

# Remembering the Nation: Allegory in the Literature of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o



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*The following is an excerpt from a longer piece. For the full text, please visit [https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/undergraduate\\_honors\\_theses/fq977w193](https://scholar.colorado.edu/concern/undergraduate_honors_theses/fq977w193)*

## Abstract

This thesis traces how national allegory is employed, developed, and altered in the early novels of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. Primarily guided by Fredric Jameson’s essay on national allegory and his assertion that the category is “profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemia of the dream rather than the homogenous representation of the symbol,” this study explores how *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and *Petals of Blood* (1977) reconstruct the dislocated memory of the individual through the traumatic history of the collective, and how this reconnection of the private and public allows for a new imagining of the postcolonial nation.

The ambivalent motif of shared cultural memory and its many figurations throughout these novels are investigated extensively. In *A Grain of Wheat*, the motif of betrayal, experienced by nearly every character in the novel, signals an ironic, introspective turn on national unity and an examination of the unfulfilled promises of the Mau Mau’s decolonial struggle. Told through the characters’ individual flashbacks to one another, principally through the arch-traitor Mugo, the memory of betrayal is seen as simultaneously the hollowing of social bonds and the basis for collective regeneration, with the survivors of the Emergency recognizing and negotiating the

pitfalls of national consciousness while dedicating themselves to redeeming those who sacrificed their lives for it. Benedict Anderson’s essay on memory and forgetting and Frantz Fanon’s critique of the national leader are vital components to this discussion of how the novel employs the motif of betrayal and memory in order to counter the mandate by Jomo Kenyatta to “forgive and forget” the Mau Mau’s struggle against Kenyan loyalists and colonial occupants.

Whereas *A Grain of Wheat* was primarily concerned with the immediate aftermath of independence on the national psyche, *Petals of Blood* directs our attention to the epic volume of history and the metamorphoses that the nation undergoes in its constant battle against imperialism and its desire for unity. The ambivalent motif of betrayal in *A Grain of Wheat* is mirrored by the motifs of ceremony, fire, and education in *Petals of Blood*, which are employed to construct a Janus-faced history of the nation exploited by the neocolonial government for its self-interest, and intervened upon by the workers and peasantry to cultivate a tradition of renewed resistance. Anderson’s essay on Walter Benjamin’s *Angel of History* is discussed in reference to how the postcolonial nation inherits the state from its predecessor, and Fanon and Ngũgĩ’s essays on national culture are considered for their dialectical frameworks of history and the cultivation of “combat literature.” In both these

novels of his early career, Ngũgĩ sought to imagine how the nation could rejuvenate the energy and idealism of the Mau Mau uprising and empower the Kenyan workers and peasantry into a different, more equitable, socialist mode of the nation.

[...]

## Conclusion

Marx writes that “[t]he tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (595). For Ngũgĩ, the precolonial past of Africa, the specter of colonialism, and the failures of Kenyatta’s regime continue to haunt Kenyans, and it is for them that Ngũgĩ writes his novels. Peter Nazareth echoes something similar in his study on *A Grain of Wheat*, where he notes how the novel attempts to bridge the “wounded souls” of his characters to the historical totality of the nation, since the traumas of individuals are collectivized and understood through the social nightmare of Kenya’s State of Emergency and its decolonization struggle. As Nazareth asserts, Ngũgĩ deals with “very complex questions: not only does he want to show how Kenya has gained its independence but also he wants to find out what happened in the process to the souls of the people” (131). What Ngũgĩ depicts in his novels are a people physically and psychologically damaged by colonialism and neocolonialism, but he also shows how Kenyans attempt to understand their wounded souls by reflecting on their national experience, the site in which history and politics have overdetermined the identity, memory, and psychology of the people.

In *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*, personal and public identity, along with personal and public memory, are interconnected. For Ngũgĩ, memory is a process where the “wounded souls” of the postcolonial nation reconstruct their selfhood, which as Fanon notes, is the discovery of how individual experience is linked to the national

collective (140). But memory can also be the site of manipulation and distortion, such as when Kenyatta resurrects of the Mau Mau oath of unity to retroactively rewrite history, and to enflame ethnic tensions by reverting to a chauvinistic definition of the nation. Under imperialism, whether during colonialism or Kenyatta’s postcolonial state, the memory of the past is used to torment the living of the present. This is why Ngũgĩ emphasizes that “re-membering” Kenya is also the process by which the nation, like his novels, are invented and reinvented. Ngũgĩ’s mastery of the novel coincides with his rearranging and assembling of the various fragments and voices of the collective’s memory as they are confronted with the neocolonial reality of their situation. By exploring the wounded souls of a nation who have undergone independence and the failed promises of the postcolonial regime, Ngũgĩ examines the broken fragments of the nation, and through its fissures, reimagines what the nation could be if made whole again.

As this thesis has argued, this process of “re-membering” the nation is accomplished through Ngũgĩ’s employment of national allegory, where the maimed souls and bodies of individuals are mended through the linking of history and the collective. When national allegory is produced, a total map of meaning is presented which unfolds the changing space and history of the nation, which as Fredric Jameson notes, is a search to reunite with the older forms of communal life that have been uprooted by international capitalism. However, national allegory is also the site where Ngũgĩ imagines a continuous conflict between imperialism and the people throughout Kenyan history, and where the nation, like allegory itself, changes at every level of the text, or in Kenya’s case, in the heat of political struggle. Through Ngũgĩ’s evocation of social and historical change, the ambivalent politics of the nation is opened up. But rather than dispensing with the nation altogether, Ngũgĩ scrutinizes the fissures

of the nation and the fragments of memory for sources of the nation's popular and political power that can be utilized to imagine different modes of the nation, as opposed to its construction under the neocolonial state. As Jameson notes, the cure for the individual cannot be found through their own efforts to demystify the ideology surrounding them, but truth is realized through the social being: "in the Marxian system, collective unity—whether that

of particular class, the proletariat, or of its 'organ of consciousness,' the revolutionary party—can achieve this transparency [of class determination]; the individual subject is always positioned within the social totality" (The Political Unconscious 283). By engaging with national allegory in his writing, Ngũgĩ is influenced by the utopic potential of the Kenyans to understand and change their historical moment.

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