CHAPTER V

*A Grain of Wheat*, published in 1967, takes the narrative art of Nugget many steps ahead from his earlier two novels. More complex in terms of narration and form than either *Weep Not, Child* (1964) or *The River Between* (1965), in *A Grain of Wheat* Nugget narrates the happenings in the village of Thabai on the eve of *Uhuru* – Kenya’s freedom on December 12, 1963. Preparations are on in the village of Thabai as she prepares to ‘dance her part’ in the *Uhuru* celebrations which is only four days ahead, along with the other ridges. As Thabai prepares to honour Mugo, whom they consider to be their legitimate leader, and remember all those who had shed their blood and taken part in the long and violent struggle leading to Kenya’s liberation; it is also time for them for introspection and self-evaluation.

Through a series of flashbacks and reflections in the lives and experiences of the principal characters, both male and female, Ngugi succeeds in placing before the readers the different dimensions of the struggle towards Kenya’s freedom – individual, communal and national. The general approach towards the novel has been to interpret it as a study in the guilt-consciousness of the central character, Mugo, and that of others, thus highlighting the theme of betrayal in it. V. Sivaramakrishnan finds *A Grain of Wheat* “a complex, powerful novel exploring the psychology of a haunted man – haunted by an act of treachery to a hero of Kenya’s freedom movement” ¹. Such an approach puts more focus on the psychological aspect of the novel but tends to sideline other issues connected with the struggle for liberation, though it is undoubtedly true that betrayal, guilt and confession form important themes, perhaps the basic framework of the novel. Highlighting on other finer points of the novel Harish Narang observes:

> Both through direct narration and through reflections by his characters, Ngugi creates an atmosphere of hopes and fears, successes and defeats, loyalties and betrayals that were…typical of the period of the struggle. ²

The last phrase ‘typical of the period of the struggle’, tries to locate the novel in the proper historical perspective. Indeed, a crisp retelling of African history from...
the pre-colonial days to the attainment of independence is what Ngugi achieves precisely in A Grain of Wheat. Acknowledging the historical importance of the novel, Shatto Arthur Gakwandi writes:

A Grain of Wheat comes close to being a historical novel. Its plot owes almost everything to the violent events of the Mau Mau movement.

Considering the importance that Ngugi gives to history in the novel, Gakwandi labels Ngugi as a committed novelist. Defining the committed novel as one that “...necessarily looks into the future because of implied faith in the ability of a people to change their history”, he writes:

Ngugi’s novels are committed in the sense that colonialism is the constant object of attack. The author-narrator is entirely on the side of revolt, stressing the atrocities of the colonial administration and the heroism of the forest rebels who are fighting against colonial domination.

Harish Narang has given a precise description of the various factors which had contributed towards the growth of the Mau Mau in the following words:

The freedom movement, contrary to the false propaganda unleashed by both the settlers and the colonial government, was the result of the 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 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.

Typical of colonial setup, the colonial administration in Kenya did its best to demean and malign the movement as it gained momentum and strength. The entire propaganda machinery of the government was swung into action to portray a distorted picture of the ‘boys in the forest’ and their motive. The most repressive measures were let loose upon the Kenyans at large and the Gikuyu in particular to crush the movement. The notorious ‘Operation Anvil’, a two-pronged attack launched against
both the civilians and the forest-fighters had far-reaching effects into the Kenyan mindset. With the majority of the male population being deported to the concentration camps, the attitude of the forest fighters was hardened further towards the colonial machinery. Seething with anger and hatred and driven to near desperation, many joined their men fighting in the forests and swelled the number of the forest fighters. While repressive measures adopted by the colonial administration had the opposite effect of what was intended by serving as an impetus to the forest fighters instead of demoralising them, many on the side of the colonisers took to justifying the atrocities committed upon the Kenyans. L. B. S. Leakey, in his *Defeating Mau Mau*, has painted a picture of the situation which, while being distorted is perhaps among those that are farthest removed from the Kenyan reality and the actual factors which led to the intensification of the movement:

...the noble whiteman, who fervently engaged in bringing civilisation, Christianity, education and the ‘good life’ to Kenya’s backward natives, was suddenly forced to defend self and property, law and order, peace and morality against the treacherous attack of the atavistic savages gone mad with a blood lust.  

Leakey’s description uses positive attributes like ‘noble’ for the whiteman with his ‘civilizing’ intentions and negative attributes like ‘savages’ and ‘mad’ for the Kenyans supposed to be treacherous and blood-thirsty. The prejudice and the falsity of Leakey’s description can be understood clearly when one contrasts them to the observation of Marjory Perham regarding the atrocities launched upon the Kenyans by the repressive colonial regime:

The death of eleven hard-core prisoners at Hola camp at the hands of African warders in 1959 shocked the British opinion and led to a searching enquiry into the incident. Besides Hola and Manyani, there were many other camps like Lari and Langata where similar massacres of innocent people who had been detained illegally, took place.
This infamous incident at Hola camp has been fictionalised by Ngugi as the incident at Rira camp under the orders of D.O. Thompson – an incident that is an important point in Mugo’s experience of the days of the Emergency in the detention camps.

Again, in *A Grain of Wheat*, D. O. Thompson’s views on the Mau Mau represent the white man’s prejudiced reaction towards the organization and also express their ignorance of the important role that this movement played in the struggle for Kenya’s freedom. According to Thompson:

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. 

Born of such auspices, *A Grain of Wheat* presents a study of power and its dynamics at various levels, ranging from the individual to the social, where the relationship among the characters is decided largely by their individual positions in particular contexts of the intricate power-dynamics.

