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## Symbolic Stagnation: Reading Paralysis in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and *Devil on the Cross* (1980)

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Submission: 23/08/2025    Acceptance: 11/02/2025    Publication:26/12/2025

### Abstract:

This article seeks to examine the motif of paralysis in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and *Devil on the Cross* (1980), situating both texts within the broader discourse of postcolonial Kenya. While the former is set against the turbulent years surrounding Kenya's independence, the latter reflects the frustrations of a society trapped in neocolonial structures. Reading the two novels together reveals a trajectory in Ngugi's deployment of paralysis evolving from a concern with the psychic burden of repression to a profound interrogation of neocolonial stagnation. From a Freudian perspective, *A Grain of Wheat* dramatizes the silences and unacknowledged guilt that stifle individuals, as past repressed memories and desires revisit them in the form of hesitation, isolation, and self-reproach. In

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exploring this issue from Fanonian standpoint, *Devil on the Cross* narrates the endurance of colonial structures under new ruling elite, exposing the corruption and systemic inequalities that undermine the promise of a true liberation.

**Key words:** Ngugi Wa Thiong'o; paralysis; Freud; Fanon; postcolonial; repression.

### **1-Introduction :**

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's intellectual journey cannot be separated from the political history of Kenya. Born in 1938 in Central Kenya, Ngugi grew up under the shadow of British colonial rule, a period marked by the systematic erosion of indigenous cultural practices, the forced alienation of land, and the violent suppression of anti-colonial resistance. The Mau Mau uprising (1952-1960), which sought to reclaim land and dignity from colonial dispossession, left deep scars on Kenyan society. Ngugi's own family was emblematic of the tensions of the era: some relatives actively participated in the Mau Mau armed struggle, while others whether by necessity or violence aligned themselves with the colonial administration. This internal division exposed the young Ngugi to the moral ambiguity and psychological crisis that define much of the colonized experience. As he later reflected, "I came to realise the power of the word in its capacity to both enslave and liberate" (Ngugi, 1986, p. 4), this statement reveals that language as a site of both enslavement and liberation may deepen the motif of paralysis in Ngugi's fiction; just as guilt immobilizes characters in *A Grain of Wheat* and structural exploitation cripples society in *Devil on the Cross*, the very medium of language can either perpetuate silence and dependency or unlock the possibility of resistance.

As a matter of fact, period of great national hope was set in by Kenya's 1963 declaration of independence (Uhuru), which promised freedom, justice, and rebirth. Yet, as depicted in Ngugi's novels, this promise is frequently subverted by a persistent presence of paralysis; a condition of multidimensional stagnation including psychological, moral, and socio-political spheres. In these works, Kenya appears as a postcolonial country torn between an uncertain autonomous future and a painful colonial history. Ngugi builds narratives in which individuals and communities remain passive; psychologically trapped in cycles of betrayal, repetition, and unresolved conflict suggesting that the quest for true freedom remains incomplete.

This study looks at how the idea of national liberation is undermined by the convergence of personal guilt, repression, and intellectual fragmentation. Freud's concept of repression ; the process by which painful memories or unacceptable desires are pushed into the unconscious offers a powerful interpretive framework for understanding Ngugi's portrayal of emotionally and politically paralyzed characters. These characters' inability to reconcile private aspirations with the disillusioning realities of a corrupt postcolonial order reflects Kenya's broader socio-political condition, in which the overthrow of colonial rule failed to dismantle the entrenched power structures it had established.

To clarify the central concepts guiding this analysis, paralysis and stagnation must be understood as more than mere physical immobility; they are metaphorical conditions representing a failure to progress emotionally, morally, or politically. In literary discourse, paralysis has been employed to

evoke alienation, impotence, or helplessness in the face of oppressive structures. Modernist literature provides notable precedents; James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) uses paralysis to expose the stifling grip of religious orthodoxy on Irish society. Similarly, as I shall argue, Ngugi has adopted the same metaphor to articulate the enduring traumas of colonial domination and the unfinished project of decolonization. Within the Kenyan context, the relevance of this metaphor is heightened by the historical trajectory of independence. The dismantling of British rule in 1963 ignited expectations for social justice, land redistribution, and economic sovereignty. However, Ngugi repeatedly critiques the newly emergent political elite for replicating colonial ways retaining exploitative land policies, suppressing political dissent, and privileging self-interest over collective liberation (Ngugi, 1981, pp.56-59). The "liberated" nation does not stand as a clear break from colonial rule but remains caught between the hope of freedom and the reality of betrayal. Independence is celebrated in name, yet the systems of power, economy, and social control continue much as before. What appears to be sovereignty is weakened by the survival of colonial habits and structures within the new state. As a result, the nation finds itself in an unfinished state which looks free on the surface but remains faithful to the same forces that once ruled it.

