

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN NGUGI WA THIONGO'S "A GRAIN OF WHEAT"

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ABSTRACT

All over the world women have to go through various forms of difficulties. Since they are weak everywhere they are exploited. But when it comes to a Third World there their suffering is more than anywhere else. For in such situation they are double victims. Firstly they are victims of the colonization and then they are victims of their culture. Thus they are doubly victimized. They have to suffer the after-effects of colonialism and the patriarchal mentality of their culture. Ngugi Wa Thiongo in his A Grain of Wheat presents the problems of African women. All the female characters presented in the novel have to go through various forms of suppression. Even if they perform certain marvelous deeds since they are women at the end they are neglected from the mainstream of the society. Often their ideas and opinions are suppressed. This research attempts to present a picture of African women especially in the context of Kenya

KEYWORDS: *Third World Women, Postfeminism, Feminist Post-structuralism, Lesbian Feminism*

INTRODUCTION

Feminist writers from the very beginning have tried to challenge the basis and characteristics of epistemologies because in it truth means reality interpreted from a male perspective. In the 1980s and 1990s, the discussions on the issues and form of feminist epistemology have taken a number of different directions. The view of the essential female experience has been criticized from within feminism by different types such as women of color, lesbian feminists and Third World women. Halberg states that postmodernism challenges feminist thinking because it questions the very idea of a foundation for knowledge. He observes that the concept of truth is always plural and situated, and therefore the very foundation of epistemology has to be questioned. Both postmodernism and post structuralism have assisted feminism's attempts to take this issue forward ahead through the concepts of deconstruction and difference. This article is an attempt to read Ngugi Wa Thiongo's A Grain of Wheat in the light of postcolonial feminist perspective.

The issues of subjectivity and experience within feminist theory have been deconstructed by post-structuralism and post-modernism. Feminist post-structuralism challenges feminism's usual tendency to view both subjectivity and women's experience as unitary, uniform, and marked by a unified discourse. Recent critical analysis of feminist epistemology has recognized and admitted that women's experience all over the world is not unitary and that epistemologically different-groups of women such as black women, working-class women, Third World women and so forth have different group specific knowledge, which requires that we propose different interest groups. Feminist post-structuralism, establishes experience as contradictory and identity as plural. From post feminism emerges postcolonial feminism. Postfeminism also challenges the

dominant assumptions held by second wave feminist epistemologies, that patriarchal and imperialist oppression is universally experienced oppression. Postfeminism indicates the joining of feminism with postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism and it challenges the modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks.

It refers to the fact that women are twice colonized by colonialist representations and by patriarchal representation. This form of colonization affects women both from the colonized and colonizing cultures in various ways. Black women writers are not limited to issues defined by their femaleness, they attempt to tackle questions raised by their humanity. Often white feminists compare the situation of white women with that of Ogunyemi in her article *Womanism: The dynamics of the contemporary black female novel in English* points out; “slaves,” “colonials,” “black minority,” “serfs in a feudal system,” the “Dark Continent” (68). Postcolonial feminists recognize the necessity of constructing an oppositional thought in order to empower the oppressed. African female writers remark that African feminism is a movement that seeks the liberation of Africa from external powers. African feminism searches for justice not only for African women but for African people. It is an inclusive movement which integrates the whole African people into the construction of the African continent. It takes into account the needs and goals that arise from the particular realities of women’s lives in African societies and the necessity of the reconstruction of Africa.

