



## STRUGGLE OF THE PROTAGONIST AGAINST CIRCUMSTANCES IN NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S *WEEP NOT, CHILD*

M.Santhana krishan, Dr.D.Shanmugam

<sup>1\*</sup> (Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University.)

<sup>2</sup> (Associate Professor, Department of English, Annamalai University.)

Email: [santhanamvms@gmail.com](mailto:santhanamvms@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT



African writers use the history of their country, intending to reconstruct the existing society. We have been concerned with colonialism set in Kenya, as presented by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in his novel *Weep Not, Child*. The Socio-Economic forces created by the Colonial policies as presented by the author in the novel *Weep Not, Child*. The policy of land alienated has been the most determinant in Kenya at the level of causing a war: the Mau Mau war. Land is an important part of Gikuyu culture, an indicator of a family. The Protagonist in the novel, the child being told to not weep is called Njoroge. He is the son of Ngotho and Nyokabi. Njoroge's mother sends him to school to get the White man's education. He has a great hope that education will help bridge the gap of social class and a bright future life. Ngugi describes how the youth as the future and the saviours of the Kenyans were victims of the colonial policies. The young people such as Njoroge, Mwhaki and Stephan lost their parents through the wars, the Mau Mau war. The author clearly illustrates the life during the novel like Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*.

**Keywords:** *Gikuyu Culture, The Mau Mau War, Colonial Policies.*

### Citation:

**APA** Krishan, M.S. & Shanmugam, D. (2017) Struggle of the Protagonist against Circumstances in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child*. *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature- JOELL*, 4(4), 279-283.

**MLA** Krishan, M.Santhana and D.Shanmugam. "Struggle of the Protagonist against Circumstances in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child*." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature JOELL*, Vol.4, no.4, 2017, pp. 279-283.

Author(s) retain the copyright of this article

Copyright © 2017 VEDA Publications

Author(s) agree that this article remains permanently open access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License



African writers use the history of their country, intending to reconstruct the existing society. Ngugi recalls the past of Kenya to express his social perspectives. The period of Mau Mau Emergency was between 1952-62 and it was a period of mass murder and mass torture of Kenyans.

Ngugi published his first novel, *Weep Not, Child*, in 1964. It was the first novel in English to be published by a writer from East Africa.

Weep Not, Child weep not, my darling with these kisses let me remove your tears, the ravens clouds shall not be long victorious, They shall not long possess the sky..... (*On the Beach at Night*)" - By Walt Whitman

The first line of Walt Whitman's poem *On the Beach at Night* provides the title, *Weep Not, Child*. It captures the sense that the darkness can not go on for ever, which is apparent in Njoroge's attitude through out the novel.

The novel *Weep Not, Child* deals with the life of a young black boy Njoroge. It is divided into two parts and eighteen chapters. Part one describes the importance of education, in Kenya. In both parts the action takes part in the Gikuyu village of Mahua, in Kenya. The main themes are the importance of education, the revolutionary ideas of the countries and a loss of land. To Gikuyu wealth means land. Land is more important than any other materials:

Any man who had land was considered rich. If a man has plenty of money, many motor cars, but no land, he could never be counted as rich. A man who went with tattered clothes but had at least an acre of red earth was better off than the man with money (20).

It is essential to understand the novel's historical context:

The Mau Mau revolt led to Kenya's independence. Kenya was made a British protectorate in 1895. The region's rich soil and natural resources were appealing to the expanding British empire, and many colonies were established with the hope of becoming rich. A small number of British settlers held most of the country's land. Land ownership is important in

the culture of the Gikuyu, the largest tribe in Kenya. The British Land policy caused a great frustration among the Gikuyu and other tribes.

Ngotho in *Weep Not, Child* is an aged person who has to work for a settler Howlands. He hopes to get back his land through educating his son Njoroge. The whole family Njoroge's father Ngotho, his mothers Njeri and Nyokabi, his three brothers Boro, Kori and Kamau work hard to educate Njoroge. Ngotho revolts against the betrayal of Jacobo, a black land owner and the latter vows to see the destruction of Ngotho's family and succeeds in it. Ngotho dies. Njoroge's ordeal makes him attempt suicide.

