

*Rewriting History in Fiction:
Elements of Postmodernism In
Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Later Novels*

KATHY KESSLER

DRAWING A DISTINCTION between modernism and postmodernism suggests that either one is a unified discourse with clear boundaries. Emerging from a radical testing of language boundaries and into a less comfortable, less centrable position wherein the tests have become the questions themselves, it is possible to understand better the social, political, and linguistic complexities that postmodernism acknowledges, explores, and celebrates. In rethinking relationships between language and cultural politics, as postmodernism asks us to do, we engage in the process of revising history and constructing meaning, which necessarily involves addressing questions concerning the relationships between those processes and concepts of community, identity, and power.

In redefining concepts of difference and otherness, a task which Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o participates in, we "step beyond the modernist celebration of the unified self, totalizing notions of history, and universalistic models of reason" (Giroux, *Postmodernism* 222). While presenting an increasingly emphatic Marxist stance, Ngugi's later fiction contributes to a shift away from the "Eurocentric notion of society that subordinates the discourse of ethics and politics to . . . an unproblematic acceptance of European culture as the basis of civilization, and a notion of the individual subject as a unified, rational self which is the source of all cultural and social meaning" (Giroux 223). In novels such as *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi presents a world which calls for historical and cultural repositioning, denying what Henry Giroux calls a "comfortable sense of place and history" (230), encouraging us to ask different questions

which are perhaps less answerable but more liberating, questions which are essential in postmodernism's "redrawing and rewriting how individual and collective experience might be struggled over, understood, felt, and shaped" (Giroux 230).

In Jürgen Habermas's definition, "the term modern expresses the consciousness of an epoch that relates itself to the past of antiquity, in order to view itself as the result of a transition from the old to the new" (3). A postmodernist would be likely to ask, "Whose antiquity?" and question the relation this position has to a "primarily white, male, Eurocentric" view of culture and history (Giroux 16). Ngugi's narrative, which undercuts such a position, engages in a similar questioning and rethinking process and contributes to the postmodernist reconsideration of such universalizing terms and their implications.

In Ngugi's complex and problematic historical world, in the context of the rape of the village of Ilmorog in *Petals of Blood*, for example, it becomes clear why a character like Karega would ask, "Which past was one talking about?" (214). And if postmodernism "seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations" (Foster xii), and to employ a "practice of resistance" that "questions the structure of its representations" (Foster xv), then postmodernists might, as Ngugi does, look at particular aspects of the past—in this case Africa's past—as "several pasts . . . in perpetual struggle," as "images pressed on images" (*Petals* 214), as historical moments inextricably tied to unrealized potential, to the not yet. Like Ngugi, they might problematize the concept of historical meaning by blurring boundaries between national and individual events, between factual history and fiction, thus throwing into question the process by which subjects position themselves in history and the ways they might conceive and tell the story. And the postmodernist writer might tell that story many times, in many ways, using many voices and perhaps in different languages—not necessarily in one text, but possibly in a series of texts which discursively define and redefine, connect and reconnect images of past, present, and future, images of national and individual struggle, of oppressed and oppressor—denying one unified meaning, one unified narrative, one centre.

It is difficult to locate a clear centre in *A Grain of Wheat*, the primary work in question here. As a work of fiction it emerges as an important step in Ngugi's development of an aesthetic and political project which becomes increasingly consistent with postmodern discourse. Ngugi's multi-layered narrative demonstrates his overriding concerns with blurring of boundaries, rejecting the idea of a unified self, reclaiming individual and national histories, rethinking the concept of tradition, and creating, as he calls it, "a national literature and culture" (Language 85), concerns which develop further in this later novel *Petals Of Blood*, and which he examines in his non-fiction.¹

Nonetheless, the interrogative nature of Ngugi's work does not preclude his commitment to Marxism. In *The Politics of Post-modernism*, Linda Hutcheon points out that postmodernism is a "contradictory ideology" (15), a "complicitous critique" (2) which at once "purveys and challenges ideology" (4). I would argue, however, that Ngugi resists what she refers to as "the totalizing impulse." Although he does not achieve the degree of self-reflexivity that Hutcheon observes in Rushdie's fiction (65), Ngugi clearly "foregrounds the totalizing impulse of Western imperialistic models of history writing by confronting it with indigenous . . . models of history" (65), in this case traditional Gikuyu models.

