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POSTCOLONIAL MEMORY, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY IN
NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S *A GRAIN OF WHEAT*

Ngugi wa Thiong'o'nun *Bir Buğday Tanesi* Romanında Postkolonyal
Bellek, Kültür ve Kimlik

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ABSTRACT

Ngugi wa Thiong'o has been a catalyst for the literary world to acknowledge the contribution of African writers to world literature. In his works, Ngugi narrated his individual and national traumas of British colonisation in Kenya. His third novel, *A Grain of Wheat* (1986), is about Kenya on its way to independence, Uhuru. The story explores the influence of colonialism on Kenyan people and their culture and how the legacy of colonialism persists in shaping the country's identity and power dynamics. Nevertheless, the long-sought independence of Kenyans has not been without suffering for the country and its people. Identity becomes problematic as the traumatic experiences of the characters intersect with social and cultural upheavals. The characters attempt to escape their traumatic memories and begin afresh with Uhuru, though they have to redeem themselves from the past.

A Grain of Wheat also explores cultural issues as the characters navigate the conflict between traditional African culture and the cultural norms imposed by British colonialism. The novel highlights the importance of culture and history in preserving traditions and identity and the dangers of cultural dissolution under colonialism. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* explores the themes of memory, culture, and power in a postcolonial context. The novel introduces essential questions about the influence of colonialism on Kenyan people and culture and how the colonised maintain and contend its authority. This article argues that the novel shows how colonialism is deeply embedded in the memories and cultural identities of the characters in the novel. Therefore, the paper offers insights into how memory and culture are used to resist and resolve colonial oppression.

Keywords: culture, memory, history, identity, postcolonial.

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ÖZ

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, edebiyat dünyasının Afrikalı yazarların dünya edebiyatına katkısını kabul etmelerinde öncü bir yazar olmuştur. Eserlerinde Kenya'daki İngiliz sömürgeciliğinin bireysel ve ulusal travmalarını anlatır. Ngugi'nin üçüncü romanı *Bir Buğday Tanesi* (1986), bağımsızlık sürecindeki Kenya'yı, yani Uhuru'yu konu almaktadır. Roman, sömürgeciliğin Kenya toplumu ve kültürü üzerindeki etkisini ve sömürgeciliğin mirasının ülkenin kimlik ve güç dinamiklerini şekillendirmeye nasıl devam ettiğini ele alır. Bununla birlikte, Kenyalıların uzun süredir arzuladıkları bağımsızlık, ülke ve halk için acı çekmeden gerçekleşmeyecektir. Karakterlerin travmatik deneyimleri sosyal ve kültürel çalkantılarla kesiştiğinde kimlik de sorunlu hale gelmektedir. Karakterler travmatik anılarından kaçmaya ve Uhuru ile yeni bir başlangıç yaşamaya çalışırlar, ancak kendilerini geçmişlerinden arınmak zorundadırlar.

Bir Buğday Tanesi, karakterlerin geleneksel Afrika kültürü ile İngiliz sömürgeciliğinin dayattığı kültürel normlar arasındaki çatışmalarını ele alarak kültürel meseleleri de irdeler. Roman, geleneklerin ve kimliğin korunmasında kültürün ve tarihin önemine ve sömürgeciliğin baskısı altındaki kültürel çözülmenin tehlikelerine dikkat çemektir. Bu bağlamda Ngugi wa Thiong'o'nun *Bir Buğday Tanesi* adlı romanı postkolonyal bağlamda bellek, kültür ve güç temalarını ele almaktadır. Roman, sömürgeciliğin Kenya halkı ve kültürü üzerindeki etkisi ve sömürgeciliğin tahakkümünü nasıl muhafaza ettiği ve sürdürdüğü hakkında temel sorular ortaya koymaktadır. Bu makale, romanda sömürgeciliğin karakterlerin anılarına ve kültürel kimliklerine nasıl derinlemesine gömülü olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu nedenle makale, eserde bellek ve kültürün sömürgeci baskıya direnmek ve bu baskıyı ortadan kaldırmak için nasıl kullanılabileceğine dair örnekleri inceleyecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: kültür, bellek, tarih, kimlik, postkolonyal.

Introduction

A Grain of Wheat delves into themes of colonialism, resistance, and identity. Through a thoughtful portrayal of the struggles of Kenya in its quest for independence from British colonial rule, the novel offers an insightful description of colonial and postcolonial discourses. The novel is a testament to Ngugi wa Thiong'o's ability to expound on the multifaceted nature of the country's fight against colonialism while highlighting the complexities of identity formation during this turbulent period. Overall, *A Grain of Wheat* is a stimulating literary work that offers a perspective on Kenya's history. Through its characters, the novel examines the profound psychological effects of colonialism on the Kenyan people. Memories of colonial oppression, violence, and betrayal continue to haunt the Kenyans, shaping their relationships with each other and their attitudes toward the struggle for independence. In his analysis of the novel, Kenneth Harrow underscores its significance, noting that with its publication, "the African perspective on the struggle for independence in Kenya was given its most complete, complex, and emotionally stirring expression" (Harrow 1985: 243). In *A Grain of Wheat*, the protagonist Mugo grapples with the profound psychological burden of betraying his friend Kihika, a celebrated anti-colonial hero who embodies the power of collective action and solidarity. Mugo's guilt and experiences form the crux of the novel's plot, leading him to a potential path of redemption through his eventual confession. As such, *A Grain of Wheat* portrays colonialism's psychological and emotional impact on the Kenyan people. It stands as a testament to the resilience and courage of those who fought against colonialism and struggled for

independence and highlights the ongoing need to examine the legacy of colonialism in shaping contemporary societies.

