CHAPTER-III

THEMATIC CONCERNS IN NGUGI WA THIONG’O’S FICTION

Ngugi wa Thiong’o has been acclaimed as East Africa's foremost novelist. His criticism of colonial rule, Christianity and post colonial abuses earned him as much admiration from the public as well as trouble from Kenya's authorities. Ngugi's literary targets have included governmental corruption, socioeconomic exploitation, and religious hypocrisy.

As a rebel writer, Ngugi has always upheld the view that it is the duty of an artist to provide moral direction and vision to the struggles of the exploited people. Through his various essays, novels and plays, Ngugi has often focused on contemporary Kenyan politics, the exploitation of the people by the colonizer and their fight for freedom. Ngugi says:

Like all artists, I am interested in human relationships and their quality. This is what I explore in my work. Human relationships do not occur in a vacuum. They develop in the context of ecology, economics, politics, culture, and psyche. All these aspects of our society affect those relationships profoundly. These aspects are inseparable. They are connected. The most intimate is connected with the most earthly. As an artist you examine the particulars to explore the interconnection of phenomena to open a window into the human soul. The material of life opens out into the spirituality of human life.  (Ngugi’s Interview with M. Pozo, 2004)
A committed writer makes a ruthless scrutiny of the social evils, which are repugnant to him and to his people. Clifford Odets and Auden in the U.S., Mulk Raj Anand and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya in India, Arnold Wesker in England, Ngugi Thiong’o in Kenya are some of the creative artists who never hesitated to invite others to listen to them and subjected their works to the scrutiny of their people. Their art is committed to the people, to revolution and transformation. It contributes to revolutionary change and it preserves everything that is good for humanity. Thus, by recording the ills in society, it remains on the side of the oppressed.

As a creative artist Ngugi is very much dedicated to the advocacy of certain beliefs and programs especially pertaining to his own African community. His beliefs emanate from his sense of moral fervor, conviction and righteousness. In Ngugi’s fictional works we find that he records the exploitation of the Africans at the hands of the Europeans during colonization and even after independence. His sensitiveness and his concern for shaping and moulding his community reflect in the following words:

I believe that African intellectuals alien themselves with the struggle of the African message for a meaningful national ideal…. The African writer can help in articulating the feelings behind the struggle.

(Ngugi, *Homecoming*, p-50)
Ngugi in his fictional works delineates the exploitation of the Africans by the Whites and the consequential effect of such exploitation on the lives of the Africans. He vividly identifies three facets of encounter of the Africans with the European imperialists—slavery, colonialism and neocolonialism. His first three novels—*Weep Not, Child, The River Between* and *A Grain of Wheat*—deal with the period of slavery and colonialism. They explore the detrimental effects of colonialism and imperialism. On the other hand, *Petals of Blood, Devil on the Cross* and *Matigari* are about Ngugi’s bitter criticism of neo-colonialism. In fact, there is also attack on slavery and colonialism. Ngugi’s latest novel *Wizard of the Crow* (2006) is his conscious effort to sum up Africa of the 20th century. It dramatizes the corruption and power struggles between the dictator-state and the people. According to G.D. Killam, “obviously here is a good deal of overlapping in the novels in the way in which the three phases, Ngugi identifies are treated.” (Killam, *An Intro. to the Writings of Ngugi*, p-7)

Ngugi Thiong’o, when he came to recreate the history of his people through fiction, selected for his first two novels—*Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965)—the events relating to the introduction of western education as well as Christianity. *The River Between* is Ngugi’s first attempt at novel writing, but it was published after *Weep Not, Child*. In fact, it contains the period of Kenyan history prior to that of *Weep Not, Child*. 
In *The River Between* (1965), Ngugi wa Thiong'o uses a distinction in setting between two mountain ridges as an organizing conceit that dramatizes the antagonism between two competing native constituencies and their seemingly irreconcilable belief structures. Because the setting (presumably the late 1940's or early 1950's) precedes emergence of substantive attempts at decolonization, Ngugi's novel portrays not so much the conflict between "colonizer" and "colonized" but the internal conflicts and plural ambitions of native people themselves. The novel's opening situates the narrative's broader conflicts within a Kenyan landscape that has yet to experience the effects of British 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-life. Honia river never dried: it seemed to possess a strong will to live, scorning droughts and weather changes. (Ngugi, *The River Between*, p-1)

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. (*The River Between* p-1)
The deeply rooted conflict between the Kameno and Makuyu ridges is centrally one of religious antagonism; whereas the Kameno ridge, home of the novel's protagonist Waiyaki, symbolizes a continuation of indigenous cultural traditions such as polytheism and circumcision, the inhabitants of the Makuyu ridge had already succumbed to the exigencies of Christianity and British educational systems. Waiyaki, perhaps occupying a luminal position between the two ridges, is forced to negotiate between contending loyalties and allegiances--between, on one hand, his foreseen responsibility as the prophesied "saviour" of Kameno traditions, and on the other hand, his conviction in the values of British education and his clandestine relationship with Nyambura, the beautiful daughter of the region's foremost Christian minister.

Ngugi’s *The River Between* is mainly concerned with the exploitation of the Africans by the Whites and adverse impact of colonization on the culture of Kenya. In the very beginning the novelist emerges as a true advocate of the cultural glory of Africa. He describes at length in the novel the impenetrable Kenya in all its beauty. He explains that the Kenyans had been without any fear of intrusion by ‘ukabi’(outsider ).They used to lead a happy ,peaceful and united life with their traditions and customs which bound them to their land. The African people believed that their land is their God, Murunga’s gift to their first parents-Gikuya and Mumbi.
Murunga told them:

This land, I give to you, oh, man and woman. It is yours to rule and till, you and your posterity.

(The River Between, p-2)

Thus, the novel begins with Ngugi’s assertion that the fertile land of Kenya belonged basically to the Africans. Mugo wa Kabiro, one of the great seers of old who had been all over the Gikuyu country prophesied the invasion of the Gikuyu country by the Whiteman: “There shall come a people with clothes like butterflies.” (The River Between, p-2)

Chege, a respected man of the ridges, a believed descendent of Mugo wa Kabiro, also predicted the arrival of the White man. He told the people of the ridges that the Whites had already set up their houses and taken away their land in the neighboring places of Murungu, Nyeri and Kiambo. But the people refused to take it seriously. Even when the railway line is laid, they whispered: “The White man cannot speak the languages of hills. And knows not the ways of the land.” (The River Between, p-7) Thus, the Africans, due to their ignorance, could not understand the evil intention of the Whites. They settled down with their religious missionary at Siriana, a place situated at the outskirts of Makuyu and Kameno ridges. These Whites soon occupied the surrounding land and with their religious preaching and catechism, they were able to convert to their faith quite a few natives like Joshua and Kabonyi. Indeed, the act of conversion is the first step of colonialism.
Livingstone, the leading missionary, visited the hills just to give new life and energy to his followers. He made Joshua, the black convert his agent to carry on his main work of preaching to the Africans about the existence of God-Jesus. Through Joshua, a firm and capable preacher, Livingstone was able to convert many Africans to take to the new faith shedding their faith in the native religion. Because of the new faith, the old conformity of the African society was broken. This is brought out symbolically by Ngugi through Joshua’s building:

The round thatched huts standing in groups of three or four convey a picture of conformity broken only by Joshua’s house which has a tin roof and is rectangular. The very presence of the house is an indication that the old isolation of Makuyu from the rest of the world was being broken down. (*The River Between*, p-28)

The preaching of new ways and values of life through a new religion had a drastically adverse effect on the old beliefs. The collision between the two antagonistic ways of life was indeed most catastrophic and tragic. Ngugi remarkably portrays in *The River Between* the tragic predicament of the Kenyans torn by a lacerating conflict between the loss of cultural heritage and identity in the exploitative colonial context at both the individual and societal levels. Thus “the disinheritance of the Gikuyu religion and tribal culture by White colonialism figures in this novel”. (Ravenscroft, Arthur. *Ngugi, Contemporary Novelist*, P-695)
The novelist clearly draws our attention to the exploitation of the Africans in the field of education imparted by the colonizers. In fact, the education imparted to the students in the Siriana missionary school was directed mainly to advance interests of the British Empire. They wanted to convert the Africans to believe in their faith and help them spread Christianity. They also wanted the students to help them in the administration of the natives. Livingstone recognized Waiyaki to be ‘a possible Christian leader of the Church.’ Such education began to condemn the native rituals, customs and traditions. Ngugi responds:

A is sitting on B…what kind of education will A want B to set? In other words, education what kind of culture and consciousness?. ‘A’ will want ‘B’ to believe that he, B has no culture or his culture is inferior. ‘A’ will want ‘B’ to imbibe a culture inculcates in his values of self-doubt and self-denigration, in a word a slave consciousness. He will now look up to A, a superior culture.


Livingstone and his missionary people considered the traditional customs as satanic works. They called the Gikuyu God, ‘the prince of darkness.’ At Siriana it was taught thus:

Those who refuse him are the children of darkness;

These, sons and daughters of evil one, will go to Hell;

They will burn and burn forever more, world unending.

(*The River Between*, p-29)
Joshua as a converted Christian began to hate his African culture. He repented all his life for having married circumcised Miriamu. He also did not want his children to have any inclination for their African culture. Joshua began preaching to the people to believe in the Bible and give up the traditions. Thus, by condemning the native tradition in favour of the new faith and by becoming a preacher himself, he was at once the exploited as well as the exploiter.

Chege was hurt to see many Africans converted. He also was disappointed as he was unable to do anything to save his culture. He feared that even his son Waiyaki might begin to dislike the ways of the ridge and its rituals. We find clearly the impact of missionary education on him. The day before circumcision Waiyaki felt hesitated to join with other boys. At first, he stood as an outsider. He grew uneasy to listen to the songs of circumcision sung by the young Kenyan boys and girls of his age. When he was pushed into the circle dancing around fire, his body moved mechanically. The voice of Whiteman’s education made him guilty so he could not put his heart in it. Ngugi comments on the disruptive influence of Christianity on the African life in this manner:

Christianity as an organized religion is corrupt and hypocritical: besides acting as an agent of imperialism. It exercised a highly disruptive influence on African life and was the chief villain in alienating the African from his own culture. (Ngugi, Homecoming, p-31)
Ngugi makes circumcision the central point around which he rotates his novel and describes in telling manner the cultural exploitation of the Africans by Whites. Robson comments: “In his narration of the ceremony of circumcision, he draws a number of elements closely together”. (Robson, *Ngugi Thiong’o*: p-8)

In chapters III and IV of *The River Between*, Ngugi describes at length the importance of the circumcision to the people who lived there. He makes it explicitly clear that the act of circumcision is the most central in the Gikuyu way of life.

Circumcision was an important ritual to the tribe. It kept the people together, bound the tribe. It was the core of the social structure and something that gave meaning to man’s life. End the custom and spiritual bias of the tribe’s cohesion and integration would be no more. (Ngugi, *The River Between*: p-79)

Indeed, Ngugi as a devoted Kenyan wants to emphasize that the colonial rule in Kenya destroyed the entire culture and social peace. It not only divided the society but also the inner beings of the Africans. As a sensitive artist *The River Between* is Ngugi’s cries for the loss of African Culture and glory of the rich heritage. We are reminded of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* which sums up the African religion thus:

How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? but he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers. He came quietly and peacefully with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer be like one. He has put a knife on the
things that held us together and we have fallen apart. (Achebe, Things Fall Apart: p-158)

The people of the ridges ceased to talk to each other. The real charm of life has been completely disappeared under the impact of white man’s religious attitude towards the natives.

