

# Reflection Of Culture and Tradition in Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between*

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## Abstract

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is a renowned Kenyan author. He is East Africa's leading novelist and has made significant contributions to African literature, particularly in terms of promoting indigenous languages and cultural authenticity. *Weep Not, Child* is one of his influential works, which represents a powerful portrayal of cultural aspects of Kenya. In the novel *Weep Not, Child*, Thiong'o skillfully portrays cultures, traditions and customs, furnishing readers with a glimpse into the rich cultural heritage of Kenya during the era of British colonisation. Thiong'o also depicts cultural and traditional practices, customs, beliefs, and conflicts of the Gikũyũ people in *The River Between*. The characters and their interactions provide a lens through which the reader can interpret the complexities of African culture and the challenges faced during the colonial era. This research paper aims to examine and analyse the cultural representation in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between* and exploring the characters, themes, and language present in these novels. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o proficiently depicts the cultural practices and traditions of Kenya in the chosen novels, highlighting their significance in shaping both personal and communal identities. Through evocative descriptions and insightful quotations, the novels highlight the resilience and significance of these cultural practices during the era of colonialism.

**Keywords:** colonialism, culture, disruption, hegemony, indigenous, languages, ritual, storytelling, tradition.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is a renowned Kenyan author and activist who has made significant contributions to African literature. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has become a prominent figure in the literary world, known for his works that explore deep into the complexities of African culture and tradition. Thiong'o's writings often explore the themes of African culture, tradition, and the impact of colonialism. He is a staunch advocate for decolonising African literature and reclaiming cultural identity. In his novels, he skillfully depicts the struggles, resilience, and significance of African cultural practices in the time of colonial oppression and the subsequent challenges of post-colonial Africa. His works, such as *Weep Not, Child*, *A Grain of Wheat*, *The River Between* and *Petals of Blood*, represent powerful narratives that centre on the lives of ordinary people, highlighting their experiences, dreams, and the complexities of their cultural backgrounds. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's writings explore the richness of African traditions, beliefs, customs, and oral storytelling, providing a different portrayal of the diverse cultures and societies within Africa.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, as a prominent African writer, demonstrates a thoughtful and deliberate approach to selecting characters in his works. His characters are often representative of diverse societies, races, and backgrounds, reflecting the intricacy of African societies and the impact of colonialism. In his novel *Weep Not, Child*, characters like Njoroge, Kamau, Boro and Mwhaki represent the Gikũyũ people, showcasing their struggles during the Mau Mau uprising and the impact of British colonialism on their lives. In *Petals of Blood*, Thiong'o introduces characters like Munira, Karega, and Abdulla, who come from different ethnic backgrounds, reflecting the cultural diversity of Kenya. He explores their lives in a post-colonial society, shedding light on the complex challenges faced by Africans while seeking independence and social advancement. Thiong'o's characters, such as Nyambura, Chege, Muthoni and Kabonyi in *The River Between*, reveal the tensions between traditional customs and Christianity in their communities, reflecting the clash of cultures during the colonial era. Through the careful selection of characters, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o not only presents a multifaceted view of African society but also provides a platform to examine the effects of traditional and cultural forces on individuals and communities.

In the novel *Weep Not, Child*, the characters are portrayed with rich cultural identities, reflecting the diversity and complexities of Kenyan society during the period of British colonial rule. One of the central characters is Njoroge Ngotho, the protagonist of the story. Njoroge is a young boy living in central Kenya, and he takes great pride in being the first person in his family to receive an education. His cultural identity is shaped by his Kikuyu heritage, and throughout the novel, Njoroge grapples with the tension between embracing his cultural roots and the influences of the colonisers. His journey represents the struggle of many individuals who face the clash of traditional values and external forces of colonisation during the colonial era. The other characters manage to avoid this dilemma by intertwining their faith with traditional Gikũyũ mythology and religious principles. Kiarie is a significant character who plays a crucial role in highlighting the clash between Christianity and traditional beliefs among the Gikũyũ community. Kiarie is depicted as a proud and staunch advocate of traditional Gikũyũ customs and values. He rejects Christianity, viewing it as a form of cultural colonialism imposed by the British. His strong resistance to embracing the new religion comes from his belief that it threatens the integrity of Gikũyũ culture and identity. As the story progresses, both Mwhaki and Njoroge, two central characters in the novel, find themselves questioning their own beliefs, including their faith in Christianity. The influence of Kiarie's perspective on traditional values and his resistance to Christianity eventually sparks doubts in Mwhaki and Njoroge's minds. They begin to reevaluate the impact of Christianity on their community and their personal identities. During their conversation, Mwhaki and Njoroge contemplate the transformations in Kenya over recent years. Mwhaki questions why Jesus didn't intervene to prevent the violence in their country. However, Njoroge remains steadfast in his faith, suggesting that God's ways are beyond human understanding. But at the end of the novel things changed as,

