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# Kenya's Rural Landscapes and Colonial Destructive Will in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*

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## Abstract

*For over five decades, scholars and critics have subjected Ngugi's A Grain of Wheat to different interpretations. Most of the studies centre on Ngugi's adaptation of Joseph Conrad's Under Western Eyes, the stylistic devices, the political, structural and historical thrusts of the novel. This paper shifts from these previous ways of reading to engage with Ngugi's representation of Kenya's rural landscape in the novel. In so doing, the paper looks at the aesthetic, social or recreational, economic, political and spiritual values of landscape to the Kenyans as well as the lifestyle of the people of the countryside before the destruction of the landscape and the people by the colonialists. The paper argues that it is not the drive towards modernity, but colonial destructive will that informs this destruction. The paper uses the post-colonial theory and the ecocritical approach to literary criticism. The article is analytical and is organised in four sections. The first section is the introduction, while the second explores the landscapes of Thabai and other villages in the novel. The third section deals with the importance of land in the life of the characters, while the final section focuses on the destruction of the rural landscapes and the people by the Europeans. The paper finds that, like his other novels, landscape is a dominating presence in A Grain of Wheat. It concludes that Ngugi uses the landscape to show the relationships between the Kenyans or the Gikuyu people and the natural world.*
**Keywords**: *Kenya, Thabai, landscape, colonialists/Europeans, Ngugi.*

> Kenya is … well known for breathtaking landscapes and wildlife.
>
> - *CARE International,* 12.

> Much of East Africa has a mild tropical climate made cool and beautiful by hills.
>
> - Ime Ikiddeh, "Introduction," *Weep Not, Child,* vii.

## Introduction

For decades, several writers such as William Wordsworth, Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence, Niyi Osundare, Nadine Gordimer, Chinua Achebe, Legson Kayira, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and many others have used landscape as an aspect in their works. In writing about the landscape, writers use it for various purposes, namely to show its beauty and human relationships to it, to foreground nature or represent the natural world and how it is sometimes destroyed by human or natural agents. Landscape also provides a background or setting for the story for writers. As Christine Loflin puts it, landscape provides a "picture as a backdrop to the action of the novel"

"African Arid Landscapes", 1) and according to Fred Langman, landscape is used as "setting for the action or an accompaniment of the mood [of a work]" (35). In addition, landscape writers focus their attention on the ideal countryside or ruralscape as well as the moral and social character of the people, for as Louis James remarks, "landscape in literature is a view, not only of the countryside, but of the moral and social milieu of the writer and readers" (61). According to Amanda Hammer, in post-colonial literature, "much attention" of landscape writers is "in the construction of postcolonial identifies and nations" (132).

In African Literature, Ngugi is perhaps the most prominent representative of landscape, for he frequently injects Kenya's rural landscapes into his novels. In doing this, he uses the landscape to show the social, recreational, aesthetic, economic, political and spiritual values of his tribe – the Gikuyu, and the subsequent destruction of the landscape by colonialist and neo-colonialist forces. As Loflin avers, "[i]n Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novels, the importance of landscape is paramount, as the landscape of Kenya is intimately related to the community's spiritual, social and political identity" ("Visions of Africa", 76). Commenting also on Ngugi's use of landscape in his novels, Adrian Roscoe says that Ngugi has "a feeling for landscape and paint[s] it well [171]. As Roscoe argues, although "other African writers" also represent landscape in their works, "one's sense of landscape's beauty and its meaning for an author and his people are vitally more present in Ngugi than in most," adding that "landscape is a palpable influence on the physical and spiritual lives of the characters. It is, in a sense, a part of character" (171). Furthermore, in describing the landscape, Ngugi does not separate it from the characters, but following "African patterns of description", he makes the landscape "an integral part of the daily life and experiences of the people who live within it" (Loflin, "African Arid Landscapes,"1).

In exploring the landscape in his novels, Ngugi usually evokes the landscape of his village, Limuru, for as Ime Ikiddeh points out, "[w]hatever names he gives to the location of his novels – Mukuyu and Kameno, Kipanga or Thabai – the landscape remains that of the hilly country around Limuru, his own home" (75). About this, Roscoe also adds his voice, saying that in representing the landscape, Ngugi usually "portrays a particular people in a particular locale. His canvas is restricted to Kenya's Central Province … Only the upland ridges and valleys of Gikuyuland are chosen for evocation" (178).

In all his novels, landscape manifests in the ways Ngugi consistently and compulsively recreates or describes features of Kenya or Gikuyu's landscapes like hills, rivers, mountains, valleys, forests, trees, prairie, caves, land and so on to show the connection between the people and the natural world. Against the foregoing backdrop, this paper explores Ngugi's

representation of Kenya's rural landscapes and their destruction by the colonialists in *A Grain of Wheat*. In doing this, the paper focuses on a description of the functions the landscapes perform about the characters, namely the aesthetic, social or recreational, economic, political and spiritual functions, as well as the destruction of the landscapes by the colonialists and neo-colonialists.

