

REPRESENTATION OF THE COLONIZERS IN A GRAIN OF WHEAT BY NGUGI WA THIONGO

Yasir Arafat

Assistant Professor of English, National University of Modern Language, Islamabad
yarafat@numl.edu.pk

Hafsah Tariq

M.Phil Scholar, National University of Modern Language, Islamabad
minamwilldoit@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Representation, in its postcolonial sense, has been the subject of investigation with all its discursive practices and manifestations in the Orient as well as in the Occident. The global South, in particular, has been the focus of the representative discourse conceived, initiated, crafted and executed by the West in order to form the nexus between power and knowledge to carry out, expand and justify the colonial project. The resistance by the colonized was either in the form of armed struggle or through a complete denial; rejecting everything that is Western or belongs to the colonizers. In particular, Ngugi WaThiongo opted for the later and ceased writing in English to express his dismissal against the institution of colonization. The Kenyans, in their holistic ways, represent them on account of their epistemological as well as on ontological grounds thus belittling, maligning, outcasting, othering and subalternizing them and resurface their own cultural, traditional and linguistic subtleties and sensibilities to mark a point of departure from the colonizing forces. The research concludes that representation, in its Saidian sense, was countered by the Africans in their narratives by reciprocity and they reconstructed their discourse to reimagining and repaint the image(s) of the West in their texts.

Keywords: Imperialism, colonialism, representation, culture, resistance.

INTRODUCTION

Ngugi WaThiongo's narrative *A Grain of Wheat* documents the Kenyan independence movement that was inspired from nationalism and which resulted after the scores of struggle against colonial machinery. Fundamentally speaking, Ngugi seems to have been re-writing the history of colonization and its different manifestations aiming at unmasking the discursive practices of the colonizers who as Kipling would put it, were carrying the "white man's burden" (Kipling:1899: 01) to educate, uplift, and civilize the otherwise darkest continents of the world. However, as the narrative unfolds, Ngugi could not help himself representing them and this counter/representative discourse was inspired by Joseph Conrad whose textual construction of imperialism in Africa had also instilled the spirit of rebellion in Chinua Achebe as well. The core issue between Ngugi and Conrad was of their diametrically opposed viewpoints related to imperialism; whereas Conrad held one type of imperialism slightly better than another one, Ngugi was all dismissive and anti-imperialist in all its forms and manifestations. Therefore, Ngugi believes that Conrad's biased view of colonization and its justifications showed that he had an impaired vision of it all. Ngugi outlined Conrad's treatise about imperialistic designs of the West in the following manner:

Conrad is very despondent when he comes to portraying workers' efforts to overthrow it or when he portrays people over racists in Africa in the *Heart of Darkness* or Asians in *Lord Jim* and others. There the people are made to look as if they were waiting for their parents or a white hero would come and save them.(Rao: 2009; 167)

The narrative in *A Grain of Wheat* is far from being linear in its structural pattern and there are multiple narratives that run parallel in the context of the novel. When the colonial machinery operates, it does so mercilessly causing fissures, debilitating situations, turmoil and above all an

overwhelming chaos that further leads to irreparable deterioration in the history of Africa and in particular that of Kenya.

When the events take their shape in a little village of Kenya, a newlywed couple is separated when the authorities send the groom, Gikonvo, to a detention camp and the bride, Mumbi, is left with very limited options. Consequently, when Gikonvo returns after a long period of six years, ironically, Mumbi gives birth to his enemy's offspring and it drifts them poles apart. This dismantling of a family is preceded by another tragic event that lead to the capture and hanging of Mumbi's brother Kihika who was a local hero and met his destiny at the hands of the colonizing forces. The circumstances have been deliberately woven such a way that it seems difficult to separate a patriot and a traitor. So, the struggle of the comrades to search for Kihika's betrayer is in vain, at least for the time being. It remains a mystery unless Mugo appear on the scene and confesses his guilt of betrayal as he was responsible was Kihika's unfortunate death.