Focussing on the historical moment of Uhuru, the day marking the inaugurating of Kenyan independence from British colonial rule, *A Grain Of Wheat*, begins to engage in a critical rethinking of the past, one which is later articulated in *Petals Of Blood* when Karega, in constructing a pedagogy for a new African consciousness, considers "a vision of the future rooted in a critical awareness of the past" (198). The significance of using Uhuru as a focal point for examining the contradictions and omissions of Africa's colonized past and the needs of a future impaired by neo-colonialism is accurately expressed in Giroux's vision of postmodernism. Like Karega's, Giroux's pedagogy arises from a recognition that we live in "an age marked by a crisis of power, patriarchy, authority, identity, and ethics" (2). In the context of Ngugi's work, these issues are deeply scrutinized. He explores them to the extent that they can be addressed within

the limitations of the novel form, and he continues to address them in his critical writing as well. He expresses the difficulty of the task in his essay "The Language of African Fiction," stating that

A writer's handling of reality is affected by . . . whether . . . he perceives and therefore looks at a phenomenon in its interconnection or in its dislocation; in its rest or in its motion; in its mutability or immutability; in its being or in its becoming. . . . But what happens when reality is stranger than fiction? How does a novelist capture and hold the interest of the reader when the reality confronting the reader is stranger and more captivating than fiction? And yet this is what confronts a novelist in a neo-colony vis-à-vis the audience most adversely affected by that very reality of a neo-colony. (78)

Because Ngugi merges elements of fiction and historical fact, he is able to create a sense of immediacy and of scope in his treatment of a nation in crisis and in his attempt to emerge as a nurturing force in a profoundly unstable world.²

The question of tradition is a central issue in terms of Gikuyu values and their role in Ngugi's "forming" what he calls "the foundation of . . . a truly national sensibility" ("Language" 85). Consequently, questions of myth-making the reconstituting of national identity arise in the novel, and it is through local crises that the larger issues take shape.

Postmodern discourse necessarily complicates the function of traditions because it questions the degree to which "a tradition or story . . . can speak with authority and certainty for all of humanity" (Giroux 231). Paradoxically, while traditions form and inform "the textual world through which people develop a sense of self and collective identity and relate to one another," the critical postmodernist argument follows that traditions are not or should not be viewed as unified totalizing texts but as most valuable in the ways they

demonstrate the importance of constituting history as a dialogue among a variety of voices as they struggle within asymmetrical relations of power. Traditions are not valued for their claims to truth or authority, but for the ways in which they serve to liberate and enlarge human possibilities. . . . [They] serve to place people self-consciously in their histories by making them aware of the memories constituted in difference, struggle, and hope. Tradition in postmodern terms as a

form of counter-memory recovers complex, yet submerged identities that constitute the social and political construction of public life.

(Giroux 231)

This applies to Ngugi's works on several levels. First, by reminding us of traditional Gikuyu mythology, he potentially reestablishes healthy links to Kenya's cultural past and a foundation for its national identity. Second, he positions women in the narrative and in the historical context in ways that foster the renovation of identity and tradition and redefine their roles in the development of a revolutionary consciousness.

In his article "Daughters of Moombi: Ngugi's Heroines And Traditional Gikuyu Aesthetics," Charles Nama paraphrases Ngugi's view that "the unequivocal liberation of Africans lies not in Westernization but in the resuscitation of traditional cultural values that have been an intrinsic part of the people's lives from ancient times" (140). Ngugi's intentions are clearly to revive ancient stories, including bits of cultural mythology, as told through characters like Nyakinyua in *Petals of Blood* (Nama 144-47), and to engage the various narrative strands in *A Grain of Wheat* with ancient stories of Wangu Makeri and Waiyaki and with the heroism of anti-imperialist activists like Harry Thuku and Jomo Kenyatta. Furthermore, through associations with Judeo-Christian tradition in references to the imagery and language of *Exodus*, the story of Moses, and also in associations with protagonist/antagonist pairs like Esther and Haman, Christ and Judas, Ngugi brings fictitious characters like Mumbi, Kihika and Mugo into a complicated historical framework in which "the tribe's mythology" (Nama 145) can have an important bearing on issues of cultural affirmation, sexual status, and gender relationships.³

