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Unconnected Consciousness as a Negation of National Patriotic Culture in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967)

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Abstract:

*This study is a discourse on Ngugi wa Thiongo's understanding and depiction of national patriotic culture in *A Grain of Wheat*. It specifically focuses on the nexus between fragmentation of society and national patriotic culture. The thesis advanced in this research is that fragmentation of society negates national patriotic culture and subverts African people's endeavours to emancipate themselves. Fragmentation of society undercuts the possibility of positive participation and contribution to societal aspirations and goals. Ngugi argues that people's reaction to the encroachment of an alien culture that reduces them to the level of lower animals should transcend social or economic status in society so as to be able to confront the system not as individuals but as a compact and connected entity.*

Keywords: National agenda, fragmentation, negation, national patriotic culture, unconnected consciousness

1. Introduction

Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* portrays the Kenyan liberation struggle. It shows the suffering of people of Thabai during the Mau Mau struggle and the betrayal of the independence ideals by the new African leadership that takes over power from the colonialists. The theme of betrayal at the personal level is connected to that of reconciliation, that is, those who betray confess their betrayal. Ngugi shows that fragmentation of society retracts national patriotic culture and subverts African people's endeavours to emancipate themselves. He shows this mainly through Mugo who epitomizes those Africans who resign from participating in national issues. From his childhood days, Mugo's life has been one of loneliness and this is even more after the death of his aunt. The only person that Mugo has been connected to is his dead aunt. Mugo mostly sees the world as a force with a grudge against him. It is this feeling that isolates him from the struggles of the African people to destroy imperialism. "The world had conspired against him, first to deprive him of his father and mother and then make him a dependent on an ageing harriden" (p.8).

2. National Patriotic Culture

National patriotic culture is an expression, fused in three related words namely nation, patriotism and culture that celebrate rootedness and centeredness in the ideals, espoused by a culture. Patriotism can be grasped as a feeling of love and devotion to one's homeland. Thus, patriotism has attributes of devout, faithful and active participation in national issues in order to advance one's national agenda. Patriots subordinate their own individual needs to the aspirations of their nations. To a patriot, the nation is supreme and of all his group loyalties, he is convinced that allegiance to his country is the most important. Patriots seek the independence, dignity, integrity, existential security, happiness and general well-being of their societies. They prioritise the creation of better prospects of life for members of their nations. Patriotism therefore means assuming responsibility, which in turn creates commitment to life giving and life affirming attitudes, which engender fulfillment.

Since patriotism entails active participation and engagement in national issues, it becomes one of the most important human factor principles that Zimbabwean people need to embrace in order to achieve total liberation. However, participation that is not informed and inspired by patriotism is sterile. P'Bitek (1986:37) equates it to clouds or dry leaves, which are blown here and there by the wind. In this sense, patriotism becomes the centre from which participation radiates. For P'Bitek (Ibid: 25) culture is a philosophy of life as lived and celebrated in a society. During the colonial era Christianity was the main instrument employed to either dilute or obliterate cultures and history. Thus, Maina wa Kinyatti (1980:1) argues that the attempt to rush and distort African national cultures and history was also an attempt to suppress African patriotic feelings.

Culture has significant value as a factor of resistance to corruption, manipulation and oppression. This is the reason why as Cabral (1979:139) notes, when Goebbels, the brain behind Nazi propaganda heard the word 'culture', he reached for his pistol. Goebbels was fully aware of the potency of culture as a weapon for total liberation. Culture is an expression of a people's material and historical realities. To Cabral (Ibid: 141) see also Ngugi (1981:20) national liberation is itself an act of culture. Patriots celebrates culture of resilience which is engrossed at any oppressive structures whether foreign or indigenous, whose agenda stands inimical to the

objectives and celebrated ethos of African people. The African people are not naïve to the extent of confusing oppression and exploitation with the colour of people's skin. This culture of resilience is predicated on patriotism.