As is typical of Ngugi’s concern over the state of affairs in colonial and post colonial Kenya, *A Grain of Wheat* deals extensively with the conflict for power between the colonial administration and the Kenyan freedom fighters during the notorious days of the Emergency. Through a series of flashbacks, the unrestricted use of the oppressive colonial machinery is presented to the readers which, at times in an understated manner, tell of how the colonial administration was bent on crushing out the Mau Mau by sheer use of repressive power. The nightmarish experience that the innocent people had to undergo in these concentration camps and under stringent ‘curfew laws’ is what makes up the collective history of Kenya during that difficult period. As the novel presents the collective experience of different characters, they contribute towards the development of the narrative and the recounting of history – from the pre-colonial past (particularly from the day the white man made his first appearance on Gikuyu land) till the attainment of independence – and in their diverse roles highlight the different strands of the power-dynamics in the novel.
Though Mugo is the chosen leader who is to be honoured on the day of the *Uhuru* celebrations in Thabai, the dead forest fighter – Kihika, also occupies the centrestage. It is in the figure of Kihika that Ngugi presents the power of the oppressed people – the representation of the movement as the direct challenge to the colonial exploitation in Gikuyuland. The character of Kihika is a discernible development upon his predecessors. Kihika, unlike Njoroge or Waiyaki, is a man who believes in united political action. In Njoroge, Ngugi had characterised a dreamy visionary who had been over-awed by the power of the white man’s education, whose mind had been ‘colonised’ by the lure of Euro-Christian education. His successor, Waiyaki in *The River Between*, is a visionary too, and has his faith fully on the power of education. In his passion for spreading education throughout the ridges, he had overlooked the need for active political action and this separation of active involvement from his visions proved to be his undoing. Kihika in *A Grain of Wheat* combines his vision of a free Kenya gained through active political action with the strength of the people united against the common enemy. Also, the historical background of *A Grain of Wheat* is different from that of either *Weep Not, Child* or *The River Between*; it is the time of active armed resistance while in *The River Between* it was a period of resisting the influences of the missionaries. Of course in *Weep Not, Child*, the Mau Mau is already considered as a threat and Njoroge’s family is shattered because of their suspected involvement in the movement. *A Grain of Wheat*, as compared to the earlier two novels by Ngugi, is set against the infamous days of the Emergency in Kenyan history.

Kihika had grown up listening to the accounts of the white man’s entry into Gikuyuland and their subsequent spreading over the area. In Chapter Two of the novel, Ngugi gives a concise yet powerful description of the process. He also tells of the ‘Movement’ as having its origin on the day the white man set his foot on Gikuyuland. He writes:

> Its origins can, so the people say, be traced to the day the whiteman came to the country, clutching the book of God in both hands, a magic witness that the whiteman was a messenger from the Lord. His tongue was coated with sugar; his humility was touching.
But soon the process of expansion begins as the whiteman begins to occupy more land:

Soon people saw the whiteman has imperceptibly acquired more land to meet the growing needs of his position...Elders of the land protested. They looked beyond the laughing face of the whiteman and suddenly saw a long line of other red strangers who carries, not the Bible, but the sword.¹⁰

In a few words Ngugi has described precisely the unholy nexus between religion and repressive power in establishing and expanding colonial power – a fact that Ngugi was always critical about. Later in the novel, Kihika also speaks of the same phenomenon in a fiery manner as he addresses a large gathering at the Rung’ei Market:

‘We went to their church. Mubia, in white robes, opened the Bible. He said: Let us shut our eyes. We did. You know, his remained open so that he could read the word. When we opened our eyes, our land was gone and the sword of flames stood on guard. As for Mubia, he went on reading the word, beseeching us to lay our treasures in heaven where no moth would corrupt them. But he laid his on earth, our earth.’¹¹ (italics mine)

The last sentence quoted above deflates the very idea, or rather, the myth of ‘the whiteman’s burden’ which the colonial settlers put forward as a mask to validate their mission of exploitation in the colonies.

Considerable effort has been made by the author in the novel to project the difference between the whiteman’s professes mission in the colonies and the actual conditions therein under colonial administration. As later Kihika says in the novel:

‘Take your whiteman, anywhere, in the settled area. He owns hundreds and hundreds of acres of land. What about the black men who squat there, who sweat dry on the farms to grow coffee, tea, sisal, wheat and yet only get ten shillings a month?’¹²
It is, as if, Ngugi is spitting venom through Kihika on the conditions created for the common people under the colonial setup. A point which needs to be discussed here to some extent is the curious fact of how many white settlers firmly believed in the myth of the whiteman's burden, and how they were later left derelicts when they could perceive that placing faith on such ideas was not going to yield the desired results for them. Their failure to see beyond the façade of the coloniser's 'civilizing' mission leads them into undreamt of paths and at times making them act at the level of the extreme. This failure of the unflinching faith in the whiteman's power of 'civilizing' others, coupled with the attainment of independence by some colonies becomes too much for some people to comprehend. These are the persons who had all their life intricately woven themselves around colonial power and staked their all on it, now as they see the edifice of colonial administration crumble, they cannot reconcile themselves to this change of power. Perhaps it is more disconcerting since for a majority of these settlers England is a far dream. They had left England to find some meaning in their life and had felt that their work in the colonies gave them something of purpose so the transfer of power from the colonial rulers to the natives was a direct blow to their long-held beliefs.

