

# SOME VERSIONS OF THE HEROIC IN NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S *A GRAIN OF WHEAT* AND KHUSHWANT SINGH'S *I SHALL NOT HEAR THE NIGHTINGALE*

In Bertolt Brecht's play *Galileo*, Andrea, disillusioned with his master for recanting before the Inquisition, makes this anguished pronouncement: "Unhappy is the land that breeds no hero." To this Galileo makes the cryptic reply, "No, Andrea: 'Unhappy is the land that needs a hero.'"<sup>1</sup> Brecht's play is indeed at some remove from the worlds of colonial India and Kenya; this exchange, nevertheless, serves as an apt point of departure for a comparative study of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*.<sup>2</sup> and Khushwant Singh's *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*.<sup>3</sup> Both novels are situated at a point in history when India and Kenya were involved in protracted struggles for Independence, a period in which the people of these lands witnessed or experienced betrayals, massacres, sacrifices, and several acts of heroism. Galileo's words are particularly appropriate here because it is from such "unhappy" backgrounds that leaders appear and attempt to transcend the lot of a beleaguered community or nation.

The primary object of this study is to evaluate the manner in which these two novelists have presented the motifs of heroism and leadership; in the process, it hopes to prove the thesis that a comparative approach to Commonwealth Literature is both feasible and desirable.

Doubtless, there is a school of thought which contends that, by continuing to employ the label "Commonwealth Literature," critics are guilty of perpetuating the notion of empire. Yet even a critic like Meenakshi Mukherjee, who in her recent writing "seriously question[s] the validity of earlier labels and pigeon holes" like Commonwealth Literature, and contends that "the only tenuous link among them [Commonwealth countries] is the British rule at some point in history," concedes that "the groupings might have served some purpose so long as the Commonwealth writer's

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<sup>1</sup>. Bertolt Brecht, *Galileo*, trans. Charles Laughton, ed. John Willet and Ralph Mannheim (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980) p. 201.

<sup>2</sup>. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat* (London: Heinemann, 1967).

<sup>3</sup>. Khushwant Singh, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (Bombay: IBH, 1980). In later references, the title is abbreviated to *The Nightingale*.

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central concern was the achievement of freedom and racial equality.<sup>4</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Khushwant Singh are emphatically concerned with social justice and with the "achievement of freedom," so they are by one definition at least Commonwealth novelists. The articulation of these themes, however, is coloured by certain national, cultural, historical, and temporal factors; as a consequence, these Commonwealth novels are "simultaneously different and like,"<sup>5</sup> and lend themselves to an intriguing comparative analysis.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's approach to literature is unapologetically polemical. He declares, in *Barrel of a Pen*, that "For the Kenya artist the most minimal step towards his own freedom is a total immersion in the struggles of Kenyan workers and peasants."<sup>6</sup> Such a stance occasionally leads Ngugi to some problems in the presentation of character, especially when he dwells on those individuals who articulate his political views. In *Petals of Blood*,<sup>7</sup> for instance, Ngugi is so supportive of Karega that the latter eventually becomes too obviously his spokesman. The reader tires of Karega's diatribes towards the end of the novel; consequently, Ngugi's "message," which had been so effectively conveyed through the interaction of character and through his judicious use of symbol, is at the end considerably debilitated. In *A Grain of Wheat*, however, Ngugi avoids this pitfall by juxtaposing the flawed hero, Mugo, with the more conventional hero, Kihika. Both the political statement and the artistic design are consequently preserved.

Christopher Wanjala declares, in *For Home and Freedom*, that "in the Mau Mau war experience, the choice is either to fight on the side of the Mau Mau or to abdicate one's racial pride for the position of a faithful dog [to the whiteman]."<sup>8</sup> Even a cursory perusal of *A Grain of Wheat* demonstrates the problems involved in adopting such an inflexible posture. While such an approach could conceivably explain Karanja's role in the novel, it does not fit Mugo. Mugo, after all, is a "villain" when he is lauded by his fellows as their champion against British oppression, and a hero--at least in the eyes of

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4. Meenakshi Mukherjee, "In Search of Critical Strategies," *The Eye of the Beholder: Indian Writing in English*, ed. Maggie Butcher (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1983) p. 52.
  5. Kendrick Smithyman, "The Common Experience, the Common Response," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 6.1 (1971): p. 8.
  6. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Modern Kenya*, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World P, 1983)p. 68.
  7. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood* (London: Heinemann, 1977).
  8. Christopher Wanjala, *For Home and Freedom* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau) p. 145.