A Nigerian poet, critic, novelist and activist Molara Ogundipe-Leslie describes African feminists concerns. She comments that African women are carrying six mountains on their back. It represents the situations that contribute to the African woman’s subjugation: The first is oppression from outside which is the after effect of colonialism and neo-colonialism, the second is from the traditional structures of society that is a relic of the past. From this traditional past comes the notion that man has the power to control the woman’s body. Due to this control practices like genital mutilation were imposed on women. The third one is her backwardness due to colonialism and neo-colonialism and it comes through poverty and ignorance. The fourth is various kinds of exploitation from men. Her race is stated as the fifth mountain because it is an important issue for African people that they have to fight against a racist ideology that is impregnated in the New World order. And the sixth is herself, for it is very important to her to get rid of these to overcome the oppression. There are some male African feminists who contribute to the struggle for the liberation of African women. Azodo in his article *Issues in African feminism: a syllabus*; observes “These include Amilcar Cabral, Cheick Oumar Sissoko, Ousmane Sembene, Chimalum Nwankwo, and Ngugiwa Thiong’o” (202). Patriarchy has been defined as a social system in which men wield all the powers and use it only to their own advantage. In Africa, one of the functions bestowed on the men by the system of patriarchy was the headship of the family. The matriarchal zone of function, on the other hand, restricted women to the kitchen, and to the bringing up of children. These socially ascribed functions prevented women’s participation in public life since they were to be seen and not heard.

In Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s ‘A Grain of Wheat’ Mumbi, the central female character of the novel. She is also one of the most beautiful women in the village. At the very beginning of the novel, it is said about her “Mumbi had learnt to school her desires, to accept what life and fate gave her” (29). In her life, she has gone through many hardships. During the conversation with her husband Gikonoyo, he neglects her questions and keeps mum to her inquires. Then she says to him “Don’t forget that Kihika and I come from the same womb” (29) it’s to elicit certain answers concerning the arrival of Mugo, their village

hero, to participate in the independence celebration. To Gikonyo, later in this conversation, Mumbi says, "I had forgotten that I am a nobody" (29). Her answer reflects her present position in the family. One day their village hero Mugo comes to meet Gikonyo at his house, and then Mumbi is alone at home. She welcomes him and they start the conversation. She says that in life she always wants to be bold and courageous:

I dreamt of sacrifice to save many people. And although sometimes I feared, I wanted those days to come. Even when I got married, the dream did not die. I longed to make my husband happy, yes, but I also prepared myself to stand by him when the time came. I could carry his sheath and as fast as he shot into the enemy, I would feed him with arrows. If danger came and he fell, he would fall into my arms and I would bring him home safely to myself. (132)

But in fact, she is helpless in the actual situation. When soldiers come, they take him away and at that time she is helpless and when he returns from the detention camp, she is unable to make him happy. Power makes the human being the savior. It is possessed by men. It becomes very clear in the case of Gikonyo's friend Karanja. He is a scheming opportunist for at the time of emergency he joins the colonialists and Berndt in his article *Ngugi wa Thiongo's Gender, and the Ethics of Postcolonial Reading* notices; "becomes a home guard, not for ideological, political or material reasons, but because he wishes to win Mumbi for himself" (101). His very purpose of joining that job is to get the woman that he loves, he doesn't regard her opinions and later he exploits his position to seduce Mumbi. The reader knows that Jabbi in his article *Conrad's Influence on Betrayal in A Grain of Wheat* states; "her single affair with Karanja was no adultery, after all, since he had exploited his position as chief and her dazed anxiety over her husband's too suddenly imminent return from so many years of detention" (63). This situation puts her in a particular situation and then she succumbs herself to Karanja. This affair that she has with Karanja is not intentional; it is the result of his exploitation of the situation. Her matrimonial devotion is unquestionable

Back from the detention camp, Gikonyo reaches home and finds a child at home obviously which is not his own. He is shocked to see both, and disregards them and later he comes to know that it's of his friend Karanja's. A true marriage demands that a husband and wife shall share not only their strengths, but also their fears and inadequacies. Gikonyo is not interested in knowing the circumstance which has led to this situation. Thereafter, he maintains a passive indifference to them. Even if Mumbi is not responsible for this she suffers silently. In the colonial period there occurred widespread violation and degradation of African women. Alexander and Mohanty in their book *Feminist genealogies, colonial legacies, democratic futures* mentions; "Where there was resistance, rape and sexual abuse were inflicted on women and the same treatment was meted out to the wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters of men who were suspected of being members of the resistance movements simply to humiliate them" (51). In the novel we find Karanja making advances towards Mumbi. He exploits his position during the entire period. He has power to save, to imprison or to kill. He utilizes his power in the way he wishes. While Kenya was at the brink of its independence, "Women offered their naked bodies to him; even some of the most respectable came to him by night" (205). These women offered themselves to Karanja out of their helplessness because their men were in detention and they had no other way to maintain their life without pleasing the officials.