A prominent theme of postcolonial theory that can be applied to Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* is cultural hybridity, which refers to the blending and fusion of different cultural practices and identities resulting from colonialism and its aftermath. Homi K. Bhabha characterises the postcolonial condition as a state of displacement and hybridity; in his words: "The postcolonial condition is characterised by a sense of displacement and hybridity" (Bhabha 1994). The novel shows how the characters grapple with their complex cultural identities, influenced by their indigenous African cultures and the dominant British colonial culture. Frantz Fanon emphasises that "colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reason. It is violence in its natural state" (Fanon 1968). For example, Mugo, a former Mau Mau fighter, struggles with remorse and embarrassment over his past actions, which were seen as subversive to colonial rule. His struggle to reconcile his Kenyan identity as a former anti-colonial fighter reflects the ongoing process of negotiating hybrid cultural identities after the end of colonial rule.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* explores how personal and national histories intersect and are shaped by larger historical forces. The novel presents Mugo initially as a heroic figure and the saviour of his village against the British colonialists, but his heroism gradually unravels to reveal his guilt and shame. Mugo is haunted by the memory of his treachery towards Kihika, the village's genuine hero and a symbol of anti-colonial resistance. Kihika's conviction in the potency of collective action and solidarity inspires other characters to join the fight for independence. In contrast, Mugo's intense feelings of guilt and shame lead him to retreat into self-doubt and isolation, preventing him from forming meaningful relationships with others or finding purpose in his life.

Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe* (2009) suggests that postcolonialism requires us to examine how the past is constructed in the present and how the present is constructed in relation to the past. In *A Grain of Wheat*, the traumatic memories of colonial violence and the suffering inflicted by British colonialism create a sense of collective identity among the Kenyan people, prompting them to rise against the colonial oppressors. Mugo's recollections of the events of 1955, particularly the murder of Gitogo, a deaf boy beaten from behind for failing to hear the white men's orders, underscore the traumatic impact of colonial violence on the Kenyan people. These memories of the past inform the present experiences of the characters and shape their understanding of their identity and history.

In tandem with the experiences of Mugo, the effects of colonialism and the impending arrival of Uhuru are also confronted by other characters, including Gikonyo, Mumbi, and Karanja, as well as the colonialist Robert Thompson. Gikonyo, for example, grapples with reconciling his yearning for independence and autonomy with the legacy of colonialism, which had suppressed his freedom and familial relations. Mumbi, too, confronts the pressure resulting from the clash between traditional African culture and the cultural norms enforced by British colonialism and the Mau Mau Emergency. Despite the characters' struggles, the novel also depicts the hope and positivity that defined the anti-colonial Mau Mau movement and the eventual triumph of Uhuru. The characters face the repercussions of colonialism on their society and culture, underscoring the intricacy of the anti-colonial movement and exposing the tensions and inconsistencies that pervaded it. The subaltern characters in *A*

Grain of Wheat, particularly those involved in the Mau Mau rebellion, are portrayed as excluded from official history and national memory, highlighting the dominant narrative of British colonialism that has silenced their voices and experiences.

The concept of the subaltern has been a critical aspect of postcolonial theory, which helps us understand the marginalised and oppressed groups excluded from mainstream political and cultural discourse. The works of theorists such as Gayatri Spivak, Antonio Gramsci, and Frantz Fanon have significantly contributed to our understanding of the subaltern. The term subaltern refers to individuals or groups who are socially, politically, and economically marginalised and excluded from mainstream discourses and structures of power. The term originates in the work of the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, who described groups subordinated and oppressed by dominant groups. The subaltern can be defined by race, gender, class, caste, language, and culture. Subalterns are often silenced. Their experiences and perspectives are erased from official narratives, and their agency and resistance are overlooked. Subaltern studies and postcolonial theory have contributed to our understanding of the subaltern and their role in shaping history and society. Giving voice to subaltern people and understanding their experiences allows us to challenge dominant narratives and power structures and work toward greater social justice and equality. In *A Grain of Wheat*, the characters who are part of the Mau Mau rebellion are portrayed as subaltern figures excluded from official history and national memory. The novel seeks to challenge the dominant narrative of British colonialism that has erased their experiences and perspectives.

The novel also highlights the importance of collective resistance, as the characters must work together to achieve their goals of independence and self-determination. Shai Ginsburg argues in his journal article, “Resistance to the colonial power structures is now located within the ambivalence of colonial authority itself as a systemic effect of the colonial regime of truth” (Ginsburg 2009: 243). This view suggests that a colonised person may simultaneously internalise the values and beliefs of the coloniser while simultaneously resenting and resisting their domination. Resistance, in this sense, is not necessarily an outright refusal of colonial power but rather a more intricate and subtle process within and against the dominant authority. As subaltern groups work together and organise around common agendas, they can resist repression and create new possibilities for social change. Therefore, *A Grain of Wheat* can be analysed through a postcolonial lens as a novel exploring the themes of cultural hybridity, subaltern, resistance, and agency in Kenya’s struggle for independence from British colonial rule. Through this analysis, we can better understand the complex dynamics of oppression and resistance in the postcolonial world and recognise the role of collective action and subaltern agency in shaping history.

A Grain of Wheat is a powerful exploration of the complicated relationship between memory, culture, and identity in postcolonial societies. Set in Kenya days before the independence celebrations called Uhuru, the novel utilises flashbacks to shed light on the uneasiness of the characters about the forthcoming event. Through the lives of several characters, the novel examines the intricate web of politics, love, and betrayal, offering an analysis of the impact of colonialism on memory, culture, and identity. The complex relationship between memory, culture, and identity in postcolonial societies has been a central area of inquiry for scholars in postcolonial studies. This paper employs a postcolonial

theoretical framework to explore how *A Grain of Wheat* engages with these themes within the Kenyan struggle for independence from British colonialism.

