

POLITICS AND THE RELIGIOUS UNCONSCIOUS IN NGUGI WA THIONGO'S *A GRAIN OF WHEAT* AND HIS OTHER WORKS

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Abstract

This article reflects on the extent to which the accretion of Biblical themes and allusions in Ngugi's work may be re-read in order to provide a way of re-imagining his decolonising project beyond the confines of disciplinary regimes of radical Marxist politics which have largely appropriated his work.

Keywords: Biblical themes, Marxism, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o

Christianity is not only a salvation religion, it is a confessional religion: It imposes strict obligations of truth, dogma and canon... Christianity requires yet another form of truth obligation different from faith. Each person has the duty to who he is, that is to try to know what is happening inside him, to acknowledge faults, to recognize temptations, to locate desires: And everyone is obliged to disclose these things either to God or to others in the community and, hence, to bear public or private witness against oneself.

Michel Foucault, *Religion and Culture*

Part I

In this paper I wish to reflect on the extent to which the accretion of Biblical themes and allusions in Ngugi's work may be re-read in order to provide a way of re-imagining his decolonising project beyond the confines of disciplinary regimes of radical Marxist politics which have largely appropriated his work. As a self-proclaimed Marxist revolutionary, Ngugi shed his Christian name "James" to suggest that he had divested himself of that faith and the colonial mentality he alleges it engenders. His revolutionary credentials were cemented by his incarceration by the Kenyan Government in 1982. Ngugi has been lionized as the leading revolutionary writer in Africa, eclipsing even writers that come from countries such as South Africa, Mozambique and Angola which have traditions of Marxist inspired liberation struggles (see Gugelberger 1998). However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decline in the ideological appeal of socialism, Marxism itself has come under siege. In literature this means that works such as Ngugi's that have drawn their appeal on the basis of Marxist revolutionary aesthetics have come to seem increasingly anachronistic and in dire need of alternative and broader grounds of critical appeal. A reevaluation of his deployment of Biblical signifiers may offer such an opportunity.

I wish to suggest that, although central to Ngugi's decolonising vision may appear to lie a rejection of the Bible and Christianity as hallmarks of the colonisation of the mind, in fact, Ngugi's decolonising vision and the means through which he seeks to achieve it may owe a more deeply ingrained debt to the Bible, particularly the New Testament, and the Christianity of his early mission school education than to *Das Kapital* or *The Communist*

Manifesto. Following a Foucauldian understanding of the nature of power as not just a negative force but holding the capacity to produce reality and to constitute individuals (Foucault 1999:195) I argue that in a sense, Ngugi along with his decolonising vision, is the product of the Christianity whose power he claims to resist. To say this is to mean that Ngugi's oppositional stance or resistance against the cultural imperialism of the Bible and Christianity should not be thought of exclusively in terms of an invasive decolonisation strategy launched from the standpoint of a secular ideology, i.e. Marxism. It should, instead, be seen also as a product of the internal dynamics of the Christian faith in the post-colonial epoch, which leads believers to problematize the major tenets of their faith, without necessarily rejecting it. This should lead to a critical approach that repositions Ngugi's work, not outside, but within the religious system itself and to see him as grappling with the fundamental issues of the faith. This should not of course detract from the potency of his anti-imperialist critique. On the contrary, it should complicate it because as Spivak observes, there is a connection between colonial racism which inscribes women as bearers of racialized bodies on the one hand and Christianity which contributed towards imperial production of colonial subjectivity as of universalized souls (Spivak 1997:291).

The approach I propose opens up a space for a critique of Ngugi's decolonising vision that reveals an important subtext in his writings which makes his work more interesting than it is from the perspective of preoccupations with class analyses that have so far dominated critiques of his work. It also brings his work into the purview of more complex appreciations of difference offered by the field of contemporary postcolonial and postmodernist studies.

The argument I wish to make is two-pronged: I suggest that beneath the veneer of modish Marxist rhetoric Ngugi is essentially a Christian and in his decolonising vision, he is grappling with the issues of his faith in the postcolonial moment. The sedimentations of Biblical themes and allusions in Ngugi's work, particularly *A Grain of Wheat* and *I Will Marry When I Want*, lend themselves conveniently to a Foucauldian analysis suggested by the epigram at the head of this paper. In the first part of the epigram Foucault refers to Christianity not being only a salvation religion but also a confessional religion that imposes strict obligations of truth, dogma and canon (1999:169). I am going to argue in the first part of this paper that Ngugi engages with the aspect of Christianity that obligates all persons to hold certain books, in this case, the Bible, as a permanent source of truth. In other words he makes a fundamental contribution to the postcolonial problematization of the Bible itself as the exclusive word of God. He seeks to find a place for it in his decolonising vision, even though it is a colonial text, heavily implicated in the dissemination of the colonial structure at whose pillars he hacks.

In the second part of the epigram Foucault talks of another truth obligation different from faith that Christianity requires, namely self-examination and confession (19989:169). Now to a certain extent Christian salvation and Marxist-style freedom from necessity are utopian goals and therefore have many correspondences between them, one being that they both depend on faith. Another is that they both are dominated by a dualistic language that collapses all difference into binaries which lead to a marginalisation of women's issues among others. Nevertheless, there is a basic difference between them. If we accept, as I do, Foucault's assertion that Christianity is a confessional religion, there is nothing in Marxism that corresponds to the Christian truth obligation that requires the practice of self-examination and confession. What puts Ngugi's decolonisation vision closer to Christianity rather than to Marxism is the importance he attaches in his work to "self-examination and confession" (1999:169). The whole theme of *A Grain of Wheat* would appear to be encap-

sulated in Gikonyo's words when he hears that Mugo has confessed his role as the betrayer of Khika:

"He was a brave man... He stood before much honour, praises were heaped upon him. He would have become a chief. Tell me another person who would have exposed his soul for all the eyes to pick at... Remember that few 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" (1986a:235).

