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## THE FUNCTION OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN THE CREATION OF A NEW NATION IN NGŪGĪ WA THIONG'O'S *A GRAIN OF WHEAT*

**Key Words:** collective memory, the creation of a new nation, sacrifice.

**ABSTRACT:** This paper aims to share a story of Kenya narrated by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* and analyse its narrative in accordance with Ernest Renan's article entitled "What is a Nation?" to reveal a part of its journey from their dependence on the British colonial rule to their independence. The whole novel is anchored in the collective memories of some of the Kenyans, describing what they have undergone so far under the British colonial rule and how they have gained their independence with the help of the Mau Mau freedom fighters who mostly sacrifice their own life for their nation's peace and liberation. This collective memory helps them get together to remember their past and build their present for their future and at this point Thiong'o's novel seems to echo Renan's arguments focusing on the basics of the nation. As Renan states in the article, embracing the past memories, accepting all the stories of sacrifice and devotion as well as their own suffering, holding a common and strong will for the present and building the future by punishing the traitors as an example for the others who might think of betraying their togetherness and unity are all the requirements to be fulfilled to create a new nation and Thiong'o appears to apply each of them to be sure that they eventually have their own independent nation.

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*A Grain of Wheat* is a fictive story of Kenya's struggle for its independence from Britain and its colonial rule. As a story of a nation, it is interwoven with numerous stories of the individuals whose past corresponds with the history of their nation. The whole novel celebrates the Independence Day of Kenya, which is called as *Uhuru*, from the very beginning to the very end by continuously referring to the Mau Mau soldiers and their rebellion. What makes this story interesting to tell and further analyse is its leading role to reveal how the novel cements the Kenyans with their past and how it unifies them to build their future in the name of Kenya. At that moment, how their collective memory helps them form a new nation echoes Ernest Renan's, who is the 19<sup>th</sup> century French scholar, philosopher and critic, widely-cited ideas which are put forth in his article "What is a Nation?". Therefore, this paper aims to show how the story of a recently independent nation of Kenya, told in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*, is built in the light of Renan's arguments on the function of collective memory in the creation of a new nation.

The novel consists of heterogeneous stories of many characters such as Mugo, Gikonyo, Karanja, Kihika and many others who undergo terrifying nightmares before awakening on the Independence Day. Their multifarious stories of the past are told to search any common meeting point for them in which they could gather under one nation with the help of these collective stories. Elaborating on the same point, Renan describes the essence of the nation in his article "What is a Nation?" as follows:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form (Renan, 1882, p. 10).

Accordingly, Renan envisages the nation which is like a wandering spirit through the individuals, casting a spell over them to get assembled in the heart of the nation. This is the spirit that bridges the gap between the past and the present; that is to say, the present-day wants to preserve

that ‘rich legacy of memories’ of the past to get together with the others so as to pass this ‘heritage’ down to the future generations.

What Renan suggests above closely resembles what the Kenyans attempt to do in *A Grain of Wheat*. It is obvious that the act of remembering is quite important for the Kenyans to allow them to build their present-day enabling them to live together. For example, the time when General R and Koina, the two Mau Mau resistance soldiers, discuss the (in)necessity to find out the traitor of Kihika, their greatest hero of the Mau Mau Rebellion, Koina suggests forgetting “the whole thing” (Thiong’o, 1986, p.27) by referring to what has happened up to that moment. However, General R strongly opposes forgetting anything about their past. “[Clearing] his throat” (ibid), he

...abruptly stopped pacing. He looked at Koina, weighing him up and down. Koina fidgeted on his seat, feeling the antagonism in the other’s stare. ‘Forget?’ General R. asked in a deceptively calm voice. ‘No, my friend. We must find our traitor, else you and I took the oath for nothing. Traitors and collaborators must not escape revolutionary justice (Thiong’o, 1986, p. 27).

