

**THE ANTICOLONIAL STRUGGLE AS A NATIONAL EPIC:
NGŪGĪ WA THIONG'O'S *A GRAIN OF WHEAT*
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A Grain of Wheat is Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's third novel, and marks a significant turn in his literary production, as a Marxist and Fanonian militant attitude replaces the liberal Christianity of his first works. The action of the novel focuses on the protagonists' remembrances of the events of the 'Mau Mau' Revolt, which Ngũgĩ sees as the only historical moment which allows "the space to imagine the birth of a new Kenya" (Ogude 1999: 23). The way these events are recounted and reshaped is a collective one, as a shifting focalization and a complex time structure create a polyphonic, choral narrative (see Bakhtin 1929) that shows in detail the physical, psychological and political impact of the Revolt on individuals living in a small community (Killam 1980: 55). The novel is set in Thabai, an imaginary gĩkũyũ village of Kenya's White Highlands, in the days preceding and following 12 December 1963, the day Kenya got its Independence. The latter is continually evoked in the narration with the swahili word *Uhuru* ("freedom"): Ngũgĩ's choice not to translate this term is significant, as in the novel the definition of the actual meaning of *Uhuru* is an open political and social question: the new Kenyan bourgeoisie sees it indeed as the possibility to replace the colonizer without changing the existing social, political and economical structure, whereas for gĩkũyũ peasants *Uhuru* means a profound break with the colonial past, a rebirth which has to bring about the restitution of the lands usurped by the white settlers and the eradication of poverty. The meaning of *Uhuru* is thus a central question, quite far from being obvious: so much so that Ngũgĩ clarifies what *Uhuru* should be only in the 1986 version of the novel, when the former 'Mau Mau' guerilla General R. states in his Independence speech "We get *Uhuru* today. But what's the meaning of 'Uhuru' ? It is contained in the name of our Movement: Land and Freedom" (AGOW 2002: 216-7). The whole novel can indeed be summarized as a collective act of recalling and reflecting on the events leading to *Uhuru*, in order to understand what actual meaning it should/could have for Thabai peasants. It is precisely in the act of recalling and reflecting on the past that *A Grain of Wheat* constructs a narration of the nation: the pedagogic moment (the act of recalling the liberation struggle) materializes in a performative moment (Bhabha 1990a) disseminated in lots of narratives, each of which is a speech act. The narration becomes therefore an active (re)construction of the past, an act of *writing*, in the sense of modelling (Ponzio - Calefato - Petrilli 1994: 63-6).

The choice of the genre is in this sense significant, as in many European and Latin American countries the novel (see Sommer 1990) – and especially the historical novel – has been a privileged cultural locus to construct a national conscience. As Benedict Anderson, drawing from Benjamin's concept of "homogeneous, empty time" (Benjamin 1955: 83), has pointed out, "The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation" (Anderson 2006: 26): the realist novel, with its many characters acting simultaneously in a shared time and space, constructed a community in which

the existence of individuals is articulated in the same geographical and temporal frame. The historical novel, in its turn, added temporal depth to these communities sharing a localized simultaneity, rendering them historical by the establishment of a link of direct succession between the readers and the generation that had preceded them.

The construction of the nation in *A Grain of Wheat* is explicitly represented as a narration, a linguistic act: indeed most of the events of the Revolt are not related directly, but *refracted* through the conscience of its heroes and heroines: it is *their* narration which is represented, and it is through their narration that those historical events are relived, following a narrative strategy typical of orature (Dseagu 1992: 600). In the novel “every significant development [...] either consists of or turns on acts of speech or their absence” (Jackson 1991: 12): the events are evoked and put one beside the other as mosaic tesseras through the heroes’ dialogues, confessions and free indirect style monologues. Most of the action actually consists of “an intricate network of speech-acts performed and unperformed, acknowledged and unacknowledged”, and “a great deal of it centers on bringing *ergon* into proper relation with *logos*” (*ibidem*): the main problem turns out to be the reliability of these narratives, which are not only fragmentary but quite often contradictory as well, “creating instability about what is known and what it means to know” (Gurnah 2002: ix).