Which is reminiscent of Foucault's:

"Each person has the duty to who he is, that is to try to know what is happening inside him, to acknowledge faults, to recognize temptations, to locate desires; and everyone is obliged to disclose these things either to God or to others in the community and hence, to bear public or private witness against oneself" (1999:170).

It is precisely because of this emphasis in the novel on confession and self-examination that Mugo has our sympathies even though he betrays Kihika, the revolutionary hero: Mumbi has our respect too even though in a moment of uncharacteristic weakness, she sleeps with Karanja while her husband is in detention, but Karanja remains the arch villain in the novel because he never carries out the obligatory self-examination and confession that redeems the other characters.

These Biblical accretions may account for what must appear, from a revolutionary feminist perspective, Ngugi's real failure to find a meaningful role for women in his decolonising vision. Women are amply represented in his work, but women's issues do not loom that large. As is generally known, a major issue in decolonisation is the matter of how anti-colonial or anti-imperialist struggles intersect with women's struggles for liberation. Leading revolutionaries, like Ngugi, are naturally expected to provide some indication of how the intersecting discourses of the two struggles may be harmonized to facilitate strategic alliances between them. However, when he attempts to frame female characters that could play a role in his decolonisation struggles, Ngugi's imagination of virtuous femininity is so effectively proscribed by Biblical models that his women bear virtues that are incongruous with the advancement of women's issues in the Marxist inspired liberation struggles of the sort he seeks to depict. This is because his women do not serve well as thorough-going Marxist or feminist revolutionaries that he probably wants them to be, but they serve perfectly as model recipients and practitioners of the self-examination and confession that constitutes Foucauldian practices of the self. Ngugi is essentially a Christian and in his decolonising vision, he is grappling with issues of his faith in the postcolonial moment. Ngugi's women are therefore not a failure in revolutionary imagination if one sees them as intended to facilitate the practice of self-examination and confession which is a fundamental truth obligation of the Christian faith (Foucault 1999:170).

Part II

I shall deal first with Ngugi's contribution to the discourse about the canonicity of the Bible as a postcolonial problem issue. Ngugi's deployment of Biblical signifiers, i.e. Biblical themes, images and allusions in his works, is a fraught project. A self-proclaimed Marxist who adopts a historical materialist approach to African social realities, he nevertheless uses the New Testament themes of sacrifice, betrayal, confusion, atonement and redemption in his most celebrated novel *A Grain of Wheat* (1967). In addition, he draws on the New Testament for his characters, e.g. Kihika is a Christ-like figure; Mumbi is reminiscent of Mary, the mother of Jesus; Karanja and Mugo turn their backs on the liberation struggle and echo

the betrayal of Judas Iscariot. The hero of the eponymous *Matigari* is a Christ-like figure even more so than Kihika. The play that landed Ngugi in trouble and led to his incarceration in 1982, *I Will Marry When I Want* is shot through with the Christian binaries of good and evil even though it is couched in the Marxist language of class. The bad guys have unlikely names, like Jezebel.

A heavy signifiatory reliance on a text heavily implicated in the imposition and later perpetuation of the colonial mentality at whose pillars he is putatively hacking is a delectable irony which even Ngugi himself felt the need to explain. In an interview with Jane Wilkinson he tried to dispose of it with the explanation that he used the Bible quite a lot in his writing because for historical reasons the Bible had become part and parcel of the African heritage, and when he uses it, he is merely drawing on a body of knowledge he can assume he shares with his audience (Wilkinson 1992:130).

I use the Bible quite a lot, or Biblical saying, not because I share in any belief in the Bible, or in the sanctity of the Bible. It is just simply a common body of knowledge I can share with my audience.

This rather bland statement sounds more like cavalier effort by a professing scientific socialist to dispose of a slightly embarrassing but persistent irritant. Later on in the course of the same interview however, he makes a statement that suggests that there is a weightier issue behind his persistent use of Biblical themes and allusions. In a point that gets an ample elaboration in the play *I Will Marry When I Want* (1980) he equates Christianity and the Bible with alcohol. "Even today in many neo-colonial regimes as in Kenya," he explains, "the Church and the bar are the only two venues available for people's entertainment, particularly on Sundays" (1992:130). Surely this goes beyond seeing the Bible as merely a readily available term of reference? It is to insinuate a sinister role to it in a way that suggests the authors more serious engagement with the text. These lines from *Ngahiika Ndenda* provide a hint of the sinister role the text stands for in his scheme of things:

We cannot end poverty by erecting a hundred churches in the village;
 We cannot end poverty by erecting a hundred churches in the village;
 Ending up with two alcoholics,
 The alcoholic of hard liquor,
 The alcoholic of the rosary (1980:114).

It is hard not to read into this the Marxian equation of religion, in this case Christianity, with the opium of the people.

Furthermore, in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) Ngugi castigates the African writers and intellectuals of his generation for cutting themselves off from empowering contacts with the peasants and workers of their societies by continuing to write in English instead of indigenous languages. However, what he laments most is how in so doing the African intelligentsia has left its African masses recklessly exposed to the onslaught from imperial culture and the propaganda of the maligned ruling elites who have a field day of unimpeded communication with the masses in African languages (1986:26). "For example," he says, "The Bible is available in unlimited quantities in even the tiniest African language" (1986:26). The Bible here is presented as a central text of the imperial culture from which the African mind is in dire need of liberation.

