

# Ambiguity Of Empowerment And Disempowerment In Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Weep Not, Child

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper aims to study the ambiguity of empowerment and disempowerment in the novel, Weep Not, Child written by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. It depicts the effect of the Mau Mau Rebellion in Kenya. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o has reflected upon the ambiguous nature of empowerment and disempowerment in education, language, religion and culture throughout the novel. He puts forward how the colonizers have used religion and education as a tool in order to divert the colonized masses from their path of struggle.

**KEYWORDS:** Ambiguity, Empowerment, Disempowerment, Education, Religion, Culture, Colonizers, Colonized.

## INTRODUCTION:

Weep Not, Child is one of the most important post-colonial novels written by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, published in 1964. Since the late 19th century, Kenya had always been under the control of the Britishers and when Ngugi had written this novel, Kenya had decolonized itself from the shackle of the British rule. The Mau Mau Revolt is the background of the whole plot in the novel. It depicts a realistic account of the struggle between the native people of Kenya and the colonizers before Kenya had attained its independence. Ngugi examines three separate themes: the influence that the education system of the colonizers had upon the native people of Kenya, the influence of the colonizer's religion i.e., Christianity in overshadowing the importance of the native religion and the factors that led to the struggle between the white masters and the native Kenyans.

## ANALYSIS:

In his novels, Ngugi has discussed the ambiguity of empowerment and disempowerment in education, language, religion and culture by provided a criticism of the postcolonial situation in Kenya. He has given a realistic description of the problems that the native people had to face to gain independence from the shackle of the Britishers. Ngugi has pointed out how the colonizers had used education as a tool to gain success in their goal of achieving full control over the colonized masses of Kenya. Through education the colonizers had provided a false sense of empowerment to the native masses and had made them to believe that it is through education they

would be able to become independent rather than following the path of struggle against the colonial masters. Through the central character, Njoroge, Ngugi reflects the importance that the Kenyans give to education and Christian religion in achieving their aim of having a better future for themselves as well as for their family.

Ngugi took reference from *On the Beach at Night*, a poem by Whitman, where the child is asked not to cry and to remain free from all the traumas of life. He has used this concept to describe the native people of Kenya who are under the threat of losing their land in the hand of the Britishers. The whole battle in the novel took place only for land as the Britishers were trying to possess the land of the Kenyans which is the main source of their livelihood. The World War II forms the background of the novel and shows how the white masters forced the colonized natives to take part in the World Wars. Many of the central characters in the novel such as Ngotho, Boro and Mwangi took part in the Wars. Ngugi shows the horrible effects of the World Wars on its survivors. After watching his brother die in the war, Boro even suffered from post-traumatic war disorder and had decided to join the Mau Mau rebellion to take revenge against his brother's death.

Ngugi has emphasized on the importance of education in resolving all Africa's challenges. Kenyans are educated in two ways: through formal missionary schools and through traditional Gikuyu methods. Ngugi portrays the extent to which Njoroge and his family believe in the empowering nature of education in the very first scene of the novel itself. By displaying Njoroge's joy at the prospect of going to school, Ngugi emphasizes on the fact that Njoroge views his education as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that he associates with progress, change and advantage. He sees his education as a means of empowering not only himself, but also his family.

Njoroge believes that by using education as a means he will be able to bring positive changes in his community and for this to happen he believes that he will have to work hard with full determination. So, he decided to go to school to start his formal education where he would be able to acquire knowledge imparted by the colonial masters which would help him in achieving his goals of life, i.e., to bring changes in his life along with the lives of others. He even tried to convince his brother, Kamau to join school along with him, but to his great dismay, Njoroge rejected his offer and said that he cannot go to school as he is already a carpenter by profession. Both the brothers are of the opinion that it is only through education one could succeed in life and this idea results from noticing Jacobo, who becomes rich as a result of his academic achievements.

Education became an inescapable part of Njoroge's life. Njoroge has full faith in the education imparted by the colonizers. They had preached him about Christianity which lead to his believe that Christianity helps to bring out the good qualities of a man more than his own religion could do. He had seen education as the only tool that would help him to free his native lands from the clutches of the Britishers. But with the gradual passing of time, it became clear that education had taken him away from his own religion and culture and had diverted him from his primary aim of achieving freedom for Kenya from the rule of the colonial masters. Education has alienated him from his own native religion of Kenya and had made him to believe more in the principles, values

and ideologies of the religion of the colonizers, i.e., in Christianity. He read the Bible and in no time he started following the values in his own life. Moreover, he had started to have faith in the concept of Jesus who according to him would help him to gain Heaven on the earth if he does good deeds.