Contrary to the claims of the colonizers as "torch-bearers of civilization" (Conrad: 1966; 24), Ngugi delineates them as rather opposites to their claims. To him, they were far from being on the civilizing mission or the harbingers of progress, development, prosperity and divine mission of delivering the Dark Continent from darkness and bringing them the light. The role of the colonizers to deliver the Africans from the shackles of darkness, exorbitance, backwardness, dogmatic and radical beliefs, poverty, and uncivilized corners to the realm of knowledge, rationality, forward-looking and futuristic world of science and technology, and above all their mission to civilize them showed the binary perceptions of the colonizers who based their narratives on a binary of US/THEM. Therefore, in the binaries of us/them, light/darkness, civilized/uncivilized, good/bad modern/backward, everything on the left side of the slash is positive and has a higher cultural value, and hence belongs to the colonizers. On the other hand, everything on the right side of the slash is negative, has a lower cultural value and therefore belongs to the colonized. (Tyson: 2006;250-252). Behind such meta narratives were the hideous plans; to conquer the land, subjugate the people and exploit the resources in favour of the empire. That is why, Ngugi, in this narrative, represents them as ruthless invaders, usurpers, and a band of thugs who have devastated the African landscape as well as the civilization. In Kenneth Harrow's words, "the storm aptly suggests the pervasive destruction caused by the white man's arrival and invasion" (Harrow; 2010, 251). The whole fiasco of colonial expedition (from natives' point of view) is written in African blood in this very narrative.

Ngugi's representation of the colonial masters is not only complex, intriguing and subtle but also holistic and all inclusive. When he represents them, he does not represent them as individuals but as types. Since he does not subscribe to them as the torchbearers of civilization, therefore his representation of them is always based on nationalistic discourse. That is the reason why they are representation shows them as hegemonic forces which single-handedly want expansion of their empire. However, it must be noticed that the perception of the Africans about the Whites was not altogether negative but it evolved over time. For example, at the moment of their advent in Kenya, they were discerned as "people with clothes like butterflies . . . strangers with a scalded skin. . . ." and even for a church they were "given a temporary shelter" (Thiong'O: 1996; 10). The very perception of them as with butterfly clothes and provision of the space for a religious seminary itself indicated that the Africans were welcoming and did not have an all-exclusive approach. Though the whites were considered as *strange* and were regarded as *Others* yet they were still accepted and were given the rights to perform rituals. Ngugi shows them as not identical with Africans in their appearance, demeanour and ideology yet they were not altogether rejected.

Later, the whites are shown as otherworldly, nefarious, hypocrites, duplicitous and perfidious who had masked themselves in the religious garb and were endeavouring to justify their claims of fulfilling the divine duty of civilizing the *uncivilized*. But this didn't change the perception of the Africans about the Whites nor did the former give any licence to the later to undertake their so called mission. Since the natives still perceived the whites as *strangers*, therefore, they struggled to alienate them from them on account of their being others. Since the natives had never had any point of affiliation and affinity ascribed to the invaders, that's why their perception, which gave white their identity as aliens, kept fostering in the hearts and minds of the natives despite all the whites could do to accept them as identical beings. Even the racial representation by the blacks was carried out and the white skin of the colonizers was proved to be an anathema for them. At many points in the narrative, they cast a contemptuous and scornful look at them and their white skin appeared to them as so much

cauterized or scorched that, “the black outside had peeled off” (Ibid). It is quite evident that the Africans considered the whites as not else but the bodies with the burnt skin thus, at least in their textual world, putting and pushing them to the marginality. That also shows that the whites would not qualify to be normal humans and their complexion was not perfection but a malformation or deficiency. This absence, to the blacks was a very reason for them to glee, feel superior and cast an inferior look on the whites.