II

In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi evokes the landscape of Thabai and other ridges. Like Hardy's Wessex, like Lawrence's Eastwood, the landscape of Ngugi's literary topography is very beautiful. Ngugi himself underscores this in a 1993 interview with Charles Cantapulo. Pressed by his interviewer whether he makes use of landscape in his novels, Ngugi replies: "It's a lot in my novels. Certainly, in *A Grain of Wheat*, the landscape is very beautiful; I am very conscious of landscape" (350). This beautiful landscape is portrayed in various sections in *A Grain of Wheat*. One occurs at the novel's very beginning in the author's description of the landscape of Thabai in the following terms:

> Thabai was a big village. When built, it combined several ridges: Thabai, Kamandura, Kihingo, and parts of Weru. And even in 1963, it had not changed much from the days in 1955 when the grass-thatched roofs and mud walls were hastily collected together, while the white man's sword hung dangerously above people's necks to protect them from their brethren in the forest. Some huts had crumbled a few had been pulled down, yet the village maintained an unbroken orderliness; from a distance it appeared a huge mass of grass from which smoke rose to the sky as from a burnt sacrifice. (4)

This excerpt describes the beautiful landscape of Thabai, showing the reader the prominent features of the landscape in the manner of landscape painting. Evoking a rustic setting, the features of the landscape are the ridges; a description of the houses: "grass-thatched roofs and mud walls", then "the forests" and finally the orderly nature of the village despite its ravaged nature.

The climate, one of the components of the landscape of Kenya, is also beautiful, cool and absorbing, and it is partly this climate that attracts the white characters such as Dr. Lynd, John Thompson and his wife Margery to Kenya. When Dr. Lynd, the colonial plant pathologist at the Githima Forestry Station, arrives in Kenya, it is the beautiful climate that attracts her: "She [Dr. Lynd liked the country and the climate and so had decided to stay" (41). Thompson, the

colonial administrator, for his part, is also thrilled by the beautiful climate of Kenya. He first came to East Africa as a soldier during the Second World War and was fascinated by the climate of Kenya. On his second and present visit to Kenya as a colonial administrator, Thompson remains so thrilled by the climate that when he arrives at Mombasa, he writes, "I am delighted… to touch the red earth of Kenya. I was here during the war and I liked the climate" (48). Here, Thompson sees the landscape of Kenya as a paradise restored and the reader is a witness to the pastoral implications expressed clearly by his use of the word "delighted". Even in the notes he makes at various times and places which he intends to put into "a coherent philosophy" in his book, *Prospero in Africa*, Thompson remains fascinated by the landscape of Kenya, especially that of Nyeri, one of the ridges of Thabai:

> Nyeri is full of mountains, hills and deep valleys covered with impenetrable forests. These primordial trees have always awed primitive minds. The darkness and misery of the forest, have led him (the primitive man) to magic and ritual. (49)

Furthermore, Thompson celebrates the beautiful nature of Thabai's landscape and the friendly disposition of the people of the village while interrogating Mugo to extract a confession about the oath. As Thompson questions Mugo and the latter says he is from Thabai, the narrator tells us that "for a few seconds he [Thompson] tried a friendly chat about Thabai: how green the landscape, how nice and friendly its inhabitants" (116). Yet, as we shall see in the last segment of the paper, it is Thompson who presides over the destruction of both the landscape and people of Thabai, which he celebrates here. Thompson's statement echoes Wanja's about Ilmorog in *Petals of Blood* when she, Karega and Munira return from the city to Ilmorog and see how the village is ravaged by drought: "So green in the past… So green and hopeful… and now this" (107).

Another locus where Ngugi depicts the beauty of the landscape is his description of the beautiful landscape of Mahee, which is in the Rift Valley, the heart of the White Highlands. With a touch of intimacy as if addressing someone, the narrator describes the topography of Mahee in the following terms:

> If you stood at Mahee at any time of day, you would see the walls of the escarpment, an enchanting guard to one of the most beautiful valleys in the land. The walls climbed in steps to the highlands, a row smaller hills, some hewn round at the top while others bore

> scoops and volcano mouths, receded into shrouds of mist and mystery. (16)

Like Nyeri, Mahee is also characterised by features of the landscape such as valleys, highlands and hills which beautify the environment. Such environments appeal to white people. It is not, therefore, difficult to see that the author partly uses the landscape as the source of conflict in the novel, for it is the forceful appropriation of the people's lands by the white settlers that provokes the conflict in the novel.

An example is Mahee itself, which is seized by the white settlers and made the White Highlands, where some of them live, and they chose to live there because the climate is cool and similar to that of Europe. As Elspeth Huxley explains, on the arrival of the Europeans in East Africa, they "instinctively select a country where the climate, vegetation and temperature most resemble those of the cold north" (72). It is in the White Highlands that we see three dominant colonial structures of coercion – the transit prison for those waiting to be taken to concentration camps, the police garrison and the police station, described as "a symbol of that might which dominated Kenya to the door of every hut" (84). However, Mahee is later recaptured by Kihika and his forest fighters.

In building the above-mentioned colonial structures in Mahee, the white settlers altered the pristine landscape of the place and refashioned it based on English models. This, of course, is not new, for it is the practice of the colonialists that on their arrival in the colonies, they always improve the landscapes of the colonies to suit their purposes. This, they do by constructing various edifices. Drawing upon Zimbabwe's experience, Lily G.N. Mabura writes:

> Whitemen such as Rhodes set out to improve Zimbabwe's landscape, based principally, on their imperialist ambitions in the construction of military cities like Bulawayo. Once this was accomplished, they further embellished the landscape using a symbol based on English or other Western landscapes. (104)

There are two predominant forest landscapes in *A Grain of Wheat,* which provides aesthetic and social or recreational functions to the characters. They are the Githima forest and the Keninie Forest. Githima Forest is a thick, beautiful, healthy and fertile forest with abundant natural resources, and it is these natural qualities of the forest that attract the Europeans to the place. In keeping with their usual imagination, Githima Forest, for the Europeans, is an unoccupied space and is not owned by anybody – a forest which is owned by the Kenyans and has served their needs for centuries. Believing that the forest is not owned by anybody, the

Europeans begin a self-appointed mission to tame and make it useful by creating the Githima Forestry and Agricultural Research Station to which I will return in the final section of this paper.

