

An Exploration of the Theme of Guilt and Redemption in *The Guide* by R.K. Narayan and *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o

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Abstract

This article examines the theme of guilt and redemption in *The Guide* by R.K. Narayan and *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Guilt and redemption are treated as one because redemption of the two main protagonists in the two novels follows upon guilt. The protagonists of the two novels are compared with each other because both of them dupe the general public into believing that they are heroes. They follow similar paths of being ordinary men who, in the course of their lives, win the admiration of their people because of a misunderstanding. Instead of revealing their true selves they allow this misperception to continue because it suits them. How each of the protagonists meets his destiny and seeks his redemption is, in the final count, the embodiment of the philosophical vision of the two novelists writing from a post colonial perspective. Since the article deals with the theme of guilt and redemption as one, it, therefore, not only compares and contrasts the protagonists in the novels, also addresses the issue of writing in a post colonial world and how this impacts the world view of each writer.

Introduction

India and Kenya experienced the same subjugation by colonial masters and gained their independence after a long struggle and a loss of many lives. Several writers belonging to the times have written about the various concerns of the people of the day and age. R.K. Narayan and Ngugi wa Thiong'o have been hailed as the best and the most representative writers of their countries. R.K. Narayan, with his light touch and subtle humour, has been described as "the master of small things" by V.S. Naipaul in a tribute in 2001 after his death in the *Time* magazine. For Naipaul, Narayan was the "Gandhi of modern Indian Literature". Critics have praised him for his seemingly effortless illustration of the Indian way of life and pointed out how Narayan's novels seamlessly slip between real life and life on the page almost as though one is merely a recording of the other. Graham Greene (foreword to *The Guide*) has expressed his view that he has understood the Indian way of life through reading Narayan's novels because he displays the understated capacity to unerringly reach the humorous heart of the matter again and again throughout his novels. Ngugi, on the other hand, is vociferous about his desire to write in Gikuyu, the language of his people. After writing several novels in English, Ngugi switched over to writing in his mother tongue. He proclaimed his desire to write to and for his people, stating that by using the coloniser's language he would still be perpetuating the colonising of the mind that takes place through

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language. He avers that he thought a great deal about the relationship between English, as the imperial language, and the language of power in a postcolonial state, and African languages, and he took the irrevocable position never to write his fiction and drama in English again

The Novels

In the end of the novels, *The Guide*, by R.K Narayan, and *A Grain of Wheat*, by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the protagonists, Raju and Mugo, respectively, stand in front of the general public exposed in their shameful ignominy. Both are surrounded by a thrumming sea of humanity, the multitudinousness of life ebbing and flowing around them with absolute indifference and rigour. Raju dies with the hope of rain in his eyes and Mugo is led away by the prison guards. The carnivalesque nature of the scene in which Raju plays out his tragic drama detracts from the essence of the ultimate sacrifice of his life and Narayan is relentless in his characterisation of his hero. Whereas with Mugo, the solemn tone adopted by Ngugi to describe Mugo's downfall in the presence of an admiring populace makes it the most poignant moment in the novel and the most touching moment in the life of a great man. Each of the protagonists becomes the signifier of the modern man isolated in his splendour, glorious in his loneliness, a fractured consciousness spinning away in his own trajectory while the universe turns around a centripetal/centrifugal force. Both the protagonists belong to an amoral universe which does not take into cognisance the societal structures that configure a community. Both of them are guilty of having duped their admirers. It can be argued that both of them are charlatans and that they deserve the punishment meted out to them and one cannot conceive of any other ending which would be redemptive. However, for the purposes of this paper, I would like to explore the delineation of their characters against the backdrop of post-colonial theory. and I would like to argue that it is the world vision of the two novelists that determines the treatment of the protagonists and as such the difference in their traits is the distinction between two writers who reflect the agency of colonial subjects - registered in complicity as well as resistance- in cultural construction.

Post colonial theory and the theoretical framework

While I admit that "post-colonial theory is all over the map" as has been pointed out by Russell Jacoby and he adds, "it is supposed to be ... the field is inchoate and can move in any number of directions" (1995:37), I would like to use Suleri's definition of post-colonial as a term which includes issues of concern of the marginalised, migrant and culturally embattled groups (Suleri 1994:246-47). There is no single post-colonial condition, but rather many post-colonialisms which would include the legacies of the coloniser/colonised relationship, both positive and negative ones. The negative legacies would include economic and psychological dependence on an imperial power, cultural marginalisation and experienced heritages. Some positive legacies would include a welcoming of cross-cultural encounters and a two way traffic and cultural exchange by subverting imperial perspectives to create new forms and ways of thinking. Brydon (1987) cites Bernard Smith's (1984) phrase, a "culture of configurations" as an adequate definition of the post-colonial situation. This is not a homogenous category across different societies or even within a single one. It refers to a multiplicity of powers and histories which need a proliferation of theories (McClintok 1994: 302-303). Thus it is a literature of "cross-cultural interactions" in which the lines of communication are varied. This, then, is the concept of post-colonialism that I will use.