Apart from the racial discrimination, the natives also mocked at the Christian mythical structures that had structured their religious beliefs. The apprehensions of the natives include many meta-narratives of the Christian religious ideology. They can't help but laugh at the idea of trinity, the crucifixion and other such religious concepts. To them, it was all but unbelievable and a jejune thought and belief to share that “God would let himself be nailed to a tree” (Thiongo: 1996;13). The Africans were either pagans or had different myths about the ontology of gods/deities but the idea of crucifixion was wholly new to them. It was an all shattering and thus an unbelievable concept for them who would always consider God as over and beyond human limits and who transcends all those limits and spaces. To them, God was an omnipotent being and how could an omnipotent being would be incarcerated, punished and hanged by the mortals. This tug of war between the mortals vs. immortals and its results were quite disturbing for the Africans. In order to avoid such questions, the colonizers would allure and incite the natives through hymns and while the natives were busy singing, the colonizers kept grabbing more and more lands. The so called philanthropy of the whites was now being exposed when they were shown acquiring and exploiting the local resources which led to resentment and anger of the local bigwigs who surmised that they had been duped, deceived and hoodwinked by the invading white Christians to expand their empire and hegemonies all the powers in their own hands. The elders of the land were shocked to notice that behind the “smiling and laughing face of the whites there was a long line of other red strangers who carried, not the Bible, but the sword” (Thiongo: 1996; 24). These swords were the weapons of the whites to counter, crush and eliminate any kind of mutiny if it was hatched by the locals.

At certain occasions it transpired that the whites would not hesitate to misconstrue, distort, twist and tailor the teachings and notions of Bible in order to suit their politico-economic ends. In one of the instances, Kihika's teacher in the school discussed some lines from Bible which hinted about the circumcision of the women and interpreted that as a heathen customs and announced that authoritatively that being Christians they were not supposed to practice such things. But, Kihika had a different point of view. He encountered his teacher in the class and was of the view that Bible no directions at all about the circumcision of the women and all the stories were merely the figments of the imagination of the clergy. As a result the whole group of students felt stunned and an overall ambiance of wrath and revenge overwhelmed everything around signalling bad omen. (Thiongo: 1996; 24-25). That is why the students were awe-struck and terrified.

This resulted into same parochial and tunnel view of the clergy which charged the boy with blasphemy and had saved himself by running away from the show that had been arranged in the church to pronounce the punishment. The unequivocal authority established by the whites was meant to denounce and punish all who would dare to resist; physically as well as intellectually. The attitude of the colonizers was that of intolerant tyrants who would not spare any move to unleash the horrors and terrors in the form of an onslaught. The British also laughed when the stories of Indian freedom struggle were narrated to them by Kihika. To them, all was a farce and the whites were mighty enough to quell the resistance in whatever form it would surface. (Thiongo: 1996; 45-46).

The representation of the Whites on the basis of race and religion was not the only type of representation that Ngugi's narrative carries out. The very shelter of the whites was not allowed within the premis is of the native population rather it was allowed *yards away*, suggesting that the whites and non-whites were not identical and hence were like two parallel railway tracks that would never merge no matter how approximate they remain. The teachings and preaching's of the whites, at times, would not make any sense to them, and they would term them as mad, lunatics, outlandish and abnormal beings whose senses might have ceased their imagination or may be “the hot water must have gone into their head” (Thiongo: 1996; 28). Apart from religious practices, the claims of the whites regarding geographical and cultural contexts were also looked down upon by the natives and they would represent them as liars and boasters, braggarts and blusterers. The claims of the white man about their country of origin where they were being ruled and governed by a noble, majestic and a

mighty Queen were mocked at by the natives as it was totally against their own ideas of governance and manhood. Therefore, they made fun of the “eccentric man” and considered him as a creature who has lost its wits (Thiong’O: 1996; 29). What really startled and ultimately shocked the Africans was the very idea of a woman’s rule, the homage that she receives from all the men and women alike, the obedience that the people that they manifest, and the aspirations of the whites to spread the benevolence of the Queen to the rest of the world especially Kenya is nothing more than a joke for the Kenyans. They could not, even in their wildest dreams, imagine that the empire was being run not by a man/king but a woman/queen. It led them to believe that perhaps the whites were impotent and therefore were being ruled by a woman. The Kenyans in fact had already been through this transition of the women rule and were now out of that circle. Therefore, the natives believed that the whites were still grappling with the idea of women rule and had yet to evolve in the political sense too to reach the evolutionary stage of the natives. The Kenyans, in their conception, had brought an end to the women-rule by impregnating them. But, it appeared to them that the whites had not been able to do so, and that was the reason why they were still being ruled by a woman. Harrow Kenneth sums up the whole situation in the following words;

The protecting shadow of the Christian woman, the white man’s benevolence and protection, that hang over the land like a sword, only form part of the larger irony of history for which the appearance of changing events is belied by the recurrence of oppression.(Harrow: 2010; 258)