Her society always privileges the status and justifies the actions of men. When the conflict over the child intensifies at home between Mumbi and Gikonyo, Once again Jabbi points out; "he calls her "a whore," an unfair charge which wounds

her self-pride so much that she decides to leave Gikonyo's house for good and live on her own" (205-06). In this context she is unable to tell even to her parents why she left home, for a parent does not encourage a daughter to disobey her man. Society has privileged the deeds of men over women. It is evident from the words of Wambui she says, "The women of today surprise me. They cannot take a slap, soft as a feather, or the slightest breath, from a man. In our time, a woman could take blow and blow from her husband without a thought of running back to her parents" (176). At the time of struggle, the black men in Nyeri, Mwangi and Matemo are taken to Manyani, the most famous and largest concentration camp in the country. At this time, the people who live there go through a tough time, Mumbi narrates the terrible experience to Mugo, "We were prisoners in the village, and the soldiers had built their camps all rounds to prevent any escape. We went without food. The cry of children was terrible to hear. The new DO did not mind the cries. He even permitted soldiers to pick women and carry them to their tents" (139). Isaacman in his article Peasants and rural social protest in Africa remarks; Feminist scholars "argue that peasant women were important agents of change as well as victims of oppression" (44). In this novel, there is the mention of an old woman she, lives at the end of the Main Street. Nobody knows her age: she has always been there, a familiar part of the old and the new village. She lives with her only son Gitogo who is deaf and dumb. He supports his mother by doing physical labour. During the early stages of emergency, he is shot dead by soldiers and they say "Another Mau Mau terrorist had been shot dead" (5). After the death of her only son, nobody is there to look after her. She is isolated, neglected, forgotten and disconsolate and since the death of her son she has been avoiding the company of the rest of the people. She is absolutely alienated from the community.

The independent state in Kenya emerged from a nationalist movement that involved the participation of women in heroic roles. Most of these women led struggles and protested against colonial domination and colonial oppression. During the time of fight for Uhuru (independence) these heroic women fought against colonialism and effectively participated in the political discussions leading to independence. Through the character Wambui, women's vital role as Mau Mau arms couriers is mentioned. Wambui was not very old, during the emergency; she carried secrets from the villages to the forest and back to the villages and towns. Once she carried a pistol tied to her thighs near the groin. She was dressed in long, wide and heavy clothes. She was taking the gun to Naivasha. Then, she was caught in one of those sporadic military and police operations which plagued the country. When her turn came to be searched her tooth started aching; she, moaned saliva ran out of the corners of her mouth and flowed down her chin. The Gikuyu police-man went on searching. He started from her chest, searched under her armpits, gradually working his way down towards the vital spot. Then suddenly Wambui reacted.

The children of these days,' she began. 'Have you lost all shame? Just because the white man tells you so, you would actually touch your own mother's. . . the woman who gave you birth? All right, I'll lift the cloths and you can have a look at your mother, it is so aged, and see what gain it'll bring you for the rest of your life.' She actually made as if to lift her clothes and expose her nakedness. The man involuntarily turned his eyes away. (19-20)

Here we see that Wambui's avoidance of colonial strategies of detection is conducted through an appeal to her revered position as a mother within traditional society. Once again Berndt observes; "Although her subterfuge is unavoidably predicted upon patriarchal ideologies and a uterine social organization, she recasts gender oppression by inhabiting it as a strategic performance, evacuating it of its authoritative claims upon her in the name of revolution" (99). Dr. Lynd, a plant

pathologist at Githima forestry research station, has a shocking experience from Africans at the time of emergency. She is being raped by two natives and this heinous crime her house boy assists the two men and later this boy joins the freedom fighters. This physical violence against her cannot be simply regarded as an act of lust. This act ultimately displays the moral imbalance that may result from a sustained life of violence. When it is recollected through Koinandu's consciousness it is a futile rebellion against European domination. In his own words, he is Maughan in his article "Mau Mau" and Violence in Ngugi's Novels notices "Doing to you what you did to us - to black people" (17). Here, the mentality is important, it does not matter whether woman is African or white, but 'women' suffer during the colonial period.