Drawing on the works of postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, the article demonstrates how the novel presents a multi-layered critique of colonialism and its legacies while also illuminating the complexities of postcolonial identity formation and the role of memory and culture in shaping collective and individual identities. Our analysis argues that *A Grain of Wheat* offers a powerful vision of postcolonial memory and identity that challenges dominant narratives of colonialism and offers a more intricate understanding of colonial legacies in the postcolonial world. By foregrounding the experiences and perspectives of the characters, the novel reveals the complexities of postcolonial identity formation. It provides an understanding of the impact of colonialism on memory and culture. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that *A Grain of Wheat* contributes to postcolonial studies and provides rich insights into postcolonial memory and identity complexities.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory is a critical perspective that seeks to understand the complex relationships between the colonisers and the colonised and the continuing legacies of colonialism today. As Homi Bhabha has noted, postcolonial refers to the cultural, geopolitical, and psychic realities of societies that were once under colonial rule (Bhabha 1994). Culture and identity, shaped and transformed by the historical experience of colonialism and its aftermath, are fundamental concepts in postcolonial theory. The postcolonial theory seeks to understand how these historical processes have shaped the world we live in today and how they continue to affect people's lives worldwide. Postcolonial criticism exposes literary figures, themes, and representations that have imposed imperial ideology, colonial domination, and Western hegemony to reveal the forms of expression that convey Europe's ideologically biased ways.

Culture is a group or community's shared practices, beliefs, and values. In postcolonial theory, culture is often seen as something shaped by power relations, with dominant groups using their cultural practices to assert their authority over subjugated peoples. Shehla Burney highlights the function of culture in colonialism in her article, "In short, colonialism does not necessarily operate through political domination alone but also the tropes and power of language and culture" (Burney 2012: 51). The language and culture of the colonising power are often presented as superior to that of the colonised, which is used to justify the control of the colonising power over the colonised. The language and culture of the colonised are often portrayed as inferior or backward. Therefore, culture reinforces the power dynamics of colonialism and makes it more difficult for the colonised to resist the status quo or to challenge it. Colonialism often involved the imposition of dominant cultural norms and values on colonised peoples, leading to the erasure or marginalisation of indigenous cultures and practices.

In postcolonial theory, cultural identity is considered a crucial concept and is believed to be in constant flux. As Stuart Hall states in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990), cultural identity is a matter of "becoming" as well as "being," and it is something that belongs as much to the future as it does to the past. The notion of identity is closely intertwined with culture, as cultural practices and beliefs significantly influence how people understand and

express their identities. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999), argues that postcolonialism is concerned with comprehending the complex and varied ways individuals and communities experience their colonial past and how this shapes their identities. In postcolonial theory, identity is frequently viewed as a constantly evolving and contested concept, as people struggle to assert their cultural identities in the face of dominant cultural norms.

Bhabha contends that “hybridity represents a re-evaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the recurrence of discriminatory identity effects, resulting in the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination” (Bhabha, 1994: 112). Hybridity challenges dominant power structures based on fixed, static notions of identity and creates new and unique identities by blending different cultural elements. Hybridity does not entirely eradicate or eliminate the effects of discrimination and domination. Instead, it reveals how these forces are inscribed in the bodies and psyches of the subaltern. In doing so, hybridity unsettles the power relations between colonised and colonised, creating new possibilities for collective resistance and social transformation.

Bhabha’s idea of cultural hybridity is based on the notion that cultures are not static, permanent entities. Instead, they are constantly growing and changing through contact with other cultures. According to him, cultural hybridity is a process of negotiation and translation between cultures in which both cultures are transformed. Bhabha claims that “the uncertain and threatening process of cultural transformation is a complex and dynamic process that displaces the authority of any one culture” (Bhabha, 1994: 33). Bhabha’s concept of cultural hybridity has transformed the study of cultural identity and difference by challenging the fixed and static concepts of identity that often underpin dominant power structures. Bhabha has opened up new possibilities for collective resistance and social transformation by highlighting cultures’ dynamic and fluid nature.

The concept of mimicry is a well-known example of cultural hybridity discussed in Bhabha’s works. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha asserts that: “Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal so that other ‘denied’ knowledge enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority – its rules of recognition” (Bhabha 1994: 114). Mimicry refers to how colonised people imitate the culture and behaviour of their colonisers, often to obtain power or status within colonial society. Bhabha argues that mimicry is not simply a form of cultural assimilation or exchange but a provocative and transformative process. The act of repetition is also essential to mimicry, as it disrupts originality rather than merely representing it. His emphasis on the complex and dynamic nature of cultural identity has challenged traditional notions of cultural difference and has opened up new possibilities for cultural transformation and exchange. By imitating the coloniser, the colonised subject exposes that colonial discourse is not a coherent or unified system of meaning but is instead marked by internal conflicts and tensions. Bhabha points out, “The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (Bhabha 1994: 129). Disrupting the false notions of sameness and coherence surrounding colonial discourse, mimicry thus becomes a potentially powerful tool of resistance, allowing the colonised subject to challenge and subvert dominant power structures.

Frantz Fanon as a psychiatrist and philosopher of Martinican origin has significantly influenced postcolonial thought through his writings on colonialism's psychological and social effects and the struggle for independence. Fanon's most famous work, *Wretched of the Earth* (1961), severely criticises colonialism, arguing that it creates a system of oppression that denies the colonised access to power, education, and resources. Fanon stresses that this system of oppression is deeply embedded in the colonised psyche, and its effects can only be overcome through decolonisation, which involves both political and psychological transformation. Fanon emphasises that colonialism creates "an unequal power relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, leading to the latter becoming subjugated and exploited" (Fanon, 2008). Fanon also examines the relationship between violence and resistance, stressing that violence was a necessary part of the struggle for independence and the only way the colonised could escape colonial rule's psychological and social consequences. Fanon asserts that "colonialism is a violent practice, characterised by the imprisonment of the colonised, as seen in apartheid, and the violent subjugation and exploitation of the colonised" (Fanon, 1968). Fanon's work has helped us to understand how colonialism has transformed the psyche and identity of the colonised. It has underlined that the struggle for independence is a multifaceted and challenging political and psychological transformation process.

