

RECLAIMING POWER THROUGH THE METAPHOR OF
LAND: A POSTCOLONIAL JOURNEY IN NGŪĠ WA
THIONGO'S *WEEP NOT, CHILD*

Sonal Gupta

B. A. (H) English, Amity School of Languages

Amity University, Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow

Archana Gupta

Assistant Professor, Amity School of Languages

Amity University, Lucknow

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Abstract

Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's Weep Not, Child can be interpreted in multiple ways and examined through different lenses. It is a tale of resilience of Kenyans against the colonial rule. It is also a tale of conflict between hope and disillusionment in the face of adversity. The novella's emphasis on the importance of education in unravelling the political hegemonical exploitation of the natives and helps in asserting one's identity. At the same time, it makes an appeal to the readers to recognise the importance of one's roots for aid and constant support. Ngũgĩ's Weep Not Child is one of the memorable pieces in which he celebrates the strength of family, friendship, kinship and community in one's life. Through oral storytelling, myths and folklores, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o vividly portrays the significance of land and its connection to one's identity and power. While most of the narrative depicts the oppression faced by blacks and the existing disparity between the two races, some parts of the novel also emphasize on bridging the gap between the two races and the possibility of reconciliation and harmony in their life.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Education, Oral Storytelling, Land, Optimism, Disillusionment, Myths, Race, Racism, White Man's Burden, Colonial Conflict, Universalism, Non-separatism

Africa saw a turbulent time during the colonial era which was characterised by the imposition of foreign power, exploitation of resources, and the repression of indigenous traditions. In this context, *Weep Not, Child*, a novel by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, provides a moving portrayal of the challenges encountered by the Kenyan people during colonial subjugation. The novel is set in a Kenyan village during the 1952-1960 Emergency. The Mau Mau uprising began in 1952 as a reaction to injustices imposed by the British in Kenya. With the Mau Mau uprising set as a backdrop in the novel, it navigates the political terrain to highlight the hopes and difficulties of the natives aching for freedom.

The protagonist of Thiong'o's story is Njoroge, whose unwavering desire for education serves as an oasis of hope in the face of hardship. The novel is a critical investigation of Njoroge's journey to aspire for education and become one with the Whites. He encounters myriad challenges during his journey such as the loss of land, friendship and family, and the significance of the nation's collective identity. In addition to this, the tale becomes more complex by highlighting the contrast between idealism and realism, as represented by the central characters like Njoroge and Mwihaki. Through the characters of Njoroge and Stephen, the novel highlights the need to focus on reconciliation, resilience even amidst turbulent conditions existing between the two races.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's debut novel, *Weep Not, Child*, follows the life of Njoroge, a young boy in Kenya during the country's struggle for independence. Njoroge's aspirations for education and betterment are challenged by the turmoil surrounding him. He faces familial tensions, particularly due to his father's clashes with a wealthy farmer collaborating with the colonizers. Njoroge's dreams of getting education and helping his family are disrupted by the involvement of his brothers in the Mau Mau rebellion. Despite his determination, Njoroge's life spirals downward with his father's death, his brothers' political entanglements, and his own struggles to find employment. His last hope of eloping with his love, Mwhaki, is dashed when she chooses to stay with her mother towards the end of the novel. Feeling abandoned and desperate, Njoroge attempts suicide but is saved by the sense of familial duties. He is awakened to senses by the call of his mother Nyokabi.

The title *Weep Not, Child* draws on Walt Whitman's poem "On the Beach at Night," where the speaker urges the child not to cry amidst the turbulent storm, assuring him that it will soon pass. In a broader sense, the novel's title signifies the hope that supports its characters amidst the brutality and hardships of the Mau Mau revolt. Like the child on the beach, Njoroge and Mwhaki strive to focus on the forthcoming peace rather than the current turmoil. The beautiful and encouraging lines from Whitman's poem are: Weep not, child; Weep not, my darling; With these kisses let me remove your tears; The ravening clouds shall not be long victorious; They shall not long possess the sky. (Whitman, 1856)

These lines aptly fit in the context of the novel and make the title *Weep Not Child* centrally linked to the theme of it.

Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, a prominent Kenyan academician and writer, is renowned for his advocacy of African languages and his literary works in *ikũyũ*, a Bantu language spoken in Kenya. Born in 1938, he currently holds the position of a Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine. His academic background and literary contributions have established him as a leading figure in post-colonial theory and African Literature.

In 1970s, Ngũgĩ faced imprisonment by the Kenyan government for his involvement in the play *Ngaabika Ndeenda* (*I Will Marry When I Want*), which he co-wrote in *Gikũyũ*. The play, critical of post-colonial Kenyan society, was perceived as a threat by the government and led to Ngũgĩ's incarceration. Following his release, he lived in exile for over two decades due to threats to his safety in Kenya. One of Ngũgĩ's most influential works is *Decolonising the Mind*, published in 1986. In this book, he argues for the importance of linguistic decolonization, advocating for the revival and preservation of native African languages that were suppressed during the colonial era. He contends that language is a crucial tool for reclaiming cultural identity and resisting the legacy of colonialism.

The protagonist of Ngũgĩ's novel *Weep Not, Child*, Njoroge, is often seen as a reflection of the author himself. The novel, structured as a Bildungsroman, follows Njoroge's journey of self-discovery and resistance against colonial

oppression. Through Njoroge's experiences, Ngũgĩ explores themes of identity, education, and the impact of colonialism on African societies. Ngũgĩ's own experiences with language suppression in Kenyan schools, where students were punished for speaking native languages, are reflected in *Weep Not, Child*. This aspect of the novel highlights the dehumanizing effects of colonial language policies, which sought to undermine African languages and elevate colonial languages as superior.

Njoroge's constant pursuit of education is a recurring motif of hope amidst Kenya's struggle against colonial oppression. Njoroge, an ordinary Kenyan child, grows up with a vision: a vision to get education for himself, a light to his home, and an escape route for his country from ruin. His character embodies the conflicts and challenges faced by the Kenyan people as they strive for a better future amidst colonial oppression. The narrative of the novel is presented through Njoroge. He is full of happiness and gratitude when he discovers that he would start going to school. He receives immense support from his family as they believe his education can bring out crucial change in the society. While his mother, Njeri finds his education to be "the greatest reward she would get from her motherhood", his father, Ngotho considers education a tool which can help his child get his land back (Thiong'o, 1964:32). Owing to these sentiments of his family, Njoroge sees himself destined for something big and consequential in time of inconsequence.

The practice of oral storytelling is a vibrant and integral part of Kenya's cultural heritage. It encompasses a wide range of traditions, including myths, legends, folktales, proverbs and histories, which are passed down from one generation to the other through spoken words rather than written text. As Ms. V. Anushya Devi explains: African literature never attained popularity or fame in the early years because its literary texts were offered orally. The texts reflect the ties that the Africans enjoyed with the Plants and animals, the rivers and rocks for every aspect of nature was significant in the life of African people. Tribal members were taught by example; those guiding principles were not memorized in formal lessons but were internalized from childhood and became a part of their daily lives. Their literary expressions were oral in nature for they did not have formal written script.

Thus, oral literature derives its form from its tradition of performances, which incorporated stylistic devices used by these narrators who skilfully captured and held the attention of their audience. Ngũgĩ's fiction portrays oral traditions of his culture. He makes use of myths, legends and folklores. Ngũgĩ explores devices of oral traditions for the purpose of the preservation and projection of socio-cultural heritage and to teach moral values. (Devi, 2019)

In the similar way, Ngũgĩ also projects the socio-cultural background of Kenya through his literary works. *Weep Not, Child* is his masterpiece in which he beautifully depicts the storytelling tradition of the natives through his characters.