Gikonyo, Mumbi, and the reader--when he is executed for treachery. When the Mau Mau war breaks out Mugo makes strenuous efforts to stay away from "a drama in a world not his own."<sup>9</sup> He resents the liberation movement because it threatens the security, prosperity, and peace of mind that he had achieved after years of labour. His plans are shattered, however, when Kihika walks into his hut after killing D.O. Robson, and suggests that he complement the work of the Mau Mau by organizing an underground movement in the village. This leads Mugo to betray Kihika to the British. Ironically, the deed rebounds on him. Instead of being rewarded, he is treated as one of the terrorists, kept in detention, and tortured:

They took us to the roads and to the quarries even those who had never done anything. They called us criminals. But not because we had stolen anything or killed anyone.... Day and night, they made us dig. We were stricken ill, we often slept with empty stomachs, and our clothes were just rags and tatters so that the rain and the wind and the sun knew our nakedness.<sup>10</sup>

Mugo is lionized by the community for his resilience and fortitude, but it is only when he is released from detention and forced to battle remorse and the undeserved plaudits of his fellows that his moral leadership becomes patent. As a survivor from the horrendous Rira camp and as Kihika's friend, Mugo could have played on the susceptibilities of the villagers and fulfilled his ambition of becoming a messianic leader; like the Conradian characters Jim and Razumov, however, Mugo is a slave to his own conscience. He resists all attempts to make him into a patriot, and when he is confronted with the naively penetrating questions of Kihika's sister, he breaks down and confesses. Subsequently, during the Uhuru day celebrations, he reveals his crime to the people of Thabai, and gives himself up to the tender mercies of General R. and Koinandu.

Shatto Gakwandi asserts that Ngugi's purpose in this novel is to warn his society "against an overhasty process of setting up heroes to worship and traitors to persecute."<sup>11</sup> Ngugi achieves this aim by portraying Mugo variously as a lonely householder; betrayer of Kihika; conscious-stricken detainee; reluctant hero; and, eventually, willing martyr. He is, like Kihika, the seed that must perish before it yields new grain. After all, the only positive to emerge from a sombre Independence day celebration in Thabai is Gikonyo's imminent reconciliation with his wife. This synthesis, which is surely symbolic of the need to coalesce all the factions within post-colonial

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<sup>9</sup>. Ngugi, *A Grain* p. 212-13.

<sup>10</sup>. *Ibid.* p. 76.

<sup>11</sup>. Shatto Arthur Gakwandi, *The Novel and Contemporary Experience in Africa*, (London: Heinemann, 1977) p. 110.

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Kenya, will only be achieved if the various groups frankly confront and reassess the mistakes of the past. Gikonyo is in no doubt that this transformation is brought about because of Mugo:

"He was a brave man, inside," he said. . "He stood before much honour, praises were heaped on him. He would have become a chief. Tell me another person who would have exposed his soul for all the eyes to peck at?" He paused and let his eyes linger on Mumbi. Then he looked away and said, "Remember that few people at the meeting are fit to lift a stone against that man. Not unless I--we--too--in turn open our hearts naked for the world to look at."<sup>12</sup>

Ngugi, then, charts Mugo's precipitous journey to martyrdom with considerable artistic aplomb. He describes Mugo's treachery and its repercussions with damning detail; at the same time, however, he understands why Mugo acted the way he did. Furthermore, Ngugi goes on to demonstrate how Mugo transcended his selfishness and fear to become a true leader of the people. Mugo is perhaps a greater hero than the "unblemished" leader, Kihika, because he has to cope with physical, psychological, and moral pressures which the latter never encounters. No such progression is discernible, however, in Khushwant Singh's portrayal of Sher Singh. In an article entitled "Khushwant Singh's Fiction," Chirantan Kulshrestha, having made the point that Khushwant Singh's socio-cultural preoccupations define the nature of his fiction, goes on to say:

