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## Heroism in A Grain of Wheat

### Eileen Julien

There can be little question that Kihika, the rebel in Ngugi wa Thiongo's *A Grain of Wheat*, is a hero. With respect to Mugo, however, opinion may be divided. Mugo is a traitor who finally admits his treason. To be sure, Mugo's peers, the people of Thabai, are deeply puzzled by the sense of his acts. Yet Ngugi's choice of narrative form can direct the reader's interpretation, for the novel proposes an expansion of the concept of heroism to include not only the magnanimous gestures of an exceptional man but also ironic self-discovery by the average man.

Mugo knows all too painfully the impossibility in his own life of the 'old' heroism embodied by the legendary Kihika. Noble, passionate, single-minded, caring little for his own material existence, Kihika dominates the pre-independence world of Thabai. He is articulate and speaks out forcefully against the British who have robbed the Kenyan people of their lands and freedom. It is his vision and daring that reflect the mood of the times and announce the impending crisis. Kihika's personal heroes are mythic figures, Gandhi and Christ, who have changed the history of mankind and who are immortalized in legend. He thus envisions for himself, too, an idealized role as leader:

Unknown to those around him, Kihika's heart hardened toward 'these people', long before he had ever encountered a white face. Soldiers came back from the war and told stories of what they had seen in Burma, Egypt, Palestine and India: wasn't Mahatma Gandhi, the saint, leading the Indian people against British rule? Kihika fed on these stories: his imagination and daily observation told him the rest; from early on, he had visions of himself, a saint, leading the Gikuyu people to freedom and power.<sup>1</sup>

It is the struggle against the British, the Emergency and Mau Mau that create for Kihika the occasion to realize his ideals for both

himself and his people. By lashing out at the enemy of his people, Kihika proves himself to be a man of 'great deeds and noble qualities'. He eventually becomes a martyr for Kenyan freedom. His bravery and death earn him the admiration of his fellows, and he becomes an inspiration for them as did Gandhi and Christ for him. Kihika is clearly a hero in the eyes of both the people of Thabai and in those of the implied reader; it is through battle and the sword that Kihika's dreams come to fruition.

Just as Kihika dominates the prelude to the novel's action (pre-independence), Mugo dominates the action itself, which starts when freedom has been won and independence is to begin. Before independence, Mugo, an orphan, lives with a cruel aunt. Unlike Kihika, he is lonely, introspective and taciturn. Yet he, too, aspires to be part of the community. Mugo feels rootless when his aunt dies:

Whom could he now call a relation? He wanted somebody, anybody, who would use the claims of kinship to do him ill or good. Either one or the other as long as he was not left alone, an outsider.

He turned to the soil. He would labour, sweat, and through success and wealth force society to recognize him. (p. 9)

Mugo's dreams of becoming prosperous and respected are shattered when Kihika comes to him and tries to pull him into the tide of violent political events. Panicked by the prospect of losing his life to one side or the other, Mugo betrays Kihika to the British – an act that the text clearly shows to be a moral failure. Yet the text also contrasts this ugly act of weakness with Mugo's many virtues. Despite his fear, Mugo is a man of courage and generous instincts which both the village and the implied reader recognize. He reaches out to the old woman who has lost her son. He defends a pregnant girl from the brutality of the homeguards, and in prison he never bends under the torture of his captors. Nonetheless it is the burden of guilt that weighs on him now – the knowledge of his weakness and treachery in the face of the village's deep admiration for his supposed heroism. When the novel begins, Uhuru is but a few days away, and Mugo is now faced with a new challenge: the Party has asked that he, a hero of the Kenyan struggle, lead the Uhuru ceremonies in Thabai. Mugo must now come to terms with himself. The only honourable course is to admit to himself his own imperfection and frailty and to confess the responsibility for Kihika's death before the village.

The challenges laid before Kihika and Mugo differ in several respects. Kihika's enemy is the British, a plain and external threat; his strategy is physical combat in which he risks his life. In contrast, Mugo's enemy is his own fears and desires; his is an internal, mental struggle in which he may lose both his life and his fragile honour. Kihika's objectives are clear and straightforward – the expulsion of the British – but Mugo's are less obvious and the rewards less certain, for there will be no tangible laurels when Mugo, true to himself at last, admits his crime.

Yet, there is an important similarity between these two struggles. Although Mugo's declaration takes place in the non-glorious world of everyday life, it, like Kihika's defiance, requires immense courage. The narrator himself likens Mugo's final effort to that of a warrior:

His heart pounded against him, he felt sweat in his hands, as he walked through the huge crowd. His hands shook, his legs were not firm on the ground. In his mind, everything was clear and final. He would stand there and publicly own the crime. He held on to his vision. Nothing, not even the shouting and the songs and the praises would deflect him from this purpose. It was the clarity of his vision which gave him courage as he stood before the microphone and the sudden silence. (p. 204)

The other characters may grope for the meaning of Mugo's startling revelation and of his contradictory deeds, but this passage leaves the implied reader with a strong sense of Mugo's heroism.

