



**REVOLUTIONIST’S VIEW OF AFRICAN FICTION AS A PROTEST  
LITERATURE: NGUGI WA THIONG’O’S A GRAIN OF WHEAT**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Protest in African literature developed out of the misrule, marginalisation, exploitation, deprivation, forced labour, slavery, and subjugation perpetrated by inept, colonialist and neo-colonialist governments in Africa. In South Africa, it is a protest against apartheid; in East Africa, it is a protest against colonial domination of the land; and in West Africa, the protest is centred on the marginalisation and subjugation of the natives by the British colonialists. Aside from these, there is a general protest that spreads the entire continent against blacks’ inhumanity to fellow blacks at the corridor of power – the neocolonialist forces. Hence, there is the African struggle for decolonisation in African novels as evidenced in A Grain of Wheat. Therefore, this paper explores the elements that constitute protest in the novel. In its findings, it is discovered that characteristics such as environment, socio-political, religious and cultural situations prevalent in Africa are the factors that necessitated protest in the novel and African literature generally. This paper concludes that the protest in A Grain of Wheat is a struggle for decolonisation of an African Nation – Kenya and by extension the African continent. The paper recommends the sustenance of the commitment (which has made African fiction a protest literature) of African writers towards liberating African nations from the shackles of neo-colonialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

**KEYWORDS:** African Fiction, Protest, Colonialism, Neo-colonialism.



## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, it is pertinent to discuss African literature in reference to African fiction as a base. If the western conception of literature or the idea of most Euro-centric critics and scholars is anything to go by, then African literature is generally oral. The unavoidable influence of western ideas with the African base left the definition of African literature to be complex. It could be recalled that the Europeans misconceived Africans as people who had no culture, no identity, no education and, in fact, no literature.

Responding to the misconceptions about Africans, most African writers reacted sharply against these assertions. For instance, Chinua Achebe affirms the cultural heritage of Africa prior to the coming of the white man in his novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Joseph Conrad (1972), a colonial writer, for instance, saw the African in his *Heart of Darkness* as “a caricature and primitive, unable to think and read.” The blackman as a result lost his values and identity. It is this impression that the African writer tends to correct. Nnolim (2006) states that “it was lachrymal; it was a weeping literature, a literature of lamentation, following Africa’s unhappy experience with slavery and colonialism” (p.1).

Most of the first batch of written literature in Africa had the tone of protest resulting from “weeping,” with slavery, colonialism, lamentations of suffering and sorrows. These writers strive to redefine, reappraise and regain the lost identity through their literary works, hence the concept of protest literature. They contend that before the advent of the Europeans, Africa had existed with rich cultural activities. Some of these activities include masquerade dances, sacrifices to the gods, ceremonies, such as new yam festivals, marriages, chieftaincy coronations and so on. These cultural activities were in situ in Africa and form part of our literature.

In these occasions, songs, incantations, drama, and so on are rendered and performed, which are essentially oral and portend the essence of African literature. The African’s fiction has been useful in reaffirming the African’s confidence in his own ability to express himself and to put across to the world his point of view and that of the African society. There are groups of writers which gave rise to the need for a new poetic (protest) in African societies (Taiwo 1967, p.70). Similarly, Emenyonu (1979) justifies the African writer’s commitment when he says:

The African writer sees social change in part as change from cultural wholeness to fragmentation and disorientation of the individual, who can regain “wholeness” of self and proper orientation to behaviour as well as obtain the deserved rewards only through his maintenance of traditions or a return to the traditionally sanctioned behaviour (p.91).

*A Grain of Wheat* opens on the eve of Kenya’s independence and ends four days later. But very little in the novel actually happens during those four days; instead, the reader is taken back by numerous “witnesses” to a whole series of events in the past” (Palmer, 1972, p.25).

The title of the novel comes from (1 Corinthians 1, 15:36-38). It refers to the need for continual struggle, suffering, and even death in order to achieve freedom from all these areas. Ngugi in the novel concerns himself with the wickedness of the oppressors, and also attacks the weakness of the indigenous people themselves. The novel has about five centres of interest: Mugo, Gikonyo, Karanja, Mumbi and the whiteman, Thompson. Related to Ngugi’s *A Grain of Wheat* are other anthropological writers who are conscious of Europe-Africa contact and the disruptive effect of the western culture on African traditions as it affects the social life and



religious beliefs of Africans. This group is also aware of the influence of colonialism and or neocolonialism in Africa, that is, the imperialists. Members of this group include Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Peter Abrahams, Onuora Nzekwu, Gabriel Okara, Timothy Aluko, Niyi Osundare, Festus Iyayi, and so on. Literature is used as a weapon of social change and it transcends the narrow confines of cultural barriers.

