

2013

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Recommended Citation

St. Ives, Kate (2013) "A Call to Action: Conflict and Change in Three Major African Novels," *The Corinthian*: Vol. 14, Article 7.
Available at: <http://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian/vol14/iss1/7>

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Kate St. Ives

A Call to Action: Conflict and Change in Three Major African Novels

A Grain of Wheat, *The Sun By Night*, and *Nervous Conditions* are each set in a time period and country in Africa in which tremendous changes are taking place. These changes come in many forms such as clashes between different belief systems, the development of new governments, and the changing roles of women. Additionally, all three books take place in countries that were once British colonies, and the history of colonization and process of decolonization hang over and influence all of the other changes presented in the books. Each book also presents a variety of individual characters in the throes of internal conflict, struggling with a divided sense of self, or with a sense of self under threat of being divided. What is meant here by a divided sense of self is that characters are torn between different identities, unable to reconcile past with present and future, act based upon a distorted sense of reality, or are fighting external influences that could prevent them from being holistic people. In each book, the internal struggles of characters reflect the external struggles of their countries, and while the characters confront their conflicts in a variety of ways, the confrontation always results in an implied call to action that makes the tone of each book ultimately positive.

A Grain of Wheat, the premiere novel about the Kenyan struggle for independence, was published in 1967, but it covers a time-frame that begins in the early 1950s, goes through the 1950s and the Mau Mau rebellion, up to 1963 and the eve of Kenya regaining its independence from Britain. The primary conflict that most of the characters in this book face is the difficulty of integrating experiences of the past, particularly the recent past, in order to move forward into the future. The most prominent technique the author employs to explore these conflicts is the use of extended flashbacks throughout the book. The flashbacks do not originate from one character,

but at different times from five different characters. The interwoven personal histories of characters serve not only as plot structure, but also show how different people react to stress, and emphasize the type of crisis the characters in this book are undergoing. The characters face crisis as they struggle to understand the significance of their pasts and to integrate those pasts into their present lives and implied futures, and the fact that the book takes place after most of the action with which it deals further highlights the fact that crisis in this book revolves around the integration of the lasting effects of past behaviors and experiences. The novel develops as a kind of mystery story, and the overt question throughout is who betrayed Kihika. The suspense that builds surrounding this question and the suspense that builds around the approaching Uhuru Day celebrations creates a building suspense within individuals. The individuals are forced to re-examine their own pasts, and in doing so each character heads towards a personal climax at the end of the book that is within the larger climax of the story.

A sense of the haunted permeates the book. However, this haunted tone is paired with suspense and events that force characters to make decisions in the present. Essentially, the construction of the plot brings each character to a point of unbearable internal pressure in which he or she must re-evaluate and integrate past events and feelings about past events in order to simply proceed with life. Mugo's experiences are a prime example of this phenomenon. In the last third of the novel Mugo reflects on his memories and his changing sense of awareness:

The sun was fiercely hot. Children – there were always children – played in the streets. And yesterday, on Sunday, he had seen these huts as objects that had nothing to do with him. Yesterday, this morning, before Mumbi told her story, the huts had run by him, and never sang a thing of the past. Now they were different: the huts, the dust, the trench, Wambuku, Kihika, Karanja, detention-camps, the white face,

barbed-wire, death. He was conscious of the graves beside the trench. He shuddered cold, and the fear of galloping hooves changed into terror of an undesired discovery.

(Ngugi 195).

With this reflection—and one must admit it is more than a reflection—it is possible to see how the interactions of people and events in the book build a kind of suspense that forces characters to deal with the meaning of past events. This is more than a reflection because of the involuntary nature of Mugo's thoughts. In this passage we see that the past is exploding into the present. It is no longer entirely separate and disconnected from the present as Mugo tries to pretend throughout much of the book. The ghosts of Mugo's past are reasserting themselves, and this and other passages suggest that they will continue to do so until he finds a way to reconcile past feelings and actions. The ghosts of Mugo's past become like knives tearing into the psyche of the character. It is important to note that the above passage shows how the confrontation of the past makes Mugo more acutely aware of sensations. For instance, he notices the hotness of the sun, he sees the things around him more fully, and he feels cold. At this point in the book Mugo is portrayed as more sensitive to his surroundings, and therefore more alive, than he is portrayed in the beginning. In the beginning of the book he is characterized primarily by simple routine movements such as, “One, two three: he pulled the blanket away from his body. He washed his face and lit the fire. In the corner, he discovered a small amount of maize-flour in a bag among the utensils” (4). The short sentences here, the character's lack of feeling and reflection, and even the dull rhythm established with the counting, “one, two, three,” all point to a repression in Mugo and a lack of life. Once Mugo begins confronting his past he begins to become more alive, although as we see throughout, the sensations of life are often painful. However, despite pain and even loss at confrontation, the trend of the book is one of expansion of the individual and of

the society the book represents.

