

Colonial Disillusionment in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child*

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Abstract

Disillusionment is experienced when expectations are not realised. Some of the natives of the colonies naively believed in the nobility of the intentions of the whites, their aspirations to teach their language, convert them to their religion and other prospects of prosperity and development. They hoped that they would lead a respectable life. They were not aware of the hidden agenda of the colonisers. When they find out that the colonial religion or Education or anything that colonialism has brought into their lives is of no use and least worthy to be trusted, an overwhelming sense of disillusionment engulfs them, which results in desperation, a sense of loss, self-hatred, hatred for others, mental and physical trauma, self-doubt, and unexpressed anger against colonial powers. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is a politically skewed post-colonial writer whose works reflect his own experiences as a subject of colonisation. The paper makes use of the concept of disillusionment provided by Paul J. Maher and Eric R. Igou in their article titled "Disillusionment: A prototype analysis", wherein they have scientifically conceptualised the experience of disillusionment. They have worked on both the epistemic and affective factors that characterise disillusionment. This paper utilises their findings to explore the colonial disillusionment in its various aspects in Ngũgĩ's *Weep Not, Child*. These aspects include Politics, Education, and Spirituality. With reference to the concept of colonial disillusionment, this article makes an effort to probe into the novel for these aspects.

Keywords: Disillusionment, Colonialism, Politics, Education, Spirituality

Expectation is created when there is a particular desire that has a chance of being fulfilled. Disappointment results when the prospect is not realised. Disillusionment, on the other hand, occurs when a person's fundamental views are shattered by disappointment. An individual who is disenchanted feels a profound feeling of loss when they realise that their assumptions are wrong. Disillusionment is an acute feeling of disappointment. A person becomes pessimistic as a result of disillusionment, and pessimistic traits like anxiety, low self-esteem, and hopelessness make up their personality. "The word 'Disillusionment' has its early usage in 1855 with a positive connotation, "to free from illusion". However, the word is now largely understood to be in the negative sense.

The British colonised almost all parts of the world using their military power and other methods of force and coercion. The colonisers strategically used the natives' innocence, particularly in Africa, to gain their trust by portraying themselves as wise superiors who had come to free them from their oppression and guide them into the light. Christian Missionaries introduced the Gospel to the nation with promises of new life and hope. This made the colonised believe that one day, they would lead a life of the whites. Though few natives became conscious of their strategy of grabbing their land and destroying their culture, they thought Western Education was the only possible tool that would help them chase away the whites from their land. However with an epistemological discovery, one realises that they were under deception and what they were made to believe is not the reality. Disillusionment is the outcome of their dreams being dashed.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the first East African novelist, depicts this covert plan of white men and the ignorance of the natives in most of his works, particularly in his debut novel *Weep Not, Child*. The novel's title alludes to its sad conclusion, in which the protagonist, Njoroge, loses faith in both Western Education and spirituality. The other significant characters in the novel serve as victims of political disillusionment.

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Weep Not, Child is a coming-of-age novel in which Ngũgĩ attempts to present the socio-political issues of the native Kikuyu during the Mau Mau Revolution. The protagonist of the book, Njoroge, is a young boy growing up during one of the nation's most critical periods. *Weep Not, Child* is undeniably a work about loss, as Ben Okri claims in the novel's introduction. The white people are greatly admired, particularly for their commitment and contributions to the black community. The characters in the novel have a great admiration for the whites, especially towards their dedication and contribution to the black community. Throughout the story, Njoroge harbours a strong love for Western culture, which extends even to the costume worn by his teacher: "The teacher wore a white blouse and a green skirt. Njoroge liked the white and green because it was like a blooming white flower on a green plant" (14), and for the huge house of Mr. Howland: "They passed near Mr. Howland's house. It was huge and imposing. It was more grand than that which belonged to Mwihaki's father" (38). Such admirations of the natives towards the Westerners make them crave a life like theirs. This is because of their presumed inferiority to the whites. "Colonialism had persuaded ... that England was a perfect place, a developed country where everybody was happy, had perfect knowledge, had good houses" (Lovesey 78).