The protagonist of the novel, Njoroge learns about his roots from his father Ngotho's stories. Ngotho, the patriarchal head of the family recites how his ancestors, Gikuyu and Mumbi received the gift of land from the creator, Murungu. Upon learning this, Njoroge questions his father "where did the land go?" (Thiong'o, 1964:60). The question hints that the child is not even aware that Blacks are the actual owners of the land, and the Whites are mere settlers. His favourite book was the Bible which made him acquainted with Adam, Eve, and Moses. The naïve child comes to believe that the Blacks are the chosen people of God and the Gikuyu people were no different than the children of Israel who were eventually rescued by Moses. Even when his family descends into turmoil and faces financial crisis because of the fight between Ngotho and Jacobo who is a black man with colonial mindset, Njoroge continues learning. The author states:

Through all this, Njoroge was still sustained by his love for and belief in education and his own role when time came. And the difficulties of home seemed to have sharpened this appetite. Only education could make something out of this wreckage. He became more faithful to his studies. He would one day use all his learning to fight the white man, for he would continue the work that his father started. When these moments caught him, he actually saw himself as a possible saviour of the whole God's country. Just let him get learning. (Thiong'o, 1964: 92).

On the one hand, it makes one applaud the resilience and dedication of the child, but on the other hand, it also evokes sympathy for the child as he carries the sole responsibility of bringing reform in his native land. It also encourages readers to think about the ill-consequences of such happenings taking place around the child of such tender age. Ultimately, such incidents do culminate into fatal results and lead to life changing actions of the central characters.

Njoroge's journey towards his goal of getting education, motivated by the support of his family and village, reflects the enduring connection between modernity and tradition. It also illustrates how one's roots to his home and family provide essential support during times of adversity and change. Njoroge's education was financially supported by his brother Kamau, a carpenter. Furthermore, when he gets admitted in Siriana high school everyone from his village contributes money so that he can continue his studies. The author states, "He was no longer the son of Ngotho but the son of the land." (Thiong'o, 1964:113). These acts beautifully portray one's strong sense of belongingness and connectedness to one's roots despite outside turmoil. The human being is sustained by such rootedness when everything else seems to have fallen apart. The constant changing time and the advent of modernity can make one adapt oneself as per the needs of the situation, but one will always come back to one's own traditions and values for support and belongingness. The stark contrast between the values of the colonizers and the natives of Kenya is

rightfully established by the writer by highlighting the difference between the families of Mr. Howland, the Englishman in the novel and Ngotho, the native: Whereas the family of Ngotho is strongly knit together, the relationships between the members of Mr. Howlands's family are loose. The only passion for the 'rational' Mr. Howlands is his farm, and he considers his wife and children as valuable only in so far as they contribute to the farming. Likewise, his wife, his and his daughter leave the country and go back to England after the emergency is declared, leaving Mr. Howlands in such a moment of crisis alone. In contrast, Njoroge and his brothers always think about the upliftment of their family and never think of only their personal benefits; even Njoroge's dream of attaining education is based on his desire to uplift his family and even the black community from their present suffering. (Chakrabarti, 2008)

In this way, Ngũgĩ stresses on the possibility of restoring the natives' faith in cultural values and love for community and how it makes them different from the West.

The profound sense of betrayal and disillusionment felt by Kenyans is encapsulated in Ngotho's tragic realisation that the British were not the benevolent individuals as they projected themselves initially. He says, "They are not the gods we had thought them to be" (Thiong'o, 1964:26). The disillusioned colonised man Ngotho's statement clearly describes the sense of disappointment which the Kenyans felt when they realised that the British were not saviours but perpetrators. This realisation marks a pivotal shift in their attitude towards the Englishmen and lays bare the colonial and hegemonical practices exercised on the natives. It leads the natives towards the path of freedom and the reclamation of their cultural identity. The realization dawned on them very late that the white men were not there to civilize them. Neither the west is civilised and superior nor is the east barbaric and inferior. As Edward Said rightly said, "We cannot fight for our rights and our history as well as future until we are armed with weapons of criticism and dedicated consciousness" (Said, 2007:233). Said's call for a critical awareness and consciousness to fight for rights, history, and a more equitable future fits rightly in the narrative.