If Kihika's heroism is achieved through brave deeds in physical combat, Mugo's is attained through the seemingly unlikely medium of language – the public forum through which we discover ourselves. From his youth, Kihika is gifted with words and the power to move his listeners – Mumbi, his friends, or compatriots – with his beliefs and visions. In contrast, Mugo rarely speaks at all. The narrator stresses Mugo's shy silence by stating early on in the novel that Mugo had given 'only one real speech' in his life, during a public meeting in which the returning detainees were presented to the people. 'His voice, colourless, rusty, startled him. He spoke in a dry monotone, tired, almost as if telling of scenes he did not want to remember' (p. 58). As Mugo describes the nightmare of the prison camp and brings back to consciousness the memory of what has happened, he faces the truth of his experience. For a brief moment he achieves a kind of purity and truly awakens from his numbed existence. Suddenly he finds that he is no longer talking of things as they were but rather things as he would have

liked them to be, of the dream of home and love so dear to him who had none. Realizing the lie, he stops abruptly, leaving the audience suspended. This speech before the people of Thabai is the first occasion on which Mugo begins to articulate and thus to recognize the sense of his life. It is a bitter truth, one that he wishes to embellish and from which he finally turns away. The second and final such moment occurs on Uhuru day when Mugo admits his part in Kihika's death: 'As soon as the first words were out, Mugo felt light. A load of many years was lifted from his shoulders. He was free, sure, confident' (p. 204).

Language is the means of self-knowledge, a new heroism represented by Mugo. Indeed all the characters in the novel who move towards self-discovery do so through the act of talking. Little action in fact takes place in the story. From the moment Mugo is introduced until the race on Uhuru day, the story consists primarily of encounters in which the principal activity is an exchange of words. The leaders of the Party come to invite Mugo to speak; Gikonyo then confides in him; Mumbi, too, unburdens her heart to him, and so on. Yet the form which these words take is not dynamic dialogue so much as the voice of a character (sometimes rendered by the narrator) reconstructing aloud his or her past. By the same token, the only main characters in the novel who never ease their troubled consciences and who continue to lead unfulfilling lives are those who have no meaningful communication: Margery and John Thompson and Karanja. In *A Grain of Wheat* silence is accompanied by introspection, inertia and self-centredness which impede the integration of the individual into the whole. Speech implies sharing, energy and other-directedness which offer a path to personal fulfilment within the social context. Words are the new 'deeds' that enable Mugo and the others to unravel the sense of their experiences and heroically look at themselves for what they are. Language is the tool, par excellence, for the sounding of oneself; it is with Mugo that heroism shifts from bold deeds to truthful words.

Now if both Kihika and Mugo can be viewed as heroes, they are quite different with respect to depth of character. Given both his ideals and his achievements, Kihika can be likened to heroes typical of romance or epic. Such figures are, Northrop Frye tells us in *An Anatomy of Criticism*, 'superior in degree to other men' and sometimes to their environment as well.<sup>2</sup> Like other warrior heroes in literature (for example Beowulf, Roland, Shaka, Sundiata), Kihika is elevated above his companions and comrades. Of course,

since *A Grain of Wheat* is highly mimetic and projects a replica of actuality, Kihika has no marvellous attributes, magic and supernatural powers, as these and other such heroes do. Ngugi makes the superiority of Kihika's intellect and the intensity of his commitment quite believable. Yet Kihika remains, even in the realistic mode, an exceptional individual. His home is the forest which represents in many older narratives a world apart from 'reality', in which time is of a different rhythm and nature is enchanted and volatile. This sylvan setting and the physical distance itself that separates Kihika from the village reinforce the distinction between him and his people. Furthermore, in the fashion of tragic heroes of romance and epic, his death marks 'the passing of time, of the old order changing and yielding to a new one'.<sup>3</sup> Kihika's demise helps usher in the dawn of Kenyan independence.

Like the heroes of older narrative forms then, Kihika loses in resemblance to the reader what he gains in glory. His death locks him into the purity of his youthful idealism, a purity that makes him more appropriate to a narrative universe of absolute heroes and villains. Because Kihika is exceptional, he wanders in the shadows of the novel where, illuminated by little light, he has little depth. He is a static, 'flat' character who is not seen in the context of the workaday world. Kihika does not grow or change, two fundamental requirements for mimetic novels such as this one. His perfection makes him seem inappropriate for the novel. These remarks, however, are not a negative judgement of Ngugi's art but refer merely to the workings of the narrative. Kihika is integral to the sense of *A Grain of Wheat*. His virtue and portrayal distance him from the reader and thereby contribute to the more moving effect of Mugo's victory.