The reason why General R. reacts that angrily to Koina seems not clear at that moment but it could be speculated that because of his military career, he feels more responsible for the creation of the nation out of the collected memories of the Kenyans. That might also explain his wish to hold the Kenyans together throughout the novel; thus, as one of the most powerful figures of the novel, he turns into a looking glass reflecting the wishes of the Kenyans who want to remember their heroic past with Kihika and the others like him and crave to curse the ones who betray them by forgetting their oath. Accordingly, General R. tries to strengthen the link between the past of the Kenyans and their present-day by remembering and making the others remember the legacy of their past for keeping them as a whole.

General R.’s concern to Kihika seems to be so critical that he places him at the center of the nation and asks all the others to gather around him to form their nation. Kihika is perceived as the hero of this nation who fought to the death for Kenya; he is thought as the hero who sacrificed his

own life for the sake of the others and their present and future. In this regard, it gets apparent that Kihika gets the strongest force to unite the Kenyans. He becomes the embodiment of Kenya's heroic past while simultaneously getting the magnet for the present-day Kenya. In a similar vein, Renan advances the description of a nation with special emphasis on the heroic past, the need for a sacrifice and devotion in this way:

The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past, great men, glory (by which I understand genuine glory), this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea. To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more- these are the essential conditions for being a people [...] The Spartan song- "We are what you were; we will be what you are" - is, in its simplicity, the abridged hymn of every patrie (Renan, 1882, p. 10).

Similarly, Renan mentions the process of the creation of a nation which can merely be fulfilled after a massive accumulation of contacts with the past. Through this accumulated legacy, which is defined as the 'social capital' by Renan, the present-day man can know himself in his nation; in other words, such a common sense shaped by the mutual cultural baggage of the man is able to help him to define himself.

Kihika and the others like him who fought to the death as well as the ones who managed to survive such as Mugo become an ideal self through which the Kenyans associate themselves; the Kenyans terribly need such a chain of national heroes to make their existence meaningful in present-day. That seems to be the most probable reason for which Renan puts '[the] heroic past, great men, glory' in the core of '[the] national idea.' It is quite evident that the act of remembering is so significant for the Kenyans since it brings the collective memory, which leads them to establish a new nation and this might possibly explain why General R. gets so angry to Koina when she suggests forgetting "the whole thing" (Thiong'o, 1986, p.27) In that regard, the Kenyans feel obliged to remember the dead in order not to forget how hard and painful to gain their independence. Such gratitude

towards the freedom fighters who devoted their life to the independence of the whole nation is vividly expressed by Gikonyo, “the richest men in Thabai ... elected the chairman of the local branch of the Movement<sup>2</sup>” (Thiong’o, 1986, p. 18) in this way:

The movement and leaders of the village have thought it a good idea to honour the dead. On Independence Day, we shall remember those from our village and ridges near, who lost their lives in the fight for freedom. We cannot let Kihika’s name die. He will live in our memory, and history will carry his name to our children in years to come [...] [Mugo’s] name and that of Kihika will ever be linked together [...]. We of Thabai want to honour our heroes (Thiong’o, 1986, pp. 23–24).

Gikonyo plans what they need to do on the Independence Day and it appears that whatever can be done to remember their lost would be meaningful. However, that could still be insufficient to continue living within the same nation. Thus, he suggests compensating their lost with the ones who survived such as Mugo. At that point, the compulsion to remember the dead to gather the people who are alive sounds so Freudian and so ‘uncanny’ since how lively people are ready and eager to welcome the dead to their life so as to find a meaning to survive is as unusual and awkward as Freud’s analysis of the term “uncanny”, something which “is not known but familiar”; “new and exciting as well as frightening” (Freud, 1925, p. 219–220). Here, ‘[the Kenyans] cannot let Kihika’s name die’ in a similar vein; if they let it fade away, they know that they will disappear altogether. That’s why, they want to preserve his name in their memory; in doing that, they think that they will be able to pass their heroic past down to the next generations. Accordingly, Kihika’s name becomes the soul or spirit that Renan mentions as the basis of the nation; it is “the ghost of the colonial past still haunting Independent Kenya” (Thiong’o, 1986, p. 220).