To these is brought a novelist's realism, a view of life that is ironic and detached, sometimes deeply satirical but seldom tender. His characters--mostly ordinary people, foolish and stubborn, even pompous, corrupt, and vain--emerge out of the vast amorphous complex of Indian life."<sup>13</sup>

Although Khushwant Singh is "tender" in his treatment of Sabhrai and "detached" in his portrayal of Taylor, it is his satiric bent which is most prominent when he deals with Sher. Sher Singh is afflicted by a chronic feeling of insecurity and inadequacy. The only son of an influential Sikh magistrate, he is pampered as a child; consequently, he never matures. Convinced that he is a failure, Sher becomes the leader of a terrorist organization because he sees in this position an opportunity to achieve fame and success, and a useful way of camouflaging his weaknesses. The social and political climate of the time certainly helped him in this enterprise. *The Nightingale* is set during the last days of the Raj, a period in which it was both fashionable and advantageous to be a

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<sup>12</sup>. Ngugi, *A Grain* p. 76.

<sup>13</sup>. Chirantan Kulshrestha, "Khushwant Singh's Fiction," *Considerations*, ed. Meenakshi Mukherjee (New Delhi: Allied, 1977) p. 123.

nationalist. While Gandhi and his followers were risking life and limb in their struggle for *swaraj*, Sher Singh flirts with communism, secure in the knowledge that his influential father would protect him if these flirtations led him to any trouble. In the following extract, the author captures the hypocrisy, the egotism, and the insecurity which prompted Sher to crave leadership:

The applause that came from his family and his colleagues was offset by his early marriage. Champak, despite her expressions of admiration, gave him an uneasy feeling of being a failure. To impress her became an obsession. The form it took was to hold out visions of a successful political career by which he would take her to dizzy heights of eminence along with him. The more his physical inadequacy gnawed his insides, the more daring he became in his political activity. From fiery speeches, he went on to uniforms and discipline; from those to believe in force: the worship of tough men and love for symbols of strength, like swords crossed over a shield. These, with the possession of guns, pistols, cartridges, and the handsomely masculine Alsatian as a companion, completed his martial padding. Living with these symbols of strength and among people who vaguely expected him to succeed, Sher Singh came to believe in his own future and his power.<sup>14</sup>

Sher Singh, then, takes upon himself the role of a charismatic leader. But, as the author contends, he is nothing more than a "hot-house plant blossoming in a greenhouse."<sup>15</sup> When he is called upon to take a firm stand against colonial oppression, he proves to be both inept and pathetic.

The only Indian character in this novel who is untouched by the author's satire is Sher's mother. It is largely because of Joyce Taylor's respect for Sabhrai, and her concern for the latter's failing health, that she urges her husband to release Sher from detention. Sher not only revels in the unexpected freedom but he also uses the episode to fulfil his political ambitions.

Sher Singh was flushed with excitement. At long last it had come. An imprisonment and a heroic stand against torture by the police. What more could anyone ask for? He would be the hero of the city for the next few days. If he kept up the citizens' interest and

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<sup>14</sup>. Khushwant Singh, p. 192.

<sup>15</sup>. *Ibid* p. 192.