D. O. Thompson in A Grain of Wheat is one such character in whom Ngugi portrays the characteristics of a typical coloniser who cannot bring himself to reconcile to the fact that Kenya is gaining her independence and the offices earlier maintained by the whites would now be taken over by the blacks. In Weep Not, Child too, Ngugi had portrayed the character of the typical settler in Mr. Howlands with his passionate attachment to the soil and his need for maintaining his control over it. In Thompson, Ngugi has taken the character of the settler-administrator a step further as he remains under the delusion of the whiteman's indispensability in the colonies if there is to be any development. As a prejudiced English bureaucrat, Thompson is firm in his belief that the Kenyans are utterly incapable of maintaining what the whites have built in Kenya. His views on what the state of affairs would be in the hands of the Africans after Uhuru is based on a very low estimation of the African's capability and efficiency in the management of affairs. As he looks at the Chemistry-block, the nearest laboratory, where test-tubes upon test-tubes neatly arranged by the glass window can be seen, he asks himself:
Would these things remain after Thursday? Perhaps for two months: and then – test tubes and beakers would be broken or lie un-washed on the cement, the hot-houses and seed-beds strewn with wild plants and the outer bush which had been carefully hemmed, would gradually creep into a litter-filled compound.13

Thompson’s wife, Margery, too relishes the power that she enjoys in Kenya by virtue of her being the D. O.’s wife, and a white lady at that. Margery’s addiction to colonial power has been very nicely described by Ngugi in the following words:

...in her wanderings from district to district all over Kenya, no other house, no other place was so intimately bound up with her. No other place had given her such a sense of release, of freedom, of power.14

But perhaps more than the sense of power, it is the sad realization that she might not be as indispensable as she had taken herself to be. As she asks herself whether she was using the kitchen or seeing Githima for the last time, the reader can trace the underlying sadness beneath her questions to herself. Identical feelings rise in Thompson’s mind as he also looks at his office and chair, as if he wished to protect his chair from any other black officer sitting on it. A prejudiced expression regarding the indispensability of Europeans is made by Thompson on the night before their departure from Kenya. He tells Margery:

‘We are not beaten yet’, he asserted hoarsely. ‘Africa cannot, cannot do without Europe.’15

Nothing could be more improper or prejudiced than such a statement made by a colonial administrator who had earned notoriety for himself by bringing about the death of eleven detainees at the Rira camp. It is the hurt vanity of Thompson who cannot reconcile to the fact that the whiteman is forced to leave Kenya to the hands of the natives.

Taking into consideration Thompson’s earlier career at the concentration camps and his biased attitude and views later, especially with regard to the
Movement, Cook and Okenimpke have written him off as basically a fraud whose intentions are evil from the beginning:

Thompson embodies for Ngugi that most odious form of political authority, colonialism, so of all his characters it is on Thompson that he pours most scorn. Thompson is a supreme example of those who refuse to admit the logical links between past action and present outcome...His hypocritical visions are exposed as sham, and together with them he is shattered and broken.16

S. W. Perera tries to trace the fault in Thompson to his environment. In his words:

[Thompson] deteriorates from an “idealistic” administrator to something akin to a monster because he is misguided, impractical, and unable to admit that his ideals are wrong. His colonial attitude towards Africa has been brought about by his education, social conditioning, and acquaintance with privileged, “white-washed” Africans in England who “are enthusiastic about the British Mission in the World”.17

It is true that Thompson had been greatly influenced by his reading of the exploits of Lugard and the fiction of Kipling, and arrived in Kenya with his idealistic dreams. But the racism inherent in his ideology restricts whim from realizing that the ‘mission’ which he wants to accomplish in Africa is a wrong one. So, when he meets with resistance from the natives in his so-called ‘civilizing’ attempt, or rather his colonial project in Kenya, he takes recourse to violence. His efficiency is recognized and it is believed that “a brilliant career in the colonial administration lay before him”18, but the incident at the Rira camp makes it necessary for the administration to transfer him to Nairobi.

It is even seen that in the beginning he brings a humane change in the detention camp at Rira. Some of the inhuman methods of extracting confessions from the prisoners are abandoned and sick persons are rushed to the hospital. But even this along with his other method of painting rosy pictures of the prisoner’s future with
their families on their return extracting confessions and information from the prisoners fails and he resorts to violence.

His failure lies in not seeing into the bitter reality of the whiteman’s mission in Kenya. Blind to the cries of reality, he seeks refuge for his actions in the ideologies and tracts of colonial project. For him, the unwilling Kenyan is a ‘vermin’, and he cannot understand how the English government could consent independence to ‘the vermin’. Nothing perhaps can possibly be provided as a justification for his actions in Kenya and the incurable colonial attitude that he holds till the end. This attitude of Thompson is evident also in the title of the unfinished tract ‘Prospero in Africa’ which he had designed to write during his stay in Kenya. The entries in his diary made towards the composition of this tract reflect a strong racial prejudice towards the Africans and an exotic view of the land.

More prejudiced and atrocious than Thompson is Thomas Robson, popularly known among the people as ‘Tom’ the man-eater who seemed to derive a queer pleasure in putting others to death, till he is shot by Kihika. Robson dies with the word ‘brutes’ in the hospital. Viewed together, Thompson and Robson reflect the prejudiced view of the whiteman against the blacks whom they believe to be inferior to them in all respects. In their ignorance they fail to accept the other as capable of anything equal or superior to them, and even tend to look down upon them as disposable things without any regard to their life or dignity.

Even a white lady like Margery exhibits the colonial attitude in her relationship with the Kenyans. She is interested in them more for their polygamous nature than for their own sake. So whenever she has any chance she asked the boys and men who came to her about the number of wives they had, a question she asks Karanja too. For her, the uniqueness of the tradition turns the Africans into ‘exotic’ beings from her Western English standing.

It is against such overbearing and dehumanising colonial attitude that the forest fighters led by Kihika address themselves to. Kihika in A Grain of Wheat is the epitome of the counter-force that is set against exploitative colonial power. It is in the conflict between these two contending forces that much of the power-dynamics
depends. As already mentioned, Kihika grew up listening to the accounts of the whitemen arriving in Kenya and gradually extending his control over the country. Kihika, like Njoroge and Waiyaki, had received the same Euro-Christian education in the beginning but his action of questioning the propriety for his being punished after he had dared to question his teacher on the issue of female circumcision brought an end to his schooling. Later, he educated himself at home and read widely of the Bible and the important revolutions of the world. His reading and experience of things had led him to see the cycle of colonial exploitation going on around him and when the Movement began to sweep over Gikuyuland, he decided to join and strengthen it.