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<sup>2</sup> “The Movement” refers to the time when the white man came to Kenya first and stayed there until the Mau Mau Rebellion declaring the Kenyans’ independence from Britain’s colonial rule. The further information about it can be found at the beginning of the second chapter.

What makes the Kenyans 'we' is nothing but Kihika who is depicted as a mythological figure of Ares, the ancient Greek god of war. Singing the song of the Spartans- "[we] are what you were; we will be what you are" (Renan, 1882, p.10) – all the Kenyans come together with Kihika and rename themselves as the individual members of Kenya. Being proud to be different than how they used to be defined by the others, Europeans, they sing the song of their independent nation all together in great harmony as follows:

We shall never rest  
Without land,  
Without Freedom true  
Kenya is a country of black people (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 21).

Despite the sense of joy to celebrate their freedom, the song evokes strong memories of their suffering in the past under the British colonial rule. In other words, although they should feel merry and happy to claim their land as well as their freedom in their own country, they seem to feel upset about what they have undergone and lost. This might also explain the reason for the "sudden, almost an uneasy silence" (ibid) when Koina sings. Therefore, the celebration on the Independence Day turns into a kind of ritual to commemorate and mourn for their loss rather than a joyous occasion.

As Renan puts forward in his article, "What is a Nation?", it is possible to consider that suffering altogether brings people much closer than any other joyful events. He explains what he thinks about this as follows:

"Suffered together", I said, for shared suffering unites more than does joy. In fact, periods of mourning are worth more to national memory than triumphs because they impose duties and require a common effort (Renan, 1882, p. 10).

As it is clearly observed, Renan explicitly states that instead of happy memories, the pathetic sight of past-terror, violence and starvation make people sympathize and empathize with each other. Their grief gets the

magnet for their community holding them together with the sense of mutual duty and responsibility to sustain their nation. In *A Grain of Wheat*, this is achieved by the glorified existence of Kihika because almost all characters revolve around him despite his absence. Paradoxically, his absence strengthens the others' presence; that is, it seems that his absence guarantees the others' living. This could explain why gratifying the soul of Kihika becomes the 'common effort' for the Kenyans; they do not want to leave anyone out from the celebration at Uhuru since they believe everyone needs to be there as a kind of duty or responsibility towards Kihika at his service of Kenya, his nation.

In order to fulfill such a mission, all the Kenyans especially the elders such as Wambui, insist on picking up Mugo to Uhuru celebrations; his presence in Kihika's absence is so significant for all the community because Mugo "is Kihika born again" (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 180) and therefore he can be the one who is the most appropriate substitute for Kihika. Like a mediator or a representative for all the Kenyans, Mumbi, who is the sister of Kihika, is commissioned to persuade Mugo to attend the Uhuru celebrations by Wambui. He tells her: "This matter concerns all Thabai [...] Forget your troubles in the home and in the heart. Go to Mugo. Tell him this: the women and the children need him" (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 181). It is apparent that Mugo's attendance at Uhuru is crucial for all the Kenyans in terms of their identification with their past; in order to do that, they need Mugo who substitutes for Kihika. At that point, Mugo turns into the body keeping the soul of Kihika and all the other Mau Mau soldiers in the eyes of all the Kenyans and Mugo gets aware of what is expected from him when realizing the duty imposed upon him by the common will. He utters: "I am important. I must not die. To keep myself alive, healthy, strong- to wait for my mission in life – is a duty to myself, to men and women of tomorrow" (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 197). Mugo has been perceived as the would-be hero, the substitute for Kihika, helping all the others unite with the help of their collective memory to create a new independent nation throughout the whole novel; therefore, he becomes a means to an end. As a present-day Saviour for all the Kenyans, he is attributed to another form of Kihika that compensates for Kihika's and all the others' loss.

