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## **African Literature and The Protest Novel: Neo-Nationalism in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not Child***

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**ABSTRACT:** *Every literary writer belongs to a particular society; he writes to reflect the conditions of that society. Therefore, African literature captures the African temperament. This paper attempts an analysis of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Weep Not Child. Colonisation turns people into objects in order for the colonialists to facilitate their manipulation and the handing over power to Africans with a hope that this group of Africans will change the cause of events. The inability of these leaders to perform to expectation leading to a period of transition from colonialism to neo-colonialism necessitated the protests in most African novels. This paper explores the African literature written from the African point of view. It explores what inspires the Africans to protest through their literary works. The origin and trends in African literature from the ancient to the stage of protest is also discussed. The paper uses the eco-criticism framework to focus on the protest element in Ngugi's Weep Not Child. It exposes the forceful acquisition and abuse of power on the social and political life of the entire citizens. It looks at Ngotho who protests against the inhumanisation and exploitation from the white counterpart, turning them into slaves. It further examines the critical analysis of the novel, viewing the elements that make the novel a protest fiction. Finally, the paper pins down the work of this great African writer as a protest based on its contents.*

**KEYWORDS:** African Literature, Protest, Colonialism, Neo-Colonialism, *Weep Not Child*.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The concept "African literature" has been the subject of much literary and critical rumination, a controversial topic between critics of the European and afrocentric schools of thought. Different diverse definitions based on their perspectives and posturing; some have argued against the existence of any such phenomenon as "African literature" hence we are in a debt to not only prove

what African literature is, but to testify its existence as a literary field of study with merit. Consequent upon the misconception that shrouds the true identity of African literature, it has been mistaken for concepts like folklore, oral tradition, folktale, etc. Okoh (2002) citing Abrams defines “folklore as the collective name applied to verbal materials and social rituals, it includes legend, superstition, songs, tales, proverbs, riddles, etc” (p.33).

Folktale as a term does not adequately embrace or describe African literature. This paper favours a cultural definition as eloquently elucidated by Chinweizu et'al (1980) that “African literature is such literature that is written from an essentially African point of view” (p.168). African protest novel is an offshoot of African literature written in European language; of a necessity traces the form of the novel and seeks to establish the phenomena of the African protest novel. The novel is usually defined as an extended fictional narrative whose subject matter is “man in society” and it is also averred that “the novel unlike the Romance is concerned with man in a materialistic society”. The implication of this “man in society” is that the novel’s narrative is built or wrapped around the “man”, the central character portrayed as the hero, like in classical Greek drama in which the plot was developed around the tragic hero.

### **The Hero in African Protest Novel**

The African protest novel is thus projected in the presentation of the hero of the African novel. The hero of the African novel is not stereotype of flat character, rather there is no monolithic type of hero, instead, there are heroes whose specific challenges and individual comportments are defined by specific milieu which they created to typify.

Any hubristic act is a disruption of the ferrous balance between the natural and supernatural worlds and could yield disastrous consequences for the hero and his society. So, at this stage, one may say that the protest novel is setting up its fundamentals. It is at the expository stage in which the protest elements are laid down in the framework of the structure of the society and the hero. The hero of the African novel of revolutionary inspiration is not the epic hero, nor does he approximate the magician, priest, healer, farmer, etc. He does not embody the man-spirit duality rather he lives a contradictory existence; an embodiment of the aspirations of a new society and the victim of the old order. The hero embodies the protest in the novel at this stage. He is the collective personage embodying the angered consciousness of the oppressed in such protest novels as *Two Thousand Seasons*, *The Healer* and *Petals of Blood*.