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faith in him, a political career was his for the asking.<sup>16</sup>

Sher certainly achieves his desires. His friends organize events in such a way that his release is taken as a victory for the Indians over the British Raj. He returns home accompanied by police escort, cheering crowds, and brass band. In many ways, Sher's triumphal march is reminiscent of the processions that were sometimes used at the end of Greek comedies to indicate that all the conflicts were at an end, and the difficulties resolved. In *The Nightingale*, however, the accolades and the fanfare are parodic and satiric in their intent. The reader is not allowed to forget that the man who pompously declares, "they [the British] could not break the spirit of this son of India"<sup>17</sup> to the malleable mob outside the prison, had denounced the various liberation movements to Mr. Taylor, had wept like a child when the police beat him, and would have betrayed all his friends at the first sign of further punishment. Thus, what Sher Singh considers to be the launching of a triumphant political career, is really an authorial *coup de grace*. The "hero's" welcome that Sher receives is an indictment of both the pseudo hero and the gullible people who unquestioningly accept Sher as their leader. Although Ngugi castigates the people of Thabai for the nonchalance with which they make and destroy heroes, he insists that their lapses be regarded in a more ameliorating spirit because the entire nation was devastated by the colonial experience. Khushwant Singh ascribes no such redeeming features to Sher or to his acolytes. While Ngugi shows that Mumbi and Gikonyo are able to recognize the personal and political implications of Mugo's moral triumph at the end of the novel, Khushwant Singh asserts that Sher's victory is a hollow sham; consequently, the political and moral ideas articulated so convincingly by Mugo and Kihika in *A Grain of Wheat*, become in *The Nightingale*, a subject for satire.

The two individuals examined so far are those who could be labelled "problematic heroes;" Kihika and Sabhrai, however, are more traditionally conceived. Once again a perusal of the manner in which they have been presented by Ngugi and Khushwant Singh reveals intriguing patterns of convergence and divergence. Ngugi does not portray Kihika with the same complexity as he did Mugo. Indeed, there are some infelicities in Ngugi's characterization of Kihika that have been well documented by commentators like Gakwandi. He describes the weaknesses in the novel thus:

The reader gets a discomfiting impression that the events of the novel have a much wider significance than can be grasped in the interactions of peasant characters. Sometimes the author tries to overcome this by attributing to his characters a greater social awareness than is convincing, for instance when at their local meetings they discuss

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<sup>16</sup>. *Ibid.* p. 223.

<sup>17</sup>. *Ibid* p. 225.

Gandhi and Indian politics and the American war of Independence.<sup>18</sup>

The undue historical and political awareness given to Kihika is undoubtedly an artistic lapse, but Ngugi's portrayal of Kihika works in spite of this blemish because such blemishes are the exception rather than the rule in *A Grain of Wheat*. He is, no doubt, an idealized figure, but he is more than a sentimental version of a revolutionary hero who is invincible until he is betrayed. Furthermore, while Kihika's actions and pronouncements have the author's sanction, he does not become a mere authorial mouthpiece. The challenge before the critic is to discover how Ngugi achieves the success that eludes him in his depiction of Karega.

Eileen Julien, in an article entitled "Heroism in *A Grain of Wheat*," makes this perceptive observation about Kihika:

Kihika can be likened to heroes typical of romance or epic. Such figures are, Northrop Frye tells us in An [sic] Anatomy of Criticism, "superior in degree to other men" and sometimes to their environment as well. Like other warrior heroes in literature ... Kihika is elevated above his companions and comrades.<sup>19</sup>

Ngugi states in the first chapter that "Kihika, a son of the land, was marked out as one of the heroes of deliverance,"<sup>20</sup> and after the successful raid on the police garrison at Mahee, "People came to know Kihika as the terror of the whiteman. They said that he could move mountains and compel thunder from heaven."<sup>21</sup> Once Ngugi has established that Kihika is an exceptional individual, the reader has no difficulty in accepting the Christlike aura that surrounds him. He comes to realize that Kihika is the kind of individual who is capable of making the supreme sacrifice, not for self-aggrandizement or for the purpose of satisfying a personal whim, *a la* Sher Singh, but because he has an abiding love for the land of his birth. Not only does Kihika display his potential for leadership, but from his youngest days, he has that rare ability to articulate his views on heroism and martyrdom. This is what he declares to Karanja long before the Emergency was declared:

All oppressed people have a cross to bear. The Jews refused to carry it and were scattered like dust all over the earth. Had Christ's death

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<sup>18</sup>. Gakwandi p. 111.

<sup>19</sup>. Eileen Julien, "Heroism in *A Grain of Wheat*," *African Literature Today* 13 (1983): p. 139.

