

Narrative Technique in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child*

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Abstract

Weep Not, Child is indeed a historical novel. Ngugi's fictional world outlook presents his socialist thinking through historical elements. He wants to bring liberation that they cannot ignore legends and past heroes as it is from them, they get inspiration. Ngugi's structuring of novel as a *Bildungsroman* also a valid novelistic convention intended to invite readers to identify with the protagonist's struggle to establish his identity and to understand this aggressive world. The employment of this myth in Ngugi's novels is symbolic not only in the author's desire to present genuine history of his people, but also in his secret attempt to act like the elders noted above to provoke Kenyans to the realization of their deprivations. Ngugi purposely fictionalizes real historical heroes of the Mau Mau uprising and investing them with legendary qualities by making their exploits and personalities go beyond historical reality. The form of the dissent found in Ngugi is determined by the relative hegemony the Gikuyu 'tribe' holds within the Kenyan superstructure, and the extent to which the Gikuyu dominated the Mau-Mau struggle.

Keywords: Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child*, historical, liberation, hegemony, superstructure

Introduction

Africa's political, economic and social systems were loaded with the struggle of slavery and colonialism, even though their cultures and aesthetic sensibilities remain unchanged and energetic, particularly in the oral based forms of cultural expression. Though African societies have found development in writing traditions, Africans are primarily known as an oral people and it is that tradition that has dominated the cultural forms and also created that continent. Artistic expression plays a vital role in the lives of African peoples because it provides an opportunity to participate in the community and for exploring the mysteries of humanity.

African literature never attained popularity or fame in the early years because its literary texts were offered orally. The texts reflect the ties that the Africans enjoyed with the Plants and

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Ms. V. Anushya Devi Narrative Technique in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child*

18

animals, the rivers and rocks for every aspect of nature was significant in the life of African people. Tribal members were taught by example; those guiding principles were not memorized in formal lessons but were internalized from childhood and became a part of their daily lives. Their literary expresses were oral in nature for they did not have formal written script.

Thus, oral literature derives its form from its tradition of performances, which incorporated stylistic devices used by these narrators who skillfully captured and held the attention of their audience. Ngugi's fiction portrays oral traditions of his culture. He makes use of myths, legends and folklores. Ngugi explores devices of oral traditions for the purpose of the preservation and projection of socio-cultural heritage and to teach moral values.

Discussion

Weep, Not Child (1964) is the most autobiographical of Ngugi's novels. It focuses on the period at the end of World War II and explains the causes of the Mau Mau struggle. Njoroge is the protagonist who is a bright student, a self-centered youth with mission-school education and messianic ambition. His hopes are destroyed when his brothers' involvement in Mau Mau forces him out of school. His father Ngotho has religious attachment to the land of his ancestors taken from him by Mr. Howlands. Ngotho is the only a tenant farmer who works for the White settler Mr. Howlands. His son, Boro, who had fought the British in the World War II, returns home embittered by his experience, the death of his brother Mwangi in the war and the loss of their ancestral land. He despises the passive attitudes of the elders and resolves upon action joining the Mau Mau guerrillas. Jacobo is a betrayer of people who is killed by Boro. Ngotho offers himself to the authorities and confesses to the murder. He is tortured and dies. Howlands is killed by Boro and finally he surrenders. The novel depicts all Ngugi's major themes - land, religion, leadership, and the travails of a people struggling against colonialism.

Njorge's life and education so closely compared to that of the author. Many local readers who had grown up under the state of emergency, found it very difficult to tell where to draw the line between fact and fiction. But by analyzing from the autobiographical dimension of this novel, it is not to be suggested that Njorge's life is exactly like Hgugi's. The early stage many readers established their view in an autobiographical point of view. Because it is obvious that Ngugi had presented this novel in this manner to his readers early in his career. Ngugi's structuring of novel as a *Bildungsroman* also a valid novelistic convention intended to invite readers to identify with the protagonist's struggle to establish his identity and to understand this aggressive world.

Weep Not, Child is indeed a historical novel. Ngugi's fictional world outlook presents his socialist thinking through historical elements. He wants to bring liberation that they cannot ignore legends and past heroes as it is from them, they get inspiration. *Weep Not, Child* traces the

history of Kenyan people in general and of the Gikuyu. The story brings together history, legends and folklores as a way of tracing the range from past.

