

The Failure of Love and Frustration in Nguigi wa Thiongo's *Weep Not Child* (1964): A Thematic Study

Dr. Vijayalaksmi Patil Asso.

Prof in English, G.F.C.C., Kalaburagi-585105

Abstract

Nguigi Wa Thiongo is the major writers of East Africa who wrote seven novels, four collections of short stories, four memoirs, five plays and five books of general prose. He is not only an intellectual but also 'supposed' revolutionary who fought for the freedom of Kenya, his mother country from the clutches of the Britain. In his novels he not only portrays trials and tribulations of his people and but also insists on the education which leads the natives to resist against the British. *Weep Not Child* is the second novel which focuses mainly on the theme of love and frustration between Njoroge, the protagonist, aspires to rebuild his country. He falls in love with Mwihaki, the only daughter of a rich man, Jacobo. The love-affair is broken between the two. Out of frustration, he attempts suicide by a rope to a tree but timely protected by his mother Nyakobi.

Keywords: East Africa, writer, slavery, education, strike, resistance, British, killing of Jacobo, love, frustration, attempt for suicide.

Nguigi Wa Thiong'o is one of the major African writers and the most prominent one of the East Africa. In 1938 he was born in Limuru, in Kimirithu, and studied in the Alliance High School and later in Makerere University, Kampala and London. He wrote his first novel *River Between* (1965) and handed over 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 actual name James Nguigi. *Devil on the Cross*, *Petals of Blood*, *Matigari*, (1987), *A Wizard of the Crow*,. The first three novels he wrote in English as he was under influence of the alien language and later, he realized that he should use his mother tongue, Gikuyu for the next four novels, wrote and translated them by himself. All his novels show the suppression and oppression by the British and the sufferings of the natives who rebel against them and freedom their country. They have the tone of the post-coloniality.

The title *Weep Not Child*¹, 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,"² the son of Ngotho by his first wife, Nyakobi lives with his family in Mahua, a village in central Kenya. The novel starts with the Njoroge's going to school. When he is a young boy, his mother, tells him he will be the first person in the family to attend school for education. Overwhelmed with happiness, Nyokabi runs to Kamau and tells him the good news, reveling in the idea that he will receive an education. Kamau is Njoroge's half-brother, since their peasant- father, Ngotho, has another wife

named Njeri. He is a man having two wives and five sons, working on the lands of Mr Howlands. Those lands belonged to Ngotho's ancestors in the past. 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 a carpentry apprenticeship (which is what Kamau is pursuing) will benefit 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 says, he looked forward to returning home and collecting whatever “reward” the white settlers would bestow upon him and his people for contributing to a war that had nothing to do with the Kenyans themselves. 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 (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.(i.e., serf).

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 starts school. On his first day, several other boys pick on him, but they’re warded off by Mwihaki, the daughter of Jacobo, the rich black man in the area, having land who is from the same village as Njoroge. Like Mr Howlands, he also grows pyrethrum and becomes rich. Her sister, Lucia, is their teacher in the same school teacher. What’s more, Mwihaki’s father, Jacobo, because he is a landowner. After Mwihaki helps him fend off bullies, Njoroge takes a liking to her, and the two children become close companions who both value the opportunity to attend

school. During this time, though, a bitter enmity grows between their fathers, as Ngotho and Jacobo clash over how to respond to a workers' strike.

Ngotho, for his part, feels compelled to join the strike as a way of responding to Boro's critique that he isn't doing enough to win back their family's land. However, he isn't certain it's 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 he used to own. When talk about a strike circulates, Mr. Howlands threatens to fire his employees if they join the movement. Nevertheless, Ngotho can't contain his rage 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 refrain from striking, Ngotho finds himself so furious that he rises and advances upon Jacobo. Followed by his fellow villagers, he beats Jacobo and flees, though not before a police officer strikes him in the face with a baton.

In the aftermath of this failed 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 captured, 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 to go to 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 spy, 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 politically 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 this constant criticism, Ngotho has become meeker

around his son, allowing Boro to speak over him because he's embarrassed. However, when Boro tries to convince him to pledge an oath to the Mau Mau, he refuses.

Before long, Njoroge tests 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 cheerfully. Although he and Mwihaki 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 Mwihaki goes to the school. Far away, and 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 invites him to her house, and though he's 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, Mwihaki leads him to a hill, where she admits that she's afraid of all 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, Mwihaki invites him to run away to Uganda with her, but he refuses, saying that he couldn't bear to leave his family when conditions are so bad. He does not agree with her idea of running away leaving his mothers and go away.

As the Mau Mau rebellion continues to recruit new members, it grows more and more violent, ultimately posing a threat to the very people it aims to protect. This pleases Mr. Howlands immensely, as he delights in the fact that black Kenyans are “destroying each other ”(WNC,). 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 (though unlike Kori, she is quickly released).

One day, Njoroge is pulled out of his new European-style school at Siriana by armed men who work for Mr. Howlands. Then he is dragged to Mr. Howlands's office and tortured. After asking Njoroge where Boro is and whether or not Njoroge himself has taken the Mau Mau oath, Mr. Howlands asks him, “Who murdered Jacobo?” (WNC,91) When Njoroge is unable to answer, Mr. Howlands fetches a pair of pincers and squeezes 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.

Several days later, Njoroge recovers, and his two mothers—who were also detained—are released along with him. Shortly thereafter, Njoroge sees his father in the family hut. He has been beaten severely and can barely 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 worked 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 wanted to murder Ngotho ever since the workers' strike, he released him. Now, just as Ngotho is about to die, Boro appears in the entrance of the hut. "Forgive me, Father—I didn't know—oh, I thought—" (WNC,96) Boro says, stumbling. "I had to fight,"¹⁰ (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 tells 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 captured 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 monetary way 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 fired one day, he decides he must see Mwihaki, 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 run away, but now it is Mwihaki's turn to decline, saying that Njoroge must maintain his hope for a better future. Although it's clear that she loves him back, she refuses to elope with him, ultimately leaving him distraught and hopeless.

In fact, that he hopelessly leaves his house the next evening and makes his way to a specific tree, where he fashions 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 runs home and opens the door for his mothers. He is ashamed of his own act and rejoins his family of mothers. His hope ("The sun will raise tomorrow") is never realized and frustration remains with him, because of his discontinuation of education and his failure of the dream of "rebuilding his country"(WNC, 64).

The narrative structure of this social novel is straightforward because of the chronological narrative technique. The dominant theme is the failure of love between Njoroge and Mwhaki, the daughter of the rich man Jacobo due to their class difference and idealism of Njoroge. Out of frustration he attempts to commit suicide by hanging by a tree but timely he is saved by his mother. Mwhaki leads him to a hill, where she admits that she's afraid of all the turmoil surrounding them. Njoroge. It, as it is in the Greek drama, leads seriously to complication, and ultimately to its climax of the tragic event of Ngotho's death. Simplicity of fictional language is its foremost virtue. It may be concluded that it is a really "artistic in purest".⁵

REFERENCES:

1. Nguigi Wa Thiongo. *Weep Not Child*. London: Penguin, 1964.
2. Ben Okri. "Introduction" to *Weep Not Child*, p.x.
- 3.Op.cit ., Introduction by Ben Okri.
4. Op.cit ., Introduction by Ben Okri.

Copyright & License:

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.