The subtleties of this process become apparent in the narrative of *A Grain of Wheat*, even in a seemingly mundane and insignificant exchange of banter between men (clearly generalized by Ngugi) and "women like Mumbi" who, in the absence of husband or brother—resulting from arrest, detention, or murder—must build a new hut, traditionally a male job. As we see Mumbi "on the roof hammering in the nails" (124), it is particularly interesting to note that this scene's conspicuously sexualized banter between men and women involved in hut building not

only demonstrates a necessary rethinking of the traditional roles of men and women but also *performs* a traditional aesthetic and cultural function within the text. On one level, Ngugi's renovation of cultural history involves characters' telling stories of important political figures like Jomo Kenyatta. On another level, this scene dramatizes the Gikuyu community's traditional building process, which involved clearly defined relations among gender, work, and artistic activity. Apparently, Jomo Kenyatta recognized important cultural dynamics here and addressed them in his own writing.

Nama notes that Kenyatta was concerned with explaining these role demarcations in terms of the complementary relationships between men as artists and artisans and women as those who "enhanc[e] the 'beauty' of Gikuyu art forms" (Nama 140). The significant detail is that Kenyatta wrote of the songs sung by women thatching the roofs of the huts after the men had built the structures. In his account, these songs frequently involved teasing, in which "the women poked fun at the artistic inadequacies of the men" (Nama 140). In Ngugi's novel, the men teasingly blame the women for the situation: "It was all because a woman—a new Wangu—in England—had been crowned: what good ever came of a woman's rule?" (124). To which the women reply, "Aah, but that is not true . . . Doesn't Governor Baring, who rules Kenya, have a penis?" (124). In this seemingly crude vignette, Ngugi achieves a renovation of traditional values in the context of the contemporary crisis, recycling traditions in a way that seeks to establish their value as a means of "name[ing] the partial, the particular, and the specific" (Giroux 231) as elements of community selfhood, rather than seeking to establish a sense of traditional authority.

By interconnecting strands of myth, historical fact, and localized fiction in *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi seems to be trying to establish a critical, revolutionary consciousness as a means of renovating and strengthening national identity. For example, the names Mumbi and Gikonyo suggest the central figures in the creation myth of Mumbi and Gikuyo. Although the creation myth is not addressed directly in this novel, the meaning of the name Mumbi, "mother creator," is mentioned in *Petals of*

Blood (237). The theme of creation is also depicted through Gikonyo's work as an artist/carpenter, particularly in this imaging of a stool in the form of a man, a pregnant woman, and a child. This thematic concern is also evident in Gikonyo's estrangement and ultimate reconciliation with Mumbi and his association of Mumbi with a "the birth of a new Kenya." In addition, Mumbi herself is a central feature in the novel in her role as a touchstone for the three major male characters and in her struggle to communicate with Gikonyo.

In the latter case, two symbolic pieces of dialogue between husband and wife form important mirror images at the beginning and the end of the novel. At the end of Chapter Three, Mumbi says, "Let us talk about it." Her husband replies, "About what?" and she answers, "The Child" (28). Significantly, this is the child fathered by Karanja, the cruel homeguard. In a parallel scene at the close of the novel, the dialogue is reversed; Gikonyo blurts out in an awkward but genuine effort at reconciliation: "Let us talk about the child." This gesture leads to a statement by Mumbi, "now really aware of her independence," which is symbolic of the issues at stake for her African nation:

People try to rub out things, but they cannot. Things are not so easy. What has passed between us is too much to be passed over in a sentence. We need to talk, to open our hearts to one another, examine them, and then together plan the future we want. But now I must go for the child is ill. (213)

