



Nguigi Wa Thiongo's *Weep Not Child* (1964) As Tragic Novel

Dr. Renuka B. Janbow, Asso.Prof in English,

G.F.G.C. K.R.Puram College, Bangalore-85

Abstract

Nguigi Wa Thiongo is a major writer of East Africa who wrote seven novels, four collections of short stories, four memoirs, five plays and five books of general prose and five books for children. He is the 'supposed' revolutionary who fought for the freedom of Kenya, his mother country from the clutches of the Britain. In his novels, he depicts trials and tribulations, pain and sufferings of his people and their resistance against the British. *Weep Not Child*, the second novel, mainly focuses on the theme of education-education as only solution for the problem of slavery. Njoroge, the protagonist, aspires to educate himself by joining the local school and rebuild his country but by violent circumstances the death of his father in the aftermath of the killing of Jacobo, and Mr. Howlands and arrest and imprisonment of his brothers, Boro and Kamau, and Kori. Hope fails at the end and out of frustration, he attempts suicide by a rope to a tree but timely protected by his mother Nyakobi.

Keywords: Kenya, writer, clutches of the Britain, slavery, strike, resistance, killing of Jacobo, attempt for suicide.

Nguigi Wa Thiongo is "the giant of African Literature"¹ is the most prominent one of the East Africa. In 1938 he was born in Limuru, in Kimerithu, and studied in the Alliance High School and later in Makerere University, Uganda, and London. He wrote his first novel *The River Between* (1965) and gave the script to Chinua Achebe. But in publication, it has become the second. *Weep Not Child* (1964) is supposed the first novel published in 1964. *A Grain of Wheat* followed them in 1967. He published them with his original name James Nguigi. The first three novels he wrote in English as he was under influence of the alien language. *Petals of Blood*, (1977) *Devil on the Cross*, (1980), *Matigiri*, (1987), and *A Wizard of the Crow* (2006) later novels, he "would write in the language of his birth, Gikuyu"² and translated. All novels show "the hopes of the young, the impossibility of the world, the way in which politics affects (their) "inner lives, the necessity of resistance, and the meaning of family"³

The title *Weep Not Child*, taken from a line from, the great American poet, Walt Whitman's poem "On the Beach at Night". "Introduction" is written by Ben Okri in which he mentions that it is the "tragic story of young boy Njoroge,"³ the son of Ngotho by his first wife, Nyakobi lives with his family in Mahua, a village in central Kenya. When he is a young boy, his mother advices tells him he will be the first-person in the family to

attend school. Overwhelmed with happiness, Nyokabi runs to Kamau and reveals him the good news, reveling in the idea that he receives an education. Kamau is Njoroge's half-brother, since their peasant- father, Ngotho, has another wife named Njeri. He is a black man having two wives and five sons, working on the lands of Mr Howlands. In the past, those lands belonged to Ngotho's ancestors. Upon hearing that Njoroge will be going to school, Kamau congratulates his younger brother, and the two boys compare their futures, discussing the fact that both an education and Kamau's carpentry apprenticeship benefits their family.

Shortly thereafter, Njoroge gathers with his family in the evening and listens to his father tells stories about the past. Addressing several neighbors, Kamau, Njoroge, his wives, and his eldest sons, Boro and Kori, Ngotho tells the story of how he and his fellow Kenyans lost their land to the white settlers. Explaining that he was enlisted by the British during World War I, he says, he was whisked away from home in order to build roads throughout Kenya that would help the war effort. All the while, he looks forward to returning home and collecting whatever "reward" the white settlers would bestow on him and his people for contributing to a war that had nothing to do with the Kenyans. However, when he finally returned, he discovered that the white colonialists had kicked his family off their ancestral land and taken over the farm that was their livelihood. Unable to do anything, he and his father lived as Muhoi (i.e., serfs), working on land that used to belong to them and waiting for the day that the white people would vacate Kenya. However, this day never came, and Ngotho's father died as a Muhoi.

The one silver lining, Ngotho tells the people listening to his story, is that an old Gikuyu prophet has foretold that the land will one day be returned to its rightful owners. When he says this, though, Boro shows cynical disdain. Having fought and lost his brother in World War II, Boro is a silent, brooding figure who resents not only the white settlers, but his elders, who, he believes failed to protect the land. Tired of waiting for this prophesy to come true, Boro interrupts his father's story, saying, "To hell with the prophecy. How can you continue working for a man who has taken your land? How can you go on serving him?" (WNC, 19)

Amidst these tensions, Njoroge begins to attend school. On his first day, some boys pick on him, but they are hushed off by Mwhaki, the daughter of Jacobo, the rich black man in the area, having land. Like Mr Howlands, he becomes rich by growing pyrethrum. Mwhaki's sister, Lucia, is the teacher in the same school teacher. Mwhaki's father, Jacobo, is a landowner. After Mwhaki helps him fend off bullies, Njoroge begins a liking to her, and the two children become intimate who both value the opportunity to attend school. During this time, though, a bitter enmity grows between their fathers, as Ngotho and Jacobo clash on the issue of workers' strike.

