

**Simona KLIMKOVA**

Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra  
sklimkova@ukf.sk

**HISTORY AND FICTION: NGŪGĪ WA THIONG'O'S VISION**

**Abstract:** Since postcolonial writing has always been rooted in the historical process of colonization, the narratives, especially in the early stages of postcolonial literature, bore an imprint of the historical development in the colonies. With local writers often addressing the pressing historical and political issues of that time and authors being seen as “beacons, soothsayers, and seers of political movements” (Boehmer), literature became implicated in the turmoil of public happenings. The paper seeks to examine the relation between history and fiction as presented in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s early novel *A Grain of Wheat*. Thiong’o, who is known for his zealous political activism, sees literature not only as a medium which reflects social reality but rather as a creative process that is conditioned by historical social forces and pressures. The paper challenges the concept of fiction as representation of history but also ruminates upon the role of Thiong’o’s writing within the context of Kenyan historiography.

**Key words:** postcolonial literature, history, politics, community, individualism

*History is very important in any people. How we look at our past is very important in determining how we look at and how we evaluate the present.*

(Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1978)

The rootedness of postcolonial writing in the historical process of colonialism and the subsequent post-independence period, often referred to as the period of neo-colonial rule, has shaped the character of postcolonial literary production to a large extent. In fact, the very term *postcolonial* defines the inevitable affiliation of this type of literature to the historical condition of colonialism and thus delineates its thematic scope as well. History, its critical reading and interpretation, as well as its implications for the present of postcolonial communities, became part and parcel of postcolonial agenda. Especially in the period preceding the liberation from colonial

rule and during the early stages of post-independence development, postcolonial writers addressed the pressing historical and political issues of their time, thus contributing to the revival of cultural nationalism. In an attempt to challenge and counter the colonial discourse and to reconstitute the sense of communal identity, shattered and repressed by colonialism, the writers recognized the power of the written word and frequently utilized the novel form for pragmatic purposes.

In this respect, literature played a crucial role in the recovery of national consciousness in the early stages of anti-imperialist struggle. It was within the realm of fictional stories that the notions of national identity, history and culture, shaped and influenced by the colonialist discourse, were challenged, tampered with and contested. According to Eleke Boehmer, this early moment of anti-imperialist resistance, manifested by vehement literary activism, *laid the ideological and strategic bedrock of later developments* (2005:96). The focus on the reinterpretation and revision of history was accompanied by a revival of national myths which contributed to the rising nationalist mobilization. There was a significant shift in literary rhetoric, a *moving away from colonial definitions, transgressing the boundaries of colonialist discourse*” to *“borrowing, taking over, or appropriating the ideological, linguistic, and textual forms of the colonial power* (ibid.:101). The postcolonial writer thus became an advocate of revision, recovery and mobilization.

Interestingly, in the context of African literature, from the 1930s onwards writers’ commitment to social and political issues was regarded by many intellectuals as a moral duty. In words of Chinua Achebe, *[...] an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant—like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames* (Achebe 1968). The pre-independence period in particular called for activism and involvement and many African writers were using literature as *a weapon of political liberation*, enlisting their work in the anti-colonialist cause (Boehmer 2005:175). There was an agreement that literature should be representative of the *moving spirit in the nationalist struggle* (ibid.) and that it should facilitate the much needed social transformation. Nadine Gordimer’s statement that politics occurs in African literature not as a vulgar interruption of the more exalted pursuits of life, but as fate (1973:33) embodies the accepted notion of the political character of African writing.

In that sense, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s understanding of the social commitment and responsibilities of a writer fully correspond with the abovementioned line of thought. Thiong’o, whose fiction and critical essays are characterized by his socialist visions, promotes active participation of writers in the process of social reconstruction and rejuvenation. *I think that any writer who is dealing with serious problems that confront an individual must write about the whole social and political society* (Thiong’o quoted in Sander, R. and B. Lindfors 2006:23). In his view, literature is seen not only as a mere tool of entertainment but rather as a

medium of social change; the real job of the writer is then to “raise consciousness of the people” (ibid.:37). Such an understanding of the purpose and function of literary production acknowledges the power and the potentialities of the written word within a larger socio-political context. The novel is then moulded in such a way so that it effectively mirrors and examines the outward reality and provides hints at possible improvements or the inevitable impetus to change.

