

BRITISH IMPERIAL POLICY IN KENYA AND ITS EFFECTS: A STUDY OF NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S *WEEP NOT, CHILD*

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Abstract:

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's novel, Weep Not, Child, is set in Kenya in the mid-twentieth century. The story documents the tribulations and sufferings of the family of Ngotho, a black Kenyan working in the farm of a white settler. The land which he works in originally belonged to his ancestors and was forcefully grabbed by the Europeans as Kenya was turned into a British colony. Ngotho's participation in a strike demanding the return of the land and the end of humiliation of the blacks in their own country leads to his losing his job. Moreover, three of his sons get either involved or are suspected to be involved in the Mau Mau, an armed rebellion against the colonisers and their black allies. What follows is extreme torture of Ngotho by the whites and his subsequent death; also, three of Ngotho's sons are either jailed or awaiting execution when the novel ends. What was a happy family at the beginning is totally broken and destroyed at the end. The family of Ngotho, in fact, symbolically stands for contemporary Kenya and the sufferings of Ngotho, his sons and his wives are the sufferings that every native Kenyan is subjected to during this turbulent period of Kenyan history.

Key Words: *British Colony, Kenya, Exploitation, Rebellion, Destruction.*

One significant aspect of the compositions of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, one of the most prominent African writers of the modern times, is a sharp focus on the damaging impact of colonial rule on native Africans and their indigenous cultures. His protest against the colonial enterprise and its lingering effects, even after the attainment of independence, on the African psyche reached its climax when he denounced English as his medium of literary expression and instead adopted native African languages, Gikuyu and Swahili. Even his earlier name, James Thiong'o, was changed to Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, thus underscoring his detestation of everything that signifies colonial 'hangover' in the minds of the colonised and also declaring his allegiance to the Gikuyu tribal tradition. His ideological stand against the colonial viewpoint is reflected in one of his remarks in his revolutionary work, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, "The present predicaments of Africa are often not a matter of personal choice: they arise from a historical situation. Their solutions are not so much a matter of personal decision as that of a fundamental social transformation of the structures of our societies starting with a real break with imperialism and its internal ruling allies. Imperialism and its comprador alliances in Africa can never develop the continent." Thiong'o's debut novel, *Weep Not, Child* (1964), already reveals traces of the traits which were to dominate his future and more mature writings- a graphic description of how the colonisers gain control over an alien land and over its inhabitants, using the force of the obedient, submissive natives against the resisting ones, thus practicing an effective 'Divide and Rule' policy, and an explication of the irreparable damage done to the native tribal, cultural tradition by the imprinting of the white, Occidental beliefs on the black psyche. Even there can be noted an underlying appeal to break free from colonial customs and to embrace the age-old tribal customs and beliefs in the face of rampage. Interestingly, the Indian reader will find an added interest in the novel as (s)he cannot but find a striking similarity in the respective histories of colonisation and its continuation in India and Kenya, Thiong'o's native country and

the setting of *Weep Not, Child*.

The novel, *Weep Not, Child* is divided into two sections- "The Waning Light" and "Darkness Falls". As the names of the two sections suggest, the atmosphere gradually turns gloomier as the story progresses until at the very end total destruction engulfs the land of Kenya. As can be assumed from the events described, the tale begins in the late 1940s or the early 1950s, immediately after the Second World War. In the initial chapters, the readers are presented with the principal characters around whom the story will revolve. Ngotho is the patriarchal head of a family that resides in the village of Mahua which is situated close to the town of Kipanga in Kikuyuland. As was common custom among the Gikuyus, he has two wives- Njeri and Nyokabi- living with him in the same household. Interestingly, the two wives share a friendly relationship and there is no apparent discord within the family. Njeri's three sons- Boro, Kori and Kamau- and Nyokabi's only son, Njoroge, spend their time merrily together. The youngest son, Njoroge, harbours the hope of getting educated and thereby playing a vital role in the future in the upliftment of the native black community. None of the other children has ever attended school and it is made clear that sending a child to school is a luxury to the poor family. Yet, all the family members value education and feel, as Njoroge feels strongly, that only education, precisely western education, can put an end to their misery and even the misery of their country. So, each of them helps in their own ways, and looks to the matter that Njoroge can continue with his dream of attaining education. In the very first chapter, during a conversation with Kamau, Njoroge reveals why he is so much interested in being educated.

...And you know, I think Jacobo is as rich as Mr. Howlands because he got education. And that's why each takes his children to school because of course they have learnt the value of it (Chapter 1).