Ngotho, for his part, is compelled to join the strike as a way of responding to Boro's critique that he does not do enough to win back their family's land. However, he is uncertain it is a good idea to simply stop working for the white settlers, since doing so will mean losing his job at the white Mr. Howlands's farm, which he grows pyrethrum, a commercial crop. Ngotho works for Mr. Howlands because he wants to stay close to the

earth with love. When talk about a strike circulates, Mr. Howlands threatens his employees and says not to join. Nevertheless, Ngotho cannot contain his anger when he discovers at a village meeting that Jacobo has sided with the white settlers. As Jacobo walks to the front of the group with several white police officers and urges his people to withhold from strike. Ngotho becomes furious that he rises and advances upon Jacobo. Followed by his fellow villagers, he beats Jacobo and runs away, though not before a police officer strikes him in the face with a baton.

After the failure of strike of the black people for their land, the people start talking about Jomo Kenyatta, a political leader who they believe will help drive away white settlers. Unfortunately, though, Jomo has been caught, and although everyone believes he will be freed once he has a hearing, this is not the case. As such, the collective sense of hope suffers in Njoroge's village. As for Njoroge's family, they are forced to move off Jacobo's land, so they relocate to Nganga's property (Nganga is Kamau's carpentry master). Meanwhile, Boro and Kori move to Nairobi, where Boro becomes even more passionate about the oppressive practices of the white settlers like, Mr Howlands. As Njoroge continues attending the school, tensions between Kenyans and white settlers mount, especially since the Mau Mau—a militant group opposing the colonialists—tries to recruit new members.

As the years pass, Ngotho struggles to support his family. To make things worse, Jacobo is made chief of the village, and Mr. Howlands becomes a Directing Officer of the “home guard” (the colonial police force). As such, Jacobo, a sort of a informer, now goes from house to house with armed guards, searching for people who have joined the Mau Mau. Isaak, the teacher, was taken by them at gunpoint and killed in the nearby forest. Around this time, Boro and Kori become more and more active by joining the Mau Mau. Ever since Ngotho attacked Jacobo, Boro has been harsh on his father, upholding that his rash decision only escalated tensions. Because of the criticism, Ngotho has become meeker around his son, allowing Boro to speak over him because he is embarrassed. However, when Boro tries to convince him to pledge an oath to the Mau Mau, he says no.

Before long, Njoroge admits into a boarding prestigious high school at Sirirana where in the white men where the teachers. During a football match he, as part of audience, meets Stephen, the son of Mr Howlands who speaks with him joyfully. Although he and Mwhiki no longer attend the same school and she goes to a Teachers Training school in a far off place. They rarely see one another—partly because Mwhiki goes to the school. Partly because their families are enemies—she asks him to spend time with her one time when she's home on break. During this meeting, she calls him to her house, and though he is hesitant, he accepts. When he arrives, he has a stilted conversation with Jacobo, but the man treats him kindly enough, saying that he hopes Njoroge does well in school so that he can “rebuild the country.”(WNC, 34) Afterwards, Mwhiki leads him to a hill, where she admits her fear about the turmoil surrounding them. Njoroge, for his part, tries to console her by insisting that “sunshine always follows a dark night.” (WNC,47). Impressed by his optimism, Mwhiki

invites him to run away to Uganda with her, but he refuses, saying that he could not bear to leave his family when conditions are so bad. He does not agree with her idea of elopement leaving his mothers and go away.

As the Mau Mau rebellion continues to recruit tribals, it grows more and more violent, ultimately posing a threat to the very people it aims to protect. This event pleases Mr. Howlands immensely, as he delights in the fact that the "black were destroying the blacks" (WNC,74). During this period, Jacobo uses his power as the Chief to take revenge on Ngotho's family. To do this, he tries to imprison Boro and Kori, though he only manages to catch Kori, picking him up when he walks outside after curfew with Njeri, the second wife who is also detained.