Though a firm believer in the teachings of the Bible he had not been turned into a misfit like Njoroge. It is true that he carried the Bible with him whenever he went on important missions yet it had been a source of inspiration to him. His own experience had taught him to look at things from a different angle. Even as a young man, 'he was marked out as one of the heroes of deliverance'. Kihika, in his effort to unite the Gikuyus against the colonial tyrant, presents India as an example. Kihika was deeply impressed by Gandhi’s power of uniting the masses against the British. He tells Karanja, Mugo, Gikonyo and others:

There came this man Gandhi. Mark you, Gandhi knew his whitemen well. He goes round and organizes the Indian masses into a weapon stronger than the bomb.

For Kihika, the secret of Gandhi’s success lay not just in organizing the people but also in leading them on to sacrifice everything for their country’s sake:

Do you know why Gandhi succeeded? Because he made his people give up their fathers and mothers and serve their one Mother – India.

The value of sacrifice that Kihika finds so appealing in the movement for India’s independence is what he wants to install in his people. Time and again in his speeches he calls upon the people to prepare themselves for sacrifice, as he does on the day he addresses a large gathering at the market place or while addressing the gathering of young people at the railway station.
It is to be noted that the theme of sacrifice runs very strongly in *A Grain of Wheat*. The description of the village as given in the first chapter hints at the sacrifice motif:

Yet the village remained an unbroken orderliness; from a distance it appeared a huge mass of grass from which smoke rose to the sky as a burnt sacrifice.\(^{22}\)

Indeed, the village of Thabai joins hands with the other parts of the country in her contribution towards liberation. Later in the next chapter it is remarked that the Movement grew on the sacrifices and the wounds of those who had taken part in it.

Kihika’s decision of going into the forest and organising the young forest fighters puts him in direct confrontation with the colonial authorities. His gradual realisation of the pitiable state of the Kenyans in their own land had led him into organising armed resistance against Wambuku, he expresses the plight of the Kenyans under the yoke of colonialism with the following words:

‘It is not politics, Wambuku’, he said, ‘it is life. Is he a man who lets another take away his land and freedom? Has a slave life?’\(^{23}\)

Tormented with such thoughts it is natural that Kihika should prefer armed resistance as the appropriate step towards liberation, and he understands that such a step involves sacrifice on a mass scale: ‘This is not 1920. What we now want is action, a blow which will tell’...\(^{24}\)

Kihika strikes the blow; not once but twice – leading to the capture of Mahee and the shooting of Robson. The capture of Mahee was a direct challenge to the might of the whitemen. It is important to note that Mahee is seen as an emblem of the power of the whiteman: the symbol of his control over Gikuyuland:

The valley sprawled flat for a distance and then bounced into the ridge of small hills. Beyond, and to the right, Kihika could just trace the outlines of
Mahee Police Station, a symbol of that might which dominated Kenya to the door of every hut.  

But Mahee falls and the myth of the whiteman’s invincibility is shaken. Kihika and his men take over the police station in surprise, loot the arms and rations, and disappear into the forest after setting fire to it.

It is when D. O. Robson is shot in front of his guards that Kihika enters into Mugo’s life, thus complicating the psychological drama of a reticent individual who wanted nothing more than to be left alone. So when Kihika appeals to Mugo to join the Movement and help to spread it across the ridges, Mugo feels himself trapped. A person given to heightened feelings, he feels the appeal of Kihika as a dead end where nothing but death awaited him. He finds that his dream of an imagined happy future to be on the brink of destruction. Assailed by such thoughts, Mugo finally decides to take a drastic step – to betray Kihika on the appointed date of his meeting. He also thinks that the reward that he would receive on Kihika’s capture would set him off financially. Guided by such thoughts, he betrays Kihika to D. O. Thompson but he too is sent to detention. However, the people’s suspect Karanja to be Kihika’s traitor as he joins the homeguards soon after Kihika’s hanging.

The conflict between Kihika and Mugo is the conflict between the man of action and the man of contemplation. Mugo’s betrayal of Kihika has to be judged keeping in mind the fact that Mugo is a person of extraordinary sensibility. Having experienced an unhappy childhood, he had established a separate peace with himself and wanted it to continue. On Kihika’s approach, his personal world felt threatened and he committed the act which made him socially accountable, for in African society no individual is outside the society. Mugo does to Kihika what he had thought of doing to his aunt in his childhood – kills him, though the murder is not carried out with his own hands. But Mugo’s silent and stoic manner of enduring the tortures and pains inflicted upon him make him a hero among the other detainees. His involuntary action of snatching the whip from the soldier to protect a pregnant woman adds to his reputation. But it should be kept in mind that Mugo was unaware of himself being worshipped as a hero by the people.
Rather, Mugo is visibly troubled by all the attention that is given to him. The knowledge of his own guilt pursues him in everything he does and thinks. He behaves, literally, like a man on the run; suspicious, alert, and always on his guard. The description of Mugo as he returns from his field to his hut reflects his troubled mind:

He walked like a man who knows he is followed or watched, yet he does not want to reveal this awareness by his gait or behaviour.  

He lives a strained life and cannot understand why the people should choose him to speak on the day of celebration. As always, he wishes to be left alone and his nightmarish thoughts:

Why did they want him to lead the Uhuru celebrations? Why not Gikonyo, Warui or one of the forest fighters? Why Mugo? Why? Why? Why? 

It was this very desire to be left alone that had forced him to betray Kihika to the whiteman. When Kihika had appealed to Mugo to join the Movement on the fateful night of shooting Robson, he had called upon Mugo to prepare for sacrifice. Hinting upon the possibility that he himself might be killed any day, he had told Mugo:

But a few shall die that he many shall live. That's what crucifixion means today... Choose between freedom and slavery and it is fitting that a man should grab at freedom and die for it.  