In his description of the Githima Forest landscape, Ngugi opens before his readers the buildings in the area and in so doing, he shows the disparity between the European houses and the African houses. Some of the Europeans, like John Thompson, live in the Forestry Station in the Githima, and his house is a beautiful one surrounded by flowers. In the words of the narrator, "[a] neatly trimmed hedge of cider scrubs surrounded Thompson's bungalow. At the entrance green creepers coiled on a wood stand, massed into an arch at the top and then fell to the hedge at the sides" (34). Mind that the word "green" signifies beauty and freshness associated with the flora and fauna in forests all over the world.

Within the house, we see Mrs. Margery Thompson's gardens characterised by flowers of different colours. As the narrator describes it, "[t]he hedge [of the house] closed gardens of flowers: flame lilies, morning glory, sunflowers, bougainvillaea. However, it was the garden of roses that stood out in colour above others. Mrs Margery Thompson had cultivated red roses, pink roses – roses of all shades" (34). While living in Githima Forest, Thompson's wife, Mrs. Margery Thompson, has so loved the place and their house that as Kenya's independence approaches and the Europeans prepare to leave Kenya for Britain, Mrs. Margery Thompson cries out painfully with a sense of nostalgia:

> Would she never, never see Githima again? Would her flowers mean anything to whoever would take her place in the house? Every corner of the house, the chairs, the table, the beds and even the walls, held a memory for her; in her wanderings from district to district all over Kenya, no other house, no other place was intimately bound up with her. No other place had given her such a sense of release of freedom, of power. (44)

In contrast to the beautiful landscape of Thompson's house, there is the only "licenced eating house at Githima" known as "Your Friend Unto Death" (36), a frightening, polluted and miserable hotel meant only for the Africans. According to the narrator, "[t]he stony walls [of the hotel] were covered with grease, a fertile ground for flies" (36). It calls to mind hotels like Six Eighty, May Fair and Farewell Bar in *Petals of Blood* and Sell Me Death and Angel's Hotel in *Wizard of the Crow*. In *A Grain of Wheat*, the Githima Forest landscape functions as a site for love-making, for it is in that forest that Mrs. Margery Thompson and Dr. Henry Van Dyke, the colonial "meteorological officer" (31), make love at the back of his car seat. This resonates

with the way the wife of the Minister for Truth and Justice had sex with her driver in a black Mercedes-Benz in the wilderness in Ngugi's *Matigari*.

Apart from the Githima Forest, there is also the Keninie Forest landscape, which provides social or recreational functions to the characters in the novel. This is seen in the way the people of Thabai, Rung'ei, Keninie and the other villages go to dance and to recreate themselves in Keninie Forest. Before they go to this forest for their social and recreational activities, they first go to the railway station, which itself provides a "meeting place for the young" (63) to socialise or just to see the train. According to David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe, "unlike the restless moving, disruptive train, the railway station serves as a dynamic, unifying purpose by attracting villagers of the neighbourhood to weekly gathering on Sundays at which social issues and the future in general are discussed" (83). Like a tourist centre, the villagers go to the train station on Sundays to "meet one another, to talk, to gossip, to laugh" (63) and even hatch love-affairs. One leaves the train station, and they proceed to Keninie Forest to further socialise or dance. As the narrator informs us:

> From the [railway] station they normally went to dance in Keninie Forest overlooking the Rift Valley. Guitar players occupied a place of honour in this community; beautiful girls surround them and paid tribute with their eyes. Men bought dances. When a person bought a dance, the guitarist played for him alone, praising his name, always the son of a man. The man danced to the rhythm alone or invited his friends to join him while others watched. Nobody else could come in. The conventions governing the dances in the wood were well understood. (63)

During the dance sessions, the narrator further says that "men and women fell into groups and laughed and buzzed, animating the wood" (83). The dances foster unity and interpersonal relationships among the people and also help them to forget their sorrows.

In and around Kininie Forest are trees, valleys and hills which give beauty to the environment and make it cool: "It was cool in Keninie Forest" (83), says the narrator. We see these features of the forest landscape during the dance sessions in the forest. For instance, when Wambuku and Kihika are dancing together in the forest, the narrator says they dance "their way round the silent trees, their feet shuffling through the fallen leaves. The tree-trunks also seemed to move among the dancing couples" (84). When they later move to "an open place in the sun," it is a landscape characterised by "green wattle trees and bush sloped sleeping into the valley below. The valley sprawled flat for a distance and then into a ridge of small hills" (84).