Ngugi places his characters in a tense space where they struggle not only against the visible systems of oppression around them but also against the hidden scars left in their minds; fear, guilt, shame, and a deep sense of alienation. These inner battles reflect the larger conflicts of society and reveal how the wounds of history continue to shape both the individual and the nation. In *A Grain of Wheat* and *Devil on the Cross*, paralysis emerges as both a personal and a national condition, rooted in the repression of a

painful past and reinforced by the persistence of unfair power structures after independence.

## 2- Research Problem and Hypothesis

The thematic concerns outlined in the introduction naturally lead to a more focused inquiry into how Ngugi conceptualizes paralysis as a defining condition of postcolonial Kenya. Rather than functioning as a mere narrative motif, paralysis functions in his work as a critical metaphor through which the failures, contradictions, and unfinished struggles of the independence era can be understood. In *A Grain of Wheat*, the paralysis is intimate and moral, unfolding in the inner lives of characters like Mugo, Gikonyo, and Mumbi, whose personal guilt, silences, and fractured relationships mirror the nation's struggle to reconcile its past with its aspirations for the future. In *Devil on the Cross*, paralysis expand to have a broader social meaning, embodied in the grotesque spectacle of the "Devil's Feast" and the exploitative excesses of the "Robber Barons," symbols of a post-independence elite who have merely inherited and repurposed colonial systems of domination while wearing the mask of liberation.

Ngugi uses these personal and collective portrayals of paralysis to expose the deeper psychological and ideological currents sustaining postcolonial stagnation. This study suggests that paralysis in Ngugi's fiction is a complex condition where the individual's inner struggles with repression, guilt, and trauma are inseparable from the wider paralysis produced by political betrayal and neocolonial exploitation. Through his depiction of broken minds, compromised institutions, and silenced voices, he portrays a Kenya suspended between aspiration and betrayal, where the

promises of freedom remain incomplete and the struggle for true liberation must continue.

### 3-Theoretical Framework

Before turning to Ngugi novels, it is important to clarify what is meant by “paralysis” in this context. Broadly, the motif of paralysis refers to a state of being unable to move forward, whether as a result of psychological forces, moral indecision, or structural obstacles. This concept, as we shall argue, finds resonance in both psychoanalytic and postcolonial theoretical perspectives.

In accordance with what has so far been said, Sigmund Freud’s theory of repression explains psychological paralysis as the mental process by which distressing thoughts, memories, or desires are excluded from conscious awareness, yet continue to influence behavior unconsciously. This repressed material often re-emerges in the form of neuroses, guilt, or inaction (Freud, 1915, p. 148). When traumatic memories or guilty secrets are buried in the unconscious, they exert persistent pressure, manifesting in compulsions, self-punishment, or an inability to act decisively, “The super-ego torments the sinful ego with the same feeling of anxiety and is on the watch for opportunities of getting it punished by the external world” (Freud, 1930, p.72). In literature, such paralysis often symbolizes the inner conflict of characters whose past holds their psyche hostage. In *A Grain of Wheat*, Mugo’s repression of his betrayal and the resulting guilt leave him almost incapable of true human connection or decisive action, a condition that may be understood as a Freudian paralysis of “the ego” under a “punishing superego.”

In parallel, Frantz Fanon (1961) interprets paralysis on a collective and structural level. He analyzed the failures of national liberation movements in post-independence Africa, arguing that colonialism does not truly end with the departure of the colonizer. Instead, the national bourgeoisie “steps into the shoes of the former European settlement... [it] has practically no program and does not represent anything but its own greed” (p. 149). This leads to what he calls a “false decolonization,” in which the outward signs of independence flags, anthems, and elections conceal the persistence of exploitation and inequality. The disillusionment that follows independence often arises from the realization that “independence was a fraud... a refinement of the colonial system, not its abolition” (ibid., p. 155).