Ngugi is by no means alone in his indictment of the Bible as implicated in the colonial conquest of Africa. An apocryphal story generally passed on by word of mouth and rehashed in various written versions wherever the Christian mission was established in Af-

rica, goes: "When the white man came to our country, he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us 'Let us pray.' After the prayer the white man had the land and we had the Bible." The same idea is reiterated in Ali Mazrui's *Cultural Forces in World Politics* (1990:14), in which we may safely take the Bible to be synonymous with the God of the three imperatives that include gold and glory, which Mazrui posits behind European imperialism. Ngugi himself laments the fact that the Bible, for most Africans during the colonial period and for many years afterwards, provided the main literary experience, because:

African children who encountered literature in colonial schools and universities were made to experience the world as defined and reflected in the European experience of history (1986:93).

It is therefore clear that Ngugi is deeply troubled by the centrality of the Bible in facilitating both erstwhile Western imperialism and continuing Western captured hegemony.

Musa Dube expresses views of the connection between the Bible, which she describes as a "cultural text of imperialism," its readers and the institutions of Western imperialism in terms that resonate with the fundamental tenets of Ngugi's decolonising politics. She argues that the Bible, as part of the imperialist culture that was rammed down the throats of subjugated peoples, is "implicated in the colonization and alienation to subject people from their own languages, religions, environments and culture" (Dube 2000:15). This is a way of putting the situation that is entirely consistent with Ngugi's view of decolonising the mind as a radical reversal of the effects of colonialism by restoring Africa's cultural integrity through the revival of indigenous languages, religions, environments and cultures. It is precisely to such a revival that Ngugi harks when he makes Kiguunda blame his wife Wangeci for talking him into agreeing to undergo a ridiculous Christian marriage ceremony:

Who wanted a church wedding?
 You an old woman
 Wanting to go through a humiliating ceremony?
 And all because of looking down on our culture!
 You saw fools going for foreign customs
 And you followed in their footsteps.
 Do you think it is only foreign things
 Which are blessed? (1980:109).

In other words, when it comes to the issue of the role of the Bible in facilitating the erstwhile European imperialism and the concomitant colonization of the mind, the evidence is, as Dube asserts, "overwhelmingly damning" (2000:15). Ngugi would concur wholeheartedly.

The crucial problem that the Bible raises for Ngugi as a writer with a Christian background, struggling, nevertheless, for the emancipation of the continent from mental colonization, is perhaps best summed up in a statement by the similarly placed Dube, who explains:

Those of us who grew up professing the Christian faith in the age of the armed struggle for liberation, from World War I to the South African independence (sic) in 1994,m were never left to occupy our places comfortably... We were called upon to explain the ethics of our religion to justify its practice, its practitioners and institutions ... how could we as black Africans justify our faith in a religion that has betrayed us – a religion of the enemy, so the speak (2000:4).

It is a problem that stems directly from Christianity's obligation of truth, which includes the obligation to hold certain books, in this case the Bible, as a permanent source of truth (Foucault 1999:170). This obligation would seem, in fact, to be a *sine qua non* for the truth obligations of the Christian faith to hold as true a set of propositions which constitute a dogma, and to accept the decisions of certain authorities in matters of truth, which would be untenable if they did not derive their legitimacy from a text accepted *a priori* as the word of God.

Ngugi provides an indication of how he deals with the problematic issue of the canonicity of the Bible through an incident in *A Grain of Wheat*. Towards the beginning of the story, the young Kihika rejects his teacher's assertion that female circumcision was an abomination which "as Christians we are forbidden to carry on such practices" (1967:85), pointing out that Jesus himself had undergone a circumcision rite.

"It's just the white people that say so. The Bible does not talk about circumcising women" (1976:86).

When the teacher decides on punishing Kihika for blasphemy, Kihika defiantly refuses to submit to the punishment unless the teacher cites a Scripture that proved him wrong. Unable to provide such a Scripture the teacher nevertheless insists on meting out the punishment, upon which Kihika bolts out of the classroom, never to return.

"You will hit me only after you have told me the wrong I have done", Kihika said, trembling with anger (1976:86).

Eventually he joins the Mau-Mau guerilla movement to fight against British colonial rule.

The incident is significant because even though it reaffirms the validity of the Bible as the source of permanent truth, it also reveals the Bible as a site of contestation. The teacher tries to use it to condemn and suppress indigenous ritual practices in the interest of advancing the spread of Christianity. Kihika, on the other hand, invokes the authority of the Bible to defend a non-Christian practice against a rampantly hegemonising Christianity. It is a context which the teacher loses because the verse from the Bible that he cites as proof that female circumcision is wrong, embarrassingly fails to support his case. Not only does it not mention female circumcision, but also "circumcision of the flesh was not even specifically condemned" (1967:86). Kihika is thus vindicated in his defiance because he has also scored an important victory on behalf of pre-Christian indigenous religions using the authority of the Bible itself. In other words, the Bible can be read in ways that do not necessarily suppress indigenous religions, but on the contrary, concede their validity.

The recognition implicit in the incident cited above that while it is true that the Bible is a colonizing text, it can also be read in ways that do not set it against traditional non-Christian beliefs and practices but actually promotes them, makes the Bible itself a highly conflicted cultural icon. Ngugi uses it as a signifier to deconstruct its own power to suppress indigenous religions of the places to which it has been transplanted. Such instances of Christianity's central text being turned against it are not mere imaginative whims. John Karanja, in an article on the establishment of mission states in Kenya gives accounts of how Biblical authority was invoked to support practices among its converts (2000:254–284). Thus forms of circumcision, bride price and polygamy were often tolerated among converts because it was pointed out by them that they were not specifically condemned in the Bible.