But Mugo's choice differed from that of Kihika. His heightened sensibility fogs his mind and he simply cannot realize that his appearance exudes confidence. His silent manners and his tall build are such that they easily draw confidence from others. The manner in which Ngugi describes Mugo walking in the rain with a basketful of vegetables and potatoes in Chapter Thirteen clearly expresses the power that Mugo has on his on-lookers:
He was tall; with broad shoulders, and he walked with a slight stoop that created an impression of power. Indeed, the impression of power that Mugo creates is such that persons Gikonyo and Mumbi, who cannot open up their souls to others, confide in him unhesitatingly. It is an irony that while others can lighten their own burden by confiding in him, he must bear the cross of his suffering to the utmost of endurance. So, when he finally confesses to Mumbi that he had been instrumental in bringing about the death of Kihika, she is dumbfounded. Yet she, of all persons, can endure and reason out why Mugo had acted thus, and forgives him. It is interesting to note the heightened, more precisely, dramatic anguish that continues in Mugo’s mind till the confession is made – almost verging on the level of the hallucinatory, thereby imparting him an almost Shakespearean touch as in the character of Macbeth; a tragic dignity. It is only when Mugo confesses the betrayal publicly that his mind is cleared of the load of guilt that had turned normal life a nightmare for him. In doing so, he had not only saved the life of Karanja, but also made others see within themselves for signs of their own betrayal. It also cannot be denied that Mugo shows genuine goodness of heart in confessing his crime and rejecting all the material benefits which he could have easily enjoyed by remaining silent and passing on the guilt to another person. How befitting are Gikonyo’s observations on Mugo when he tells Mumbi and his mother in the hospital:

‘He was a brave man, inside’, he said. ‘He stood before much honour, praises were heaped on him. He would have become a Chief. Tell me another person who would have exposed his soul for all the eyes to peck at.’

He further adds:

‘Remember that few people in that meeting are fit to lift a stone against that man. Not unless I – we – too – in turn open our hearts naked for the world to look at.’

Gikonyo’s observations are an acknowledgement of the collective guilt of the community and the dark side of every individual.
Mugo’s rise to popularity also brings into focus the manner how legends grow around persons. From a simple man who has returned from detention, Mugo is catapulted into a heroic figure overnight. Next to Kihika, he becomes the embodiment of resistance against colonial power. But he feels himself utterly unworthy of the praise showered upon him and this feeling of his own unworthiness becomes his undoing. Despite the betrayal that he does to Kihika, his honesty is beyond question. That is why Gikonyo is led to such introspection about Mugo towards the end of the novel. When he thinks:

What difference was there between him and Karanja or Mugo or those who had openly betrayed people and worked with the whiteman to save themselves?  

he is expressing Ngugi’s feelings on the collective responsibility of the people in trying to judge things on their outward value only.

If one considers Kihika as representing the collective resistance of the blacks against colonial power, it might be possible to interpret the conflict between Mugo and Kihika on the basis of power-dynamics. In such a case it would be possible to say that Mugo’s act is an act of resistance to Kihika’s efforts of drawing him into the current of the liberation movement, though it has to be admitted that it is an unfortunate event. It may even seem feasible to explain away the betrayal of Mugo as his attempt to maintain his individual position against collective pressure (as Kihika represents collective resistance). His action is not excusable when we consider the fact that in African society the individual is not aloof from or above the community, and is, therefore, accountable to it for every action. But as one tries to understand the motives between the betrayal of Mugo, Karanja and Gikonyo, the differences tell different tales, thereby forcing the readers to arrive at their own standards of judging or condemning them.

Mugo’s betrayal is born out of completely private feelings and though he betrays Kihika to the whiteman he never takes sides with the latter. His is an impulsive action dictated by a feverish mind. Mugo, it can be safely said, considered the whiteman as nothing but evil. He tells Mumbi:
‘When I was young, I saw the whiteman, I did not know who he was or where he came from. Now I know that a Mzungu is not a man – always remember that – he is a devil – devil.’

Needless to say, Mugo had experienced the evil side of colonialism during the days of his detention and this had led him to conclude that the whites are evil.

Gikonyo, too, had betrayed the Movement by confessing the oath when he felt that there was no other way out for him from the suffering in detention. He had been led to this action because of his love for Mumbi and his fear that he might not last through the Emergency to see her again. The memories of the happy days spent with Mumbi supported him throughout the detention but when after six years he finds that he cannot bear it any longer, he decides to confess the oath and go back to his village. He does not feel victorious while returning to the village, rather, he feels bad inwardly for confessing the oath. His only solace is that he would be united with Mumbi and take up the thread of life where he had left it. But what he encounters on returning home is way beyond his wildest dreams. He finds that Mumbi has got a child from another man, who later turns out to be Karanja – and all his dreams of homecoming are shattered to pieces. Everything seems unreal to him:

The years of waiting, the pious hopes, the steps on the pavement, all came rushing into his heart to mock him.