They believe what they observe in the colonisers' way of life constitutes truth, from which they create their knowledge. This firm epistemological foundation serves as the basis of their hopes. The white people are believed to be Gods by the blacks. For instance, a certain barber in the novel comments on the whites, "They are not the gods we had thought them to be." (9) this evidently shows the exalted status that white people hold in the hearts of the indigenous people. Once this belief is discovered to be false, they are disillusioned. This echoes what Maher and Igou say: "Disillusionment is associated with epistemic challenges that involve a stark contradiction or even a shattering of core beliefs about the world" (3).

Disillusionment in politics is characterised as a discrepancy between "what is" and "what ought to be." The colonisation of Kenya began in the late 19th century, which is before the two catastrophic world wars, even though the narrative is set in the 1950s. The locals were won over by the whites' benevolence and their 'selfless, humble obligation' to educate the less-civilised non-whites, which Rudyard Kipling referred to as "The White

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Man's Burden." Ngũgĩ points it out as follows: "The land had been taken away, through the Bible and the sword ... he blamed the foolish generosity of their forefathers who pitied the stranger and welcomed him with open arms into their fold" (61). Both World Wars I and II, which Ngũgĩ refers to in his book as "the first big war" and "the second big war," in which the British used the Africans. Ngotho, Njoroge's father has been part of the first big war. He firmly believes that their efforts throughout the battle would be amply rewarded. However, paradoxically, upon his return from the conflict, he is greeted with the most painful loss of all—land appropriation—which leaves him disillusioned. He tells his family about these events as he describes them: "We came home worn-out but very ready for whatever the British might give us as a reward...but Ng'o! The land was gone" (25). Ngotho becomes even more submissive to the white people and eventually works as an enslaved person in his land. Boro, Njoroge's half-brother, is disappointed by the revelation about the land appropriation.

In contrast to Ngotho, the effect was different on him. Boro, who had participated in the second big war against Hitler, becomes extremely enraged as his fundamental faith in the Gikuyu Seer, Mugo wa Kibiro's prophecy, is destroyed. Boro displays his irrational rage "in a whisper that sounded like a shout" and says, "To hell with the prophecy" (27).

Njoroge desires Western Education, dreams for it, and eventually becomes disillusioned. Education for Njoroge is "the vision of his childhood ... for ... a bright future" (3). The Education that no one in his family has received except him gives Njoroge his only chance for a bright future. Everyone in his family, not just him, is pleased and hopeful about his schooling. Kamau, his other stepbrother, tells him, "Get an education...then we shall, in the future, be able to have a new and better home for the whole family" (4). His mother, Nyokabi, is proud of her son going to school:

She felt elated that it was to her the greatest reward she would get from her motherhood if she one day found her son writing letters, doing arithmetic, and speaking English. She tried to imagine what the Howlands woman must have felt to have a daughter and a son in school. She wanted to be the same. (16)

Enquiring about his schooling, Njoroge's father tells him, "Education is everything" (41). His confidence in himself and his vision are boosted as a result of

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seeing everyone around him being hopeful. With the possibility of the fulfilment of his dream, "He saw himself destined for something big, and this made his heart glow" (41). The entire town was joyful when Njoroge passed the exam and prepared for high school. Many villagers contributed financially to his Education, as he is today "the son of the land" (116). He feels empowered and proud of himself because his score is higher than that of Mwihaki, his friend. Afterwards, he attends Siriana Secondary School, which Njoroge considers as a little paradise: "To Njoroge, coming here was nearly the realisation of his dreams" (119). However, this sense of realisation only lasts for a while. Simon Gikandi, in his book *Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo*, says, "One needs to be educated in order to be an autonomous bourgeois subject, but education only leads to disillusionment and the breakdown of identity" (Gikandi 91). The same is the case with Njoroge.