The hero is protest to the Marxist tendencies portrayed therein; galvanises the collective will of the down-trodden, the peasantry workers, students and progressive intellectual in a revolutionary vanguard. The incidence and feature of these novels of protest wherein the hero has a culturally divided personality of the symbolic mulatto emphasises the discontent, leading to the agitations. The agitations are for a neo-nationalism. Odumukwu (2017) puts it succinctly that:

When we return to immediate task of understanding the African novel in the light of change what we need today in Africa is a new form of sense for understanding the nation. That is, we need a new paradigm that will deconstruct our traditional perception of African *self* and nation and political independence (p.132).

The protest novel progressed alongside the hero of the novel, here, the hero of postcolonial disillusionment is a hero who seeks identification through acts of violence and outlawry, the hero's anguish and pain stems from the fact that he is aware of the ideal values which life in society negates. He thus protests by seeking solitude and seeking mythic resolution by being an outlaw. The novels such as *A Walk in the Night* and *Kill Me Quick* are protest novels protesting the ideal values which the society negates.

The African protest novel is thus an embodiment of the plight and the frustration of the individual moralist in an atmosphere of spiritual and moral decadence against which he is pitched. In the protest novel, crime and acts of outlawry sieve not only as a language of defiance, protest and freedom. We find this far that a protest novel protests against injustices, inequalities, oppressions, sufferings, political and economic dominations, radical subjugation and psycho-physiological maltreatments against moral values and virtues, cultural imperialisms, etc. inherent in contemporary African societies. The origin and trend in African literature from the ancient to the protest stage is the subject of much literary critical controversy which is basically a European and Afrocentric dichotomy. "In tracing the historical development of African literature written in European languages, that is, English and French, it goes back as far as the 1990s. Poetry by black writers in French appeared in 1948 while their English counterparts lagged behind until 1957.

The balkanisation of African and the colonial experience coupled with the lack of a literate African populace greatly influenced the African writers toward modeling their works to the form of the European novels. African novel could be said to have come through several stages namely: the first stage – the literature or novel of historical crisis and clash of African and European cultures and the problem of acculturation. Such world as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Ngugi's *Weep Not Child* and Lawis Nkosi's *Tasks and Masks* belong to this stage/phase. The phase of historical crisis and cultural clashes gives way to the second phase – "marvelous realism" as championed by Amos Tutuola in *The Palmwine Drinkerd*. This phase is distinctively African and contrasts western surface realism by its presentation of the African cosmology with the feature of a tripartite system of interaction. This stage of literary progress moves on to the third phase of "form and experimentation". The major preoccupation of this phase is its focus on the transfer of idioms and proverbs into English and in rare cases an outright transliteration as undertaken by Gabriel Okara in *The Voices*.

This phase is closely followed on the heel by the phase of novels of post-independence disillusionment. The literature of this phase was concerned with the challenges of independence

and the problems of leadership. The novels in this phase include Achebe's *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. Soyinka's play, *The Interpreters* and Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, etc. There are several other types that fall into diverse thematic preoccupation such as feminism, psychology of characters, interior monologue (stream of consciousness), etc. No doubts, the African novel is a hybrid form influenced by the oral narrative technique of non-literate African and western traditions of the novel. The hybridisation of these two traditions and cultures has been artistically employed by Ayi Kwei Armah and to some extent Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in a work of reconstruction of African history. This experiment of reconstruction is in their works: *Two Thousand Seasons*, *The Healers* and *Why Are We So Blest*. "It was lachrymal; it was a weeping literature, a literature of lamentation, following Africa's unhappy experience with slavery and colonialism". (Nnolim 2006, p.1). It is this "weeping", with slavery and colonialism, lamentation and sufferings of sorrow that have given most of the first batch of written literature in Africa the tone of protest.

In South Africa, voices are still heard singing of human dignity and the fight of man to determine his destiny. The theme of protest in early South African writings and negritude movement could be traced to the political and cultural revolutions that preceded African independence and since then the African writers and critics have turned African literature to express their dissatisfaction with situations and circumstances in which they find themselves. Ohia (1995) avers that "the protest writers are torchbearers of the then emergent African identity in social and political spheres of life. It is only plausible that they were more concerned with having out this identity in its sharpest features in their works, than with intellectual indulgence of intra-cultural insurrection" (p.6).