To the best of our knowledge, and in light of these approaches, it is important to mention that no previous study has attempted the task that this work now sets forth. One of our key arguments, thus, is that combining Freud’s insights into repression with Fanon’s analysis of neocolonial stagnation allows us to approach paralysis in Ngugi’s work as both a personal psychological state and a broader socio-political condition. His novels demonstrate how inner traumas and collective disillusionment reinforce one another, creating a cycle in which the legacy of colonial domination continues to shape both the individual and the nation.

#### **4-Paralysis in *A Grain of Wheat*: Memory, Guilt and Silence**

In *A Grain of Wheat* the sense of paralysis is constructed through both narrative form and thematic content. The novel’s non-linear structure weaves together several stories, shifting between the present moment of 1963 and flashbacks to the 1950s Emergency period. This arrangement illustrates a

reality in which the past never dies; it comes back to haunt the present life, preventing both individuals and communities from moving forward .

The novel begins with Mugo, an orphan raised by a harsh and alcoholic aunt, whose cruelty and neglect shape his childhood and leave him with a deep hunger for solitude. Publicly, he is revered as a hero believed to have endured detention and solitary suffering in defiance of colonial authority. The community mythologizes him as a figure akin to Kihika, the martyred rebel leader. The truth, however, is that it was he who informed the white man about Kihika, a fact he has never confessed. His public image is thus a fabrication, and the dissonance between the celebrated persona and his private guilt leaves him in a state of paralysis. He oscillates between “a desire to cry out the truth” and a compulsion “to hold it deep inside, in the dark”. Even on the eve of Uhuru, when he is expected to give a speech, he remains paralyzed; he stands apart, enclosed in his hut, listening to the celebrations as if they were happening in a world far removed from his own.

This irony celebrating a traitor as a hero highlights Ngugi’s critique of post-independence Kenya. Just as Mugo has buried his guilt, the village has suppressed memories of betrayal during the liberation struggle. Gikonyo and Mumbi also embody this paralysis. Returning from detention, Gikonyo discovers that Mumbi has had a child with his rival, Karanja. Unable to reconcile the betrayal, he immerses himself in carpentry but avoids emotional intimacy . National narratives often hide rather than confront painful truths, and this silence produces a kind of moral paralysis within society. In *A Grain of Wheat*, Thabai seems, on the surface, to be rebuilding after independence new houses rise, people gather, and life appears to move forward. Yet beneath this appearance of renewal, time is stuck at the moment of betrayal and violence. The community cannot openly speak about its

wounds, so its trauma lingers in silence, shaping daily life in hidden ways. This gap between outward progress and inward stagnation reflects how the nation itself struggles to reconcile pride in independence with the guilt and divisions left behind by colonial rule. In this sense, Thabai's "frozen time" is not simply a local condition but a mirror of Kenya's larger difficulty in facing the past honestly.

Silence functions as another form of paralysis. For Mugo, silence functions as both protection and punishment. By keeping quiet, he avoids the risk of being exposed as the betrayer, yet the same silence isolates him, cutting him off from any real human connection. His withdrawal into solitude shows how repression may guard the self but also deepens loneliness and guilt, "he was indifferent to his fate. He was in that state of despair when a man perceives that all struggle is useless" (Ngugi, 1967, p.129). Mumbi's refusal, at first, to speak openly about her relationship with Karanja has a similar effect. Instead of healing the rift with Gikonyo, her silence prolongs their estrangement and leaves their marriage marked by distance and mistrust. On the collective level, General R and others also practice silence by keeping their suspicions about the traitor hidden. In doing so, they avoid direct confrontation but also allow suspicion and fear to spread in the community.

These patterns of muteness reveal a society caught in contradiction. Silence appears to offer safety, but it actually prevents the possibility of healing. What remains unspoken festers beneath the surface, shaping relationships and social bonds in destructive ways. Ngugi suggests that when independence arrives, Kenya carries this habit of silence as an unacknowledged burden. The nation celebrates freedom outwardly, yet inwardly it remains bound by unresolved guilt and unspoken betrayal. In

this way, silence is not just a personal weakness but a collective condition, a form of paralysis that undermines the promise of renewal in the postcolonial era.