It is easy to understand why invoking of Biblical authority to circumvent Christian suppression of traditional African religious practices would be a potent weapon in Ngugi's decolonising cultural politics. The concessions that are thus gained send out a clear message that pre-Christian religions are also valid; and if Africans did not hear of God for the first time from white missionaries, the whole *raison d'être* for missionary work had the

wind taken out of its sails. The claim that the spread of Christianity was justified because it introduced the benefits of civilization and knowledge of God to backward and godless peoples could hardly be sustained in the face of such concessions. Ngugi's point precisely is to use the Bible to urge among Christians tolerance and a spirit of co-existence with other faiths that was absent in the proselytizing discourses of the missionaries. He finds in the Bible justification for the validity and integrity of traditional African faiths and their sacred texts, albeit in oral form. This implies that the Christian truth obligation to hold certain books as a source of permanent truth must be extended to include text other than Biblical ones.

In other words, Ngugi would concur, I suggest, with leading African Biblical scholars, among them Musa Dube and Canaan Banana, who argue that the Bible has no role in the decolonisation process unless it were re-written, so that it includes the sacred narratives of cultures other than those of the Biblical holy lands.

Religious shrines and traditions of the peoples of Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe and the Caribbean must surely be important sources of God's revelation (Banana 1993:30).

Musa Dube sees evidence of God's self-revelation in the widespread phenomenon of Semoya in southern Africa. Semoya, "Spirit," is a notion that refers to the idea of an ever-present agent of God among all the believers (2000:116). Through it men and women receive powers of prophecy, and truth, which on occasions supersede that from the Bible. A case in point is that of Virginia Lucas, a woman possessed by the spirit who was repeatedly asked, "Why are you a female church leader when the Bible seems to forbid it?" and she replies, "I have been asked this questions several times before. I always tell people that God spoke to me through the Spirit, God never opened the Bible to me, God's spirit told me to open a church and heal God's people, which is what I am doing now" (Dube 2000:42).

What I have been doing in the above discussion is to demonstrate an often-overlooked aspect of Ngugi's use of Biblical themes and allusions. It is that Ngugi uses Biblical themes and allusions in order to find grounds in the Bible itself to defend the integrity of pre-Christian African beliefs and practices. It is important for him to do this because he is anxious to show that Africans do also draw inspiration from sources other than the Bible. The following speech by Kihika in response to Karanja's criticism that he contradicts himself when at one point he says Jesus had failed, and at another, that Kenyans need a Christ.

"Yes – I said he had failed because his death did not change anything, it did not make his people find a centre in the cross. All oppressed people have a cross to bear... In Kenya we want deaths that will change things, that is to say, we want true sacrifice, but first we have to be ready to bear the cross. I die for you, you die for me, we become a sacrifice, for one another. So that I can say that you, Karanja, are Christ. I am Christ. Everybody who takes the oath of Unity to change things in Kenya is Christ. Christ then is not one person. All those who take up the cross liberating Kenya are true Christs for us Kenyan people" (1967:95).

This passage when read in conjunction with Kihika's own subsequent death in the novel, described as a "crucifixion" (1967:26) by General R, suggests that Ngugi uses Kihika as a Christ figure, to prove that the Bible provided inspiration as well as heroic figures who were adopted as role models by freedom fighters. This is indeed supported further by the fact that Kihika himself "read the Bible everyday, and took it with him wherever he went" (1967:22). However, what is often overlooked is the fact that juxtaposed with all these references to the Bible and the need for oppressed people to carry their cross are references to the pre-Christian practice of oath taking – "everybody who takes the oath of unity to change things in Kenya is Christ" (1967:95). This is sleight of hand by Ngugi because at the same

time as displaying how Jesus was an inspirational figure to the Mau-Mau fighters it also uses the Bible to justify the non-Christian practice of “oath taking”. It is possible that it is the force of the oath of unity that swore the Kenyans to secrecy and readiness to die for their country, rather than the example of a self-sacrificing Christ, urging his fellow-sufferers to turn the other cheek, that made the Mau-Mau the dreaded organization that the colonial regime in Kenya sought to suppress by a brutal state of emergency. If, as I argue, this is the case, then Ngugi has cleverly used the Bible to show that people can draw inspiration from non-Biblical faiths, in ways that are identical and complementary to the way they can from the Bible.

The validity of traditional Africa faith is starkly contrasted with the sham and hypocrisy of post-colonial Kenya’s Christianity in *I Will Marry When I Want*. Gicaamba is distressed by the way the neo-colonial elite in post-colonial Kenya use Christianity to “shut the eyes of the poor/ the peasants and all the workers/ the masses as a whole/ ensure that they never wake up and open their eyes/ to see hat we are really doing to them” (1980:113). As if in search of an alternative source of spiritual renewal he harks back to the power of the pre-Christian practice of oath taking which in the past powered the struggle for independence by the Mau-Mau:

When we took the Mau-Mau oath,
 We used to make this vow:
 I’ll always help this organisatoin
 With all my strength and property
 I’ll always aid members of this organization
 If a bean falls to the ground
 We shall split it equally among us
 If I fail to do so
 May this, the people’s oath destroy me,
 And the blood of the masses turn against me (1980:113).