According to Fanon, "the colonists have always found a reason for their actions to justify themselves" (Fanon, 2008: 30), and his writings encourage us to examine the power dynamics and psychological effects of colonialism critically. According to Fanon, colonialism's ultimate goal is to "kill the colonised in the native" by stripping them of their culture, language, and identity. He argues that colonial powers use various means to achieve this, such as the imposition of their language and cultural norms and destroying traditional forms of social organisation. (Fanon 2008). Social genocide in postcolonial theory refers to a colonial power's intentional destruction of a colonised people's culture, society, and community. The term "social genocide" was first coined by Raphael Lemkin, who defined it as "the destruction of the structures of the life of a national group" in his 1944 book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (Lemkin 2008). The term has since been applied to the postcolonial context, where it describes how colonial powers attempt to eradicate the cultures and identities of colonised peoples.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a renowned Indian-born scholar, literary theorist, and feminist, has significantly contributed to postcolonial thought. "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" is a seminal postcolonial essay by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, first published in 1988. The essay focuses on representing subaltern groups, particularly women, within the discourse of Western colonialism. Spivak argues that subaltern groups cannot simply speak for themselves and assert their agency and that the voices of subaltern groups are often silenced or misrepresented within this discourse. Instead, they must navigate the complex terrain of colonial discourse to find a space from which they can speak. Spivak notes that: "For the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation" (Spivak, 1988: 285). Spivak argues that for the "true" subaltern group, whose identity is defined by its difference from the dominant group, there is no single, unified subaltern subject that can know and speak for itself. According to Spivak, the intellectual's role is to create conditions where the subaltern can speak for itself rather than speaking on

its behalf. Widely cited and debated in the field, the essay has significantly impacted postcolonial studies. Its focus on the representation of marginalised groups and the complexities of power and agency has helped shape discussions in postcolonial theory, feminism, and cultural studies. The essay's title has become a touchstone for discussing the representation of subaltern groups and has inspired much other work in the field.

Another crucial aspect of Spivak's work is that she stresses the role of language and representation in constructing power dynamics. She argues that issues of power and domination are inextricably linked to how we talk about and represent the world. By highlighting the silenced voices of the subaltern, she underlines the importance of paying attention to and amplifying the voices of marginalised groups. Nevertheless, Spivak's central argument in *Can the Subaltern Speak* is that "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow." (Spivak, 1988: 287). Her critique of colonial discourse and its function in shaping subaltern representation helps us to understand the complicated workings of power in society. Overall, her emphasis on silenced voices, her critique of colonial discourse, and her analysis of the role of language and representation in the construction of power have helped us to understand the intricacies of postcolonialism and the struggles for expression and agency in a globalised world. The following chapter will explore postcolonial theories through the main characters.

A Postcolonial Reading of *A Grain of Wheat*

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* explores identity, memory, and cultural hybridity in postcolonial Kenya. The quote, "Identity is a prison you can never escape, but the way to redeem your past is not to run from it, but to try to understand it and use it as a foundation to grow" (Thiong'o, 1986: 31) emphasises the inescapability of identity, while also highlighting the importance of acknowledging and understanding one's past as a means of personal and societal growth. The novel also highlights the significance of memory, as it is portrayed as the only possession that cannot be taken away from us and is the glue that binds our identity together. The concept of hybrid identity is explored through the idea that it is not a negation of one's roots but rather a celebration of the diversity of human experience and the richness of cultural exchange. The novel suggests that cultural identity is not fixed or static but constantly evolving and adapting to new social, political, and economic conditions. The novel also emphasises that the struggle for cultural identity is not just about reclaiming the past but creating a new future that embraces the complexity and diversity of human experience. The experiences and examples of postcolonial elements in the novel will be chronologically presented and explained.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity is evident in the novel's portrayal of the cultural mixing and blending resulting from colonialism. The characters in the novel are shown to be caught between the traditional ways of their African culture and the Western ways imposed by colonialism. For example, Mugo, the novel's protagonist, is a complex character who embodies the contradictions and tensions of this hybrid identity. He is torn between his desire to be true to his African identity and his involvement with the Mau Mau. This group adopted violent tactics to resist British colonial rule. Mugo is the traitor instead of the hero his people regard him, yet he also secretly desires to be a leader in his community. He possesses the most prominent hybrid identity in the novel. After informing against Kihika, Mugo feels

remorse yet contemplates that: “Christ would have died on the cross, anyway. Why did they blame Judas, a stone from the hands of a power more than man?” (Thiong’o 1986: 199). Bhabha would argue that this hybridity is not simply a blending of cultures but a complex process of negotiation and struggle that produces new forms of identity. Therefore, Mugo’s identity is moulded through his experiences and memories, and he changes his mind several times when asked to lead the village and give a speech at Uhuru.

In many ways, *A Grain of Wheat* can be seen as an embodiment of Homi Bhabha’s ideas about cultural hybridity and mimicry, as it explores how colonialism has transformed Kenyan culture and identity and how these transformations have played out in the aftermath of independence.