A young black boy Njoroge is offered to go to school by his mother Nyokabi. She is the second wife of Ngotho. His first wife is Njeri. A man's first wife is favoured in Gikuyu custom. Ngotho is a father to Njoroge, Boro, Kamu and Mwangi. Boro and Mwangi fought in the World War II. Kamu is an apprentice to Naganga. Ngotho's wives and children get along well. Nyokabi offers her son Njoroge, a chance to go to school, something the family had never been able to afford for his older sibling. Njoroge is delighted to get education. He has a hope, ambition and vision for a bright future life. They have a hope to become as rich as either Jacobo, a wealthy and educated local villager or Mr. Howlands, an English man who had lived among the community for a long time: "Njoroge always thought that schooling was the very best that a boy could have. It was the end of all living. And he wanted everyone to go to school" (40).

Ngotho feels proud that his son Njoroge will be educated like the daughter of a man Jacobo. Struggle in the lives of the protagonists, Isanusi in *Two Thousand Seasons* Densu in *The Healers*, Mugo in *A Grain of Wheat* and Njoroge in *Weep Not, child* is caused by the external forces around them and the sufferings of the protagonists are observed by other characters in the novels.

Njoroge wants to educate himself to serve his people. To Njoroge the conflict is caused by his father Ngotho who antagonizes Jacobo, a black land owner. Ngotho is a man of wisdom and the tribes always respect him and any decision in the village is taken according to his advice. He is a talented farmer



and even his landlord Mr.Howlands, a white appreciates his tireless effort and movement to cultivate the land. When people call on strike against the masters to get fair wages, Jacobo takes sides with Howland. Ngotho attacks Jacobo for which he has to pay heavily. From that moment onwards destruction of Ngotho's family becomes the aim of Jacobo and Howlands and the conflict in Njoroge's life begins. The problem in the novel is that there are some people be they black or white who don't want others to rise above them. Njoroge has to suffer throughout the novel for the impulsive anger of his father where as Mugo in *A Grain of wheat* has to suffer the agony of his own sin committed in the early part of his life.

Njoroge enjoys learning from his teacher Isaka. The rich man Jacobo's daughter Mwhiki makes friendship with Njoroge. They talk about their parents. Both of them fear their parents, even though they are good children. Njoroge recalls a time that an Indian boy tried to befriend him by giving him a piece of candy and his mother made him throw it on the ground. When Njoroge and Mwhiki pass Mr.Howlands house, Njoroge mentions that his father works there, and they speak around the fact that whites own land that once belonged to the blacks: "Njoroge did not want to be like his father working for a white man, or worse, for an Indian" (46). Mwhiki mentions her father's belief that the natives were robbed because they were uneducated. Njoroge and his father Ngotho believe that education is the most important pursuit, although Ngotho thinks that "education is good only because it would lead to the recovery of lost lands" (40).

Ngotho tells stories about how white man came to Kenya and then stole their land. Boro wants to know why his father continues working for the man Mr.Howlands who took his land. Mr. Howlands brings his wife Suzanne or Memsahib, to Kenya, hoping to find inner peace there. He has three children. The eldest son Peter, was killed in the World War II, and his daughter became a missionary. The youngest, Stephen, still lives with them.

The struggle in the life of Njoroge arises due to the colonial pressure. The struggle symbolizes the sufferings of the exploited class caused by the black masters though, of course there are vivid descriptions of the ruthless activities of the whites.

So the focus is on social discrimination and not on racial differences. The struggle faced by the protagonist also represents the collective consciousness of the people.

Njoroge is the only black boy in the area to pass and progress to high school education. Mwhiki also passes but she will attend a teacher's training college. One day, a school for European boys competes against Njoroge's school in foot ball. The white boy Stephen wants to talk to the black boys. Something prevents people of different races and classes from interacting with each other. But Njoroge assures Stephen that the tension will one day pass and Kenya will be peaceful again. "It's strange. It's strange how you do fear something because your heart is already prepared to fear because may be you were brought up to fear that something, or simply because you found others fearing..."(121).