Mr. Howlands is the white settler in whose farm Ngotho works. Farming is his passion and he considers it a great achievement on his part to have tamed the wild land. However, he is indifferent to the blacks and values them only as 'cheap labour'. And Jacobo represents that class within Kenyan society who helped the British in their imperial mission. In return, he has been helped by the British, and he is allowed to grow certain cash crops which the native Africans have been barred from growing. Jacobo is rich, but is not respected by his fellow black men, as is revealed in Kamau's observation on that societal class which Jacobo stands for,

...A white man is a white man. But a black man trying to be a white man is bad and harsh (Chapter 2).

However, in spite of the presence of potentially harmful people like Mr. Howlands and Jacobo, the village, particularly the family of Ngotho, apparently seems to be a happy and peaceful one. Discontent lies just below the surface, it is true, as is revealed during the discussions and story-telling that are a regular affair in the household of Ngotho. But, on the other hand, those very sessions of story-telling and vigorous discussions in which all youths from the village participate reveal that healthy aspect of tribal culture which encourages unity and warm relationships among the villagers. As the story progresses this peace is lost and is replaced by fear- fear of death and in the case of Njoroge, even fear of living.

Despite the outward calmness, an underlying tension can be felt from the very beginning. The two World Wars are revealed to have had tremendous impact on the lives of the main protagonists, both white and black. But, the grievance of the blacks stems from the fact that the black Africans had nothing to do with either of the wars; the wars were, instead, fought in the interest of the whites, and the blacks were forced to participate in them. Both the World Wars brought about loss for Ngotho and his fellow black Kenyans. In the first one, they were forcefully used as labourers. The British colony in Kenya was in its initial stage then. In Ngotho's version,

Then came the war. It was the first big war. I was then young, a mere boy, although circumcised. All of us were taken by force. We made roads and cleared the forest to make it possible for the warring white man to move more quickly (Chapter 2).

But the effect was more profound than the mere psychological impact of participation and risking of lives in a meaningless, bloody battle. The absence of the Gikuyu males for a considerable period of time from their homeland meant that the land that earlier belonged to them was no longer theirs; the British imperialist government has taken this opportunity to confiscate and distribute their lands among the white settlers. Ngotho is a witness to this tragic outcome.

The war ended. We were all tired...we wanted to go back to the soil and court it to yield, to create, not to destroy. But Ng'o! The land was gone. My father and many others had been moved from our ancestral lands. He died lonely, a poor man waiting for the white man to go (Chapter 2).

In the Second World War, the blacks were forced to participate not merely as labourers but also as soldiers. As a consequence, the casualties were naturally higher. Ngotho has lost one of his sons, Mwangi, in this war. Another of his sons, Boro, has returned, but the war has left a permanent scar in his psyche- he has changed and is always withdrawn and never really recovers from the shock of having witnessed the death of his closest brother in the battlefield.

...But the thing he could not forget was the death of his step-brother, Mwangi. For whom or for what had he died? (Chapter 2).

Interestingly, the white settler, Mr. Howlands, has also suffered due to the two wars. In the first one, he himself fought and at the end of it, was disillusioned; all the ideals he believed in prior to the war seemed meaningless. In an attempt to flee from his motherland which only symbolised disillusionment for him, he settled in the Kenyan Highlands. In the Second World War, Mr.Howlands's elder son, Peter, on whom his all hopes lay, died. The brutality with which Howlands tries to handle the black rebellion later in the novel can be attributed to this loss of a son; he is simply shattered and devoid of emotion from then on. Though Ngotho and Mr.Howlands both have lost their sons in the Second World War Ngotho does not consider their fates as similar. The difference lies in the fact that he has lost his son in the war of the whites; it was not a war which Mwangi should have been involved in. When, in a moment of weakness, Mr.Howlands informs Ngotho about the death of Peter in the war, Ngotho experiences an inner struggle.

Ngotho had never known where the other son had gone to. Now he understood. He wanted to tell of his own son: he longed to say, 'You took him away from me'. But he kept quiet. Only he thought Mr.Howlands should not complain. It had been his war. (Chapter 3)

As can be gauged from the emotional outbursts of the black characters throughout the novel, land is of supreme value to the people belonging to the Gikuyu tribe. Historically, the white settlers were mostly allowed to settle in the Kenyan Highlands where soil was the most fertile and the weather was also suitable for the inhabitation of the Europeans. The Gikuyus traditionally lived in the Highlands and, thus, suffered the most due to the white settlement in Kenya. From being proud land-owners they were turned into manual labourers working in the lands of the Whites which actually belonged to them. The pain is all the more because they believe that the land was gifted by their god, Murungu to Gikuyu and Mumbi, the first man and the first woman from whom the Gikuyus descend. Ngotho says to his sons and to many other young men of the village,

...But he had shown them all the land- yes, children, God showed Gikuyu and Mumbi all the land and told them,

'This land I hand over to you. O Man and woman/ It's yours to rule...'(Chapter 2).