<sup>20</sup>. Ngugi, *A Grain* p. 18.

<sup>21</sup>. *Ibid.* p. 20-21.

a meaning for the children of Israel? In Kenya we want a death which will change things, that is to say, we want a true sacrifice. But first we have to be ready to carry the cross. I die for you, you die for me, we become a sacrifice for one another. So I can say that you, Karanja, are Christ. I am Christ. Everybody who takes the Oath of Unity to change things in Kenya is a Christ.<sup>22</sup>

This passage demonstrates a maturity in Kihika which belies his youth. It focusses on the altruism and self-sacrifice that characterize his heroism. This maturity is seen yet again when in a later passage he insists that the masses too should be given a prominent place in this struggle. Contrast this with Sher Singh's attitude in *The Nightingale*. In spite of his grandiose socialist pronouncements, Sher Singh is a snob at heart and in deed--witness his disgust at the realization that he is beholden to an "uncouth" villager. To Kihika, however, the struggle cannot be carried out by the leaders alone. He declares:

We want a strong organization. The white man knows this and fears. Why else has he made our people move into these villages? He wants to shut us from the people, our only strength. But he will not succeed. We must keep the road between us and the people clear of obstacles. I often watched you in old Thabai. You are a self-made man. You are a man, you have suffered. We need such a man to organize an underground movement in the new village.<sup>23</sup>

Kihika's insistence that the masses be included in the vanguard of the movement does not imply that there is a reduction in the stature and usefulness of the leader. Cook and Okenimkpe conclude, somewhat erroneously, that Ngugi rejects the messianic role that Kihika gives himself. They state that according to Ngugi, "this individualistic obsession is to be deplored."<sup>24</sup> This observation is questionable. Nowhere does Ngugi suggest that he has any quarrel with Kihika's vision of being "a saint, leading the Gikuyu people to freedom and power."<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, Ngugi asserts that Kenya needs individuals like Kihika who by their charisma and self-sacrifice can inspire others to follow their example.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, the concepts of heroism and leadership are closely allied

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<sup>22</sup>. Ngugi, *A Grain* p. 110.

<sup>23</sup>. *Ibid.* p. 218.

<sup>24</sup>. David Cook, and Michael Okenimkpe, *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: An Exploration of His Writings* (London Heinemann, 1983) p. 84.

<sup>25</sup>. Ngugi, *A Grain* p. 77.



to Ngugi's version of Christianity. Ngugi always regarded Christianity with some ambivalence. In *Weep not Child*, and certain sections of *Petals of Blood*, he illustrates how the church supported the state in its efforts to subjugate the masses. This "mission," which had its origins in the colonial era, is carried out with renewed vigour after Independence. Even *A Grain of Wheat*, a novel which does not attack the church with the same vehemence, admonishes this institution for its role in sanctioning colonialism. Kihika states:

We went to their church. Mubia, in white robes, opened the Bible. He said: Let us kneel down to pray. We knelt down. Mubia said: Let us shut our eyes. We did. You know, his remained open so that he could read the word. When we opened our eyes, our land was gone and the sword of flames stood on guard. As for Mubia, he went on reading the word, beseeching us to lay our treasures in heaven where no moth would corrupt them. But he laid his on earth, our earth.<sup>26</sup>

Both the author and his hero, then, question the motives and actions of institutionalized religion, but at the same time they are aware that Christianity can be harnessed into a powerful moral force capable of destroying the evil that is colonialism. Peter Nazareth goes to the extent of insisting that Kihika's "moral" inspiration comes from the bible.<sup>27</sup> It must be emphasized, however, that although Kihika views himself as a modern Christ, his acceptance of Christianity is not unqualified. He takes Christianity and modifies it to suit the needs of the Kenyan people. Consider the following passage:

We only hit back. You are struck on the left cheek. You turn the right cheek. One, two, three--sixty years. Then suddenly, it is always sudden, you say: I am not turning the other cheek any more. Your back to the wall, you strike back. You trust your manhood and hope it will keep you at it. Do you think we like scuffling for food with hyenas and monkeys in the forest? I, too, have known the comfort of a warm fire and a woman's love by the fireside.... I despise the weak. Let them be trampled to death. I spit on the weakness of our fathers. Their memory gives me no pride. And even today, tomorrow, the weak and those with feeble hearts shall be wiped from the earth. The strong shall rule.... These are not words of a mad man. Not words, not even miracles could make Pharaoh let the children of Israel go. But at midnight, the Lord smote all the first-

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<sup>26</sup>. Ngugi, *A Grain* p. 18.