**Weep Not, Child**

*Weep Not, Child* is Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's first novel, published in 1964. It was the first English novel to be published by an East African. Thiong'o's works deal with the relationship between Africans and the British colonists in Africa, and are heavily critical of British colonial rule. Specifically, *Weep Not, Child* deals with the Mau Mau Uprising, and the bewildering dispossession of an entire people from their ancestral land. Ngũgĩ wrote the novel while he was a student at Makerere University. The novel is divided into two parts and eighteen chapters. Part one deals mostly with the education of Njoroge, while part two deals with the rising revolutionary, anti-colonist turmoil in Kenya.

Njoroge, a young boy, is urged to attend school by his mother. He is the first one out of his family who is able to go to school. His family lives on the land of Jacobo, an African made rich by his dealings with white settlers, namely Mr. Howlands, the most powerful land owner in the area. Njoroge's brother Kamau works as an apprentice to a carpenter while Boro, the eldest living son, is troubled by his experiences while in forced service during World War II, one of which was
witnessing the death of his elder brother. Ngotho, Njoroge's father and a respected man in the surrounding area, tends Mr. Howland's crops more to preserve and keep an eye on his ancestral land, than for any compensation or loyalty.

On the first day of school, Njoroge meets Mwihaki, who is the daughter of Jacobo. She is one year ahead of Njoroge in school. Njoroge admires and befriends her. Njoroge’s family likes to sit together and tell stories. One time Ngotho, Njoroge's father tells the story about how the land, which is now owned by the landlords originally belonged to their ancestors. Njoroge is very successful in school and soon catches up with Mwihaki and goes to the same class with her.

One day, a strike is called for higher wages for the black workers. Ngotho does not know if he should participate at first, because he would likely lose his job. Finally, however, he decides to go to the gathering, although his two wives do not agree. At the demonstration, there are calls for higher wages. Suddenly Jacobo, the father of Mwihaki, appears. He tries to put an end to the strike. Ngotho attacks Jacobo. The result is a big tumult with two people being killed. Nevertheless, Jacobo survives and swears revenge. Njoroge’s family is forced to move and Ngotho loses his job. Njoroge’s education is thereafter funded by his brothers who seem to lose respect for their father.

The relationship between Mwihaki and Njoroge is not affected by their fathers' hatred of each other. They are still very good friends and remain successful in
school. Eventually, however, the two are separated because Mwihaki continues her education at a girls' only boarding school. Njoroge stays close to home where he switches to another school.

For a time, everyone's attention is focused on the upcoming trial of Jomo - a revered leader of the movement. Many blacks think that he is going to bring forth Kenya’s independence. But Jomo loses the trial and is imprisoned. This results in further protests and greater suppression of the black population.

Jacobo and a white landowner, Mr. Howlands, fight against the rising activities of the Mau Mau, an organization striving for Kenyan economic, political, and cultural independence. Jacobo accuses Ngotho of being the leader of the Mau Mau and tries to imprison the whole family. Mr. Howlands has Njoroge removed from school for questioning. Both father and son are brutally beaten before release and Ngotho is left barely alive. Meanwhile, the situation in the country is deteriorating. Six black men are taken out of their houses and executed in the woods.

One day Njoroge meets Mwihaki again, who returned from boarding school. Their friendship is not affected by the situation between their fathers. Then Njoroge passes a very important exam that allows him to advance to High School. The whole village is proud of him. They collect enough money so that Njoroge is able to attend High School.
After a few months, Jacobo is killed. He is murdered in his office by a member of the Mau Mau. Although there doesn't seem to be a connection between Njoroge's family and the murder, it is eventually revealed that Njoroge's brothers are behind the assassination. Boro is the real leader of the Mau Mau. Ngotho soon dies from his injuries and Njoroge finds out that his father was protecting his brothers. Kamau has also been imprisoned for life. Only Njoroge and his two mothers remain free with Njoroge left as the sole provider to his two mothers. With no hope of making ends meet, Njoroge gives up all hope of going further in school and loses faith in God.

Njoroge now hopes for Mwihaki's support, but she is angry because of her father’s death. When he finally pledges his love to her, she is too afraid to marry him. He finally decides to leave town and makes an attempt to take his own life, but his two mothers are able to bring him back from the brink. The novel closes with Njoroge's utter sense of hopelessness.

In Ngugi's *Weep Not Child* and *The River Between*, the images of "darkness" no longer protect the land. A full scale colonial penetration has reduced the Gikuyu of the ridges to squatters on their own land and has brought about the destruction of the traditional family unit. Ngugi's opening quotation from Walt Whitman bears repeating:

> Weep, not child
> Weep not, my darling
> With these kisses let me remove your tears,
The ravening clouds shall not be long victorious,
They shall not long posses the sky ....(Whitman, “On the Beach at Night”:1885,P-381)

The images of "ravening clouds" reflect the darkness of colonialism, whose controlling forces are limited like weather. Despite this optimistic introduction, the land of ridges is to be dominated by a white colonial bourgeoisie and a black collaborating home guard. Ngugi's sub-sections in the novel, "Waning light" and "darkness falls" chronicle the destructiveness of colonial penetration in the Central Highlands.

While Weep Not Child does not present the dominant ridges of Kameno, Makuyu, or the Honia river that are prevalent in The River Between, there are key landscape images that characterize and develop our sense of colonial Kenya. Ngugi acknowledges the ridges both as a former home and as a source for Kipanga in Weep Not Child:

I have tried to describe the landscape in Weep Not Child where Kipanga town obviously stands for Limura, or Ruungai as the town popularly known, one of the valleys described in Weep Not Child originates from Kamiriithu. (later to become an important political and cultural centre for community theatre).

(Ngugi, Homecoming,p-7)

Dominating this novel's landscape is the division of land between the settler class, personified by Howlands and the collaborating indigenous or national bourgeoisie, represented by Jacobo. A second major image is that of "the road" divided the people into economic zones. The African peasants were forced to live in the least productive
areas. The Road image receives more elaborate treatment in *Petals of Blood*. The "road" introduces the conflict between Howlands and the peasant, Ngotho in a generalized way through historical record. The road and its construction acts record of colonial exploitation.

Their children from black women were abused and underfed in Kipanga. The road symbolizes the divisiveness of colonialism that segregate Kenyans into classes and races:

In a county of ridges, such as Kikuyu land,
there are many valleys and small plains.
Even the big road went through a valley on the opposite side. Where the two met they had as it were embraced and widened themselves into a plain. The plain, more of less rectangular in shape, had four valleys leading into or out of it at the corners. The first two valleys went into the country of the Black People: other two valleys divided the of the Black People from the land of the White People. This meant that there were ridges that stood and watched one another.

Two of the ridges on the opposite sides of
the long sides of the plain were broad and
near one another. The other two were
narrow and had pointed ends. You could
tell the land of Black People because it
was red, rough and sickly, while the land
of the white settlers was green and was not
lacerated into small strips. (Weep Not, Child, p-7).

The division of land was a perpetual source of conflict between the white settler class
and the Gikuyu peasant as Ikeidden suggests:

Historically, land as the source of man's
life, the basis of any social community and
the foundation of all human culture,
remained the sensitive factor in the
contention between Africans and Europeans
in Kenya. From the attempt by Joseph
Chamberlain in 1902 to found 'a national
home for the Jewish race' on thousands of
square miles of land in Kenya and the
official appropriation for British ex-
soldiers after the World War, to the open
seizure and illegal speculation by white
settler-farmers that went on all the time,
the record of British usurpation of land in Kenya must be one of the most sordid scandals in colonial.

(Ikeidden, *James Ngugi as a Novelist*:p-10)

The political struggle between Howlands and Ngotho is the control of land. Ngotho is the legitimate owner. His aboriginal title is based on generations of use by his family. His mind was always directed towards the shamba. His life and soul were in the shamba. Everything else with him counted only in so far as it was related to shamba. Even his wife mattered only in so far as she made it possible for him to work in it more efficiently without home.

Ngotho's alienation from the land is recorded in a story to his son, Njoroge. It started with his conscription to the war effort during World War I. Upon his return, his family forcibly removed from their ancestral land. Ironically, Ngotho is forced to work on Jacobo's land and work on his "own land" for Howlands. By acting as an informer, Jacobo received permission to plant a cash crop of pyrethrum. Jacobo's wealth is a conscious problem for Ngotho until the strike meeting finally realizes that Jacobo was in the pay of the white establishment. Ngotho discovers Jacobo has “…crystallized into a concrete betrayal of the people. He became the physical personification of the long years of waiting and suffering- Jacobo was a Traitor". (*Weep Not, Child*,P-58).

Like Kabonyi in *The River Between* and later Karanja in *A Grain of Wheat*, Jacobo personifies those who betrayed their communities for the power of colonial affluence
and favour. They are victims of a divisive foreign ideology, just as Judas was victimized predestined betrayal of Christ. Jacobo like Karanja is a lackey of his white overseer.

Howlands, a colonial usurper, is obsessed with owning the land. He takes pride in seeing go to work his land because Ngotho "tended the young tea plants as if they were his own" (Weep Not, Child, P-30). For Ngotho alienation from ancestral land also means the death of his family:

... it was a spiritual loss. When a man was
severed from the land of his ancestors
where would he sacrifice to the Creator?
How could he come in contact with the
founders of the tribe, Gikuyu and Mumbi?

(Weep Not, Child, P-74).

Ngotho's decision to attack Jacobo in order to prove his worth to Boro, results in a near-collapse of his family. By refusing to take up Boro's demand for armed resistance the settler class, Ngotho erodes his own status head. Ironically, it is the weight of Ngotho's guilt that betrayal of his family. It is not an active betrayal or collaboration in the sense of Jacobo, but a passive one built from a series of inactions. In that way he is similar to Waiyaki; he was unable to respond against until it was too
late. Above all it was Ngotho's guilt that undermined his protective status as father, particularly the case of Boro.

He had not wanted to be accused by a son anymore because when a man was accused by the eyes of his son who had been to war and had witnessed the death of a brother he felt guilty. For his part, Boro had no future on the land. He was unable to work in the city either. While his generation's fight against colonialism through "Mau Mau" was an active progressive cause, Boro as an individual, affected by the loss of a brother and a father, is almost nihilistic in his response to colonial oppression. His passion for revenge because of the death of his father and brother consumed him. Two distinct passages illustrate his alienation from his roots in the soil and his betrayal of his family. Firstly, a verbal exchange with a lieutenant in the "Mau Mau":

'Don't you believe in anything?'

'No. Nothing. Except revenge.'

'Return of the lands?'

'The lost land will come back to us maybe. But I've lost too many of those whom I loved for land to mean much to me. It would be a cheap victory'.

(Weep Not, Child ,P-102).

Secondly, his confrontation with Howlands adds a climatic force to the drama between the white settler and peasant farmer on the ridges:
'I killed Jacobo.'

'I know'

'He betrayed black people. Together, you killed many sons of the land. You raped our women. And finally you killed my father. Have you anything to say in your defence?'

Boro's voice was flat. No colour of hatred, anger or triumph. No sympathy.

'Nothing.'

'Nothing. Now you say nothing. But when you took our ancestral lands - '

'This is my land! Mr. Howlands said this as a man would say, This is my woman.

'Your land!, Then, you white dog, you'll die on your land!

(Weep Not, Child P-128-29).