In his essay, "Commitment: Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*," Shatto Arthur Gakwandi discusses the novel and the ways in which individual conflicts and situations within the novel relate to the larger context in which the novel is based. He says that "All the events in the novel have been directly or indirectly related to the struggle for independence" (Gakwandi 109). He calls the novel committed because everything in it is an attack against colonialism or an assertion of faith that the people of the novel, the Kenyan people, will, with the end of colonialism, be able to create the better world that they are envisioning (108). He also calls the novel "historical" due to its close connection to real events, and goes on to say that even anxieties and conflicts of individual characters that are rooted in the fight for independence are revisited within the context of the novel. There is much evidence throughout the story to support Gakwandi's arguments. Additionally, conflicts prior to the fight are revisited as well. Mugo's feelings about the abuse and sense of abandonment he experienced as a child resurfaced during the fight for independence and influenced him in his decision to betray Kihika, and these feelings resurface again as he reviews his choice to betray Kihika and thinks about the request people have made of him to make the Uhuru Day speech. We can see that things such as the jealousy between Gikonyo and Karanja is rooted in the past before the fight for independence, but that it takes on new dimensions during the fight and afterwards. Every conflict ends up connecting in one way or another to the war for independence, and continues growing after the war.

Gakwandi continues his discussion of the novel by talking about how the characters of the novel could be strengthened as individuals in order to make the overarching issues of the book, such as the issues of the fight against British rule and the after-effects of war, more

powerfully felt. He thinks most of the characters are too simplistic, that they can seem “flat” and that they don't have the necessary depth to their personalities to truly support the weight of a topic as powerful as that contained in *A Grain of Wheat* (Gakwandi 117). However, it seems that perhaps this flatness to many characters helps to serve the tone of the book, and display the shell-shocked post-war atmosphere of the novel. Images of destruction abound throughout the book, such as the images of the destroyed Rung'ei “Most of the buildings had battered walls with large gaping holes, smashed and splintered doors stared at him – ruins that gave only hints of an earlier civilization” (Ngugi 135). There is a kind of numbness to the world of the book that seems connected to both the damage done during the war and to the oppressiveness of the colonial rule that existed before the war. The characters of the book also, for the most part, seem somewhat numb, and their confrontations of and reconciliations with the past often feel like an awakening.

No place is this sense of awakening more apparent than in the character of Gikonyo in the final pages of the novel. Over the course of several days Gikonyo gradually becomes more aware of how he feels and of how he should act. This awakening happens slowly beginning with such things as, “Lying in hospital, Gikonyo was again possessed by a desire to carve a stool” (Ngugi 278). Then, “increasingly he longed to speak with her about Mugo and then about his own life in detention” (278). Finally he begins to actually work on the stool: “He worked the motif in detail. He changed the figures” (279). This elegantly wrought scene makes the reader feel the falling away of numbness and increased life. Just as Mugo became more alive when he was finally able to look the past in the face, so does Gikonyo. Even the fact that Gikonyo is in a hospital in the final scene seems to serve to emphasize the notion of healing. In the very last words of the book Gikonyo thinks, “I'll change the woman's figure. I shall carve a woman big—

big with child” (280). Taken in the context of the story this ending anticipates a future not just for individual people, but for the community, and one might even say for the people of Kenya as a whole. It seems to say: we have the strength to rebuild after the destruction caused by the oppression of the British colonizers and by a war in which members of the same community turned against each other. It calls on readers not only to imagine a future for Mumbi and Gikonyo, but also to recognize the people of Kenya as pregnant with the future of their country, responsible for its life.