This recognition that traditional African belief systems and practices are as valid sources of inspiration as those described in the Bible is not unique to Kenya The Chimurenga liberation war that brought about majority rule in Zimbabwe owed a lot of its impetus as much to Christianity as to the spirit of the spirit medium called Ambuya Nehanda of the pre-colonial African religious beliefs (Banana 1993). Nehanda was a spirit medium that inspired the Shona rebellion against the imposition of colonial rule in the 1890s and when finally she was arrested, she was executed by public hanging. Yvonne Vera’s eponymous novel re-enacts her story (Vera 1993).

The suggestion of a degree of bed-fellow-ship between Biblical beliefs and traditional African beliefs is only odd from the point of view of proselytizing mission Christianity which emphasizes radical differences between the world of the “saved” and “unsaved” Africans. However, as Karanja has argued, conversion in Kenya, and arguably elsewhere in Africa, occurred on the large scale it did because the converts did not perceive a radical discontinuity between Biblical beliefs and practices on the one hand, and traditional African beliefs and practices on the other (Karanja 2000:269). Conversion may not have been as fundamental a break with pre-Biblical religions and faiths as the missionary proselytizers would have wished; on the contrary, it may have been possible because in Christianity and the Bible, Africans found ways of legitimating and preserving their own pre-Christian beliefs and practices. This is, I suggest, at the heart of Karanja’s suggestion that in Kenya the

African church acquired a distinctly Kikuyu character because "It was important for mission Christianity to accommodate itself to the realities of Kikuyu culture if it was to survive, let alone make an impact" (2000:269). It was an accommodation in which the missionaries followed a Kikuyu lead rather than exercised their authority (Karanja, *ibid.*)

What I have attempted to show so far in this discussion is that Ngugi's deployment of Biblical signifiers needs to be grasped, neither primarily as a Marxist inspired attempt to expose the complicity of the Bible in the infamies of colonialism, nor as an endorsement of its status in Christian dogma as a timeless and placeless word of God. I argue rather that Ngugi beckons us towards readings of the Bible that deconstruct its own claim to be the sole source of permanent truth for believers. There are other words through which God reveals himself to humanity. In Ngugi's work the Bible amplifies the voices of the gods of the people among whom it is introduced, in spite of the missionaries' efforts to secure an exclusive role for it as the sole voice of God. He reads the Bible in a way that forces it to create space within the Christian faith for it to be read alongside the sacred texts of other indigenous faiths of the societies to which Christianity is exported. He problematizes the Bible itself in the context of the Christian truth obligation to hold it as a source of permanent truth. However, one such truth that the Bible endorses is that the sacred texts of other faiths have equal claim to the Christian truth obligation to be held as source of permanent truth.

In fairness to the Christian Mission Societies who are in some respects the butt of Ngugi's most barbed attacks, it is only right to point out that what Ngugi is doing here is in fact to problematize from an African nationalist perspective of an issue that the mission societies themselves anticipated and had been grappling with as far back as the 1920s. King (2000:287) refers to one D'Costa who suggests that there were three major positions in the debate on the issue of the relationship between Christianity and other faiths. The "exclusivists" maintained that other faiths are marked by human kind's fundamental sinfulness and are therefore erroneous, and that Christianity offers the only valid path to salvation. Then there were the "inclusivists" who affirmed the salvific presence of God in non-Christian religions, but maintained that Christianity was the definitive and authoritative relation of God. Finally, there were the "pluralists" who argued that other faiths are equally salvific paths to the one God and that Christianity's claim that it is the only path should be rejected. It is here opined that these paradigms are still a useful grid for the general mapping of the postcolonial manifestation of the aforementioned problematic issue (D'Costa 2000:22, 52, 80). Ngugi, Dube and Banana are perhaps latter-day pluralists.

Part III

I wish now to turn to another aspect of Ngugi's work that suggests that he has a stronger ideological affinity to Christianity than to the Marxism that he espouses, namely his depiction of women, particularly the character of Mumbi in *A Grain of Wheat*. In one sense, from the point of view of feminist politics there is not much to choose from in the positions that Marxism and Christianity as ideologies assign to women. After all, Christianity and Marxism are both salvational ideologies whose language is dominated by binary oppositions which tend to collapse differences in a manner that subordinates women's issues, among others, to male privileging issues of the conflict between good and evil or the class struggle. Both have, in the words of Jocelyn Murray, "an essentially virile profile" (2000:68).

This is not to say that women do not feature much in Ngugi's work. Female characters, and major ones at that, abound even in Ngugi's early works like *The River Between* and *Weep Not Child*. Often they are quite central to the structure and theme of the works, as is shown in the case of Muthoni, the young female convert who tries to reconcile neighbouring villages divided and set at loggerheads by the arrival of Christianity because one is made up of believers (i.e. converts to Christianity) and the other, of non-believers. She dies trying to reconcile, in her own life, her desire to be both a "woman in the tribe" in a proper Kenyan tradition and a Christian (Marun 1987:129).

Similarly, women's representation looms large in *A Grain of Wheat* in Mumbi and it is her that I would like to explore in order to develop the argument I wish to make about Ngugi's use of biblical signifiers – the role it assigns to women in his revolutionary scheme of things and how this suggests that he is ultimately grappling with issues of his Christian faith than advancing a Marxist-style revolution.