In this whole course of action, we could see that Njoroge along with his native people were completely unaware of the true motives of the colonial masters. They thought that they were helping them to gain education to improve their lives, but the real motive behind this was to make the colonized people a puppet of the colonial system whom they could use according to their own needs for the benefit of the colonial system. Njoroge thought that after pursuing the education of the colonial masters, he could use it in his struggle against the rivals, i.e., the Britishers to achieve independence for Kenya in all aspects. Thus, it could be seen that education was just used as a means to give a sense of false empowerment to the colonized people and to divert them from their battle against the Britishers.

There is an incident in the novel where Njoroge saw Mwhaki, a native Kenyan approaching towards him and he felt ashamed of the clothes worn by Mwhaki as it has not covered the whole body. Before going to school, Njoroge has never thought that he would ever be ashamed of the dress that he had worn since his birth. Thus, this incident itself shows how after going to school and becoming educated, he feels shame about his own native culture. So, in this case, education has disempowered him in spite of empowering him to uplift his own community.

Just like Njoroge, we can also see the ambiguity of empowerment and disempowerment in the case of Jacobo too. Though Jacobo thought that education would help him to empower and establish himself amongst the poor and uneducated Kenyans, but in reality, education only acts as a means of disempowerment for him as he ended up giving his own life in the hands of his native Kenyans. Colonial education had made him a puppet of the colonial masters and had used him in their battle against the native Kenyans. They had used him only as a means to broaden their scope of control among the masses of Kenya. The colonizers had acted like giving power to Jacobo, but in reality, he was driven away from his own community and was finally termed as a traitor by his own people.

Just like in education, there is also ambiguity of empowerment and disempowerment in the case of language too in *Weep Not, Child*. Njoroge along with his native Kenyans thought that it is very much necessary to know how to speak the language of the dominant country. If they does not know to speak it, it would become a barrier in their path of achieving success in all terms. Gikuyu was the mother tongue of the Kenyan people, but Ngugi shows that how they were more interested to learn the language of the Britishers, i.e., English, rather than trying to gain complete mastery over their own language. Through Njoroge, Ngugi had portrayed the influence of the Britishers language upon the Kenyans. When Njoroge had learned to speak English after going to school, he considered it as a great achievement for him as it would help him to earn a livelihood in his future life by doing business with the colonial masters. Here, he forgot the fact that in order to gain victory in his struggle against the Britishers, he had to first strengthen his own native language, religion

and culture. Thus, it can be seen that, the poor colonized people of Kenya thought that they were empowering themselves by learning to speak English, but in reality, they were only trapped by the white masters in order to achieve their goals in Kenya.

### **CONCLUSION:**

In conclusion, we can say that that there is ambiguity of empowerment and disempowerment in Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child* as what is empowering for one might be disempowering for the other. In *Weep Not, Child*, Ngugi has dealt with the ambiguity of empowerment and disempowerment in the case of education, language, religion and culture in an extensive manner. While discussing the Kenyan struggle for freedom, Ngugi shows how the colonizers have used education as a means to fulfill their own motives in Kenya.

Njoroge's belief in the Christianity ultimately alienates him from his own native religion and culture. This ambiguity can also be seen in the case of Jacobo too, as he thought that education would help him to empower and establish himself amongst the poor and uneducated Kenyans, but in reality, the colonized masters have trapped him and used his education only to possess their control over the native Kenyans. The colonizers act like giving power to Jacobo, but in reality, he was actually driven away from his own community and was finally termed as a traitor by his own people. Moreover, the thought of the Kenyans that they must be able to speak English in order to achieve any success in life had disempowered them more than empowering them in reality.

The Kenyans are only trapped by the white masters in order to achieve their goals in Kenya. Thus, at last when Njoroge was thrown out of the school, he lost his faith in God. The white masters act as if they have been working for the benefit of Kenya, but in reality they are exploiting them. At last, the conflict of Njoroge for his own identity reveals that fact that what he thinks to be empowering for him actually becomes the cause of his disempowerment.

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