All these fragments are kept together by some connecting passages narrated by an anonymous narrator whose voice is entrusted by Ngũgĩ with relating the collective vicissitudes of the country, a strategy which makes the novel “a national epic” that “affirms the values of community” (Obumsele 1974: 113). It would be misleading though to present these passages as direct interventions of the writer, because here the narrator is himself is *represented*, his is not an *objective* word, but an *objectified* one (Ponzio - Calefato - Petrilli 1994: 184): the anonymous narrator of these passages in fact employs the modes of orature and speaks like a traditional storyteller, a technique which emphasizes his distance from the author. The following passage, relating the struggle waged by the gĩkũyũ warriors against the railway introduced by the British, is in this sense a paradigmatic example:

Waiyaki and other warrior-leaders took arms. *The iron snake spoken of by Mugo wa Kibiro* was quickly wriggling towards Nairobi for a thorough exploitation of the hinterland. Could they move it? *The snake held on to the ground*, laughing their efforts to scorn. The whiteman with *bamboo poles that vomited fire and smoke*, hit back; his menacing laughter remained echoing in the hearts of the people, long after Waiyaki had been arrested and taken to the coast, bound hands and feet. Later, *so it is said*, Waiyaki was buried alive at Kibwezi with his head facing into the centre of the earth, a living warning to those, who, in after years, might challenge the hand of *the Christian woman whose protecting shadow now bestrode both land and sea*. (AGOW: 12, my italics)

In Lee Haring’s words, here “folklore is used as a device of group characterization” (1974: 86): we are before a typical example of orature, more precisely that Isidore Okpewho (1994: 25), in his genre classification of orature, defines “historical legend”. However, this narrator-storyteller is far from being omniscient, as his voice

is embedded among the voices of the heroes: it could have been possible to speak of identification between author and narrator (which is anyway never complete, given the exotopic status of literary discourse, see Bachtin 1929, 1979; Ponzio - Calefato - Petrilli 1994: 183-98) if Ngũgĩ had put all the vicissitudes of his characters within an external narrative frame, endowed with a narrator whose voice was above all the others', but this is not the case. The narrator's voice is only one among many voices, even though its connecting function puts it in a central position. In this way Ngũgĩ can at once reconnect himself with the traditional storyteller and distance himself from him, showing how he can no longer be such a figure, as the society to which storytellers belonged no longer exists.

Nevertheless, it is the storyteller's narratives that function as keystones in the construction of the nation: on the narrative structure level, they are the axis which gives meaning and keeps together all the narrative fragments; on the other hand, on the level of their *modus narrandi*, the voice change is signalled by the use of a first person plural and by a consistent referral to a "we", a community whose geographical extension and temporal depth seem to extend well beyond the gĩkũyũ people, even though they are centred on Thabai village, at different times referred to as "our village" (*AGOW*: 156, 177-8, my italics): it might be said that this narrator is a gĩkũyũ who speaks for the whole Kenya. Moreover, in some passages the anonymous narrator addresses his audience saying "you", thus placing himself in the position of someone speaking "for the people and to the people" (McLeod 2000: 93). It is not a mere stylistic question: this *modus narrandi* is devised to construct a Kenyan community, imagining it as a nation (ivi: 93-4), i.e. a community linked to a geographical space and endowed with temporal depth (Grosby 2005: 11). This view, centred on the gĩkũyũ but addressed to the whole nation, reflects perfectly Ngũgĩ's idea of Kenya as a melting pot of all its various peoples (Ngũgĩ 1972: 24). In this perspective, the African communities are placed at the centre, as witnessed by the reference to Kenya in the novel as the "country of black people" (*AGOW*: 20, 57) and by the statement of one of its main heroes, Kihika, that "Kenya belongs to black people" (ivi: 85). More precisely, at the centre of this "imagined community" there is a rural community: it is the gĩkũyũ peasants whom Ngũgĩ chooses as heroes of his novels and of his narration of the nation. Here he fully endorses Fanon's thesis on the central role of the peasants in the anticolonial struggle (Fanon 1976: 25), and accordingly depicts the countryside as an environment where human beings can live in harmony with nature, whereas the city is represented as a place of corruption and deceit ruled by that same elite that escapes its national duties and keeps at a distance rural masses (Ogude 1999: 46-8). This romantic view of the relationship between land and people is a topos of nationalism, but has its roots also in the precolonial tradition of gĩkũyũ culture, wherein the land was seen as 'mother'. Indeed, the flexibility of the novel genre allows Ngũgĩ to draw a lot of cultural elements from European and African traditions, reshape them and give them new meanings: he employs the narrative modes of African oratures, mixes up biblical and gĩkũyũ mythologies, employs the techniques of detective stories, finds inspiration for the