The characterization of Mumbi in *A Grain of Wheat* suggests to me that gender is indeed a blind spot in Ngugi's revolutionary vision. It is not so much that women have no presence in his work as that in spite of that, women's issues are conspicuous by their absence. Mumbi is an evolving character and the virtues that Ngugi invests her with at successive stages in her evolution suggest a gradual elevation to an apotheosis of revolutionary womanhood. All the same in the end Mumbi comes across as a woman in a man's world and the feminine virtues that she embodies seem to be a projection of male desires. This is clear from even a cursory examination of the qualities that he ascribes to her at certain key moments in the evolution of her character, as I shall presently show. By his own attestation Ngugi began writing under the literary influence of the oral traditions of his native Kikuyu culture, the Christian literature of his early mission school education and the English literature masters of his secondary and university education curricula, particularly Shakespeare, Conrad and DH Lawrence. All these influences have their accretions in Ngugi's characterization of Mumbi.

Mumbi is the only woman character drawn with the fullness that we find in the male characters such as Kihika, Gikinyo or Mumbi. The fact that there is only one major woman character in the novel does not necessarily compromise Ngugi's radical decolonising politics. What is disturbing are the virtues that Ngugi draws upon or highlights in women in order to make Mumbi a worthy revolutionary. These virtues are disclosed at certain key moments in her life.

The first of these key moments include her childhood and early youth when Ngugi is anxious to hold her up as a model young child. While the boys, like Kihika, Gikonyo, Karanja and others engage in heated discussions about colonial rule and the need for the struggle, Mumbi is the apple of her parents' eyes and her destiny seems focused on making some man a good wife when she grows up. She is modeled too closely on the sort of girl that the missionaries would have liked their converts to believe was Mary, the would-be mother of Jesus. She also recalls Miranda, Prospero's dutiful daughter, whose perfect childhood makes her the appropriate future bride to the man from the brave new world, Ferdinand in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Mumbi is to Gikonyo what Miranda is to Ferdinand.

Later on during this phase when Mumbi is a young woman it is to DH Lawrence that Ngugi turns for the attributes that would supposedly endear her to both male and female supporters of his decolonising vision. There is clearly something Lawrentian about the description of Mumbi in *A Grain of Wheat*. The sexual act between Mumbi and Gikonyo puts

one in mind of both Miriam and Paul of *Sons and Lovers* and Mellors and Constance Chatterley in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

"Let us explore the wood", Gikonyo suggested in a voice vibrant with subdued emotion. They came to an open space at the centre of the forest... He stood facing Mumbi and surrendered himself to a power he knew drew them together. He held her hands and his fingers were full, so sensitive (1967:91).

Anyone with a mere acquaintance with Lawrence would not fail to recognize echoes of the Lawrentian male-dominated eroticism that finds its fullest expression in the sexual act in the woods. The trembling woman that sends a quiver of fear and joy trilling in his blood is perhaps as close as Ngugi as a writer can get to Mellors and Constance without courting accusations of plagiarism.

She lay against his breast, their hearts beat each to each... Mumbi was trembling, and this sent a quiver of fear and joy trilling in his blood. Gradually he pulled her to the ground, the long grass covered them. Mumbi breathed hard, but could not, dared not, speak. One by one Gikonyo removed her clothes as if performing a dark ritual in the wood (1967:91).

It is in the climax of the sexual act that Mumbi can be read as Ngugi's pretext to celebrate with DH Lawrence, the mysterious male potency embodied in the phallus, which achieves some sort of apotheosis in the eyes of women, smitten by a Jungian primeval penis envy. In the sex scene between Gikonyo and Mumbi, as in Lawrence's sex scenes, it is the man's sexual agency that is celebrated, as is clear from the fact that the penis is presented as an instrument for prising the female spirit open and eliciting the involuntary moan (1967:92).

Gikonyo found himself suspended in a void, he was near breaking point and as he swooned into the dark depth, he heard a moan escape Mumbi's parted lips (1967:92).

It is as if Mumbi's sexual organs and Mumbi herself, had no existence except as sources of the pleasure Gikonyo had by right, as a man.

The next key moment is her married life, which in a Nelson-Winnie Mandela fashion, is cut short when Gikonyo joins the Mau-Mau and is arrested and sent into detention, leaving her to fend for herself throughout the hard years of the state of emergency. Ngugi portrays her as a strong woman who endures with fortitude and supports her own and her husband's parents.

Mumbi was depressed because there was no man in the house. In the end she tied a belt round her waist and took on a man's work (1967:141).

Like Winnie Mandela she is the butt of taunts and harassment from the colonial regime, which banishes her from her home to the regrouped village where Karanja is eventually the chief. She steadfastly rebuffs Karanja's advances and stays loyal to her husband for seven long years, a worthy object of warrior husband's love. This is the case even when Karanja is made chief of the village by the colonial regime and has power, even of life and death, over her.

Karanja always pointed out to me that my faithfulness was in vain... He did not humble himself in front of me as he used to do. Instead he laughed to hurt me, and I hung onto Gikonyo with all my heart. I would wait for him, my husband, even if I was fated to rejoin him in the grave (1967:49).

Gikonyo, on his part, survives the trials of detention because his spirits are buoyed by the cherished hope that his wife remains true to him and he would one day see her again. Ironically, it is the desire to see his wife again which becomes his undoing. Unable to hold on

any longer he confesses to having taken the Mau-Mau oath to the colonial authorities in order to obtain his release and realize his hope of being with his beloved wife again. However, when Mumbi learns from Karanja of her husband's imminent release, she is so overwhelmed with joy and gratitude that she allows Karanja to make love to her. It is a weakness she regrets immediately when she collects her thoughts, but as luck would have it, she conceives. The effect of this is that when Gikonyo returns home he finds his wife nursing another man's child. A woman whose image was his source of hope and strength becomes the object of destructive self-righteous indignation. In a reaction not too dissimilar to Othello's

Was this fair paper, this most godly book,
Made to write whore on (IV.ii.69)

when he contemplates his supposed betrayal by Desdemona. Gikonyo's thoughts are wracked by imaginings of Mumbi's fall from grace:

The image of Mumbi moaning with pleasure as her naked body bore Karanja's weight corroded him everywhere. He recreated the scene in its sordid details: The creaking bed, Karanja's fingers touching Mumbi everywhere... (1967:120), etc.