Conclusion

The use of myth in Ngugi's novels, is a sign of the author's interest in history of his country, Kenya and his people. More importantly it is also a means through which he celebrates his people's belief in the land as a divine patrimonial inheritance. For this reason, the land must not be passed to any invader, no matter how strong they are. When the white man comes to Kenya and begins to use Kenyan lands, the mere chant of this myth in the novels condemns this action and reassures the people of the authority of their demand for the full ownership of their land. In *Weep Not, child*, Nguni brings the same myth to the children who had gathered in his Thingira to listen to stories. He told them;

And the creator who is also called Murungu took
Mumbi from his holy mountain ... Yes, God showed
Gikuyu and Mumbi all the land and told them, this
land I-hand over to you. It's yours to rule and till in
serenity sacrificing only to me, your God, under my
sacred tree (*Weep Not, Child*, p. 24).

The employment of this myth in Ngugi's novels is symbolic not only in the author's desire to present genuine history of his people, but also in his secret attempt to act like the elders noted above to provoke Kenyans to the realization of their deprivations. This device is used to emphasize the Kenyans' divine ownership over the Kenyan lands as well as to keep Kenya's history alive in the minds of the Kenyan public. Ngugi finds this tremendously essential in order to fight the wave of misrepresentation inherent in a situation where the colonizer is the sole historian.

As Ngugi shows in his novels, the mere knowledge of history without firm efforts at making things straight is only the lame excuses of a coward. This explains the fact that why most of the author's heroes are always fighting for the liberty and when they cannot archive this, they try to rebel against an oppressive authority against their beliefs. Ngugi seems to expect his Kenyan readers to act in the same way as his heroes. By the skillful use of myth, he makes his reader share the feelings and attitudes of the fictional heroes or characters. For example, in *Weep Not Child*, after Nguni has finished narrating the myth of divine patrimony of the land to the children, Njoro's direct reaction is a question which even embarrasses Nguni: "where did the land go?" (*Weep Not, Child*, p. 25). As for Boro, his anger can neither be controlled nor calmed. He cannot nourish why the black man could have allowed his land to be taken while he sticks to a superstitious belief in a prophecy, and he faces Nguni, his father:

How can you continue working for a man who has
taken your land? How can you go on serving him?
He walked out without waiting for an answer.
(*Weep Not, Child*, p. 27).

As can be expected, such reactions which this myth invokes in the minds of the fictional characters may also be their effect on the reader and the reader has been encouraged to share the character's feelings and beliefs. The questions rose by Ngoroge and Boro are the major issues which Ngugi imports into the naive consciousness of the reader.

Ngugi purposely fictionalizes real historical heroes of the Mau Mau uprising and investing them with legendary qualities by making their exploits and personalities go beyond historical reality. They assume legendary status and their actions become another version of the novel's legendary story. Dedan Kimathi, a real historical leader of the Mau Mau war is fictionalized in this sense. The stories that are told about him by other characters in the novel makes him appear super-human. Karanga tells of how Dedan Kimathi changed into a white police officer and deceived a whole police fort into replacing his old motor bike for a new one, when in fact they had intensified their vigilance in order to catch him.

As his listeners express doubt at the truth of this story, Karanga reaffirms in *Weep Not, Child*;

That's the point. Dedan can change himself into
anything; a white man, a bird, or a tree. He can also turn
himself into an aeroplane. He learnt all these things in
the big war. (*Weep Not, Child*, p. 18.)

Through their extraordinary feats and ideal behavior, these heroes inspire their fellow fictional characters as much as they do the reader. By presenting their efforts as patriots in such legitimate cause, Ngugi idolizes them as a commander of the liberation struggle and makes the readers admire not only their dedication and invincibility but also the cause for which they stand. By the use of these myths and legends and their sequential presentation in his novels which tends to record the stages of Kenyan's gradual colonization and alienation from their ancestral lands. Ngugi hopes to draw the sympathy of his readers for the black man's experience in that country.

Ngugi himself believes that Kenyan people find that their fears are confirmed in the Bible, Biblical allusions become the device with which he strikes the chords of their innermost feelings equating their sufferings to those of the Israelites and strengthening their belief in the

justice of their cause in their bid to regain what the settler has taken from them. His Kenyan readers see themselves and their traditions presented in identifiable terms in *Weep Not, Child* where Ngoroge equates other fictional characters' identities and positions to these of the Biblical Israelites. As the narrator relates in *Weep Not, Child*,

It did not make much difference that he, Njoroge, had come to identify Gikuyu with Adam and Munbi with Eve ... there was growing up in his heart a feeling that the Gikuyu people, whose land had been taken by white men, were no other than the children of Israel about whom he read in the Bible. This explains his brother's remark that Jomo was the Black Moses (*Weep Not, Child*, p. 49).