This dialogue suggests the practical realities of the creative/procreative task and its inseparability from language, on both the individual and national level.⁴

Injury and illness are consequences of the traumas undergone by the men, women, and children of Kenya. Dealing with that illness is a necessary part of the recuperation process, but it must take place simultaneously with political and social transformation. Kenya must proceed like a young mother learning how to juggle her responsibilities for her sick child, injured husband, and changing community. Once again ancient stories are invoked in a beautiful image of Mumbi, who, in younger days,

ardently yearned for a life in which love and heroism, suffering and martyrdom were possible. She fed on stories in which Gikuyu women

braved the terrors of the forest to save people, of beautiful girls given to the gods as sacrifice before the rain. (67)

Mumbi represents a nurturing force who, even in her idealized dreams, is capable of bringing together elements of culture that represents a potential source of strength and offer a vision of continuity in a dislocated world.

The other feature of mythologizing central to Ngugi's dialectic of language, history, and power develops around the deeply problematic character of Mugo. Through him the narrative enlarges the experience of the alienation of a marginalized people by interweaving the acute agonies of a functionalized individual psyche and a ravaged national psyche. As literature of revolutionary consciousness, *A Grain of Wheat* examines the meaning of individual and collective commitment to cultural/political revolution; however, it simultaneously explores the psychology of the disenfranchised, whose personal struggles to serve, like Mugo's, can become destructive forces which undermine the endeavours of the freedom movement.

In her essay "Birth Pangs of a National Consciousness: Mau Mau and Ngugi wa Thiong'o," Kirsten Holst Petersen observes the central paradox in the "typology of Ngugi heroes . . . caught between the two opposing forces of the war" (218). The author's attention to the conflicts between an "obsession with failure" and a "commitment to vindicate the Mau Mau" appears to be a strange way to enter into a discourse of "complete political consciousness coupled with revolutionary action" (218). But as Petersen argues,

by stressing the difficulties rather than the successes of gaining a political revolutionary consciousness, Ngugi has indicated the enormity of the task undertaken. . . . These early agonizings, born of anger, and cataloguing the slow and painful birth of a political conviction with honesty and integrity, give us an extremely valuable insight into a decisive moment in the history of an emerging African nation.

(218-19)

Ngugi seems to "subordinate reason to uncertainty" in ways that are consistent with Giroux's postmodernism. Giroux states that postmodernism "pushes its sense of distrust into transgressions that open up entirely different lines of inquiry" (228) and ac-

knowledges the "messy material relations of class, race, and gender" (16). However, keeping the concept of betrayal in mind, Carol Sicherman sees Ngugi's intentions as more clearly demonstrated: "Ngugi's career-long emphasis on Mau Mau has to be seen as a form of resistance to . . . betrayal by oblivion, as a monument in words to the heroes of the forests" (362). The key here seems to be that Ngugi's monument is one whose own dialectical form does not deny the messiness of the project of gaining independence and reclaiming a sense of "collective destiny."

The dominant theme of personal and political betrayal interwoven throughout the narrative is a primary feature of Ngugi's engagement with the problems of making a transition from life during the State of Emergency to life in neo-colonial Kenya, bringing to bear his insights into the psychology of its traumatized and disenfranchised peasants. In this respect, Giroux's discourse corresponds with Ngugi's narrative field of conflict and inquiry, as it attests that

postmodernism's widespread appeal and conflict-laden terrain indicate that something important is being fought over. . . . As a discourse of plurality, difference and multinarratives, postmodernism resists being inscribed in any single articulating principle in order to explain either the mechanics of domination or the dynamic of emancipation. . . . Postmodernism rejects a notion of reason that is disinterested, transcendent, and universal. Rather . . . reason . . . can only be understood as part of a broader historical, political, and social struggle over the relationship between language and power.

(17, 20)

This seems to be precisely what Ngugi is doing. In *A Grain Of Wheat* the struggle is illustrated primarily through Mugo's insinuating presence, which informs the novel with the author's sense of resistance to "inscribing any single articulating principle" and "the dynamics of emancipation." The primary characteristics of Mugo's psychosis and its effects upon others correspond to a postmodern retheorizing of mythology and language. I contend that these concepts form a textual network of meaning—mediated by language and its relation to identity, history, perception, and temporality—that informs both the aesthetics and the politics of Ngugi's novel.