With the death of Howlands and probable execution Boro, a generational colonial struggle has reached its climax. The weight of the family's survival now weighs heavily on Ngotho's two wives, Njeri and Nyokabi as well as on the naive and suicidal Njoroge, the youngest son of Nyokabi, whom they must prepare for the future. Colonialism in the Emergency period of Kenyan history has produced the conditions of betrayal in Weep Not Child. Jacobo is a "loyalist collaborator" so his
community means that he is despised by the colonial settler class, namely Howlands. Ngotho's betrayal is a passive one; unable to protect any of his four sons from the destructive colonial machine, he jeopardizes the survival of his remaining family members by spontaneously attacking Jacobo. Boro's betrayal is a complex one and originates from sense of having been betrayed by the British colonial administration who refused to acknowledge the support of the Kenyan peasantry and working classes' defense of imperialist interests during World War II. But more importantly, he betrays the communal interests of "Mau Mau" by fighting for personal retribution. Instead of fighting for the freedom of the land and the protection of his family, Boro contemptuously murders Howlands and Jacobo. His motive for personal undermines his revolutionary consciousness, making him vulnerable to capture, torture, and inevitably death. By continually reprimanding his father's in the face of colonial exploitation, Boro goads his father into a rash act of spontaneity which threatens the survival of the family.

Thus, disillusionment and disappointment prevails in this novel and a young boy’s journey into manhood. Sadly, Njoroge is forced to accept that there is no hope for his generation. Sweet promises of prosperity from the hands of modernization collide with the Mau Mau’s passionate battle cries. Idealistic like Njoroge who say, “weep not” are buried in the rift between these powers because they cannot choose a side. Ngugi points the oppressive power of colonialism to erase, alter, divide and destroy an entire race of people.
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 chronological 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. The novel focuses on how Ngugi attempts to contest the Eurocentric representations of the freedom movement while also focusing how he problematizes and 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: *A Grain of Wheat*, p-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" (Lazarus, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in Postcolonial World*, 1999: p-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. (Lonsdale,*Mau Mau of the Mind*: 1993: p-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 base The River Betweenarous movement negative in everything it does and accompanied by circumstances of revolting savagery.


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.

(Narang, *Prospero and the Land of Calibans*: p-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.


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*, 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.

(Ngugi, *A Grain of Wheat*, p-55)

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" (Fabian, Time and the Other, 1983:17). 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, Heart of Darkness: p-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. (Ngugi A Grain of Wheat: p-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" (Ngugi, *A Grain of Wheat*: p-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" (Ngugi, *A Grain of Wheat*: p-166). For him, therefore, the freedom movement is merely a black force. 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" (*A Grain of Wheat*: p-187). 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" (*A Grain of Wheat*: p-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 Kigondu 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” (*A Grain of Wheat*: p-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.

(Hutchinson, *Revolutionary Terrorism*, 1978: p-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" (A Grain of Wheat: p-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 furthers 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 tenor in the heart of the oppressor. (A Grain of Wheat: p-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"


What is 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?" (Ngugi, *Homecoming*, 1972: p-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. (A Grain of Wheat:p-186). If the Mau Mau are "brutes" (A Grain of Wheat:p-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 baThe River Betweenaric 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". (Rosberg ,The Myth of Mau Mau,1966:p-261). It is also believed that "in employing secret oaths, the African was rejecting modernity and reverting to primitive behavior patterns" (Rosberg p-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.


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"

(*A Grain of Wheat*: p-134).
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 or 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 white man? . . . The decision to lay or not to lay your life for the people lies in the heart.

(A Grain of Wheat:p-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 home guards 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.
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" (Lonsdale, *Mau Mau of the Mind*, 1993:p-39). A close reading of *A Grain of Wheat* allows us to recognize that the novel is Ngugi's attempt to dispute. When a meeting of the movement is held at Rung'ei Market, through the 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” (*A Grain of Wheat*:p-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" (A Grain of Wheat:p-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. 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" (Rosberg, The Myth of Mau Mau,1966:p-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. (Ngugi, *Homecoming*, 1972: p-24)

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. (Jameson, *Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism*, 1986: p-65)

Thus, 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 knows 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 (Jameson, Third-World Lit, 1986:p-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 the novel 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. (A Grain of Wheat: p-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 voices from the Movement 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. (Bhabha, *Introduction: Narrating the Nation*, 1990: p-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" (Bhabha, *Introduction: Narrating the Nation*, 1990:p-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 it 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 foThe River Betweenade 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 thesestories: his imagination and daily
observation told him the rest;from early on, he had visions of himself, a saint,
leading Kenyanpeople to freedom and power.” ( A Grain of Wheat:p-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.

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.

(Gicandi, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 2000: p-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 relive. 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 home guards 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" (A Grain of Wheat:p-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 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 lighting 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.
(Lonsdale and Odhiambo, Mau Mau and Nationhood, 2003:p-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. (Kenyatta, Suffering Without Bitterness, 1968:pp-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" (Kenyatta, *Suffering Without Bitterness*, 1968: p-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" (*A Grain of Wheat*: p-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.

(A Grain of Wheat:p-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" (A Grain of Wheat:p-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" (A Grain of Wheat,p-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." (JanMohamed, Manichean Aesthetics,1983:p-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"


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" (A Grain of Wheat:p-
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.

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'? (A Grain of Wheat, p-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 delegitimate 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" (A Grain of Wheat, p-178).
Such a belief is confirmed even more by the fact that "it 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)" (A Grain of Wheat,p-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" (A Grain of Wheat,p-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 provocingly, knowing that the men in corners watched them.

(A Grain of Wheat,p-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" (A Grain of Wheat, p-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" (A Grain of Wheat, p-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:p-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 (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1963: p-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. (*A Grain of Wheat*, pp-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" (Fanon, 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! (*A Grain of Wheat*, p-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!" (*A Grain of Wheat*, p-126).
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" (*A Grain of Wheat*, p-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" (*A Grain of Wheat*, p-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" (*A Grain of Wheat*, p-38).
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" (McClintock, Postcolonialism:…..,2000:p-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 a historical abstraction" and suggests that "post-colonialism "encourages "a panoptic tendency to view the globe within generic abstractions voided of political nuance" (McClintock, Postcolonialism:…..,2000:p-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. Here, 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" (Nazareth, *Marxism and African Lit.*, 1986:p-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 colonialisit master's political system negating the history of its own peoples and perpetuating colonial authority and legacies.

*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 unrecognized 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.

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. (Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 1963: pp-149-150)

Imitating the role of the Western bourgeoisie, the national bourgeoisie in the postcolonial countries functions as "the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the mask of neocolonialism" (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" (Fanon, 1963: p-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, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1999: p-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 Kameria – 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 eeked a precarious living from each and everybody – workers, peasants, factory owners, blacks, whites – indiscriminately. (*Petals of Blood*: p-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." (*Petals of Blood*: p-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? (*Petals of Blood*: p-293)
Wanja's worldview — that "you either preyed or you remained a victim" (*Petals of Blood*:p-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. Aime Usaïre has critiqued the oppression of colonialism in his famous equation: "colonization = `thingification'" (*Petals of Blood*:p-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 (RSAa) 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 (Althssser, *Lenin and philosophy and Other Essays*,1971:p-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" (Amuta, *The Theory of African Lit.*, 1989:p-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" (*Petals of Blood*:p-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 reenforces 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" (*Petals of Blood*:p-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"
(Petals of Blood:p-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" (Petals of Blood:p-172). By speaking the language of
Matthew Arnold, 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 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. 

*Petals of Blood*:p-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!" *(Petals of Blood*:p-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" *(Petals of Blood*:p-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.

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: Wanza! 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".

(Petals of Blood:p-212).

The betrayal of the hope of the masses, what Ngugi calls one of "the ironies of history" (Petals of Blood:p-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.
Accidents. I was an accident. I was a mistake, doomed
to a spectator's role outside a window from a high
building. (*Petals of Blood*:p-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" (*Petals of Blood*:p-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" (*Petals of Blood*:p-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 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" (*Petals of Blood*:p-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 realize 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. (*Petals of Blood*:p-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, *Colonilism/Postcoloniualism*.1998, pp-55-57).

As a record of the transformation of Kenya between the precolonial 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" (*Petals of Blood*:p-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?

(*Petals of Blood*:p-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.
Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Devil on the Cross* is more remarkable in his life as it was written in Gikuyu. Its original title was in Gikuyu as *Caitaani Hultharaba Ini*. It first appeared in 1980 and later in English in 1982. When he was in prison, he wanted to express his emotions regarding the neo-colonial exploitation of ordinary Kenyan people. The novel was written on toilet papers. Ngugi accepts:

Free thoughts on toilet papers! I had deliberately given myself to difficult task… the Kenyan people’s struggles against the neo-colonial form and stage of imperialism. (Ngugi, *Detained*, 1981, p-8)

Ngugi as a sensitive writer is worried about corruption that prevails in the Kenyan society. He believes that capitalism is a systematic robbery of peasants and workers. It is a robbery protected and sanctified by large courts, parliament, religion armed forces, police and educational institutions. The novel opens at a crush in a realistic society. There is a journey in a taxi from Nairobi to Illmorog. During the journey the driver and five passengers discuss social issues which are the most central to the novel. They are going to attend the gathering in Illmorog. The scene in the minibus, simply melts into the voice of the meetings of the masters of ceremonies.

And now, before I sit down, I shall call upon the leaders of foreign delegation from the international organization thieves and robbers whose headquarters are in New York, U.S.A. to talk to you. I think you all know that we have already applied to become full members of IOTR. Their visit to this delegation thus, the gifts and the crown they have brought marks the beginning of even more fruitful period of co-operation. (Balogun, *Ngugi’s Devil on the Cross*, 1988, p-87)
The seven representatives are the neo-colonial powers indulging in the most heinous corrupt practices and exploitation. Each one wears shirts made of paper money of their respective homelands and reveals his grabbing of the Kenyan economy. They take away the natural resources of Kenyans and also indulge in exploitation of the workers and peasants. Gitutu is a big-bellied person who fattens on land. He proudly relates how he has taken over vast estates from the White settlers, subdivided into plots and sold them at high prices to the citizens. He accepts without any hesitation:

The land wasn’t mine and the money with which I had paid for wasn’t mine and I hadn’t added anything to the land where did I get the 2,20,000 shilling? From the pockets of the people. Yes, because the land really belonged to people, and the money with which I bought it came from the people. (Ngugi, Devil on the Cross, p-106)

The above confession shows the grabbing of the lands of the poor peasants by the black imperialists like Gitutu Kihaahu. The land key adulterous detonates his practice of exploitation in three areas such as education, local government and housing. In education, he has discovered a method of luring the status secrets to his school. He does not approve of any indigenous syllabus in his school curriculum. The advertisement in newspaper was given thus:

Modern-day Nursery School.
Experienced European Principal.
Formerly for Europeans Only.
Now Open to a Few Kenyans.
Foreign   Standard as Before
National Languages, National   Songs, National Names Banned.
Foreign   Languages, Foreign Songs, Foreign Toys etc., etc.
English Medium of Instruction
Limited   Places.
Telephone or Call in Your Car
   Colour   is no Bar: Money is the Bar
Fees High. (Ngugi, *Devil On the Cross*, p-113)

Kinaa Ku is another   evil who indulge   in corrupt practices in the local elections.
He bribes the voters, indulges in rigging and wins the elections. He easily becomes
the chairman of local housing committee. He does not get hesitated to get
percentages by foreign speculators in exchange for building contracts. Ngugi
boldly depicts the confrontation that flares up the pot-bellied and the cadaverous
exploiters. The fat persons indulge in unscrupulous commercialism. There is a
discussion on the topic that elite should exploit only the poor. The novel exposes
false educators and business tycoons. One of the exploiters comments:

   I hadn’t shed a drop of sweat. All my money came… I
never stopped plucking it. I picked one fruit after
another. The sweet juice would spill out the corners of
my mouth before I learned to eat more decrepitly.
(Ngugi, *Devil on the Cross*, p-116)

Nditika takes up another area of exploitation. It is the practice of smuggling-
cornering goods and hiking up the prices of essential commodities through black
market. The whole narration runs like a treatise on exploitation of the Africans by
the Africans imperialists.
Mwireri demands that exploitation be made exclusively indigenous, cut free from foreigners who take the richest pickings. He reveals how the multinationals force the local enterprise out of the market by under-selling cooking oil, skin lightens or contraceptives. Mwireri is killed for questioning the neo-colonial basis of exploitation. The novel reaches its peak when each speaker claims the crown of social crime and gives a brand new scheme of exploitation. Kihaaku describes the plastic puppets of White children he deploys to supplement White head ministers in entitling parents to send their children to schools. Gituku looks forward to the class when instead of tiny toys, plots of land being sold, citizens will queue up to buy near plots or trays of soil to grow for sustenance. He would also sell the air to the workers in the airtight bottles. Nditika suggests in conferring the market in the human organs for transplants so that the elite will purchase the physical immortality and leave death to others.