Here, Njoroge's ready appropriation of the identity of the Israelites to his people further shows Ngugi's subtle use of sheer narrative expediency to arouse patriotic zeal in his Kenyan audience. His experiment with this device further indicates his assumption of an articulator of the Kenyan nationalist sentiments through his art, for the Biblical allusions now reveal an attempt to turn the white man's own religion against him by using same to establish colonial atmosphere and also to criticize the white man.

This oppression depicted above is intensified by the declaration of a state of emergency over Kenya. By describing the Mau Mau War, the taking of the oaths of loyalty and the refusal to operate with the white colonizer. Ngugi portrays the Kenyan people as living up to their words as depicted in the above except. In this way, the sympathy educed in the minds of the Christian readers becomes more strengthened. The arousing of this sense of identification in the mind of the reader is Ngugi's aim in his employment of the Biblical allusions.

Christianity inculcates in its Africa adherents, a shallowness of mind. That makes them lose their rationality and the characteristic commitment which the African shows to the welfare of his community. This explains why his 'good' African Christian character teacher Isaka in *Weep Not, Child*, often possesses sterling qualities that contribute so much to the welfare of others. The Biblical allusions are used as a two dimensional device. One is to judge the actions of a people who found themselves in an oppressive position similar to that of the Israelites and who had to fight back in order to liberate themselves. Ngugi's use of the Biblical allusions are used as a satiric weapon against the Christian religion and its white colonizers.

Here, the individuals referred to existed in history and their actions are historical. Therefore, while contributing to the success of Ngugi's stories, the use of historical allusion enhances a detailed re-examination of the events of history and also promotes these events to an international scope. Since the facts and figures alluded to have been fictionalized in their contents, they become satirical.

The above action of rain is symbolic of the physical and psychological disposition of Kenyans on the eve of independence. It is true that independence is now a reality, but Kenyan Africans will never forget the sufferings that attended their colonial experience, particularly those of the Emergency period and the Mau Mau war. Those of them who survived those waves of violence surely caught the pathetic figures of maize plants whose leaves were lacerated into numerous shreds. The rain could also symbolize peace, luxuriance and triumph. In *Weep Not, Child*, for instance, rain ushers in a ray of hope, of victory and triumph for the Africans of Kenya who were going to stand trial the next day. As the narrator relates:

Much rain fell at Kipanga and the country around on the eve of the judgment day. People were happy in all the land. The rain was a good omen. Black folk were on trial (*Weep Not, Child*, p. 72).

The effect of the author's use of symbols is the wide range of associations and handiness to reveal hidden message are also expressive of the author's thematic vision. Ngugi's use of symbols also strengthens the active reader by posing little challenges of interpretation, the unraveling of which makes him enjoy the novels as mature works of art. The use of symbols also makes for a firmness of structure as they save the author from wordiness.

Finally, the title of the novels are also symbolic. *Weep Not, Child* symbolizes the disillusionment of the hero, Njoroge who suffers of a result of the imperialist and his dreams are frustrated. Another device Ngugi uses in his novels is motif. The dominant motifs that run through Ngugi's novels is the messianic or Saviour and land motifs. In each novel the bone of controversy is the people's lands which have been taken by first the white colonizers and then the black imperialist.

The struggle centres around how to get the land back because to the Kenyans, loss of land is equated with loss of manhood. A man is worthless without a piece of land. The messianic motif is also common to his novels. In *Weep, Not, Child*, Jomo Kenyatta is the 'Black Moses'. Just as Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, he will deliver his people from the hands of the imperialists. The young Njorogo envisions himself as Jomo's successor as he feels that education

will serve as a weapon for this mission. Ngotho believes in an age old prophecy of a Saviour that will come to recover the lost land from the colonialist.

The form of the dissent found in Ngugi is determined by the relative hegemony the Gikuyu 'tribe' holds within the Kenyan superstructure, and the extent to which the Gikuyu dominated the Mau-Mau struggle. This relative hegemony allows Ngugi to present Gikuyu traditions and symbols as a general Kenyan nationalism.

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