Through interior monologues and flashbacks, the novel reveals how Mugo's early life shaped his detachment. This isolationism culminates in his betrayal of Kihika, an act that ensures his safety but condemns him to lifelong guilt. A Freudian reading interprets Mugo's condition as the work of a punishing superego, in which internalized guilt immobilizes the ego (Freud, 1923, p. 52). Accordingly, the superego emerges as the internalized authority of societal injunctions, functioning as an internal judge over the ego's desires and actions. When an individual commits an act perceived consciously or unconsciously as a betrayal of moral law, the superego can impose relentless punishment in the form of guilt, self-reproach, and inhibition. In Mugo's case, the betrayal of Kihika to the colonial authorities becomes the nucleus of such psychic torment.

In psychoanalytic terms, this is an externalization of the superego's voice. While no one has yet confronted him directly, his own mind constructs accusatory gazes and imagined whispers which reflect a projection of self-condemnation onto others. So that repressed guilt often returns in disguised forms, surfacing in the perception of persecution by others (Freud, 1930,p.71). A simple way to see this mechanism is by looking at how the story moves between moments of isolation and moments of intrusion. At first, Mugo lives almost completely alone. He spends his days working in his garden and avoids contact with the other villagers, finding comfort in being left undisturbed. But this quiet life does not last, because the community keeps reaching out to him. People visit his hut, and the approach of the independence celebrations forces him back into contact with others. What

starts as chosen solitude slowly becomes a situation where he can no longer hide. For Mugo, the presence of others feels threatening because it risks uncovering the secret he has long tried to bury. His silence, meant to protect him, only deepens his isolation and makes him more vulnerable when the truth presses in. In this way, Ngugi shows how personal repression and social intrusion feed into each other, creating the paralysis that defines Mugo's life. Yet the return of political leaders to Thabai and the approaching Uhuru celebration draw him into public space, forcing him to confront a world where his moral transgression might be exposed. His nervous tics avoiding eye contact, hesitating before speech signal the ego's defensive strategies against the superego's incessant judgment. The more Mugo attempts to control the situation by withdrawing, the more intrusive the imagined judgment becomes.

In our view, silence, in this framework, functions as both a defense and a symptom. Mugo's muteness is not simply an absence of speech but an active ongoing suppression of the truth that consumes his emotional energy. His life thus becomes a paradox; in seeking to protect himself from the consequences of confession, he consigns himself to an existence defined by loneliness. This personal muteness parallels other silences in the novel. For example, Mumbi's initial refusal to explain her relationship with Karanja cause her estrangement from Gikonyo. Her shame and his resentment create an emotional stalemate in which neither can speak openly, even when the opportunity arises. Both are caught in a fixation unable to progress beyond the point of injury because the trauma has not been symbolically processed through speech. For Mumbi words would not solve the problems; she has gone through very difficult experiences broken relationship with Gikonyo, her assault by Karanja, and the silence that grew between her and her

husband after prison. If she tried to explain or talk about these things, it would not heal her but only remind her of the pain more strongly that is why she stays silent. While for Gikonyo, silence becomes a way to avoid confronting his own failures during detention.

The broader community manifests a similar reluctance to name the traitor. General R and others hide their suspicions, opting for hints and indirect comments rather than outright accusation. This collective muteness suggests that Kenya enters independence with an unspoken burden a national secret that mirrors Mugo's personal one which is a form of societal repression. The betrayal of Kihika is too painful and divisive to address directly, so it is buried in the communal unconscious, where it festers and shapes behavior indirectly. The unacknowledged loss is not only Kihika himself but also the ideal of unity and sacrifice that he represented. The nation celebrates Uhuru without having resolved the betrayals that undermined the liberation struggle, producing a melancholic independence one that cannot fully inhabit its own freedom because it remains bound to the unresolved injuries of the past.

This melancholic condition illustrates why the independence celebrations in the novel are painted with unease. On the surface, there is dancing, music, and speeches; beneath it, an undercurrent of mistrust and unspoken grievances. Freud's notion that repressed content inevitably returns applies here since the truth about Kihika's death will emerge, and when it does, it will disrupt the harmony. We can say that Mugo's eventual public confession thus becomes both an act of personal liberation and a symbolic confrontation with the nation's own repressed history. His words spoken before the assembled villagers mark the first time the community directly addresses the betrayal. In this sense, the confession is the moment

when the superego's punishment reaches its culmination, forcing the ego to submit and integrate the truth.

