



A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HISTORY AND FICTION: A CASE STUDY OF NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S "A GRAIN OF WHEAT"

Barungi Celestin¹, Twagirumukiza Gratien²

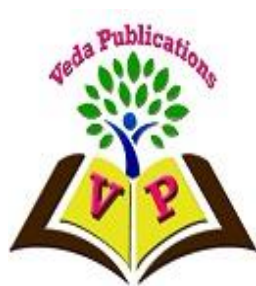
(Faculty of Education, Department of Languages, University of Gitwe.)

(Faculty of Applied Fundamental Sciences, INES Ruhengeri.)

Corresponding Email Addresses: bacele86@gmail.com, g.twagirumukiza@ines.ac.rw

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ABSTRACT



The relationship between fiction and history is that the two are the representation of society. The difference is their techniques of presentation. In history, events are presented as they happened in their places while in fiction, historical events are transformed by literary techniques. These literary techniques make a literary work more difficult than a history work during their understanding. Some readers, after reading a literary work, come up with a wrong conclusion that it is totally a fiction without possessing trustful information. It is the same case for Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* that some readers judge as a work for entertainment without having true information. The characters that he used to present his message and the events told in the novel are fictitious but the events from Kenyan society that they represent are trustworthy. The intention of my work is to discuss history and fiction basing on the novel, *A Grain of Wheat* so as to discover whether it is a historical novel or a totally imaginary work. After analyzing the literary techniques used in the novel such as characterization, plotting and setting and comparing the narrated events with the historical events, I found that Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* is a historical novel talking about Kenyan history. The key to better understand this literary work as a true story is to analyze it literarily first and secondly, to relate the narrated events to the depicted society in order to have full information from both sides.

Keywords: *Fiction, History, Society, A Grain of Wheat.*



1. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Literature is a reflection of human daily activities. It can talk about the past, the present and it can project the future basing on its two previous periods as well as its major themes can be political, social, astronomic, economic, etc where we can have one work consisting of more than two themes. As a reflection of society, it is understandable that it is also one of the means used to keep the history or to spread the social values through storytelling and the writers have the exhaustive ability to represent well this history and social values through the way of entertainment. In addition, the main literary objectives state that a work of art has a double intention, entertainment and instruction. But the first role is entertainment wherein they say that through entertainment we gain instruction. In this connection," *A Grain of Wheat*" is at the same time the autobiography and a collection of Kenyan history and other countries sharing some of their history. It is mostly focusing on Kenyan politics rather than other themes.

This novel, *A Grain of Wheat* written in 1967 by the Kenyan author, Ngugi wa Thiongo is set in struggle for independence that resulted in the victory of this independence, 12 December 1963 as a temporal setting. As he is said to be a historical and political novelist, this work justifies him well where he mixed fictitious characters and real actors who had participated in the resistance movement to point out how historical his work is. He narrates the Kenyan history during the colonial period with emphasis on the resistance period leading to the Kenyan independence. He shows how Kenyans had suffered from colonialism and this suffering woke up

the natives so that they could fight for their freedom. This novel is also a kind of alarm for the whole Kenyan country to stand up and claim their right abused by the white men, the British.

In Mutiso (1974), Charles Poore asserts that "a nation's novelists are usually more effective than its statesmen in telling us about that country's people and their way of living". It implies that the novelists are more skillful than other citizens in narration due to their high visionary way in which they are more sophisticated in use of the language whereas a statesman is only familiar with the popular literature such as riddles, proverbs, sayings... Furthermore a novelist creates, in his fictitious world, the actors, setting, themes and a plot in order to present for us the event of a real action.

The author of this novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, is also a Kenyan writer who knows well her history for he has lived and learnt it, suffered from it in his everyday life. Mutiso (1974) affirms that all literature depicts the values of the people and the periods. This is to say that however imaginative a writer may be, the framework of his writings must always be the society he knows. The experience the writer gets from his society becomes his inspiration to produce his work.

From the author's experience, *A Grain of Wheat* is the autobiography of Ngugi wa Thiongo wherein he talks about his own life by using literary language (its techniques) and fictitious characters that classify the work as literary production instead of being a proper book of history in which they use an ordinary language and the real characters throughout the whole novel.