Clearly, Thiong’o does not doubt the transformative power of literature. In fact, he strongly emphasizes the responsibility of the writer to react to historical, political or economic reality that s/he is a part of. In his book of essays *Writers in Politics*, he comments on this issue as follows: *A writer’s subject matter is history: i.e. the process of man acting on nature and changing it and in so doing acting on and changing himself. The entire changing relations of production and hence the changing power relations consequent on mutable modes of production is a whole territory of a writer’s literary concern* (Thiong’o 1981:72). Literature is then regarded not only as a medium which reflects social reality but rather as a vehicle for a creative transformation that is conditioned by historical social forces and pressures. *[I]t cannot elect to stand above or transcend economics, politics, class, race or what Achebe calls ‘the burning issue of the day’ because those very burning issues with which it deals take place within an economic, political, class and race context* (ibid.:6).

According to Thiong’o, however, the writer’s immersion in a particular socio-political situation compromises his neutrality. An impartial rendering of the outer reality is, in fact, seen as undesirable. Instead, the social responsibilities with which the writer is endowed require a clear delineation of his vision. As a spokesperson of a certain class position, he has to *articulate [his] world outlook which is in harmony with this or that class* (Thiong’o quoted in Sander, R. and B. Lindfors 2006:130). The same holds true for the writer’s stance towards the depiction of historical events. The need to counter the distorted views of the colonized countries and their history, as manifested by the imperialist discourse of European superpowers, drives his understanding of the writer’s commitment. In numerous interviews, Thiong’o repeatedly emphasizes the need to address and portray history *correctly*.<sup>1</sup> Such a position inevitably suggests a rather limited understanding of history and presupposes an ideological reading of the past and its appropriate

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., in 1975, Thiong’o suggested in an interview that *[...] literature must be able to freely and correctly mirror our society in all its strength and weaknesses* (Thiong’o quoted in Sander, R. and B. Lindfors 2006:95) Moreover, *[t]here is no writer who is apolitical. The point is: Whose politics is a writer espousing in his works?* Though the statements do not necessarily rule out a pluralist interpretation of historical and social events, they clearly point at an ideologically motivated understanding of reality which finds its reflection in the writer’s work. While Thiong’o does not explain his exact understanding of a *correct* reflection, his numerous statements regarding the purpose of art and literature suggest that the word might be tied to one’s political and social views. In Thiong’o’s case, his interviews as well as his extensive work, both fiction and non-fiction, point at his unwavering belief in the socialist vision which inevitably finds its reflection in his work (as this paper demonstrates).

literary representation. Thiong'o's strong affinity for socialist ideas thus posits him on the side of the peasantry, struggling against the imperial and, later, neo-colonial oppression.

*I believe that we in Africa or anywhere else for that matter have to use literature deliberately and consciously as a weapon of struggle in two ways: a) first, by trying as much as possible to correctly reflect the world of struggle in its stark reality, and b) secondly, by weighting our sympathies on the side of those forces struggling against national and class oppression and exploitation, say, against the entire system of imperialism in the world today* (Thiong'o quoted in Sander, R. and B. Lindfors 2006:246).

Thiong'o's fiction does not aim to be historically mimetic. Instead, history is seen as a terrain that is open to reinterpretation and revision<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, the author problematizes the concept of historical meaning "by blurring boundaries between national and individual events, between factual history and fiction, thus throwing into question the process by which subjects position themselves in history and the ways they might conceive and tell the story" (Kessler 1994:76). The novels not only document the history of the country, they also provide the author with the space to rewrite the history from the perspective of the formerly silent colonized subject who was believed to be deprived of his or her voice. *Ngugi posits narrative here as an agent of history because it provides the space for challenging our notions of national identities, uses of history, and ways in which they are deployed in power contestation in modern Kenya and Africa in general* (Ogude 1999:2). His novels thus not only reconstruct the history of the country but also take the liberty to modify and mould the historical narrative in such a way that suits his artistic and political purposes.