<sup>27</sup>. Peter Nazareth, "Is *A Grain of Wheat* a Socialist Novel?" *Critical Perspectives on Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, ed. G.D. Killam (Washington: Three Continents, 1984) p. 256.

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born of the captive that was in dungeon. And all the first-born of the cattle. And the following day, he let them go. That is our aim. Strike terror in their midst.<sup>28</sup>

The extract has an intertextual relationship with the Book of Exodus and the Sermon on the Mount, but it is readily apparent that neither the spirit nor the sentiments expressed here are consonant with the tenets of Christianity. "The use of biblical text and typology," as Sharma declares, displays "a curious and baffling ambivalence;"<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, it becomes clear towards the end of the novel that Kihika, in the main, advocates a combination of the militant, Old Testament brand of Christianity and the Christlike martyrdom of self as the principles that will free Kenya from the shackles of colonialism. Not only does Kihika make the people aware of these principles, but he acts on them. Thus Ngugi has created his hero in such a manner that the reader has no hesitation in accepting the villagers' view that Kihika's martyrdom was justly obtained.

It is important to note that Kihika, while upholding all the values that the author reveres, still convinces as a character. In *Petals of Blood*, Karega, who performs a similar function, languishes into a type. Kihika, fortunately, does not degenerate in this manner because he is drawn with greater care. Although Ngugi's endorsement of Kihika's actions is total, this does not prevent the author from giving Kihika some human foibles. General R. complains that Kihika talked too much while the others fought. There is more than a touch of presumption and arrogance when Kihika instructs Mugo to help the Mau Mau without ensuring that Mugo is willing to risk his life for a cause he had never intended to join. Then, there are the other failings which Killam has identified: "a certain pomposity about him and a tendency to show off, to draw attention to himself."<sup>30</sup> These peccadillos, while not robbing Kihika of the exemplary qualities he otherwise displays, certainly succeed in humanizing him.

In spite of Maughan Brown's strenuous efforts to prove otherwise,<sup>31</sup> it is patent that Ngugi emphasizes, in *A Grain of Wheat*, that violence is an inevitable, even necessary corollary to a liberation struggle. This view, however is not shared by Khushwant Singh: the policemen who perpetrate violence are bullies and the individuals

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<sup>28</sup>. Ngugi, *A Grain* p. 216-17.

<sup>29</sup>. Govind Narain Sharma, "Ngugi's Christian Vision: Theme and Pattern in *A Grain of Wheat*." *Critical Perspectives on Ngugi wa Thiong'o*, ed. G.D. Killam (Washington: Three Continents, 1984) p. 203.

<sup>30</sup>. G.D. Killam, *An Introduction to the Writings of Ngugi* (London: Heinemann, 1980) p. 58.

<sup>31</sup>. David Maughan Brown, *Land, Freedom, and Fiction: History and Ideology in Kenya* (London: Zed, 1985) p. 230-65.

like Sher who regard themselves as politicians and revolutionaries are cowards; it does not follow, however, that his entire work is an unremitting exposure of violence and political chicanery. Khushwant Singh views himself as a responsible satirist; as a consequence, he does not make ridicule an end in itself, but balances his criticism by invoking certain norms that are placed in opposition to these aberrations.

