

Verisimilitude in fiction: Exploring the didactic theory of literature in light of heroism reflected in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's A Grain of Wheat

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Abstract

Literary critics often time rhapsodize heroes over their performance to depict verisimilitude about human exploits, nature and nurture, life and death, strong love and sacrifice for others to survive; as some of the central elements that art- fiction is concerned with. In this literary study, analysis is carried out in light of Ngugi's A Grain of Wheat. Particular interest is directed to heroism as a recurrent theme in most of the colonial African Literature. The study seeks to demonstrate the power of fiction to express verisimilitude. The author explores the didactic theory of literature which posits that a literary work is a source of knowledge, insights and wisdom and probably prophecy. When one accepts the call - by himself or by other forces - to die for others, to sacrifice for others' survival, that is heroism and unequalled human value.

Key words: African literature, fiction, verisimilitude, didactic theory of literature, a grain of wheat, heroism, sacrifice, liberation, independence.

Introduction

Literature is a tool by which critics have stake in human life at socio-cultural, economic and political levels; and this is done through forms embodied in the three main literary branches without exception to fiction (Bazimaziki, 2021). No matter how heroism is outlandish in a fictitious story, it is associated with concepts of triumph, courage, glory, victory, death and rebirth, sacrifice, selfless act, strong love for others and self-denial, success, fight for one's right and the right of the oppressed, acceptance to die for others to survive, thus an unequalled human quality where a call for adventure is inevitable.

According to Sawira et al. (2017) heroism is connected with admiration for achievements and noble qualities; and heroes as necessities in life. Franco et al. (2011) view heroism as "a social but not personal attribution; and a historically determined choice. They add that it is a positive and pro-social act that is distinct from other pro-social activities. Such view parallels with Franco et al. (2016) putting that heroism is a personal, communal and societal responsibility in

the face of an evil. Related to the point made here, in Haessly(2011) heroism is identified by selfless act and a hero is described as the one who demonstrated exceptional strength or courage, and is admired for his nobility, exploits or outstanding achievements. Thus, the discussion on heroism is important for contemporary communities to ape or rhapsodize what is benefitting them and blame the oppression done by human being over his fellows. In that regard, a study on Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* is deemed necessary to shed light on some historical events which can serve as a learning tool in a way or another because, as Haessly(2011) put it, heroic deeds can guide people and enable them to act beyond their own self-imposed limits.

Aim of the study

The overarching aim of this study is to carry out a literary analysis of Ngugi's novel *A Grain of Wheat* using the didactic theory of literature. Further, the study aimed to:

- (i) Demonstrate how fiction embodies verisimilitude;
- (ii) Apply the didactic theory of Literature in a literary study;
- (iii) Demonstrate that heroism is a recurrent theme in African colonial literature;
- (iv) Identify some lessons that could be drawn from heroic deeds

Study Questions

- (i) To what extent does fiction reflect reality?
- (ii) How does the didactic theory of literature apply in the study of Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*?
- (iii) How is heroism a recurrent theme in African colonial literature?
- (iv) How far are Ngugi's protagonists of independence a relevant tool to society?

Theory and Method

The methodology that guided this study is mainly qualitative literary analysis by applying the didactic theory of literature to the primary source selected purposively among Ngugi's fictional works. The choice fell on *A Grain of Wheat* because it displays the theme of heroism affecting the protagonists of Independence which is the leading theme of that novel. Related Literature was used to supplement the interpretation of quoted passages from the corpora. Both primary and secondary sources used in this study were acknowledged in line with the American Psychological Association (APA) referencing style.

Discussion

The main function of literature is to share knowledge with the reader about what happened in their world or their neighbouring places (Bazimaziki, 2021) so that they can draw some lessons to help them cope with related challenges or ape the quality deeds as performed by story characters. This is the reason for which a number of questions are posed at the center of this discussion such as what is verisimilitude? What can be learnt from a heroic story? Reflecting on these questions will take much consideration into the situation in the corpus under study grounded on a theory of literature.