The exploration of the theme of guilt and redemption is not done, therefore, as an application and extension of Hindu or Christian tenets or systems of beliefs. This exploration is going to take a different route through the labyrinth of post-colonial theory which examines the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised and the encounters between the

colonial and the post colonial as both continuous and discontinuous with the overall project of modernity. In comparing the two novels that belong to different climes the danger of oversimplification always lurks in the corner. It is, however, more meaningful and enriching to establish connections where supposedly there are none in the hope of widening the discourse in intellectual enquiry. Homi Bhabha (1990) points the way by expressing a concern with the presence of cultural difference and is primarily directed at the discourse on modernity and consequently on the structures of modernisation. Bhabha's theory of hybridity and ambivalence is not just an attempt at understanding the perplexity of cultural difference, but also a way of redefining the process of identification and the praxis of agency in modernity. Bhabha differentiates between the subject position for a subaltern in a colony and the migrant within the metropolis. Subaltern historians focus on "the historical moment of rebellion" as pointed out by Veena Das(1989:32) effected by subordinated, colonised people, with a view to discovering the specific nature of the "oppressive contract" which people were compelled to make with the modern institutions of domination. My argument seeks to compare the consciousness of the subaltern with the migrant within the metropolis because I believe that the simultaneous approach and retreat from cultural difference is the common theme of the ontological homelessness of the subaltern/migrant.

A Grain of Wheat

In *A Grain of Wheat* Mugo's, like Kihika's and Gikonyo's, is the subaltern voice which is not allowed expression by his colonial masters. The subaltern, Partha Chatterjee notes, is "a contradictory unity of two different aspects: in one, the peasant is the subordinate, where he accepts the immediate reality of power relations that dominate and exploit him; in the other, he denies those conditions of subordination and asserts his autonomy" (1993:167). *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi's best novel to date, deals with the theme of guilt and redemption of the subaltern. The story is woven around the four characters Mugo, Gikonyo, Mumbi and Kihika. While Kihika is the Moses figure and the true hero in the novel, Mugo is the false hero and Gikonyo represents the other end of the spectrum. Kihika is the leader of the Mau Mau rebellion and Gikonyo is the betrayer of the cause. His sole purpose in life is to rush back to the loving care of his beautiful wife, Mumbi. Mumbi, meanwhile, has betrayed her husband by having a relationship with another man and begetting his child. Mumbi explains her actions thus:

Karanja always pointed out to me that my faithfulness was vain. The government forces were beating the Freedom Fighters. We never got a letter or heard a word from those in detention. The radio no longer mentioned them. And with years Karanja became arrogant towards me. He did not humble himself in front of me as he used to do. Instead, he laughed to hurt me and I hung on to Gikonyo with all my heart. I would wait for him, my husband, even if I was fated to rejoin him in the grave. (Ngugi 1967:131)

Kihika, the true Moses, is betrayed by his people and the three main characters in the novel, Mugo, Gikonyo and Mumbi, are left to carry their own burden of guilt. Strangely enough, it is Mugo who becomes a beacon of light for the others in this guilt-ridden world. Mugo, unknown to the rest of the community, is carrying a greater burden of guilt. He is the one who has betrayed Kihika to the Colonial Master thus becoming the cause of his death. He is imprisoned in the course of the novel and in prison Mugo reveals a streak of great courage when he prevents a prison guard from beating up a pregnant woman. This act of valour spreads like wild fire and overnight he becomes a hero in the eyes of the people almost of the same calibre as Kihika. People are overjoyed to find a leader who can replace Kihika, not knowing that it was Mugo's betrayal that caused Kihika's death.. Both Gikonyo and Mumbi

find solace in him as do the other members of the community.

