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A Land with Three Shadows: Combined and Uneven Development in *A Grain of Wheat*

Jingting, Fu[1], Tao Li[2]
[1]School of Foreign Studies, University of Science and Technology Beijing, Beijing, China.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6375-6707
E-mail: f15869701870@163.com
[2]Professor, School of Foreign Studies, University of Science and Technology Beijing
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9323-5833

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Abstract

Taking the four days before Kenya's independence as the historical background, Ngũgĩ wa Tiang'o's novel *A Grain of Wheat* reveals multiple tensions in the colonial and postcolonial society. With the theory of combined and uneven development, this paper systematically analyzes the novel from economy, politics and culture, exploring how Kenyan society presents a multi-layered combination and unevenness under the interweaving of global capitalism and colonial modernity. In economy, the novel shows the combination and unevenness between colonial capitalism and traditional Kenyan agriculture, as well as the rupture between the emerging bourgeoisie and the persistent poverty of the peasantry. In politics, the coexistence and conflict among the colonial regime, tribal tradition and nationalist force are described. In culture, the novel presents the cultural disillusionment of the colonizer, showing how the combination of morality and violence is irreconcilable in practice. Native's cultural identity fracture is also revealed. Meanwhile, the fiction reflects Ngũgĩ's combination and turn in his literary creation—From Western literary forms and English to the indigenous cultural narratives and Gikuyu. The study finds that *A Grain of Wheat* is not only a historical review of colonial tyranny, but also contains criticism of decolonization in post-independence Kenya. Moreover, the paper illustrates how African literature represented by Ngũgĩ's works seeks to give voice to its subjectivity in an unequal global literary system. Ngũgĩ's literary practice provides important insights into the cultural dilemmas faced by societies in the global South today in the process of modernization.

Keywords: Ngũgĩ; *A Grain of Wheat*; combined and uneven development; unequal global literary system.

1. Introduction

A Grain of Wheat is an important novel by Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o published in 1967, which is a representative of his early English-language creative period and widely regarded as a sign of his political awakening and the maturation of his narrative form. As one of the masterpieces of African anti-colonial literature, *A Grain of Wheat* tells the story of Kenya in the four days leading up to independence. In these days, Ngũgĩ constantly cross-narrates past experiences and reality, showing readers the fate of inhabitants of Thabai as they go through colonial oppression, resistance, betrayal, and moral choices. The novel unfolds in a non-linear narrative structure with multiple characters and perspectives, revealing the intricate relationship between the individual and the collective in the context of colonial rule. Moreover, unlike the traditional national liberation narratives, *A Grain of Wheat* does not simply portray the resistance movement as a heroic epic. Through characters such as Mugo, Gikonyo, Mumbi, Kihika and Karanja, it profoundly demonstrates the divisions, uncertainties, and contradictions within the independence movement. While depicting the historical transition, the novel also presents a realistic and insightful picture of the combination and unevenness experienced within Kenyan society in terms of economic structure, political order and cultural identity.

In this paper, the theory of combined and uneven development (hereinafter referred to as CUD) is utilized as an analytical framework to systematically interpret *A Grain of Wheat*. The CUD theory was originally proposed by Leon Trotsky to illustrate that in the global capitalist system, backward societies often do not undergo a complete development path in the process of being integrated into the world market, but rather enter modernity in an asymmetrically combined developmental way. "The imposed capitalist forces of production and class relations tend not to supplant (or are not allowed to supplant) but to be conjoined forcibly with pre-existing forces and relations" (Warwick Research Collective 10-11). Therefore, Trotsky concluded that the meaning of combined is "an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms" (3). Taking Tsarist Russia in the 19th century as the research object, Trotsky observed that under the influence and intervention of Western Europe, Russia was forced to embark on capitalist development in the absence of industrial and commercial foundations. However, the weakness of the bourgeoisie prompted the development of capitalism to still rely on the old landlord class, which illustrates that "the solution of the problems of one class by another is one of those combined methods natural to backward countries" (Trotsky 5). Large factories and villages coexisted, and peasants were "thrown into the factory cauldron snatched directly from the plough" (Trotsky 334). This way of combined development of the old and the new would cause unevenness in the economy, politics and culture. Especially in colonial or postcolonial societies, various modern and traditional, central and peripheral forces reorganize in unique ways, giving rise to highly complex social and structures.