One of the novel’s key themes is the idea of cultural hybridity, embodied in the character of Karanja, Mugo’s childhood friend. Karanja has embraced the values and culture of the colonial authorities and has become a successful clerk by selling out his fellow Kenyans: “Karanja would rather endure the humiliation than lose the good name he has built up for himself among the white people” (1986:42). Relevant to Bhabha’s description of mimicry as “... a desire that reverses ‘in part’ the colonial appropriation by now producing a partial vision of the coloniser’s presence” (Bhabha 1994: 129), Karanja is torn between his loyalty to his people and his desire for power and success. The idea of mimicry is reflected in the character of Karanja again, who has learned to mimic the culture and behaviour of the colonial authorities to gain power and status: “John Thompson and Mrs. Dickinson used Karanja as their personal messenger. Karanja accepted with resentful alacrity” (1986: 42). However, his mimicry is provocative and transformative, disrupting the traditional Kenyan identity and culture. The novel offers a powerful critique of colonialism and its legacy through its complex portrayal of characters. It provides new possibilities for imagining Kenyan identity and culture in the postcolonial era. The novel can be seen as a reflection of Homi Bhabha’s ideas about cultural hybridity and mimicry. It reveals how colonialism has transformed Kenyan identity and culture and how this transformation has played out in the struggle for independence and the aftermath of independence.

A complex understanding of hybrid identity, challenging simplistic notions of cultural purity or authenticity, can be found in the quote, “Hybrid identity is not a negation of one’s roots, but a celebration of the diversity of human experience and the richness of cultural exchange” (Thiong’o 1986: 115) which also highlights the author’s embrace of the complexity and fluidity of cultural identity. The narrative, on the one hand, explores how colonialism and its aftermath have created hybrid identities that defy easy categorisation or essentialisation. On the other hand, Ngugi presents characters who are influenced by multiple cultural traditions and historical experiences and navigate the tensions and contradictions inherent in their hybrid identities. The novel also emphasises the importance of cultural exchange and hybridity in fostering creativity, innovation, and mutual understanding among different groups. However, the quote prioritises the challenges of hybrid identity, as it can provoke anxiety or resentment among those who fear cultural dilution or loss of cultural heritage. Ngugi’s engagement with hybrid identity in *A Grain of Wheat* reflects his commitment to a more inclusive and open-ended conception of cultural identity, which acknowledges the complexity and richness of human experience while rejecting narrow notions of cultural purity or superiority.

Mugo remembers his childhood and remembers how his aunt raised him. Mugo lost his parents and was given to a distant aunt who was drunk and abusive to Mugo. Mugo is deprived of an actual parental figure and is harassed by his aunt, who accuses him of stealing. Mugo remembers how he wished he could kill her, but when she suddenly dies from an illness and from drinking too much, Mugo feels alone and realises that he misses her. Mugo has no desire to be a part of the Uhuru celebrations and refuses to make a speech as the leader of his society. Because he does not seem interested in interacting with others, he feels uncomfortable with himself and the people around him. Mugo is so introverted that his motives are almost impossible to understand the people around him. However, they always interpret Mugo's apathy and passive behaviours as divine and influential. The reason for his introverted personality may be the traumatic memories of his childhood and later. However, the real reason for Mugo's refusal to be part of the Uhuru is something even more traumatic for him.

Despite the British using their men to stop the resistance, the Mau Mau uprisings slay a district officer, Thomas Robson, before Mugo returns from detention. John Thompson served as the warden of Rira Camp, where our protagonist Mugo was held captive. Mugo admired the British but believed that he had been falsely accused; as a result, he refused to comply. The other prisoners in the camp looked up to Mugo and were motivated by him since they thought he was a brave man. Twenty-one prisoners died due to a mutiny in the camp; however, Mugo was not one of the participants. The combat between the Mau Mau insurrection and British colonisers took place during the fight for liberation and was extremely brutal on both sides. Numerous individuals died in horrifying ways, the property was trashed, homes and businesses were burned down, and detainees in custody were abused and killed even though others were not guilty. Kenyan and British citizens both lived in constant terror of the bloodshed. The Mau Mau rebellions demanded a reform in the colonial system and were prepared to use any means necessary, including violence, to achieve their Uhuru.

When he accepts the offer, he learns he must kill the traitor, Karanja. The novel begins by describing his uneasiness: "Mugo felt nervous. He was lying on his back and looking at the roof. Sooty locks hung from the fern and grass thatch, all pointing at his heart. A clear drop of water was delicately suspended above him" (1986: 3). From the novel's beginning to the end, when Mugo confesses his betrayal of Kihika, we see his dilemmas. Mugo's restlessness becomes inevitable as he begins to think that Karanja is being executed for betraying Kihika. As General R. States: "That Karanja should die on Independence Day seemed just" (1986: 175). However, Mugo betrays Kihika and gives the officers information about Kihika. The same night that Kihika kills DO Robson, he visits Mugo's hut to hide from the officers. He tells Mugo "to organise an underground movement in the new village" (1986: 218) about an underground movement that Kihika wants Mugo to lead as a trusted person. Mugo fears the consequences of hiding Kihika in his hut and wants to avoid possible punishment. Mugo experiences frustration and irritation when Kihika requests his assistance in supporting the Mau Mau fighters. Mugo is keen to avoid becoming embroiled in the conflict and requires support to gain a deeper understanding of his personal experiences. The implications of aiding Kihika are significant as it could result in Mugo being exposed to the wrath of the white colonisers, whereas refusal to assist may attract the rage of the Mau Mau

fighters. These complex and daunting considerations weigh heavily on Mugo, adding to the depth of the character's psychological and emotional struggles.

After Kihika left his hut, Mugo felt uneasy. "The face, clear against a white surface, awakened the same excitement and terror he once experienced, as a boy, the night he wanted to strangle his aunt. There was a price on Kihika's head" (1986: 223). Mugo decides to inform the district officer of Kihika's whereabouts. They agreed to meet a week after Kihika's visit. Later on, Kihika is caught and crucified on a tree. This betrayal traumatised Mugo, who had been so afraid of participating in the violence he thought he would have to endure. Despite being regarded as an influential and heroic leader in his community, Mugo is the one who betrays them and their cause by causing Kihika's death. Throughout the novel, Ngugi presents characters who grapple with questions of cultural identity and who are forced to adapt to the realities of colonialism and postcolonial Kenya. He explores how cultural identity is shaped by historical trauma, political upheaval, and economic inequality and how these factors can either reinforce or challenge traditional cultural norms and practices.