One of the central features of Mugo's character is his inability to integrate himself with his society. He is misanthropic and alienated, without familial or interpersonal connections. Detained during the emergency and tortured in a series of concentration camps, as Gikonyo and many others were, Mugo's experience is nonetheless unique. He is not controlled by the desperate longings for family and community which motivate Gikonyo to betray his oath of allegiance to the freedom movement or by a passionate interest in using relations with the white authorities for personal sexual aggrandizement, like Karanja. His own sense of personal guilt results in his experience of oppression as an indication of his worthlessness and self-contempt. In many instances he experiences himself as deserving punishment.

The people of Thabai village, however, see him as a stoic and a survivor; the perceptions of his community transform him into a hero, a "chosen man." Having been present at a famous uprising involving a hunger strike at the Rira detention camp, which resulted in eleven prisoners' being brutally beaten to death; and having somewhat mechanically intervened when a homeguard was savagely whipping a pregnant woman in Thabai's enforced labour site, a trench; and having spoken (again rather mechanically) at a Party meeting, unintentionally arousing the spirit of resistance in his community, Mugo comes to represent precisely what he is not: he becomes, in effect, a material signifier for the needs of the people of Thabai. Virtually all of his actions and words are misinterpreted by the villagers, as they construct a hero out of a man who has really betrayed them by giving up Kihika, their heroic Mau Mau leader, to the police.

In some respects, his words, the signs he offers, have no referent for him; when he speaks publicly of the experience in detention and the lodging for home and family, the linguistic gap becomes apparent, as he reveals that his speech is virtually empty of any personal referent. After he describes the detention experience in short, passionless, declarative sentences such as "We only thought of home," and abruptly breaks off, the linguistic problem becomes evident:

At first Mugo enjoyed the distance he had established between himself and the voice [his]. But soon the voice disgusted him. He wanted

to shout: that is not it at all; I did not want to come back; I did not long to join my mother, or wife or child because I did not have any. Tell me, then, whom could I have loved? He stopped in the middle of a sentence and walked down the platform towards his hut. (58)

Meanwhile, in the minds of the audience, the myth begins to take shape. And in an almost tongue-in-cheek comment, the narrator-author adds,

But legends have thrived on less fertile ground. People in the meeting said the man was so moved he could not speak any more. And when Warui commented on this meeting he never forgot to say: 'Those were words from no ordinary heart.' (58)

Here we see the needs of a community to construct a legend of "a man of courage" (197), in part as an affirmation of cultural tradition, in part an example of the process gone wrong. On one level we see an example of what Hutcheon calls "a strange kind of critique . . . that can not escape implication in that which it nevertheless still wants to analyze and maybe even undermine" (4). On another level we see that author demonstrating how language functions as a vehicle for both constructing and disrupting meaning. Moreover, Mugo's role as analogous to an empty signifier becomes clear in an interchange between Mumbi and Wambui, in which Mumbi valiantly considers some way she might have "saved him," to which Wambui replies: "There was nothing to save . . . Hear me? Nobody could have saved him . . . because . . . there was nothing to save" (209).

As we have seen, Mugo's personal suffering and outward behaviour are essentially different in character and cause from what is perceived by those around him. Despite their perceptions, he does not suffer for the community; he has not lived through oppression, as others have, with hopes of receiving "leaves of victory" for enduring "the ills of the whiteman . . . in their call for African freedom" (91). He is presented in contrast to Kihika, who truly "lived the words of sacrifice he had spoken to the multitude" (15). After Kihika visits Mugo's hut in confidence and in an attempt to seek shelter from the police, Mugo reflects:

