau war can also be a threat to the New Kenya if they have lost the ideals of nationalist liberation.

When Kimeria talks about his business partner Nderi wa Riera to Karega, he says:

We used to have our little differences. He [Nderi wa Riera] was what you might call a, eh, a freedom fighter, that is, he was member of the party and was taken to detention. And I was, well, shall we say we didn't see eye to eye? Now, we are friends. Why? Because we all realise that whether we were on that side of the fence or this side of the fence or merely sitting astride the fence, we were all fighting for the same end. Not so? We were all freedom fighters. Anyway, Mr Nderi and I, we are quite good friends. We have one or two businesses together. (153)

Kimeria's statement: “We were all freedom fighters” echoes Kenyatta's claim that all the Kenyans fought for Uhuru. Even though Kenyatta's speech carries some truth that the Mau Mau fighters are not the only group who fought against the British because Kenya's independence was also achieved by those who worked in a constitutional way, it cannot be denied that in the post-independence period the fruits of Uhuru have not been equally shared. The “we” is not a homogenous entity but is divided into two sides by “the fence” built by capitalism. Ngugi makes clear that even though Nderi wa Riera is an ex-Mau Mau, he is not regarded as as one of those who stand on the same side of fence with Karega and Abdulla because he

has become an exploiter like those he once fought against. The previous “little difference” between him and Kimeria is rubbed out by their embrace of capitalist ideology.

Didactic in tone, *Petals of Blood* is unambiguous about its stance toward “post-colonial” conditions in Kenya. It touches on two important issues in postcolonial criticism which do not reach reconciliation. Postcolonial intellectuals and theorists pay critical attention to two different areas of inquiry: colonial/postcolonial discourse analysis and the material aspects of colonialism. While the first group focuses on how the West legitimates its imperial power on the colonized deploying a variety of representations in such discursive fields as literature, history and anthropology, the latter directs its attention to the economic and cultural changes engendered by colonialism in the postcolonial period (Loomba 55-57). As a record of the transformation of Kenya between the pre-colonial to post-colonial periods, *Petals of Blood* addresses both the issue of the discursive representations of Kenya in history and the material changes in the neocolonial Kenya. The reconciliation between the discursive and the material is best captured when the schoolteacher Karega teaches history in Ilmorog. Trying to enlarge the historical imagination of his students, he encourages them to think of themselves, Ilmorog, Kenya, Africa as part of “a larger whole, a larger territory containing the history of African people and their struggles” (109). Karega, however, realizes that the “imagined communities” that he is drawing are too abstract. Teaching history in this way is useless since the students too cannot draw a material/practical connection between the world outside and Ilmorog they live in.

Karega therefore thinks of approaching history from the local point of view which needs to take into account the material conditions of the community:

He and Munira were two ostriches burying their heads in the sand of a classroom, ignoring the howling winds and the sun outside. Was this not the same crime of which they had accused Chui in Siriana? How could they as teachers, albeit in a primary school, ignore the reality of the drought, the listless faces before them? What had education, history and geography and nature-study and maths, got to say to this drought? (110)

Ngugi here seems to suggest that even though history plays a crucial role in constructing identity, human beings as subjects are not only formed by language and discourse, but also are conditioned by their immediate material reality. The struggle for a civil society thus requires changes both in the realms of the discursive and the material. The “listless faces” Karega sees in the classroom can become agents of social change only when they can *both* escape the capitalist economic exploitation *and* represent themselves as the speaking subjects of history.

CONCLUSION

Carol Sicherman notes that Ngugi makes two changes in his revision of *A Grain of Wheat* for Heinemann's reissuing of the novel. These changes are very significant in that they illuminate Ngugi's understanding of history and of his role in the rewriting of Kenyan history. Both changes, made in chapter two, reveal his perception of the Kenyan nation-state. The first one is about political terminology: at the beginning of chapter two Ngugi changed the word "the Party" to "the Movement."

. . . to most people, especially those in the young generation, the Party [Movement] had always been there, a rallying center for action. It changed names, leaders came and went, but the Party [Movement] remained, opening new visions, gathering greater and greater strength, till on the eve of Uhuru, its influence stretched from one horizon touching the sea to the other resting on the great Lake. (Sicherman 10)

The revision obviously demonstrates Ngugi's disillusionment with the nation-state in the post-independence era. As Sicherman puts it, "[b]itter at the betrayal by the Kenyan African National Union (KANU) of its own ideals, he refuses to see it as the inheritor of the nationalistic movement" (299). Delegitimizing the nation-state as the authentic idealist Movement because it failed to keep its promise for the people and aligned itself with neocolonialism, Ngugi associates the Movement not with KANU but with Dedan Kimathi's Land and Freedom Army, generally known as Mau Mau.