The two boys discover that their previous lack of interaction was due to shyness, not animosity. Stephen thinks that fears and prejudices spread within a community. The author suggests that hatred and prejudice seem more inherent than unnatural.

The men of Mahua gather to discuss political affairs. They plan a strike to involve all black people who work under white people or the British colonial government to raise a pay. Boro and his friend Kiarie also participated in the rally. Ngotho attempts to attack a rich black man Jacobo, and a violent riot begins there. Ngotho has lost his job. His family becomes homeless, Nganga the carpenter allows them to set up new huts on his land. Kamau and Kori help Njoroge's education. The revolutionary leader Jomo is arrested. Jacobo has become a chief. Mr .Howlands has become the district officer:

All white people stick together. But we black people are very divided. And because they stick together, they' Ve imprisoned Jomo, the only hope we had. Now they' ll make us slaves. They took us to their wars and they killed all that was of value to us... (82)

Mr. Howlands delights in how the divisions among Africans have made it easier for the British to oppress them. Jacobo tells Mr. Howlands that he believes Ngotho and Boro are secretly participating in



the rebellion. Ngotho might be the secret head of the Mau Mau. Mr. Howlands instructs him to arrest Ngotho and his sons. Njeri and Kori are also arrested. Ngotho pays fine, but only Njeri is released. Kamu becomes the family's support. One day Kamu tells Njoroge that six villagers including Nganga and the barber have been taken into the forest and murdered. Everyone in the village avoids Mwhiki because she is Jacobo's daughter. Mwhiki wonders why Jesus did not prevent the violence in their country. Njoroge has a strong faith in God. He replies that God works in mysterious ways. They speculate about whether Gikuya are being punished for some one's sins. Mwhiki is a symbol of innocent victim.

Isaka brings Njoroge and other youths to a church. He insists Njoroge that he would never join the Mau Mau because he has devoted his life to Jesus. The officers bring Isaka into the forest and shoot him. Njoroge feels sick. The officers were actually looking for Boro and his guerillas, who are staked out in the forest. Boro thinks about his brother Mwangi, who died in the World War II. In fact, his entire life is devoted to avenging Mwangi's death. He believes that killing Jacobo will serve this goal.

Jacobo takes Ngotho's attack on him as a public humiliation and exploits his power that he entertains as the richest black landowner of the place. Jacobo being a rich man does not want others to become rich because he wants to be the only man with wealth. He joins Mr. Howland the white land lord and schemes to see Ngotho family ruined. The family is ruined from where they live because the place belongs to Jacobo. Ngotho is dismissed from his job by Howlands. The family suffers from acute poverty and in spite of all these calamities, Njoroge is optimistic about the future. "Njoroge had always been a dreamer, a visionary who consoled himself faced by the difficulties of the moment by a look at a better day to come"(120). He hopefully says that he is going to serve his country after completing his studies. Unfortunately he is forced to discontinue his studies at Sirianna because of Jacobo. Njoroge does not directly do anything to fall a victim to the struggle that he is entangled with where as Mugo in *A Grain of Wheat* is the sole reason for his sufferings.

One day the headmaster pulls Njoroge out of class to tell him that his family has been involved in a "sad business" and that he must remain open to Christ. He hands over Njoroge to the Police. They put Njoroge in prison and give a cruel, inhuman treatment. Then he is released from the prison. He knows that his father Ngotho protects his eldest son Boro, the real leader of the Mau Mau war. Njoroge's brother Boro kills Mr. Howlands, who is another important white landlord of the village. Therefore Boro is executed. Kamau has also been imprisoned for life time. Only Njoroge and his two mothers remain in the family. Njoroge tells Mwhiki that he loves her. Mwhiki confesses that she too loves him. Njoroge proposes to run away to Uganda together, as she once proposed. She insists they must stay because they have a duty to make a brighter future for their country. He feels forsaken by everything he once cared for – education – God, country and Mwhiki.