The profound significance of land in Ngotho's cultural identity becomes a poignant symbol of the broader dispossession experienced by the African community. It also reflects how the loss of land deepens disillusionment and raises doubts about the possibility of a better future in the face of colonial oppression. Ngotho supports his son's dream of getting education and breaking free from the chains of poverty. He looks at education as a tool to get back his land. Ngotho is one of the major characters who is very close to his roots and feels connected to his ancestors solely through their lands. Thus, land holds a lot of importance in Gikuyu culture, and it becomes a prominent metaphor for reclaiming one's past and sense of belongingness. In the novel it is a recurring image to heighten the pain and trauma faced by the natives. In the similar way, the renowned South African writer Alan Paton also portrays 'land' as a character itself in his award-winning novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*. It plays an

important role in building up relationships, bringing harmony and retrieving one's lost identity. In Paton's novel, the protagonist Stephen Kumalo's quest for his sister and son turns to be a unified mission for searching his "own" people whose departure from their native land to the city of Johannesburg leads to the loss of their identity and doom. As Fanon rightly explains, "For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity." (Fanon, 1963) The British control over the native lands did not only displace the colonised natives physically but also psychologically. The importance of education lies not only in career-making but also being aware about getting one's rights and identity back. However, one needs to realise that revolutions are not brought over night, but it takes years to succeed. Things go downhill when KAU leader Jomo Kenyatta gets arrested. Nguni, who put too much faith in Njoroge's education and Jomo, feels defeated when the strike fails. His impulsive actions eventually land him and his family in trouble. His land is taken away by the white settlers, stripping him of his dignity and self-sufficiency. His loss of land symbolizes the broader dispossession experienced by the African community.

The arrival of white settlers in Kenya showcases an ironical situation. The people who were seeking refuge from their own hardships in their homeland end up subjecting the natives to the similar fate or even worse than that in their colonies. Mr. Bwana Howlands, a white settler, is the owner of Nguni's land. He escapes from England and relocates himself in Kenya hoping to have a better life. However, white settlers who had escaped their motherland to avoid wars and difficult circumstances exercise the same domination and exploitation over the natives of Kenya. They interfered in political, economic, social and cultural affairs of the people. For instance, they did not allow natives to grow cash crops except tobacco. However, they expected tobacco to be their puppet and when time came, tobacco returns their favour by deserting his own people and supporting the Whites. Mr. Howlands receives gratifying pleasure after witnessing that "the blacks were destroying the blacks" (Thiong'o, 1964: 106). He even goes on to compare the black men with donkeys or horses working in his farm. The whites did not even consider the blacks as humans but mere creatures who were created to serve them eternally. Here, Mr. Howlands becomes an epitome of "negrophobe". Frantz Fanon defines, "Negrophobes exist. It is not hatred of the Negro, however, that motivates them; they lack the courage for that, or they have lost it. Hate is not inborn; it has to be constantly cultivated, to be brought into being, in conflict with more or less recognized guilt complexes" (Fanon, 1967). Mr. Howlands cultivates the similar hatred for the natives to overcome his own fear.

A stress on universalism (non-separatism) is illustrated in the novel as well. It "pleads for connectedness and compatibility among races and sexes in general and between the white colonizers (represented in the novel by Mr. Howlands) and the colonized black subjects (represented by Nguni), in particular. It

promotes the dividedness of all races, particularly those living in the same community” (Hassan, 2014). Both have lost their son in the world war and share the same affection for their lands. Ngũgĩ’s ancestral land was like his own child whom he has borne and reared while for Mr. Howlands it was like an adopted child. This reflects that Mr. Howlands was attached to the land emotionally too. The two races who consider each other rivals are not so different from each other in actuality. This sentiment is beautifully brought out in the narrative when Njoroge runs into Stephen, Mr. Howlands’ son, in Siriana Secondary School. Reminiscing their childhood days, they share how both wanted to interact with each other, but they never did so because they feared each other. This fear was inculcated in their minds by their families who had imposed their racist ideologies on their innocent children. It is only after their interaction they realise that they are “united by a common expression of insecurity and fear no one could see” (Thiong’o, 1964: 118). Stephen considers how prejudices and anxieties propagate within a community in this passage. He makes the argument that certain people are predisposed to hostility because of the impact of their families and their culture, which suggests that bias and hatred are more learned than innate. The inclination of Njoroge and Stephen to become friends and encourage a positive relationship implies that racial harmony is achievable. Thus, if the two races put aside their differences and inhibitions, they will realise that they have same needs, desires and fears. Only healthy communication between the two races is capable in healing their wounds which further can bridge the gap between the two worlds and bring them together for better future.

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