As a recreational centre for the people, Keninie Forest is where they run competitive races, such as when Karanja out-runs Gikonyo in the race to the train as a test of strength. Love relationships are also played out in this forest. Soon after Karanja defeats Gikonyo in their race competition, we are told that Gikonyo and Mumbi "walked side by side" in the wood, which "made a cool shelter from the sun" (79). Like the lovers in Robert Frost's poem, "Two Look at Two," who explore nature in the woods, Gikonyo and Mumbi also explore the beauty of nature in Keninie Forest: "Let us explore the wood," Gikonyo suggests to Mumbi and "they came to an open place at the centre of the forest… He stood facing Mumbi and surrendered himself to a power he knew drew them together. He held her hand and his fingers were full, so sensitive" (80). Like the hill in *Weep Not, Child*, where Njoroge and Mwihaki forge their love relationship and like Honia River in *The River Between* where Wayaiki and Nyambura do the same, Keninie Forest is where Gikonyo and Mumbi forge their love relationship in *A Grain of Wheat*. As Gikonyo remarks, "[e]very day I found a new Mumbi. Together we plunge into the forest. And I was not afraid of the darkness" (86). And eventually, it is here that Gikonyo makes love for the first time to Mumbi on the grass.

Following in the landscape writing tradition, Ngugi represents Keninie Forest landscape as a refuge or, as William Slaymaker will put it, a "haven and security for the Mau Mau" (688) freedom fighters. It is in this forest that the author foreshadows the war between the freedom fighters and the Europeans, for it is here that the Kenyans draw their counter-resistance plans against the colonialists to reclaim their lost lands and souls. As the State of Emergency is declared by Boring, the colonial Governor, the narrator says that the people "went less to the train, the dance sessions in the forests turned into meetings where plans for the day of reckoning were drawn" (87).

Thus, as soon as Jomo Kenyatta and other nationalist leaders are arrested, Kihika and other Mau Mau guerrilla fighters, such as the woman Njeri, General R. and Lt. Koinandu, run into the forests to fight the Europeans. It is from the Keninie Forest that Kihika and his men come and attack Mahee, the big police garrison and transit prison and free the Kenyan inmates. It is also from this forest that the Mau Mau terrorists appear and disappear after shooting the cruel Chief Muruithia. When Karanja is appointed Chief by the colonial government, he leads "homeguards into the forest to hunt down the Freedom Fighters" (129). It is in Keninie Forest that Kihika is captured and subsequently hanged by the Europeans.

While fighting in the forest, the Mau Mau guerrillas depend on the spiritual powers of the natural elements of the forest landscape such the mountains, for according to Lieutenant Koinandu, one of the Mau Mau members, before engaging the Europeans in any battle, the

freedom fighters pray, "facing Mount Kenya" (20). This is because "[t]he Kikuyus believe that God dwelled in the mountain" (Wangari Maathai, 173). Otherwise called Mount Kirinyaga or "Mwenanyaga," Cook and Okeninkpe write that the mountain "is the source of spiritual value for the people and of their ancient, communal concepts of good life" (88). The Mau Mau freedom fighters also exploited the mountains, which they knew very well as their hideouts in the war against the Europeans in the forests. About this, Tirop Simatei writes:

> It is in the forested mountains, especially Mount Kenya and Nyandura that the Mau Mau guerrillas enact mastery of the landscape to the awe of the colonial police. They become experts of moving and blending into the local terrain. In the war of liberating the land, the landscape itself becomes an invaluable ally. (88)

## III

In *A Grain of Wheat,* Ngugi's description of the landscape flows into an exploration of the land and its role in the life of the people. Meena Pydah observes that "Ngugi, through his descriptions of landscape, introduces the importance of land in the lives of the Africans" (110). The land is portrayed as a fertile one, a prime part of the landscape which provides for the economic needs of the people and ensures their survival. According to the Gukuyu creation myth, the land was a divine gift, one given to them by God, and in Ngugi's fictional writings, the land assumes both economic and spiritual importance. As Roscoe points out, land in Ngugi's novels is "the central factor in an equation guaranteeing the economic, social, psychological and spiritual survival of a people" (171). In his book, *Facing Mount Kenya*, Jomo Kenyatta also writes: "As agriculturalists the Gikuyu people depend entirely on the land. It supplies them with the needs of life, through which mental and spiritual contentment is achieved" (21).

As an economic commodity, land provides food for the people. Also, the forest landscape, such as the Keninie Forest, the Aberdares Mountains and Mount Kenya, is pregnant with trees like Muriri wood, podo and camphor timber, which Gikonyo uses in making furniture for the people of Thabai. It is because of the importance of the economic trees found in these mountains that, as Gikonyo tells one of his female customers, "the white people appropriated that land to themselves" (65). And as Thomas P. Ocfansky informs us, on the arrival of the Europeans in Kenya, "large quantities of timber were required to build schools and hospitals for the expanding indigenous population" (137). This is perhaps why the Europeans appropriated the Aberdares Mountains which Ocfansky also affirms is a wooded area in Kenya replete with

trees like "cedar yellow wood, Ibean camphor, Ibean poon, black and white wood, stinkwood, and pillar" (136).

The people of Thabai are basically pastoralists and this partly shows how the landscape influences the people, either as farmers or animal rearers. Ngugi exemplifies this through the lives of four characters: Waitherero, Mumbi's father, Githua, and especially Mugo. Early in the novel, the author says that Mugo's aunt, Waitherero, rears goats and sheep. At the death of his parents, Mugo lived with Waitherero and "used to sleep on the floor in his aunt's hut sharing the fire place with goats and sheep" (7). Gitua, the freedom fighter with a maimed leg like Abdulla in *Petals of Blood* is a poultry farmer before he loses his leg in an accident. As he recalls, before this incident, "Money was nothing to me. I was negotiating for a farm in Kerarapon, near Ngong. At home here I had poultry" (109). Mumbi's father, Mbugua, is also a farmer who "earned his standing in the village through his achievements as a warrior and a farmer" (66).