In Kenya the power difference between men and women in many Kikuyu marriages makes women more susceptible to victimization through domestic violence. In African culture like in hunter-gatherer cultures, Kikuyu men generally are in charge of major tasks like generating income and providing food for the family and these responsibilities provide men with greater control of resources and power in decision making. In such a situation women have to obey and respect their husbands, consult their husbands before taking decisions and respond promptly to his demands. Ngugi consistently represents the position of women in the traditional economy as one of oppressive subordination to male power. For example, in the case of Gikonyo's mother, Wangari, her husband Waruhiu is so rich so "He got new brides and complained that the thighs of the first wife did not yield warmth any more. He beat her, hoping that this would drive her away" (71). She leaves the household, to make a new life for herself and her child.

In the case of Karanja's mother Wairimu "She was the third of the four wives that Karanja's father had acquired by paying so much bride price in goats and cattle. He acquired them, yes, and then left them to their own resources" (220). He visited each woman in turn, sprung a child in her and then retired to his hut. She is bringing up Karanja with the hope that he would take care of her in her old age, but the son displays the qualities that are not expected from a hardworking son. In Kenya women are not encouraged in politics. There the masculine construction of state treats women as if they are outside the political realm. Kamau in his book *Women and political leadership in Kenya* states; "The only opportunity they provide women is the opportunity for co-operation into a male-centric system" (10). The marginality of women in political leadership and their continued avoidance in political decision making is the product of the history of the patriarchal state in Kenya.

It is documented that women, who were completely excluded from the colonial administrative and political structures, actively participated in the nationalist movements as fighters and party activists. And on many occasions they took independent action to protect their own interests as women. Though it's so, they all have to sacrifice their life for a greater cause. Njeri Kihika's lover is an example of this. Nelson in his article *Representations of Men and Women, City and Town in Kenyan Novels of the 1970s and 1980s* mentions; "She reveals a great strength and determination of a true kikuyu woman when she makes a vow to devote herself to Kihika when he leaves home to become a guerrilla fighter in the forest" (56). Whenever fight occurred at Kinenie, she always fought with men. A cat, men called her, because few could impose their physical will on her. We find her running away to the forest to fight along with Kihika. Even if she loves Kihika she never gets an opportunity to live peacefully with Kihika. Soon after Kihika's death she is shot dead in battle. Once again Kamu points out; After attaining freedom the leadership of the country "was largely male and there were no females in the first Cabinet that Kenyatta cobbled together. Indeed, key figures in the Kenyatta government stated their belief that women could

never make good leaders” (12).

African patriarchy has lowered the status of African women by assigning the position of the mythological role of mother, even the women who have participated and played a vital role in the revolutions were cut out of the political arena or from full national participation after independence. Despite the promises of national freedom, women were excluded from full national participation on an equal footing with men. When Karanja, Kihika and Gitongo once reach Gikonyo’s workshop Gkonoyo’s mother Wangari is addressed by Karanja as “Mother of men, we have come. Make us tea” (79). This tribute to Wangari reinforces Once again Nicholls remarks; “Gikuyu male privilege by revering Gikuyu women’s reproductive and child-rearing capacities” (98). Women are constituted as heroines while they perform their duties as gender oppressed entities. This framing of anti - colonial resistance is extended to other characters in the novel. When we are introduced to Wambui, we are told that as a young woman she criticized the reticence of male workers to go on strike at a shoe factory. She believed in the power of women to influence events. At the workers strike in 1950 she played a vital role. It was meant to paralyse the country and make it very difficult for the white man to govern. A few men were reluctant to take part in this strike.