The third group of African writers were quite satirical in their works. Prominent among this group are the Francophone writers whose approach to literature evolved the philosophy of negritude. Among them are Mugo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono, Leopold Senghor, Sembene Ousmane, Birogo Diop, David Diop, Camera Laye and others. The negritude philosophy has made a great impression on transatlantic Negroes and many French-speaking African writers draw their inspiration from it. The concept is irrevocably committed to the cause of African liberation, both political and cultural. In this context, it is judged not only in its intrinsic value but its contribution towards the restoration of the dignity of the African. In fact, African literature was used as one weapon against colonialism. As Satre (1965), cited in Bruce and Kolawole (1974), puts it:

It is unthinkable that a writer should not be politically committed: like morality, literature needs to be universal. So that the writer must put himself on the side of the majority, of the billion starving, if he wishes to be able to speak to all and be read by all. Failing that he is at the service of a privileged class and, like it, an exploiter (p.214).

Satre is saying that, living in a world which demands action, a writer is irrelevant should he devote himself to luxury; rather, if it is necessary to throw bombs in a bid to change society, he should throw as many bombs as possible to prove his dedication and obligation to such society. Again, the writer cannot excuse himself from the task or re-education and re-generation; hence, he should march right in front. Mphielele says that "literature is as important as education."

Little wonder, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in his protest novel, *Weep Not Child* thinks of education, especially of the woman as an essential tool to fight for liberation and freedom. It therefore follows that if one is educated literarily, he/she will face the challenge in the society frontally without any iota of doubt because it is when a person is educated literarily that he/she in turn becomes a good writer. Nwoga (1978) says this of the writer's intention to write in relation to his society that:

When the writer in his own society can no longer function as conscience, he must recognise that his choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of a chronicler and post-mortem surgeon.... The artist has always functioned in African society as the record of the mores and experience of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time. It is time for him to respond to this essence of himself (p.56).

From the exposition above, it is apt that writers should function as explorers, critics, and developers in their societies. Their works are the mirrors with which societies view both negative and positive events and activities prevalent in them. As satiric writers and protest writers, they attack the ills in the society and extol the virtues therein.

*A Grain of Wheat* puts together two related hallmarks of Kenyan history: the mau-mau struggle and a long awaited independence. It is a story of heroism and betrayal. The exploits of the young leader Kihika add to the spirit of the resistance, boosting the courage of many, including



the women of Thabai who indulged in building a new village in the absence of their men. Kihika's name is mentioned and discussed in anticipation of Uhuru. The novel is a protest and a catalyst to the liberation and freedom of an African state.

### **Elements of Protest in *A Grain of Wheat***

The concept of protest or commitment in literature is not peculiar to Africa but a dilemma of every intellectual who finds himself in a situation which demands practical solutions or physical confrontations. For instance, in Ireland, there is a protest writer like William Butler Yeats. In this perspective, Idowu (1992) says that, "world literary history, indeed, that of art and culture in their entirety, pulses with creative landmarks famed for being graphic commentaries on the social ferment of the artist's own time" (p.28). Alexandre Solzhenitsyn's monumental epic, *The Gulag Archipelago* is a protest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which expands on the theme of the ills of the world war. It explains the bestial ingenuity of the state in defunct communist soviet's prison camps; the thrust had been to expose societal ill, in passive hope that such exposure, somehow, would inspire for a change.

Our choice of instances outside Africa is neither exhaustive nor comprehensively representative of the Marxian protest tradition. It serves to illustrate the epoch's thematic thrust against the definition of western critics in trying to peculiarise and Africanise protest in literature. However, the Marxian idea, as a common denomination of the epoch nonetheless, is that it can be argued that the writers vary in degree of tenacity of their vision of ultimate freedom from class oppression. Protest literature seeks to precipitate change by rallying its audience to action, using theme and language as vehicles, its dominant objective being to torpedo or at least alter the status-quo by inciting the down-trodden who, for all times, are in the majority to revolt. Protest literature is inevitably, to varying degrees of an author's ideological commitment, proletarian inclination. The penchant of most authors is to induce and commit to struggle.