Thiong'o's early fiction, ranging from his debut novel *Weep not, Child* (1964) to *The River Between* (1965) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), verbalizes Kenyan historical experience with European colonialism. Patrick Williams suggests that it is possible to *read Ngugi's fictional output as an increasingly politically committed anatomizing of the troubled development of twentieth-century Kenya as a nation, or at least as a nation-state* (1999:17). Historical events, embedded in local and national politics, stand at the core of Thiong'o's narratives and emerge as a recurrent theme in his works, especially in *Weep not, Child* and *A Grain of Wheat* which derive their plot from events connected with the Mau Mau uprising, a turbulent period preceding the declaration of Kenyan independence in 1963. By returning to crucial historical moments and rewriting them from his perspective, Thiong'o counters the *simplistic European response to the African experience* (Thiong'o quoted in Sander, R. and B. Lindfors 2006:39) which often labelled the colonized culture as ahistorical.

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<sup>2</sup> While Thiong'o advocates a revision of the past, his interpretation is strongly influenced by his ideological background (See footnote 1) and is thus rather unilateral.

For this reason, the novels, especially the explicitly political *A Grain of Wheat*, resort to quoting significant historical personae, such as *Waiyaki Wa Hinga*, Jomo Kenyatta or Harry Thuku (founder of the Young Kikuyu Association), who become essential parts of the fictional accounts of Kenyan history. The second chapter of the novel provides a fairly detailed account of Kenyan resistance movement, recounting the struggles of the abovementioned leaders and thus accentuating the moment of resistance in African history. Waiyaki's death, as the narrator informs us, planted the seed of the latter Mau Mau movement, around which the novel revolves. *Waiyaki's blood contained within it a seed, a grain, which gave birth to a movement whose main strength thereafter sprang from a bond with the soil* (Thiong'o 1986:12). As the depiction of the history of the resistance movement progresses, the roles attributed to historical Kenyan leaders are gradually handed over to fictional characters, such as Kihika, who will carry the struggle for independence in the fictional realm of the novel.

While the grandnarrative of Kenyan history is often broken into a kaleidoscopic mosaic of personal, individualized mininarratives of Thiong'o's protagonists, historical facts and crucial events of historical significance are part and parcel of his narratives as they are great reminders of communal achievements. Hence, the communal (national) sense of identity is derived from a shared historical experience and that is why the invocation of the past, especially of the glorious moments of exceptional heroism and bravery, plays a crucial role in reconstituting national identity. Thiong'o's novels can be therefore seen as tapestries of local narratives which are relevant to history of a much larger scope. In words of Patrick Williams, his books offer a look at *history from below* (1999:59) but at the same time, there is an inevitable intersection between the individual histories of his characters and the communal, national history.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, these two narrative threads are inextricably interwoven. Set in a fictional village of Thabai, the novel recounts the happenings preceding the declaration of Kenyan independence in 1963 by focusing on individual stories of selected villagers. Mugo, a survivor of a British detention camp, returns home celebrated as a hero since no one knows about his betrayal of Kihika, the legendary resistance fighter. Kihika's sister Mumbi struggles with her malfunctioning marriage to Gikonyo, another survivor of a British detention camp, while their relationship is threatened by Karanja, a collaborator with British administration. Thiong'o's approach to the pre-independence period is indeed directed from below; by *privileging the voice of the peasants, often deleted in grand nationalist narratives in favour of the 'elite'* (Ogude 1999:25), the novel focuses on the struggles and sacrifices of individuals.

*A Grain of Wheat* recounts the stories of the peasants, which are frequently mediated through flashbacks and memories, and problematizes the meaning of local events within a larger socio-historical context. Though the Mau Mau movement seems to be celebrated for its achievements in the fight for independence, Thiong'o casts

a critical look at its inner mechanism as well. By revealing the failures and incessant betrayals of ordinary people who were an integral part of the movement, he breaks away from the tendency to romanticize the fortitude of everyone involved. In that sense, *it is difficult to separate the heroes from the villains as virtually every character could be accused of committing a potentially shameful act during the colonial period* (McLeod 2000:97). Thiong'o's approach to Uhuru thus subverts the *triumphalist version of independence from the point of the national leadership* (Williams 1999:59) and supplants it with a more realistic narrative, one that casts a dark shadow over the euphoria and anticipation accompanying the Uhuru celebrations.