As the voice of the society, the writer as held by Wikipedia the free encyclopedia addresses the political conflict as Ngugi does in *Weep Not Child* where he incorporates a description of the power of the white rulers, the bitterness of Africans at being enslaved in their own land and their attempt to rise against the tyranny. To lend credence to the position that Ngugi in *Weep Not Child* and by implication African literature is a voice and writing of protest, the novel more than anything else stresses the evils of war as it affects a nation and the individuals who make up the nation. This seems to be one of Ngugi's aims in writing *Weep Not Child*. Ngugi as a writer wants to protest against the evils of war. Nnolim (2006) did not mince words to say that:

Modern African literature (its written version) arose after psychic trauma of slavery and colonialism and made her literature one with running sore, stigmata that forced her writers to dissipate their energies in a dogged fight to re-establish the African personality (p.12).

If we agree with Nnolim, that the writers of modern African literature were involved in a dogged fight to re-establish African personality, and then we are inadvertently suggesting that the beauty

of the personality of Africa has been raped, murdered by the interplay and interaction of societal forces.

Whether as the literature of the negritude in which the writer was engaged in a struggle with historical cum cultural imperialism, in which the protest sought to, restore the dignity of man, all is protest. The negritude movement gave way to the literature of nationalist protest, with much of it, came independence to allow us develop ourselves. The African protest writer has since broken new grounds as the writer now plays his protest against the suffering in neocolonialism. This stage of the protest literature followed closely after a strong and resentful protest by African writers against cultural genocide and moral subjugation. In the same spirit in which the negritude protest writers like Leopold Senghor, David Diop, Leon Damas and others devoted their consciousness the spirit to see himself as a full human being with a culture that is in no way inferior. Protest literature in South African attacked vigorously and tirelessly the South African apartheid policy or racial segregation and discrimination, ban on freedom of expression, ban on freedom of movement, etc.

Through authors' biographical works like Peter Abrahams' *Tell Freedom* and *Mine Boy*, Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night* and the poetry of Oswald Mtshali, Dennis Brutus and Nelson Mandela's *No Easy Walk to Freedom* protest is espoused. Literature and politics are inseparable; literature must serve the cause of the people for their liberation. The protest against the nefarious effect of neo-colonialism is captured by Ngugi in *Weep Not Child* as he says: "Now there are only two tribes in Africa, the have and the have not" (p.62). Thus, the writer protests against structural classism of an exploitative nature as found in *Weep Not Child*. The role of the African protest suddenly shifts as in Festus Iyayi's *Violence* from focusing on systems, government, races, and history but rather, the writer's attention rest on such thematic preoccupation: situations, circumstances, conflicts, etc. The novel *Violence* holds that "violence" has been redefined. The meaning goes-beyond the physical to emphasise the social, psychological, economic as well as moral violence in the society.

### **Protest in *Weep Not Child***

The novel is symbolic; it discusses the ills in African society. The novelist identifies collective will and rededication of people to national aspiration as the key to a just and egalitarian society. It is therefore, this issue of ideology in African literature which is put across in the form of protest fiction that forms the core of the theme in *Weep Not Child*. The story is of man and woman to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression, and other issues that, Ngugi shows the corrupt practices and oppressive tendencies of some Africans in collaboration with the western colleagues to curry favour. He sees socialism, as the means to the salvation of the proletariat in the society, especially his Kenyan society. Ngugi has been able to put forward socialism as a cure to the problems in his society because he is aware of the history of African struggle in his society. Ngugi portrays exploitation of the masses in the hands of the western bourgeois in collaboration

with the blacks because of the favour gotten from the white men; such men like Jacobo are later used as a weapon to fight against the blacks during the emergency.