In *The Nature of Narrative* Robert Scholes offers a description of a hero common in the days of Aristotle. Scholes' remarks, though they were not made with reference to realistic characters, help pinpoint Kihika's role in Ngugi's novel and explain Mugo's hostile reaction to Kihika's idealism:

Together with the obsessed, the perverted, the weak, and the foolish, the hero is a mere passive product of his heredity and environment. Like the other types, however, the hero still refuses to admit that he has no control, no hand in the shaping of his own character and his circumstances. But in his case the pretense makes him insufferable in the eyes of the others. Unlike them, he bears no burden of guilt, of shame, or despair. To the unthinking, his quick wit, his beautiful body, his physical courage, and his poise still merit praise, as though he

made them himself. He is unsympathetic to the dark, inarticulate, passionate underside of human nature, for he does not experience it himself and he cannot believe that it is ever beyond one's ability to control.<sup>4</sup>

Kihika sees himself as the arbiter of his own and his people's destiny, but Mugo is suspicious of Kihika's sense of control. Mugo feels that Kihika is a 'mere passive product' whose freedom to choose is not of his own making but rests on Kihika's having had the love and support of a family. Mugo hates Kihika because the latter, having all those things that everyone (especially Mugo) desires and having done nothing (in Mugo's eyes) to earn them, squanders them all for illusory notions of grandeur and freedom.

Mindless of the fact that his fervour and heroism seem 'make-believe' and beyond the grasp of the average man, Kihika comes to Mugo. On that occasion Kihika admits that he himself knows fear, but Mugo is hardly persuaded; Kihika's ability to put that fear aside still seems superhuman. Kihika appears to have little awareness of the magnitude of imperfection in human life. This ignorance of human nature, his insensitivity to Mugo's fragile dreams and his presumption of Mugo's collaboration make Kihika still more intolerable to Mugo.

Also, while Kihika is hardly the 'mere passive product' that Mugo believes him to be, Kihika's righteousness and strength are nonetheless enigmatic. The novel presents a number of events from Kihika's youth which reveal a growing commitment to Kenyan freedom, but there is no sense of a struggle on Kihika's part in making this commitment. The implied reader cannot share that process. It is as though Kihika's identity and goals have always been what they are; he has always known what truth and justice demanded: 'Unknown to those around him, Kihika's heart hardened toward "these people", long before he had ever encountered a white face' (p. 73, my emphasis). Because Kihika's loftiness and portrayal remove him from the heart of the narrative, *A Grain of Wheat* is, above all, Mugo's story; it is his struggle that wins the empathy of the reader.

Unlike Kihika, Mugo is a flawed and intensely reflective individual, and he is for that reason a more interesting and weighty character. Frye tells us that the protagonist of the mimetic novel is 'isolated by a weakness which appeals to our sympathy because it is on our own level of experience'.<sup>5</sup> In Frye's view such a novel is, at its best, 'the study of the isolated mind, the story of how someone recognizably like ourselves is broken by a conflict between the

inner and outer world, between imaginative reality and the sort of reality which is established by social consensus'.<sup>6</sup> It is the resolution of this conflict and the individual's coming into an awareness of himself that the novel presents.

Mugo is a character who, in his complexity, resembles the reader. He wants desperately to be integrated into the whole but is isolated by his crime and guilt; he is searching for a way to give meaning to his life. In Mugo we find the great tension that makes *A Grain of Wheat* a compelling story: Mugo is a character 'with enough crudeness for . . . *hamartia* [imperfection] but enough sensitivity for ultimate discovery and self-understanding'.<sup>7</sup> Mugo is human in both the most glorious sense and in the most pathetic sense, such that his admission of his human nature is a victory – not for absolute virtue but for humility. This is a victory within the grasp of all the people of Thabai. Mugo's example is not lost, for Gikonyo, at least, sees its significance:

'He was a brave man, inside . . . He stood before much honour, praises were heaped on him. He would have become a chief. Tell me another person who would have exposed his soul for all the eyes to peck at . . . Remember that few people in that meeting are fit to lift a stone against that man. Not unless I—we-too—in turn open our hearts naked for the world to look at.' (p. 202)

Mugo's act calls upon the people of Thabai to look at themselves honestly as he has done and to accept the unvarnished truth that 'pure' heroism is but an ideal. Real people are rarely so pure, or their antagonists simple. Ironically, Mugo comes to accept a burden he had earlier refused:

No sooner had he finished speaking than the silence around, the lightness within, and the sudden freedom pressed heavy on him . . . He was conscious of himself, of every step he made, of the images that rushed and whirled through his mind with only one constant thread: so he was responsible for whatever he had done in the past, for whatever he would do in the future. The consciousness frightened him. (p. 204)

It is an existential consciousness that fills Mugo, one that Kihika had possessed – intuitively, virtually without struggle – long before him. Thus Mugo's journey of self-discovery leads him to embrace both the existential burden of acting (with its inevitable responsibility for those acts) and the disturbing but honest view of human nature as a complex mixture of strength and weakness.