The didactic theory of literature posits that a work of art is a source of knowledge and insights. *A Grain of Wheat* fits this situation. The novel is featured with verisimilitude. Though it is fiction, it displays the quality of truth and reality since based on historical events. According to Harrow (1985), the novel draws the past of Kenyans paved with violent experiences of long sufferings reflected in the novel characters who held together towards independence. Similarly, Fadhel (2015) contends that most of these characters are victims of colonial oppression where they were tortured a great deal and, inherently, the novel

reveals that violent resistance can be applied when peaceful resistance fails during liberation war.

Heroism is an end of devised means for a solution to an identified problem. It is a de facto result of an already accomplished deed, a difficult task, whether self-assigned or tasked by others besides one's feeling of ability to overcome a challenge, to save the oppressed, to fight for a cause, to cope with injustice done by human beings over their fellows; thus the will to readily bring change. In most of literary works, particularly in colonial period, the theme of heroism is connected with the protagonist who prevails upon his antagonist(s), with or without the help of the mentor, for the good of society.

In Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, the situation is not far different from what is stated above. The book title reveals sacrifice as one of the characteristics of heroism. A grain must die for wheat to be harvested. Blood must shed to water the freedom tree. This reflects a long period of suffering of Kenyans deprived of their rights to enjoy the fruits of their sweat, rights to live freely. We are told that some time back, one of the protagonists of freedom, Waiyaki, had already been buried alive as a result of his long term plan - together with other warriors, to free his brothers and sisters. He is a victim of oppression. However, his "blood contained within it a seed, a grain which gave birth to a political party whose main strength thereafter sprang from a bond with the soil" (Ngugi, 1967: 15). To illustrate, Mugo's cooking porridge in a sufuriya (sauce pan)(Ngugi1967: 4) when the roof was leaking is symbolically one of the effects of the colonialism that could not let him forget how he was fed a 'half cooked porridge' in the detention during emergency.

Zeno et al. (2011) contend that heroes act in a pro-social manner despite personal risk. Kihika fits this situation. When he mobilized MAUMAU fighters to stand and resist the colonialists, he knew that some would die but many would survive. Driven by courage and strong love to brothers he wished would be

liberated, he showed military genius and tactics. Ngugi(1967:19) put it that capturing Mahee, a big police garrison in the Rift Valley and a transit prison for men and women to be taken to concentration camps , ranks among Kihika's greatest deeds because he and his men led the prisoners out into the night and set it on fire. Although caught alive and hanged in public at Rung'ei Market a year after a price had been put over his head, he had already done a lot. He had already translated his sacrifice words into deeds. That is heroism. Despite his death, the party remained, liberation war went on, and independence took place. Ngugi said that "his blood rained on and watered the tree of freedom." It is truth about a grain of wheat revealed in the Bible, in John, 12:24 that "... unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain".

Sacrifice is reflected in the above words in the sense of death for survival which is unequalled human value. When Ngugi(1967:21) says; "The party , however remained alive and grew, as people put it, on the wounds of those Kihika left behind", the idea meant here is related to the common belief in some African settings that " a hero never dies but sleeps" meaning that heroic deeds always describe the departed one. It is a result of Kihika's talk calling others for sacrifice when he said: "A day comes when brother shall give up brother, a mother her son, when you and I have heard the call of a nation in turmoil", p.19. From the above words, Kihika is seen as a prophet since he augurs what would happen in the coming days when "he and his men went to the forest followed by hundreds of young men from Thabai and Rung'ei"; committed to free their people as witnessed by Koinandu saying: "A sacrifice! A sacrifice! ... Oh, we did sacrifice [...] We also sang:

'We shall never rest,
Without land,
Without Freedom true

Kenya is a country of Black people'

Actually, those freedom fighters were committed to fight restlessly until they get independence. They were led by God's word where particularly in some verses like those Gikonyo read to Wambui as found in Psalm 72: "He shall judge the poor of the people, he shall save the children of the needy, and shall break in pieces the oppressor, For he shall deliver the needy when he cometh; the poor also and he that hath no helper", p.27