The Party convened a general meeting at Rung’ei. At the height of the proceedings, Wambui suddenly broke through the crowd and led a group of women to the platform. She grabbed the microphone from the speakers. People were interested. Was there any circumcised man who felt water in the stomach at the sight of a white man? Women, she said, had brought their Mithuru and Miengu to the platform. Let therefore such men, she jeered, come forward, wear the women’s skirts and aprons and give up their trousers to the women. Men sat rigidly in their seats and tried to laugh with the crowd to hide the inner discomfort. The next day all men stayed away from work. (175)

This passage is based on the idea of male potency upon one’s circumcised status. At first, reading her actions and words in this passage apparently put her in a position where we feel that she is raising her voice against the cultural codes that silence Gikuyu women’s dissenting political voices. Paradoxically, her voice adds strength for the Gikuyu patriarchy by the gender framing of her dissent. Once again Nicholls points out; The men strike, not because they have been persuaded of the necessity of strike action, but because they do not wish to be ‘upstaged’ by a woman. Wambui holds them accountable as members of a dominant and privileged gender, but her appeals to the potency or bravery of men also serve to reinforce that dominance and privilege. (96)

Colonization and resistance are couched in sexualized description. The climatic description of Uhuru celebrations too follows this pattern. The description of the community’s tense moments of anticipation in the moments leading up to Independence renders visible a patriarchal subtext:

As usual, on such occasions, some young men walked in gangs, carrying torches, lurked and whispered in dark corners and the fringes, really looking for love-mates among the crowd. Mothers warned their daughters to take care not to be raped in the dark. The girls danced in the middle, thrusting out their buttocks provokingly, knowing that the men in corners watched them. 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. (199)

An analysis of the novel reveals that even the homestead is the site of an ideological struggle between male and female subjects who are socially constructed and hierarchically organized. In this novel by framing Gikonyo and Mumbi's relationship in dialogue, Ngugi renders this ideological struggle transparent. One day when Gikonyo comes back home in the evening Mumbi understands that he is in a bad mood. He is not speaking to her, it is not unusual. When she gives food he only glances at it then continued staring at the wall. This too is not unusual then she asks him what is it that troubles him? He answers "Since when did I start discussing my affairs with you?"(16). Later in this conversation, when she says that Mugo will not take part in the independence ceremony, he shouts at her as if she is responsible for his actions. Then he starts to taunt her, later he pulls at the boy, he falls down and bursts into tears. Then she asks him "What sort of man do you call yourself? Have you no manly courage to touch me? Why do you turn a coward's anger on a child, a little child. . .?" She seethed like a river that has broken a dam. Words tossed out; they came in floods, filling her mouth so that she could hardly articulate them" (163).

There is a description concerning the mythical overthrow of matriarchy in the novel. In the prehistorical time women ruled the land of the Agikuyu. At that time men had no property, they were only there to serve the whims and needs of the women. Those were very tough time for men.

So they waited for women to go to war, they plotted a revolt, taking an oath of secrecy to keep them bound each to each in the common pursuit of freedom. They would sleep with all women at once, for didn't they know the heroines would return hungry for love and relaxation? Fate did the rest; women were pregnant; the takeover met with little resistance. (10-11)

The 'birth of a new Kenya' heralded at the conclusion of this novel also at one level, works to silence femininity. In the novel with the indication of Mumbi's imminent pregnancy at the end, the priority for women becomes less promising. By the end of the novel Mumbi is pregnant. When we connect her pregnancy with the above mentioned Gikuyu myths of origin of patriarchy, it is likely that her reproductive functions will be used to exclude her from political agency. As a mother, she will represent the nation, but her pregnancy will exclude her from power. At the end Mumbi is found situated within the historical tradition and future aspiration, and she is devoid of political agency in the present moment. In other words, we conclude that Mumbi is both symbolically enhanced and politically incapacitated at the novel's conclusion. She shares the fate of a postcolonial African.

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