For the peace and tranquility of the whole community, Mugo is forced to turn into a hero who can sacrifice his life for his nation. This seems to be something which needs to be accepted and achieved for the whole community and their union under the same flag in the same nation. Renan places emphasis on such a strong sense of togetherness as follows:

... [a] nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. It presupposes a past; it is summarized, however, in the present by a tangible fact, namely, consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life (Renan, 1882, p. 10).

As Renan details each step to follow to create a new nation with the help of the collective memory, Ngugi wa Thiong'o appears to apply them in his story. Accordingly, Kihika and all the other freedom fighters such as Githua and Gatu are depicted as the ones who sacrifice their own lives for the others and thereby being shown as the past of the Kenyans. Likewise, Mugo, as 'a tangible fact' is described as the present-time hero who is ready to dedicate his life to the Kenyans. At that point, Kenya matches all the expectations or requirements to form and declare their independent nation in accordance with Renan's perspective.

What is upsetting is to learn that Mugo is not the true person in whom they could put their trust as their hero. Paradoxically, Mugo is perceived as a perfect would-be hero who can substitute for Kihika throughout the whole novel although he is the one who betrays Kihika by revealing his place to the British officers and leads him to death. Realizing that Mugo cannot be their expected or needed hero, the Kenyans instantly discard him since he does not serve the needs of them any longer. Nonetheless, they want to have him believing that he could still be used in the creation of their new nation. By making an example of him, all the others who (might) betray them or their oath of loyalty and unity for the Independence are warned, threatened or scared. He is once again the chosen one but not as the present-day hero for Kenya but as the traitor to Kenya who is needed to be punished.

No matter how much Mumbi objects to the decision of Mugo's trial, everyone thinks that he should be judged and penalized for what he did. Wambui approves of the common decision and agrees with all the others; he explains its reason to Mumbi who feels repentant and regretful not to save Mugo in this way:

'Who are you talking about?' Wambui asked quickly, and turned her eyes away from Mumbi.

'Mugo.'

'There was nothing to save,' Wambui said slowly. 'Hear me? Nobody could have saved him... because... there was nothing to save.'

'But you did not see his face, Wambui, you did not see him,' Mumbi said in a heated voice (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 242).

As Mumbi accuses herself of not helping Mugo, Wambui repeats the fact that 'there was nothing to save' for Mugo. Meanwhile, we, as readers, understand that Mugo is condemned to death, too like Kihika but as the traitor of Kenya. At that point, it is interesting to question Wambui's insistence on the necessity of his punishment, which causes him to die because it may suggest another sacrifice for the creation of the nation. That is to say, making him a sacrifice to Kenya helps them soothe their past memories by giving them a chance to punish Mugo to make Kihika and his soul happy. Besides, Mugo's death penalty would be a warning to anyone who thinks of betraying their loyalty and unity in their nation. In the end, Kenya honours Kihika and all the other Mau Mau freedom fighters with the death of Mugo who is made an example of any traitors and this leads Kenya to complete all the stages to form their nation with their collective memories of the past and the present.

In conclusion, the rest of the story provides the reader revealing information about Kenya which gains its new flag and a new national anthem (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 203) Fulfilling all the expectations to become a new nation mentioned in Renan's article "What is a Nation?", Kenya declares their independent nation in Uhuru at the end of the novel. Besides, the novel ends with traces of their attempts to get used to their independent becoming. To make this clear and observable for the readers, Mumbi says

“[we] have got to live” and Warui agrees with her by adding that “[they] have the village to build”; Wambui continues with “[the] market tomorrow, and the fields to dig and cultivate ready for the next season” and Mumbi finishes by reminding “their children to look after” (Thiong’o, 1986, p. 242). Collectively, they speak up for their present and future by assigning specific roles and duties to their present day and future. Accordingly, all these hold out a grain of hope for all the Kenyans for their freedom and independence while raising similar hopes for the readers of their sustainable nation formed by their heroic past full of stories of sacrifice, their fair and appreciative present-day and their promising future purified by the ghosts of their colonial past which once haunted Kenya.

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