A prototype of this tradition in West Africa is Ngugi Wa Thiong'o whose work, *A Grain of Wheat*, is used in this paper. Protest is perhaps explicable on the early and latter writers' historical circumstance. The protest writers are the torchbearers of the then emergent African identity in social and political spheres of life. It seems only plausible that they were concerned with hewing out this identity in its sharpest features in their works, and then with intellectual indulgence of intra-cultural insurrection. This, at least, would explain Ngugi's preoccupation with the mau-mau uprising against the British strong-hold in Kenya in *Weep Not Child*, *The Rivers Between*, and the uhuru political movement for independence in *A Grain of Wheat*; Chinua Achebe's anticolonial passion in *Things Fall Apart*; Peter Abrahams' anti-apartheid rage in *Mine Boy*, *Tell Freedom* and Athol Fugard's in *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*. When, however, the dream of racial prosperity fostered on political independence became stillborn in the miasma of the visionless self-leadership, it is to be expected that these pioneer writers would re-orientate their art to the exigency of upsetting the treacherous social political equation.

There are criticisms against protest and negritude concepts in literature. Such critics claim that African writers should be influenced mostly by the uniqueness of their own experience, their desire to be integrated with their environment and propagate their culture rather than by any philosophy originating elsewhere. Notable among the critics is Professor Wole Soyinka who rather advocates the protest by shouting and crying about: "inhumanity, colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism be stopped." He propounded the tigritudiste approach of



marching force to force as a means of solving the problem. It is clear that in *A Grain of Wheat*, there were non-conformists to the independence movement in Kenya. These people are the natives who sit on the fence in matters that affect the welfare of the black race. The supports of Uhuru movement in Kenya suffered many untold hardships in the quest for freedom. Wright (1966) speaking of the theme of *A Grain of Wheat* states that:

While earlier Ngugi began with either a tribal hero (Waiyaki) or a simple character who aspired to be a peace's saviour (Njoroge), in *A Grain of Wheat*, the alliance of the author is downward away from the saving hero to the people of the village themselves (p.19).

That is not to say that *A Grain of Wheat* is without a saviour; in fact, the novel has two characters through which the pattern is still present. Kihika is the most obvious example and Mugo is a variation on the theme. But the author's attitude to the saviour theme has altered considerably. The centre of interest is the living with cowardice among the average villagers. The overall structure of the novel follows more closely the pattern explored in *Weep Not Child*. The novel is a radiation of the African experience polarised in the development of the plot and theme in the literary, polemical and pure historical narrative of the Kenyan experience as it affects other African countries with similar experience in a bid to revolutionise the blackman's relationship with the white man.

In Ngugi's works are identifiable, consistent motifs and themes that underlie his fictional world, and all of which are traceable to various stages of the African experience. The African experience he has broken down into three principal phases of: pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. His works have consistently explored themes arising mostly from the colonial experience and its aftermath. This is very much illuminated in *A Grain of Wheat*.

In an attempt to explore the major concerns of this novel, it is observed that each major character develops through a real personal experience occasioned by the emergency. This is purely in the interest of forging a process of reconciliation in the quest of prosecuting the uprising even in the midst of hardship. The presence of the colonial masters worsened the realisation of any peace initiatives especially since the uprising was geared towards the total emancipation of the black people from the imperialists' grips. Each character, therefore, is faced with the sole option to chart his own future by identifying with the uprising. The author presents the picture in a series of flashbacks, personal experiences and cinematographic techniques.

It is for this reason that Mugo, Gikonyo, Mumbi and Karanja examine their youth and through flashbacks reflect on their achievements and failures so far. It is as if the author, in exploring the saviour theme, examines the characters personally in order to reveal the various levels of commitment shown by each of them. He presents Karanja as the villain of the novel who compromises with the imperialist as a result of his rejection of Mumbi's love. Viewed against this backdrop, the reader sees it as a protest against the lukewarm attitude of the Kenyan natives or Africans in matters that affect the white lords. In fact, he compromised his manhood and self-respect for the love of a woman. He remains nearby to protect Mumbi and later joins the home guard and becomes its local leader after the removal of its former leader. Karanja forms the centerpiece of an "all-for-love" theme in the novel. He embodies the theme and succeeds in gaining for himself the contempt and hatred of all who suffered for the cause of independence in Kenya. Thus, Karanja's personality represents an image to be understood psychologically, for as Howard (1973) puts it:



Ngugi nevertheless dismisses him as a man who must go nameless into a new society to live as best as he can with himself. Karanja's tragic failure, then, is to place the positive value of human love above the independence movement at a historical moment when more was being demanded of him (p.114).