National patriotic culture embraces the history of a people's fight against a hostile system. For Ngugi (1981: XV) any ideological framework that does not support revolutionary and progressive Kenyan struggles to totally emancipate herself constitutes the opposite pillar of national patriotic culture. National patriotic culture is that body of values, which make oppressed people, feel ill at ease with their state of deprivation and degeneration. It conscientises them into realising that they only achieve authentic existence and fulfillment following their involvement in the struggle to dismantle the system which is oppressive, subversive to freedom and dehumanising. Patriots who participate in such struggles believe that their society remains susceptible to transformation, which they, as oppressed people are capable of bringing about. Thus Freire (1972: 28) notes that national patriotic culture enables the oppressed masses of Africa to "perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform".

National patriotic culture therefore hinges on commitment to and identification with the will and quest of oppressed people in the past, present and future. It facilitates active participation and contribution to the mass popular struggle to liberate humanity from societal structures that seek to thwart their freedom. Besides identifying with the aspirations of the generality of the struggling African people, national patriotic culture implies the belief in the ability of ordinary people to take control, determine their destiny and transform the world to make it a better habitat for all.

3. Fragmentation as a Negation of National Patriotic Culture

Mugo's isolation from society hinders him from subscribing to national patriotic culture. He does not view his position in relation to the aspirations of the community. Mugo chooses to escape into framing to get rid of his loneliness:

He turned to the soil. He would labour, sweat, and through success and wealth, force society to recognize him. There was then solace in the very act of breaking the soil; to bury seeds and watch the green leaves, heave and thrust themselves out of the ground, to tend the plants to ripeness and then harvest, these were all part of the world he had created for himself and which formed the background against which his dreams soared to the sky (p.9).

Ngugi castigates Mugo's precarious self-isolation because it undermines identification with the cherished ideals of his society. Mugo's fragmented stance subverts the possibility of positive participation and contribution. Ngugi's contention therefore is that people's reaction to the encroachment of an alien culture that reduces them to the level of lower animals should transcend social or economic status in society so as to be able to confront the system not as individuals but as a compact and connected entity. Steve Bako in Hilda Bernstein (1978: 15) rightly puts it "We are oppressed, not as individuals, not as Zulus, Vendas or Indians. We are oppressed because we are black. We must use that very concept to unite ourselves and to respond as a cohesive group".

For Ngugi, therefore, a liberative national patriotic culture takes cognisance of the fact that disjunction or the inability of oppressed people to visualise themselves as a holistic entity actually serves the interests of the perpetrators of unjust socio-economic and political systems. Unity is therefore fundamental for oppressed people to realize freedom as Chancellor Williams (1987: 326) observes "Only a largely united people can successfully confront oppressors and, without praying on bended knees, or even pleading, secure the removal of all shackling chains". During the Emergency, Mugo ignores the national spirit call Africans to fight for their economic and political heritage. He views the Mau Mau struggle as drama and a roadblock to his plans of self-advancement and fulfillment just as Njoroge sees the emergency as a disruption of his educational career:

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 forests; but this was a drama in a world not in 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 (p.163).

Mugo's vision is moribund. He fails to view the reality of the emergency because he lives in the abstract dream of tomorrow's success which is difficult to realize in a society where oppression is the order of the day. He fails to identify with the society's aspirations because he has suffered in early childhood. His understanding of the Emergency is that it is drama in another world when in actual fact he is the victim of the system he labels drama. Mugo therefore fails to make positive contributions during the Emergency. He refuses to recognize his fellow sufferers in the trench and does not even recognise the woman she defends "Mugo felt the whip eat into his flesh, and her pained whimper was like a cry from his own flesh. Yet he did not know her. He had for three days refused to recognize those around him as fellow sufferers" (p.150). Thus, because of his individualistic orientation and his violation to incarcerate himself in a world of his own, he is unable to dispatch and reciprocally receive creative energy which is the essence of national patriotic culture. He is not connected to his society. According to Ayi Kweyi Armah (1973: 133-4) connectedness is very vital in a people's undertakings if they are to realize freedom:

For in the absence of that necessary connectedness of the soul that will live, what is any slave body's freedom but the destroyer's licence contemptuously given to the slave to dance jiving dance of his own death agony?... Connected though, connected action: that is the beginning of our journey back to our self, to living again the connected life, traveling again along, and the way.