The question of individual participation in the scheme of greater historical significance, which occupied a central position in his previous novels, is examined here as well. Mugo's reluctance to participate in the movement and contribute to social changes is manifested by his ignorance of external events and his preference of seclusion. He would much rather be in the role of a passive observer and avoid communal demands altogether, as the following quotation exemplifies:

*Had he not already escaped, unscathed, the early operations of the Emergency? Kenya had been in a state of Emergency since 1952. Some people had been taken to detention camps; others had run away to the forest: but this was a drama in a world not his own. He kept alone, feeling a day would come when horns, drums and trumpets would beat together to announce his entrance into the other world.* (Thiong'o 1986:187)

Clearly, Mugo does not see himself as an active agent of the historical process of liberation. By detaching himself from the communal attempts at transformation, he relies on others to bring about the desired change. Interestingly, Mugo associates the transition to independence with some kind of a messianic figure, an external force announced by *horns, drums and trumpets* (ibid.). Of course, the irony of the passage is not lost on the reader. It is Mugo who is involuntarily associated with the role of the Messiah later on in the novel and it is the responsibility which comes with that role that eventually forces him to confess his sin. Although upon his return to Thabai Mugo becomes excited by the prospect of being the only son *who was born to save* (Thiong'o 1986: 134), it is clear that such a belief is unjustified and mistaken. The messianic aspect of the struggle for independence is emphasized by Kihika too; he, however, transfers this vocation to the whole community.

*In Kenya we want deaths which will change things, that is to say, we want true sacrifice. But first we have to be ready to carry the cross. I die for you, you die for me, we become a sacrifice for one another [...] Everybody who takes the Oath of Unity to change things in Kenya is a Christ. Christ then is not one person. All those who take up the cross of liberating Kenya are the true Christs for us Kenyan people* (Thiong'o 1986:95).

Hence, Thiong'o's vision of the individual role within the historical narrative is unequivocal. *I don't think individuals as such are saviors as such. They are more symbols of certain social forces which are started, and the individuals are mere agents of those forces which are already in society* (Thiong'o quoted in Sander, R. and B. Lindfors 2006:49). Mugo's cowardice and subsequent treachery thus demonstrate his *scepticism and cynicism towards heroism and hero worship*" (Ogude 1999:25-26) and point to the problematic creation of idols. Therefore, while the *Mau Mau war, the anticolonial struggle, provides Ngugi with the space to imagine the birth of a new Kenya* (Ogude 1999:23), he makes it quite clear that the potential for future rejuvenation lies with the community as a collective, united entity and not in dubious heroism of individuals like Mugo or even Kihika. The scepticism of *Weep not, Child* and *The River Between*, which both portrayed the communal disintegration and lack of concord and collective cooperation, is supplanted by a more hopeful vision. Here, the uniting element resides in the Mau Mau movement itself. Although the crowd tends to pinpoint and idealize the role of selected individuals in the fight for independence, the narrative is steered in the direction of communal achievements. Thiong'o's scepticism towards the exaltation of individuals is also manifested in the collective narrative voice since the inclusive narratorial *we* adopts a speaking position from within the community and stresses the importance of unity and solidarity.

In conclusion, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's belief that historical records are open to examination and reinterpretation leads him to an active scrutiny and remodelling of Kenyan historiography. His writing is implicated in the complex exploration of historical consciousness and challenges its representation in public discourse. In other words, by examining Kenyan history from his own perspective, the writer resists *the historical 'fiction' constructed by the colonial masters and tr[ies] to subvert the norms instituted by colonial historiography* (Sivan 2014). As the analysis of his third novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, demonstrates, Thiong'o is particularly interested in investigating history from below. His novel gives voice to peasants and thus validates their role in the history-making processes. While there is no denying that his stance is shaped by a specific ideological platform, Thiong'o's fictional account of the historical moment of independence, both on the personal and communal level, is nevertheless worth looking into. It encompasses his understanding of the role of the working class in the shaping of modern Kenyan history and its active contribution to the formation of a new nation.

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