God meant little to him .Njoroge had lost faith in all the things he had earlier believed in, like wealth, power, education, religion. Even love, his last hope, had fled from him<sup>1</sup>

Similarly the novel *The River Between* explores the clash between traditional African beliefs and customs and the establishment of Christianity by the colonial missionaries. The novel takes place in Kenya and explores the division between Kameno and Makuyu, neighboring villages with contrasting beliefs and ideologies. The conflict between these villages leads to deep animosity among the adults

from both sides. Waiyaki, a youthful and ambitious leader, encounters tremendous challenges and went through immense obstacles and hardships while he attempts to bring reconciliation between the two villages of Kameno and Makuyu in the story. The arrival of the missionaries disrupts the cultural practice of the villages, as they denounce traditional practices and beliefs, including female circumcision and polygamy. This clash is exemplified by the conflict between Joshua, a fervent Christian convert, and Kabonyi, a respected traditional leader who opposes the abandonment of their cultural heritage. Thiong'o skillfully merges the Christian concept of a savior with the Gikũyũ prophecy about, Salvation shall come from the hills<sup>2</sup> Chege said this prophecy to Waiyaki and told him to go to mission place.

Learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices. Be true to your people and the ancient rites<sup>3</sup>

The novels delve into the historical context of Kenya during the period of British colonial rule and examine the ways in which colonialism disrupted and transformed tradition and cultural practices. The arrival of the British settlers not only imposed a new political and economic system but also introduced a foreign culture that clashed with the existing indigenous traditions.

Another significant character is Njoroge's father Ngotho, whom Njoroge deeply admires. His father embodies the older generation's connection to culture and traditions and the resistance against colonial oppression. Through this character, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o portrays the cultural resilience and determination of the Kenyan people in the period of adversity. When white settlers attempt to take over the villagers' land, Ngotho leads a fierce resistance. He unites his fellow villagers, refusing to let go of their ancestral land without a fight. He narrates the story when white man came and took the land,

Then came the war. It was the first big war... 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. Mugo had said this would come to be. The white man did not go and he died a *Muhoi* on this very land. It then belonged to Chahira before he sold it to Jacobo. I grew up here, but working on the land that belonged to our ancestors<sup>4</sup>

Ngotho's resistance against the land grab by white settlers showcases his determination to protect his people's ancestral land. Throughout the novel, Ngotho faces numerous challenges, including poverty and discrimination. Even his son Boro was not happy with his father because he thinks that his father who had fought in the war only to be dispossessed. However, Ngotho never loses hope and remains resilient in the face of adversity. His determination to provide for his family and uplift his community represents the unwavering spirit of the Kenyan people during difficult times. The establishment of Christianity by the British missionaries challenges the existing indigenous religious systems, causing a clash between traditional spirituality and the imposition of a foreign faith. There are characters in the novel that represent different aspects of Kenyan society, cultural identities and conflict between beliefs. This conflict is depicted through the characters of Njoroge and Mwihaki, who grapple with the tensions between their Christian beliefs and their ancestral customs. Mwihaki, a young girl and Njoroge's love interest, comes from a mixed-race background. Her character highlights the complexities of racial and cultural dynamics during colonial rule. She not only represents the union of different cultures and traditions but also the challenges faced by individuals who straddle multiple identities.