Thus, applying CUD theory to the textual interpretation of *A Grain of Wheat* helps readers understand the historical tension from a more structural and global perspective. Specifically, this study will analyze the novel from economic, political and cultural levels. It is worth mentioning that in the cultural aspects, CUD is embodied in the author Ngũgĩ himself. Besides CUD, this paper will also explore Ngũgĩ's peripheral literature through Franco Moretti's ideas in "Conjectures on World Literature" and Pascale Casanova's literary capital, analyzing Ngũgĩ's cultural revolt against the unequal literary world. Through the combination of theory and text, this paper will argue that *A Grain of Wheat* is not only an anti-colonial novel with historical value, but also a peripheral masterpiece in world literature that shows how colonized society seeks identity and autonomy in the combined and uneven structure, providing enlightenment to the global South that is still under CUD.

2. Literature Review

The research on *A Grain of Wheat* is carried out mainly from the following perspectives: Narration, irony, armed rebellion, history, and struggle. First, Fasselt discussed the "we-narratives"

and suggested that "a narrative 'we'…transgresses the conventional postcolonial center/periphery paradigm" (155). Harrow emphasized the uniqueness of Ngũgĩ's use of irony in his novels, which shows the chaos and disorganization of African society after independence, and "Ngũgĩ's *A Grain of Wheat* stands as the strongest example of the ironic mode in East African fiction" (244). About armed rebellion, Krause concluded that Ngũgĩ pays homage to those who fought for independence, giving hope at the end of the novel, while also criticizing the new ruling class in post-independence Kenyan society (9-10).

In terms of history, by combining fictional characters with historical figures and events, Ngũgĩ let "Kenyan readers reflect on their own place in the continuum of history" (Sicherman 351). Additionally, Ngũgĩ presented national history through the traumatic experiences of minor figures, argued that history has failed to fully recognize the active role of the Kenyan people, and appealed to historians to concern the history of ordinary people (Sicherman 35). For struggle, Vaughan especially focused on the tension between "social commitment and the individualist problematic" issue, pointing out that "Ngũgĩ recognises, at least partially, the inherent contradiction between a broad social concern and a formal individualism" (26).

The above research and studies compose a sound foundation for the present paper. However, the combined and uneven development embodied in the novel has not yet received in-depth analysis. Particularly noteworthy is that the current academic research on economic deprivation, class differentiation, political pluralistic power structure, and cultural hybridity tends to describe them from political or historical perspectives, but less from structural and global aspects to reveal their deeper mechanisms. "Ngũgĩ's concerns today seem to be with the work of culture in the shadow of global, financial capital (or 'capitalist fundamentalism,' as he calls it)" (Rao and Ngũgĩ 162). Therefore, there is still a research gap on how to place *A Grain of Wheat* in the context of global capitalism and colonial modernity. In addition, fewer scholars have connected Moretti's and Casanova's theoretical framework of world literature with *A Grain of Wheat*, so as to recognizes the inspiration that Ngũgĩ's literary production brings to the global South from the perspective of an unequal world literary system. Thus, the study in this paper can not only make up for the lack of existing studies, but also help deepen readers' understanding of how peripheral literature in the world literary system engages in cultural resistance.

3. The Triple Journey of a Grain: Economic, Political and Cultural Combined and Uneven Development in *A Grain of Wheat*

3.1. One Grain, Three Soils: Colonial Economy and Class Fracture

British colonization of Kenya was not only a military occupation, but also a process of economic intervention rooted in the logic of capitalism. The large-scale land annexation, the exploitation of traditional agriculture, and the control of local labor in the novel are exactly what CUD theory emphasizes: Capitalism comes in while the old economic structures are preserved, but will serve capitalism.