Conversely, in some cases, a heroic journey is affected in one way or another, by betrayal. In Ngugi(1967: 19), talking about sacrifice, Kihika had warned his audience against any betrayal using a Swahili proverb : Kikulacho kiko nguoni mwako" (ones betrayers are among themselves). Mugo is concerned with this betrayal. Despite that he led a hunger- strike in Rira detention camp which is another event on the journey to liberation, and the role he played in many escapes from the detention, he later betrayed his brother. At the occasion of independence celebration, on "Uhuru Day", the one who sold Kihika's life is now known and confessed:

"'You asked for Judas', he started. 'You asked for the man who let 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 white man. And this thing has eaten into my life all these years" (Ngugi, 1967: 252)

It follows that the public, including Githua the war casualty, denounced Mugo as an impostor, a traitor, a 'sheep into wolf's clothing'. This was a surprise to the public, a situational irony, since they believed Mugo as a hero who had played an invaluable role in the journey to liberation. For a long, people suspected Karanja to have betrayed Kihika, based on the assumption that he was the white collaborator but everything becomes clear. Mugo is now a proof that "our betrayers are among ourselves", a

defective behavior that could be denounced among community members.

Back to the research question about the insight and wisdom that would be learnt from *A Grain of Wheat*, it is hard if not impossible to exhaust the list of lessons. However, one cannot fail to mention that the novel is a source of history-past, present to augur the future. It is all about historical events; a long journey towards independence. More so, it is important to learn from it that “union is power”, that success springs from a painful and hard work, holding together, with self-determination and commitment for each, with the will and readiness to die for others to survive. The novel is a tool to learn that not the protagonists of liberation are they that enjoy the fruits of their long journey of suffering, torture, oppression, right deprivation or the like. However, their names could be still remembered as well pointed out in Gikonyo’s words :

“On the Independence Day, we shall remember those from our village and ridges near, who lost their lives in the fight for freedom. We cannot let Kihika’s name die. He will live in our memory, and history will carry his name to our children in years to come”.(Ngugi, 1967: 27).

The above words, as spoken by Gikonyo during the discussion about the independence celebration, imply that “heroes never die but sleep”. Their deeds are kept in people’s memory, be they those who survived the wars or the next generations. Although published more than half a century ago, the novel still draws a picture of Africa of the colonial period, by describing the protagonists who prevailed over their antagonists since they were led by the will and strong love of their mother land.

Thus, the novel is inclusive in terms of narrated time. Hinged on heroism and sacrifice, and selfless acts, it draws the past for the present without leaving out the future. This implies that heroism is a theme of all the time since heroes existed in past, exist today and the future generation are no exception. By and large, A

Grain of Wheat is an invaluable tool from a generation to another to learn how to fight the ills done by human beings on their fellows no matter how they can risk their lives. It teaches that union is power and that victory is for all natives as well explained in Fadhel(2015) that the story ends with celebration by participants in liberation war – both children, young, old , men and women, singing the victory, the independence of Kenya; after a long period of humiliation, land grabble, culture and freedom deprivation(Lèfara, 2017).

Conclusion

The discussion in this study based on literature as an art which reflects reality. The study framed on the didactic theory of literature which views it as a source of knowledge, insights, wisdom and prophecy. Fiction is one of the means to this ends. Using *A Grain of Wheat*, discussion revealed that fictitious characters reflect historical figures involved in liberation of their people. Authors interested in colonial period depicted the African wish and will to save the oppressed, the fight for independence characterized by a lot of sacrifices. It is a heroic spirit that could prosper among brothers. It is the context of a “grain of wheat”, survival after sacrifices; a seed sowed into the soil, died to give many corns later. That is heroism associated with one's suffering for the sake of others' survival. The protagonist Kihika has been a grain of wheat among others. His “blood rained and watered the liberation tree”. Accepting to die for ‘truth and justice’, that is heroism.

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