The protest in African literature is therefore as a result of the deplorable consideration of the opposed black African who lost their lands and freedom to the white settlers after they went to fight for them. Ngugi gives us an insight of the nature of the enslavement that gives rise to the massive exploitation of the people. In *Weep Not Child*, there are two classes of people: the suppressed Africans and the whites who dominate the land of the blacks. Ngugi looks at the situation in Kenya in the light of Walt Whitman's poem of hope and consolation in the face of difficulties when he says:

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

In the struggle for return of the land, the white settlers who are the government unleash all the forces of law at their command to crush the black Africans. The Africans have almost nothing on their hands to fight back their white oppressors. Ngugi who is depressed by the condition of his people has no solution to offer to save his people except to hope that his people will be victorious if only they agree together. He clearly reveals the pathetic state of the black Africans in Kenya using the hero, Njoroge through whose eyes we see a lot of what goes on in Kenya, by drawing attention to the oppressed blacks in the hands of the white men. In depicting their struggle conditions for existence, the novel could be seen as a cry for political freedom as well as bitter indictment of hypocrisy blacks who were used as home guards to destroy the freedom fighters. Therefore, unity is neglected because of their self achievement.

Ngugi revealed the bitterness against the white skin by using Kipanya to portray where the Africans live as being poor and barren, the shops are built in two rows which face each other with noise and filthiness, the young Africans who roam about because of unemployment, the rape case during the war are all issues of protest in the novel. The resentment of the Africans to the continued possession of their lands by the settlers is the major issue of protest which Ngugi fights against. Again the owl cried twice!

A warning to her, Njoroge thought and again whole soul rose in anger – anger against all those with a white skin, all those foreign elements that had displaced the true sons of the land from their God-given place.

Ngugi protests against the evils of war that denies one of one's liberty and destroys one's morality. Jomo was arrested, state of emergency declared and normal life disrupted. Again war is portrayed as an evil agent that destroys happy family life. This is shown by the "complete disruption of the families of Ngotho, Mr. Howlands and education is everything..., you must learn to escape the conditions under which we live. It is a hard way. It is not much that a man can do without a piece of land" (p.39). Ngugi sees education as the light of Kenyan people. This is why Njoroge listens to his father. He knows that education would be the fulfillment of a wider and more significant vision if only there will be unity among the Africans.

Let Africans stick together and charge very low prices. We are all blacks. If this be not so, then why grudge a poor woman the chance to buy from someone be he white or red who charges less money for his things (p.8).

## CONCLUSION

In the explication of Ngugi's *Weep Not Child* as a protest novel in African literature, elements of protest are easily discerned. We may argue that "protest" implies something more than or much more sinister than mere human cut of confronting normal human existential problems. This protest situation of inequity and inequality is vividly portrayed in Paulo Freire's (1972) statement that: "Any situation in which A objectively exploits B or hinders his pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression" (p.31). Ngugi Wa Thiong'o maintains that "it is when people are involved in the active work of destroying an inhibitive social structure and building a new one that they begin to see themselves" (p.94).

It is clear that Ngugi's creation of characters like Njoroge, Baro, shows his dislike and disapproval over what is happening in the Kenya society. This can be seen in Njoroge's behaviour when the teacher was beating a boy, Whack! Whack and the stick broke into bits (p.15). But he could not render any help to the boy to rescue him such situations in his country has given birth to protest in the novel, *Weep Not Child* in which Ngugi is crying out against injustice, deprivation, exploitation, enslavement and lack of freedom of the blacks from their rightful ownership of their land, thereby asking for their political freedom with the tool of education as their weapon. The people's reaction to this forceful dispossession of their land is the emergence of the mau-mau fighters who kicked against the oppression by the colonialists whose ultimate aim is the subjugation of the natives for the sole purpose of looting the economic resources of the land. The conditions which the Africans live spur them into a protest and struggle for their land which they believe is an inheritance from God which the oppressors dominate. Ngugi feels freedom brings about unity which means getting education as a tool to be able to fight the white man in the Kenyan society and the African continent at large.

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