However, the psychological cost of this long silence is not limited to Mugo, for example, Gikonyo's obsessive carpentry, Mumbi's quiet sorrow, and Karanja's guarded defensiveness are all symptoms of unresolved guilt and resentment. Each character's paralysis is shaped by the same dynamics of repression and the avoidance of direct confrontation. The author uses these interconnected stories to suggest that postcolonial paralysis is both individual and collective rooted in the psychic wounds of colonialism and the moral compromises of the liberation struggle.

Thematically, this aligns with Fanon's (1961) warning that political independence without psychological and structural transformation leads to a "false decolonization" (p. 149). In *A Grain of Wheat*, the false decolonization is not simply a matter of neocolonial economics but of moral and emotional life in the inability to speak truthfully about the past perpetuates the paralysis initiated under colonial rule. Freud's framework allows us to see how this operates on the level of individual consciousness, while Fanon's illuminates the structural conditions that sustain it. By embedding Mugo's personal drama within a wider web of silences we see that paralysis is not merely the fate of one man but a symptom of a society caught between the desire for renewal and the weight of unresolved history. In this reading, Mugo's hut isolated, quiet, and filled with unspoken tension becomes a microcosm of the nation or a space where the past is both hidden and omnipresent, where freedom is declared but not yet lived.

The novel's conclusion is that Mugo's confession may release him from the secrecy that has dominated his life, but it also seals his fate. His

story is thus both a personal tragedy and an allegory for a postcolonial condition in which independence remains haunted by the ghosts of unresolved tensions. The community's response is not unambiguously forgiving; the acknowledgment of betrayal forces a reckoning that many would have preferred to avoid. This moment can be transformative, allowing for the integration of repressed feelings into conscious life. Yet Ngugi leaves open the question of whether Kenya and by extension Africa will take this opportunity or retreat once again into silence.

The novel's uses tone full of pauses, ellipses, and internalized reflection to mirror this silence. By contrast, *Devil on the Cross* abandons silence in favor of overtly political speech wherein characters publicly denounce corruption, and the narrative brims with anger, satire, and direct address. If Mugo's confession is "a small crack in the wall of silence", *Devil on the Cross* is a shattering of it, confronting what we may call a paralysis that results from refusing to name exploitation. We mean a kind of mental stagnation when a person or a society refuses (or is unable) to clearly name and acknowledge exploitation, injustice, or betrayal, it becomes intellectually frozen. That is, without naming exploitation, you can't analyze it, challenge it, or organize against it. So, that blockage keeps both individuals and communities from moving toward solutions. In *A Grain of Wheat*, for example, the refusal to openly identify the traitor or talk about the compromises of the liberation struggle lets the betrayal remain in shadow; community can't fully process or resolve it. Kenya's mind and spirit remain constrained, requiring deeper reckoning before true freedom can be realized a tension that *Devil on the Cross* revisits in the context of entrenched postcolonial corruption and inequality.

## 5-Paralysis as Allegory of Social Disorder

In *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi relocates the motif of paralysis from the interior, guilt-ridden silences of *A Grain of Wheat* in which characters were immobilized by secrecy, shame, and the weight of unspoken memory to the public stage of political and economic landscape. Paralysis is rendered loud, brazen, and grotesque. The setting is no longer the intimate confines of a village wrestling with betrayal; it is the “Devil’s Feast,” an open-air carnival of corruption in which Kenya’s elite boast of their thefts before an audience of foreign and local collaborators.

The central event, the competition organized by the “International Organization of Thieves and Robbers” in Ilmorog, is framed as a parody of a business conference but functions as a ritualized confession of moral decay. Here, Kenya’s most powerful “Robber Barons” compete for the title of greatest thief, proudly narrating their schemes to plunder resources, exploit workers, and sell the country’s wealth to foreign powers. Gitutu wa Gataanguru, for example, is introduced in terms that strip away his humanity: “his belly protruded so far it would have touched the ground had it not been supported by suspenders his head had shrunk to the size of a fist” (Ngugi, 1980, p. 97). These elites are incapable of reform precisely because they are rewarded by both local structures and foreign capital for their vices. The Devil’s Feast is precisely such a theatre where speeches about “development” are replaced by boastful accounts of theft, and applause comes not from the masses but from the very foreign interests that perpetuate dependency. Each robber’s story exposes actual exploitative practices in Kenya’s neocolonial economy. Frantz Fanon’s warning that the “national bourgeoisie” in Africa would “discover its historical mission as intermediary” enriching itself by serving foreign capital” (Fanon, 1961, p.

