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Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the Writing of Political Freedom

Abstract

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's rewriting of short stories in *Secret Lives* informs plotlines in *A Grain of Wheat*. I argue that while *A Grain of Wheat* attempts to model decolonial narrative sovereignty following Kenyan Independence, it unconsciously enters into identificatory dependency. I conclude that Ngũgĩ's literary career follows a trajectory to that seeks to undo this creative bind.

Keywords: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Kenyan Independence, *A Grain of Wheat*, *Secret Lives*

We tend in African Studies to think of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's emblematic progressive political commitment, not least in his championing of African language literatures and the necessity of polycentric translation. It is less certain that this commitment has a settled status in his fiction, which exhibits aesthetic variations. We reflect upon the early historical realism of *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965), the complex interiority of *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), the epic history of *Petals of Blood* (1977), the Africanization of aesthetic form and language choice in *Devil on the Cross* (1987) and the mirthful political caricature of *Matigari* (1990) and *Wizard of the Crow* (2006).

These landmark texts speak to Ngũgĩ's creative range, but we should not overlook the political implications of rewriting and changes in narrative design. I analyse Ngũgĩ's transformation of two short stories in *Secret Lives* into episodes in his most famous novel, *A Grain of Wheat*. Ngũgĩ tells us that he originally wrote "The Return" and "Goodbye Africa" between 1960 and

1963 (1975: unpaginated preface).¹ As fictional accounts of the Mau Mau war, the stories likely pre-date both formal Independence (12 December 1963) and the publication of *A Grain of Wheat* (1967). As Ngũgĩ scholars have remarked, elements of *A Grain of Wheat* are present in these stories in early form. Clifford B. Robson states that “Goodbye Africa” exhibits the “complex and sympathetic approach that marks [Ngũgĩ’s] vision in *A Grain of Wheat*” (1979: 81), and Brendon Nicholls observes that “The Return” shares “thematic and ideological affinities” with *A Grain of Wheat* (2010: 76). Simon Gikandi calls both stories “working prototypes of *A Grain of Wheat*” (2000: 103). I argue that while *A Grain of Wheat* attempts to model decolonial narrative sovereignty following Kenyan Independence, it unconsciously enters into identificatory dependency. I conclude that Ngũgĩ’s literary career follows a trajectory to that seeks to undo this creative bind.

Ngũgĩ’s rewriting involved acts of creative choice. In any creative choice, a purposeful consciousness works within the shaping force of the political. Purposeful consciousness, I would add, is allowed by the newness of the moment in which it finds itself. Put another way, the transformation of unlinked stories into linked episodes in a novel suggests a creative mind taking the measure of its later moment in order to rearrange fictional ingredients first inspired by an earlier moment. Since we are thinking here of the watershed of formal Kenyan Independence between short stories and novel, I argue that we may trace how Ngũgĩ’s changes in narrative design work with (and against) the movements of “formal” political emancipation.

¹ Simon Gikandi dates “The Return” to 1962 and “Goodbye Africa” to 1964 (2000: 103).

The influence of the short stories on the novel is undeniable. In “The Return,” Kamau returns to his village after detention. Similarly, in *A Grain of Wheat*, Gikonyo returns to Thabai after detention. Compare the two passages:

“A path branched to the left. He [Kamau] hesitated and then made up his mind. [. . .] In the street, naked and half-naked children were playing, throwing dust at one another.” (1975: 49, 53)

“As Gikonyo left the road and took a path into the fields, he could still hear the echo of his steps on the cement pavement four years back. The steps had followed him all through the pipe-line, for in spite of the confession, Gikonyo was not released immediately. [. . .] In the streets, naked and half-naked children were played throwing dust at one another. Some of the dust entered Gikonyo’s eyes and throat [. . .]”

(1967: 98)

While the sentence about the children’s play is repeated almost verbatim, the layering of character and consciousness differs across the two narrative scenes. The dust entering Gikonyo’s body is an everyday correlative for his previous physical suffering (in detention) and his ongoing mental suffering (through trauma, through guilt). An earlier time intrudes upon a later one. Gikonyo is haunted by past actions in a way that Kamau is not. Gikonyo is followed by the sound of his own prior steps toward the screening room in the detention camp, where he has confessed to taking the oath of loyalty to Mau Mau. Gikonyo, in other words, is accompanied by a dissociated self when he returns home. He has been reduced from his own

previous entirety to his partial residual effect; the sound of betraying steps which continue to walk out of time with, and far removed from, the place of their erstwhile happening.