At this point he seems completely oblivious to the fact that he is himself guilty of betrayal since he confessed to having taken the oath to escape detention. Perhaps he could see his betrayal as mitigated by the fact that it had served the greater cause of reuniting them. But this only serves to intensify his sense of injury, for he finds his wife "begrimed", to borrow Othello's term, for no higher a purpose than wanton lasciviousness.

The unfairness of Karanja's judgment and Mumbi's patient acceptance of his reaction suggests that Ngugi is at pains here to show that women played an important role in the struggle for independence. Yet no matter how much sympathy the reader may feel for Mumbi, she hardly comes across as a revolutionary in a sense that would commend itself to the women's struggles. The Setswana word for women, "mosadi," means "one who stays home and waits" because women traditionally were the housekeepers and stayed home while the men were out hunting or at war. There is too much of a "mosadi" in Mumbi to make her a credible revolutionary.

Conrad too leaves his mark on the Ngugian woman. Later on in the novel Mumbi is cast in the role of Conrad's "intended" in *Heart of Darkness*. She waits patiently for the return of her detained husband who had joined the Mau-Mau and taken the oath. However, like Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* the idealism that inspires him disintegrates due to loneliness, isolation and pining for his wife, and he betrays the ideals, which she in her perfection, embodies and which had led to their separation in the first place.

In casting Mumbi in the mould of the Conradian woman who embodies illusory ideals which idealistic men pursue at their own peril, Ngugi may have been a more profound critic of his own revolutionary idealism than he probably intended. It provides one possible explanation for the incredible sexual encounter between her and Karanja. It may be a means of commending to the reader Karanja's cynicism and refusal to be taken in by the ideals of the struggle for it seems vindicated by the fact that the struggle ideals are betrayed and seen as a sham even in the midst of preparations to celebrate its victory. At any rate it seems to revise the significance of the earlier scene in which it is Gikonyo rather than Karanja who wins Mumbi's favours during the race to the train, which would seem to have been a commendation of Gikonyo's loyalty to Kihika. At any rate the scene makes it a moot point that we should not read into the fact that it is Mumbi's sexual encounter with the struggle's arch-enemy, Karanja, the arch-traitor of the revolution, that produces a child. Ngugi could

as easily have made Mumbi make love and have a child with any one of the unsullied, self-proclaimed revolutionaries that worship at Kihika's shrine. It may be grudging commendation of a cynical refusal on the part of Karanja to be taken in by the utopian ideals of the struggle that led many a naïve person to their death or incarceration. And it seems that Karanja's cynicism is vindicated because these ideals are betrayed even in the midst of preparation to celebrate their triumph. In making Mumbi finally succumb to Karanja's seduction on the eve of her husband's return from detention Ngugi may be grudgingly conceding that the idealism that drives the struggle may be fundamentally flawed and less to be preferred than Karanja's skeptical cynicism that makes him invest in the more tangible and immediate benefits of siding with the might of the colonial regime.

The last key moment in Ngugi's delineation of Mumbi's revolutionary attributes to which I would like to refer, occurs towards the end of the story in the aftermath of the struggle. It is a moment of stocktaking in which everybody is required to undertake the introspection they require to enable them to come to terms with their role in the struggle. She is among the first to do this. Her acceptance of her child with Karanja, despite the loathing she felt for Karanja, suggests that the struggle has left everyone "holding the baby," so to speak. She leads the way in dealing with the seamy but inalienable aspects of their history, which the child represents. Hence her jubilation when her husband, Gikonyo, finally does the same. Furthermore, not only does she bare her own soul to Mugo when she explains the circumstances of her seduction by Karanja, but she in turn listens to Mugo's confession without passing judgment on him. Similarly, she does not pass judgment and seek revenge against Karanja for his role in the home guards or for the strain in her marriage. In this she is completely at odds with the self-appointed high-priest of the revolution, General R, who advocates a witch-hunt in which those who betrayed the revolution would be judged and condemned "by their actions" (1967). Mumbi is here an embodiment of nation-building attributes which recall not so much the creator in the sense that Ngugi explains in the remarks cited above, but the divine grace by which Mary becomes the blessed among all women. In other words, Ngugi's Mumbi is not so much the freedom fighter but the receptacle of the grace through which the society will be saved.

However, in *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams*, drawing on his traditional Kikuyu cultural background, Ngugi himself explains that his inspiration for the image of Mumbi is, in fact, the traditional Kikuyu culture in which the name 'Mumbi' means "one who moulds" and it is used to refer to the creator or God.

There are various kinds of creatorship that are recognized in Gikuyu culture. There is *mumbi wa iguru na thi*, the creator of heaven and earth.

There is *mumbi wa nyungu*, maker of pots ... *mumbi wa mihianamo*, maker of images, etc. (1998:10).

Ngugi does not make much of the fact that "Mumbi" is generally a girl's name and the association in Gikuyu culture of women and the Godhead or creatorship which his explanation suggests. It may well be that it is this notion that is at the heart of his depiction of Mumbi in *A Grain of Wheat*, and that his intention is perhaps to highlight the role of women in the revolutionary struggle as bearers of nation-building qualities. However, in the above explanation it is art that he invests with something godlike. But if Mumbi means the creator too, it is curious that Ngugi does not make the association between art as a repository of nation-building values and women as bearers of nation-building attributes in his explanation.