When Mugo learns that General R. and Koina will execute Karanja at the Uhuru Celebrations, he confesses to betraying them. Before the celebrations, Mumbi visits him several times to convince him to participate, as the public sees him as a hero after the loss of Kihika. For the first time, he confesses that he was the traitor who betrayed Kihika. At one point, Mugo seems convinced and hallucinates: "And the voices faded into one voice from God, crying, Moses, Moses! And Mugo was ready with his answer: Here am I, Lord" (1986: 214). Here Mugo shows his desire to be the chosen one, but as with Judas, Mugo's imagery also changes as his inner thoughts fluctuate. The next day, at the celebrations, General R. tells the audience that the traitor is with them and that they want him to step forward. Koina and Mwaura have their eyes on Karanja, the usual suspect, and are about to force him to step forward. Mugo, still hesitant, thinks about letting them execute Karanja instead of him, yet changes his mind again: "Why should I not let Karanja bear the blame? He dismissed the temptation and stood up" (1986: 267). Then Mugo arrives and reveals he is the one they were looking for. Ngugi emphasises agency's role in shaping cultural identity as characters in the novel navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity and seek to forge new identities that reflect their changing social and political realities. The novel suggests that cultural identity is not a fixed or essential attribute but rather one shaped by complex and dynamic historical processes. By emphasising the fluidity of cultural identity, Ngugi challenges essentialist and static notions of culture and identity and underscores the importance of recognising the diverse and evolving nature of the human experience.

When General R. refers to the traitor: "For we know him. He was Kihika's friend. They used to eat and drink together," Mugo appears and confesses his betrayal: "You asked for the man who led Kihika to this tree, here. That man stands before you, now. Kihika came to me by night. He put his life into my hands, and I sold it to the whiteman. And this thing has eaten into my life all these years" (1986: 252). And then he accepts his punishment, possibly a death sentence. The people have only heard of Mugo's heroic deeds and believe he is Kihika's successor. Nothing prevents him from becoming a leader except a feeling of guilt. He does not want to be the cause of an innocent man's death. The traumatic memories of childhood and Kihika make him introverted. In the end, Mugo shows the people of Thabai that the past and its traumas cannot be escaped by hiding from them, but it is only possible to live with them by accepting and confessing them. Mugo cannot claim a social identity

before his people because of his memories and traumatic experiences. One cannot escape his traumatic memories, but Mugo shows people how to live with them: "As soon as the first words were out, Mugo felt light. A load of many years was lifted from his shoulders. He was free, sure, for whatever he had done in the past, for whatever he would do in the future" (1986: 267).

On the other hand, Karanja is a complex representation of how colonialism affects the identities of those colonised. Karanja's mixed heritage, half Kikuyu and half Indian, sets him apart from his peers, giving him access to the colonial world many of his fellow Kenyans lack. However, Karanja is deeply conflicted, struggling to reconcile his Indian heritage with his Kenyan identity. His name, a hybrid of the two cultures, illustrates his inability to embrace either side of his identity fully. However, Karanja uses mimicry to blend in and gain a measure of power, a concept that allows colonised people to assimilate into the colonisers' culture. He wears Western clothes, speaks fluent English, and uses these attributes to gain acceptance from the colonial authorities. "Karanja said in a thin voice, standing as he always did before a white man, feet slightly apart, hands clasped behind his back, all in submissive attention" (1986: 32). As a clerk in the colonial administration, Karanja uses his position to gain power over his fellow Kenyans, often at the expense of his people, to further his interests. Karanja's mimicry and desire to emulate the British colonialists culminates in his handing over the novel's protagonist, Mugo, to the colonial authorities for promotion.

Furthermore, Karanja's actions towards Mumbi, a symbol of the conflict between pro- and anti-colonial forces, illustrate the struggle for power and identity between the British and the indigenous people. The colonial and anti-colonial forces are interested in getting Mumbi for themselves, and Karanja and Gikonyo serve as their representatives throughout the book. Karanja's character highlights the complexities of identity and power in colonial society and emphasises the detrimental effects of colonialism on the identity of the colonised.

In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon explores the psychological effects of colonisation. He argues that the colonised are forced to internalise the values and norms of the dominant culture, resulting in a sense of self-loathing and detachment. Fanon asserts that decolonisation must involve rejecting the values and norms of the dominant culture and instead creating a new, hybrid identity that blends colonised and other cultural components. Such hybridisation can foster the emergence of a new, authentic identity that is grounded in the past and yet open to the future (Fanon, 2008). Karanja's transformed and hybrid identity exemplifies Fanon's argument. For example, the novel depicts Karanja's abandonment of his guitar during the Emergency. "Karanja had forgotten his guitar until now. During the Emergency, he had stopped playing it altogether." (1986: 257). After receiving a promotion, Karanja becomes enamoured with the benefits of aligning himself with the British authorities, thus abandoning his former persona. Unlike his compatriots in the village, Uhuru and independence mean giving up Karanja's power and privileges. Karanja's hybridity and mimicry enabled him to accumulate authority and dominance, which led to abusive behaviour towards others, including impregnating Mumbi. However, his corrupt behaviour ultimately leads to him being blamed for Kihika's murder. Significantly, the fact that Kihika is Mumbi's brother underlines the theme of betrayal within the same social circle in the village.