All his dreams and visions are shattered by the incidents that follow after his headmaster shows up in his class to notify him, "You are wanted at home" (127). Njoroge is utterly lost. He gets arrested and is brutally tortured by whites. Simon Gikandi rightly opines that: "Once he is arrested and tortured, Njoroge comes to realise that his accomplishments in school offer no protection against the brutality of power. He wakes up from his dream and discovers that what appeared to be "the difficulties of the world" marked the true state of the African subject under colonial terror" (Gikandi 96). Njoroge's optimism is completely crushed by this mental trauma, which is followed by physical agony, giving him a death instinct: "Perhaps death was not bad at all. It sent you into a big sleep from which you never awoke to the living fears, the dying hopes, the lost visions" (128). According to Simon Gikandi, the most significant part of Njoroge's Education is undoubtedly his realisation that the things he believed to be the sources of his identity, his father, his family, and his school, are actually hollow and twisted forms of desire. Seeing his dying father, or rather, his pained body, Njoroge thinks "the world had turned upside down" (135). This allegory of the world turning upside down appropriately portrays the disillusionment that results from Njoroge's epistemological discovery that his dream or vision was nothing more than a mirage, something that vanishes as one gets closer to it; the same is referred to in the novel as "the devil's waters because they deceived you and made you more thirsty"(5).

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A distinctive element that underpins Western civilisation is the Christian faith. Africans perceive Christianity as a Western religion; however, *Weep Not, Child* does not portray it as a white' religion; rather, it is clear through Njoroge that they believed in Christ as their own God and that "they were the chosen people of God" (52). Ngũgĩ's choice to capitalise the word "God" only when referring to the Christian God supports his core conviction that Christianity is true. Njoroge is a wonderful example of spirituality since he prioritised both religion and Education equally: "His belief in a future for his family and the village rested then not on a hope for sound education but also on a belief in a God of love and mercy, who long ago walked on this earth with Gikuyu and Mumbi, or Adam and Eve" (52).

Njoroge's actions and routine tasks demonstrate his incredibly strong faith in God. His priority, commitment and dependence on God show his deep-rooted trust in God. No matter how horrible the situation is, Njoroge's initial reaction is to pray. When the indigenous people went on strike against the government to demand equal wages as Indians and Europeans, "he prayed that the strike to be a success" (54). He repeatedly prays for his Education:

"He prayed, Lord, get me learning... I ask you all this through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen" (47).

"Day by day, he prayed...God heard his prayers" (65).

"His first impulse when he learnt that he has passed was to kneel and thank God for all He had done for him" (115).

Njoroge has a remarkable confidence in God, and instead of holding on to that faith for himself, he transfers it to Mwihaki, his lone friend and the person he loves most. Mwihaki is deeply worried and terrified after hearing a sermon about the end of the world owing to the unsettling Mau Mau Rebellion scenario. Njoroge provides her hope by considering that he might be the country's possible saviour: "he felt a bit awed to imagine that God may have chosen him to be the instrument of His Divine Service. So he just said, 'God works mysteriously.'" (102, 103). He even compares himself to David, who delivered the whole country from Goliath's threat. This spark of hope in him is not allowed to burn for very long since he is expelled from school and subjected to horrendous abuse after being arrested. The outcome is a decline in his spiritual

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conviction. "That day, for the first time, he wept with fear and guilt, and he did not pray" (132). The twenty-year-old Njoroge now approaches Mwihaki, his final hope, and asks her to leave their home and migrate to Uganda in order to live in peace. He loses all hope once she rejects that notion, which completely undermines his fundamental belief in God: "O, God – But why did he call on God? God meant little to him now. For Njoroge had now lost faith in all the things he had earlier believed in, like wealth, power, education, religion"(145).

Disillusioning experiences have important consequences for individuals and society as a whole. As a person, Njoroge could have accepted his disillusionment as a sign to get rid of the illusion. However, his agonising anguish over the rejection of his core beliefs prevents him from doing so. As a result of this, he decides to commit suicide, which is a serious sin in the faith he follows. The overly optimistic protagonist chooses to live in darkness intentionally: "And he sat there waiting for darkness to come and cover him" (146). Likewise, the other characters, Ngotho and Boro, in the novel also face severe consequences as a result of "having their defences fully breached" (Maher and Igou 3). The novel does, however, end on a hopeful note. In his wait for the 'night,' he sees his mother coming in search of him with "a glowing piece of wood ...to light the way" (146), bringing in a sense of new hope, as said by Walt Whitman in his poem *On the Beach at Night*,

Weep not, child,
 Weep not, my darling,
 With these kisses, let me remove your tears,
 The ravening clouds shall not long be victorious,
 They shall not long possess the sky... (lines 14-18)

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