In *The Nightingale*, these values are located in Sabhrai, and Khushwant Singh's portrayal of her gives the lie to Kulshrestha's conclusion that "an utter indifference to values"<sup>32</sup> is essentially a part of the author's world view. Sabhrai is portrayed in a manner reminiscent of Nyakinyua, a character in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, but there are certain differences. She does not possess the powerful personality which allows Nyakinyua to make a whole community act according to her wishes, but like Ngugi's heroine, Sabhrai upholds ancient virtues; and although her range of influence is small, within these limits she is supreme.

What makes Sabhrai different from the other members of her family is her integrity. While Buta Singh and Sher Singh have no real convictions (even their nationalism is open to doubt), and are devious in their pursuit of political power, no such charge could be levelled at Sabhrai. She is deeply anchored to Sikh traditions, rituals, and beliefs, and the tenacity with which she maintains these beliefs allows her to transcend the mediocrity and hypocrisy that are so much a part of the more "educated" members of her household. Her attitude to life, controlled as it is by the dictates of the Guru, might appear reductionist, and it is too simplistic to suggest that the author recommends a total emulation of her principles. Yet in a novel that is mainly concerned with the repudiation of the false values held by aspiring politicians, Sabhrai serves as the moral criterion against which these other peccant characters are judged.

Although Ngugi establishes Kihika's strengths from the beginning, he only gradually informs the reader that Mugo has the propensity to be a leader. Khushwant Singh chooses the latter option in his delineation of Sabhrai. Initially, the reader recognizes in Sabhrai a "simple," peasant woman who except for her homespun wisdom has little to offer the novel. It is only when her son is jailed that Sabhrai's true nature surfaces. At this point, she is able to prove Taylor's comment that Sabhrai "has the dignity of an ancient people,"<sup>33</sup> and the ability to perform acts of courage and sacrifice that make her what her husband and son could never be, a true hero. Taylor promises that Sher will be freed if he turns King's evidence and reveals the names of the other terrorists who killed the police informer. Buta Singh, horrified that Sher has jeopardized his chances of being mentioned in the New Year's Honour's list, is adamant that his son should act accordingly. Sabhrai, however, seeks counsel of the Guru.

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<sup>32</sup>. Kulshrestha p. 124.

<sup>33</sup>. Khushwant Singh, *op.cit.* p. 220.

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The passage in chapter ten which describes Sabhrai's visit to the Golden Temple is one of the most moving in the entire novel. Khushwant Singh not only creates the environment of a place of worship, but he also captures the mental torment that Sabhrai undergoes as she tries to obtain direction from the gods. Her predicament is certainly disturbing. If Sher does not confess, he will be subjected to further physical harassment, and as a mother she recoils from placing her son in such a situation. But if Sher gives the names of the others, he will become a traitor. Sabhrai finally chooses the former course, and the reasons which prompted her to take this decision are given in the following quotation:

Sabhrai also recalled the terrible days when the Sikhs wanted to take over their shrines from the clutches of corrupt priests and the police had decided to help the priests against the people. They had killed and tortured passive resisters. But for each one who was killed, beaten, or imprisoned, another fifty had come. Word had gone round that whenever a band of passive resisters prayed with faith, the Guru himself would appear in their midst and all the lathi blows the police showered on them would fall on him and not on them. That was exactly how it had happened. Frail men and women, who had not known the lash of a harsh tongue, had volunteered and taken merciless beatings without wincing. The police had tired and the priests had panicked. The faith of the Sikhs had triumphed. Was her faith shaking? She tried to dismiss all other thoughts and bring the picture of the last warrior Guru to her mind. He came as he was in the color print on her mantlepiece: a handsome bearded cavalier in a turban, riding his roan stallion across a stream... *There was a man. He had lost all his four sons and refused to give in to injustice. She was to lose only one. How had the Guru faced the loss of his children?... She was a Sikh; so was her son. Why did she ever have any doubts?*<sup>34</sup>

Sher too relives the halcyon days of the Sikhs, but there is a crucial difference in the postures adopted by mother and son. Sher surrounds himself with all the insignia of Sikh heroes because he feels that these will give him a martial air. Sabhrai, on the other hand, sees in the past an inspiration for present action. In earlier times, Sikhs had encountered greater oppression and had come through victorious; consequently, there was no reason why her son could not emulate his sires. Khushwant Singh's treatment of Sabhrai makes it plain that the mantle of the Sikh warriors of old falls neither on the would-be hero Sher, nor on his pompous father Buta, but on a person who constantly describes herself as "an illiterate native woman."<sup>35</sup> Sabhrai's heroism reaches its

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<sup>34</sup>. *Ibid.* p. 203-04.