Connectedness is therefore fundamental for a people that endeavour to free themselves. Mugo fails to strike harmony with the aspirations of his society and to enter into communion or share the sentiments of his society. On the other hand, an ideal national patriotic culture will apply emphasis on the fact that every individual in a dominated society-just like Mugo's, should in fact envisage himself as a link in the claim of action that binds him with his people and the shared dreams and aspirations of his society. By failing to identify, Mugo can neither participate nor contribute meaningfully to the popular struggles of his day. Instead, his "contributions"-

the killing of Kihika is detrimental to the progress of the struggle. Fragmentation therefore stands in contradistinction to freedom. That is why Chancellor Williams (Ibid: 326) argues that "If the race is incapable of unity, it is incapable of survival as a free and equal people, and will deserve all the iniquities imposed upon it, for it will have proved beyond all questions that it is indeed unfit to survive as a people free and equal in every respect whatsoever with the other peoples of the earth". Ngugi relates that nearly everybody is a member of the party and yet Mugo is not. Most people have taken the oath which Mugo has not. This means that Mugo does not have the chords that should bind him to the ethos of his society. This compromises his allegiance to his society because his actions are not rooted in the projected destiny of his society. He thus sees Kihika, a freedom fighter, as a barrier to his egocentric ambitions:

Why should he drag me into a struggle and problems, I have not created? Why? He is not satisfied with butchering men and women and children. He must call on me to bathe in the blood. I am not his brother, I am not his sister, I have not done harm to anybody. I only looked after my little shamba and crops. And now I must spend my life in prison because of the folly of one man (p.168-169).

Mugo's self-isolation, therefore, undermines national patriotic culture and is subversive to the Kenyan people's endeavors to liberate themselves. He never shares with Kihika, Warui and Gikonyo a common brotherhood of purpose. The essence of national patriotic culture is to view one's interests within the framework of the societal aspirations. Mugo violates this tenet and stresses his responsibility to himself and not to anyone else. It is this fragmentation of society that Ngugi castigates. He advocates for unity of all progressive Kenyans. In G.D. Killam (1984:40) Ngugi argues that:

Democracy and justice can only be achieved when the various interest groups voice their opposition to fight for them. Until democratic minded Kenyans, workers, peasants, students, progressive intellectuals and others unite on the most minimum basis of a patriotic opposition to imperialist foreign domination of our economy, politics and culture, things will get worse not better...

Ngugi therefore castigates Mugo who seeks fulfillment outside the context of the group, without realizing that fulfillment itself is not uncluttered space or an absence of controls. It is a powerful and demanding presence. His ambition is to be recognized when he has accumulated wealth and so the materials benefits associated with Kihika's head play a major factor in his betrayal of Kihika "These lofty sensations were mixed up with thoughts of money, reward and the various possibilities opened before him. He would buy more land. He would build a big house... He would flash his victory before the eyes of his aunt's ghost. His place in society would be established" (p. 171-2). Mugo's betrayal of Kihika is a clear manifestation of how self-isolation and individualistic advancement serve to negate national patriotic culture. The betrayal of Kihika is a logical outcome of Mugo's propensity for personal development and also a form of revenge in Kihika for shattering the fragile illusions he had built. That betrayal subverts the African people's efforts to liberate themselves. It qualifies Mugo to be an African reactionary. Establishment in society and revenge on his aunt are Mugo's means of achieving his own individuality. According to Marimba Ani (1994:351) the idea of thriving on competition and individual achievement belongs to European culture "European culture creates a being who thrives on competition and therefore, on individual and distinct achievement...because a person's existence as a member of the groups does not in itself mean much-the individual strives to be "better than", to stand apart from others in the craving for recognition".