However, even if it were true that he intends Mumbi to be a representative of woman as bearer of socially constructive attributes, these attributes seem to me inconsistent with a thorough-going socialist revolution. Mumbi as the woman who would be creator or who would embody the creative principle, comes across as a rather otherworldly apparition constructed from the attributes of idealized biblical women. They are not the attributes of a woman who would fight for women's issues. This is why I suggest that it is to Mary, the mother of Jesus in the Bible, that Mumbi is the most obvious allusion. That Mumbi is intended to be read as a Mary-like figure is clear from the fact that descriptions of her childhood share a pedigree with those to be found in the mission school readers intended to inculcate Christian values among female converts, who often bore local variations of the name Mary, e.g. Maliya, Meli, Mariya, etc. Like Mary in the Bible, Mumbi is presented as a paragon of her culture's feminine virtues. Subtle correspondences are disclosed as the story progresses: Despite her premarital sexual encounter with Gikonyo, she is nevertheless presented as a virtuous woman fit to be the mother of the Jesus-like child that would embody the troubled land's future. Furthermore, like Mary who is betrothed to be married to a carpenter, Mumbi is betrothed and eventually marries Gikonyo, a wood carver (i.e., like Mary in the Bible, Mumbi marries a man who works with wood). Both Mary and Mumbi bear children who are not biologically sired by their husbands, and both husbands have excruciating psychological problems coming to terms with the fact.

As with the New Testament in which Mary is primarily the bearer of the Christ-child through whom society finds its redemption from an unwholesome past, or Elewa in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* that bears the child who shall represent the revolutionary values for which its assassinated father fought, Mumbi is a conduit for the child that embodies both the idealism that drove the struggle, and the human weaknesses that betrayed it. "We want a Kenya built on the heroic tradition of resistance of our people" (1967:221), General R tells the party at the Uhuru celebrations; but the child's conflicted parentage reminds us that General R is wrong. It is not through the search for heroes to revere and traitors to punish that a viable future will be secured, as General R suggests when he says: "We must revere our heroes and punish the traitors and collaborators with the colonial enemy" (1967:221). For if truth be told, such a clear-cut division between the sheep and the goats is not possible, because "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." This is why Mumbi stops her husband's precipitous grasp at reconciliation: "No! Not today. People try to rub out things, but they cannot. Things are not easy. What has passed between us is too much to be passed over in a sentence. We need to talk, to open our hearts to one another, examine them, and then together plan the future we want" (1967:246) and as if to underscore the indelibility of the history she talks about, she concludes: "But now, I must go for the child is ill" (1967:246).

Towards the end Gukonyo comes round to Mumbi's way of thinking, when overawed by Mugo's confession of his role in the betrayal of Kihika, he rejects General R's retributive justice. He says of Mugo:

"He was a brave man... He stood before much honour; praises were heaped upon him. He would have become a chief. Tell me another person who would have exposed his soul for all the eyes to pick at... Remember that few 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" (1967:235).

Hearing Gikonyo speak this way, Mumbi "felt herself lifted to the clouds" (1967:234).

It is tempting to think that in Mumbi Ngugi has created a female figure in whom the discourses of revolutionary anti-imperialist politics and the liberation of women intersect.

However, this is not the case. The fact that Mumbi has virtually no agency in the novel would dismay many women readers (Mugo; Mohanty, Spivak) who would prefer to see a more positive positioning of the function of female wombs and bodies (Spivak 1997:291). She comes across as the long-suffering woman whose suffering confers upon her redeeming insights or graces – redeeming, not to her and other women as such, but to men, otherwise bent on a self-destructive course. In this way, she is cast in the same mould as Achebe's Beatrice in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) whose suffering and loss of a lover are the price she pays for the insight that saves the society from the misguided ambitions of self-seeking men. It also earns her the role of the novel's oracular mouthpiece. In other words, Mumbi is an idealized paragon of a virtuous African womanhood, and like Mary in the New Testament whose virtues are intended to make her a fitting object of the immaculate conception, Mumbi is carefully drawn so that she becomes an appropriate mouthpiece for the author's ethical insights in the novel. By the time she utters the novel's great truths she has attained a quasi-religious veneration that makes her the novel's paradigm of the perfect woman through whom the word of God is made flesh.

The successive phases of the development of Mumbi's character suggest a gradual apotheosis of woman to the level of oracular mouthpiece for the novelist's ethical insights. This may seem consistent with women's liberation struggles' demand for significant roles in the fictional representation of women. However, the virtues with which Ngugi invests Mumbi in order to enable her to fit this role, are incongruous with the rough and tumble of the struggle for power and resources. They produce a woman perched upon a pedestal, shrouded in oracular mystique, high above the day-to-day rough and tumble of social struggles for power and resources. Her role in the novel seems to be to facilitate as well as to exemplify the practice of self-examination and confession, which, according to Michel Foucault as explained above, is one of the truth obligations of the Christian faith. Ngugi's decolonising vision may owe something to Edward Said or Franz Fanon's cultural politics, but while these two ignore or subsume women's issues within the anti-imperialist struggle, in Ngugi women are not ignored. On the evidence of *A Grain of Wheat* Ngugi would appear to seek to satisfy women's aspirations in quasi-religious roles which do not intersect too happily with the demands of a secular revolutionary anti-imperialism. However, this should not detract from the validity of his decolonising project, especially if it is understood as addressing the religious inflection in the imperial production of human subjects.

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