*Weep Not, Child* published in 1964, was the first major novel in English by an East African writer. However, later in his career, Thiong'o made a conscious decision to write primarily in Gikũyũ

language to emphasise the importance of indigenous languages in African storytelling and cultural representation. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's commitment to indigenous languages and cultural authenticity originate from his experiences growing up in Kenya and witnessing the impact of colonisation on African societies. Thiong'o strives to depict the cultural realities and experiences of the Kenyan people during the time of colonial rule. Achebe addressed this dilemma by incorporating Igbo proverbs, songs, parables, and an inherent Igbo rhythm in his novels as a means of expressing his reality. Ben Okri said,

Ngũgĩ adopted this approach and was later famously to go further, declaring that African literature should be written in African languages, the better not only to keep African languages alive but also to develop them as languages capable of expressing profound and elevated thought<sup>5</sup>

Thiong'o advocates for the use of African languages as a means of reclaiming cultural identity and challenging the dominance of colonial languages in African literature. The novel includes elements of the Gikũyũ language, one of the major ethnic languages in Kenya. While the majority of the novel is written in English, Thiong'o includes Gikũyũ words and phrases to infuse the story with a sense of cultural authenticity which gives the novel its rich African feeling. Thiong'o discussed about the holy tree Mukuyu, which is a Gikũyũ word in *Weep Not, Child* as,

This was Mukuyu, God's tree. Now, you know that at the beginning of things there was only one man (Gikũyũ) and one woman (Mumbi). It was under this Mukuyu that he first put them<sup>6</sup>

Thiong'o further said that Murungu took Gikũyũ and Mumbi to Mukuruwe wa Gathanga i.e the Kikuyu Garden of Eden. This linguistic choice reflects the complex relationship between colonialism and indigenous languages. His use of language in *Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between* also reflects cultural nuances and perspectives. The characters' dialogue and interactions in English and Gikũyũ reveal the interplay between Western influences and traditional cultural values. For instance, when all the children want Nyokabi to tell the story, she said, If you all come to my *Thingira*, I'll tell you one or two<sup>7</sup>. Here, *Thingira* means hut or house. In the novels, the characters often switch between English and Gikũyũ depending on the context of their conversations. The characters seamlessly blend the languages, illustrating the coexistence of Western influences and traditional cultural values in their lives.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o incorporates elements of oral tradition, a vital aspect of African storytelling. Thiong'o's novels often include scenes where characters share stories orally, passing down knowledge and wisdom from one generation to another. For example, in *Weep Not, Child*, the character Nyokabi tells her son Njoroge stories about their ancestors and the history of their people, instilling a sense of identity and cultural pride in him. The novels also feature proverbs, folktales, and songs that are passed down from one generation to another. In *The River Between*, Nyambura's beauty described as, she looked like a lamb on the altar of sacrifice<sup>9</sup>. In *Weep Not, Child* proverb of the lamb also used as, A lamb takes after its mother<sup>10</sup>. Lamb is a metaphorical reference to a person or animal sacrificed for the common good. The metaphor, she looked like a lamb on the altar of sacrifice draws a striking parallel between Nyambura's situation and the image of a lamb, an innocent and defenseless creature, prepared for a sacrificial offering on an altar. This comparison highlights Nyambura's helplessness and the sense of being at the mercy of powerful cultural traditions that demand strict faithfulness to practices that may not align with her personal beliefs or desires.

This inclusion reinforces the importance of oral history and the preservation of cultural knowledge. Not only *Weep Not, Child* but many other novels of Thiong'o have the element of storytelling. Thiong'o's exploration of storytelling and oral traditions in his works illuminates the central role they play within the community. By portraying these practices, he highlights their significance in preserving cultural wisdom, transmitting ancestral knowledge, and asserting cultural identity. Through the power of storytelling, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o empowers his characters to challenge dominant narratives and celebrate the resilience of African cultures.

Africans used storytelling as the most form of preserving their history, traditional culture and ritual ceremonies<sup>11</sup>

Through this quotation, the author emphasises the cultural importance of storytelling as a way to motivate, educate, and preserve communal values.

*Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between* novels that are set against the backdrop of the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya during the 1950s. This historical context is crucial to understand the impact of colonisation on cultural representation within the novel. One of the key impacts of colonisation on cultural representation in the novel is the suppression and marginalisation of indigenous languages and cultural practices. Through the story, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o highlights the importance of cultural pride, self-determination, and the reclaiming of cultural narratives as a means of resistance against colonial oppression. *Weep Not, Child* examines the social hierarchies prevalent in Kenyan society during the colonial era. It explores the divisions between different ethnic groups, as well as the disparities between the colonisers and the colonised.

Through the characters' interactions and experiences, the novel sheds light on the complex power dynamics influenced by culture and ethnicity. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o uses vivid descriptions and symbolic elements to enhance the cultural representation in the novel. For example, the Honia River in *The River Between*, serves as a metaphorical representation of the divide between the two villages and the clash between tradition and modernity. The river is seen as a physical barrier but also a symbol of cultural separation. It becomes a powerful image that represents the cultural rift that emerges as a result of external influences. The Honia River in the story stands for the big differences in beliefs and ideas between the nearby villages of Makuyu and Kameno. The river flows between them, keeping the people physically apart. This separation shows how different their beliefs are, Kameno supports tribalism, while Makuyu follows the Christianity brought by the white people. Interestingly, the river becomes the place where these important cultural and religious differences are shown like Kameno does their traditional circumcisions there, while Makuyu performs Christian baptisms. Even though the river separates the two villages and shows their differences, it also shows that they are connected and need each other. In the first chapter of the novel, Honia river depicted as...

the soul of Kameno and Makuyu. It joined them. And men, cattle, wild beasts and trees, were all united by this life-stream<sup>12</sup>

Throughout the novel, various aspects of cultures, traditions and customs are depicted, highlighting their significance in shaping the lives of the characters. One aspect of cultural representation in the novel is the importance of circumcision within the Gikũyũ community. Circumcision is considered a rite of initiation and a symbol of manhood in the Gikũyũ culture. The initiation ceremonies, which include circumcision, play a significant role in both the novels. The circumcision ceremony for Njoroge's brother, Kamau, is described in detail, emphasising the importance of this cultural practice in marking the transition from childhood to adulthood in Gikũyũ culture. The



same cultural practice depicted in *The River Between* through a young woman named Muthoni, who is the daughter of Joshua from Makuyu, flees her village to Kameno with the intention of undergoing circumcision. Tragically, she loses her life during the procedure. The perspective on circumcision, whether it is seen as a superstition or a sacred ceremony, is determined by the strength of one's beliefs.

Chege views Muthoni's death as a punishment to Joshua who had turned against his traditions. Joshua, on the other hand, sees it as a punishment for filial disobedience<sup>13</sup>

These rituals demonstrate the significance of cultural heritage and the struggle to maintain traditions in the time of colonial influence. Thiong'o describe the importance of these rituals as,

Circumcision was an important ritual to the tribe. It kept people together, bound the tribe. It was at the core of the social structure, and a something that gave meaning to a man's life<sup>14</sup>

This emphasises the cultural value placed on these rites, symbolising the preservation of cultural identity and the passage of traditional knowledge from one generation to the next.

Colonialism also resulted in the misappropriation and commodification of indigenous cultural artifacts. The novel portrays how British settlers exploited the cultural heritage of Kenya, appropriating and commercialising traditional artifacts and practices for their own benefit. This exploitation is exemplified through the character of Mr. Howlands, who collects African artifacts and exploits the labor of Kenyan workers to build his house.

*Weep Not, Child* and *The River Between* highlights the detrimental effects of colonialism on cultural representation. Through its narrative and characters, the novel showcases the erosion of native languages, the disruption of traditional cultural practices, and the commodification of indigenous culture. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's work emphasises the importance of acknowledging and reclaiming cultural heritage in the period of colonial domination. Thiong'o's writings not only shed light on African culture and tradition but also raise important questions about the power dynamics of language, the effects of colonisation, and the role of literature in the process of decolonisation. His works have left a lasting impact on African literature, inspiring generations of writers and readers to embrace and celebrate their cultural heritage.

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