Under colonial rule, villagers were forced to leave their farmland and move to "the protected village" (Gurnah 12) Thabai, which was forcibly built in a concentrated manner. In the first chapter, Ngũgĩ wrote:

> Thabai was a big village. When built, it had combined a number of ridges: Thabai, Kamandura, Kihingo, and parts of Weru…in 1955…the grass-thatched roofs and mud walls were hastily collected together, while the whiteman's sword hung dangerously above people's necks to protect them from their brethren in the forest. (Ngũgĩ 21)

This not only describes how the colonial regime unified villages through military deterrence and isolated villagers from rebel forces, but more importantly, the spatial reconfiguration essentially broke the initial economic mode. The original economic system, in which the villagers were dependent on the land for self-sufficiency, was severely undermined by land annexation. The appropriation of land by the British colonizers led to the forced migration of Africans to less favourable conditions: Fertile land was allocated to Europeans, and certain areas were divided up for the exclusive use of the European settlers, while Africans were left with only a small portion of the infertile soil. "Despite later adjustments in Kenya, about 15,000 square miles are now allotted to less than 30,000 Europeans, of whom only about 2,500 are farmers, while 5,000,000 natives have only 52,000 square miles assigned to them" (Parker 128). In addition, since coffee has been a major cash crop in Kenya, the British colonizers integrated the Kenyan coffee industry into the capitalist economic system by promoting the cultivation of coffee by African farmers, thus satisfying the demands of the global market. "The colonial government…beckon low-cost African farmers into coffee production, in a bid to…ensure the survival of the coffee sector" (Hyde 81). Tugume concluded that "Ngũgĩ… portrays the dispossession of Africans of their land by the colonial government in order to create land for white settlers to engage in commercial farming and industrial development" (194). Therefore, it can be seen how Kenya's native agriculture was monitored and organized by the colonial government to serve the needs of capitalist commodification and export. As a result, the spatial transformation was essentially a conversion of the economic function of the land.

During the historical period when colonial capitalism was combined with traditional agriculture, some individuals were able to make it in the colonial economic system, forming the dependent bourgeoisie. They learned from the practices of capitalism and went with the flow. Gikonyo is a typical example. After six years in a detention camp, he returned to Thabai and became "one of the richest men... respected and admired as a symbol of what everyone aspired to be: fiercely independent" (Ngũgĩ 35). He conducted a variety of business activities, including buying land and operating stores. His economic position stemmed from learning how capitalism operates, and reflected the reproduction of local elites after the ostensible end of colonial rule.

However, Gikonyo's success did not represent true equality and independence. His personal achievement was set against a backdrop of national sacrifice. Although he was once a member of rebellious fighters, he "confessed the oath" (Gurnah 12) to be released from prison, showing how his resistance to colonization had been violently suppressed by colonial power. He was "lured by the promise of freedom, the end of torment and torture, and a blissful conjugal life with his wife Mumbi" (Rajbhandari 168). He said: "I would have sold Kenya to the whiteman to buy my own freedom" (Ngũgĩ 80). Since then, he had "a guilty conscience…because he betrayed the Movement by denouncing the oath" (Tugume 208). However, after arriving home, he met family disintegration: Mumbi had a child with Karanja. Symbolically, Mumbi is a metaphor for the nation, the land and the mother. Her husband was arrested by British rulers and she was occupied by Karanja, "the Home Guard" (Gurnah 12), which refers to those Africans who worked for the colonial force and suppressed their compatriots, just as Kenya was oppressed by both imperialism and local collaborators. The disconnection between Gikonyo and Mumbi is a metaphor for the deep internal rift that the Kenyan nation faced, and Gikonyo's lack of understanding of Mumbi is also presented as a shift in his mindset from one of the rebel to one of dependent bourgeoisie, who can no longer think of Mumbi's situation in terms of colonial violence. The trigger for Gikonyo's emotional outbursts against Mumbi even involved business activity: It probably "precipitated…by a more recent disappointment with his local parliamentarian over a business matter" (Jabbi, "The Structure of Symbolism" 223). Therefore, his estrangement from Mumbi symbolizes the ethical and emotional costs of his economic upward mobility, embodying the alienation that CUD leads to: Dependence on the colonial structure for success, but isolation from the real masses in the process of national independence and social reconstruction. Comfortingly, the end of the novel gave Gikonyo a "moral regeneration" (Jabbi, "Conrad's Influence on Betrayal" 79). Vaughan pointed out that "the

very concepts associated with Mumbi in her capacity as the expression of communal consciousness—the concepts of empathy, redemption and regeneration" (49). Gikonyo "musingly feels his way back to Mumbi's bosom" (Jabbi, "Conrad's Influence on Betrayal" 79), finally having comprehension of Mumbi's sacrifice and his mistakes, which connotes a promising future for the family and the country. Ngũgĩ thus illustrates that no matter who, "can re-establish community in an understanding that none is without guilt, and in the discovery that they face a common enemy in the new urban elite" (Gugler 330), who was the main object Ngũgĩ criticized in the post-independence Kenyan society.