Kimeenderi caps all that has gone before. He outlines his plan to head all workers into barbed wire compounds where their blood split will be thumped, squeezed and dripped from them daily and sent out packaged by pipe lines to the home or kept for export while the donors are kept in quiescent by means of conditioned religion, education and pseudo-culture. The forces of law and repression will be kept in reverse in the background. He also insists that the Christian mass has already pointed the way to Kimeenderi’s ideal by urging the regular imbedding of Christ’s flesh and blood, a last twist of knife.
Indeed, the novel artistically renders how the Kenyan bourgeois elite exploited an army of workers, peasants, petty traders and students. The Kenyan capitalists are described as the thieves, robbers, hypocrites and criminals. In the words of S. Gikandi, “fantasy in this novel is only the gateway to realism” (S. Gikandi, *The Epistemology of Trans.*, 1991, p-161-162)

It is pertinent to note a few events of realism in the novel. The novel records how the African multi-millionaires made money by indulging in the exploitation of the Africans. According to Ngugi, the trademark bulging belly, the arrogance of power, the uncurbed ambition and cynicism characterizing African imperialist stooges in their pursuit of wealth are the sad factors of life in today’s African society.

Ngugi conveys that exploiters would go to any extent to promote their interest. They have a desire to make money at the cost of moral scruples. It is due to their materialistic interest that they sold their motherland to the colonizers. It is for the same reason that they continue to serve it into neo-colonialism.

Through the use of songs, Ngugi discusses contemporary issues and also the element of exploitation by the Africans. For example, Gatuiria sings thus:

- Hail, our land!
- Hail, Mount Kenya!
- Hail, our land!
- Never without water or food or green fields!

 (*Devil on the Cross*, p-128)

Wariinga and Muthuri also burst out thus:
Famine has increased in our land
But it has been given other name.
So that the people should not discover
Where all the food has been hidden.

(Devil on the Cross, p-150)

Thus, through the songs the novelist reiterates the theme of exploitation of the Africans at the hands of the fellow Africans.

In Devil on the Cross, Ngugi tries to convey that the Devil is worshipped by the capitalist power magnets. It is Satan who exposes the precise methods of power of the elite and their cynical exploitation of the religion. Satan made a true picture of what was going on in the neo-colonial Kenya. The pattern of exploitation reaches its zenith:

We, who are gathered here now, belong to one clan: the clan of workers-I think all of us saw the incredible spectacle of those who have bellies that never bear children come to scorn us. Those bellies are not swollen by disease. They have been fattened by the fruit of our sweat and blood. Those bellies are barren and their owners are barren. What about us the workers? … Today here, we refuse to go on being the pot that coos but never tastes the food. (Devil on the Cross, p-208)

Here, the novelist argues that the cook, in spite of his tasty food, is deprived of eating it as he is not allowed to eat the pudding by the master of the house. Similarly, the peasants and the workers in Kenyan society toil and produce resources which are never enjoyed by them. It is due to the exploitation of the neo-colonial Africans who exploit the poor and the indigent.
MATIGARI

One of the major themes in Ngugi’s *Matigari* is the deceptiveness of any notion of an epistemological rupture between colonial and post-colonial society. The confrontational tone of *Devil on the Cross* is retained and *Matigari* posits a vision of utopia, which must be obtained through armed struggle. While Ngugi also in *Matigari* is reversing the colonial binarism in order to combat the hegemonic interpellations of the neo-colonial regime, I argue that there is a paradigmatic shift in *Matigari* as the novel transcends the *The River Between* of a Marxist, materialist discourse of *Devil on the Cross*. By including magic and supernatural elements, *Matigari* propagates a utopia which is based on what one could call an ‘ethical universal,’ in Ngugi’s case premised on the ethical principles of Gikuyuism, Christianity and Marxism. This non-materialist discourse with its magical aspects involves, as Brink states in another context, an acknowledgement of a more holistic way of approaching the world, an awareness of more things in heaven and earth than have been dreamt of in our philosophy, a free interaction between the living and the dead.(Brink, “Interrogating silence: new possibilities faced by South African literature,” 1998: p-25)

Ngugi’s extension of his ideological base is premised on a profound disillusionment with the concrete socio-economic, cultural and political realities in the 1970s and the 1980s from which *Matigari* is generated. It is my contention this that *Matigari* addresses the urgency of the polarised situation of post-colonial Kenya, not only by
transgressing his former, materialist discourse, but by having only one story to tell and thereby distancing his narrative from the multiple stories of postmodern fiction. Ngugi discusses the relationship between Matigari’s role as a prophet and the decentred, fragmentary voice of post-modern literature. In *Penpoints* Ngugi claims that Art has more questions than it has answers. Art starts with a position of not knowing and seeks to know. Hence its exploratory character. (Ngugi, *Penpoints*, 1998: p-15.)

In fact art has hardly any answers. Ngugi even goes on to illustrate his point by using Matigari as an example, who was going about asking questions related to the truth and justice of what was going on in the country. Actually Matigari was only asking one question: where could a person wearing the belt of peace find truth and justice in a postcolonial society? Ngugi’s emphasis on art’s and literature’s function may in some way seem to contradict Ngugi’s own development from *A Grain of Wheat* to *Devil on the Cross* and *Matigari*. In the first part of *Matigari* there is a sense that this Socratic, exploratory mood is being introduced where Matigari’s quest is governed by two questions: where is truth and justice to be found and: ‘Had anything really changed between then and now?’ (Ngugi, *Matigari*, p-9)

These questions are being tested as Matigari explores the ideological cartography of the country after independence. *Matigari* confirms the impression from *Devil on the Cross* that the expected discontinuity between the colonial and post-colonial times is illusory. In fact, any idea about a new land as a result of the liberation struggle is
being queried and eventually pulverised as a result of Matigari’s numerous, depressing experiences after his return from the forest. After his encounter with the children who are being exploited by the adults, his Socratic query is shifting to a more rhetorical one: ‘So a handful of people still profited from the suffering of the majority, then sorrow of the many being the joy of the few?’ (Ngugi, Matigari: p-12)

In the prison the true story of the land is being told:

Our country is truly as dry as this concrete floor. Our leaders have hearts as cold as that of Pharaoh. Or even colder than those of the colonialists. They cannot hear the cry of the people. (Ngugi, Matigari: p-53)

The collapse of the dream for a better post-independence future has created an atmosphere of repression and fear, transforming people from truth-sayers to self-interested egotists, blatantly exposed in the student’s and teacher’s idealistic response in the cell and their cowardly rejoinder to Matigari’s moral challenges later. (Ngugi, Matigari: 54, 89-92) Ngugi’s insistence on the Socratic role of art seems therefore more theoretical than seriously related to Matigari. While questions can be asked, there is a sense that the answers are grounded in and premised on a fairly preconceived ideological foundation. Matigari’s version of post-colonial Kenya is thus based on the fierce contestation of ‘whose reality counts. As the teacher says: ‘I also know that there are two truths. One truth belongs to the oppressor, the other belongs to the oppressed’. (Ngugi, Matigari: p-121)
By constructing “the reality” it wants to convey through dominant ideology’s various repressive and propagandistic means, the neo-colonial state as experienced by Matigari represents a monolithic force which fights to maintain hegemonical control. The question of representation is consciously and deliberately dealt with by the representatives of the neo-colonial regime: ‘We have qualified professors who can write new history for us’ (Ngugi, Matigari: 118). It is this continuous reinscription of neo-colonial ideology which is being targeted by Matigari and his co-patriots.

Whereas Ngugi’s earlier fiction has been focusing on objectifying the reality of grim post-colonialism with an underlying aspiration for revolution, he seems in Matigari - even though the idea of revolution is by no means forgotten - to realise the historical limitations of Marxism and its resultant lack of elasticity. Matigari’s response to the repression and exploitation of the present regime represents in one way a paradigmatic shift in Ngugi’s development as an author. As a prophet Matigari not only passes judgment on the present state of affairs, but also projects a vision of a new Jerusalem. By straying away from a strict materialist discourse, Ngugi lifts the novel beyond a mere reiteration of Marxist jargon by widening the scope of combat strategies, thus challenging in multiple ways the present order and the inevitability of the post-colonial situation. By transcending in this way the fixity of the post-colonial situation, the response to post-colonial imposition is more complex than Brenda Cooper’s somewhat condescending remarks about ‘the
biblical tone of tilling and reaping and the exaction of godly vengeance’ attest to’ (Cooper, *To Lay These Secrets Open: Evaluating African Writing*. Cape Town: David Philip, 1992:p-177.)

The dual and enigmatic nature of Matigari (moving beyond time and space and still having a material reality) does not, however, detract from the over-all focus on the ethical and political realities of the novel. In a sense Matigari functions as the beautiful one who comes back from the bush and queries the healthiness of the post-colonial situation, captured in the heading of the second part of the novel: “Seeker of Truth and Justice.” As a prophet who tries to reinvigorate the spirit from the days of Mau Mau, Matigari represents these ideals of resistance against oppression. Embodying the double-edged role of the prophet Old Testament style, Matigari both projects the Truth to the people and passes judgement on the present state of affairs. But Matigari seeks beyond the limits of a traditional prophetic role by claiming a Christ-like stature. This can be attributed to the various specific New Testament allusions coupled directly to Matigari. Matigari’s departure from the novel in the midst of the thunder and lightening is reminiscent of the New Testament’s rendering of Jesus’ death and ascension. Ngugi admitted long before the writing of *Matigari* the rationale behind the use of the Bible:

‘I have also drawn from the Bible in the sense that the Bible was for a long time the only literature available to Kenyan people that has been available to them in their national languages.’ (Ngugi, “An Interview with Ngugi.” *The Weekly Review*, 9 Jan. (1978): p-10)
Even though Ngugi’s use of biblical allusions and the very similarities between Matigari and Christ thus can be seen as a way of accommodating his audience, there is a shift in how these biblical allusions are used which signal a vision of a new order beyond a mere materialist discourse. While the biblical allusions in Devil on the Cross often turned sour and negative, the positive ethical implication of Christianity was tentatively put on the agenda. In Matigari this is taken a step further and I agree with Maughan-Brown who sees Matigari as ‘a new departure based on a reassessment of the cultural, and thereby political significance of religion.’ (Maughan-Brown, “Matigari and the Rehabilitation of Religion,” Research in African Literatures 22, no. 4 (1991): p-174)

Ngugi’s characterisation of individual church people are as harsh as before, with Guthera’s father as a very notable exception. Characterised as a devout Christian and a church leader with high moral principles who support the children altruistically, he is at the same time politically very active in the liberation struggle. Coming as a shock to Guthera his activism leads to his death:

Is it true? (that you are an activist - my insertion) …
Yes, for there is no greater love than this: that men and women should give up their lives for the people by taking to the mountains and forests. (Maughan-Brown: p-35)

Here the biblical reference (the gospel of love) is contextualised into the political and economic situation of the neo-colonial state, projecting visions about the ideological foundations on which the new Kenya must build. Admittedly old wine in
new bottles, it nevertheless underlines Ngugi’s perception of a post-colonial situation which desperately calls for moral rearmament based on age-old principles.