It is, however, through the life and character of Mugo that Ngugi most illustrates this pastoral life of the people. Until Kihika "come [s] into his life" (9), Mugo, an orphan, has nothing to do with politics, not even with the Uhuru celebrations near the corner, but with farming: "I only looked after my little shamba and crops" (169), says Mugo. His ambition is to make a name and a mark in society through farming. Therefore, "[h]e turned to the soil. He would labour, sweat, and through success and wealth, force society to recognise him. There was, for him, solace in the very act of breaking the soil" (9). Thus, like Thomas Hardy's Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, Mugo is always with a knife and a hoe, going to and returning from his farm.

When he is first seen, Mugo has woken up from sleep and he is heading to his farm, a piece of land given to him by Wairu, a village elder because Mugo's piece of land has been seized by the whitemen while his is in detention: "He took a jembe and a panga to repeat the daily pattern his life had now fallen into… To reach his new strip of shamba which lay on the other side of Thabai, Mugo had to walk through the dusty streets" (3). Alone on his farm, cultivating his crops, Mugo's fully himself. The land itself has become his identity, and he is part of it. Even when he deems it necessary to betray Kihika to the colonial authorities, it is after the day's farming in another of his farms "near Rung'ei Railway Station" (107) that Mugo goes to Thompson and betrays Kihika. As Mugo reaches this farm, what we see is a beautiful and fragrant landscape: "The air was fresh and clear and sharp. The fields around, all covered with green things–long, wide leaves hiding the dark earth–appeared beautiful to look at" (108), says

the narrator. For Ngugi then, Mugo is an ideal farmer, contributing to the economic base of Thabai and the other villages.

Finally, Ngugi's description of the landscape in *A Grain of Wheat* runs into an appraisal of the nature of the countryside and the lifestyle of the people. The countryside is represented by Thabai and "eight ridges around Thabai" (56). Unlike the city, Nairobi, which is a place of destruction, corruption, noise and unease, the countryside is a place of peace, harmony and natural beauty. It is a prelapsarian and peaceful world with traditional values. As shown earlier in this paper, before colonial intrusion, Thabai and its surrounding ridges or villages were beautiful and idealised environments with hills, rivers, mountains, valleys, lakes, trees, forests and fertile lands. The people have a close relationship with this non-human world. In the countryside, the homesteads are beautifully scattered among bushes and trees. Consider, for instance, this description of Mumbi's father, Mbugua's home in old Thabai:

> His home consisted of three huts and two granaries where crops were stored after harvest. A bush – a dense of mass creepers, brambles, thorn trees, nettles and other stinging plants – formed a natural edge around the home. Old Thabai, in fact, was a village of such grass-thatched huts thinly scattered along the ridge. The hedges were hardly ever trimmed; wild animals used to make their liars there. (676)

Apart from showing the nature of houses in Old Thabai village, this passage shows that the people in the countryside have a close relationship with their environment, where they cherish the land as their sole source of existence. This explains why the people are farmers.

There is also in the countryside an organised and close communal bond or fellow-feeling among the people. They also share things in common. For instance, when the people march to Nairobi to demand the release of Harry Thuku from the colonial government, the narrator recalls: "We shared whatever crumbs we had brought. Great love I saw there. A bean fell to the ground and it was quickly split among the children" (13-14). And when Gitogo is killed by the colonial soldiers, the author says that to ameliorate Gitogo's old mother's pains for losing a child, Mugo, out of fellow-feeling, "brought some sugar, maize flour, and a bundle of firewood" (7) to her. Though absent in the city, Nairobi, there is an organised traditional way of administering justice and resolving disputes in the countryside. In the novel, Ngugi illustrates this through a traditional body in Rung'ei known as "the village council of elders", which is described as ("an official Kiama, traditional in origin and character, that nevertheless discussed and resolved conflicts among the village people)" (73). Joe Nwabueze Obinaju puts

in perspective the nature of life lived by Africans in the countryside before the advent of colonialism and the city:

> Before colonialism was born, Africa never knew the city the way they have come to know and appreciate it today. People then lived freely in their different ethnic cultural groupings and societies preferably referred to as villages. Life was simple, easy-going, well structured… communal life reigned supreme with family members helping one another, sharing their joys and pains. (253)

The passage shows that in the countryside, people live a free, simple and communal lifestyle. Indeed, such is the life lived by the people of Thabai, Rung-ei and the other villages before the incursion of colonialism and the influence of the city. Thus, until the arrival of the colonial masters, there were no modern power structures or instruments of coercion, such as courts, prisons, police, army and detention camps in the countryside.

**IV**

The evidence so far in his paper is that in his representation of landscape in *A Grain of Wheat,* the author has, using Thabai and its surrounding ridges, shown Kenya's or Gikuyu's countryside as a peaceful, idyllic and Eden-like place before the arrival of the colonial masters in Kenya. However, on their arrival, the Europeans not only seized but also wilfully destroyed the landscapes, including the people. In the remainder of this paper, I show this destructive will of the Europeans.