In addition, there is yet another potent rationale about men’s impotence and the rule of the women; the men were unable to govern and a woman had ascended the Kenyan throne. But that period was over for them. It was narrated that a woman ruler had “removed all her clothes, and danced naked in the moonlight” (Thiong’O 1996; 36). So, it was concluded that the women were unsuitable to become effective and suitable governors and they were prone to be carried away in the flow of emotions combined with a sense of superiority imbibed in the very genesis of the civilization of the natives which was labelled as strange, insane and eccentric. They are shown to be too weak to rule the country as well as to *manage* their women.

At another level the whites are depicted as a violent, inhuman, callous, and ruthless creature who unleashed their wrath over the locals for being non-compliant, rebellious and non-conformist. The natives who raised their voices against colonial aggression and invasion were silenced mercilessly and as a result they had rejected the rule of the white man because it had deprived them of their “freedom”, and “land”. They also expressed their discontentment by referring to all the ills that the whites’ rule had brought them; tax, forced labour, homelessness and poverty. (Ogude: 2010; 91). Therefore, the rise of rebellion/freedom movement seemed inevitable.

Contrary to the claims of the whites about themselves as harbingers of modernity and civilization, the natives perceived them as quite otherwise; the harbingers of barbarism, brutality, exploitation, injustice, division, bloodshed and mass massacres. This exploitation was not limited to the native bodies but extended to their produce and resources too. Whereas the locals starved, the treasures of the empire were stashed with gold, ivory and other produce from the local mines. The teachings of Bible had been replaced by the teachings of the empire; lust, loot, plunder, kill and exterminate the brutes. Since the natives were not unaware of the ongoing situation, they attempted to convey their grievance at many occasions and through different mediums. At one stage Kihika explains it to his fellows that when they participated in the rituals in the church, the clergy asked them to close their eyes and connect with God. When they opened their eyes, their possessions, including land, freedom and homes were gone. As for Mubia, 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. (Thiong’O: 1996; 19)

The speeches made by Kihika were so intense, powerful and convincing that they really moved the people from inside out and the people were recharged against the occupation of their lands and distortion of their culture by the whites. Kihika unmasked the covetous schemes of the colonizers and this narrative appealed and ignited the people against such oppression. He had represented the whites as cunning, mischievous, shrewd and lusty fellows whose interests lied not in the uplift mobility of the people, as they had claimed, but serving the interests of the Queen and the Empire. The result was as expected; treachery, betrayal and ultimately elimination. It so happened that Kihika

was betrayed by one of his close aides named Mugo and his dead body kept hanging on the tree for quite a number of days. In this way, he was made an example for all the dissenting voices. Such brutal occupation was not confined to the borders of Kenya only but had extended to wherever the British had established their settlements. Although the places were different yet the stories were the same. When Kihika and Wambuku are deliberating on the confiscation of their lands by the colonial masters, they overtly conceive them as usurp us stating from whoever the patches of the land were confiscated, “it did not belong to the white man”(Thiong’O: 1996; 20). The resistance and counter resistance continued for all the time, not only in the physical world but also in textual and imaginative world of the minds. For example, in their attempts to *Other* the whites, the natives would carry out their mimicry, demean them by mocking at them, belittle them by cracking racial jokes against them and involve themselves in their mock-imitation. At one of such occasions, during a tea party, Wambuku denounced the practice of taking tea outside by yelling at the people saying, “have you become Europeans”(Thiong’O: 1996; 51). In fact, he was quite upset to realise that it was not only the loss of the land but the culture and values too that was taking place with the speed of light.