Referring exclusively to religious principles in a non-transcendent, here-and-now context, Matigari emphatically refutes that he is ‘the one whose second coming is prophesied’. (Maughan-Brown,:p-156) Ngugi uses religion in a secularised version to facilitate his message of change:

The God who is prophesied is in you, in me and in other humans. He has always been there inside us since the beginning of time. Imperialism has tried to kill that God within us. But one day that God will return for the dead…and liberate us who believe in Him…But…if you let your country go to the imperialist enemy and its local watch-dogs, it is the same thing as killing that God who is inside you… (Maughan-Brown:p-156).

It is liberation theology in a new, very secular fashion as Ngugi wants to reinvigorate values like peace, justice, equality and brotherly love that are solidly based on Christian ethics. Moreover, such values are concomitant with the traditional, Gikuyu or Kenyan values which are expressed in the traditional songs of the novel. In this way Matigari offers another alternative than Fanon’s view of religion as detrimental to revolutionising the masses:

The colonialist bourgeoisie is helped in its work of calming down the natives by the inevitable religion. All those saints who have turned the other cheek, and who have forgiven trespasses against them, and who have been spat on and insulted without shrinking are studied and held up as examples. (Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, (1968):p- 67)
The novel’s paradigm of a new national culture is akin to Appiah’s definition of the establishment of a national heritage, ‘constructed through the invention of traditions, the careful filtering of the rough torrent of historical event into the fine stream of an official narrative, the creation of a homogenous legacy of values and experience.’ (Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, 1992: p-59) In such a perspective it is hardly ironical, as Ranger claims, that ‘those like Ngugi who repudiates bourgeois elite culture face the ironic danger of embracing another set of colonial inventions instead.’ (Ranger, Terence “*Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa,*” *The Invention of Tradition.* Eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983: p-262). The eclectical nature of Ngugi’s counter-discourse is determined by the ideological conviction that such a discourse is necessary in an attempt to rescue Kenya from destruction, an eclecticism well-established in African resistance from the days prior to independence.

Ngugi opens, by transcending his own materialism, a terrain which takes into account or acknowledges other perceptions of reality deeply ingrained in the people he wants to address. It is a way of acknowledging the cultural roots and the epistemological horizon of the Kenyan peasants and workers, and a way of linking up with a cultural environment which the exiled Ngugi has been somewhat alienated from.
Matigari’s authoritative role as a prophet and truth sayer stands in clear contrast to the decentered and problematised voice of post-modern writing. By employing the image of the prophet as the main representational figure, the text has already crushed any notion of multiple representations as equally authentic or true. As Ngugi himself recognizes, the prophet is linked to concepts like truth and authority, concepts which are not apotheosised in post-modern criticism, but which are urgent in Ngugi’s political and, it must added, aesthetic struggle.

Unlike Mugo in *A Grain of Wheat*, Matigari, despite his multifaceted roles and transcendental qualities, thus comes out as a fairly one-dimensional character who rarely questions, like prophets seldom do, the legitimacy of his truth-finding mission or the truth value of his answers. Also towards the end the binary understanding of the post-colonial world is reiterated: ‘Matigari spoke again: “There are indeed two worlds,” he said, as echoing Guthera’s words. “The world of the patriots and that of sell-outs.” ’(Ranger: p-152)

Matigari emerges, by embodying the novel’s ideological location, as a centered, unified self who as a prophet distinguishes truth from false and maintains that there is basically one story to tell: ‘The world is turned upside down, but it must be set right again. For I have seen that in our land today lies are decreed to be the truth, and the truth decreed to be a lie.’ (Ranger ,p-137).
Matigari’s crucial, ideological function as the epitome of the new Kenya is thus to attempt to repress alternative stories and thereby to cover up -up to a point - the dilemmas of meaning-making through representation.

*Matigari* focuses, not on the act of imposing order, but on narrating a story with an encoded message with which it interpolates the reader. Since there in *Matigari* are no multiple endings the text does not suggest suspicious continuity or relativised finality. The novel is concerned with truth and with linking past to present, shying away from ‘the tensions that exist between the pastness (and absence) of the past and the presentness (and presence) of the present and… between the actual events of the past and the historian’s act of processing them into facts.’(Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989:p-73)

Whereas Hutcheon asserts that ‘to accept unquestioningly such fixed representations is to condone social systems of power which validate and authorize some images of women (or blacks, Asians, gays etc.) and not others,’(Hutcheon, p-17.) *Matigari* focuses on fixed representations as a necessary tool to expose both post-colonial power and its oppositional elements. This insistence on fixed representation is part of the combat code: whereas *A Grain of Wheat* in the original version was concerned with the analysis and reflection of the fragmented self of the colonized and the reconstruction of that very self, there is a sense that *Matigari* focuses on the direct, uncompromising and one-dimensional reaction and opposition against the oppressor. The text tries to restore, as Ngugi confirms, also in *Penpoints*, ‘voices to
the land. It tries to give voices back to the silenced.’ (Ngugi, *Penpoints*, p-25) The implication is not necessarily that Ngugi rejects Spivak’s query about the subaltern’s potential/possibility to speak, but that ‘A neo-colonial state tries to impose silence on the population as a whole… Art gives voice to silence in the great prophetic tradition.’ (Ngugi, *Penpoints*, p-27).

Ngugi is thus not so concerned with the theoretical problem about the reconstruction of the subaltern voice, but focuses on giving the subaltern a voice. It is this urgency of addressing and speaking for the people who feel betrayed and long for “a new Kenya” which is the engine of the novel. Old concepts like the failures and betrayals of independence are used because Ngugi insists on their appropriateness in a new era. While there may be some truth in Simon Gikandi’s claim, in an article from 1992, that Matigari doesn’t understand ‘the new Kenya because he has been for too long in the forest,’ (Gikandi, Simon. *The Politics and Poetics of National Formation: Recent African Writing*, 199: p-382.) the real reason for his incomprehension seems more due to, as we have seen, his initial confusion about the lack of epistemological rupture which independence promised rather than any complexity and novelty brought about by a new order. Gikandi questions in the same article the relevance of Matigari’s fact finding mission even if Matigari may find the truth: ‘Matigari’s words may resonate with the truth, but the ideological machinery of the state determines the realities of the nation.’ (Gikandi, *The Politics*: p-382). By privileging the contemporary material practices without, it seems,
questioning the legitimacy of those very practices, Gikandi here seems to belong politically and epistemologically to another world than Ngugi.

Gikandi’s criticism is grounded on the ideological premise that the paradigms have changed since Matigari was in the forest. Whereas Ngugi stresses continuity and linkages, Gikandi underlines discontinuity, accusing Ngugi of filling the new bottles with old wine, resulting in an ideological dead-end street:

Writers who still seem to believe that the post-colonial situation is simply the continuation of colonialism under the guise of independence, or that the narrative of decolonization can be projected into the post-colonial world, seem to be entrapped in an ideological cul-de-sac. (Gikandi: p-379)

Critiquing Matigari and thus Ngugi for insisting that Matigari is the voice of the nation, he is ‘the crystallization of the collective desires of the nation,’ Gikandi:p-382) Gikandi projects a picture of a post-independent Kenya which cannot be reduced to a single ideological formula. Gikandi’s critique is premised on his denigration of Ngugi’s ideology which he calls ‘primeval (expressed through Gikuyu legends and Christian allegories).’ (Gikandi :p-381) True as some of his criticism against the text’s simplicity and one dimensionality may be, there is a sense that Gikandi’s own post-modern ideology is suspiciously unpolitical and non-agency oriented. His ‘analysis’ of the international and national scene is at best very resigned as well as abortive, unwilling, it seems, to invoke the subaltern voice or analyse subaltern agency or to critique the present state of affairs. Whereas Ngugi
wants to fight the present material practices also in fictional terms Gikandi sees literature as an arena of exposing the plural stories of post-colonial realities, thereby reducing the urgency of addressing what Ngugi sees as the moral and political disease in post-colonial Kenya.

Gikandi’s very critical analysis of *Matigari* from 1992 has been supplemented by a much more sympathetic reading in the chapter on *Matigari* in his recent book on Ngugi. (Gikandi, *Ngugi wa Thiong’o* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). There Gikandi tones down his explicit political criticism of Ngugi by maintaining that Matigari privileges form over content and ‘reality’: ‘reality has become secondary to the forms in which it is represented’ (Gikandi, *Ngugi wa Thiong’o*, p-246) Still Gikandi acknowledges Matigari’s political dilemmas: ‘The overriding question for him now is how he can meet the challenge posed by these unexpected experiences,’ (Gikandi:p-243), but insists on the importance of Matigari’s identity in interpreting the novel. Gikandi writes:

> while the novel ends by affirming the familiar themes about revolution and change, such affirmations are made against the background of doubt and uncertainty triggered by Matigari’s mysterious identity which the ending of the novel confounds rather than resolves. (Gikandi :p-243)

Against such a reading of Matigari my earlier contention that the uncertainty of Matigari’s identity must not be linked to any confusion about Matigari’s political message is supported by the final pages of the novel, where - after Matigari’s
ascension - Muriuki digs up ‘all the things that Matigari had hidden,’ (Gikandi:p-175) picking up Matigari’s cartridge belt, the sword and the AK 47. Clearly Muriuki is in the process of following in the ideological footsteps of Matigari (and thus confirming grassroots agency – for the first time- without Matigari), re-echoed in the last slogan where Muriuki seemed to hear, the voices of the students and of other patriots of all different nationalities of the land, singing in harmony:

Victory will be ours!

Victory will be ours!

Victory will be ours!

Victory will be ours.

(Gikandi:p-175)

This somewhat romanticised ending confirms the novel’s ideological closure and Ngugi’s paradigmatic stance which, according to critics like Wilson-Tagoe (and Gikandi, as already noted) are inadequate because the individual narrator, in this case Matigari, remains assured and convinced of the truths he is expressing. By employing Nuridin Farah’s Maps to illustrate the new paradigm Wilson-Tagoe shows how the authority of the single narrative voice is decentered and problematized and where the concepts of freedom and community are interrogated which, according to Wilson-Tagoe, the earlier nationalist perspectives had taken for granted…. Farah’s Maps destabilizes the often grossly romanticized and stridently patriarchal idealism that surrounds liberationist politics and their construction of

Gikandi seems in his criticism of Matigari to succumb to a depoliticized version of post-modernism where the legitimacy of those in power and the pressing political problems in the novel are not properly addressed. In Ngugi’s ideological project certain truths are inviolable and are not subject to negotiations or interrogations. Maps, to the take the example referred to above, is simply written from another ideological and political perspective where a decentered focus dilutes the political, social and moral issues at stake. Ngugi’s rejection of what he would term the perverted values of neo-colonialism, and his insistence on an alternative economic and moral order which stresses equality, justice, truth and moral rearmament may seem obsolete in the post-modern era, but is seen by Ngugi as mandatory in the struggle for the poor in Kenya and Africa. Whereas Gikandi seems more interested in explaining and representing the complex and often confusing postcolonial reality by a conscious selection of certain sociological or development theories, Ngugi is capitalising on strategies which can change a political situation which may have become more complex, but which nevertheless needs to be rectified by a dramatic overthrow of the present order. Ngugi questions if the proposed complexities and contradictions of post-colonial reality which post-modern and poststructuralist
theories outline blur and undermine any possibility of profound change of a situation which is dismal for the majority of the people in Kenya.

