CHAPTER II

NGUGI AND HIS WORKS

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o was born in 1938 in a traditional Kenyan family in Kamiriithu village in Kiambu District of Kenya. Ngugi’s father Thiong’o Wa Nducu was an ‘ahoi’ a dispossessed peasant farmer, struggling to sustain his large family.

Ngugi had his early education for two years at Kamaandura Christian Missionary School in Limuru. Then he moved to Independent School Karinga, in Maanguu village run by the native Kenyan Africans.

From 1954 to 1958 he had his secondary education at Alliance High School at Kikuyu where Carey Francis was the principal whom he admired in Weep Not, Child. The influence of Christianity and Christian Missionary School education is evident in his use of the Biblical references and Christian mythology in his novels. In an interview with Micere Mugo Ngugi admitted the use of the Biblical references saying that:

"The Gikuyu society is somewhat lacking in mythological background and the Bible conveniently provides one with a relevant framework. For instance, the idea of destiny with regard to the Israelites and their struggle against slavery."
The Gikuyu people have had similar experiences. Biblical mythology is also widely known and has the advantage of being easily understood by most audiences."¹

There is also reference to Siriana Alliance High School as Siriana Secondary School in his novels and other works, while narrating his childhood and adolescent experiences, especially in Weep Not, Child. There are many parallels between his childhood and the situations depicted in Weep Not, Child. In Weep Not, Child there is a typical Kenyan household of Ngotho, father of Njoroge, an 'ahoi' in the estate of an Africa landowner, like the household of Ngugi's father Nducu. His brother Wallace Mwangi and his involvement in the Mau Mau movement finds expression in Boro, Njoroge's brother in Weep Not, Child. Ngugi uses his childhood experiences and his family situations meaningfully in his novels; Ngugi's step brother Gitogo, who was deaf and dumb and was shot dead by government forces, is presented in A Grain of Wheat not even changing the name of Gitogo. Reverend Livingstone's character in Weep Not, Child resembles Carey Francis. In many of his novels he has even used the names of his family members and relatives. For instance, in Petals of Blood, Nducu his Father's name is given to one of the characters. His School Kamaandura also

figures in Petals of Blood. When asked if his works are autobiographical, he affirmed that "Every writer's books are autobiographical, that is, you write about your experience, your immediate experience."^2

After school education Ngugi was encouraged by Gikuyu to prosecute his studies further. The universal passion for education among Gikuyu people Ngugi has recorded in Weep Not, Child. He was not an activist in the Mau Mau movement. There is no evidence that he had any specific opportunities for participation in the active struggle of the Mau Mau. As he himself has recorded, the crisis did not disrupt the routine life in Gikuyu country. He has expressed his own process of reappraisal and re-evaluation of the Mau Mau which he believed had not only been heroic but also a very effective movement in the struggle for Gikuyu, Kenyan and African liberation. Ngugi has presented the Mau Mau as a model in the continuous struggle for social justice in the frame work of the continuing class conflict.

After his successful schooling Ngugi moved on to Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda for his degree in Honours English in 1963, where he had varied and vigorous participation in literary and creative activities. He recorded his life in detention in Detained (1978). After

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2. Interview by Allan Marcuson, Mike Gonzalez and Dave Williams, Leeds University Union News, 18 November, p.6.
graduation he wrote a full length play *The Black Hermit* which he successfully produced for Uganda Independence in 1965. He also wrote shortplays for Makerere's regular literary companions, two of which appeared later in *This Time Tomorrow and other Plays*. He was for some time editor for the student journal of creative writing, *Perpoint* for which contributed a number of short stories. His collected short stories appeared in print under the title *Secret Lives* in 1975.

Leeds opened up new perspectives for Ngugi when he moved to Leeds University after graduation. Leeds systematised his thinking on many issues - Political, social, literary and academic. He concentrated more on completing his *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*.

Ngugi's perception of liberation includes entire Africa. And it is total freedom from the shackles of foreign dominance-political, economic, spiritual and psychological freedom. He is for absolute transfer of political power and economic independence improving the financial status also of uneducated and underprivileged and for psychological emancipation from years of denigration and self-denigration, finally leading to reconstruction of modern Kenya.

culture, and politics, was published in 1972. The popular play which presented the cause of the Mau Mau as the starting point of the continuing struggle for social justice, The Trials of Dedan Kimathi was published in 1977. The same year collaborating with Ngugi Mirii, he wrote a play in Gikuyu, Ngadhika Ndeenda which he staged at Kamiruthu Community Educational and Cultural Centre in his home town, Lamuru, at first with official permission, but banned from staging subsequently. Ngugi himself translated Ngadhika Ndeenda in English under the title I will Harry when I want focusing the strained relationship between rich and poor, avaricious wealthy class of society exploiting peasants and workers owning small piece of land.