152) is here staged as comedy. This comic staging, however, should not be mistaken for mere entertainment. It is precisely through satire that Ngugi intensifies his political critique, exposing corruption not as isolated acts of greed but as a systemic logic defining the post-independence state. What is particularly striking is the reversal of moral values. Theft, which should be condemned, is here celebrated; applause, which should belong to the people, comes instead from the foreign interests who profit from exploitation. By transforming Fanon's theoretical warning into theatrical comedy, the reader is invited to witness the extent to which the national bourgeoisie has internalized the logic of colonial domination. They do not conceal their collaboration with foreign capital but announce it proudly, turning their complicity into a badge of honor.

Whereas, in *A Grain of Wheat*, the inability to move forward was linked to the repression of personal and collective guilt, in *Devil on the Cross*, paralysis is institutionalized for the economy remains colonial in structure. For instance, the political elite are complicit, and the very mechanisms that should address exploitation the police, the courts and the media serve to protect the exploiters. By placing the Devil symbol of greed, exploitation, and treachery on the cross, Ngugi inverts the Christian image of sacrificial goodness. In this Kenya, evil is sanctified and virtue is punished. When Wangari attempts to alert the police about the criminals, she is the one arrested, illustrating that the state functions to protect the corrupt rather than the public. This moment shows the systemic nature of stagnation, in which the mechanisms that should act as correctives law enforcement, public are themselves passive.

Ngugi also plays with the motif of voice. In *A Grain of Wheat*, silence was both a symptom and a cause of paralysis. In *Devil on the Cross*,

everyone talks the thieves, the resistance, even the narrator yet the proliferation of speech does not automatically produce liberation. The thieves' boasting is a parody of public discourse; speech emptied of truth and saturated with self-interest. For the oppressed, however, speech becomes an act of reclamation . For instance, in Wariinga's final address to the people of Ilmorog calls exploitation by its name: "It is the thieves who eat while we starve, the robbers who grow fat while our bones show through our skin" (Ngugi, 1980, p. 212). She undergoes a journey from personal victimhood to political consciousness. Initially seduced and abandoned by a wealthy old man (one of the exploiters). Her survival and eventual decision to fight back culminating in her shooting of this man who ruined her life and others mark a break in the paralysis. Her transformation mirrors Fanon's (1961) call for the oppressed to reclaim agency through decisive action. Her journey further expands the motif of paralysis into gendered territory. Initially marginalized and humiliated, she moves from despair to political consciousness, ultimately confronting her oppressors .

This contrast between the shameless speech of the powerful and the truth-telling of the oppressed suggests that breaking paralysis requires not just confession (as in Mugo's case) but collective mobilization. From this point, it can be assumed that *Devil on the Cross* reframes paralysis from a largely internalized, psychological condition to a public, structural, and ideological one. The grotesque satire of the Devil's Feast uncovers what was hidden in *A Grain of Wheat*, showing that in neocolonial Kenya, paralysis is sustained not by guilt and silence but by shamelessness and the co-optation of state power. In both novels, the result is a society unable to move toward true liberation. This aligns with Mbembe's (2001) notion of a "politics of illusion" (p. 103), where the outward trappings of sovereignty mask the

continuity of authoritarian and extractive systems in which authoritarian regimes mask repression beneath the spectacle of democratic forms. The thieves' preference for "chromium-plated cars, trips to the French Riviera, nightclubs" over productive investment becomes an emblem of national stagnation; the machinery of state and economy functions only to sustain elite self-indulgence. This satire makes clear that until the sources of this paralysis are confronted; economic dependency, elite complicity, and the criminalization of dissent, the promise of independence will remain unfulfilled.

## **6-Enduring Stagnation: The Return of Political and Moral Paralysis**

Despite the distinct narrative modes of *A Grain of Wheat* and *Devil on the Cross* both works reveal a common thread: repression is cyclical, reappearing in new guises even after moments of apparent liberation. In *A Grain of Wheat*, the communal silence surrounding wartime betrayals represents the residue of colonial repression a refusal to confront the past that prevents real reconciliation. Independence brings neither catharsis nor clarity; rather, the truth must appear painfully through Mugo's confession, an act that disrupts the village's harmony but also offers the possibility of renewal. As Mugo reflects, "The truth is simple. There is only one thing to do: tell it" (Ngugi, 1967, p. 192). Yet the hesitation to speak earlier has already blocked him and others, suggesting that the liberation struggle's unspoken histories continue to paralyze the community.

