



Research Paper

## Narrative Method in Ngugi WaThiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat, Petals of Blood* and *Wizard of the Crow*.

OkachukwuOnuahWosu

Department of English and Literary Studies,  
Rivers State University, NkpoluOroworukwo  
Port Harcourt.

Ndubuisi Nwaonyeocha

Department of English and Literary Studies,  
Rivers State University, NkpoluOroworukwo  
Port Harcourt.

---

### ABSTRACT

Style as an artistic expression helps in the placement of the contents of literary works in their proper perspective. Perspective takes hold of the different ways people narrate their stories as a way of making sense and conveying their subject matter to their audience. This paper, *Narrative Method in Ngugi WaThiong'o's A Grain of Wheat, Petals of Blood, and Wizard of the Crow*, seeks to investigate the importance of narrative point of view in the understanding of post-colonial issues. Furthermore, the purpose of this study will be to bring together some of the important explanations that have occurred in the study of narrative perspective and how narrative method or point of view primarily contributes to the development and understanding of post-colonial issues in the three texts under consideration.

**KEYWORDS:** narrative, style, point of view, and post-colonial.

Received 05 Feb, 2022; Revised 15 Feb, 2022; Accepted 18 Feb, 2022 © The author(s) 2022.

Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)

### I. INTRODUCTION

Ngugi WaThiong'o's literary works encapsulate the history of Kenya and African literature. For example, *A Grain of Wheat* is the symbolic representation of the development and the revolutionizing of African Literature. It was written in a period where many countries, particularly in African and Asia, were clamouring for self-rule.

The impetus that necessitated the struggle for self-determinism eventually gave birth to a new Kenya. Ngugi's novel *A Grain of Wheat, Petals of Blood* and *Wizard of the Crow* are works of national Liberation, decolonization, national renaissance and the restoration of nationhood. Fanon in the *Wretched of the Earth* defines decolonization as the "replacement of certain species of men by another species of men without any period of transition, there is a total, complete and absolute substitution" (27). As a novel of decolonization, Gurnah asserts that:

Ngugi's novel is dependent on fairly rigidly sustained stereotypes such as heathen African and heartless European and by particularizing the pasts, Ngugi is able to undertake transformative strategies for redeeming his nation from the oppression of neocolonialism (48).

The African novel, generally speaking, is a reaction to the consequences of imperialist occupation and exploration, a historical process which comprised three phases. First, there was a phase of imperialist conquest with consequent erosion of African values and disruption of traditional society; this was followed by the phase of anti-imperialist rebellion; finally, there was the period of post-independence, largely one of readjustment in an attempt to rediscover lost values. Reacting to European colonialism and imperialism to African self-determinism, Ogude States that "the action of the novel in *A Grain of Wheat* focuses on the protagonist's remembrance of the events of the Mau Revolt, which allows the space to imagine the rebirth of a new Kenya" (23).

The justification of the Mau Mau struggle/violence is predicated on the ground that it was directed against injustice. The action of the novel is about the struggle of the Kenyan populace to revolt against the existing British order through the machinery of the "Mau Mau" to create a rebirth of a new Kenya, in the form of reconstruction. According to Bakhtin:

The way these events are recounted and reshaped is a collective one, as a shifting focalization and a complex time structure create a polyphonic, choral narrative that shows in detail the physical, psychological and political impact of the revolt on individuals living in a small community (55).

Bakhtin comments on the way the events are being told or narrated by every individual in the community, making the struggle for reconstruction a collective one. The events in the novel are remembrances of the events leading to independence, where everyone is a partaker of the narration. This points to the fact that the novel has a national spirit, or Volkgeist, as would be described by some socialists. Obumsele observes:

All these fragments are kept together by some connecting passage narrated by an anonymous narrator whose voice is entrusted by Ngugi with relating the collective vicissitudes of the country, a strategy which makes the novel a national epic that affirms the values of community (113).

The anonymous narrator of these passages in fact employs the modes of oral literature and speaks like a traditional storyteller, a technique that emphasizes his distance from the author. According to Sarala in his *Stylistic Analysis of the Story in Ngugi's A Grain of Wheat*, the novel is presented as a form of art, according to Sarala. To him, "A Grain of Wheat cannot be cast into a single mold and doing so would rob the discourse of the manifold stories that it comprises" (10).

*A Grain of Wheat* has colonial undertone, where the European settlers occupied the positions of prime importance in Kenya. According to Ngugi in *Mau Mau, violence and culture*:

The settler was able to use his political power to consolidate his economic position. He forced black men into labour gangs, working for him in the white highlands. He rationalized this exploitation of African land and labour by claiming he was civilizing primitive people (26).

