

## The Kenyan Struggle for Independence in *Weep Not, Child*: A Study

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### Abstract

Freedom in the postcolonial writings finds the prime position and wins the attention of the readers around the world. *Weep Not, Child* (1964), Ngugi's second written but first published novel focuses on Kenya's struggle for freedom from British rule and the effect of the struggle on the lives of individuals within the Kenyan context. . The novel portrays an important phase in the Kenyan struggle for independence when Western education was still looked upon by the Kenyans as a possible solution to their ills under colonialism.

**Key Words:** Slavery, Struggle, Freedom, Education, Culture

Freedom struggle takes place as a revolt against slavery led by the British. After colonizing Kenya as also some other parts of Africa, the British asserted that they had come to bring progress and enlightenment to the people who had no social, political, cultural or economic status in the comity of nations. There were no classes in Kenyan society at that time. There were only different ethnic groups with varied styles of political and economic organization. Because of lack of means of communication, they lived in isolation from each other. The mode of production was subsistence oriented and was based on a commercial system of labour utilization, which was either voluntary or obligatory or both. The missionaries started showing various aspects of African culture, their dances, songs, images of god and their rituals as primitive. Such wholesale

condemnation of Kenyan culture and tradition was not only desirable but perhaps essential from the point of view of the colonizing British, because although their ulterior aim was to get at the people's land other Kenyan resources, it would not have been either complete or secure without control over Kenya's cultural environment, its religious system, its education system, its literature and its music. British missionaries preceded the colonial administrator and asserted soon after their arrival in Kenya that the various Kenyan tribes had no system for educating their child. Since these two aspects, education and religion form the larger part of Gikuyu social organization, the missionaries together with the colonial administration decided to attack them simultaneously. These two aspects worked together particularly in order to destroy the Gikuyu way of life and replace it with their

own. For this, it was necessary to get the people's land and other natural resources in Kenya.

Most of the novels emerging from the African continent consist of the tribal traumas and the anxiety to escape from that in the name of freedom or the so-called material development. *Weep Not, Child*, Ngugi's second written but first published novel focuses on Kenya's struggle for freedom from British rule and the effect of the struggle on the lives of individuals within the Kenyan context. It highlights the causes and effects of the Mau Mau rebellion in a dramatic manner. The novel portrays an important phase in the Kenyan struggle for independence when Western education was still looked upon by the Kenyans as a possible solution to their ills under colonialism. In the backdrop of the society, which is not only in transition but in turmoil too, the novel depicts a typical Gikuyu family, a microcosm for the entire Kenyan society which is destroyed when it tries to adapt itself to the ways of the west, particularly in culture. *Weep Not, Child* belongs in subject matter to the period shortly after the close of the Second World War when national sentiments came to a head in Kenya. The events the novel describes are seen principally from the point of view of Njoroge, the youngest son of Ngotho, from the time he enters school to a point in the midst of the emergency, some twelve years later, when disillusioned by the destruction of his family, denied the education by which he sought to fulfil himself and enrich the life of his family and his country, he tries to take his own life.

The novel reveals how all the members of Ngotho's family – his sons

Boro, Kori and Kamau by his first wife Nejri and Njoroge by his second wife Nyokabu become involved in the crisis and suffer the violence it provokes. Through these experiences Ngugi examines three separate but related themes: first, the appropriateness of a young Kenyan getting western education; secondly, the influence of Christianity in the Kenyan context (since the education is provided by a mission school); and thirdly, the causes and conditions of the independence struggle. Ngugi treats this material in a straightforward manner and his examination of the three run more or less parallel, mingling in the life of Njoroge, whose progress in the various schools he attends takes place as the political situation in Kenya deteriorates to the point where Jomo Kenyatta, the political leader of the nationalists, is arrested, tried, found guilty and imprisoned. At the same time a state of emergency is declared, sides in the struggle are drawn up, a number of Kenyans, among them Njoroge's elder brothers Kori and Boro, go to the forest to become freedom fighters. Poised against them are the British forces joined by white farmers who are sworn in as political officers in the emergency, and by Kenyan consultancy. Violence and atrocities are committed on both sides as Mau Mau soldiers seek to drive the Europeans from the land from which they had alienated Africans, a land by legend, law and custom rightfully theirs.

Ngotho, the head of the family, is like thousands of other Gikuyu, a muhoi squatter on the land of a fellow black, Jacoboin Mahua village where he lives with his family along with four of his sons and one killed during the Second World War in

which he like a large number of others, had been forced by the British government to fight on their behalf. Ngotho's home was well known for being a place of peace. Currently, there is a lot of excitement in the family because the youngest son, Njoroge, is about to go to school, the first one in the family. Naturally the most excited is the child himself.

'Would you like to go to school?' 'O mother!' Njoroge gasped. He half feared that the woman might withdraw her words.' '(Weep Not, Child 1). The mother, Nyokabi, looks at it as a means for the enhancement of their status in the society. Nyokabi was proud of having a son in school. It made her soul happy and light-hearted when she saw him bending double over a slate or recounting to her what he had seen at school. It did not matter if anyone died poor provided he or she could one day say, "Look, I have a son good and well educated as many of you can find in the land." (Weep Not, 15).

The story is a well-known Gikuyu myth about the beginning of man, of handing over the land of Murungu, the creator, to Gukuyu and Mumbi, the first couple. Then came the white men as had long been prophesied by Mugo wa Kibiro, the Gikuyu seer of old. He came from the country of ridges; far away from Mugou had told the people of the coming of the white man. He had warned the tribe. So, the white man came and took the land. But at first, not the whole of it. Ngotho adds a personal note to the story by observing that the land on which he himself is working as a Muhoi once belonged to his

father. Finally, he refers to yet another prophecy by Mugo. According to this prophecy, a son of the tribes would lead them like Moses to deliverance from the Mzugu who would then go away leaving their land once again in their possession. Thus we see how Ngugi blends the theme of education with that of political independence when Njoroge begins to believe that he himself would be the prophesied deliverer. He knew that his education would be the fulfilment of a wider and more significant vision that embraced the demand on him, not only by his father but also by his mother, his brothers and even the vision. He saw himself destined for something big and this made his heart glow.

Weep Not, Child integrates Gikuyu mythology and the ideology of nationalism that serves as catalyst for much of the novel's action. The novel explores the detrimental effects of colonialism and imperialism. Njoroge's aspiration to attend university is frustrated by both the violence of the Mau Mau rebels and the violent response of the colonial government. This disappointment leads to his alienation from his family and ultimately his suicide attempt.

### **Conclusion:**

In this novel, Ngugi gives a very graphic and artistic expression of the struggle the people of Kenyan for Independence. The novel portrays an important phase in the Kenyan struggle for independence when education-western education was still looked upon by Kenyans as a possible solution to their ills under colonialism.

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