African writers like Ngugi who sourced their literary materials from the past, with particular respect to *A Grain of Wheat* cannot avoid some necessary facts of African history. Mindful of these facts, protest becomes an unquestionable element of these African novels which have preoccupation with the African past. Killam (1985) agrees with this fact when he says that:

Most African writers have fact from the beginning ... a special obligation to the societies in which they function. This commitment or rather intensity of this commitment possibly arises out of the recognition that the colonial experience in Africa was particularly intense.... African writers, unlike writers in some other non-African countries with similar colonial pasts, have not turned their works or their own cultures but have faced up to many problems – political, social, educational and cultural – which colonialism produced and have sought solutions for them in imaginative terms (p.91).

The protest in the novel even passed on to the divine because the natives see nothing good about the whiteman and so ridicule anything that comes with the white man. The white man becomes an epitome of evil, danger and death. This is clearly stated in chapter two of the novel in this way:

About Jesus, they could not at first understand, for how could it be that God would let himself be nailed to a tree? The whiteman spoke of that love that passeth all understanding. Greater love hath no man than this, he read from the little black book that a man laid down his life for his friends (p.12).

The protest here is a ridicule to belittle the whiteman's personality as a liar and deceiver who came with a sweet-coated tongue, having a negative influence on the culture, customs and traditions of the people.

This assertion is corroborated with the statement in the novel in which the natives observed that:

The few, who were converted, started speaking a faith foreign to the way of the land. They trod on sacred places to show that no harm could reach those protected by the hand of the Lord. Soon people saw the white man had imperceptibly acquired more land to meet the growing needs of his position. He had already pulled down the grass-thatched-hut and erected a more permanent building. Elders of the land protested... a long line of other red strangers who carried, not the Bible, but the sword (p.13).

The activities of the whiteman in Kenya led the natives to take arms in defence of their motherland. Consequently, Waiyaki and other warrior leaders took arms. The leaders were later arrested and killed in an evil way. For instance, Waiyaki was buried alive at Kibwezi with his head facing the earth. Of course, the death of Waiyaki led to the growth of a grain which later metamorphosed into a wheat (party struggle) to resist the whiteman's activity in Kenya. The symbolic title of the novel, *A Grain of Wheat* is espoused here. The *Grain* is the political party struggle which grew to *Wheat*, the Kenyan independence achievement. The title of the novel and the entire work spell the concept of protest. Look at the revealing statement in chapter two



of the novel: “Then nobody noticed it;... Waiyaki’s blood contained within a seed, a grain, which gave birth to a political party whose main strength thereafter sprang from a bond with the soil” (p.15).

After the death of Waiyaki, the people saw Henry Thuku, a man with God’s message and new leader. He denounced the whiteman and his evil machinations. He also read letters of protest against the whiteman in Kenya and finally enjoined sundry to rally round the party to fight against injustice, deprivations, forced labour, slavery, and so on perpetrated in the land by the alien whites. There is the revolt over land ownership and freedom of the natives. As Ngugi puts it:

Henry denounced the whiteman and cursed that benevolence and protection which denied people land and freedom. He amazed them by reading aloud letters to the white man, letters in which he set out in clear terms people’s discontent with taxation, forced labour on white settler’s land, and with the soldier settlement scheme which after the first big war, left many black people without homes or land around Tigoni and other places (p.16).

In fact, there is the revolt of the peasants near at hand.

The deceit tendency and the seizure of the peasants’ land was revealed in the words of Kihika at the party meeting in Rung’ei market. He said this of the whiteman using Nubia as the symbol of the white man:

We went to their church. Nubia, in white robes, opened the Bible. He said: let us kneel down to pray. We knelt down. Nubia said: let us shut our eyes. We did. You know, his remained open so that he could read the word. When we opened our eyes, our land was gone and the sword of flames stood on guard. As for Nubia, he went on reading the word, beseeching us to lay our treasures in heaven where no moth would corrupt them. But he laid his on earth, our earth (p.15).

Kihika was nick-named the terror of the white man; his death was a historic one in Thabai and other ridges.