This shift from the internalized repression of to the public exposure of corruption marks a transformation in Ngugi's literary strategy. In the earlier novel, paralysis is largely interior psychological guilt and moral hesitation, embodied in Mugo's fears. In the later work, paralysis is public

and performative; the “Devil’s Feast” stages Kenya’s post-independence elite boasting of their crimes before foreign backers. This recurring paralysis is not merely thematic but historical. The post-independence optimism of the 1960s was followed by the political clampdowns of the 1970s precisely the period during which Ngugi wrote *Devil on the Cross*. In both fiction and history, the author warns that freedom is never guaranteed by the symbolic markers of sovereignty flags, anthems, or constitutions but must be safeguarded through ongoing struggle. Yet within these depictions lies a thread of hope. In *A Grain of Wheat*, the possibility of reconciliation is clear in the tentative gestures toward truth-telling at the end. In *Devil on the Cross*, Wariinga’s evolution from despair to militant agency signals the possibility of personal and political transformation. Her climactic act of resistance shooting the man who betrayed and exploited her may be morally ambiguous, but it asserts her refusal to remain passive.

In fact, this persistent interrogation of paralysis across these works dismantles the illusion that liberation is a single event. Instead, it is represented as a continuous, unfinished project that demands historical truth-telling, economic justice, cultural decolonization, and psychological healing. Until these dimensions are realized, the cycle of repression will recur, wearing new masks but feeding the same paralysis .

## **6-The Unfinished Battle against Repression: Paralysis Reloaded**

Repression does not end with its first defeat; it survives by transforming, taking on new and less recognizable forms. What appears silenced in one moment often re-emerges in another, reshaped by shifting social, political, or personal contexts. A memory pushed aside may later surface as a fractured story; an injustice thought to be overcome may return

as disillusionment in new generations; a personal betrayal may reappear as distance or mistrust in relationships. The power of repression lies in its ability to adapt its refusal to disappear, choosing instead to mutate and inhabit the present in disguised ways. This persistence reveals that neither individuals nor societies can ever fully escape what they attempt to bury, for the past inevitably returns, altered yet still forceful, to shape future realities.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, the end of British colonial rule does not dissolve the silences and moral wounds produced during the Emergency. In *Devil on the Cross*, the site of repression shifts from the colonial state to the postcolonial regime. Here, silencing is no longer implicit; it is enforced through the institutions of the new nation. The optimism of the early 1960s was gradually replaced by the political clampdowns of the 1970s and 1980s. This fiction reflects this historical cycle, warning that the conditions enabling repression are never entirely erased they reappear whenever vigilance wanes. Until such systems are transformed, repression will always find its way back, wearing a different mask.

Through the protagonist Wariinga, the gendered dimension of paralysis is explored exposing the double oppression of women within a patriarchal, neo-colonial system. When first introduced, she stands on the edge of the railway tracks contemplating suicide, “her mind... fixed on the oncoming train” (Ngugi, 1982, p. 3). Her plight which made her see suicide as a refuge shows that Colonialism operates not only through the domination of land, resources, and bodies, but also through the capturing of the mind. Beyond physical violence, the colonizer imposes a narrative that defines the colonized as inferior, incapable, or incomplete. Over time, this narrative seeps into the consciousness of the oppressed; creating a condition that may be described as what Fanon (1963) might call the “internalized

despair” of the colonized subject. We mean here not merely sadness or hopelessness; it is the conviction, often unspoken, that one’s condition is unchangeable and that liberation, though imagined, might always remain out of reach.

This despair is “internalized” because it moves inward, settling in the psyche of the colonized subject. It shapes self-perception and social behavior. The colonized individual may begin to doubt their worth, to mistrust their cultural traditions, or to measure themselves only against the colonizer’s standards. This psychological capture is, in many ways, more enduring than material domination, for it persists even when political independence has been won. This signals how colonial power does not end with external chains; it implants chains within the imagination of the oppressed.