The second change appears when the character Warui recalls the 1923 procession in which Harry Thuku led a mass demonstration to the State House:

The first version of *A Grain of Wheat* reads: “Three men raised their arms in the air . . . Within a few seconds the big crowd had dispersed; nothing remained but *fifteen* crooked watchers on the ground, outside the State House” (qtd. from Sichertman 300: her emphasis). In the revised version, Ngugi increases the number of casualties to one hundred and fifty which is the most widely accepted figure for the massacre, while the official one is twenty-one. Like the first, the second change suggests Ngugi’s serious doubts about the nation-state as it distorts the truth by reducing the number of the dead demonstrators. More importantly, the revision enables us to see the potential violence deployed by the nation-state to suppress its own people who are fighting against foreign domination in both colonial and post-colonial periods.

Ngugi himself has had an adversarial relationship with the state. In 1977, he co-authored his first Gikuyu play, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* or *I Will Marry When I Want*, with Ngugi wa Mirii. The success of the play, which is a critique of governmental power in post-colonial Kenya first staged in his hometown Limuru and performed by the peasants in the area, sent Ngugi into detention between December 1977 and December 1978 under the Public Security Act of Kenya in the command of Daniel arap Moi, then vice-president. Being detained in December 1977 also meant Ngugi’s loss of his position as Chair of the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi.

Ngugi’s discontent with the neocolonial nation-state which seeks to suppress the truth and oppress its own people is what concerns his latest prose work, *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams* (1998), originally the 1996 Clarendon

Lectures for the Oxford University English Faculty and the Oxford University

Press. In it, Ngugi voices his thought about the relationship between writers and the state:

Writers have no real choices other than to align themselves with the people and articulate their deepest yearnings and struggles for change, real change. Where the state silences, art should give voice to silence. Where, for instance, there is no democracy for the rest of the population, there cannot be democracy for the writer. Where there are prisons, the artist is also in prison. Where people are marginalized into ghettos and slums, the artist is also marginalized. Hence it is obligatory for writers in Africa, Asia, South America, and the world over to keep on fighting with the rest of the population to strengthen civil society, expressed in the capacity for self-organization, against encroachments by the state. (1998: 129)

The civil society that Ngugi dreams of is also envisioned by the character Karega of *Petals of Blood*. Not happy with Wanja's capitalist worldview in which "you either preyed or you remained a victim" (294), Karega says:

The true lesson of history was this: that the so-called victims, the poor, the downtrodden, the masses, had always struggled with spears and arrows, with their hands and songs of courage and hope, to end their oppression and exploitation: that they would continue struggling until a human kingdom came. (303)

If the nation-state is what creates the ironies of history wherein the masses bringing about historical changes are made merely the object of history, the writers aligning themselves with the masses are those who are capable of writing "the true lesson of history" which locates the real actors of history at the center. The two changes in *A Grain of Wheat* as observed by Sicherman, combined with Karega's statement, powerfully suggest that the nation-state is a real threat to the construction of Ngugi's "imagined" community. Therefore, as a writer, he has to create counter-narratives to the "official" narratives created by the nation-state.

The River Between, A Grain of Wheat and *Petals of Blood* comprise Ngugi's fictional world and expose oppressive situations in Kenya where "art has the right to take up penpoints, to write down our dreams for a world in which, at the very least, there are no prisons and gunpoints" (Ngugi 1998: 132). Ngugi's civil society and Karega's "human kingdom" can be imagined only when the power of the nation-state is reduced.

The nation-state is delegitimated as the foremost national institution because as a replica of the colonial state it perpetuates both structural and confrontational violence on its own people and thus generates social divisions. As long as it uses violence as a way to suppress the masses who are thirsty for freedom, the Kenyan nation-state, like the British colonizer, is always confronted with greater violence. It is this vicious circle of violence that prevents a civil society from coming into being, for it alienates human beings from each other, and from themselves. In an oppressive colonial situation, violence, as Fanon proposes, maybe necessary for the colonized to liberate themselves from the colonizer. Yet, violence is never an end in itself in liberation struggles, but the last recourse when peaceful negotiations fail. If the energy used for that violence is more positively channeled, social change is possible and exploitation ended. Ngugi emphatically suggests that the modern Kenyan nation-state should stop imitating Europe, but seek its own way to create a more inclusive civil society where the Manichean world collapses. As Fanon puts it, "[f]or Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity . . . we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set

afoot a new man” (1963: 316). A new leaf or a new community that Fanon and Ngugi imagine is one in which human beings recognize and affirm each other.

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