This injustice was revolted against by the violence of "Mau Mau" and was justified by Ngugi. These events of injustice and violence also featured in other works of Ngugi such as *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, *Weep not Child*, and to a lesser extent in *Petals of Blood*.

*Petals of Blood* was published in 1977 and it was Ngugi WaThiong'o's last artistic work written in English. The novel probably presents the most comprehensive analysis so far of the evils perpetrated in independent African society by black imperialists. It subsumes several other aspects of Ngugi's earlier novels. Even the narrative technique seems to be a conglomerate of the methods of *A Grain of Wheat* on the one hand, and *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child* on the other.

The novel which is based on an investigation into the puzzling murder case of three capitalists: Chui, Kimeria and Mzigo, is written such that it represents different types and classes of people in the Kenyan society during changing historical times: the pre-colonial, the colonial and the post-colonial eras. It reveals a society full of betrayals of the peasant class by the powerful ruling elite.

Through this novel, which can be seen as a product of the then ongoing, albeit incomplete, transition from an Afro-European to an African novelistic style, Ngugi aims at awakening the revolutionary spirit among Kenyans similar to that of the Mau Mau freedom fighters during the battle against the European settlers for independence. This national consciousness is aligned to Frantz Fanon's conception of a writer as:

A native intellectual who is in one of the three phases: the first phase which is characterized by the writer's unqualified assimilation, the second phase where the writer is disturbed but decides to remember who he is by just recalling the past life of his people and the third phase which is the fighting phase where the writers become an awakener of the people (40-41).

Ngugi used *Petals of Blood* as an "awakener" of the people to inspire national consciousness especially among the peasants in the neo-colonial Kenyan society.

In his essay from *Decolonizing the Mind*, titled *The Language of African Fiction*, while commenting on the language crisis he found himself in, Ngugi, Posed, "I knew whom I was writing about but whom was I writing for?" (72). He termed *Petals of Blood* as 'the climax of his Afro-European writing but it is quite clear that despite writing it in English, Ngugi had the Kenyan working class in mind as the novel's primary audience.

In the *Wizard of the Crow*, Ngugi portrays Africa's political idiosyncrasies such as corruption, neocolonialism, embezzlement and disillusionment. According to John Updike:

The novel is too aggrieved and grim to be called satire. Yet for all its grotesque hyperbole, wizard on the crow struck me as truthful in its dissection of power... its flaws of obsessive reiteration and prolixity, arise partly from its bold experimentation with oral forms; and from giving rein to the pathologies of the corrupt at the expense of the more intimate dilemmas of those who challenge them... (10).

John Updike's review on the novel is partly satirical and partly realistic which brings the dual lenses of reality and satire to bear upon the legacy of colonialism not only as it is perpetrated by a native dictatorship but also as it is polemic.

Wizard on the crow is a detailed explication of how politics works in Africa, and a summation of an African country's history. It is an investigation of how identities are developed and ourselves can be renewed through storytelling, a homage to an enrichment of oral literature, a form that Ngugi believes is vital to an authentic African culture.

The three novels of our concern apply the storytelling technique, even though they remain a written discourse.

### **BACKGROUND OF THE AUTHOR**

Ngugi WaThiong'o was born in 1938 in Limuru, Kenya. He is one of the leading East-Africa's novelists. He studied at Makerere University in Uganda. As a student there, he published his first short stories. After graduating, he pursued a second bachelor's degree at Leeds University in England. He eventually became a professor of English, and has taught around the world.

Ngugi is best known for his novel *Weep Not, Child*, (1962) which he works while studying at Leeds. However, he has had a prolific career as a novelist, and his style has changed over time. He initially wrote most realistic works, but in recent years has explored a more experimental, magical realist aesthetic. Some of his other well-known novels include *Petals of Blood* (1977), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), and *Wizard of the Crow* (2006). In 2012, his memoir in the House of the Interpreter was published.

### **NARRATIVE METHOD IN NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S A GRAIN OF WHEAT**

Prose is probably the most common and popular form of writing. The language of prose is the language of news, business, administration, and instruction. Thus, prose may be said to be everyday language which has been represented or transformed into writing.

In writing prose, the writer makes use of different devices to narrate his story. He knows the nature of his narration and therefore, stands a better chance to choose what suitable narrative devices that will best convey his message to the readers.

In the novel *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi adopts a multiple narrative technique. Some of the perspectives employed by Ngugi are explicated below:

#### **OMNISCIENT NARRATIVE METHOD:**

One of the narrative perspectives employed by Ngugi in *A Grain of Wheat* is omniscient or anonymous narrative technique. Here, the narration is everywhere. He is not a character in the novel. The story told in the omniscient point of view uses the third person (he, she, it or thy) in describing the characters and their actors except when they are conversing.