The first way Ngugi represents the destruction of the landscape or environment in the novel is the way the Europeans appropriate and destroy the Githima Forest. This, they do by refashioning or improving the Githima Forest landscape to suit their purposes. According to Ofcansky, "[t]he establishment of British rule also marked the beginning of an influx of European settlers bent on refashioning the Kenyan landscape after their notions of a 'white man's country'" (137). And Jonathan Bate tells us that "the Western man" has always regarded "virgin rainforest [as] a powerful idea" and when he goes "out of the city to the country [his] response to what [he] sees is shaped by cultural conditions" (63).

In *A Grain of Wheat,* Ofcansky and Bate's statements above are true of the colonialists, especially Mr. Rogers, the Colonial Agricultural Officer with a deep passion for "land development" (31). Like many other European travellers to East Africa who travel by train, it was while "travelling by train from Nairobi to Nakuru" (31) that Mr. Rogers first saw the Githima Forest. Attracted by the beauty and natural resources of the forest, Mr. Rogers later

carries out a *locus in quo* inspection of the forest and thinks of using science to tame and develop the forest by setting up a "Forestry Research Station" but he is suddenly "killed by a train at Githima crossing" (31).

After Mr. Roger's death, the Europeans began the improvement of Githima forest by creating the "Githima Forestry and Agricultural Research Station … as part of a new colonial development plan" and soon after its creation, the station "teemed with European scientists and administrators" (31). It is in this station that most of the colonialists and their African stooges like Karanja and Mwaura live and work. According to Byron Caminero-Santangelo, "[t]he apparent purpose of the 'station' is to develop knowledge of plants, and weather to improve agriculture and conservation" (2007:702; 2011:157). The setting up of this station echoes the way C.F. Elliot, an official of the Indian Forestry Service in 1902, "opened a Forestry Department in Nairobi, recruited three forest rangers and began introducing exotic tree species – including two species of pine – for experimental plantation" (Thomas P. Ofcansky, 138).

Although the "Githima Forestry and Agricultural Research Station" is a plausible project, I argue that underneath is the Europeans' usual desire to take the people's land and dispossess them of their existence. It will also lead to environmental destruction, for to build the station, vast lands belonging to the people will be seized and destroyed. The application of chemicals to improve agriculture will also lead to the destruction of the landscape. As Caminero-Santangelo puts it, the station "reinforces the dispossession of the Gikuyu from their land by formulating the British as its proper stewards and by effacing the forms of knowledge and the kinds of relationships with the land which have been developed over centuries" (2007:702). Emily Brownwell and Toyin Falola also write that "[t]he introduction of new technology into landscapes and the colonial encounter both often rely on the alienation of people from their land" (6). About this, Harry Garuba also writes: "Colonialism is not simply about taking away the land, it is also about dispossessing the colonised of their histories and ontologies" (214). Even the re-naming of the forest by the Europeans tells their desire to take over the land, for according to Garuba, "[t]hese new ways of seeing and naming land effectively took away cognitive ownership of the colonized" (218).

However, as the Europeans set out to destroy the Githima Forest landscape, "the forest fights back" (277), to borrow Kayode O. Ogunfolabi's words. This, the forest does by killing two Europeans – Mr. Rogers and Dr. Henry van Dyke who are both killed by a train at Githima. Although Ngugi does not say so in the novel, in all probability, the two Europeans only paid the price for the prior will to destroy the forest. They were presumably killed by evil spirits in

the forest, for in Africa, the forest is usually "conceived of as the problematic 'Other' harbouring all sorts of supernatural forces" (Ato Quayson, 46).

The second way Ngugi portrays the destruction of the landscape is through the building of the railway station in Rung'ei by the Europeans to exploit the people and the environment. According to Christine Reichart-Burikukiye, "[t]he railway has played a significant role in the process of colonisation of Africa. It was an instrument of economic exploitation and control and it encapsulated the ideas of European expansion and domination" (62). Cook and Okenimkpe observe that "the railway represents the ruthless advance of colonialism" (82) into Kenya. This goes to confirm the prophecy of the Gikuyu seer, Mugo wa Kabiro, for it cannot be forgotten that, long before the building of the railway station in Rung'ei, Kabiro had prophesied the coming of "the iron snake [train] towards Nairobi for the through exploitation of the hinterland" (12).

The implication of building the railway in Rung'ei by the colonial government is that there are now industrial forces threatening to destroy the pristine landscape and environment of the people, including their heritage. The construction of the railway means altering the rural landscape. When the first train appears in Thabai, it leads to the displacement of the people as they run for their dear lives. As the author puts it: "Of the story, current to this day in other ridges, which told how men, women and children deserted Thabai for a whole week when the iron snake, foreseen by the Gikuyu seer, first appeared on the land, they kept discrete silence. They ran for refuge to the neighbouring ridges" (62). This displacement of the people falls within the latitude of what Rob Nixon calls "displacement without moving or stationary displacement", that is a displacement which amounts "to loss of land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable" (19).

Displacement or dislocation of people from their homes or places because of environmental destruction is a common occurrence in many parts of the world today. It results mostly from wars and the exploration of natural resources by multinational oil companies. Yet, nothing is done to ameliorate the pains and sufferings of the displaced people. A familiar example is the displacement of the Ogoni people of Rivers State, Nigeria, as a result of the exploitation of oil in Ogoniland by the multinational oil companies.