The whites are shown as biased, prejudiced, and indifferent to the natives right from the beginning of their encounters with them. These essential *traits* are so deeply imbedded in them that that they appear to be inherited and pre-meditated notions. In all their discourse patterns, observations and conception, they seem to have been bereft of thinking with impartiality. It was not only the administrative machinery but the missionaries too who had grown such negative thinking patterns about the natives. For example, a researcher aiming at setting up a study centre at Githima addressed a letter to the Governor for seeking permission and to his utter dismay his own fellows mocked at him saying that he had gone mad. At this very attempt, they mocked at him and were surprised. Therefore, “Mad they thought him: science in dark Africa”? (Thiong’O: 1996; 33). So, introducing science in the Dark Continent was an anathema merely because the continent was inhabited by the blacks. Science which is the only medium that does not take into account anything on racial basis has been coloured by the whites even in this context. Such racism also erupts at one more occasion when the racial slur translates into stereotypes through which the Africans are undermined. When Mugo, after being held, was interrogated by the white man whose name was Thompson who was highly racial and judgemental because to him it was “difficult to tell one black face from another: they looked so much alike, masks” (Thiong’O: 1996; 63). It shows that every individual involved in the colonial expedition was programmed as such to look down upon the natives.

In such and many other ways, the blacks are perceived as types, lacking individuality. And on the other hand, Ngugi presents the whites as stereotypists who consider blacks as having undistinguishable features. The whites even rebuke the blacks calling them vermin and in the same manner he asks his officer to “eliminate the vermin” (Thiong’O: 1996; 67) by pointing out his finger toward him. The ethical and moral fabric of the whites is also shown as flimsy and their hatred for blacks is also evident in another scene when Dr. Lynd and Thompson are busy in a conversation followed by a killing of their dog. Mrs. Thompson’s reaction after the killing of her dog is reminiscent of the killings of the blacks in the African continent however; the scale of the dog’s tragedy is presented as much higher than the loss of black lives. Although Thompson asks her not to worry but she seems to have lost control of their thoughts and full of venom against the blacks stating that “I hate them. How can I help it? Every time I see them, I remember-I remember” (Thiong’O: 1996: 23). This callousness towards the fellow Africans is beyond any proportion.

It was not the principles that the whites were serving but the vested interests. The similar kind of impression is formed by Gatu, a detainee from Nyeri, who believes that, “the white man just wants to break us with lies” (Thiong’O: 1996: 59). So, lies are not just naive practices being practised by the whites rather they are strategies to strengthen their hegemonic control, foster their loot of resources and hide their hideous plans of subjugating, controlling and ruling the *dark* continent. He renders the whites as mere cowards because Napoleon’s “voice alone made the British urinate and shit on their calves inside their houses” (Ibid). The colonizers are cowards when confronted by the mighty.

The whites, in *A Grain of Wheat*, are shown as compilers, editors and propagandists of lies, myths and doctored narratives. For example, Thompson, a civil servant in Africa, scribbled notes about the Africans that were titled as *Prospero in Africa*, which run like the following: “The Negro is a child, and with children, nothing can be done without the use of authority” (Thiong’O: 1996: 44), and later on he maintains that remember the African is a born actor, that’s why he finds it so easy to

lie. Suddenly, I spat into his face. I don't know why, but I did it.(Ibid). But this act of excess brought no remorse in him.

The whites, and in particular, Thompson believes that the natives are at the infancy of evolution and therefore, they need to be instructed, monitored and punished in order to keep them on the track set by the whites.

The portrayal of the whites as outcasts, others, irrational, immoral, obscurantists, ruthless and as dwarfs has been quite obvious throughout the narrative *A Grain of Wheat*. The whites are perceived to be the evils incarnate and the natives seems to have been judging them through dark glasses. In their efforts to subvert the epithets ascribed to them by the whites, the natives seem to be returning the same to them. It is interesting to observe that the whites had been charging the natives as lazy, idle and lethargic but in return the blacks also call them by the same epithets. It is revealed through a success story of a black man who became rich over the period of time and his journey from scratch to prosperity is marked with sheer hard work. So, Gikonyo became a living example that every mother would mention to others saying, "their son was not afraid to make his hands dirty. He never slept to midday like a European" (Thiong'O: 1996; 45). It appears that the Europeans were represented as sluggish and idle when compared to the Kenyans. On the other hand it also shows that for the Kenyans, every white figure represented Europe no matter where he might belong to.