Ngugi's use of literary language in his work causes it not to be recognized as a reflection of Kenyan history. This will be discovered if we consider the relationship between fiction and history by decoding the literary techniques used by the literary men to communicate with their audience. The crucial problem for the critics is that the author did not use true or real names for instance where he used Kihika, Mugo, Gikonyo and Karanja in the book instead of the real characters who had participated in freedom fighting. Therefore these characters are representing the actors who had contributed to the uprising against the white men as the real characters outside the novel, the real world. This equivalence of characters gives the novel its reliance as a historical story and both temporal and spatial settings are the real situation that happened in Kenya.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

For the sociological approach, literature is "a social fact". This equivalence gives two assertions: "literature as a social product" first due to its medium, language used within a community and secondly "literature as produced by and a producer of a society" basing on that it is produced by a member of society and it projects or recreates the present society into the future. Here Ngugi tells us the real history of Kenya although he tried to use fiction in his characters but some of them are real Kenyan contributors to her independence. Then, the problem is that among the scholars, nobody had considered or tried to show this historical characteristic which is dominant in Ngugi's "A Grain of Wheat". The novel is made of both characteristics but due to the fictitious techniques the author used, it is necessary to primarily analyze these techniques.

Through this analysis, the history told in the novel will be found out. The writer gave the code to his work as to better understand it, it is necessary to have a key which is the literal analysis to unlock the information.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Having a conversation with Meja Mwangi, one of the East African writers and the same generation of Ngugi, about his "Kill Me Quick"(1973), Nicholas Lee (1981, p.197) asked Mwangi what he was trying to say in his writing, the overall message that he wanted to communicate. He replied that "the message that I want to give is to give the audience – particularly East African audience, Kenyan audience – a realization of the atmosphere around them.

This is in connection with Ngugi's message wherein he has the same audience, Kenyan people telling them their history and the way in which they can build their new nation after independence. Both writers emphasized the idea that every writer talks about the society he knows well and his audience is the people he obviously knows.

As Ngugi is the famous writer, it is understandable that I am not the first person to work on him. There are other scholars who talked about him. RWASAMANZI Eric in his memoir "The Importance of Gikuyu religious ideas in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novels" (2002), explored the aspects of myth and Christianity in Ngugi's novels. MUKAMA Ides (1999, p.7) also affirms that "my contribution is to show how Ngugi portrays the problem of betrayal in post-independent Africa, how he insists on its consequences after a deep analysis through his well-



chosen characters.” This one focuses on the theme of betrayal in Ngugi’s novels.

The other scholars are RUKABUKIRA Ildephonse and NSENGIYUMVA François. The former, in *“The Black Intellectual in Ngugi’s fiction”* (1981) explored the intellectual as a mediator between black people and white people, black leaders and the black masses, then intellectual as revolutionary. The black educated people helped the African leaders to gain their independence. After succeeding the black leaders became the only decision makers in a corrupted society. This caused the black intellectual people to revolt through their writings. The latter carried out his work *“The Treatment of ‘MAU MAU’ in Modern Kenyan Writings”* in which he says that it “is a criticism of the books written in Kenya about Mau Mau after the declaration of the state of the emergency (NSENGIYUMVA, 1986, P.7).

All these scholars explored Ngugi in a different way from mine. Nobody among them tried to talk about the past to the present independent Kenya in which her history can be well explained as the best way to understand this country. My focus is to find out the history hidden in Ngugi’s novel *“A Grain of Wheat”* so that I can contribute to the good understanding of Ngugi as historical in his work.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

My research as it focuses on history and fiction will be underlying on the following objectives:

1. To show how *“A Grain of Wheat”* is more historical than fictitious.
2. To highlight the autobiographical aspects from the novel.