In contrast to the colonial rule and the neo-bourgeoisie, most of the ordinary peasants were mired in poverty, becoming the sacrificed subjects in CUD. "There were no crops on the land and what with the dried-up weeds, gakaraku, micege, mikengeria, bangi—and the sun, the country appeared sick and dull" (Ngũgĩ 24). This is a description of the country's decline and a metaphor for the peasantry's entrapment in the economic structure. The common masses had to pay tax, which they had a great dissatisfaction with, and they were the "forced labour on white settler's land" (Ngũgĩ 30). Thus, the modernity of the colonial economy did not lead to balanced development, but rather to increased social inequality. On the one hand, the colonial government built a system of railroads and highways leading to the city and the port, turning Nairobi into a metropolis. However, "there was not a single African shop in the whole of the central and business area of Nairobi" (Ngũgĩ 73). On the other hand, the rural areas were reduced to resource-exporting areas and labor reserves. This asymmetry in regional development and the great disparities in race and class exemplify the uneven spatial development: Modernity was selectively introduced to serve colonial interests rather than the well-being of African society.

Besides, the poor and needy have not experienced any economic improvement after national independence. Here is a reflection of Ngũgĩ's disappointment and criticism of the ruling government in post-independence Kenya. The national leader, Jomo Kenyatta, centralized power in various ways and placed Kikuyu in the dominant position of the country, while other ethnic groups were suppressed. Thus, the classification of ethnicity has shattered the hope of redistributing social resources. Kenyatta even said that "nationalisation would not serve to advance African Socialism" (Branch 9). Not only that, due to the influence of colonial capitalism, Kenya's indigenous capitalism also began to develop, so the emerging bourgeoisie after independence was mostly the middle class supported by the colonial government. This model of economic development determined the ruling class's negative attitude towards Mau Mau Rebellion. Ngũgĩ himself also recognized this point in the novel: "Sometimes too painfully real for the peasants who fought the British yet who now see all that they fought for being put on one side" (18). Therefore, the poor people who sacrificed for the independence movement were not treated well after independence, and their history has been rewritten to serve the ideological demand.

Here lies the novel's critique of decolonization: In post-independence Kenya, the administrative, economic and educational models from Britain have not changed at all. The ruling class conspired with Britain to accelerate capital accumulation, but paid no attention to the lives of ordinary people at all. Thus, the decolonization in Kenya is "'an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been'—provided Ngũgĩ with an important epigraphic text for his third novel" (Gikandi 98). Just as Warwick Research Collective examined: In CUD, "capitalist modernization entails development…but this 'development' takes the form also of the development of underdevelopment, of maldevelopment and dependent development" (13). The incomplete decolonization in Kenya has meant that economic resources of the nation were still concentrated in the hands of a few, and the poor were still marginalized and unable to share the benefits.

In the economic dimension, *A Grain of Wheat* demonstrates the bonding between colonial capitalism and Kenya's traditional agriculture, and the class divisions and social inequalities that CUD produces. Colonial dispossession, the emerging bourgeoisie, and the persistent poverty of the

peasantry constitute a classic CUD economic structure: Multi-track, strongly dependent, and highly uneven. In this way, Ngũgĩ not only records the trauma of history, but also reveals the central contradiction of the postcolonial world that national independence does not necessarily equate to economic emancipation, showing that tradition and modernity, domination and subordination coexist in the same space, and creating a social reality that is both unifying and divisive at the same time.

3.2. One Land, Three Powers: The Triple Shadow of Political Rule

CUD is not only applicable to the analysis of economic structures, but can also be used to understand the combination of political forces. In the colonial context, the original tribal political authority was not completely eliminated, but formed an interlocking system of governance with the colonial power structure, while nationalist movement rapidly emerged as the third force. The coexistence, conflict and interaction of these three forces constitute the hybridity and rupture of the political structure.