Abrams and Hapham assert that:

Fiction written from this omniscient perspective accords with the narrative convention that the narrator knows everything that needs to be known about agents, actions, and events, and has privileged access to the characters' thoughts, feelings and motive... (272)

The omniscient narrative technique is typical of oral literature. All the events are kept together by some connecting passages narrated by an anonymous narrator whose voice is entrusted by Ngugi with relating the story. This is illustrated in the following passage thus:

Waiyaki and other warrior-leaders took arms.

The iron snake spoken of by MugoWaKiboro was quickly wriggling towards Nairobi for a thorough exploitation of this hinterland. Could they move? The snake held on to the ground, laughing their efforts to scorn. The white man with bamboo poles that vomited fire and smoke hitback; his menacing laughter remained echoing in the hearts of the people, long after Waiyaki had been arrested and taken to the coast bound hands feet (12).

Here, the anonymous narrator is the omniscient narrator. This mode of presentation confirms to a large extent the literary inventiveness and ingenuity of Nguig's commitment in the collective reconstruction and the interdependence of his ideology which corroborates with his artistic style. It is through the narrator's variegated point that the social conditions in the novel are revealed. This helps in the overall realization of meaning and understanding of the text.

#### **THE PARTICIPANT/COLLECTIVE NARRATIVE METHOD**

In this narrative technique, the writer appoints one of the characters who is both a participant and a narrator. Such a character is usually the story's protagonist. He uses 'I' or 'we' in places. The voice is his own, not necessarily the author's. according to Nnolim in the use of collective narrative method "The author often

comes out in what he calls propria persons and introduces with too many a "we" and "us" in the narrative passage that cannot be attributed to any character in the novel"

In the absence of a joint action, the group cannot tell a sustained "we" or shared narratives, and its collective aspect may remain confined. A point commitment by members of the group to act as a body in order to achieve the shared goals is a good illustration of collective/participant narrative method.

The use of the participant/collective narrative method is seen in the following passage in *A Grain of Wheat*:

They remembered heroes from our village too ... and underneath it was the chord that followed us from street to street. Somewhere a woman suggested that we go and sing to Mugo, the hermit, at his hut (232).

Another textual example of this kind of narrative method is given in the passage below:

Kingori: Let us pray, lord open thou, our heart.  
Crowd: And our mouths shall show forth thy praise. We shall never rest  
without land (21).

In the excerpt above, we have an individual member of a group leading the prayer, using the words. "let us pray" which suggests a collective participation. And the words "Lord open thou our hearts" clearly indicate a collective narrative perspective. The response of the crowd above is also a clear indication of togetherness and collective responsibility.

### **ANALEPSIS OR RETROSPECTIVE NARRATIVE METHOD**

In the terminology of Robert Graves's, the white Goddess, as quoted in *A Handbook to Literature* by William and Hugh, analepsis is "A type of vision or trance in which something from the past or the unconscious mind is restored to vivid life in the present or conscious mind. It means any recovery or restoration" (22).

Retrospective narrative is a reflection or reminiscence of past events recounted by the narrator in the cause of the narration. Here, important incidents which do not take place in the narration are remembered by the storyteller. Ngugi uses retrospective narrative method to fill up gaps in the story. A textual example of analepsis is given below:

Then nobody noticed, but looking back we can see that Waiyaki's blood contained within it's a seed, a grain, which gave birth to political party whose main strength thereafter sprang from a bond with the soil (3).

This excerpt is a reference to Waiyaka which indicates his exploits in the past which are now recounted by the narrator to the audience.

This narrative method is also seen when Ngugi made reference to Jomo Kenyatta thus:

They sang of Jomo (he came, like a fiery spear among us), he stays in England (Moses Sojourned in the Land of Pharaoh) and his return (he came riding on a cloud of fire and smoke) to save his children. He was arrested... the gates of hell could not withhold him. Now angels trembled before him (190).

This reference to Jomo Kenyatta is also evident of retrospection. It is this point in the novel that we are made to understand the resilience and exploits of Jomo Kenyatta, which the narrator admonishes his fellow countrymen to imbibe in the struggle for freedom. It does not just tell us the heroic exploits of these figures but at the same time creates a link between the past and the present, creating a historical relevance.