Mugo wants to be recognized through work and possession. Njoroge in *Weep, Not Child* seeks it through education and Muthoni wants her individuality recognized in her community and so does Waiyaki in *The River Between*. Mugo's individualism is despicable and deplorable. It is different from Okonko's individualism in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* which is pursued within the matrix of the welfare of his society. Resultantly, it brings honour and pride to his village. Mugo's individualism actually derails the advancement of his society's aspirations. It is anathema to Kenya's national patriotic culture. National patriotic culture celebrates unity of purpose and active participation in societal issues as Warui demonstrates:

We of Thabai village must also dance our part; he started his voice though low, embracing the whole room. Yes we must dance the song, the way we know how. For let it never be said Thabai dragged to shame the names of the sons she lost in war. No. We must raise them-even from the dead to share with us. Our people are there a song sweeter than that of freedom?...Those who have gone before us, those of us spared to see the sun today, and even those to be borne tomorrow, must join in the feast (p.18-19).

Warui's sentiments above concur with Chancellor Williams (Ibid: 21)'s observation that "Massive black unity would be massive black power which of course, would reduce white power and its domination of the earth". Mugo acts against the collective voice of Thabai whose stress is placed on the advancement of communal interests and not on the individual. Mugo fails to perceive his separate existence as subordinate to that of Thabai. The dance that Warui alludes to indicates the collective participation which is best understood within the realm of national patriotism. Mugo's detachment from societal issues is therefore an aberration in African philosophical tradition. Gikonyo notes that "I know how you feel, "Gikonyo said", you want to be left alone. Remember this, however, it is not easy for any man in a community to be left alone especially for a man in your position" (p23).

According to Okot P' Bitek (1986:37) a man is incapable of being free because his thoughts and actions are guided by the philosophy of life which is instilled in him from childhood. One might attest that Ngugi's castigation of Mugo's aloofness serves to mobilize, unite and instill the spirit of national patriotism to the Kenyans at a time when they are struggling to totally liberate themselves. It is the spirit of communal fellowship and solidarity that Ngugi seems to be advocating for. When Harry Thuku is detained people are prepared to sign vows with their blood for his release. It is the blood of Kihika that Mugo refuses to acknowledge. The failure to establish a blood relationship with Kihika implies a failure to subscribe to the notion of national patriotic culture. This is shown when Mugo goes to a meeting because it had been rumored that Kenyatta would be there. Kihika's speech on sacrifice repels Mugo:

Mugo left a constriction in his throat. He could not clap for words that did not touch him. What right had such a boy, probably younger than Mugo, to talk like that? What arrogance? Kihika had spoken of blood as easily as if he was taking of drawing water in a river, Mugo reflected, a revulsion starting in his stomach at the sight and smell of blood (p.15).

Mugo fails to see the necessity of sacrifice in the struggle because he is not informed by national patriotic culture. He has withdrawn himself from the society and lives at its fringes. He has established a rift between himself and its society. After coming out of detention, Mugo is forced to make a speech and he only manages to do so after establishing a distance between himself and his audience. "At first Mugo enjoyed the distance he had established between himself and the voice" (p.76).

4. Conclusion

This article has argued that fragmentation of society is detrimental to the realisation of societal goals. It produces individuals who act in ways that are not commensurate with the celebrated values of the society. National patriotic culture celebrates connectedness and cohesion. Fragmentation of society undercuts the possibility of positive participation and contribution to societal aspirations and goals. The research has argued that the betrayal of Kihika is a logical outcome of Mugo's propensity for personal development and also a form of revenge in Kihika for shattering the fragile illusions he had built. That betrayal subverts the African people's efforts to liberate themselves. Ngugi castigates Mugo's precarious self-isolation because it undermines identification with the cherished ideals of his society. Mugo's fragmented stance subverts the possibility of positive participation and contribution.

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