What is of interest is that all the people, General R., Koinandu and others believe that Karanja is the one who betrayed Kihika and Mugo does not take any action to disabuse them of this misinformation. After independence has been won at great cost to the community the people of the village want to organise a grand celebration to honour the detainees, particularly Mugo. They come to his house to invite him and even at this point in time he does not dispel their ignorance. But during the celebrations he stands in front of the crowd and confesses his sin. The crowd is all set to lynch him but a sane voice prevails:

He was a brave man, inside. He stood before much honour, praises were heaped on him. He would have become Chief. Tell me another person who would have exposed his soul for all eyes to peck....Remember that few people in that meeting are fit to lift a stone against the man. Not unless I - we - too in turn open our hearts naked for the world to see. (Ngugi 1967: 202).

The guilt and redemption of the protagonists in this novel are played out in their lifetimes. Mugo's confession strengthens Mumbi's resolve to forgive her husband. Gikonyo rises above his petty bourgeois mentality to forgive Mumbi and accept her child as his own. As an atonement for his sin he decides to carve a stool with a woman "big with a child" (213). There is a suggestion of reconciliation between Gikonyo and Mumbi at the end of the novel. The expiation of the guilt brings about a restoration of harmony in the community and in the lives of the main characters in the novel. *A Grain of Wheat*.

The Guide

Raju, in *The Guide*, is the migrant to the metropolis. R.K. Narayan describes a social milieu which is post colonial in nature. The devastating effects of colonialism have not touched this sleepy hamlet and one knows that colonisation has taken place only because a railway line has been laid across the town, Malgudi. It is a railway track that leads Raju away from the egalitarian, agrarian society that Malgudi is, to the teeming metropolis it becomes in the course of the novel. Therefore, while there is no spatial removal of the protagonist from Malgudi, it is in his consciousness that he becomes a migrant to the metropolis. From being an ordinary guide to people who step out of the train at Malgudi, Raju grows to be a connoisseur of classical arts and dance forms. Metropolitan culture is such that in order to survive, one has to don the garb of sophistication and intellectuality. Raju slips into the role very readily and smoothly through his association with Rosie. Rosie is the symbol of culture in the novel and like a meteor follows her own trajectory independent of her association with her husband, Marco, and her lover, Raju. For her they are the means to reach the ultimate goal which is the blossoming of her art.

Narayan does not concern himself with Rosie's story unduly because the dilemma of the modern man trapped in the web of his own making is of greater interest to him than the story of a dancing girl. Rosie is but a cameo in the drama that unfolds before our eyes. We see her through a film of coconut juice, her sinuous movements imitative of a snake as she dances and enchants her viewers. When Raju is caught by the Police for having forged her signature, she is not too troubled. As a character she never becomes "rounded", to use E.M. Foster's terminology. I believe that this characterisation of Rosie is kept to the minimum and she is relegated to the background because Narayan does not want to lose focus and I

attribute it to his discomfort with the characterisation of women in his novels.

The subject position of the subaltern in the metropolis and the post-colonial migrant in the metropolis, in a certain sense, can be described as isomorphic. Both are outsiders. Sennet(1977) argues that a city is a congregation of strangers and he proposes that there are two types of strangers. One, who is culturally, linguistically or racially distinct and therefore, is immediately recognisable as an outsider and, two, the stranger who carries no explicit sign of otherness but who is, nevertheless, unfamiliar and unknown. Bhabha points out that in the sociological tradition the relationship between the individual and the nation state is a metaphorical linkage and identity formation which is the integration of part to the whole. In liberalism, the conventional response of the individual is to preserve his ethnic difference and guard his individual space. However, in a colonial and a post colonial setup, heterogeneity is perceived as a threat that will lead to a fragmentation of society. Several calls to unity in diversity address this specific issue where diversity can be secured only within a broader unity and multiculturalism which is but a form of assimilation. Thus, we should not study colonial and post colonial literature as literature of the centre and the periphery, or the self and the other, or the central and the marginal. We should dispense with such binary oppositional terms and introduce a multilayered reading of the subaltern and migrant question. I would like to argue that this is possible through an engagement with myth formation and formulation as is done in the two novels that are being discussed in this paper.

Formation of the Myth

Both *A Grain of Wheat* and *The Guide* are novels cast in the realistic mode. "Realism," Northrop Frye(1957:136) explains in his seminal work on myths and archetypes, "is the art of verisimilitude...an art of implicit simile, myth is the art of implicit metaphorical identity". Myth is the imitation of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire. Myths operate at the top levels of human desire. The presence of mythical structures in realistic fiction, however poses certain technical problems for making it plausible and Frye suggests that the devices used in solving these problems may be given the name of "displacement".