Yet, internalized despair is never passive. It reveals itself in silences, in hesitations, in the paralysis of action. A person may desire change yet remain convinced of his own inadequacy to achieve it. Communities may celebrate independence but quietly fear that new rulers will reproduce the injustices of the old. This makes it one of the most effective weapons of subjugation to make people doubt themselves and sometimes even replicate the systems that harm them. We are not here pointing to an individual weakness but to a profound historical wound. It is a reminder that colonialism’s deepest legacy lies not only in borders and economies but in the emotional and mental landscapes of those who endured it. To study this despair is therefore to understand how domination seeks to perpetuate itself invisibly, and how liberation must begin as much in the mind as in the political sphere. Similarly, Wariinga’s paralysis is not merely personal it is symptomatic of what Mohanty (1988) terms the “double colonization” of women in postcolonial societies, wherein patriarchy is reinforced by

economic exploitation. As a teenager, she is seduced and abandoned by a rich old man. Later, sexual harassment from her boss costs her both her job and her boyfriend. Wariinga's joblessness, eviction and isolation mirrors the socio-economic paralysis Ngugi presents as endemic to Kenya's neocolonial reality.

Her turning point comes two years later, she reappears transformed Empowered by the new understanding that her sufferings are due to the corrupted environment, experiencing a kind of rebirth. She has trained as a mechanic "her hands were now as skilled with the spanner as any man's" (Ngugi, 1982, p. 245) and learned karate to defend herself. Ngugi constructs this rebirth as both personal and political: she embodies a refusal to remain "a passive mule for other people's burdens" (ibid).

The climax arrives when she meets her beloved's parents and recognizes his father as the old man who exploited her sexually. In a moment of uncontrolled self, she killed him and several of his fellow bourgeois exploiters. In our view, her action disrupts paralysis at the personal level, but whether it catalyzes broader social change is uncertain since the novel closes without any indication that her violence has destabilized the wider apparatus of corruption and exploitation. The "Feast" may have been interrupted, but the forces it represents; the collusion of political elites, capitalist greed, and patriarchal authority are still active. So, this can be read as a confrontation of oppression that requires rejecting internalized victimhood and embracing active resistance. In Fanon's view (1963), such violence is not merely destructive but potentially regenerative a cathartic rupture capable of purging the colonized psyche of internalized fear and inferiority. Wariinga's decision to shoot the representatives of Kenya's comprador bourgeoisie can be read as a symbolic rejection of both personal victimhood and the larger

neocolonial order that sustains her oppression. The unresolved tension between personal agency and structural change reflects the novel's broader political vision that liberation is not a singular, decisive event but an ongoing struggle requiring sustained political organization and cultural renewal. In this sense, Wariinga's departure is both an ending and a beginning; a disruption of paralysis at the personal level is shown through the narrative image of her walking away "without a backward glance" a visual marker of her refusal to be paralyzed any longer. Her departure signifies a break from paralysis in its most intimate form of the persistent grip of fear, shame, and subjugation that had defined her earlier life.

## 8-Conclusion

In the light of what has been said, we might confirm that the concept of paralysis is deployed as both a psychological state and a socio-political metaphor. *A Grain of Wheat* offers a portrait of a society haunted by guilt, betrayal, and silence; legacies of colonial rule that continue to keep individuals and communities stagnant. Figures such as Mugo and Gikonyo embody the harsh reality of a liberation struggle marked by violence, moral ambiguity, and fractured trust. These wounds, Ngugi suggests, cannot be healed through mere political independence; without collective mechanisms for truth telling, justice, and reconciliation, national freedom risks remaining a hollow abstraction. On the other hand, *Devil on the Cross* shifts the axis of paralysis from the internal to the structural; through Wariinga's journey from victimhood to defiance the gendered experience of paralysis is established. Her violence breaks this paralysis imposed by years of abuse, shame, and economic disempowerment. This forms a dialogue between *A Grain of Wheat* and *Devil on the Cross*; while the former warns that unresolved moral and historical repressions can paralyze nations, the latter

urges active, even radical resistance yet leaves open the question of whether individual acts of defiance can achieve structural transformation. Read together, Ngugi does not treat freedom as a final prize that, once achieved, can be safely stored away. Instead, he portrays it as a condition that depends on the choices people and nations make every day. Independence, for him, is not the end of the struggle but the beginning of new responsibilities. A society that refuses to face the truth of its past its betrayals, its silences, its wounds risks carrying those unhealed scars into the future.

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