The British colonial government, as the most intimidating power in Kenya, directly shaped social structures and individual destinies through political violence. The colonizers enjoyed the absolute power to govern, while the colonized were disempowered, disenfranchised, and incapacitated. The system of detention camps, as an example of colonial political violence, is not only the imprisonment in physical space, but also the suppression of political will. "The administration resorted to detaining all those suspected of Mau Mau affiliation, and many were held for extended periods of time without trial, often tortured, and forced to confess of having taken Mau Mau oaths" (Rajbhandari 164). The novel repeatedly depicts the miserable environment in detention camps. For instance, the "Rira Camp" (Ngũgĩ 135) Mugo once stayed, its "conditions worse than those in Manyani. Food rations were small" (Ngũgĩ 136), and "eleven detainees were beaten to death" (Ngũgĩ 77). The detainees were severely interrogated by white rulers, letting them admit that they "confess the oath, or give any details about Mau Mau" (Ngũgĩ 113). Besides, it is heartbreaking that "the dumb and deaf Gitongo is shot dead in cold blood…The irony is that soldiers declare him a Mau Mau terrorist" (Tugume 205-206). In this way, the colonial power could better suppress resistance and maintain authority. The colonial polity seemingly appeared as a modern state, bringing regulations, decrees, and administrative divisions. However, in real practice, it realized a unidirectionally violent rule with an uneven power structure, which is a demonstration of political CUD.

Prior to the implantation of modern governance structures by the colonial regime, there was a traditional political order within Kenyan villages based on family eldership, warrior prestige and oral contracts. Despite the colonial attempts to modernize and administratively replace it, this traditional power structure did not completely dissolve, but rather coexisted within the village alongside the colonial system, constituting a combined phenomenon in the political dimension. Ngũgĩ demonstrates the continuing influence of the traditional authority through the role of Mumbi's father, Mbugua:

> Mbugua had earned his standing in the village through his own achievements as a warrior and a farmer. His name alone, so it is said, sent fear quivering among the enemy tribes. Those were the days before the whiteman ended tribal wars to bring in world wars. But Mbugua's reputation survived the peace. His word, in disputes brought to the council of elders for settlement, always carried weight. (Ngũgĩ 86)

Mbugua's position in the village is not a mandate from the colonial system, but rather from his own traditional honor as "a warrior and a farmer" (Ngũgĩ 86). His prestige is based on his contribution to tribal history, his outstanding war service and his ability to work the land —It is the kind of political prestige on the ground of local knowledge and practical experience, as opposed to the administrative power generated under the colonial system by positions and appointments.

Of particular note, the novel stated that "the whiteman ended tribal wars to bring in world wars" (Ngũgĩ 86), which satirized the self-promotion of ending barbaric tribal wars and bringing in peace in the colonial discourse, while revealing that the colonizers merely replaced tribal wars with much larger world wars. In other words, while the colonizers ostensibly put an end to traditional violence, they did not really bring about legitimate governance, but rather suppressed and marginalized local political authority without being able to replace it completely. This historical tension reflects the political dimension of the CUD. To some extent, the traditional political power that has not been eradicated provides a possible cultural foundation for resistance to colonial rule and the reconstruction of social order.