When Ngugi simplifies the analysis of post-colonial Kenya by e.g. heralding that ‘Poverty and sorrow shall be banished from our land’ (Ngugi, *Matigari*: p-121), one can legitimately query the adequacy of such one-dimensional sloganeering. (Gikandi, “*The Politics*,: p-379) It is not Matigari’s lack of multiple, mutually exclusive endings which are problematic, but its lack of problematised endings which in principle are antithetical to the truth-finding mission Matigari has embarked upon. By suppressing more problematised endings Ngugi confirms a representation of the post-colonial situation which is fixed and one-dimensional, but which at the same time runs against the suspicions of complexity in the narrative. Even though in line with the novel’s ideological project the imposition of an unproblematised, heroic ending exposes a terrain where the previous anxieties and fears are miraculously deleted.

While Ngugi’s neglect or rejection of the “new” paradigms of the postcolonial era blurs complexity and diversity, it is at this juncture again worth recalling that the effect of Matigari’s determinate, revolutionary vision has been more powerful than any other book ever produced for the Kenyan market. Moreover, Ngugi’s obsession with change and agency enforces a paradigmatic shift in Matigari whose focus on reclaiming national autonomy is not his resort to Western ideology as such, but his inclusion of a non-materialist discourse. Ngugi’s counter-discourse is an attempt to
prevent the Western crisis of representation from spreading to a continent already
distraught by fragmentation and anarchy, and it is Ngugi’s legacy in Matigari to
highlight areas of a resistant order which the author thinks can reclaim historicity
and dignity to the African continent.

WIZARD OF THE CROW

Ngugi thiong’o’s *Wizard of the Crow* (2006) is his last novel. It is ‘Truthful in its
dissection of power, and remarkably free of bitterness… the poisonous ness of its
targets never infects the author’s vision, nor his faith in people’s power to resist.’(GUARDIAN) "The tale is in turns fantastical, surreal and scatological. ...
*Wizard of the Crow* is first and foremost a great, spellbinding tale, probably the
crowning glory of Ngugi's life's work. He has done for East Africa what Ahmadou
Kourouma's *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote* did for West Africa: He has turned
the power of storytelling into a weapon against totalitarianism." (Aminatta Forna,
*The Washington Post.*) "*Wizard of the Crow* is rich in metaphor, symbolism, and
biblical allusion, and Thiong'o employs his razor-sharp wit throughout the book to
contrast two parallel worlds -- that of the powerful and that of the powerless."(Owuor, Elizabeth, *Christian Science Monitor*) (2006).

The novel *Wizard of the Crow* takes its name from a series of misunderstandings
that followed the activities of the impoverished, unemployed Kamiti; and is set in a
fictitious East African nation, Aburiria. The Ruler, a prototype of every dictator and
the quintessential Life President, is the same as ‘the country’. His mood represents the state of the nation’s affairs; his sigh a warning of an impending doom; and his word the final judgment. His three pandering Ministers have undergone plastic surgery to elongate, respectively, their tongue, ears, and eyes, the better to pronounce the Ruler’s wishes, and hear and spy on dissidents. The ultimate birthday gift for the Ruler is the Marching to Heaven project: an attempt to touch the sublime while down on earth. The project is expected to be the planet’s next super wonder, the world’s tallest building and a platform to position the Ruler for a face to face contact with God and to elevate Africa above the West. It is a project that captures the esteem with which the Ruler is held by his people.

It is also a project that can transport its Chairman from an average business man to visions of himself as ‘the richest man in Aburiria, the richest man in Africa’ and ‘probably the richest man in the whole world’ (*WIZARD OF THE CROW*:p-173) based on bribery around contracts. The Marching to Heaven project and the plastic surgeries of the three Ministers already mentioned aside, the Ministers of Defense and Finance who went to America to negotiate loans for their ministries used respectively the occasion to upgrade a collection of pornographic videos, and to begin the process of transformation from a black man to a white man by changing his right arm to white (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-742). The most disquieting thing is not just power but power plus comprehensive buffoonery and the tragic combination this represents for a civilized and for civilizing a society.
With the support of his courtiers, the Ruler trimmed Aburiria to a country where there is no respect for civil liberties – free speech, freedom of worship, right of assembly and freedom to organize nonviolent opposition; and no due process as legal protection against arbitrary administrative actions (unwarranted detentions, secret arrests, forced confessions), unfair trial procedures, and fuzzy, all-encompassing laws that give extensive discretion to government officials. Vague laws against queuing represent a typical instance. There are also attempts to control the institutions responsible for producing ideas: churches, media and schools. The Ruler’s power is no ordinary power. It is the kind that sits on the brain and completely dissolves into it such that the brain is power and power is brain. As such, every thought and action that emanates from the brain automatically exudes from the seat and site of power. But everything has a price; and the higher the stake, the more intense the final result. The Ruler is shown what he wants to see and told what he desires to hear while his lackeys and flatterers maintain a screen on their thoughts, afraid to even reach out a little to each other. It is not about a plot but hidden plots. On the other extreme, authoritarian regimes breed resistance.

The Movement for the voice of the People working as an underground movement sets about scuttling all flagrant demonstrations of state power. For the Movement, the Marching to Heaven project symbolizes a corrupt, unresponsive state, a state dominated by power-interested bureaucrats and headed by a dictator obsessed with power. The protest movement takes it upon itself to uphold the economic interests
of the ordinary people, the moral ideological values of the state, peace, justice, Aburirian dignity and pride. The Movement also provokes political interest, educates citizens about political issues and values and teaches members the most efficient methods to press their policy demands on the government. More importantly, power is faithless. Those who court power invariably experience its elusive nature: its possession is the same as inheriting the wind. There is a dilemma that confronts every power-monger: the obsession to ‘step on’ and the paradoxical conflict of needing the ‘step’ as the basis for support. Karl Popper avers that ‘so long as one man cannot accumulate enough physical power in his hands to dominate all others, just so long must he depend upon his helpers. Even the most powerful tyrant depends upon his secret police, his henchmen and his hangmen’. (Popper, K. R., , *The Open Society and its Enemies: Volume 1 The Spell of Plato*, 1962:p-122) The lesson which the Ruler leaves behind is the exact opposite of what he tries to achieve. It is a moral which should always be remembered: alluring as absolute power may be, it ultimately blinds and suffocates the bearer. In the Ruler’s case his world-views become ultimately self-justified and self evident, so fixed, in fact that he becomes incapable of learning. His state of mind becomes extremely pathological, power mad. His bent towards aggressive action and ruler-megalomania bereft him of ideas and divests him of all sense of limits as he tries to eliminate people whom he suspects oppose his ideas or dreaming of power. He will also stop at nothing to get the character, the Wizard of the Crow, to reveal the secrets of his knowledge which he hopes to incorporate into himself and then have the Wizard
thrown into a dungeon so as to become ‘sorcerer number one’ (*Wizard of the Crow*: p-562).

In spite of all this frantic efforts, by the time the story ends the Ruler has been exterminated by the flame of power. It is an ironic twist that the impoverished, unemployed Kamiti gained a reputation as a powerful sorcerer, a wizard of the crow, who delivers. Without any effort in the direction of power, Kamiti has enormous power thrust on him. Here is a lesson and a moral for power seekers: in the final analysis, power chooses its own candidate.

Perhaps there is nothing new in the ethical commitment of the novel, yet the persistence of leaders turning into dictators and manipulating power as an instrument of destruction rather than a tool for service to Africa establishes the moral dimension of the story as both current and persistent. Reflecting but also anticipating the havoc of power in Africa, *Wizard of the Crow* portrays a Ruler whose pathological romance with power is the sole reality purchasable at any cost – unemployment, starvation, repression of all opposition and of course killing of opponents (real and imaginary). Importantly, *Wizard of the Crow* is more than the moral affliction of a single power-confused Ruler. It is also the language of social interaction; the construction of the public sphere. Douglas Keller points to an important aspect of Habermas’s notion of the bourgeois public sphere which many of its defenders and critics fail to note. The thrust of Habermas’s study, according to Keller’s observation, is ‘precisely that of transformation, of the mutations of the
public sphere from a space of rational discussion, debate, and consensus to a realm of mass cultural consumption and administration by corporations and dominant elites’ (Habermas, J., *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. 1989:p-2) By stressing transformation, however, Habermas points to the means by which social norms can be maintained and critiqued. Ngugi’s *Wizard of the Crow* demonstrates that society can be reformed by social means. *Wizard of the Crow* encourages activities that curtail the unbridled actions of state managers, that criticize narrow opinions on who constitutes society, that extend the meaning of what it means to shun authoritarian interference and that strengthen the people’s voice, going beyond politeness in speaking ‘truth’ to the state and mediating and harmonizing private and public interest in ways that speak of Habermas’s ideas. *Wizard of the Crow* employs the values of the public sphere to pass satirical comments on society’s values and practices: old assumptions are questioned, established world-views reviewed and concealed class and gender issues revealed and reassessed. Conversation is used to frame problems and solutions are proffered by principal characters in the fashion of idealized conclusions. Habermas might not deal adequately with some issues, especially, the insufficient attention to gender and marginalized groups, but his notion of citizens engaging in rational discourse and generating public opinion that upsets unjust and authoritarian leaders is one that can be gainfully applied to major aspects of Ngugi’s novel. The two dominant aspects
that this paper will take up are the nature of power and resistance in African public sphere and more importantly, the character of the African public sphere.

There is the concept of the public sphere to frame the discussion about the role of power and resistance in Ngugi’s *Wizard of the Crow*. The idealized vision of the public sphere calls for social integration to be founded on rational-critical discourse that promotes equal participation and communication rather than domination. The public sphere, then, is a social construction located at an impartial space where discussions, ideas, information, arguments are shared and entertained and where public opinion can be formed. In essence, Habermas’s conception of the public sphere entails the role of political discourse in a democracy. This in turn implies that citizens talk about and criticize government actions, thereby turning public opinion into a political force.

In *Wizard of the Crow* the public sphere is presented as a site of intense conflict between two kinds of power: productive power and repressive power. The right to participate in political concerns is not a given, it is obtained through force, depending on the resources available to the contenders. While those on the side of repressive power – state agents – employ power as coercion and ‘construction of incentives’ (Shively, W.P, *Power & Choice: An Introduction to Political Science* 1997:p-6) and ultimately to render people as playthings; those on the side of productive power – the Movement for the Voice of the People – take up resistance and use power as a mark of freedom and interdependence and the capacity of people
to change their world. Having shown these two aspects of power, in what follows I will adopt the concept of power for state power while productive power will be subsumed under resistance.