A few minutes ago, lying on the bed, in this room, the future held promise. Everything in the hut was in the same place as before, but the future was blank. Kihika was a man desperately wanted by the

government especially after the destruction of Mahee. To be caught harbouring a terrorist meant death. Why should Kihika drag me into a struggle and problems I have not created? Why? He is not satisfied with butchering men and women and children. He must call on me to bathe in the blood. I am not his brother. I am not his sister. I have not done harm to anybody. I only looked after my little shamba and crops. And now I must spend my life in prison because of the folly of one man! (*Grain* 168-69)

These are the ruminations of a man as far from being his brother's keeper as he can be, contrary to his own visions of himself as another Moses. In fact, he is unable to differentiate between his own personal experience and the immediate political situation controlling his life. He has no idea why he has been chosen to lead the Uhuru celebrations; he has absolutely no sense of purpose in life; and in spite of his experiences as a prisoner, he has absolutely no sense of either the struggle of his people or the issues at stake. Yet until his public confession he is perceived as compassionate and trustworthy by Kihika, Gikonyo, Mumbi, and others.

Fredric Jameson makes an interesting correlation between psychology and semiology that is pertinent to Ngugi's portrayal of Mugo. In "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Jameson offers his rewriting of Lacan's rewriting of Freud, in which he characterizes schizophrenia as a symptom of the postmodern experience. He argues that the schizophrenic experiences a "breakdown of the relationship between signifiers," and that "the experience of temporality, human time, past, present, memory . . . is also an effect of language" (119). Furthermore, in Jameson's scheme,

the schizophrenic . . . is condemned to live a perpetual present with which the various moments of his or her past have little or no connection. . . . In other words, schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence. The schizophrenic thus does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the "I" and the "me" over time. (119)

These symptoms relate to Mugo's situation as well as to the national situation. Ngugi's efforts in helping to establish the "sense of the persistence of the 'I' and the [*we*] over time" seem,

at the very least, to suggest the possibility of the "formation of a mature [national psyche]" (Jameson 118).⁵ Moreover, Mugo's inspiration of myth-making signifies the ongoing importance of the construction of cultural meaning and the positive and negative power it can generate. Underlying this process, in Ngugi's critique, are the problematics of constructing meaning and the shifting linguistic components that demand critical awareness, particularly at the historical moment of Uhuru, when not only individual identities are at stake, but a nation's as well.

Giroux claims that the postmodernist project "attempts to transgress the borders sealed by modernism, to proclaim the arbitrariness of boundaries, and to call attention to the sphere of culture as a shifting social and historical construct" (22). In the context of shifting social, political, and linguistic relations, Ngugi problematizes concepts of authority and submission, individual and community, dependence and freedom, fidelity and betrayal. By consistently disrupting these binary oppositions in his narrative, he allows us to see relations that are unstable and not firmly attached to an ideology of the unique self and the unified narrative.

Questions of meaning are necessarily attached to questions of relationships, particularly for a nation on the threshold of independence, when questions of its overall well-being arise. And these questions permeate *A Grain of Wheat*. Just before Mugo betrays him, Kihika asks, "But what is an oath? For some people you need the oath to bind them to the movement" (167). Later on, Karanja asks, "What is freedom?" as he recalls his first job as a homeguard, in which, dressed in a white sack "which covered all his body except his eyes," he decided with "a nod of the head," who was guilty of being involved in Mau Mau and who was not (199). The same question is asked by Gatu, "the well-known oath administrator and the spirit of the [Yaka detention] camp," whose own spirit is finally broken, resulting in his suicide (95-96). In contemplating the senselessness and cruelty of Kihika's death, General R, a community leader, asks, "What is a prayer? . . . It did not help Kihika. Kihika believed in prayer" (21). And on his way to tell the District Officer of Kihika's whereabouts, with a dual vision of himself as Abraham and

Moses, Mugo asks, "What is greatness but power? What's power? . . . To be great you must stand in such a place that you can dispense pain and death to others without anyone asking questions" (171).

