

Portrayal of the Mau Mau Rebellion in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o *A Grain of Wheat*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38177/AJBSR.2023.5210>

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Article Received: 21 April 2023

Article Accepted: 31 May 2023

Article Published: 19 June 2023

ABSTRACT

This research paper critically examines the portrayal of the Mau Mau rebellion in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's novel, *A Grain of Wheat*. The Mau Mau rebellion was a significant anti-colonial uprising that occurred in Kenya between 1952 and 1960. The paper analyzes how the rebellion is depicted in the novel and explores its consequences on the characters and the society. By delving into the historical context, character motivations, and symbolic representation, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the rebellion's significance in the novel. Furthermore, the paper compares the fictionalized portrayal with historical accounts, assesses its accuracy, and explores its impact on identity and nationhood. Through this analysis, the research paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the Mau Mau rebellion, its representation in literature, and its implications for postcolonial studies.

Keywords: Mau Mau; Anti-colonial; Rebellion; Historical; Nationhood; Postcolonial.

Introduction

A Grain of Wheat is a novel published in 1967. The book tells the story of the struggle for independence in Kenya from British colonial rule, with a particular focus on the Mau Mau uprising of the 1950s. The novel takes place in a small village called Thabai, where the inhabitants are dealing with the aftermath of the struggle for independence. The central character is Mugo, a man who has been hailed as a hero for his supposed role in the liberation movement. However, as the novel progresses, we learn that Mugo's true motives were not entirely selfless, and that he has been carrying a heavy burden of guilt for years. The novel also follows the lives of other characters in the village, such as Kihika, a true hero of the liberation movement who is being sought after by the authorities, and Gikonyo and his wife Mumbi, who have been separated by the struggle for independence. Through the stories of these characters, Thiong'o portrays the complex and often painful process of nation-building, as well as the human cost of political struggle. He also explores themes of guilt, redemption, and the search for identity in a changing society. So, it is a powerful and insightful portrayal of Kenya's struggle for independence, and a reminder of the sacrifices made by those who fought for a better future.

James Ogude observes, at this point, Thiong'o, like other writers of the early 1960s, was grappling with issues of ethnicity, individualism, and nationalism. According to him, the choice of the novel as a form, and English as a medium of expression, was generic to the educational background of the African intellectual. The African novel in English, he argues, proves problematic in terms of a literary genre of commitment. This is because while the novelist has a didactic social vision intended for the wider community, which if translated could involve mass revolutionary action, the medium employed restricts and narrows the audience to a socially specified group. He advocates that the only way to break out of the vicious circle of the neo-colonial linguistic dilemma depends "on a writer willing to write in an African language, a willing translator to translate from one African language to another, and a willing publisher to invest money in the venture. Ngugi's emphasis is on the political function of the critic and he insists that both the creative artist and the critic must derive direction from a social conscience" (Pandurang 18).

A Grain of Wheat is a postcolonial narrative that explores the complexities and contradictions of Kenyan society during the Mau Mau Uprising and the subsequent struggle for independence. In order to write this novel, Thiong'o drew inspiration from a variety of sources, including his own experiences growing up in colonial Kenya, but one of the most important influences on his work was the writing of Frantz Fanon, particularly his seminal work, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

The Wretched of the Earth is a powerful critique of colonialism and its impact on the colonized. Fanon argues that the violence and oppression of colonialism not only dehumanize the colonized but also create a culture of violence that permeates all levels of society. He also emphasizes the importance of national consciousness and collective action in the struggle for liberation. Thiong'o *A Grain of Wheat* reflects many of the themes and ideas of Fanon's work. The novel explores the psychological effects of colonialism on the colonizer and the colonized, as well as the role of violence in the struggle for independence. The writer also emphasizes the importance of national consciousness and collective action, as seen in the character of Kihika, the revolutionary leader who becomes a symbol of hope for the oppressed masses. The novel begins with a statement of Chinua Achebe:

Africa is a huge continent with a diversity of cultures and languages. Africa is not simple – often people want to simplify it, generalize it, and stereotype its people, but Africa is very complex. The world is just starting to get to know Africa. The last five hundred years of European contact with Africa produced a body of literature that presented Africa in a very bad light and now the time has come for Africans to tell their own stories (Achebe Intro ix).

Thiong'o's novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, stands as a powerful exploration of the Mau Mau rebellion and its consequences in Kenya during the period of British colonial rule. The Mau Mau rebellion, which took place from 1952 to 1960, was a significant armed uprising against colonial oppression and injustice. Thiong'o's novel delves into the complex dynamics of this historical event, capturing the multifaceted impact of the rebellion on individuals, communities, and the collective struggle for independence. In this research paper, we aim to critically analyze the portrayal of the Mau Mau rebellion in *A Grain of Wheat* and examine its implications within the broader socio-political and historical context of Kenya.

To set the stage for the analysis, an overview of the historical context of the Mau Mau rebellion and its significance in Kenya's struggle for independence. The root causes of the rebellion, including land dispossession, political marginalization, and socio-economic disparities under British colonial rule. By highlighting the British response and the declaration of a state of emergency, we emphasize the gravity of the conflict and its impact on the Kenyan society.

The novel employs various symbols and metaphors that enhance the portrayal of the Mau Mau rebellion. The researcher analyses these symbols, including the grain of wheat, and their connection to the rebellion, nationhood, and the characters' search for identity and purpose. By examining Thiong'o's use of symbolism, he uncovers deeper layers of meaning and explore how these symbols contribute to the overall portrayal of the rebellion and its consequences. The Mau Mau rebellion played a crucial role in shaping Kenyan identity and aspirations for nationhood. The research scholar explores how *A Grain of Wheat* reflects the impact of the rebellion on the characters' sense of self and their quest for a liberated nation. By analyzing the novel's exploration of identity,

memory, and collective consciousness, he also uncovers the profound influence of the rebellion on the formation of a postcolonial Kenyan identity.

Conclusion

To summarize the key findings of the analysis and discuss the significance of the portrayal of the Mau Mau rebellion in *A Grain of Wheat*. The research paper reflects the novel's contribution to postcolonial literature and its relevance in understanding the historical and socio-political complexities of Kenya. By contextualizing the novel within the broader framework of postcolonial studies, we highlight the enduring importance of Thiong'o's work and its impact on our understanding of resistance, nationhood, and the consequences of colonialism. Through a comprehensive examination of the portrayal of the Mau Mau rebellion in *A Grain of Wheat*, this research paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of this seminal period in Kenyan history. By exploring the novel's themes, symbolism, and historical accuracy, there is a hope to shed light on the broader socio-political implications of the rebellion and its enduring significance in the context of postcolonial studies.

Declarations

Source of Funding

This study did not receive any grant from funding agencies in the public or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

Consent for Publication

The author declares that she consented to the publication of this study.

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