Though a positive means of transportation, the train is ironically one of the known sources of environmental pollution. This is true of the first train that appeared in Rung'ei and Thabai. On its appearance in Rung'ei and later in Thabai, the train polluted the environment, "coughing and vomiting smoke as it rattled along" (62), thereby contributing to global warming and

climate change. With the building of the railway in Rung'ei and Thabai, the process of industrialisation of these places began, since the railway is a powerful symbol of industrialisation. Referring for instance, to Nathaniel Hawthrone's description of the sudden and startling appearance of the locomotive which shattered the pastoral peace in the woods near concord, Massachusetts (as in the case of the people of Thabai and Rung'ei) Leo Marx writes: "The locomotive, associated with fire, smoke, speed iron and noise, is the leading symbol of the new industrial power. It is… a cause of alienation in the root sense of the word" (27).

The effect of the "colonial development plan" with the train is that the people suffer what Nixon again calls "slow violence". In his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor,* Nixon describes slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). While the destruction inflicted on the Githima Forest and Thabai landscapes by the colonialists illustrates what one knows as violence – that is, "an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space" – one has to put these into the context of "incremental and accretive" (2) slow violence still going on presently in Kenya as elsewhere in Africa. There are various forms of slow violence, including global warming, acid rain, climate change, deforestation and land conservation as the colonialists do to the Githima Forest and the Thabai landscape. And this fits into Nixon's idea of slow violence: unspectacular, gradual, bloodless and difficult to reverse.

In *A Grain of Wheat,* the alienation of the people from their environment by the Europeans properly begins when the colonial government declares a State of Emergency all over Kenya in order to contain the Mau Mau insurgency. With the State of Emergency, the old life and personalities of the people, including the environment, have changed over time. As Gitua cries out early in the novel, "The Emergency Destroyed Us" (5). The aspects of destruction are many. First, the deaf and dumb Gitogo, suspected to be a Mau Mau terrorist, is shot by the British soldiers. Next, Waiyaki is arrested and "buried alive at Kibwezi with his head facing into the centre of the earth" (12). Young Harry is jailed and Kihika is hanged in public; Jomo Kenyatta, like Young Harry is also jailed; Gikonyo, Mugo, Gatu and several others are sent to various detention camps where Gatu later hangs himself; under John Thompson as Colonial Administrator, eleven African detainees die during questioning and torture; Wambuku is severely beaten by a soldier for refusing his advances and she later dies during pregnancy; Njeri is killed in the forest in a battle with the British soldiers, and the people themselves have

become traitors—a lifestyle they never lived, but are forced to live under the State of Emergency to escape from the wrath of the colonial masters.

The changes brought about by the State of Emergency also affect the ridges and the environment. This manifests in the way black and white soldiers invade Thabai and Rung'ei to destroy the places:

> One day people in Thabai and Rung'ei woke up to find themselves ringed with black and white soldiers carrying guns, and tanks last seen on the road during Churchill's war with Hitler. Gunfire smoked in the sky; people held their stomachs. Some men locked themselves in latrines; others hid among the sacks of sugar and beans in the shops. Yet others tried to sneak out of the town towards the forest, only to find that all roads to freedom were blocked … Gitogo continued running. Something hit him at the back. He raised his arms in the air. He fell on his stomach. Apparently, the bullet had touched his heart. The soldier left his place. Another Mau Mau terrorist had been shot dead. (6)

In representing environmental destruction, the author sometimes juxtaposes scenes of man-made environmental changes with natural ones. For instance, not too long after the above incident, one sees a natural disaster in the form of a severe drought ravaging the entire Kenya, leaving the landscape arid without crops. Being a farmer, Mugo is disturbed by this development as he lies down in his hut: "In the shamba, he [Mugo] felt hollow. There were no crops on the land and what with the dried-up weed, gakaraku, micege, mikengeria, bangi – and the sun, the country appeared sick and dull" (7). Even in lived experience, Kenya is suffering from drought today, for according to *CARE International,* "climate change is heavily and continuously showing its impact on the East African country. Kenya has been facing droughts in recent years with the most severe hitting the country in 2016/17" (12). When Mugo leaves his house and goes to his farm to plant crops, he meets dry soil caused by the drought. As he raises his hoe to tilt the soil, Mugo hears "the soil, dry and hollow, tumble down. Dust flew into the sky, enveloped him, and then settled into his hair and clothes… He quickly dropped the jembe… He sat down: where was the fascination he used to find in the soil before the Emergency?" (7). Here nature is conspiring to work against human efforts.