It is important to note that all the insights the characters gain in *A Grain of Wheat* point them towards action. This is contrary to what happens in many books that deal heavily with the memories of characters. In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, the 1961 novel about a group of Scottish school girls and their relationships with their unorthodox teacher, Jean Brodie, the characters also struggle with internal conflicts and try to find meaning in their memories. At the end of the book the main character, Sandy, who has since become a nun and a famous writer, is asked ““What were the main influences of your school days, Sister Helena? Were they literary or political or personal? Was it Calvinism?” Sandy said: 'There was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime’” (Spark 125). The reader understands here that Sandy has finally understood why her teacher exerted such influence over her. The reader recognizes that Sandy understands that it was the very combination of good and evil in the woman that was both unbearable and irresistible, and that it was the contact she had with this combination that allowed her to experience her childhood world in a more complex way, a world that was otherwise defined by narrow mindedness and absolutes. The end of this book is powerful, but it implies no action for the future. It is the insight of the character alone that is important. Similarly, in Nabokov's 1936 story, *Spring in Fialta*, when Victor says “suddenly I understood something, something I had

been seeing without understanding—why a piece of tinfoil had sparkled on the pavement, why the gleam of glass had trembled on the tablecloth, why the sea was ashimmer” (Nabokov 501), there is no call to action. Victor suddenly realizes that it was Nina who made the world seem better to him, and his inability to admit, or even acknowledge to himself, that he loved her is what has given him his greatest sense of loss. In this story the only solace for the character is in the insight at the end and the catharsis of that insight. Both the Nabokov and Spark story are about the impossibility of changing the past, while *A Grain of Wheat* is about the possibility, necessity, and indeed, even reality of changing the past. The central drive of *A Grain of Wheat* is one of expansion, while the drives of these other two stories seem to be compression and decline. One might make the argument that the societies and time periods out of which each of these books came influences the essential tone of each book. For instance, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* was written in post World War I and World War II Britain, and a sense of loss permeates the book from the micro to macro level, whereas *A Grain of Wheat*, while dealing with a quite a bit of loss as well, also deals with a kind of rebirth of a society. The important point here is that the insights the characters have in *A Grain of Wheat* suggest positive action in the future—they suggest a future.

In *The Sun By Night*, just as in *A Grain of Wheat*, characters deal with internal conflicts and struggle to reconcile a sense of the past with a vision of the future. However, in this novel their struggles are more complex, and the divided sense of self often more severe. *The Sun By Night* takes place in Ghana the late 1970s, some twenty years after Ghana regained its independence from Britain. The world chronicled in the book is one of chaos, and the chaos of the constantly changing government is the background against which all the chaos of individual lives plays out. Although a newly independent Ghana presents an opportunity for great things to

develop, characters do not often seem to know what the best way for them to use this opportunity might be. While the tone of *A Grain of Wheat* is one of numbness leading to gradual awakening, the tone of *The Sun By Night* is frenetic.

In his book, *Of War and Women, Oppression and Optimism: New Essays on the African Novel*, Eustace Palmer discusses *The Sun By Night* and articulates some of the issues in the society of the book as possible factors contributing to the divided sense of self that many of the characters display. Notably he mentions “tradition versus change,” “the individual's determination to break with tradition and convention,” and “post-independence African malaise” (Palmer 285, 286). Malaise is an especially important issue to bring up. Nearly everyone in the novel is troubled by a sense of ill-defined unease, and this usually manifests itself by a character becoming inflexible, or pursuing an alternative, often dangerous or socially unacceptable life. Ama Badu, Kubi, and John Amoah are all examples of characters who are deeply divided. John Amoah creates a rigid and very specific set of rules for his life. Kubi and Ama Badu fashion for themselves alternative lives. However, the specificity of the delineations these characters make does not come out of any internal sense of order; instead each character seems to be reacting to external events and attempting to create something meaningful in a world lacking definition. The creation of an unrealistically rigid life in John Amoah's case, and the creation of double lives in the cases of Kubi and Ama Badu may actually be attempts not to divide or discard, but to retain a sense of wholeness or groundedness in a world that does not offer other clear ways of doing so.

During book two, “The Eclipse of Mother,” we see arguably one of the most pivotal points in Kubi's life, the day he is caught smoking marijuana. He is confronted by his mother, and at this moment she could offer guidance on the right way to live, a way that demands honesty and responsibility for one's actions. However, instead she draws him into a terrible

promise. She says, “You will pretend you're going to school and no one but you and I will know what has actually happened. I just want you to promise that you will never do this again” (Kwakye 167). She cuts the boy off from his family, particularly from a meaningful relationship with his father, and from a clear definition of right and wrong. She also introduces him to the concept of hypocrisy when she induces him to “pretend” and thus behave in a way that is disconnected from the reality of the situation. The boy is denied external guidance and therefore is not able to develop internal guidelines. So, later, when Kubi responds to stresses in life, such as the stress of being abandoned by his girlfriend, he cannot respond in constructive ways because he does not know how. As Palmer suggests, Kubi seems to have no sense of equilibrium, and his divided sense of self seems to develop out of a misguided attempt to gain a sense of balance and to be connected to people (Palmer 298).