Ngugi remained a freelance writer whose voice of protest in the cause of social justice is respected throughout Kenya and Africa and all over the world in general.
Ngugi feels that Africa should "be free from fear and destructive anxiety, physically free to journey towards the heights he can reach, and ready to affirm the work of life, in spite of its tribulations".

Weep Not, Child "challenges the Kenyan youth to identify the powerfully positive elements in their heritage". It stimulates the Kenyan youth and pleads to change his role from one of silent mourn to one of 'action-man'. Quiet sitting or avoiding or escaping the complex situations in which they are living is not the solution. On the contrary, it may land them into despair. It is the responsibility of not only Njoroge, the protagonist but also of entire Kenyan youth to realize or take note of the sacrifices and achievements of the Boros, of the Nyokabis, the Njeris and the Ngothos.

The novel depicts the events of the Mau Mau emergency in Kenya in the nineteen fifties. But it is not just the record of political events. Ngugi subtly reduces the effects of political events by writing the novel from protagonist Njoroge's point of view. The focus is on the human relationships of Ngotho family within and outside and the impact of political events on the family and community.

3. 'As I see It : The Three levels of Independence', Sunday Nation 189, 21 October 1963, p.39.

Ngugi gives a balanced view of the situation in Kenya by depicting the weaknesses of both the Africans and the Europeans as well and the struggle of the natives to reposses the lost land with which Kenyans have sentimental attachment and through which they are spiritually attached to their ancestors. While Ngotho in Weep Not, Child is sentimentally and spiritually attached to the land, Mr. Howland's Chief interest is profit. Jacobo a convert to Christianity does not hesitate even to betray his own people and he becomes the chief informer of Mr. Howlands to protect his personal interests. Ngotho though sceptical about the success of his factory strike, participates in the strike for some workers profits. But he loses his job Ngotho's family is harassed and Ngotho himself is put to torture for the involvement of Boro and Kamau in the Mau Mau rebellion and its acts of violence.

Njoroge imagines himself as the 'Black Messaiah', the redeemer and saviour of his people and land, hopes to save his people from colonial oppression through education. But he is utterly disillusioned when he too is beaten up by the police. "His ideals are shattered, his illusions exposed, and his family and aspirations destroyed". And even in desperation he turns to Mwihaki and suggests to her that they should flee their country to Uganda. But she

turns down his proposal and cautions him of his great responsibility towards his community and country.

"Don't you see that what you suggest is too easy a way out? we are no longer children... we have a duty. Our duty to other people is our biggest responsibility as grown men and women."6.

And finally Njoroge attempts to commit suicide. But he is saved by Nyokabi, his mother who reminds him of his responsibility towards his family. Ngugi seems to suggest in his novels that education alone is not the proper solution to the problems of his household, community and the country.

In The River Between various topics of Kenyan history and ideology reveal a new pattern of explanation for the history of the individual during colonial preoccupation. The novel is not a novel of leadership, or education but of protagonist who longs to lead his life against the tide of his time. Waiyaki is unsuccessful in his attempt to reconcile the different factions. His first love ends tragically and there seems to be no fulfilment possible for the second. He forfeits his position as teacher and allows his people slip into the hands of the most obscurantist and sectarian faction of the community. Ngugi subordinated the

black-white strife as back drop of the novel, to Waiyaki, the central character. Waiyaki grows into a sensitive, intelligent and a brave person, fixed by a vision of greatness. The preaching of Christianity brings division in the community which Waiyaki tries to challenge with unbounded passion by taking upon himself the onerous task of educating as many people as possible. Waiyaki also dreams of the vision of unity between the ridges through the symbolic act of marrying Joshua's daughter Nyambura. But this mixing of his public concern with his private dream does not fructify as the tribe is not yet ready for harmonious coexistence and reconciliation. The shattering of Waiyaki's dream and his tragic fate spells out the disturbing political reality of the colonial situation but the novel emerges as a novel of individual aspiration with a flavour of a Greek tragic tale.

The River between also deals with the people living in two villages Kameno and Makuyu which are separated by the river 'Honia', which means cure or bringing back to life. "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." Contrary to this, the river separates the two villages. But there used to be considerable social harmony before the arrival of the whiteman with his religion and colonial administration.

The white man has divided the people and the land. Makuyu became the stronghold of Joshua who embraced Christianity. Kameno became the seat of traditionalists. Waiyaki, the protagonist of *The River Between* lives in Kameno where his father Chege, is a well known elder of the village, a traditionalist, respected by the entire village, for he "knew, more than any other person, the ways of the land and the hidden things of the tribe. He knew meaning of every ritual and every sign".  