Through the course of the novels both Mugo and Raju acquire mythical proportions through displacement. It is not something engendered by them or engineered by them. They simply happen to be at the right place at the right time. Raju comes out of the jail and proceeds to the barber's shop. Subsequently he settles down on a ledge near the river Sarayu and he is taken to be a "Sadhu": a seer. The concept of a Sadhu is a peculiar one in the Indian subcontinent. A Sadhu is one who has renounced all worldly desires, taken an oath of celibacy and committed his life to devotion to God. Further, a Sadhu is a mendicant who depends on the generosity of the common man for his daily bread. He is not expected to work, but rather, to concentrate on praying to God in an effort to escape the cycle of life and death and rebirth every Hindu is trapped in. In Hinduism, one is cursed to this inexorable cycle of birth and death as lower and lower biological forms and the only way one can escape this cycle is by leading a life of piety. The Hindu believes that every soul (*Atman*) is but a minuscule part of the Greater Soul (*Paramatman*) and aspires to become one with it. Hindu mythology abounds with stories of saints who give up material pleasures in their devotion to God. God may take different forms but the basic underlying theme of all the stories is a union with the Divine. Therefore, a Sadhu is a great soul who is not just a devotee but also a spiritual leader because he has escaped from the coils of mortality. Ordinary folks turn to Sadhu (s) to gain some spiritual knowledge and guidance in the world of every day existence. However, it must be pointed out that there are several charlatans who dupe the public so that they can get free food and shelter.

R.K. Narayan plays on this theme and the title of the novel *The Guide* acquires an ironic

tone when one realises that this guide is not a spiritual leader at all, but a fraud. Several critics have commented on whether Raju is a fraud or a leader and it is a hotly debated issue. Raju is trapped when his words are misunderstood by the village moron who conveys to everybody that he is going to fast to bring rain to a dry and parched land. It is expected that Holy men can command the forces of nature through the sheer force of will and the might of prayer. His devotees maintain a constant vigil around him as part of their devotion to him and their admiration of his noble sacrifice for the sake of humanity, so he is not in a position to sneak some food into his mouth. The mask of a Sadhu that he wears becomes the man. All the villagers rally around the Sadhu and express their steadfast belief in his miraculous powers by singing bhajans (holy songs). Crowds gather to witness this great event. The scene acquires a comic tone and the solemnity of the occasion is replaced by joy and celebration. Hawkers pitch up to sell their wares; families make the occasion a picnic; children run around and play. To top it all comes an American news reporter to "catch the action live". Raju, faint with hunger, is exposed to life in all its vigour and he dies thinking that it is raining in the distance. Narayan leaves the ending vague. One does not really know whether it is raining or not. This deliberate ambivalence at the end of the novel is symptomatic of the tensions in the migrant's attempt to negotiate the difference between the past and the present. For me whether Raju is a charlatan or not, is not the central issue in the novel. Raju, in his being, symbolises the desires and aspirations of the populace for the idea of perfection to exist. The politics of identity formation detaches people from their past. Raju, an ordinary guide who rises up to be Rosie's agent, becomes a prisoner when he is caught and subsequently evolves into a spiritual leader. Bhabha points out that cultural difference in a multi-cultural perspective does not presuppose a fixed cultural identity, but, rather in its formulation of a qualitatively new object which is the hybrid. For Bhabha, cultural difference is not bound to the demands of assimilation or integration but emerges from the tension of the supplement. Identity is, no more but no less, than a constant process of negotiation between image and fantasy.

Conclusion

In the ultimate analysis both Mugo and Raju forge ahead and clear their own path through thickets of prejudice and false belief. In the colonial situation Mugo, the subaltern voice, finds expression and Ngugi secures his salvation in Christian terms through confession of his guilt and its expiation. In the post-colonial situation, though Raju sacrifices his life for a greater cause, Narayan's ambivalent tone does not allow redemption for the hero. In the light of Post colonial theory, both writers emerging from vastly different and varied environments conceptualise the centre-periphery duality in their own terms by representing modern history of the region through the reactions of the colonised. They emphasise, in their novels, that the metropole -periphery relationship was of lesser significance than the relations amongst the indigenous groups which included elites and subordinate social groups. For any study to be meaningful according to Ghosh and Kennedy (2006), there is a need to go "beyond metropole and colony, to extend our analytical focus to the multiple networks of exchange that arose from the imperial experience, networks that connected colonies to one another as well as to Britain and stretched across geographical and political boundaries that normally delimit such enquiries" (p.2) which is what this analysis of the two novels has attempted.

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