Mwhiki is the source of strength to Njoroge. Mwhiki the daughter of Jacobo loves Njoroge and he is surprised at her benign attitude towards him. He seeks solace and assistance from Mwhiki. Jacobo is the root cause of Njoroge's sufferings, yet Mwhiki continues to shower love and affection on Njoroge. He wonders "How could she be Jacobo's daughter" (86). The pure love between Njoroge and Mwhiki centrally proves resilient: "Her world and Njoroge's world stood somewhere outside petty prejudices, hatreds and class differences"(97). The end of the novel conveys a message that love may endure, but that it cannot change a person's circumstances. They are bound by a stronger sense of duty to their parents and their country. The concept of land for Kenyans and the exploitation of workers and the impact of the wars on the contemporary youth suffer from the neocolonialism. Njoroge decides to commit suicide. He has lost his family, education, faith in God, love and his country. He is a dreamer, visioner and saviour of his family and country. He feels guilty for shirking his father's last command, which was to take care of his mothers. He thinks that he is a coward, because he could not change the society.

Njoroge clings on to the hope that "he might find an anchor in Mwhiki".(135) Her presence alone



makes him forget his distress. Endless physical as well as psychological torture depresses Njoroge and even then he considers only Mwihaki as his last hope left. He says "Mwihaki, you are the one dear thing left to me. I feel bound to you and I know that I can fully depend on you. I have no hope left but for you, for now I know that my tomorrow was an illusion". (132)

Though this novel lacks the complexity and intrigued introspection that one finds in *A Grain of wheat*, Ngugi has successfully unfolded the struggle of the protagonist and also how he confronts it. Njoroge who begins his life as an optimist, who believes in tomorrow ends up as a pessimist saying "All was a dream. We can only live today" (133). This transition is convincingly drawn by Ngugi through the narrative strategies. The suffering of Njoroge is indicated by "darkness" in the novel.

There is a contrast between light and darkness. The two sections of the novel move from "Waning Light" to "Darkness Falls" [Titles of the two divisions of the novel.] The confrontation of struggle changes Njoroge's attitude towards life. His brothers Boro and Kamau are sentenced to death for being members of Mau Mau rebellion which was begun by the natives to get what is due to them: a normal justified organization. Even a casual visit to Jacobo's house which is compelled by Mwihaki makes Njoroge a culprit associated with the murder of Jacobo and later Mwihaki herself refuses to see him. He understands the world now. His concept of life changes; he learns through his unpleasant and humiliating experiences. To this learning Njoroge has to pay heavily, his father's death, his brother's education and the discontinuation of his education: All these experiences now come to Njoroge as shocks that showed him a different world from that he had believed himself living in.

Njoroge's final resort is Mwihaki but she too refuses to go along with him and reminds him of his duty to others. He felt betrayed and attempts to hang himself. Fortunately his mother saves him and the moment he is saved he feels guilty, the guilt of a man who had avoided responsibility for which he had prepared himself from his childhood. The delineation of conflict and the confrontation of the protagonist shows one the way to heal the society. Njoroge's

attempt to hang himself and later his regret may enlighten the younger generation of the day.

#### WORK CITED

- [1]. ThioG'O Wa NGuGi. *Weep Not, Child*. London: Heinemann, 1964.
- [2]. Howard, W.J. "Themes and Development in the Novels of Ngugi," *The Critical Evaluation of African Literature*, ed. Edgar Wright. London: Heinemann, 1973.
- [3]. Killam, G.D. *An Introduction to the Writing of Ngugi*: London: Heinemann, 1980.
- [4]. Brett, E.A. *Colonialism and Underdevelopment in East Africa*. London: Heinemann, 1973.
- [5]. Kinyatti, Maina – Wa. "Mau Mau: The Peak of Political Organization and Struggle for Liberation in Colonial Kenya" *UFAHAMU*, XII, 3 (1983), 90-123.