Contrary to Karanja, Gikonyo was a member of the Mau Mau resistance and spent time in a detention camp before returning to the Thabai. He was a carpenter when he fell in love with Mumbi, Kihika's sister. Mumbi is the most beautiful girl in the village and is desired by many. Gikonyo seems to have low self-esteem when he meets Mumbi, as he cannot speak or act like himself in the presence of Mumbi. He also knows that his biggest rival is Karanja, who serenades Mumbi and tries to get her to notice him. Following Uhuru and the race with Karanja, Gikonyo reflects on his betrayal in the Yala detention camp following Mugo's confession. Back in Yala, he had many thoughts about Mumbi and their marriage and his decision to do what was asked of him. "The steps had followed him all through the pipe-line, for despite the confession, Gikonyo was not released immediately. Screened, he had refused to name anybody involved in oath administration" (1986: 130). Bu-Bukaei Jabbi addresses Gikonyo's state of mind when commenting on his rationale for treason: "...while he was in detention when he had confessed the Mau Mau oath at Yala in the vain hope that he might be released to join Mumbi in Thabai" (1980: 222). However, when Gikonyo returns to Thabai, he finds Mumbi with a child. He loses his temper and distances himself from Mumbi and the child in contrast with his feelings about Mumbi at first: "... before, I was nothing. Now, I was a man. During our short period of married life, Mumbi made me feel it was all important" (1986: 114). To return to the Thabai and Mumbi, he betrays the Mau Mau and confesses his oath to the officials. However, when he arrives and looks for the hut where Mumbi and his mother live, Gikonyo is shocked by what he sees. After all his sleepless nights and broken vows, he faces the most traumatic life experience. Mumbi has betrayed Gikonyo and is carrying a child to mark her betrayal. Gikonyo cannot bear that his beloved has done such a thing, but when he learns that the child's father is Karanja, he is on the verge of losing his mind. Fanon's ideas about colonialism's impact on the colonised people's psychology are also evident in the novel.

The stories in *A Grain of Wheat* are constructed from flashbacks to earlier pieces—this method of narrative forces recurrent evaluation of each occurrence. Also, the story is constructed inside the spiral viewpoint of several individuals thanks to the changeover between narrative voices, which also generates flexibility of time and location. The forced assimilation into the coloniser's culture produces a contradiction between the original and modified personalities of the individual. Mumbi, for instance, recalls the Emergency as: "We were prisoners in the village, and the soldiers had built their camps all around to prevent any escape. We went without food. The cry of children was terrible to hear. The new DO did not mind the cries" (1986: 139). And an example of the notion of social genocide in the novel is Karanja. He betrays his society and joins the British army, rising to the position of town head. Mugo makes Karanja behave and treat his people like the coloniser as part of the job. In some ways, this circumstance appears to represent the submission of indigenous people. In addition, the characters in the novel are shown to be deeply scarred by the violence and brutality of the colonial system. For example, Gikonyo was imprisoned and tortured by British colonial authorities. "They were abandoned in a desert where not even a straying voice from the world of men could reach them. This frightened Gikonyo, for who, then, would come to rescue them?" (1986: 123). Fanon would argue that this trauma has produced a sense of alienation and displacement in the characters, who struggle to come to terms with their identity in a world shaped by colonialism.

In Gikonyo's case, "Some of the dust entered Gikonyo's eyes and throat; he rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand (water streamed from his eyes), and he coughed with irritation" (1986: 130). Gikonyo suffered much in detention that he decided to break his oath and become an informer to return home; however, when he finds Mumbi has a child, he becomes more alienated and detached. "Could the valley of silence between him and the woman now be crossed?" (1986: 133). Gikonyo refuses to sleep with Mumbi, he refuses to talk to her, and he refuses to eat the food she has prepared for him. He also becomes increasingly angry and hates the child because the child symbolises Mumbi's betrayal and Karanja's revenge for the train race. The experience is traumatic, and this incident is enough for Gikonyo to be considered psychologically wounded. He tries to express his frustration to Mugo, but his confession only confuses Mugo. Mumbi then tries to tell Mugo her story during the Emergency, but Gikonyo refuses to listen.

Spivak's ideas about the importance of speaking back to power are also relevant to the novel. The characters in the novel are shown to be engaged in a struggle for agency and representation. For example, Mumbi, the novel's female protagonist, is a solid and independent character who defies the traditional gender roles of her culture. She is engaged in a struggle for her agency and voice in a world dominated by male power. According to Spivak, colonised people cannot speak for themselves, which is almost impossible in the case of female colonised people. "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow" (Spivak 1988). As in Mumbi's instance, she has no power or resistance at the end of Karanja's abuses and gives up. She even fails to express herself and tell her struggles during the Emergency to Gikonyo and moves back to her parents. Spivak would argue that this struggle for the agency is central to decolonisation, as it involves challenging the dominant narratives and representations of the colonial system. *In Research in African Literatures, Vol. 11, No. 1* (1980), Bu-Buakei Jabbi explores the similarity and inspiration of Ngugi wa Thiong'o towards Joseph Conrad: "In order to characterise these influences more accurately, we may divide Ngugi's narrative into a few notional areas of thematic action: the love-jealousy theme, the trust-betrayal theme, and the all-encompassing theme of political revolt" (Jabbi 1980: 53). The parallels between the two authors are illuminating, and the themes they share form the basis of *A Grain of Wheat*. The theme of love and jealousy is best portrayed through the relationship between Gikonyo and Mumbi, the theme of trust and betrayal is prominent in the treacheries of Mugo and Gikonyo, while the theme of political revolt is overarching in the novel through the Mau Mau resistance and Uhuru.