One day, Njoroge is taken out of his new European-style school by armed men who work for Mr. Howlands. He is then brought to Mr. Howlands's office and tortured. After asking Njoroge where Boro is and whether or not Njoroge has taken the Mau Mau oath, Mr. Howlands asks him, "Who murdered Jacobo?" (WNC,91) When Njoroge is not able to answer, Mr. Howlands fetches a pair of pincers and holds the boy's scrotum, saying, "You'll be castrated like your father." (WNC,92). As Njoroge screams, Mr. Howlands tells him that Ngotho has already confessed to killing Jacobo, but before Njoroge can react, he passes out from pain. It is Boro who really killed Jacobo, not Ngotho. Mr. Howlands finds a dairy thrown behind lavatory wherein Boro mentioned the details. He reports to the police and asks them arrest the sons of Ngotho.

Several days later, Njoroge recovers, and his two mothers—who were also detained—are released along with him. Shortly, Njoroge sees his father in the family hut. He has been beaten severely and can hardly speak, but when he sees Njoroge, he assumes that his son has come to laugh at him because he has failed as a father to protect his family. Apparently, Boro snuck into the village from the forest and murdered Jacobo and then disappeared once more. Knowing that Mr. Howlands would assume that Kamau was the one who did the deed, Ngotho bolsters up the courage and turned himself in, claiming he was the one who killed Jacobo. After beating and castrating Ngotho, though, Mr. Howlands understood that the man was only trying to protect his son, and despite the fact that he has intended to murder Ngotho ever since the workers' strike, he released him. Now, just as Ngotho is about to die, Boro appears at the entrance of the hut. "Forgive me, Father—I didn't know—oh, I thought—" (WNC,96) Boro says, stumbling. "I had to fight," (WNC, 97) he says, asking his father for forgiveness. "All right," Ngotho says, straining to lift himself onto one arm. "Fight well." (WNC,98) Telling his son to "turn his eyes" (WNC,98) to God, he lies back and dies, and Boro runs away from the place.

Sneaking into Mr. Howlands's office, he reveals the man that he was the one who killed Jacobo, and then he returns and shoots by a pistol Howlands in the head. On his way out, Boro fires at as many officers as possible before getting caught and taken away. In the aftermath of this violence, police officers detain Kamau, so that now Kori, Boro, and Kamau are all in custody.

As such, Njoroge is the only brother left, meaning that he has no money to continue his education. Because of this, he spends his days working for an Indian man in a market, constantly feeling ashamed because everyone who sees him knows what has happened to him and his family. After getting scolded one day, he decides he must see Mwhaki, soon after her father's death. He believes is his final source of "hope." When they meet, he confesses his love to her and insists that they should go away, but now it is Mwhaki's turn to decline, saying that Njoroge must retain his hope for a better future. Although it is clear that she loves him in turn, she refuses to elope with him, ultimately leaving him distraught and hopeless.

In fact, that he hopelessly leaves the house the next evening and makes his way to a specific tree, where he makes a noose and prepares to hang himself. Just as he's about to end his own life by suicide, though, he hears Nyokabi's voice calling his name on the road, and despite the fact that he feels ashamed for failing to finish his education and is hopeless about the future, he walks out to meet her. On the way home, they encounter Njeri, and the three of them walk home as Njoroge asks himself why he did not go through with his suicide plan. "Because you are a coward," a voice within him says. "Yes," he whispers. "I am a coward." (WNC,106). Saying this, he hurries to home and opens the door for his mothers. He is ashamed of his own foolish act and rejoins his family of mothers. His hope ("The sun will raise tomorrow") is not realized and frustration rests with him, because of his discontinuation of education and his dream of "rebuilding his country"(WNC, 64).

The narrative structure of this tragic "novel about loss"⁶ is straightforward because of the chronological narrative technique. The narration is in the third-person. The main characters like Ngotoho, Njoroge, Mwhaki, Nyakobi, Mr Howlands, Jacobo are vivid but minor ones like Suzanne, Howlands's wife, are sketchy and shadowy. The places of are not realistically and elaborately described. The time is accurately mentioned with the use of letters. The atmosphere of the novel is rather gloomy. It, as it is in the Greek drama, leads seriously to complication, and ultimately to its climax of the tragic deaths of Ngotoho, Jomo, Jacobo. The biblical simplicity of the narrative language is its chief virtue. It is concluded that it is a really "a work of art."⁷

REFERENCES:

1. Sarala Krishnamurty, "A Life of Courage and Conviction" *Deccan Herald*, 15, June, 2025,p.2.
- 2.Gautam Bhatia, "A Life of Defiance", *The Hindu*, Literary Magazine, 8 June, 2025,p.2
4. Ben Okri. "Introduction" to *Weep Not Child*, p.x.
5. Ibid., "Introduction" by Ben Okri.xii.
6. Ibid., "Introduction" by Ben Okri.xi
7. Ibid., "Introduction" by Ben Okri.xiii.