The third political force combined with the colonial domination and the traditional eldership is the evolving nationalist movements, particularly Mau Mau Rebellion, which presents the complexity and internal tensions of nationalist movements. Ngũgĩ clearly pointed out that "Nearly everybody was a member of the Movement, but nobody could say with any accuracy when it was born…It changed names, leaders came and went, but the Movement remained, opening new visions, gathering greater and greater strength…" (Ngũgĩ 28). Mau Mau Rebellion is portrayed as an uncertain and expansive political formation with revolutionary potential. Within it, there were radical forest fighters such as Kihika, the ambiguous subject and betrayer such as Mugo, and many others who fought hard once but succumbed to colonial violence, including Gikonyo. The diversity makes nationalism not a unified entity but a highly fractured political coalition. Mugo's defection reveals the moral dilemma of such a movement. Originally mistaken for a national hero and even elected to be a representative at the independence ceremony, he eventually admitted: "I wanted to live my life. I never wanted to be involved in anything. Then he came into my life, here, a night like this, and pulled me into the stream. So I killed him" (Ngũgĩ 183). What Mugo faced was "an impossible ethical choice" (Rajbhandari 161), presenting an irreconcilable contradictory situation of Mau Mau Rebellion. General R.'s speech also expresses the political fragmentation and unevenness: "He who was not on our side, was against us. That is why we killed our black brothers. Because, inside, they were whitemen" (Ngũgĩ 215). This statement evidently proves that the boundaries of political loyalty are absolute, with no room for middle ground. The black-or-white political logic has weakened the inclusiveness of the nationalist movement, making narrow nationalism a distinguished feature of Mau Mau Rebellion. Therefore, Maughan-Brown focused on "the ambivalence of the attitude towards 'Mau Mau' suggested by the fiction" (11). The targets of Mau Mau Rebellion were not only Europeans, but also Asians or Africans, as long as these people blocked its political goals or hindered its actions. Between the radical Mau Mau Rebellion and the colonial government, the people who were most hurt were still the lower class, who only strived for survival: "Unable to defend themselves against either the guerrillas or the government forces, the local population had to be on good terms with both until one of them established permanent prominence" (Maloba 120). Kenyatta also uses the limitation of Mau Mau Rebellion to deny the positive role it played in national independence, erasing its historical contribution.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, the three political forces of colonial rule, tribal tradition and nationalism are not linear alternatives, but rather a dynamic structure that exists at the same time and constantly combines. The colonial regime reinforces its control through violent administrative mechanisms, the traditional tribe is not eliminated as a potential resource for social governance, and the nationalist movement, while contributing to the independence of the country, exposes its internal tensions and fissures. The political CUD inevitably leads to cultural CUD, which is analyzed in the next chapter.

3.3. One Voice, Three Echoes: Cultural Disillusion, Ambiguity and the Formation of Literary Agency

In *A Grain of Wheat*, culture is a complex field formed in the process of colonial oppression and resistance. In this chapter, the split within the colonial discourse, the ambiguity of the identity of the colonized, and Ngũgĩ's literary transformations constitute the typical structure of CUD in the cultural dimension.

John Thompson, a colonial official, was initially convinced that the British Empire was a great moral project and fantasized about assimilating the peoples of unenlightened nations. "His faith in British Imperialism had once made him declare: To administer a people is to administer a soul" (Ngũgĩ 67). He hoped to change the African backward social and cultural environment and incorporated the African peasantry into the ethos of the empire. This reflects the civilizing mission of the colonial bureaucrats and reveals the colonial regime's intention to deeply intervene in the culture and psyche of the dominated peoples. However, although British imperialism exported moral universalism and violent repression at the same time, this combination was irreconcilable in practice. At the Rira detention camp, Thompson personally supervised interrogations that led to the deaths of 11 prisoners under torture. "The formerly idealistic Thompson" (Harrow 256) was eventually reduced to an enforcer of the machinery of violence, and the creed changed from create a fair country to "eliminate the vermin" (Ngũgĩ 137). He wrote what Dr Albert Schweitzer said in his diary: "Every whiteman is continually in danger of gradual moral ruin in this daily and hourly contest with the African" (Ngũgĩ 68). Eventually, Thompson discovered that colonization had become nothing like what he envisioned, and he left Kenya disillusioned. Ngũgĩ's portrayal of Thompson presents the ruptures and contradictions within the colonial discourse, which is the uneven development in the cultural dimension: The colonial discourse emphasizes morality and civility on the surface, while practicing oppressive and dehumanizing mechanisms of domination in reality. Even the colonial official at the center had difficulty in realizing the cultural ideal in the colonial order and experienced CUD, who was both a constructor of the colonial discourse and a victim of its failure.