The whites' oppressive strategies, which manoeuvred the resources as well as the whole administrative system to their own benefit, helped them rule with the iron fist. The repressive state apparatuses were used in order to exercise their control over the natives. To this end they had established many detainee camps in order to intimidate, tame, control and keep the natives at bay. For example, at one of the occasions, a detainee speaks of those horrible tales excoriating the whites. Ngugi chronicles that in the following manners;

The rhetoric tone was seized by the detainees who rose to speak. They talked of suffering under the white man and illustrated this with episodes which revealed their deep love of Kenya. In between each speaker, people would sing: Kenya is the country of the black people. (Thiong'O: 1996; 65)

In these and many other instances, the natives show their respect for their own country and repudiate the oppressive forces that had been occupying their land for so long. The suspicions about the whites had been so deeply engraved in the minds of the locals that even the train was thought to be an *iron snake*, although the snake was not harmful because it was being touched by the red strangers themselves(Thiong'O: 1996; 71). Everything conceived, strategized, implemented and executed was dubious in the eyes and imagination of the natives. But finally, when they looked at the whites touching and journeying through the trains, it appeared to be a sigh and sign of relief for them.

The mimicry and stereotyping of the whites continues by the natives through the stories of Gatu who narrates an unprecedented yet imaginary meeting with the Queen of England in a detainees' camp,

"You can imagine my surprise when I saw the famous Queen-Queen of England. She said (mimics her voice): 'Why are you living in this dark place? It is like a cold, dark cell in prison.' 'I like it where I am.' I told her lying on the ground. She said (mimicks her):However, before I could say anything more, she had called in her soldiers who bound my hands and feet and drew me out of the valley. (Thiong'O: 1996; 108-109)

The above extract shows how even the Queen of England was made the object of stereotypical discourse and the highest offices of the whites were also subject to ridicule and representation. The mimicry and imitation of her manners as well as of her demeanour reduces her to a stature of a common person who becomes a laughing stock for the natives. It also brings into account the westerner's "moral laxity and sexual degeneracy" (McLeod: 2007; 22), very much the subject matter of Orientalism.

The whites are also shown to be suffering from superiority complex to such a great extent that they cannot imagine that the blacks can live without them at all. In his deliberations with Margery, Thompson concludes that, 'Africa cannot, cannot do without Europe.' Margery looked up at him, but said nothing". (Thiong'O: 1996; 166)

The whites are so sure of their dependency and inability for self rule that the sustenance and survival of the blacks looks bleak to them. The governing structures of the whites, their administrative skills, and overall colonial infrastructure are considered to be the achievements of the whites par excellence. Ngugu, here too, shows that the whites consider themselves as inevitable and inevitable for the well-being of the blacks. When Mugo visited the office of the District Officer to report the whereabouts of Kihika, the response of the white officer was highly condemnable and humiliating. Ngugi shows him as a giant, swelling in his might, and suffering from superiority complex. After listening to Mugo, threatened him by saying that 'Many people have already given us false information concerning this terrorist. Hear? Because they want the reward.' (Thiong'O: 1996; 199).

This all leaves the readers and critics doubtless that the result of begetting hatred is always hatred. That is why before the advent of Uhuru, Koinareached Dr.Lynd'sabode and shouted at her saying,

"Let me never see you again in this country,' he told her as he felled her dog with panga blows, 'do you hear? Let me never see your face in Kenya again!'"⁴¹. (Thiong'O: 1996; 21)

All this boiled down to an armed resistance against the whites and when Uhuru started the blacks treated and represented the whites as nothing else but the arch-enemies.

CONCLUSION

The detestation of the blacks towards the colonial masters was mainly because the later had deemed the former as inhuman/sub-humans or animals, who invariably behave violently and savagely and never yield to the whites' *notions of civilization*. In addition, they also held that the whites' seizure of physical and cultural resources was wholly iniquitous and thus unacceptable. In reality, Ngugi held that if colonialism involves colonizing the mind of the target community, then resistance to it requires decolonization of the mind, and therefore, in this process of decolonization the iconoclastic images of the whites were to be removed, broken and made to crumble down from the minds of the colonized. This was possible partly through armed resistance and partly on representation of them as inhuman, irrational, schemer and at the bottom of the ladder of civilization. Thus, like Achebe, Ngugi endeavours to (re)construct the identity of the colonized and categorize the whites through all the representative discourses and stereotypical jargons that were extensively used for the target communities in their discourses.

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