The major conflict between power and resistance in *Wizard of the Crow* is between state owners and the Movement for the Voice of the People. The notion of the public sphere as a realm of social life that admits citizens and their opinions turns it into a target of an authoritarian regime as the state both tries to appropriate it and decimate its members. The Mars Café that acts as a rendezvous where people can sit and talk ‘for long stretches after consuming what they had ordered’ (*Wizard of the Crow*: p-106) is hijacked by official spies to track down dissidents. Kaniuru and two of the policemen ‘waiting to pounce on Nyawira’ (the leader of the Movement for the Voice of the People) sat ‘at separate tables in the Mars Café. (*Wizard of the Crow*: p-217). This is in compliance with the Ruler’s order ‘to use all means, necessary and unnecessary to capture dissidents dead or alive and put a stop to leaflets and plastic snakes’ (*Wizard of the Crow*: p-136) used by the Movement to educate the populace and counter government’s unpopular policies. The Ruler also, through the exercise of comprehensive power and a series of anti-citizen policies gradually claims all public space with the intention of silencing all opposition. To ensure that opposition is stamped out a ‘ban was imposed on queues involving more than five persons. No matter the time or place or business, it was illegal for more than five people to stand in line, whether entering a church or mosque or riding a
bus or meeting in an office’ (Wizard of the Crow:p-253). The attempt to scuttle the public sphere by imposing a ban on gatherings of more than five people may be an exercise in futility. Steven Schneider quotes Keane as suggesting that ‘a public sphere is brought into being whenever two or more individuals, who previously acted singly, assemble to interrogate both their own interactions and the wider relations of social and political power within which they are always and already embedded’. (Schneider, Expanding the Public Sphere through Computer-Mediated Communication: 1997:p-17) True enough; the ban did not sufficiently hamper the activities of the Movement. Its members continued to organize and mobilize and turn every government event into an opportunity to struggle for a fundamental transformation of the system – its policy priorities, behavioural interactions that connect political leadership with mass participation, and the structural relationship between rulers and ruled. The resistance movement rejects a subordinate status based on political repression, economic marginalization and public humiliation, and tries to inculcate in their members a higher moral character. This creation of a public interest faces counter-resistance from the state and is stalled by severe difficulties. The state places a death sentence on the leader and seals off all possible space for the members’ interaction. The over-reliance on power and its coercive possibilities eventually leads to political stasis – an inability to respond to crisis situations with innovative policies and strategies. It is this that eventually turns power on itself, leaving the Ruler exposed and fragile and making it relatively easy for a new-comer (Tajirika) to engage in power games to eliminate the Ruler and take over power.
This is in direct contrast to the way the members of the resistance group protected Nyawira. Their activities in setting up a people’s court to sanction domestic offenders, using the People’s Assembly to demand the truth about the murdered Minister of Foreign Affairs, sensitizing the public through leaflets, helped to revitalize the democratic sphere by bringing private, hidden and new issues to public attention. It is a triumph for the public character (dialogic communication based on respect for common good) of the public sphere as against the controlled nature (one-way communication anchored on authoritarian disregard for public concerns) of power-directed leadership.

More so, it is the contradictions created by the Ruler and his cohorts that provide the basis for transformative change. The truth is at a deeper level of power relations the irresponsible exercise of power breeds resistance. In the last resort, building a healthy democracy and a progressive nation critically depends on tensions – conflict, contradiction and resistance. Indeed the Movement came as near as any to realizing the possibilities of a democratic public sphere. Wizard of the Crow underscores the value of protest and the need to encourage the spirit of criticism on which intellectual excellence is anchored, bearing in mind that social relations will never be free of power. There is something, however, all resistance movements should know: namely that resistance can be manipulated and turned into surrender. The women’s protest dance during the dedication of Marching to Heaven aimed at shaming state power is explained to visiting delegates as ‘a sacred Aburirian dance
performed only before most honoured guests’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-242) by the Ruler and his Minister of Foreign Affairs. Again the date chosen by the Movement for a ‘general strike and the day for the rebirth of the nation’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-669) is thwarted by the Ruler who fixes his birthday celebrations on the same date. As such the call for a one-day general strike by the Movement to mark the Day of National Self-Renewal ‘lost the power of threat as the government declared the day a public holiday’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-669). In addition, the queues formed by the people in *Wizard of the Crow* to expose high unemployment were converted by government as proof ‘that people were voting with their feet in support of Marching to Heaven’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-199). To sustain a high-powered resistance calls for continuous re-strategizing, creative applications and the ability to be many steps ahead of the oppressor. In Aburiria where there are very few free spaces, the Movement reconverted the unemployment queue into ‘a site of democracy where gatherings did not require police permits’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-199) and ‘decided that whenever they wanted to have a meeting, they would form a queue. They would use the queues for purposes of political mobilization’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:pp-199-200). Also the actual denunciation of the Marching to Heaven project and the Global Bank’s involvement in saddling Africa with loans is made possible for the Movement by the ‘democratic space guaranteed by the bank we oppose!’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-246). The logic here is that to carry out an effective resistance there is a need to turn a seeming surrender into a fertile site to resist surrender.
Habermas’s conception of the public sphere as a discursive space where people gather together to deliberate on issues and problems of mutual concern has an endorsement of freedom and openness surrounding it. In theory, at least, it projects rational public opinion as both outside state control and an effective check for government excesses. In essence, the public sphere mediates and moderates the political atmosphere. Habermas’s ideal notion of the public sphere as the necessary condition for a genuine democracy is applied in the assessment of the ideas contained in *Wizard of the Crow* in an attempt to map out and understand the African public sphere. *Wizard of the Crow* portrays the African public sphere as very fluid. The happenings in the private sphere project into the outer workings of the public sphere as the events in the public sphere determine and direct the inner activities of the private sphere. One of the theories advanced for the strange illness of the Ruler is ‘the tears, unshed, that Rachael, his legal wife, had locked up inside her soul after her fall from his grace’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-6). In fact the women protesters that shamed him during the dedication for Marching to Heaven shouted at him to ‘set Rachael free!’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-250). In this way, an issue that is consigned to the domestic arena is made public and also brought to the attention of global audience. Also the beating that Tajirika, chairman of Marching to Heaven, received from members of the People’s Court on account of beating his wife is situated within the principle that ‘what happens in a home is the business of the nation and the other way around’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-435). Nyawira, the brain behind the Movement, insists on the need to intensify ‘struggle against all gender-
based inequalities and therefore fight for the rights of women in the home, the family, the nation, and the world’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-428). *Wizard of the Crow* points to the changing nature of the African public sphere by highlighting issues that are usually kept in a reserved area, thereby sending a clear message for the incorporation of such concerns in the construction of a healthy social space where citizens and government can play out their roles. The role of the public character in advancing the cause of the public sphere is also stressed in *Wizard of the Crow*. The police officer, Arigaigai Gathere, is one such character. Through his accounts, usually rendered in bars, the happenings in the state-world are transmitted to the people. For instance, it was from him that the people gathered information on what transpired during the Ruler’s visit to America. It was, in fact, on his recommendation that the Wizard of the Crow was sent to America to cure the Ruler of his malady of words. Much as the public character may not always be in possession of all facts, his/her strategic positioning of being in contact with a wide spectrum of activities and people helps to promote the free flow of information and generate a variety of criticisms which are essential elements for revitalizing the African public sphere.

*Wizard of the Crow* also reveals why the position of constitutional theorists concerning protest movements is not tenable in most African political spheres. Charles Andrain and David Apter observe that constitutional theorists expect protest movements to advocate their demands for policy changes through the orderly
processes of representative government. Protesters should seek to redress their grievances through established institutions like competitive political parties, legislatures, executive agencies, bureaucracies and courts instead of using disruptive tactics such as riots, rebellions, sit-ins and mass demonstrations. (Andrain, C. F. and Apter, D. E., *Political Protest and Social Change: Analyzing Politics*, 1995: p-147)

What does it mean to talk of representative government or competitive political parties in a country like Aburiria where there is ‘no tomorrow beyond the Ruler’? (Wizard of the Crow:p-751) He is the country and every other interest derives its existence or extinction from the vagaries of his mood. In response to international pressure the Ruler introduced democracy. But that is only in name; in content its definition is what the Ruler says it is: ‘he would be the nominal head of all political parties. This meant that in the next general elections, all the parties would be choosing him as their candidate for the presidency. His victory would be a victory of all the parties, and more important for Aburirians, a victory for wise and tested leadership’ (Wizard of the Crow:p-699). Instead of the introduction of democracy to extend public political discourse and critique that would usher in new democratic ideals or at least bring substantial transformation of the existing one, new measures were introduced to further stifle the existing freedom. The Ruler’s new Baby democracy ‘would do away with secret ballots and introduce the queuing by which one openly stood behind the candidate of one choice. Direct democracy. Open democracy’ (Wizard of the Crow:p-699). It does not require sustained reflection to imagine what would happen to an Aburirian who refused to line up behind the
Ruler. Indeed the first time the Special American envoy suggested to the Ruler that his Ministers might be interested in forming opposition parties, the Ministers vehemently rejected the idea. In their vociferous denial they claimed that ‘we in Aburiria know only One Truth, One Party, One Country, One leader, One God’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-580). All these ‘ones’ of course, refer to the Ruler. The fawning gets to a point that one is convinced it is all fiction; yet at that exact moment all surrounding factual evidence speaks of a reality that even (although it is difficult to imagine) surpasses fiction par excellence.