His act of confession, his decision of becoming the black sheep among the other detainees, all mount to nothing as he encounters this bitter reality on his return. His only release from his torturous thoughts is his work and he devotes himself fully to it, yet he cannot come out of the facts and accuses Mumbi of betraying his faith in his absence. It is true that through confessing the oath Gikonyo ‘fails’, but his fail is not so serious as that of Karanja because Gikonyo does not name the persons involved in administering the oath during the screening. His betrayal is born out of his chasing a private dream, not does he ally himself to the whiteman as Karanja does.
It seems that it is in the character of Karanja that Ngugi portrays the worst type of betrayal, the act of selling oneself completely to the whiteman and turning against one’s own brothers. But it should also be remembered that there is a certain amount of sympathy in Ngugi’s treatment of Karanja which saves him from degenerating into a total villain, and perhaps he wants the readers also to judge the character of this man with the same sympathy that he shows him. A few days after Gikonyo’s departure to the detention camp and Kihika’s death, Karanja takes on the job of a homeguard under the new D. O. and soon becomes the Chief after Chief Muruithia is shot by the forest fighters. When confronted by Mumbi, he tells her the reason for carrying the whiteman’s gun:

The coward lived to see his mother while the brave was left dead on the battlefield. And to ward off a blow is not cowardice.\textsuperscript{35}

He firmly believes in the power of the whiteman and has no faith that Kenya would one day achieve independence or those in detention would come back some day. His effort of trying to explain his action as an act of discretion does not hold much water, rather, it were as if Ngugi was trying to point out the dangers that such collaborators as Karanja posed to the Kenyan society during the period of her struggle against colonial exploitation.

It is an undeniable but sad fact that throughout the struggle, African collaborators, such as Karanja in this novel played an important role on behalf of their white masters. Awed by the whiteman’s power and having tested a share of that power they became the extended presences of the whiteman. Their contribution towards continuing colonial rule in Africa was two-fold; first, to support the colonial machinery, and secondly, to dissuade the people from rising against their white masters by a show of sheer power. In the novel under discussion, Karanja, in his capacity as a homeguard and later as a Chief, tries to justify all that the colonial government was doing and also to emphasize the futility of resisting the might of the whiteman. He tells Mumbi that she should give up the hope that Gikonyo would ever return from detention and that the forest fighters would ever drive away the whiteman. He tells her:
The whiteman is strong. Don’t you ever forget that. I know, because I have tasted his power. Don’t you ever deceive yourself that Jomo Kenyatta will ever be released from Ladwar. And bombs are going to be dropped into the forest as the British did in Japan and Malaya. And those in detention will never, never see this land again.\textsuperscript{36}

The effect of such surrender to the power of the whiteman is far-reaching. His degree of dependency on the whiteman goes on increasing with the passage of time. As Harish Narang points out:

\begin{quote}
Once caught into the logic of surrender and collaboration, Karanja sank deeper into such dependence.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

But what Karanja seemed to enjoy in this state of dependency was the taste of power — ‘power to save, to imprison, to kill’.\textsuperscript{38} The taste of power turns his head and soon he finds pleasure and thrill in shooting people. In league with the whiteman, he had felt himself to be ‘a part of an invisible might whose symbol was the whiteman’ (p. 230). Yet later this attachment to power turns into an obsession:

\begin{quote}
Later, this consciousness of power, this ability to dispose of human life by merely pulling a trigger, so obsessed him that it became a need.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

It is the ultimate degeneration of Karanja into the identity imposed upon him by the colonial set up.

In his character Ngugi has described the negative effect of power and the misuse of it in the hands of persons like Karanja. His atrocities make people antagonistic to him but basking in the intoxication of his newly-experienced power he cares nought for others. His only regret is losing Mumbi. Believing that colonial power in Kenya was never going to end, he imagines himself to be safe from harm. But the over-reaches himself and is removed from the post of the Chief. However, he is given a job at the Government library at Githima under Thompson. This, instead of opening his eyes, makes him more reliant upon the whiteman for his survival, and when the English Government finally decides to grant independence to Kenya,
Karanja cannot endure the thought of the Thompsons going away and ‘leaving’ him in an administration run by the blacks. The realization that with the departure of his white masters from Kenya he will lose his power automatically makes him afraid of black power. It is interesting to note how during his departure from his village to Githima after the *Uhuru* celebrations, he shudders at the thought of what might have become of him if Mugo had not confessed the guilt of having betrayed Kihika. In the absence of white power to shield him from his past actions, he now finds himself at the mercy of his (black) fellowmen. The very fact that it had been arranged to ‘sacrifice’ him – the traitor – at the *Uhuru* celebrations sends a shiver down his spine.

The people’s hatred for Karanja whom they brand as a traitor, a collaborator, is Ngugi’s own feelings towards this group that had served as a major obstacle in Kenya’s struggle for independence. An important motif in *A Grain of Wheat* is the punishment for traitors and collaborators. If General R. and Lieutenant Koina are bent on punishing the betrayer of Kihika, whom they mistakenly think to be Karanja, Rev. Jackson is also killed for turning into a Revivalist and trying to divert the people on religious basis from their immediate objective for uniting and fighting against their colonial oppressor. It is a historical fact that one of the objectives of the Mau Mau Movement was to locate and finish off traitors and collaborators who served as termites to eat away into the unity that the Movement was trying to forge among the people. Killings and mysterious ‘disappearances’ of informers often took place in squatter areas. These were supposed to serve as warnings to those who still kept themselves allied to their colonial masters. The reaction of the people on Rev. Jackson’s murder that all traitors should be wiped out is an echo of the common sentiment against traitors.40 Another instance of such killing carried out by the Mau Mau in the novel is the murder of Teacher Muniu. Thus, looking beyond the usual interpretation of *A Grain of Wheat* as a novel which is primarily built upon the theme of betrayal and guilt, it is also possible to interpret it in terms of power-dynamics and study how the actions and decisions of the individual characters stem out of their individual positions in which they find themselves in the power-matrix, and how by their very actions they either contribute or resist the power-structure, though keeping the cycle going on.
Besides the operation of power already analysed in the relationship among the colonizer, the colonized, and the collaborator, there is yet another sphere where power operates both as an instrument and a theme: and it is in the gender-relationships in the novel that represent the disproportionate distribution of power among the sexes at the domestic as well as on the public fronts. Mumbi’s character is a large stride forward from the female characters that Ngugi portrayed in his earlier novels. Of all the female characters portrayed till A Grain of Wheat, it might be stated that in delineating the character of Mumbi, Ngugi has taken the greatest pains. Though there can be traced a steady development in the characters of Nyambura and Muthoni in The River Between from that of Mwihaki in Weep Not, Child, Mumbi in A Grain of Wheat takes the development many steps forward. In both his earlier novels the women have been shown as motivating a considerable part of the protagonist’s actions, and thereby leaving a mark on the narration and the development of plot, yet in A Grain of Wheat Mumbi is the centre of attraction and motivation for a major portion of the developments in it. Not only that, she is herself an active agent who tries to act and at times acts consciously on important issues that have far-reaching effects on herself and others who are related to her.