Neither events in Kubi's family nor events in his society can be blamed entirely for Kubi's behavior. However, one can see that the restlessness in Kubi is reflected in the restlessness of the country at large. Additionally, there are changes in the society in which Kubi and the other characters live that contribute to making life more confusing. Many excellent opportunities have arisen out of the changing society—increased economic opportunities for some people like Koo Manu—but pursuing many of these opportunities leads to new stresses, such as the stress on family life that Koo Manu's family experiences. In his essay, Palmer talks about the notion of the “abused road” in the book. He says that the idea of a road being abused makes the road seem passive, and suggests it as a metaphor for people abusing a way of life (Palmer 278). The book seems to suggest that a way of life is being abused because there is no longer clear guidance on how to live and because changes in the society have allowed human desire to exert itself in new ways. This is not to say that the book makes a statement on whether

changes are negative or positive. Instead it seems to imply the need to take responsibility for one's actions. Just as in *A Grain of Wheat*, the book presents a kind of call to action. The way of life is portrayed as passively offering little resistance to corruption, and this implies a demand for internal resistance from people. It is no accident or plot device that the framework of the entire novel is a court trial. There is the sense within the book that each and every character is on trial here, being confronted, mostly by themselves, about how he or she lives or should live. In a multitude of ways the book deals with guilt or lack of guilt, and behind the issue of guilt lurks the idea of personal responsibility.

In the book's final, brilliant scene we see a character owning up to something he did. John Amoah tells his congregation "he had committed fornication right there in church" (Kwakyie 306). Although it is this specific act, one that people would have been none the wiser for if he had not mentioned it, for which he asks forgiveness, he carries on after this in a way that suggests he is asking forgiveness for much more. He explains that "he was only human" (306). He says that "He wasn't God. He would keep striving to get closer to God. But our best deeds are like filthy rags before God" (306). Given Amoah's past distant and uncharitable behavior towards others, it seems this is what he is really asking to be forgiven for. It also seems that he is asking to be forgiven for simply being human. He wants to be forgiven for being fallible, and in asking for forgiveness, he is forgiving others their fallibility. He is also finally talking in a way that makes sense, contrary to his cryptic style of communication throughout much of the book, and this seems to suggest that he wants to become part of a community again. The ending seems to say it is all right to be an individual and to be conflicted, so long as one does not forget care for self and the surrounding community of others.

In *Nervous Conditions*, unlike in *The Sun By Night*, the individual conflicts of characters

are not merely suggestive of larger problems in the society, in this case 1960s Zimbabwe, but are directly related to the straightforward narrator of the story. The strong first-person voice of Tambu makes the problems of the society come across to the reader like a slap in the face, and this directness mirrors directly how Tambu feels and leads the reader to experience the injustices that she narrates. It is especially interesting to look at this novel when considering the theme of a divided self or sense of self that is under threat of being divided, because it presents a detailed and intimate portrait of an extremely self-aware individual who is capable of articulating her experiences. Gikonyo and Mugo in *A Grain of Wheat* are forced by their situations to become self-aware. Mumbi in *A Grain of Wheat* and Koo Manu in *The Sun By Night* seem to have an intuitive sense of self-awareness by which they primarily feel what is the right thing for them to do. However, Tambu is an intellectual character who actively examines who she is and who she wants to be, and fights to retain a wholeness to her identity.

In the very beginning of the story Tambu says, “I was different. I wanted to find out the truth” (Dangarembga 5). She is comparing herself with her brother Nhamo, who we later see is not a questioner like Tambu, and who, when faced with forces that threaten to divide him psychologically, tends to succumb to whatever presents an easier life, becoming cruel and disconnected from people in the process. Tambu then goes on to point out a number of problems in the society she lives in, for instance the lack of equality for women, the pressure to assimilate as much as possible with European culture, the racism, the poverty, and of course the consequences of the colonial system that are part of every other problem. However, in bringing these problems to the attention of the reader, she always presents them directly through an account of her own experiences and through her observations of the experiences of others. For instance, she notices when Nhamo begins to take concrete steps towards turning his back on his

family and culture when he begins to refuse to speak Shona. She also notices that the implications of Nhamo not talking to his family are much more than mere annoyance when she thinks, “This restricted our communication to mundane insignificant matters” (53). She implies that when they can no longer talk in a comprehensive way with each other they are no longer connected because the topics that were important enough to reaffirm connections are no longer being discussed. It is also important to note that Tambu seems to have the ability to remain objective about her own changing situation. When she arrives at Babamakuru’s house and sees enormous material wealth compared to that in her own home, she thinks, “Some strategy had to be devised to prevent all this splendor from distracting me in the way that my brother had been distracted” (70). She ends up making a conscious decision to accept and utilize certain aspects of her new life, while retaining a connection to her old life. She attempts to integrate both the new and the old.