<sup>35</sup>. Khushwant Singh p. 208.

apogee, when on her visit to Sher's cell, she admonishes her son thus:

He [the Guru] said that my son had done wrong. But if he named the people who were with him he would be doing a greater wrong. He was no longer to be regarded as a Sikh and I was not to see him again.<sup>36</sup>

There is no way of discovering whether Sher would have acted on the Guru's advice. Joyce Taylor's admiration for Sabhrai is such that she persuades her husband to release Sher before the latter could face his interrogators. Ironically, Joyce Taylor's kind gesture brings about Sabhrai's death. Sher and his supporters are so thrilled at the knowledge that they have been "victorious" over the Raj that they disturb Sabhrai on a crucial day of her convalescence, and this leads to her fatal relapse. Her tragedy is brought about by the fact that, except for some maudlin, rhetorical flourishes by Buta Singh after her death, she dies an unsung hero while her cowardly son wins all the kudos.

C.D. Narasimhaiah<sup>37</sup> once declared that "Commonwealth Literature ... affords unprecedented opportunities for the critic to compare works from two or more cultures, not in the attempt to locate affinities (which is a very glib thing to do), but to learn to appreciate differences."<sup>37</sup> A comparative study of the motif of leadership in *A Grain of Wheat* and *The Nightingale*, while endorsing Narasimhaiah's observations, also proves that the points of convergence are equally important. It is not a coincidence, for instance, that Khushwant Singh should deride an individual who has Marxist pretensions and laud another who advocates stoic endurance and passive resistance against adversity. As Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura*<sup>38</sup> so amply demonstrates, the struggle for Independence from Britain in India was greatly influenced by Gandhi's non-violent campaign. Although Gandhi's representative in *Kanthapura*, Moorthy, is disenchanted with the movement at the end of the novel and decides to become a socialist, his followers still cling to Gandhi's creed. Sabhrai is not portrayed as a *satyagrahi per se*, yet she subscribes to the same values, values that are reinforced by her own Sikh traditions. *A Grain of Wheat* for its part ends with images of fertility and creation, but Gikonyo's concluding vision, and the prospect of his reconciliation with Mumbi does nothing to take away the notion that the change for the better was at least in part brought about by the efforts of Kihika and the other Mau Mau fighters. Although Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Khushwant Singh are post-colonial novelists, they are decidedly not heirs

<sup>36</sup>. Khushwant Singh p. 208-09.

<sup>37</sup>. C.D. Narasimhaiah, "Why Commonwealth Literature?" *Alien Voice: Perspectives on Commonwealth Literature*, ed. Avadesh K. Srivastara. Lucknow: Print House (1981) p.7.

<sup>38</sup>. Raja Rao, *Kanthapura* (New York: James Laughlin, 1963).

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to the same ethos, and their different heritage is reflected in the novelistic strategies they employ.

To focus on the contrasts, however, is not to belittle the similarities without which no comparative study is possible. Both Ngugi and Khushwant Singh grapple with issues that were common to many colonies fighting for Independence such as the importance of religion in a freedom struggle, the nature of charismatic leadership, and the strained relationship between nationalist sentiment on the one hand and individual desires on the other. Perhaps Khushwant Singh does not possess the same range as his Kenyan counterpart, but his contribution is equally noteworthy because he penetrates the facade that pseudo heroes display and exposes the sham beneath. Both writers, in the main, avoid the use of stereotype and display a willingness to experiment in their depiction of exceptional individuals or of those who have heroic pretensions. At best, they play on the reader's expectations of what a leader or hero should be and then proceed to exceed or subvert these expectations. Small wonder, then, that an intertextual analysis of their work becomes a task that is considerably rewarding.

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