Kamau, on the other hand, has betrayed no one. When Kamau discovers that his wife, Muthoni, has borne a child by his age-mate, Karanja, he comes to a realization: “Why [he reckons] should she have waited for me? Why should all the changes have waited for my return?” (1975: 54). In short, Kamau accommodates himself to the reality of the historical change that his community has fought for, and the personal setbacks and sacrifice that have ensued. But Kamau’s accommodation to change must take place in the absence of Muthoni, who has abandoned her home for Karanja.

By contrast, Gikonyo’s accommodation of historical change takes place in the continuing presence of Mumbi, his wife. Mumbi has also had a child (by Karanja) during Gikonyo’s detention. In other words, Ngũgĩ has accommodated the abiding narrative presence of women’s stories of the Mau Mau war by the time he rewrites “The Return” into this narrative strand of *A Grain of Wheat*. It is no longer simply the case that the male hero Kamau has to confront unexpected loss upon his return. Instead, the male protagonist Gikonyo has to integrate within his “thread of life” (1967: 98) the divergent narrative of his wife’s experiences at home.

In order to better understand Ngũgĩ’s creative accommodation of women’s experiences of war within the novel, we need to think about what is already present in “The Return” that has yet to materialize in *A Grain of Wheat*. The first family-member who Kamau encounters at home is his aged father, “huddled up on a three-legged stool” (1975: 52). In *A Grain of Wheat*, father and stool are absent. The novel’s resolution hinges upon the stool’s future making so that Gikonyo

can present this long-delayed “wedding gift to Mumbi” (1967: 211). In the detention camp, Gikonyo has imagined the stool’s carvings containing worn male figures. Convalescing in hospital at the end of the novel, his vision changes to include a man, a woman and a child. The vision has been recontextualized by a family scene. But in the final sentence of the novel, Gikonyo resolves to “change the woman’s figure. I shall carve a woman big – big with child” (1967: 213).

Gikonyo’s creative resolution remakes the preceding short story in two ways. First, the father and his seat of authority have been vacated from the scene of story. Second, even as Gikonyo’s carving remakes worn male figures in detention and anticipates his unborn “child by Mumbi” (1967:212), it also unconsciously makes peace with her past pregnancy by Karanja. The reworking of the father and stool of “The Return” as future possibilities that will be materialized by Gikonyo accommodates Mumbi’s story and her stake in narrative outcomes. A stake in narrative outcomes is structurally unavailable to Muthoni in “The Return,” because she has already vacated the scene.

The short story “Goodbye Africa,” in turn, provides the embryonic plotlines for John and Marjorie Thompson, Dr van Dyke, Mugo, and Dr Lynd and Lieutenant Koinandu in *A Grain of Wheat*. An unnamed Senior District Officer and his wife reflect on their former servant and Mau Mau fighter, who is variously “that man – our shamba boy” (1975 75). His transformation – from low-paid worker, to the wife’s lover, to insurgent – introduces crisis into the District Officer’s recollections. Like his successor, John Thompson, the District Officer keeps notebooks of his reflections on “Africa.” Unlike Thompson, portions of his interior monologue are addressed as a letter to his wife. In an echo of the shamba servant leaving the District Officer’s employment to join Mau Mau, Lieutenant Koinandu in *A Grain of Wheat* leaves Dr Lynd’s employment.

Additionally, the District Officer in “Goodbye Africa” snaps at the former shamba servant’s defiance and orders his execution and disappearance, which foreshadows Thompson spitting in Mugo’s face when Mugo informs on Kihika. The District Officer’s wife has had an affair with the servant, unlike Marjorie Thompson, whose affair is with Dr van Dyke. The servant’s cross-racial affair with the District Officer’s wife in “Goodbye Africa” is replaced with Lieutenant Koinandu’s rape of his former employer, Dr Lynd, in the original 1967 version of *A Grain of Wheat*.