plot, the characters and the time structure in Joseph Conrad's works and enlivens his novel with the militant nationalism of Gakaara wa Wanjaũ.

The title of the novel is taken from the New Testament, and refers to a passage from Paul's First Letter to Corinthians (15:36) which is placed as an epigraph at the very beginning: "Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die. And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat or some other grain". The reference to the "grain of wheat" links this epigraph to a second one, taken from John's Gospel (12:24), which opens the last part of the novel "Verily, verily I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (AGOW: 175). These quotations give a religious and epic tone to the novel and assert the necessity of a sacrifice for the (re)birth of the nation. Another biblical epigraph at the beginning of the last part constructs this rebirth as a mythical and utopical palingenesis: "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away" (*ibidem*, from Revelation, 21:1).

The theme of heroism and sacrifice crosses the whole work; this is not surprising, for as Ernest Renan explained in 1882, "le capital social sur lequel on assied une idée nationale" is made up most of all of "un passé héroïque, des grands hommes, de la gloire" (Renan 1882: 10). In *A Grain of Wheat* the heroic character *par excellence* is the late Kihika, the courageous guerilla leader full of messianic spirit. We learn of Kihika's life and deeds mainly from the memories of those who survived, but it is the narrator-storyteller who gives his life a meaning in the perspective of the liberation struggle, summarizing its course in the second chapter, after a long digression on the story of the party. This digression is central in the narration of the nation, as here the modern history of Kenya is identified with the story of the resistance to colonization and of the development of the liberation movement:

Nearly everybody was a member of the Party, but *nobody could say with any accuracy when the Party was born*: to most people, especially those in the younger generation, *the Party had always been there*, a rallying centre for action. *It changed names, leaders came and went, but the Party remained*, opening new visions, gathering greater and greater strength, till on the Eve of Uhuru, *its influence stretched from one horizon touching the sea to the other resting on the great Lake*. Its origins can, *so the people say*, be traced to the day the whiteman came to the country [...]. (AGOW: 11, corsivi nostri)

We are here before a paradigmatic example of nationalist mythmaking, as heterogeneous episodes of resistance are all presented as the various moments and incarnations of a single story. The party is 'naturalized' ("it had always been there") and its origins are traced back to an unspecified period, in accordance with a typical procedure of myth (Barthes 1970); its development is presented as a linear one, culminating in the party overlapping the whole country, whose borders, despite their historical determination, are thus 'naturalized'. Moreover, the party is never named, thus reasserting a sort of immutability (which mentioning its actual names might have challenged) and lending it an aura of sacredness. Here the narration of resistance

becomes the nation, for at the same time it states an horizontal link among its inhabitants (the solidarity among resistants), it provides this link with temporal depth (leaders come and go, but the party remains) and it establishes a nexus between the imagined community and the physical space comprised between the sea and the great lake, transforming it into a social space charged with mythical significance. It is worth noticing that here the Lake Victoria is not called with its colonial name: while delineating the geographical space of the nation, the narrator-storyteller refuses the colonizers' toponymy, supreme emblem of the conquest (Calefato 2006: 145-69). The ideological character of the historical and geographical construction of the nation becomes evident when one realizes that the frontiers imposed by the colonizers were totally arbitrary and that the historiographical foundations of the political genealogy of the movement proposed here are, at best, thin. Most of these historical movements were too heterogeneous to be reduced to unity, but Ngũgĩ, as noticed by James Ogude (1999: 33), intends to show the 'Mau Mau' as a unitary force with a consistent nationalist standing and a firm class-rooted view and discards all the aspects of the movement which contradict this narrative.

