



Futility of Violence in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child*

R. Rajini Beulah Shobika, II M.A. English, Senthamarai College of Arts and Science, Vadapalanji, Madurai.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000000227797393>

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5203228

Abstract

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is a celebrated Kenyan writer and East Africa's leading novelist. He authored several novels, plays, short stories and essays most of which are written in Gikuyu. He criticised the evils of colonization in his works. His Weep Not, Child (1964) is the first major novel in English written by an East African. It portrays the tragedy of a family, that was drawn into the conflict of Kenyan Independence during the state of emergency and the violence of the Mau Mau rebellion. It specifically explores the harmful consequences of dispossessing the people of their ancestral land. In this novel, Ngugi projected violence as futile and destructive. Taking revenge on the oppressors by Boro, who fought in World War II ultimately led to the ruin of the budding life of his brother, Njoroge, the protagonist of the novel. Violence didn't bring any positive change, rather it brought awful destruction. This paper aims to bring out the futility of violence in the novel Weep Not, Child.

Keywords: Futility of violence, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Weep Not, Child*

“Violence does in truth recoil upon the violent and the schemer falls into the pit which he digs for another.”

- Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Violence is never a solution to any problem. History has proved it several times. Even our nation got freedom through non violence only. Violence leads to violence and it triggers a never ending cycle of horrors. Also, violence turns detrimental not only to the doer but also to the whole community. This truth is revealed in the novel *Weep Not, Child* by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, the unforgettable writer set a landmark in Postcolonial African Literature by his expression of the harsh impact of colonialism up on the Africans. His original name was James Thiong'o Ngugi. But he adopted his traditional name to expose his opposition to colonialism. Born on 5th January 1938 in Limuru, Kenya, he grew up in colonized motherland. He brought out the politics of language that affected him deeply during his childhood days in the work, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. He graduated from Makerere University in 1963 and from Leeds University in 1964. He worked as a professor in several leading universities. He is a versatile writer as is evident from his production of several novels, plays, short stories and essays and that too differing widely apart in a variety of themes from children's literature, colonialism, traditionalism, significance of one's culture, nationalism, social and literary criticism,



infighting etc. His notable novels include *Weep Not, Child*, *The River Between*, *A Grain of Wheat*, *Petals of Blood*. His short story collections are *A Meeting in the Dark*, *Secret Lives and Other Stories*, *Minutes of Glory and Other Stories*. His prominent plays are *The Black Hermit*, *This Time Tomorrow* and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. His essays *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics* and *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for the Cultural Freedom* are worth mentioning.

Weep Not, Child is Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's first novel, which gained fame and recognition and established him as a budding writer. It also has the reputation of being the first English novel to be published by an East African. It was written by Thiong'o when he was a student at Makerere University. It is set in a Gikuyu village during the Emergency period. It brought out the evil effects of the Mau Mau Rebellion. It specifically portrays the tragedy of a family that was drawn into the conflict of Kenya's Independence from Britain. It deals with the evil consequences of dispossessing the people of their ancestral land. Ben Okri praised the novel as, "One of the signal novels to emerge from an artist listening to both the well of tradition and the troubled oracles of his time." The novel consists of two parts and eighteen chapters. Part 1 is 'The Waning Light' and Part 2 is 'Darkness Falls'. The subtitles indicate the tragedy brought out by the Mau Mau rebellion and violence.

Weep Not, Child has a simple and obvious story line. Ngotho was a worker in Mr. Howlands' plantation. He had two wives, Njeri and Nyokabi and five sons Boro, Kori, Kamau, Njoroge and Mwangi. Mwangi died in World War II. Ngotho wanted the White men to leave their country, so that he could get his land back. He was working on the land which he once owned. Nyokabi sent her son Njoroge to School. Kamau was apprenticed to a carpenter named Nganga. Njoroge was assisted by his friend Mwihaki, the daughter of Jacobo. Jacobo owned the land in which Ngotho and his family were living. Once Jacobo compelled the strikers to return to their work. Ngotho was very much angry and he started attacking Jacobo and it initiated a riot. As a consequence of it, Ngotho was expelled from his job and the land. The family moved to Nganga's land. Two and a half years passed after this incident. The whole community was in a state of perplexity, due to the violence of the Mau Mau rebellions.