As a woman, Mumbi is aware of the power which she exercises over man. Her influence over men can be understood when one considers how Gikonyo and Karanja had rivalled each other in trying to win her love. As discussed already, the actions of Gikonyo during detention were motivated by his desire to return to her. Even Karanja tries to explain his decision of carrying the gun for the whiteman by stating his love for Mumbi and his desire to stay by her as the cause. This rivalry over Mumbi continues even after she is married and it is only at the end when Karanja finds himself totally neglected by her on the day of the race that he loses all hope finally.

Besides the rivalry between Kamja and Gikonyo over her, there are other instances in the novel that point to her power over man. When the villagers find that they cannot persuade Mugo to speak on the day of the Uhuru celebrations, they decide to send Mumbi to try and persuade him for the last time. The decision to send Mumbi is motivated by her youthful appeal. As Ngugi points out:
Now the women decided to send Mumbi to Mugo. Mumbi the sister of Kihika. They would confront Mugo with sweet insistent youth – youth not to be ignored or denied.  

However, it would be gross injustice to say that it is only her youth which moves Mugo. Her determination and the fact that she is Kihika’s sister also contribute towards the confession of Mugo; and though she is shocked beyond her wildest dreams by his confession, of all persons it is only she who can understand the troubles of Mugo’s soul.

But even as a woman of such influence over men, Ngugi as portrayed her as being under the gender-engendered relationships of the Gikuyus. It has been argued against Ngugi’s portrayal of female characters that he makes them subservient to the male and permits them only that amount of space as granted within a patriarchy. But perhaps it can be suggested as a counter-argument to such views that by circumscribing the space of the female characters within the male-defined society, Ngugi was being a realist.

In the domestic sphere the position of Mumbi is not very much different from that of the other female characters. They have been portrayed as functioning within the perimeter defined by the Gikuyu custom. The subservience of the women in Gikuyu society can be understood when one considers the remark of Gikonyo towards his mother in which he tells her to mind her domestic chores instead of meddling he head in other things:

‘Go and cook. These things are beyond women.’

Though the remark is made casually and playfully as part of a conversation between a mother and son, it nevertheless points to the hearth’s being the correct space for female activity. The relationship between Gikonyo and Mumbi also takes on a gender-specific turn after Gikonyo’s return from detention. Ignorant of the circumstances that had made Mumbi submit herself to Karanja, and refusing to either listen to her explanations or to talk things out, Gikonyo puts the entire burden of betrayal on Mumbi’s shoulders. Little does he try to understand that there might have
been circumstances beyond her control that had led her to such an act. His feelings finally find their release in the quarrel when he beats up Mumbi and she leaves his home, and though he realizes his mistake he cannot bring himself to acknowledge it for such confession would be below his vanity as a male. His masculine ego, however, cannot hold for long as soon during his stay at the hospital with a broken arm he can think coolly over things that have always pricked him, and also witness the unselfish devotion with which Mumbi nurses him. The injustice of his behaviour towards Mumbi pains him and finally he tries to mend matters by asking her to return to his home:

‘Will you go back to the house, light the fire, and see things don’t decay?’ 43

But the final say remains with Mumbi. She has developed a new firmness in her character and it is not hidden from Gikonyo who has to take in her answer without injury to his masculine pride. Mumbi’s answer to Gikonyo that what had passed between them was “too much to be passed over in a sentence” and that they need to talk, confess, discuss and then plan for the future is symbolic of her new-found confidence. 44

There is a marked development in Mumbi’s character from the beginning till the end. Also, the role that she plays in the novel is not a mean one. The influence of her personality and beauty, her strength of character and her endurance mark her apart from the other female characters in the novel. From youthful vivacity to full-developed womanhood, passing through responsible motherhood, she epitomises the determined femininity which Ngugi seems to have in his mind as the standard of Gikuyu women – loving, lovable, enduring, sacrificing, enticing even, and yet able to maintain her individuality and preferences in a patriarchal society. The magnetic dynamism of her character pushes the other female characters into the shadow – whether they be blacks or whites.

Margery Thompson, by a queer streak of rebelliousness in her character, makes herself more prominent than other white female characters in A Grain of Wheat. Apart from her colonial attitude towards the blacks who serve under her husband, she can be called a woman who yearns for a certain degree of fulfilment of
her emotional needs which her husband seems to have neglected in his devotion to the empire’s work. Her attraction to Dr. Van Dyke, inspite of his uncoth manners and unattractive personality is an act of her rebellion on her part, a sickly sweet feeling of betrayal and clandestine relationship with Van Dyke as her way of avenging herself upon her husband for his apparent neglect of attention to her. Her affair with Van Dyke was one based on a love-hate relationship, with Margery growing increasingly jealous of other women who happened to come near Dyke:

She hated Dr. Van Dyke. But the more she hated him, the more she knew his power over her: she wanted his body, the wild plunge into darkness unknown, an orgy of revulsion, desperation and attraction. Jealousy and fear of what he was doing behind her back ate into her rest and peace.\(^4^5\)

The outward incongruity of their relationship was such that people often wondered how Margery could carry on with such a clout as Van Dyke and they reserved all their pity for Thompson. When Van Dyke’s car is run down by the train, their affair came to an end, and Margery, instead of feeling sadness or any such feeling, suddenly felt a peace descending on her again. It should, however, kept in mind that Margery is appealing in her own way and men like Karanja and Mwaura find her erotic. Ngugi has used certain words in describing the erotically exciting side of her character.