A prophecy by a tribal seer, Mugo Wa Kibiro, that the whites will one day return to their country has motivated Ngotho to cling to the land of his ancestors, albeit as a labourer, though he despises working for a white man.

Ngotho rarely complained. He had all his life lived under the belief that something big would happen. That was why he did not want to be away from the land that belonged to his ancestors (Chapter 4).

The younger generation, however, is not as patient and as subservient as the older one. Boro does not believe that the prophecy will be fulfilled; he accuses his father and his forefathers of a coward-like acceptance of their fate without putting up a fight, "How can you continue working for a man who has taken your land? How can you go on serving him?" (Chapter 2). Other than this awareness of deprivation of ancestral land, other factors also contribute to the widespread anger among the blacks. When Kori and Boro go to Nairobi in search of work they realise that employment opportunities for the blacks are scarce. Moreover, the 'colour bar' practised all over the country relegates the blacks to the position of second class citizens. The British allies within the black community, represented by Jacobo, have been given some extra privileges, like the growing of some 'cash crops' which other Africans are barred from growing, thus creating a sort of division within the black colonised class. It is, thus, clear that there is enough motivation for the young black men to rebel against the whites and the 'Serikali', the name for the local Kenyan government acting as an ally of the colonisers. The protests indeed begin and, though non-violent at first, do not take much time to turn violent as armed rebellion, termed the Mau Mau, breaks out.

The first sign of any attempt at united protest comes in the form of a strike, called by Kenya African Union (K.A.U.), led by Jomo, a black, Kenyan leader looked up to by many Africans as the 'Black Moses' or 'the Saviour of the black community'. 'Jomo' is a reference to the actual historical figure of Jomo Kenyatta who will later act as free Kenya's first President from 1964 to 1978. However, though there are multiple references to Jomo in the text he never appears physically. It is the rise of the well-educated Jomo to the status of a sort of messiah that instills in Njoroge the desire to get quality education and take active part in the social transformation of his country. The blacks pin their hopes on the success of the strike. They hope that it will put an end to all their miseries. Ngotho hopes that there will be an increase in salary; others believe that the strike will compel the British to abolish colour-bar and to end all inequality. While speaking in a meeting held on the first day of the strike, Kiarie, a friend of Boro and a young leader of K.A.U., even demands that the land be given back to the natives,

...Today, we, with one voice, we must rise and shout: "The time has come. Let my people go. Let my people go! We want back our land! Now!" (Chapter 7)

The protest in Kipanga, however, turns violent as Ngotho, in a fit of anger, tries to attack Jacobo, brought by the administration to pacify the black protesters, and the police fire into the crowd, thereby killing two men. In the face of threats and torture throughout the country, the strike also fails. The first part of the novel, "The Waning Light", ends with the news that Jomo and other competent leaders representing the blacks have been arrested and a state of emergency has been declared all over the country. To Ngotho's family, the failure of the strike spells disaster as he loses his job in Mr. Howlands's farm for his participation in the strike; he has also made an enemy of the powerful Jacobo, now appointed the 'Chief' of that area, and this enmity is to cost Ngotho and his family dearly.

In the second part of the novel, "Darkness Falls", the author describes how the situation darkens all over Kenya as the colonisers come down heavily upon the armed rebellion of the blacks which follows the failure of the strike, the declaration of the emergency, and the subsequent tortures by the whites and their black allies. There are direct references in the text to the Mau Mau (1952-1964), one of the most significant armed rebellions against the British regime in Africa which posed a serious threat to the British rule in Kenya. A quotation from the book, *Mau Mau from Within*, will reveal the fact that the motivating factors behind the rebellion were the same as those behind the peaceful strike called by the K.A.U. "The freedom movement was the result of ills of colonisation affecting almost all tribes in Kenya. Their lands were taken away from them by the Europeans. Their education cut, their freedom curtailed through forced labour, their wages made miserably low and their pride and dignity trampled through disallowance of observance of tribal customs and rituals and finally through the practice of obnoxious colour bar." (p. 74). The Mau Mau rebels, mostly belonging to the Gikuyu tribe as the Gikuyus were the worst sufferers due to the white settlement, took shelter in the forests and practised guerrilla warfare. It is a historical truth that a number of

white settlers were brutally killed in the heyday of the rebellion; the blacks who worked for the British were not spared either. In Thiong'o's novel, the first reference to these killings by the black militants can be found during a conversation between the native blacks,