*Wizard of the Crow* also points to the influence that new technologies have on the African public sphere. With new and sophisticated methods of news production, there is a global awareness on the need for a more delicate handling of political issues. When in the past the West (America) encouraged the Ruler to engage in a national massacre in order to protect American interests (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-579) the special American envoy on a visit to the Ruler is uncomfortable with the idea of a twenty-first century ‘national massacre. To be televised. Live’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-579). Instead he reminds the Ruler that ‘we are in the post-cold war era, and our calculations are affected by the laws and needs of globalization’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-580). The first in this consideration is to create a democratic space for capital to move as its own logic demands (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-580). To be sure, after Aburiria democratized the high points scored by the Ministers of Defense and Finance during their state visit to America were signing of agreements for loans to
enable Aburiria to buy arms from the West and agreements with several oil companies to explore oil and natural gas and mining companies to prospect for gold, diamonds, and other precious metals (Wizard of the Crow:p-710). There is a lesson here: in the new global game of correct public appearance, behind the scene manoeuvres and manipulations are critical. As a matter of fact, the head of the Aburirian Military informs the special American envoy that the measure the military is going to use to contain the ‘unauthorized processions’ (Wizard of the Crow:p-579) is to ‘encircle it with armoured cars and the latest guns you (America) sold to us sometime ago – old, but against unarmed civilians, still lethal’ (Wizard of the Crow:p-579). Wizard of the Crow points to the need for a careful appraisal before embarking on any commitment so as not to endanger the public sphere. The role of the military and police in influencing the African public sphere is a subtext in Wizard of the Crow. The Ruler relied on the forces to maintain his position and uproot any dissenting voice. The hunt for the members of the Movement and the character Wizard of the Crow is assigned to the police. It is with the help of the army and police that the Ruler in the early days of the Cold War crushed the communist insurgency in Aburiria in order to show his support for the West. He eliminated ‘seven thousand and seven hundred citizens in just seven days’ (Wizard of the Crow:p-579). The Ruler, of course, frequently reminds ‘the nation that the only votes that mattered were those cast for him by the armed forces’ (Wizard of the Crow:p-234). Indeed his first doubt regarding his omnipotence came when ‘he issued an ultimatum followed by an order for the armored division to clear the
people’s Assembly’, but ‘instead of tanks running over the dissidents, there, on the television screen, were army boys and young civilians greeting one another with high fives for the entire world to see’ (Wizard of the Crow:p-643). In effect, the armed forces play an active role in expanding or contracting the public sphere in Africa. For instance, Mugabe’s tenacious hold on power is made possible by the loyalty and public support of Army, Police and Secret Service Chiefs who have vowed never to ‘salute’ or support the opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai who is believed to have secured more votes in the Presidential election that took place in March 2008. Perhaps the most disquieting thing about the character of the African public sphere that Wizard of the Crow highlights is that after so many years of independence not much has really changed. Violence and fear still dominate the political landscape. The globalized feature of the twenty-first century Africa is very much like its twentieth century pre- and post-independence era. In Ngugi’s Weep Not, child (1964) and A Grain of Wheat (1967) people are arrested under the pretext of breaking vague laws; some brutally killed by being labeled Mau Mau terrorists. In Devil on the Cross (1982) it is the military and police that create the enabling environment for opposition to be silenced. The protesters campaigning against the activities of some rich subversive elements are attacked; some killed, and many arrested by the law enforcement agents. Ian Roxborough notes that ‘the military is a central part of the state apparatus. To view it as somehow “outside” politics is frequently misleading’. (Roxborough, I., Theories of Underdevelopment 1979:p-125). There is also the difficulty of access caused by the mutation of the public
sphere to a secret sphere in the notion of African public sphere contained in Wizard of the Crow. The understanding of the publicness of the public sphere entails that its debates and discourses should be held in the open – in an area identifiable both metaphorically and physically if access is to be gained. *Wizard of the Crow* documents a political atmosphere where citizens are not free to create social space or engage in rational critical discourse. To voice even a minimal opinion against the Ruler is a virtual invitation to be fed to the ‘crocodiles of the Red river’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-452). The only way to sustain opposition is to go underground or into exile (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-234). This creates a problem for access. An interested person may find it difficult to locate the space of a public sphere. This entails that an insider-connection is necessary. For the character *Wizard of the Crow* to join the Movement he had to rely on Nyawira. And despite his intimacy with Nyawira he knew nothing about the Movement until he became a member. This mutation of the public sphere into the secret sphere entails that members have to be assessed for correctness before being inducted as a wrong recruit will invariably spell doom for the Movement. *Wizard of the Crow* also treats information as vital in reinvigorating the public sphere. Books provide good resource base for information and extension of knowledge production. As such the ideas and facts contained in books are critical for the advancement of a healthy public sphere. *Wizard of the Crow* chronicles a consistent attempt to distort the facts and history of the nation. A memorandum for a new national education programme require that ‘all institutions of learning, from primary schools to university colleges, would be required to teach only those ideas
that came from the supreme educator’ – the Ruler (Wizard of the Crow:p-565). Also ‘anybody who aspired to write and publish could do so only under the name of the Ruler’ (Wizard of the Crow:p-565). The professor of history who dared to write a book entitled People make History, then a Ruler makes it His Story (Wizard of the Crow:p-20) was imprisoned for ten years without trial. The realization of the Ruler that his loyal biographer ‘had no imagination to sugarcoat reality and make it more palatable’ was all it took to eliminate the loyal biographer. (Wizard of the Crow:p-709) In his place, the Ruler employed a white royalist from London to fabricate a biography of ‘the Ruler through the Ruler’s eyes, with material generously provided by the Ruler and his handlers’ (Wizard of the Crow:p-709). The effect of this convoluted history on the public space will hamper effective knowledge production in the continent, compromise political participation and diminish individual self-development, misdirect research and world views. Invariably, attention will be paid to the wrong issues or where the distortion is discovered fresh resources will be channelled to combat the errors. William A. Williams notes that ‘history never provides programmatic answers. But it does guide one to ask the right questions and that is crucial to developing the right answers’. (Williams, W.A., ‘Empire as a Way of Life, 1983:p-149). All this will entail huge resources that should have gone into other areas of development.

Closely related to the public sphere as an area where information and misinformation are gathered, Wizard of the Crow points to the need to interrogate
the language of the public sphere. For instance, the media is an important player in shaping the debate and discourse in the public sphere. It is important to understand the interest it represents. It is both possible for the media to serve as the agent of domination and manipulation or function as the source of enlightenment and understanding. In *Wizard of the Crow*, the media did not mention the activities of the Movement to frustrate the Marching to Heaven launching. Instead ‘the headlines of the following days were all about the special birthday gift and the impending arrival of the Global Bank mission’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-22). In Aburiria the Ruler is news, ‘his every moment – eating, shitting, sneezing, or blowing his nose – captured on camera’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-3). Indeed the ‘Radio is the dictator’s mouthpiece’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-609). Here language adopts a hegemonic stance and all contrary views are neutralized. An Aburirian Minister admits that ‘sometimes we do actually imprison people for asking questions, but only those that question established truths or that undermine the rule of law or how this country is governed’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-410). Short of platitudes, what are established truths, what is rule of law or how this country is governed, in a country where ‘the Ruler and the country are one and the same’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-161) and ‘there was only one party, and the Ruler was its leader ... The Ruler was the sole voice of the people, and they loved it so’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-24). In Douglas Kellner’s view, ‘language suffers its contradictions, it is situated within a conflict between truth and untruth, universality and particularity, communication and manipulation’. Depending on the interest language is made to serve it can critically promote or
undermine the activities of the public sphere. For instance a misinformed electorate is most unlikely to make a well-informed choice in elections. This point is particularly valid given the bent towards individualism and the emerging role of the media as the main force in political mobilization, socialization, communication and dissemination of information during an election period. There is a need, then, to appraise the language of the public sphere in order to ascertain the degree of its effectiveness in advancing the ideals of the African public sphere. *Wizard of the Crow* also highlights the impact of globalization on the African public sphere. A major feature of globalization is the emergence of a transnational public that can act as a global court where domestic events are closely monitored and scrutinized for possible sanction. Government can no longer afford to think exclusive thoughts or take isolated actions. The Ruler’s attempt to cover the murder of one of his Ministers by accusing him of plotting against his government and seeking political asylum was countered by the American Ambassador who told him that ‘intelligence services all over the world are telling us that your Minister is not seeking asylum anywhere’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-641). In fact, most of the happenings in Aburiria become known to the global sight at times even before the Ruler gets to know of them. The Ruler on a visit to America first heard of the resurfacing of queues and women retaliatory action towards men from the representatives of the Global Bank (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-499). The point is that such a free access zone while placing a certain restraint on public condemnable acts also prompts international profile comparison. A continent that aims at a favorable public image, an essential element
for continental progress, should be cautious of the goings-on in its public space. The caution though should be less for prudence and more for genuine commitment towards citizens’ welfare. For instance, the Marching to Heaven project was purely aimed at egocentric achievement. The crowning benefits (?) are to achieve what the architects of the Tower of Babel failed to achieve, ‘the only other human attempt to reach Heaven’s gate’ (Wizard of the Crow:p-248); to present the ‘one and only super wonder in the world’ (Wizard of the Crow:p-248); and finally, to practically establish the Ruler as the other face of God. During the dedication of the project, the Minister of Foreign Affairs announced that ‘the Aburirian masses are ready to forgo clothes, houses, education, medicine, and even food in order to meet any and every condition the Bank (Global) may impose on the funds it releases for Marching to Heaven’ (Wizard of the Crow:p-248). He easily swears by ‘the children of the children of the children of the children of our children to the end of the world ... that we shall pay back every cent of the principal along with interest on interests ad infinitum’ (Wizard of the Crow:p-248). The persistent protest of the Movement against the project did not push the government to reassess its position. Instead any one associated with the Movement is declared an enemy of the state and wanted dead or alive. It was only the Global Bank’s refusal to bank roll the project because of deficit economic benefits that brought it to an end. It is difficult to understand this mind set that is completely at variance with the interest of its people and can only be checked by outside intervention. More importantly, the critical issues that should have been considered in the conception of the project were the only ones that were
left out. To begin with, the queuing in Aburiria is as a result of mass unemployment and the large gathering at the dedication of Marching to Heaven is because most of the people ‘thought that the Global Bank was on a mission of doling out dollars directly’ (Wizard of the Crow:p-248). The implication is clear: there is mass poverty. Whether Marx is completely right or not, his articulation of the importance of the economic in determining all other aspects of life is critical in understanding modern life, the relation between nations and power statements in world politics. A continent that understands this cannot engage in economically porous ventures. And if that continent is an economically disadvantaged continent in world affairs, then, the consequences of such an act assumes multiple dimensions – political, social, technological, defense, and even the right to speak and be taken seriously is either denied or granted in fragments. It is less wonder that the Ruler fails to secure audience with the American president during his visit to America and has to make do with attending ‘prayer breakfast’ in which ‘he was only one among thousands who had paid thousands of dollars a plate’ (Wizard of the Crow:p-484), the purpose of which is ‘to raise money for the American president’s charities’ (Wizard of the Crow:p-484). Clearly, in an era where technology strongly defines international relations, for a technologically disadvantaged country to seek funds for a white elephant project is the height of political misadventure. Again, there are no calculations on the effect of such project on the environment: what will be the degree of risk vis-à-vis the advantage? Will it contribute to global warming? What measures can be put in place to contain the potential consequences of global
warming – rising sea levels, desertification, spread of disease (like malaria), poor harvests (especially in Africa), and changing climate patterns? Will it pass the eco-efficiency test?

*Wizard of the Crow* also points to some silent zones – frozen thoughts in the mind that nonetheless define the activities of the public sphere. The best representative of this is the ‘if’ syndrome in which the afflicted person loses all power of speech except the occasional barking of the word ‘if’. The character *Wizard of the Crow* diagnosed this as ‘a severe case of white-ache’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-180); a code for power which all the sufferers agreed with. This acute yearning to be white freezes the thoughts of the afflicted person and renders the individual incapable of any productive action, while at the same time directing a sphere of activities – discussions, decisions – around the sufferer. And depending on who is afflicted, the fate of a nation can hang in the balance. When the Ruler was struck by the malady of words, the purpose for which he and some of his cabinet members went to America was suspended and his people literally ‘lost count of the days. Perhaps weeks’ (*Wizard of the Crow*:p-487) in their search for a cure. Most frustrating is the fact that by reverting to silence the sufferer disconnects the link between the private and public sphere and also withdraws from meaningful cooperation with other human beings. *Wizard of the Crow* uses the ‘if’ syndrome to draw attention to the need to intensify the agenda of decolonizing the African mind. A robust public sphere cannot be cultivated by people dominated by internal insecurities. Claude
Ake observed that ‘the lack of self-confidence has been obvious in the behaviour of many African leaders’. (Ake, C. *Democracy and Development in Africa*, Ibadan: Spectrum1996:p-16) Typical examples noted by Ake were Idi Amin longing for white aides; Emperor Jean Badel Bokassa longing for long-forgotten and better-forgotten French monarchs; and the decision of some African governments to disallow the speaking of African languages and the wearing of African traditional clothes in parliament. Ake renounces such states of mind and insists that ‘development requires changes on a revolutionary scale; it is in every sense a heroic enterprise calling for consummate confidence’. For Nengwekhulu (Nengwekhulu, R., ‘The Meaning of Black Consciousness in the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa’1981:p-200) ‘one should never assume that it is easy to eradicate psychological attitudes which took the oppressor centuries to cultivate’.

*Wizard of the Crow* champions an equitable gender public sphere. The critical role women can play in advancing democratic space is given adequate attention. The chairperson of the Movement is a woman, Nyawira. Under her able leadership the Movement expanded democratic sites by providing spaces for people to debate and counter most of the corrupt policies of the government. Their focus is on the politics of change. They achieve this by seeking ways to mobilize the under-represented majorities. For instance a subset of the Movement, the People’s court, took up the case of Vinjinia, the ever battered wife of Tajirika, the chairman of Marching to Heaven. It is after this encounter that Tajirika’s relationship with his wife moved
from that of master and servant to one of mutual acceptance, respect, sharing, communication and tolerance. This way the equitable stance in the private sphere is carried into the public sphere to reflect a new balance in power relations that exceeds granting women the right to vote. Indeed, *Wizard of the Crow* offers an important contribution in the poll of theories that aim at providing new interpretative spaces in the effort to appreciate the new developments which are transforming our world.