Soon after this natural change in the environment, Ngugi again returns to show other instances of man-made environmental destruction. One is the way the new Kenyan converts tread on sacred places and how the white settlers seize the people's lands:

> The few [Kenyans] who were converted started speaking a faith foreign to the ways of the land. They trod on sacred places to show that no harm could reach those protected by the hand of the Lord. Soon, people saw the white man had imperceptibly acquired more land to meet the growing needs of his position. He had already pulled down the grass-thatched hut and erected a more permanent building. (12)

At a meeting of the Party at Rung'ei Market, Kihika further points out the way the white man uses the trick of the Bible to steal the lands and destroy them subsequently: "We went to their church. Mubia, in white ropes, opened the Bible. He said: Let us shut our eyes. We did. You know he remained open so that he could read the word. When we opened our eyes, our land was gone and the sword of flames stood on guard" (15). Furthermore, the British people, such as Mr. Burton, the first to arrive in Kenya, confiscated the people's land, cleared the forests and use them to cultivate their crops. It is, for instance, owing to the State of Emergency that Mugo loses his piece of land to the colonial authorities "while he was in detention" (4). Like Wanja and Karega in *Petals of Blood,* who on their return from Nairobi to Ilmorog return only to notice the negative environmental changes in the countryside, Gikonyo in *A Grain of Wheat* sees similar changes that overcome everything in Thabai and Rung'ei on his return from six years of detention by the British people. As he narrates to Mugo: "Do you know… that when I finally came back, well for me everything had changed; the shambas, and the villages and the people" (61), including his wife, Mumbi. With a sense of loss and pastoral clergy, Gikonyo continues to see these changes. When he walks back to Thabai from detention, he is confronted with climate change affecting the environment.

The drought that the reader is to meet in larger doses and a more devastating and lasting form in *Petals of Blood* is affecting the entire countryside in *A Grain of Wheat:*

> The bumpy, battered land sloped on either side; sickly crops just recovering from a recent drought, one more scourge which had afflicted the country in this period [the State of Emergency], leaving anxious faces of mothers dry and cracked, were scattered on the strips of shambas on either side of the road. (91)

It is not only the drought that is threatening the destruction of Old Thabai. The Colonial District Officer, Thomas Robson, has also ordered the destruction of Old Thabai. The author shows this in the following passage narrated by Mumbi to Mugo:

> Even now, at night, in bed, she started. I remember the red flames. There were two huts. One belonged to my mother, the other was mine. *They* told us to remove our bedding and clothes and utensils. They splashed some petrol on the grass-thatch of my mother's hut… The leader of the homeguards struck a match and threw it at the roof… Dark and blue smoke tossed from the roof, and the flames leapt to the sky. *They* went to my hut… I shut my eyes. I wanted to scream, but I must have lost my voice because no sound left my throat … The roofs were cracking. I remember the pain as the cracking noise repeated in my heart. Soon the roofs of the hut fell in, one after the other, with a roar. I heard my mother gasp at the first roar. (122-3)

The passage tells of the way the Europeans order the home guards to destroy the people's houses and displace them from their lands. It specifically has affinity with the way Ngugi's home and village were destroyed when he returns from school, the Alliance High School, Kikuyu:

> I came back after the first term and confidently walked back to my old village. My home was now on a pile of dry mud-stones, bits of grass, charcoal and ashes. Nothing remained, not even crops, except for a lone peer tree… I stood there bewildered. Not only my home, but the old village with its allure, its memories and its warmth had been razed to the grounds. (*Detained*, 73-74)

And as the destruction continues, Mumbi avers that: "Before nightfall the walls of Old Thabai Village had tumbled down: mud, soot, and ashes marked the spots where the various huts once stood" (124). As the British people forcefully eject the Africans from their homes and set their houses on fire, the narrator says that "altogether twenty-one men and women died. They were buried beside the trench" (128). It is a rather sad situation in which "one meaning blots out another" (Bate, 21) or, as Marx would put it, "discord replaces harmony and the tranquil mood vanishes" (225) in Kenya. Thus, the earlier beautifully built and scattered homesteads of Old Thabai are destroyed and in their places begin what Gerald Moore calls "enforced villagisation" (273), that is, the building of New Thabai, which is in time characterised by the unease of city life.

Like Old Thabai, Rung'ei also experiences this environmental destruction by the colonial authorities, and this is seen through the accounts of Gikonyo and Mugo. Out of detention, as Gikonyo moves through Thabai towards Rung'ei market, the reader follows him to notice that Old Rung'ei landscape has been destroyed and it is now assuming a near urban outlook whose "very air choked him" (102) because of environmental pollution. And near the end of the book, as Mugo goes to his farm close to Rung'ei railway station, it is observed that Rung'ei and Thabai have been turned into squalor: "Here and there the fields were littered with broken sites where not a week before stood homesteads that made up Thabai village" (170).

As he moves along, Mugo is to come across "a stench of decaying rubbish" (170) where African children are looking for what to eat – an environmental abuse akin to the "GREEN MARKET" in Ngugi's sixth novel, *Matigari*. Thus, the old, peaceful order of Thabai and Rung'ei has given way to a new order in the name of economic development and progress. Thabai and Rung'ei are no longer the alluring prelapsarian world, but toxic sites. The environmental disaster seen in the landscapes of Thabai and Rung'ei brings to mind what Lawrence Buell calls "toxic gothic", for it shows the "gothicized environmental squalor" which often accompanies traumatic stories of "contained communities" in a once beautiful but now destroyed Eden-like world" *(*42-43, 36).

**Conclusion**

An aspect of fiction, landscape, is often used by writers, including Ngugi. This essay has been concerned with his representation of Kenya's rural landscapes in *A Grain of Wheat*. The essay has shown the beauty of the landscapes and the functions they perform for the characters in the novel. It demonstrates that until the advent of colonialism in Kenya, the landscapes served local needs and had meaning for the people, but on the arrival of the Europeans in Kenya, they destroyed the landscapes out of their destructive will. The paper concludes that Ngugi uses landscape in all his novels and he does this in order to show the relationships between his people and the natural world.

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