These echoing but proliferating plotlines in *A Grain of Wheat* disaggregate the story of “Goodbye Africa.” The three linked characters in the story (District Officer, wife, insurgent) spin out into six less-linked characters (John and Marjorie Thompson, Dr van Dyke, Mugo, Lieutenant Koinandu and Dr Lynd). A single plotline in the story disperses into several plotlines in the novel. For instance, Dr van Dyke and Lieutenant Koinandu experience nothing in common at the level of narrative encounter. Moreover, Marjorie’s affair with Dr van Dyke is intra-racial, while Lieutenant Koinandu’s rape of Dr Lynd is interracial. As versions of the interracial lovers in “Goodbye Africa,” they now have digressive trajectories in narrative.

The effect of Ngũgĩ’s disaggregation and dispersal of story is twofold. First, consensual love between Kenyan servant and British employer in the short story is no longer possible in the novel. Love has been problematically replaced by the political rape of a different character. Consent and wider negotiatory modes are repudiated. Second, the District Officer in the short story is still able to address his wife indirectly in his notebook about his impulsive violence against the Mau Mau fighter. By contrast, in *A Grain of Wheat*, John Thompson never confesses to Marjorie about his impulsive spitting at Mugo in detention, and nor does Marjorie ever disclose her extra-marital affair with Dr van Dyke. In sum, *A Grain of Wheat* converts interracial sexual love in “Goodbye Africa” into gender-political rupture. Koinandu’s anti-colonial struggle

includes unilateral gender violation. John and Marjorie Thompson exhibit greater communicative discord and settler colonial cohesion is even more internally fragmented than before. Unlike in “Goodbye Africa,” the motive cause of fragmented settler colonial cohesion is not strictly-speaking the Mau Mau insurgent.

A Grain of Wheat wants to think post-Independence sovereignty through telescoped political causation. But by linking black and white pasts in narrative intricacy, *A Grain of Wheat* models their complex social relationality. The colonized’s social relationality with the settler in narrative risks the unintended after-effect of complex identificatory dependencies after Uhuru.² Between “Goodbye Africa” and *A Grain of Wheat*, a curious substitution occurs. Compare the District Officer’s thoughts with Lieutenant Koinandu’s:

The man’s [worker’s] ghost would forever pursue him. Africa. (1979: 79)

Why then should [Dr Lynd’s] ghost shake him so? [. . .] The ghost had come to eat into his life; the cool Uhuru drink had turned insipid in his mouth. (1967: 185, 186)

In the short story, the settler is haunted by his deceased victim, the “shamba boy.” In *A Grain of Wheat*, the Mau Mau fighter is haunted by a living rape survivor, Dr Lynd. What difference does this substitution make? It dilutes Lieutenant Koinandu’s unilateral political acts (of sexual violation, of abandoning Dr Lynd’s employ to fight for Mau Mau) into post-Independence

² In this regard, David Maughan-Brown’s work is essential reading (1981, 1985).

melancholia. The District Officer's colonial melancholia³ in "Goodbye Africa" has become Lieutenant Koinandu's Mau Mau melancholia in *A Grain of Wheat*. Lieutenant Koinandu's incorporation of the District Officer's narrative sustains a melancholic object in common despite their political antagonisms.

Any idea of freedom relies upon the axioms of sovereign action and historical self-causation. Frantz Fanon asserts that decolonization "is the veritable creation of new men" (1961: 36) and that "the 'thing' which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself" (1961: 36-37). Ironically enough, even as *A Grain of Wheat* contemplates the fact of Independence, its narrative arrangements demonstrate that the fullest humanity promised by freedom is thwarted by residual colonial relationality and psychic causation.

Any idea of imaginative freedom, in turn, relies upon the linked possibilities of psychic sovereignty and narrative self-causation. We must look to Ngũgĩ's later fiction for these freedoms. They express themselves through ideal (literary) representatives –for instance, in *Karega and Akinyi* (1977), in *Wanja* (1977), in *Wariīnga* (1981). It is a measure of Ngũgĩ's political insight and writerly capaciousness that he embarked upon the project of a decolonized imagination before formal political Independence arrived, and that he strove across his writing career for its ultimate creative realization.

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³ Simon Gikandi attributes the short story's melancholia to Ngũgĩ's preoccupation with modernist aesthetics (2000: 104).

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