3. To find out what caused Ngugi to write this novel.

4. To decode necessary ways to understand this novel as a true story.

5. RESEARCH MOTIVATION

I have read many literary works and I found them more interesting than works from other domains for they are containers of human activities which consist of literature. Furthermore, literature in its four coordinates with the most interesting in my work, pragmatic, mimetic and subjective orientations, where they tell us more about author and the intention to the reader, is the medium or the way of communication. This encouraged me much so that I liked to highlight all those benefits and usefulness of literature within *“A Grain of Wheat”* towards its readers. Before the arrival of Europeans who brought writing means, literature was a tool for preserving and transmitting social values as well as history from generation to generation. Even though it was used in pre-writing period, it is still useful in our modern or writing period. This usefulness immortality of literature in preserving history is also recounted in Ngugi’s *A Grain of Wheat*.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

My research will be achieved by using library work, documentation as the best technique to better carry out my study. By this documentation, the emphasis is put on the traditional approach consisting of biographical, historical and philosophical approaches. These are matching with the novel in analysis because it focuses on the life of Kenyans in their country and the writer himself.



The biographical approach focuses on the hereditary determinism on the author wherein there are two kind of work, work of “reconstitution and of transposition”. This is explained well in the novel where it deals with the Kenyan people including Ngugi himself. By reading Ngugi’s life, we can understand the life of Kenyans as a work of “reconstitution” and by *A Grain of Wheat*; we can learn his life as a work of “transposition”. Concerning the historical approach, emphasis is put on the institution as well as the time which is talked about in the work by considering where and when it was produced as a work of “reconstruction” and the last, philosophical one insisting on the content.

The marxist approach is also helpful to my research. The most important causes of struggle for independence in Africa are the economic issues. Then, Kenya as part of it also crossed these problems where the Europeans were exploiting the black people. As the causes of fighting are part of history, my analysis must look at what caused the Kenyans to stand up and fight against the white men. To do so I will be using this approach. Therefore, useful documents for this work are those ones talking about fiction and history specifically of Kenya.

7. A DIALOGUE BETWEEN HISTORY AND FICTION IN “A GRAIN OF WHEAT”

A Grain of Wheat is a book classified under literary genre called novel. It explores the themes from Kenyan society. These themes are the historical events that happened when Kenya was struggling with the colonial power, the British. But the use of literary techniques while telling this history brought the novel to the only one judgment saying that it is totally a fiction. This is not the case because after

discovering these techniques used in the novel, it is understandable that it is also a history book. The characteristics of its writer, Ngugi wa Thiongo of being a historical and fictitious author, bring some difficulties while reading his writings without having some knowledge about literature.

The characters used in the novel are another problem while reading it as history. History as well as fiction has characters. But the difference is the way characters are presented. In history, characters are real persons who participate in the action while in fiction there can be a mixture of characters, the real and imaginary characters or the imaginary characters only. In *A Grain of Wheat*, the author used a mixture of characters where there are real persons who participated in the independence struggle and the imaginary characters that did not appear in Kenya independence struggle. Another feature of Ngugi’s characters is that he referred to the names of Kenyan heroes where he used the characters of one real name of the hero and another imaginary name with one character.

Concerning the narrative techniques, the events are presented in a way which is not understandable for everyone. The author used flashbacks which consist on telling a story with a mixture of plot wherein the narrator tells a story without a chronological order. He can have the order of middle-beginning-end or the interchange of these parts while a chronological order follows the order of beginning-middle- end. In *A Grain of Wheat*, the author used the order of middle- beginning-end and this feature excludes the book from history because history uses a chronological order which is beginning-middle-end.



The setting is another important element in literature as well as in history. It is divided into two, temporal and spatial settings. The spatial setting in the novel as a literary work is the same as in a history book which is Kenya but temporal setting as a literary work is different from a history book. As a literary work, it is set in three days leading to independence while if it is a totally history book it must be set according to the events said in the novel. It must start in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods with their related events.

The relationship between history and literature states that they are both a representation of human activities in a society although they do not use the same techniques. This explains how *A Grain of Wheat* is a history book with literary way of representation. Ngugi used these literary techniques to represent Kenyan history and after discussing them, the novel will be able to be also interpreted as a history book without being literary work only.