The colonial discourse not only betrays the colonizer's ideas, but also creates confusion and hybridization of cultural identities among the inhabitants in Kenya. Especially the character Karanja, who showed obvious cultural fissures and conflicting values. Karanja sold out Mau Mau Rebellion for his good life, becoming a lackey of the colonial government. He hoped "to trample on rather than be trampled on" (Krause 9). However, he still longed for acceptance by his community and always suffered the psychological torment of being a betrayer. He was looked down upon by his white superiors and spurned by his black compatriots at the same time. When Thompson was about to leave Kenya, he was afraid of "the end of white power" (Ngũgĩ 52). When facing the black, he also feared "the men and alternated this fierce prose with servile friendliness" (Ngũgĩ 51). Karanja's ambivalence is a concrete manifestation of the combination of white and black cultures. On a larger level, local culture is gradually deconstructed under colonial oppression, but cannot be reintegrated due to the tension of emerging nationalist discourse. Thus, in the novel, Ngũgĩ used this divisive and contradictory characterization to critique the alienating effect of colonial discourse on the natives, while revealing the crisis and possibility of reconstructing cultural identity.

Beyond what is presented in *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngũgĩ's personal writing journey is also an example of CUD. The experience of studying English Literature at the University of Leeds has made Ngũgĩ absorb literary creative ways from Joseph Conrad, especially the colonial depictions in *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911). He even borrowed the "Kurtz" archetype to construct the figure of Thompson in *A Grain of Wheat*. Sicherman observed that "lonely and alienated Conradian heroes populate his first three anglophone novels" (19). Fasselt explored the relation between the "we-narratives" in Conrad's colonial text of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1897) and the "we-narratives" in *A Grain of Wheat* (155). Caminero-Santangelo studied how Ngũgĩ revised "neocolonialism and the betrayal plot" in *Under Western Eyes* and applied the revision to *A Grain of Wheat* (139). Amoko thought *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *The River Between* (1965), as Ngũgĩ's first two novels, "embody the contradictory impulses of Ngũgĩ's early aesthetic education: on the one hand, they seem to affirm Gikuyu (and African) culture; on the other, they appear to attack traditionalism and endorse Christian doctrinalism" (36). Therefore, Ngũgĩ can be seen to be deeply influenced by "the great tradition" of the West defined by F. R. Leavis. Wollaeger also mentioned that "Ngũgĩ has spoken about his debt to

Conrad on multiple occasions, both before and after he decided to write his fiction and plays only in his native Gikuyu" (1).

However, although Ngũgĩ's writing is imbued with Western literary forms, the content of his novels is indigenous to Africa. While this shows a combination, it also presents what Moretti calls "one and unequal" (161) world literature: "The destiny of a culture (usually a culture of the periphery…) is intersected and altered by another culture (from the core) that 'completely ignores it'" (Moretti 161). Moretti pointed out that the independent and autonomous path of development of Western literature is not a universal phenomenon, and that the development of literature in semi-peripheral and peripheral regions fails to do so, only "compromise between foreign form and local materials" (Moretti 163). Similarly, in *A Grain of Wheat*, Western forms and Kenyan social realities demonstrate this compromise, reflecting the struggle of peripheral literature to survive under the suppression of core literature. Ngũgĩ himself was fully aware of this, and so after *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngũgĩ's fourth novel, *Petals of Blood* (1977) "had rejected Christianity, and accepted traditional wisdom only insofar as it described a communal, socialist society" (Loflin 87). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the writer's turn did not happen overnight. *A Grain of Wheat*, as the key work in Ngũgĩ's creative turn, through the unique narrative form of multiple perspectives of the underclass, namely the "multiple centers" (Rao and Ngũgĩ 163), has already exemplified Ngũgĩ's transformation in literary narrative forms and showed his concern for ordinary people, foreshadowing his future literary focus.