Ngugi is one African writer who sought to recreate the momentous events in his people’s history. Primarily, his interest has always centred on the pains and deprivations which his people have suffered. This is only a symbolic microcosm of the African worldview under colonialism. Ngugi uses these insinuations to justify the mau-mau guerilla warfare and other nationalist struggles in Africa. His primary interest in *A Grain of Wheat* is less in character study than in presenting a picture of suffering in emergency Kenya, with spotlight on Kihika, Mugo, Gikonyo, Karanja and a few Kenyan leaders.

The events in the novels revolve around the activities of these leaders which also symbolize the various dispositions of hope, aspiration and inadequacies of native Kenyans in the fate of colonialism. Kihika himself is vexed by the seizure of the land and its attendant consequences. The effort of Kihika is seen in the words of Gikonyo in chapter three during the inauguration of the freedom fighters. He said:

The party and leaders of the village have thought it a good idea to honour the dead. On Independence Day we shall remember those from our village and ridges near, who lost their lives in the fight for freedom. We cannot let Kihika’s name die (p.22).



In *Karanja*, Ngugi creates a weak character who is basked in the prophecy of a better tomorrow and dreams which are not unrealistic, but he discovers at the end that those dreams are not viable weaponry to face the political/social problems under the emergency. In chapter four, *Karanja's* visit to Mrs. Thompson and a dog attack at Dr. Lynd's route reveals this weakness. Ordinarily, nobody would have taken the nonsense he took from Dr. Lynd. The white man has a misconception of Africa and Africans. He sees the mau-mau uprising in the light of a destructive force and evil perse because through it colonel Kiambu was murdered in Rung'ei. In the words of Colonel Robson, he states: "...no government can tolerate anarchy, no civilisation can be built on this violence and savagery. Mau-mau is evil:... complete destruction of all the values on which our civilisation has thriven" (p.49).

Ngugi's choice of central characters is not by accident. His choice of Gikonyo as a central character is not accidental. It is influenced by the socialist milieu of which Ngugi is not only an ardent but also sympathetic with the masses. He is a revolutionist. In socialist ideology, classism, of which heroism is part, is denounced. Power belongs to the peasants on whose behalf the state acts, including every other person. This accounts for why Ngugi deliberately deforms his central characters in order to avoid the emergence of "hero-above-the people." Thus, the creation of heroes that are innately imbued with naturally rooted weaknesses is more of an ideological penchant than an artistic fault.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has critically viewed the protest tradition in African fiction and African literature generally using a revolutionist view: Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* as a text. The thrust of the novel is the seizure of land and the subjections of Africans to torture and denigration that necessitated the struggle. Thus, it can be seen that these African writers, particularly Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, focus extensively on such issues as socio-political conflicts and protests as well as cultural matters. This attempt, therefore, underscores the protest in the novel. These African writers protest against the ills and intolerable treatment in their various works. Judged against this viewpoint, they aim at a "better tomorrow" for the down-trodden, poor and oppressed African nations.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, the protest is against the oppressive system of the British colonial government in Kenya. The government in connivance with few Kenyan elites exploit and oppress the natives. Most Kenyans who had a better foresight of Kenya at independence had to show some form of resistance against the imperialists. This was carried out through the mau-mau uprising. Ngugi speaks of the objective of the uprising in *A Grain of Wheat*: "The basic objective of the mau-mau revolutionaries was to drive out the Europeans, seize the government and give back to the Kenyan peasants their stolen land and property" (p.205).

African fiction contributes splendidly to world fiction, particularly in the African continent by infusing this consciousness of protest against inhumanity. This enlightenment unites the writer and his audience because of the cultural values and heritage, most importantly the African interest which overrides other interests. The role of the African writer in the context of these social problems is very significant. He has constantly played the role of "patron-saint" for the oppressed peasants. In fact, the writers have portrayed their characters sympathetically with a view to alert their audience to the real sociology of revolutionary struggles in Africa.





Accordingly, stereotypes like delinquents, traitors, prostitutes and guerilla attackers have been described.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper recommends the use of protest fiction in Africa to root out all imperialist forces in the guise of neo-colonialism bedeviling Africa, its growth and development. There is no doubting the fact that the development of the African protest tradition in writing has its historical origin in the anti-slavery movement and shares in fervour and flavour a common outlook with modern African protest writing. The protest writing should start the process of *deneocolonisation* in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. This process, if followed according to the recommendation of this paper, will foster unity, growth and development of the African continent.

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