In constructing this narrative he identifies the colonial conquest as the collective trauma from which to begin the (re)construction of the nation. Here too Ngũgĩ follows a well established tradition: Renan (1882: 10) remarked that sharing mournings and sufferings is a particularly effective strategy to establish and reinforce the horizontal link solidarity which forms a nation, as they require a common effort and impose duties. Therefore, Ngũgĩ entrusts the voice of the storyteller with narrating the story of the conquest of Kenya by the British:

the whiteman came to the country, clutching the book of God in both hands, a magic witness that the whiteman was a messenger from the Lord. His tongue was coated with sugar; his humility was touching. For a time, people ignored the voice of the Gikuyu seer who once said: there shall come a people with clothes like the butterflies. They gave him, the stranger with a scalded skin, a place to erect a temporary shelter. Hut complete, the stranger put up another building yards away. This he called the House of God where people could go for worship and sacrifice. (AGOW: 11)

The arrival of white missionaries is seen with curiosity by the *gĩkũyũ*, and nobody pays attention the the prophecy of Mugo wa Kibiro, who had predicted that the newcomers would bring only misfortune. Soon, behind the missionaries' benevolence, the first glimpses of the actual intentions of the British become visible, but they are not taken seriously:

The whiteman told of another country beyond the sea where a powerful woman sat on a throne while men and women danced under the shadow of her authority and benevolence. She was ready to spread the shadow to cover the Agikuyu. They laughed at this eccentric man whose skin had been so scalded that the black outside had been peeled off. The hot water must have gone into his head. (AGOW: 11)

And then the "historical legend" gives way to the "mythical legend" (Okpewho 1994: 25), as the description of Queen Victoria puzzles the *gĩkũyũ* and recalls them lost

memories of a distant past: “his words about a woman on the throne echoed something in the heart, deep down in their history. It was many, many years ago. Then women ruled the land of the Agikuyu” (AGOW: 11). Drawing on gĩkũyũ mythology, Ngũgĩ has the narrator-storyteller recount two legends related to the mythical matriarchal period of the gĩkũyũ people: he shows here how in an oral culture “folk narrative functions as a charter for present action and attitude” (Haring 1974: 86), as it is through these legends that the gĩkũyũ manage to make sense of what the missionaries tell them. Afterwards, the narration turns back towards the “historical legend”: the British exploit the gĩkũyũ who have converted to attack the traditional religion, using Christianity as a knife to tear apart their society. The missionaries’ soft power is followingly replaced by hard power:

The few who were converted, started speaking a faith foreign to the ways 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 whiteman 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. They looked beyond the laughing face of the whiteman and suddenly saw a long line of other red strangers who carried, not the Bible, but the sword. (AGOW: 12)

Summarizing in this way the story of the conquest, the narrator-storyteller has circumscribed the collective trauma identified as the founding moment of the nation. But Ngũgĩ does not intend just to narrate the colonial trauma: what he is interested in is the reaction that the loss of their land prompts in the colonized, transforming them into a national community. It is in the struggle of the gĩkũyũ against the whites that arises the resistance movement that will *become* the nation, overlapping its own story to that of the whole country. In African oratures the “historical legends” usually had as their main subject the deeds of heroes, tracing a heroic genealogy and giving a historico-mythical legitimacy to the community it produced them (Okpewho 1994: 25). Ngũgĩ uses this epic model and reshapes it to construct his mythical narration of the nation: the narrator-storyteller presents the story of the movement as a succession of battles waged by heroic leaders against the colonizers. The first of these leaders is Waiyaki, whose death, as the grain of wheat of the title, is a source of new life for the resistance:

Then nobody noticed it; but looking back we can see that Waiyaki’s blood contained within it a seed, a grain, which gave birth to a political party whose main strength thereafter sprang from a bond with the soil. (AGOW: 13)

Waiyaki is succeeded by Harry Thuku, the founder of the East African Association:

in Harry Thuku, people saw a man with God’s message: Go unto Pharaoh and say unto him: let my people go, let my people go. And people swore they would follow Harry through the desert. They would [...] endure thirst and hunger, tears and blood until they set foot on Canaan’s shore. (*ibidem*)

It has to be noticed here how gĩkũyũ mythology is replaced by biblical mythology: in describing the different historical moments, the narrator-storyteller reflects the way gĩkũyũ perceived themselves at each moment, hence if Christianity only a page before had been defined “a faith foreign to the ways of the land”, now the gĩkũyũ have adopted a syncretic view and perceive themselves as the elected people.