8. GENERAL CONCLUSION

History talks about the past events of a period in time or in the life or development of people, an institution, or a place. As my research is about fiction and history, it is understandable that it could not be achieved without considering the history books talking about Kenya specifically during colonial period. These books of history show that the first Europeans attended Kenya when they were doing explorations as well as Christianization. The two missions of the white men transformed into exploitation which brought the white men to colonialism. This behavior of the white men created a strong conflict between the white men and the black

people which led to struggle for independence for the black people.

Historical events reveal that the struggle for independence in Kenya started early as the white attended the land of Kenya. Kenyans showed resistance to the white men at first and failed because they had not been accustomed with such a white man. It took a long time for studying that kind of person so that they could find out his strategies. After acknowledging his strategies, they started a strong struggle which was violent even with the use of killing some of these white men and their collaborator as well as the fighters lost some of their adherents. The war ended with the defeat of the white men who lost their colony and went to their native country while the black people proclaimed their independence.

The novel which is a literary product also showed that its content has relationship with the history of Kenya. It is after analyzing the techniques that have been used by the author while presenting his narrative. My research found that the techniques used in the novel had transformed the real history into fiction so that everyone cannot judge the book as the real history. By analyzing the elements used while creating fiction such as characterization, plot, theme, setting and style and what they represent, it was found that they correspond to events that happened in Kenya. The flashbacks used in the novel when the author wanted to present the past of Kenya in his setting of struggle for independence showed that there are also real events.

Such events are the origin of Kenyan society from Mumbi and Kikuyu, the ancestors of Kenya that they considered, according to history and Ngugi' s



novel *A Grain of Wheat*, as their only real God under the colonial rule instead of being the God of the white men.

The research conducted on Ngugi's novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, focused on history, on the one side and the other side, on fiction in terms of its elements. The findings show that the novel is a literary product which is depicting the real history of Kenya. This is supported by the real characters, dates and their corresponding events happened in Kenyan society. The characters, Jomo Kenyatta, Thomas Robson, District officer Thompson and their correspondent actions in the novel are trustworthy. The dates from the novel are the real dates in the history of Kenya.

The day of independence, 12 December 1963 was used many times as the corresponding day on which Kenya proclaimed its independence. "The memory was of the day in May 1955, Kenya had been in a state of Emergency for about two years" (p.124). This sentence is exactly equivalent to the historical truth because the state of Emergence was proclaimed in 1952 by the District Officer Thompson after his arrival in Kenya who replaced Thomas Robson.

Considering the findings came from the novel, *A Grain of Wheat* by the Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiongo in comparison with the history of Kenya, it is conclusively true that the author was expressing Kenyan history which is trustworthy. His maturity in using literary techniques brings his novel to some considerations that it is fiction which does not depict a real history of Kenya. These false considerations can be resolved by following two steps. Discovering and analyzing first the techniques used while writing his novel and next the interpretation of the content

basing on traditional approach: biographical, historical and philosophical approaches.

RECOMMENDATIONS

My recommendations are basing on the work under discussion which has been focusing on history and fiction. As it has been discussed, history talks about events that happened by using a direct way and this makes it more understandable for everyone while reading than fiction. Then fiction presents events composed of three parts, past, present and future. So, it is necessary to read its techniques used in presentation of events in order to understand well the work. Next step is to analyze the events in terms of the three elements: place, race and time. These elements are needed while analyzing because they help the analyst to make a correspondence of meaning of the words with their context. After the comparison between words and context, a reader can be eligible to judge a literary work as a true story.

Literature, an art of presentation of ideas and feelings, uses its techniques to help its writers to present their ideas in an indirect way. This technique of indirect way also helps them to talk about society in both sides, good and bad. The historians frequently talk about the past and present while a literary writer can talk about the three parts of time. He can denounce the futuristic impact of man on himself.

A literary writer as a good critic of society makes himself a spokesman of society who can also criticize the present leaders that the historians do not reveal. This happens when they use literary techniques that hide their ideas in order not to be



condemned. So, it is advised to read literary works in order to know these hidden ideas that others do not dare to tell the people. These literary works are also helpful to historians where they can use them to enrich their knowledge. The complementarity of the two fields, fiction and history helps a student or a researcher of one field to achieve his work.

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