Howlands and Jacobo arranged for the arrest of Kori, Njeri and Ngotho. Njoroge's education was also under threat by the Mau Mau terrorists. Mwihaki returned to the village. Njoroge and Mwihaki were happy to meet each other. Jacobo was kind to Njoroge. Njoroge was sent out of school in order to be investigated by the police. Jacobo was murdered. Police doubted that Ngotho was involved in the murder. So, Njoroge was tortured inhumanly. Howlands pitied him and arranged for his release. The reality was that Ngotho did not Murder Jacobo. Boro killed Jacobo, because he was firm in the belief that it was the only way to avenge his brother's death. Ngotho passed away. Boro again turned ferocious and murdered Howlands. Njoroge had no other way, but to give up his education and to work in a dress shop. He was frustrated to the maximum extent. He met Mwihaki. Both accepted that they loved each other but they could not be united as the sense of duty to their families laid on them. Njoroge tried to commit suicide but Nyokabi stopped him and brought him home.



In this novel, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o focused on the futility of violence and its devastating impact even upon those not involved in violence. There are many instances in the novel that validate this view. There was a strike to plead in favour of more rights for the Africans. Ngunjiri already nurtured bitter feelings against whites as his land was under their control. So, he wanted to participate in this strike, but he was also afraid that he would be sent out of his job. He then took part in a rally where Boro and his friend Kiarie were about to speak. At that time, the Police brought in Jacobo and he forced the labourers to return to work. Unable to control himself, Ngunjiri rushed to the stage and assaulted Jacobo. This violent act ended up in a riot. The riot was immediately suppressed. Ngunjiri was fired from his job and his family was sent out from Jacobo's land. Ngunjiri's violent act proved futile. Moreover it was detrimental to himself and his family.

Violence by the Mau Mau revolutionaries also created an atmosphere of fear in the village. Ngunjiri's education was under threat by the Mau Mau. People were afraid both with the police and the Mau Mau, as they used to slit the throats of suspected people. The harmony was collapsed and the village people led a life of fear. Mau Mau revolutionaries who thought that they would bring freedom to the people were actually ruining the peace of the people and spoiling the education of their youngsters. They could not achieve Independence from the British, but their violent acts led to the loss of harmony and serenity in the village.

Ngunjiri and his friends were on a church retreat. Police murdered their leader for his independent spirit. It further enraged Boro. So he murdered Jacobo. Boro's mindless action disempowered his family. Ngunjiri's studies came to an abrupt end and he was brutally tortured by the police. Police were in suspicion that Ngunjiri was involved in the murder. So, they treated Ngunjiri cruelly. Fortunately, Howlands arranged for the release of Ngunjiri. Boro's murderous act resulted in a series of troubles to his family, but he couldn't accept that his violence ended detrimental. He believed that it was the only way to avenge his brother's death in the war. He experienced violence as she had been to war. He had near death experience. So, he could not settle down to peaceful methods of opposition. Ngunjiri added fuel to the fire by narrating the story of how their family lost their land. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o explained his mind set.

Boro thought of his father who had fought in the war only to be dispossessed. Boro too had gone to war against Hitler. He had gone to Egypt, Jerusalem and Burma. He had seen things. He had often escaped death narrowly. But the thing he could not forget was the death of his step brother Mwangi. For whom or for what had he died? (2)

Boro was angry over the fact that his family members were pushed into the war. They had no cause to fight. His brother's death was constantly stinging him. He considered it meaningless to die in the war. He wanted to compensate the death of his brother by indulging in violent activities and killing the White settlers.