Dr. Lynd represents another aspect of the colonial culture in the novel in her attachment to Kenya. Despite the shocking treatment which she had received in the hands of her cook (who incidentally turns out to be Lieutenant Koina), she decides to stay in Kenya after *Uhuru* and does not seem to understand the ironic implications of John Thompson’s words that she should hire better homeguards to guard her and her property.

But when a comparative study is made between the respective positions of the European and Gikuyu female characters in the novel, it becomes increasingly clear that the black women are more ‘subjects’ than their white counterparts. Their subjectivity is three-fold:

(1) as women in a patriarchal (Gikuyu) society;
In comparison to them their white counterparts suffer lesser amount of subjectivity, only that of being women. Again, they also enjoy a certain amount of power by virtue of being white. They have the satisfaction of ordering the black people around. It will not be wrong to say that at times they enjoy more power than a black male.

It is in trying to decolonize herself from the multi-fold subjectivity and find her own voice that the true worth of Mumbi should be appreciated. The maturity that Mumbi achieves at the end goes to the credit of Ngugi that even while working within the male-dominated conventions of Gikuyu society he has been able to give her a voice which is not to be ignored. Of course there are other female characters like Wambui who are part of the Movement and carried secret messages between the villagers and the forest fighters, yet they do not attain that full bloom of character as Mumbi does. It seems that in A Grain of Wheat Ngugi has put more efforts in the psychological development of Mumbi than in any other female characters in it; a development which he was to take further in his later novels.

Besides such instances of power-dynamics at the national and social level, another dimension can be witnessed at the commercial level where the struggle over economic power is carried out between the African businessmen and the Indian traders. The inimical attitude of the African business community towards the Indian traders can be felt clearly in Ngugi’s remarks during the Uhuru celebrations. Ngugi uses ‘we’ as the collective voice to represent the expectations of the people from business in independent Kenya:

The well-to-do shopkeepers and traders and land-owners discussed prospects for business now that we had political power; would something be done about the Indians?  

It may be observed here that in more than one of his novels, Ngugi presents the economic rivalry between the African businessmen and the Indian traders. Africans considered the Indian traders as a threat to their business and to them these
Indians traders posed another aspect of economic colonialism. Thus in *Weep Not, Child*, we have the women bitterly telling Njoroge why he treated them as if he were and Indian shopkeeper. At times, the anger of the Kenyans against the Indians took the shape of physical violence. In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi describes the frustration of the local people against the Indians in the following sentences:

The boys would swear horribly and occasionally would throw stones at the Indians in revenge. Once three African boys were caught holding an Indian girl to the ground, just behind the heap, beside which Mugo set to rest. They were accused of raping the girl. Because of their age, the magistrate only sent them to Wamumu Approved School.47

The act of rape or trying to rape the Indian girl raises certain questions that merit detailed investigation into the theme of power in the novel. While from the psychological point of view, it can be interpreted as an expression of the most brutal application of male brutality over the other sex, in the context of the novel it raises other issues too. Perhaps it raises the important question that if the Kenyans considered the Indians as a threat to their economic development, should not the Indians too be wary of the Kenyans? And will not it be possible to state here that Ngugi himself is responsible of double standards while projecting the relationship between the Africans and the whites and the Africans and the Indians on the other? Two distinctly different approaches can be seen towards India in the novel. On the one hand, Gandhi is seen as an inspiring figure while on the other, the Indian traders are considered as threat. But perhaps given the colonial situation that the Gikuyus were in, it was natural for them to consider any ‘outsider’ as a threat. Between the Kenyan businessmen and the Indian traders it is a clash for economic power.

Thus, power, whether colonial or gender-based, or economic is an important theme in *A Grain of Wheat*. From individual to colonial and racial levels, relationships are decided by the dynamics of power and the struggle over power gives momentum to the plot. Mugo’s personal charisma, Mumbi’s youthful appeal, Kihika’s belief in the power of a people united, Gikonyo’s faith in Mumbi’s love and its later disillusionment, Karnja’s addiction to power, Robson’s misuse of authority, Thompson’s show of power, Margery’s sense of power, the armed conflict between
colonial power and the power of the people, etc. are all instances of the presence and operation of the theme of power in the novel. The various, and at times, contradictory, strands of power sometimes collide and sometimes supplement one another, thereby generating a propulsion of power in which they necessitate the existence of one another. Often, the structure of power in the novel is maintained, curiously, through resistance and opposition. Ngugi, concentrating the narration within a few days to the attainment of Kenya's freedom and with the help of flashbacks and direct authorial comments gives us more in this novel than what meets the eye at first sight as a text which deals basically with betrayal, guilt and confession.

Notes:


4 Gakwandi, p. 108.

5 Harish Narang, p. 75.

6 Narang, p. 74.

7 Narang, p. 77.


10. A Grain of Wheat, p. 11-12.


17. S. W. Perera, ‘The Colonial Officer/Settler: A Recurring Figure in Ngugi’s Fiction; The Writer as Activist: South Asian Perspectives on Ngugi wa Thiong’o. eds., Lindfors, Bernth., and Bala Konthandaraman. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1994, p. 52.

18. Perera, p. 46.


22. A Grain of Wheat, p. 3.


27. A Grain of Wheat, p. 64.


37. Narang, p. 90.


42 A Grain of Wheat, p. 74.

43 A Grain of Wheat, p. 247.

44 A Grain of Wheat, p. 247.

45 A Grain of Wheat, p. 52.

46 A Grain of Wheat, p. 216.

47 A Grain of Wheat, p. 196.