In addition, English, as the language with high literary capital and literariness, determines Ngũgĩ's English composition. Casanova explained that "languages having a high degree of literary value" (20) are reflected by they "are read not only by those who speak them, but also by readers who think that authors who write in these languages or who are translated into them are worth reading (Casanova 20). However, Ngũgĩ realized that this literary model, rooted in the Western center, could not really serve the expression of African reality. Literature in English was also disconnected from the population because the general public simply could not read English novels. Therefore, in the late 1970s, Ngũgĩ abandoned English to write in Gikuyu, "increasingly involved in popular community theater" (West-Pavlov 160) and produced the play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I Will Marry When I Want*), advocating for the use of native language and narrative forms to tell African stories, thus opposing literary colonialism. His fifth novel *Devil on the Cross* (1980), also used Gikuyu. Ngũgĩ said in an interview: "Now I can use a story, a myth, and not always explain because I can assume that the [Gikuyu] readers are familiar with this .... I can play with word sounds and images, I can rely more and more on songs, proverbs, riddles, anecdotes…" (Rao and Ngũgĩ 163-164). Moreover, "Ngũgĩ and his wife Njeeri have started the journal *Mutiiri*—a journal devoted entirely to publishing in Gikuyu language. The journal encourages translations from any language in the world into Gikuyu" (Rao and Ngũgĩ 162-163). Ngũgĩ dared to break the bonds of literary capitalism, whose turn reflects his comprehension of the negative impact of CUD and his determination to break the shackles of Western core literature, thus ushering in his unique literary path as an African author. Ngũgĩ's example shows that the development of the postcolonial culture is not simply a matter of decolonization or return to tradition, but rather a complicated process of combination and an enormous effort to secure an autonomous narrative space in an uneven world literary system.

In the cultural dimension, *A Grain of Wheat* presents multiple combinations and unevenness in the colonial and postcolonial contexts: The cultural disillusionment of the colonizers, the identity ambiguity and hybridization of the colonized, and Ngũgĩ's own compromises and shifts in his choice of literary form and language. As Warwick, Moretti, and Casanova agree, world literature is not a universal sphere of shared equality, but a system of asymmetrical power relations. Ngũgĩ attempted to search for a development path for the Kenyan nation in an unequal literary world and break the restrictions of literary capital, moving towards decolonized writing in the true sense.

4. Conclusion

A Grain of Wheat is not a novel limited to the narrative of Kenyan national independence, but a literary sample that profoundly reveals the CUD embodied in the economic, political and cultural structures of colonial and postcolonial society. This paper attempts to go beyond the traditional interpretative framework of nationalism and betrayal ethics, presenting the specific ways in which combination and unevenness have operated and their huge impact on individual destinies and collective experiences.

In economy, the novel depicts the capitalist plunder of land and the reshaping of the conventional agricultural structure, showing the unbalanced relationship among colonial rule, the dependent bourgeoisie and the dispossessed peasants. In politics, the novel presents the triple coexistence of the colonial regime, traditional tribe and nationalist force, as well as the resulting power interlocks and conflicts, revealing the non-linear construction of political modernity. In culture, the novel exposes the combination and unevenness of morality and violence in the imperial discourse by depicting the disillusioning experience of Thompson. Meanwhile, Ngũgĩ shows the combined and distorted cultural values of the native people through his portrayal of Karanja.

More importantly, Ngũgĩ himself has a shift from writing in English and Western forms to Gikuyu and native literary ways, which exemplifies the cultural self-consciousness and resistance of African writers under the pressure of Western literary capital. Combined with Moretti's and Casanova's theories on the unequal literary world, it is possible to see how African literature, as a peripheral literature, finds a unique path that is different from Western literature at the core. It is for this reason that Ngũgĩ's writing not only constitutes a literary testimony to Kenyan history and colonial experience, but also a powerful response to the unequal reality of the center-periphery structure in the global literary order. Through linguistic decolonization, cultural self-awareness and formal innovation, Ngũgĩ provides a model for African literature to fight for narrative sovereignty, and his creative practice itself is a form of cultural and political resistance.

Under the theoretical framework of CUD, *A Grain of Wheat* not only depicts the multidimensional developmental rupture of colonized society, but also symbolically constructs the possibility for the global South to regrow in the midst of historical oppression and structural constraints. Though buried deep in the earth, weathered by storms and distortions, the grain of wheat remains resilient to take root, grow, and germinate with voices from the periphery. In colonial debris and unequal world structures, the significance of the grain of wheat lies not in whether it is harvested or not, but in the gesture in which it is vocalized, and the form in which it breaks the uneven structure. This paper concludes that Ngũgĩ's literary practice provides the global South with an ideological resource and a cultural path that makes literature not only a form of historical expression, but also a linguistic weapon that breaks through structural inequality. Against the backdrop of combined and uneven development that still prevails in the world today, the grain of wheat still grows.

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