Through its juxtaposition of Kihika and Mugo then, *A Grain of Wheat* moves from an 'epic' to a 'novelistic' notion of heroism, from

bold, stirring deeds to a quiet, unsettling awareness of self. The text furthermore shifts its focus from the external threat to well-being, such as infamous colonial powers, to the more frightening internal menace of weaknesses, fears and doubts. Thus we find that the struggle for Kenyan independence in *A Grain of Wheat* produces an 'epic' hero whereas the everyday world of success and failure produces a hero appropriate to the novel. The implication is not that noble actions are no longer needed – we have but to consider Mugo's good instincts and bravery and his final acceptance of the consequences of his acts to know that the value of noble actions is not being challenged. Rather, the novel emphasizes that it is unquestionably valiant and indispensable to see oneself honestly. This theme looks toward the future rather than the past and is expressed most succinctly in Wangari's admonition to her son Gikonyo:

'Let us now see what profit it will bring you, to go on poisoning your mind with these things when you *should have accepted* and sought how best to *build your life*. But you, like a foolish child, have never wanted to *know what happened* . . . You are a man now. Read your own heart, and know yourself.' (pp. 153–4, my emphasis)

Wangari's words subtly recall the novel's emphasis on language as a tool of self-discovery ('Read your own heart'). The old woman equates manhood with self-knowledge, honesty and the determination to carry on. Therein lies the novel's blueprint for heroism. Dwelling on past disappointments is of no value. One must start anew with humble acceptance of what is past.

So it is that Mugo's actions (rather than Kihika's) set the example for those around him. Characters such as Mumbi, Kariuki, Githua (and, of course, Kihika) have a romantic longing for the simple and elegant act of bravery (frequently associated with war or dangerous adventures). Githua, for example, claims that his leg was wounded during the struggle against the British, though it was in fact lost in a lorry accident:

'It makes his life more interesting to himself [another character explains]. He invents a meaning for his life, you see. Don't we all do that? And to die fighting for freedom sounds more heroic than to die by accident' (p. 133).

Mumbi, too, seeks the fulfilment that comes from virtue and self-sacrifice:

Her dark eyes had a dreamy look that longed for something the village

could not give. She lay in the sun and ardently yearned for a life in which love and heroism, suffering, and martyrdom were possible. She was young. She had fed on stories in which Gikuyu women braved the terrors of the forest to save people, of beautiful girls given to the gods as sacrifice before the rains.

But the workaday world and the motivation of human beings in less extraordinary circumstances defy those clear criteria and unequivocal categories of heroism. Mugo's examples affirms that heroism is no longer the province of gods and demi-gods but is possible for any and all. It is no longer a specific deed but an *approach* to life and self. Life – with its not so clear choices, its relativity in morality and truth, its ambiguity – rarely produces pure heroes. Rather, one's goal should be to *live heroically*: to seek the truth about oneself, to face one's choices honestly, and to bear the responsibility for one's deeds.

Since the first years of independence in particular, many African novels have depicted the arduous task of re-assessment and coming to grips with the stubborn fact of human limitation. A great number have given in to a crushing sense of hopelessness. They document a crisis but do not transform it.

Readers may decry such fiction because it fails to meet its potential, that is, to render its 'singular and indispensable insight into the poetic, dramatic, or mythological dimensions and possibilities of the human situation'.<sup>8</sup> Because Ngugi ambitiously obeys an aesthetic impulse to search for heroism in new and complex settings, *A Grain of Wheat* is, on the contrary, a mimetic novel that does not yield to a glum naturalism. Ngugi's fiction is more powerful, his sober vision more haunting because he never abandons this prerogative of narrative to seek in one stroke both truth and beauty.

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## NOTES

1. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (James Ngugi), *A Grain of Wheat*, London, Heinemann (AWS 36), 1967, reset 1975, p. 73. All subsequent citations are taken from reset 1975 edition.
2. Northrop Frye, *An Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957, p. 33.
3. *ibid.*, pp. 36–7.

4. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 152.
5. Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
6. *ibid.*, p. 39.
7. Scholes, *op. cit.*, p. 261.
8. Albert Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1973, p. 14.