Although Tambu is extremely aware and questions herself and her surroundings, she does not question them to the extent that her cousin, Nyasha, does. For instance, when Babamukuru gets Lucia a job at the mission, Tambu becomes carried away with gratitude for Babamukuru. While Nyasha agrees that he should be thanked, she warns Tambu to “not make him into a hero” (162). It really makes sense that Babamukuru should not be made into a hero, particularly in light of the fact that he actually wanted Lucia to leave the homestead, and when Lucia asks him for a job, it provides the perfect opportunity for her to leave the homestead. So actually, by offering her the job, Babamukuru is building on the good idea Lucia had, but there is no credit given to Lucia for thinking of a constructive way of solving something that was, in part, a problem for Babamukuru. Lucia must remain subservient about the whole situation because she is a woman and because she is of lower status in the family. It is obvious that Lucia

is not naïve. She understands her position, and she understands how she needs to act in order to get things she wants. Her understanding is visible in her response to Nyasha: “‘But you, Nyasha, are you mad!’ she exclaimed. ‘Babamukuru wanted to be asked, so I asked. And now we both have what we wanted, isn’t it?’” (162). While Lucia is a rebellious character who pushes the boundaries of her position, she never quite steps over them. She chooses to fight certain battles, but not others. She maintains a balance between growing as an individual by questioning the status quo and simply surviving. Nyasha, on the other hand, is determined that the whole world change rather than just small parts of it at a time.

In their article, “Disabled Woman / Nation: Re-narrating the Erasure of (Neo)colonial Violence in Ondjaki’s *Good Morning Comrades* and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*,” Rachel Gorman and Onyinyechukwu Udegbe discuss Nyasha and her eating disorder. They say that what began as a rebellion on Nyasha’s part against the oppression of male dominance, and indirectly the impact of colonialism, becomes an illness that is not only destructive to her, but also ineffectual as rebellion (Gorman / Udegbe 2). Nyasha is so sensitive to her surroundings that she has no shield between herself and the impact her surroundings have on her. Her rebellion itself seems to take the place of any real action against which she rebels. Gorman and Udegbe go so far to suggest that what Nyasha’s purging comes to represent is her “deep affective and intellectual knowledge of colonial violence” (2). They conclude that once this knowledge is purged it becomes contained, or erased in a way that makes it impossible to act on it in order to bring change (2). It does seem that the more rebellious Nyasha grows, and the sicker she grows, the less able she is to even articulate why she rebels. As a person she seems shattered by her rebellion. While Tambu, although also very self-aware and sometimes openly rebellious, is not willing to delve as deeply into the environment in which she lives, she ends up retaining a

cohesive sense of self better than Nyasha does.

In part it is the differences between the effectiveness of Nyasha's and Tambu's self-awareness that make the implications at the ending of *Nervous Conditions* murky. Just as the title of the book itself suggests a story about anxieties and unease, this feeling of unease exists at the conclusion of the story. One is not left with the feeling that Tambu's entrance into Sacred Heart is entirely a triumph. Additionally, one is not left with the sense that one of Tambu's primary goals, to get an education, is all that matters anymore. Tambu's self-awareness and strength gave her the ability to both take advantage of a good education and remain connected to her family and culture, but Nyasha has planted in her questions about whether the survival of an individual or the survival of an ideal is more important. At the end Tambu says "I was young then and able to banish things, but seeds do grow" (Dangarembga 208). The reader is left with the sense that although Tambu has retained unity as a person, she will increasingly struggle with complex issues as she goes on.

Although uncertainty characterizes the end of *Nervous Conditions*, suggesting perhaps that in a troubled world there are no clear-cut answers, there is also the sense of a call to action at the end of this book, just as there is at the ends of the other two books discussed. The call to action in this book seems to be a call for self-awareness. The book seems to emphasize the necessity of searching for answers. While the ultimately positive tones at the end of both *A Grain of Wheat* and *The Sun By Night* imply that moving on with life is the goal, the positive tone at the end of *Nervous Conditions* is derived from the achievement of self-awareness by a number of characters, and suggests that self-awareness itself is the goal because self-awareness allows for conscious choices rather than simple reactions to environment. It suggests that it is this ability to choose that is important, even if the choice an individual makes is the choice to

self-destruct.

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