Ngunjiri was tortured as he was considered the murderer, but he confessed to help Kamau, who was also under suspicion. After undergoing torture, Ngunjiri passed away. Boro visited his father before he had died. Boro got enraged and he killed Howlands. Boro thought



that he brought justice to his father's death, but his murderous deed affected Njoroge extremely. He had to give up his education and to work in a dress shop. Also, Njoroge could not unite with Mwhaki. Both missed their fathers and had to fulfill that duty to their families, so they could not be together. Njoroge's life went completely out of course due to the harsh and violent deeds of Boro. Boro's actions killed the happiness of Njoroge and Mwhaki.

Boro undertook violence, because of the violent experiences during World War II. It was difficult for him to leave the hatred. He could not tolerate the death of his brother Mwangi in World War II. Boro and Mwangi were dragged to fight in World War II. They had no reason to fight, but they were forced to participate in the war. He wanted to take revenge for his brother's death. His father's recollection of the loss of his ancestral land and working there as a labourer also upset him. He began to take revenge on the British colonisers, but it paved way for a series of a brutal acts. Also the Mau Mau protest caused disorder in the village. Though Boro saw that his revengeful deeds in turn yielded harm to his family, he could not give it up. He himself admitted that he had lost his aim and all that he had in mind was to exact revenge. Mau Mau Lieutenant asked him, "Don't you believe in anything?". Boro replied, "No nothing. Except revenge." The Lieutenant was shocked and asked him whether he didn't care about regaining the lost land. Boro said, "The lost land will come back to us maybe. But I have lost too many of those whom I loved for land to mean much to me. It would be a cheap victory." Boro simply wanted all the White men to suffer. He thought that freedom was nearly an illusion. His only intention was to kill the settlers. Boro said, "Unless you kill, you will be killed. So you go on killing and destroying. It's law of nature." Boro stopped fighting for the cause of regaining their land. He became obsessed with killing. He started reflecting the violence that he experienced during the war.

When he finally killed Howlands, he explained why he killed Jacobo. "He betrayed black people. Together you killed many sons of the land. You raped our women. And finally you killed my father. Have you anything to say in your defence?". He didn't get any sense of peace. He was just finding reasons to continue his violent attitude. He didn't get any relief after killing Howlands.

The violent deeds of the characters ended up detrimental not only to themselves but also to their families. Ngotho's violence towards Jacobo ended detrimental to himself. He lost his job and his family was sent out of the land. Violence by the Mau Mau revolutionaries didn't achieve anything, rather it created tension and rivalry in the village. Boro's murder of Jacobo caused Njoroge to be arrested by putting an abrupt end to his hard earned education. Ngotho underwent tortures due to the murder of Jacobo. It eventually led to his death. Again Boro killed Howlands as a revenge for Ngotho's death. But it led to the separation of Njoroge and Mwhaki. Njoroge was driven to suicide. Though Mwhaki and Njoroge loved each other and even Jacobo was kind to Njoroge, the harmony was spoiled. Also, Stephen Howlands, the son of Howlands and Njoroge had much in common. But, they could not maintain their friendship.

Through these instances in the novel, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o projected that violence is



futile and brings ruin to all. Thus, the futility of violence is brought out through ample examples in the novel *Weep Not, Child* by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o.

References

- [1] Hans M. Zell, Carol Bundy, Virginia Coulon, *A New Reader's Guide to African Literature*, Heinemann Educational Books, 1983.
- [2] Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. *Weep Not, Child*. Penguin Classics, 2012.
- [3] Nicholls, Brendon. *Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, gender, and the ethics of postcolonial reading*, 2010.
- [4] www.ngugiwathiongo.com
- [5] www.brainyquote.com

Author (s) Contribution Statement: Nil

Author (s) Acknowledgement: Nil

Author (s) Declaration: I declare that there is no competing interest in the content and authorship of this scholarly work.



The content of the article is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.