These questions seem intended to complicate the meaning of the concepts that bind or dislocate people collectively and individually. Thus Ngugi's narrative itself becomes a vehicle for inquiry and the question of meaning. Through characters like Karega, in *Petals Of Blood*, whose life is both consumed and propelled by the questions he asks, Ngugi asks us once again to consider the relationship between signified and signifier; in Karega's words, "I believe in the reality of what's being named more than in the name itself" (125). But such a belief necessarily requires an attempt to understand and accept the shifting forces that complicate the process and perhaps to lay a critical and political foundation on possibility rather than on certainty, a foundation from which the inescapable need to generate meaning from collective historical experience will become less a means of violation than a means of creating more viable and constructive concepts of community and self-identity.

NOTES

- 1 Ngugi's commitment to engaging with this Kenyan audience is more fully realized when he takes on the challenge of writing in the Gikuyu language rather than English, after *Petals of Blood. Caitani Mutharabaini (Devil on the Cross)* is the product of this effort. For Ngugi's explanation of his increasing emphasis on the "language issue" see "The Language of African Fiction" in *Decolonizing The Mind* (72-73).
- 2 Carol Sicherman notes in her article "Ngugi and Kenyan History" that "historians object both to Ngugi's carelessness with details and to his promoting myth as history." However, she also incorporates Caroline Neale's point into her argument when she correlates Ngugi's technique with the idea that "literary treatments of history include legend as well as 'facts' because writers seek to discover 'not only what has happened'—the historians' task—'but the ways in which things are felt to happen in history.' And the way in which things are *felt* to happen may actually affect the way things *do* happen" (359; Sicherman's emphasis).
Sicherman also makes another interesting observation involving the records kept by Mau Mau survivors cited in Barnett and Njama, whose work includes actual accounts of the "ill-educated writers" who were trying "to place contemporary history in a wider context," even though they "often knew little of that context" (362).
- 3 Ngugi's description of the tone of Uhuru day involves an interesting combination of historical and cultural elements. Not only does he recount heroic figures, but he also brings in the "false" legend of Mugo and a blend of Christian and Gikuyu ritual songs. The result is a complex fabric containing imagery and voices that form a

curious harmony and suggest the possibility of a new vision of the past as a way of constructing meaning out of the present event:

People moved from street to street singing. They praised Jomo and Kaggia and Oginga. They recalled Waiyaki, who even before 1900 had challenged the white people who had come to Dagoreti in the wake of Lugard. They remembered heroes from our village, too. They created words to describe the deeds of Kihika in the forest, deeds matched only by those of Mugo in the trench and detention camps. They mixed Christmas hymns with songs and dances only performed during initiation rites when boys and girls are circumcised into responsibility as men and women.

Once again the function of language is at once celebrated and brought into question, and history becomes a beautiful yet haunting landscape of contingent and uncertain relationships.

- ⁴ Chimalum Nwankwo also argues that the dialogue between Gikonyo and Mumbi reflects Ngugi's interest in creating a "dialogue based on a mutually comprehensible language" that would empower African society. Nwankwo sees the final conversation between husband and wife as prefiguring "a secret springboard for the solution of *all* the spiritual and material problems bedeviling the Black world" (158; Nwankwo's emphasis). Although this may be pushing the argument to a utopian extreme, it supports my contention that Ngugi is using their relationship to illustrate the necessity of engaging in constructive discourse that incorporates the female experience in the plural textual landscape of revolutionary consciousness.

It is significant that Ngugi's compatibility with postmodernist discourse also extends to feminism. Giroux points out two aspects of feminism that seem particularly relevant to Ngugi's approach to gender-related issues. First, he observes that "postmodern feminists have raised serious questions about how differences are to be understood so as to *change* rather than *reproduce* prevailing power relations" (40; emphasis added). And finally, he goes on to note that "postmodern feminism provides a radical social theory imbued with a language of critique and possibility" (44).

- ⁵ In her paper "The Postmodern as Paranoid: Vian, Aueneau, Perec," delivered at the December 1992 MLA conference in New York, Jerry Aline Fleiger noted that postmodern texts characteristically contain projected modes of behaviour involving grandiose and uncontrollable projection outward. The experience of paranoia, like Mugo's, in which "the protagonist feels watched, haunted . . . menaced from without by what he can't quite finger or figure out" becomes, for Fleiger, an important element of postmodern texts.

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