...Now, the chief was a big man with much land. The Governor had given it all to him, so he might sell the black people. The men were in a car. The chief was also in a car. The two men followed him all the way from Nairobi. When they reached the countryside, the men drove ahead and waved the chief to stop. He stopped. "Who's the chief?" I am. "Then take that and that. And that too." They shot him dead and drove away-. (Interlude)

The retaliation of the 'Serikali' is swift and immediate. Black people suspected to be Mau Mau sympathizers are tortured, put in 'detention camps', and executed; some of them are even killed in fake encounters. A number of people known to Njoroge are killed by the police. The casualties include, among others, Kiarie, the firebrand leader of K.A.U., and the barber, a very popular story-teller of Kipanga. Njoroge even witnesses the fake encounter of Isaka, his teacher when he attended the local primary school and later a priest, by the white soldiers. The family of Njoroge gets directly affected after Jacobo, the chief, is murdered. Kamau, suspected to have helped the murderers, is arrested and taken to the police post. Ngotho, hoping to save his son, confesses to the murder. He is taken to the local home guard post, popularly known as the 'House of Pain', and faces extreme torture there. Mr. Howlands, now the District Officer, leads the torture and the extremity of it can only be guessed from the reaction of the home guards.

...Even the homeguards who worked with him feared to be present when the D.O. was eliciting information from this man. (Chapter 15)

However, the exercise is a failure and other than his confession of the murder, Ngotho says nothing. This leads to torture of Njoroge who is brought to the homeguard post from Siriana where he is now studying in a reputed secondary school and does not have the slightest information about Jacobo's killing. Howlands again is the main culprit.

Mr. Howlands rose and came to Njoroge. He was terrible to look at. He said, 'I'll show you.' He held Njoroge's private parts with a pair of pincers and started to press tentatively. 'You'll be castrated like your father.'

Njoroge screamed (Chapter 15).

After the sudden discovery of a notebook with Boro's name behind the lavatory from where apparently Jacobo was shot, it is understood that Boro, and not Ngotho, has killed Jacobo. This realisation leads to the release of Njoroge and a half-dead Ngotho from the homeguard post. Ngotho dies a few days later in his own home. His death is followed by the killing of Mr. Howlands himself in the hands of Boro who, after having exacted his revenge, surrenders to the police. The family which was a very happy one at the beginning of the story is, thus, totally destroyed- Ngotho, the centre around whom the family revolved, is dead, Boro is awaiting execution, Kamau has been sentenced to life imprisonment, and Kori is supposedly held in a detention camp and he may even be dead already. Only Nyokabi, Njeri and Njoroge are left at home. To all of them, life has become unbearable after having suffered one shock after another. Njoroge's hope of rising up the social ladder after getting educated is completely shattered and the scene of him selling goods in the shop of an Indian businessman is one of the most tragic scenes of the novel. The shattered family, in a way, symbolises the waste land that Kenya has become as a direct result of the insensitive British rule.

In spite of these multiple killings that affect the families of the blacks, the only ray of hope is that the tribal values that kept the families together before have not been killed. When Njoroge, suffering from deep depression, offers Mwihaki, the daughter of Jacobo and his ladylove, to escape from the Kenyan scene together leaving their mothers behind, Mwihaki declines and asks him to wait until the good times come as both have their duties to their families. When the upset Njoroge tries to commit suicide he is saved by his mother who, apprehending something wrong, defies the night curfew and appears at the right

moment to stop his son, their only hope left now, from hanging himself. And, most importantly, the story ends with Njoroge's acceptance of his responsibility towards his family.

And he ran home and opened the door for his two mothers. (Chapter 18)

An interesting comparison can be drawn between the family values of the white settlers and the black natives. 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 son 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.

The author has, indeed, mingled history and fiction successfully to draw a potent picture of the sufferings of the Kenyan public in the 1950s and the early 1960s. However, it will be oversimplification to term his position as anti-white. Thiong'o, indeed, openly blames the British misrule for the precarious situation in Kenya. But the target of attack is more the policy of the colonisers than the individual white characters themselves. Thiong'o also never says that the whites and the blacks cannot stay together within the same society. Rather, a short conversation between Njoroge and Stephen, the younger son of Mr. Howlands, reveals that Stephen is as much a son of Kenya as Njoroge is. Stephen even expresses his unwillingness to go to England,

...I was born here and I have never been to England. I don't even want to go there

(Chapter 14)

What Thiong'o, therefore, demands for are an equal distribution of resources and a stopping of the exploitation of the blacks by the colonisers. The imperial policy of the British is the main object of attack. And the novel faithfully portrays how the colonialist enterprise, in the name of uplifting the 'savages', has turned an African nation rich in heritage into a complete waste land.

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