On the other hand Joshua, the convert is a blind follower of the new faith and alien culture. But Muthoni, his daughter who believes in the native tradition and rituals runs away from Makuyu to Kameno to get circumcised. After the death of Muthoni, Waiyaki loses his job at the Siriana Mission School for simple reason that he belongs to Kameno, the seat of traditionalists. But himself, encouraged by his father starts a school in the ridges also to educate the people of ridges and to make them know the intentions of the white man. He becomes successful in his efforts to establish few more similar schools who dearly call him 'The Teacher' and adored as their 'Black Messiah'. But Kabonyi who is a friend of Joshua and father of Kamau, tries to defame Waiyaki, the teacher out of jealousy. When Waiyaki who fell in love with Nyambura, daughter of Joshua, goes to

Makuyu to meet her, Kabonyi instigates people against Waiyaki calling him 'traitor' Waiyaki fails to convince the people and fails to win his love.

**A Grain of Wheat** open a day before Kenya's independence and closes after four days. But most part of the novel is a depiction of the past incidents. The title of the novel *A Grain of Wheat* suggests that continuous struggle, suffering and death, if the situation demands, are essential for any meagre material gain. Mugo, Gikonyo, Karanja, Mumbi and other characters in focus suffer and face shame and guilt, resulting from their own actions during freedom struggle.

*A Grain of Wheat*, though lacking in 'a degree of depth' as complained by Kofi Awoonor, has its own subtlety, profound concerns of politico-cultural nature to supercede his other novels. A large part of it is the narration of the history of the freedom movement in Kenya, focussing particularly the details of barbarity of the whites. Almost all the major characters in the novel go through a long and arduous course of torture, suffering and misery. The novel provides a more balanced view of the colonial situation and presents Ngugi's interest in human character by choosing a larger canvas and a more sophisticated narrator.

At the simplest level the novel is not so much a novel of protest as of vindication. It is a political novel
of vindication, portraying and justifying Kenya's struggle for Independence and the Mau Mau movement as the core of that struggle. As observed by Govind Narayana Sarma, "its real theme appears to be not betrayal or disillusionment but rebirth and regeneration, the end of brokenness and alienation and the restoration to wholeness and community". To concretize the theme, Ngugi makes a creative and imaginative use of the Christian myth and gives his own interpretation of Christianity. Ngugi has succeeded in combining the political message of his novels with an engaging account of individual lives. The final message of A Grain of Wheat is not unmitigated suffering and frustration, but of challenge and hope.

Eventhough it is difficult to say that there is no protagonist in A Grain of Wheat, Kihika stands above all other characters. He has the vision of independent Kenya which is "moved by the story of Moses and the children of Israel," and he hopes to lead his people to freedom like a great prophet. Most part of the novel is devoted to depict the physical and spiritual destruction of Gikuyu society by the white man. This physical and spiritual unrest led to a


process which involved great soul-searching and finally led to a spiritual rebirth.

There has been betrayal during, as well as after the struggle by one character to other such as - Mumbi betrays Gikon while he was in detention. She was compelled to succumb to Karanja. It was Karanja who forced her yield to his desire against her wishes. So Mumbi's betrayal of Gikonyo may not be a betrayal in the true sense of the term. Hugo betrays Kihika by informing Mr. Thompson, the District Officer about their meeting. In this way Hugo becomes the responsible person for the hanging of Kihika in public. But for his betrayal Hugo suffers from disillusionment, brokenness and alienation. And so he confesses his betrayal of Kihika in Uhuru celebrations. His confession of the betrayal with a determination to face any consequence reveals Hugo's true courage.

After returning from detention Gikonyo is surprised to see a child on Mumbi's lap. His mother, Wangari informs him about the seduction of Mumbi by Karanja and she also tells him that Karanja is the father of the child. Gikonyo refuses to accept the child and so Mumbi goes to her parents' hut. In the Uhuru celebrations a long distance run competition is held. The old friends Gikonyo and Karanja become the rivals. Both of them try their best to get the first place, but both of them fall down. Gikonyo brakes his arm. He is admitted in hospital. Mumbi visits
the hospital everday after her parents persuade her to visit the hospital.

In the final chapter Gikonyo changes his perception of Mumbi and pleads with her to come back to his hut and he also says that he is ready to accept the child. When he asks her if she is going to visit the hospital the next day she only says". All right - May be I shall come".11

Ngugi in his three novels has demonstrated his theory of history, through the portrayal of a conflict of cultural and material objectives between two peoples, a conflict that expresses itself most conspicuously in the violent clash over legitimate ownership and effective control over the land.

Ngugi seems to suggest that when people unite, together to fight injustice and to create a better life for themselves and their progress, they would be successful.