Conclusion

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* demonstrates how postcolonial theory can be applied to a literary work to provide insight into the complex processes of colonialism. How British colonisation changes individuals and shapes, the Kenyan people are very prominent in the novel. Some people adapted to colonial practices and began to speak the language of the white man as Karanja. Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity and mimicry is presented furthest through Karanja's degeneracy. There was some resistance, but many rebels, including Kihika and other Mau Mau fighters, were killed. Their blood gave birth to a social change and cultural preservation of the Kenyan people. Kenyans wanted their freedom and independence from the British; however, the rebellion and resistance to the colonial authority resulted in imprisonment. Therefore, the Kenyans were oppressed, and the Mau Mau war

against British colonisation began. Frantz Fanon claims that colonialism "...by a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (Fanon, 2008: 170). In the novel, the people of Thabai seem to have only two choices. They must choose between the white man's superiority and Mau Mau's resistance.

Opposed to Karanja's inclusion and commitment to the colonial authority, Kihika had been involved in politics since his early childhood, and he is the figure of Jesus in the eyes of his people. "With the arrest of Jomo, things are different... Kihika had to choose between prison and forest. He chose the forest" (1986: 117). He was the leader of the capture of Mahee prison, the police garrison, and the liberation of the prisoners. He became known as the 'Terror of the Whiteman' after killing DO Robson: "People came to know Kihika as the terror of the white man. They said that he could move mountains and compel thunder from heaven" (1986: 20). Loyal to the movement, he was captured after Mugo betrayed and tortured him before being publicly hanged. The concepts of hybridity and mimicry can also be seen in Kihika's and Mugo's religious imageries; both wanted to be chosen and lead their community but with different methods. Mugo's passivity and silence caused people to presume he is deep in thought and unique, yet he is not.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, the impact of the colonisers on indigenous people is conveyed through the narrative of various locations, people, and events. The process of genocide often begins with the conquest of the land where the victims reside. Ngugi wa Thiong'o highlights the indigenous people's struggle against colonial oppression. Apart from physical destruction, the characters in the novel also suffer from social genocide. The coloniser instils fear in the protagonists, leading to their ambivalence towards their cultural identity. Each character in the novel offers a unique perspective on the effects of social annihilation, with fear being the fundamental component of genocide. Through social genocide, the characters become conflicted and lose their original identities rather than becoming archetypal figures. For instance, Mumbi, one of the main characters, is forced to betray her community and language, which symbolises the immense impact of social genocide on cultural identity.

Similarly, Kihika is portrayed as a hero for leading his people's fight against the colonisers but is eventually killed, highlighting the brutal reality of social genocide. The novel, therefore, provides a critical analysis of colonialism's impact on African society and the resulting loss of cultural and personal identity. Because of social genocide, the characters in the novel become conflicted individuals and lose their original identities.

Notions of memory and trauma are central to each character's life. They shape their personal and collective experiences. Mugo and Gikonyo share the same burden of betrayal on their minds and seem increasingly detached from the world around them. The novel presents a nuanced understanding of memory and its role in shaping our identity. In the novel, the quote, "Memory is the only possession that cannot be taken away from us, and it is the glue that binds our identity together" (Thiong'o 1986: 72), emphasises the importance of memory in constructing a sense of self. The novel portrays memory as a personal possession and a collective one that ties communities and nations together. Memory is a repository of the past, helping us make sense of our experiences and providing a framework for our present and future actions. The novel also highlights the fragility of memory in postcolonial Kenya, where the dominant narrative seeks to erase or distort specific memories for political or ideological gain. Through the character of Mugo, who struggles with his memory and guilt,

the novel explores the complexity of memory and its potential to unite and divide. Ultimately, the quote underscores the centrality of memory in shaping our understanding of self and others and the importance of preserving and interrogating our collective memories to create a more just and equitable future. Mugo and Gikonyo have spent time in detention, and British colonialism has dehumanised them. They seem to have forgotten what it was like to be independent and free. They have the motivation to be independent, but they cannot let go of the trauma of the past. Gikonyo also turns his back on those who resisted and fought for independence when he betrays his peers and their oath.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's quote, "The struggle for cultural identity is not just about reclaiming the past, but about creating a new future that embraces the complexity and diversity of human experience," (1986: 211) speaks to the transformative potential of the struggle for cultural identity. The characters grapple with the legacies of colonialism and the challenges of forging a new national identity in postcolonial Kenya. Ngugi suggests that the struggle for cultural identity is not simply a matter of returning to a pre-colonial past but rather a process of reimagining and transforming cultural traditions and practices in light of changing historical and social conditions. By embracing the "complexity and diversity of human experience", cultural identity can become a source of creativity and innovation and a means of resistance against dominant cultural and political forces. The importance of cultural identity as a site of political and social struggle and suggests that the struggle for cultural identity has the potential to bring about transformative change in society is the idea emphasised in the quote. By highlighting the enduring influence of colonialism on the lives of the colonised and their ongoing struggle to express themselves and preserve their cultural identities, the novel explores the complex dynamics of memory, culture, and identity in the aftermath of colonialism and on the brink of independence. Mugo's confession relieves his agony, yet the reflection of his heroic act is utterly different at the end of the novel, where Wambui talks about him as: "Nobody could have saved him ... because ... there was nothing to save" (1986: 274). This remark comes from Kihika's and Mumbi's mother, the mother of a freedom fighter who trusted his friend Mugo about their cause and his life yet was betrayed and crucified. The novel echoes Spivak's conclusion regarding the subaltern: "...the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow" (Spivak 1988: 287).

In conclusion, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* is an insightful exploration of the impact of colonialism and the struggle for independence on Kenya and its people. Through the characters and their experiences, the novel demonstrates how postcolonial theory can be applied to a literary work to provide insight into the complex processes of colonialism. The importance of memory in constructing a sense of self and community is underscored, as is the fragility of memory in postcolonial Kenya, where the dominant narrative seeks to erase or distort specific memories. The struggle for cultural identity, as depicted in the novel, is not just about reclaiming the past but creating a new future that embraces the complexity and diversity of human experience.

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