The British though imprison and deport Thuku for seven years. In the cycle of birth and death, the movement produces a new leader:

The Party was temporarily dismayed. But it was at this time that the man with the flaming eyes came to the scene. Then few knew him. But later, of course, he was to be known to the world over as the Burning Spear. (AGOW: 14)

It is Jomo Kenyatta, who, significantly, is not even named, thus increasing his mythical status. Here the storyteller’s narrative stops and gives way to the musings of Mugo: it is at this point, and through the conscience of the latter that we get to know Kihika. The references to Kenyatta, though not numerous, are scattered throughout the novel and are always made by the narrator-storyteller, who thus interprets the feeling of the community: Kenyatta is compared to the great heroes of the past, to Moses and Jesus, and in the 1986 version even identified with the whole nation (“A vote for Kenyatta was a vote for the Party. A vote for the Party was a vote for the Movement. A vote for the Movement was a vote for the People. Kenyatta was the People!”, AGOW 2002: 63):

They sang of Jomo (he came, like a fiery spear among us), his stay in England (Moses sojourned in the land of Pharaoh) and his return (he came riding on a cloud of fire and smoke) to save his children. He was arrested, sent to Lodwar, and on the third day came home from Maralal. He came riding a chariot home. The gates of hell could not withhold him. Now angels trembled before him. (AGOW: 190)

All these passages can be compared to the “eulogy of chiefs, sovereigns and warriors”, “one of the dominant themes in African songs” (Okpewho 1994: 23). Here again Ngũgĩ employs biblical images to show Kenyatta as a semi-divine being (see Haring 1974: 87-8).

However, the novel’s development interrupts this epic narration of a nation whose people marches towards its own liberation under the guidance of its leaders: the Uhuru Day, which should have been the apotheosis of this epic, becomes on the contrary the judgment day in which Mugo, reputed by all to be the heir of Kihika, publicly avows to have been the traitor who sold the hero to the executioner. *A Grain if Wheat*, therefore, both constructs and demystifies the narration of the nation, warning in particular against the rhetoric of heroism. Ngũgĩ is not interested in perpetuating the rhetoric of the “liberators”, he gives place to the heroic narration of the nation only inasmuch as the masses themselves endow some figures with meaning, transforming them into myths that help to mobilize the people and strengthen the horizontal solidarity among colonized. The heroic narration has been

useful to build the imagined community of the nation and lead it to independence; now it has to be discarded in favour of new narratives, as for Ngũgĩ the nation is not a goal in itself, but a means to reach a full emancipation of the masses. Mugo's unexpected confession is a moment of disappointment, but it turns out to be also the catalyzer through which the whole village can regenerate itself and finally take a more conscient look to its recent past and impending future.

A Grain of Wheat is a perfect example of the modern conscience of what Terry Eagleton (1990) has aptly defined the "impossible irony" of nationalism. In 1966, when he wrote the novel, Ngũgĩ had become close to Marx and Fanon and was aware of the ideological character of nationalism. At the same time, though, Africa was still experiencing decolonization, and in this huge historical process nationalism played a fundamental role as the only discourse which could transform heterogeneous peoples imprisoned in the frontiers set by colonizers into political communities able to get rid of the colonial yoke. Anticolonial nationalism however politically limited and often founded on totally invented identities, was a crucial and necessary passage to cross to dismantle the imperial structure; the meagre record of the first years following Uhuru, though, did not allow the Kenyan writer to offer a romantic view of a nation marching towards freedom. Hence the choice to represent at once the construction of a nation and its ironic demystification: the sacrifice of Kihika and of all the others did not bring the fruits everybody expected, but nonetheless it has not been vain. Mugo's confession is the dialectic moment when the alienation of the community (insofar as colonized people, but also as members of the national communities) is overtaken and the heroic narration of the nation is replaced by two opposed narratives: that of the new national bourgeoisie and that of the peasants "who fought the British yet who now see all that they fought for being put on one side".