### **NARRATIVE METHOD IN *PETALS OF BLOOD***

The narrative technique of *Petals of Blood* by Ngugi is not as complex or subtle as that of *A Grain of Wheat*. Some of the narrative style adopted by Ngugi in this novel are as follows:

#### **ANALEPSIS/REMINISCENCE**

Most of the events in the story are told in the form of reminiscences rather than flashbacks. The story starts in the present with Waja, Karega, Abdulla and Munira in jail on suspicion of being implicated in the murder of the three African directors on the Theny'eta brewery. The story goes back twelve years to Munira's recollections of his first anillal in Ilmorog. The narrative method consists for the most part of reminiscence which nevertheless progress sequentially.

#### **SYMBOLISM**

In its broad sense, symbolism is the use of one object to represent or suggest another. The novel's title, *Petals of Blood*, points to the centrality of the symbolism in the elucidation of the meaning. The flower (*Petals*) thus becomes a symbol of the entire society Ngugi is concerned with—potentially healthy, beautiful, and productive, but its potential unrealized and itself destroyed by the agents of completion and death. The plant with the petals of blood is actually the theng'eta plant which grows wild on the plains that are associated with luxury, vitality, and vigour. It also symbolizes truth and purity, for the flower with the four red petals was used to purify the drink and the drink itself had the remarkable quality of forcing people to confront the truth about themselves. Therefore, when the people of Ilmorog, under the leadership of Nyakinyua, that staunch upholder of traditional values, decide to re-engage in the production of theng'eta, it symbolizes a decision to

return to the purity of their traditional values, and the transformation of theng'eta into a debased modern spirit by the capitalists suggests the erosion of traditional values and the destruction of traditional innocence by the corrupt and depraved agents of modernism.

### **NARRATIVE METHOD IN WIZARD OF THE CROW**

Our objectives shall be to identify the predominant devices used by Ngugi in his novel wizard of the crow and what he achieved by using those narrative devices. Some of the techniques employed by him are:

#### **FIRST PERSON NARRATIVE**

In first person, we only see the point of view of one character. While this character may share details about others in the story, we are only told what the speaker knows. An author may switch from character to character, but still use first person narrative. This way, we may learn about what other characters think and feel, but we are still limited in our knowledge because we must-rely on what the character shares.

In wizard of the Crow the rebellion against the Ruler during the unveiling of the marching to heaven Grand project and the wizard's exploits are achieved through the use of first-person narrative. The markers for first person narratives are "I" and "we" singular and plural respectively. This is found in the novel below:

Wizard: And if I say what I should not say, may the words tell on me.  
Wizard: We need mirrors to see our shadows. We need mirrors to see other people's shadows crossing ours.  
Tajirika: if only I were while  
Wizard: ...I will capture it in the mirror...once the image is capture in my mirror, I will take a sharp knife and scratch it, and from that movement all your enemies will vanish forever (232).

The mode of presentation in the first-person narrative method is reserved for a character who is a participant or resident in the story he or she tells. He may tell the story as he or she experienced, saw, heard, and understood it.

#### **THE USE OF IRONY**

Irony is a broad term referring to the recognition of a reality different from appearance. A narrator can ironize a character's opinions, attitude or feelings by phrasing them in a diction loftier than they deserve. This narrative style is seen in wizard of the crow. For example, there is a birthday song for the Ruler, which ironically equals the ruler to fierce wild animals-leopard, lion and tiger (20).

The use of irony is also seen in Machokali's and Sikiokuu's statements telling the global bank that the people of Aburiria queue in support of marching to heaven project (178).

#### **FIGURAL PERSPECTIVE**

Here, events are not presented to us by a narrator, but rather mirrored in the consciousness of a character, (a reflector), who is not aware that he is the mediator. In fact, the story in the novel is presented by the consciousness of the characters as a whole. This style according to BAL is called "secondary" or "embedded focalization". Through the consciousness of the characters' the story in the novel is revealed to the reader. For instance, it is through the consciousness of Kamiti, the wizard, people tend to actualize their dreams. First, in the novel, he is not the wizard but Kamiti, a beggar lying half-dead on a trash heap. This portrays the way self-discovery through story telling works throughout *Wizard of the Crow*. Again, marching to heaven building is revealed through the ruler's consciousness.

#### **WORKS CITED**

- [1]. Fanon, Frantz. "On National Culture" Grove Publishers: New York. 1967. Print.
- [2]. Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968. Print.
- [3]. Ngugi, WaThiong'o. *Petals of Blood*. Heinemann, 1977. Print.
- [4]. ... "Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of language in African Literature". Heinemann: New York. 2013 print.
- [5]. ... "Mau Mau, Violence and Culture". Home Coming. London: Heinemann, 1972 Print.
- [6]. ... *A Grain of Wheat*. London: Heinemann, 1967. Print.
- [7]. ... *Wizard of the Crow*. Nairobi: EAEP, 2007. Print
- [8]. William Harmon and Hugh Holman, *A hand to Literature*. Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986. Print.